

# Understanding Religious Opinions on Brain Donation and Research



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INDIANA UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MEDICINE  
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## Understanding Religious Opinions on Brain Donation and Research

As advances in Alzheimer disease (AD) research continue to be made throughout the world, more and more people are beginning to appreciate the enormous potential of postmortem brain research. What much of the public does not realize, however, is that while promising results are being reported, and our understanding of severe neurological and dementing disorders is improving, more rapid progress is actually being delayed because of a scarcity of human brain donors and the ability to perform autopsies.

Some people feel so strongly about the need for postmortem human brain research that they do not think twice about agreeing to donation. Many more, however, seem to find this decision to be a difficult and complicated one. It is a decision that causes many to contemplate their innermost feelings about death, whether or not there is an afterlife, what constitutes the soul during life, and what happens to the body after death.

For centuries, religious leaders have been grappling with these very same issues. This brochure has been put together with the help of ministers, priests, rabbis, and medical ethicists to provide answers to some of the religious questions you may have regarding autopsy and brain tissue donation.

### ***Does agreeing to an autopsy or brain donation go against my religious beliefs?***

This is the question that many individuals need answered before deciding to donate the brain or consent to an autopsy of a loved one. Though the answers vary from one denomination to another, it appears that the majority of religions do support postmortem brain tissue donation and research. While some faiths have very particular laws regarding the circumstances of donation, the mandate to heal and the call to compassion are recognized as fundamental to all religions.

## BUDDHISM

The Buddhists believe that the decision to donate organs or tissue is a matter of individual conscience. While there is no written resolution on the issue, Reverend Guomay Masao, president and founder of the Buddhist Temple of Chicago, says, *We honor those people who donate their bodies and organs to the advancement of medical science and to saving lives.* The importance of letting loved ones know your wishes is stressed.

## CATHOLICISM

The Catholic church has long supported organ and tissue donation. The consent to donate is seen as an act of charity, fraternal love, and self sacrifice. On the other hand, organ and tissue donation is not considered to be an obligation. For this reason, free and informed consent of the donor or donor's family is imperative. The Catholic Church also specifies that in order to show respect for human life, respect for the author of life and respect for the person who once existed, dignity and reverence are due to the remains of every human being. Therefore, organs and tissues for autopsy should be removed only when there is sufficient reason to justify such an action.

Pope Paul XII was an early advocate of tissue donation and Pope Benedict XVI relies on his teaching today. In 1956 Pius XII declared that *the public must be educated.* He explained that to consent to autopsy or organ donation *in the interest of those who are suffering is in no violation to the dead...this consent can involve sadness and sacrifice for near relatives, but this sacrifice is glorified by the aureole of merciful charity toward some suffering brothers.*

## CHRISTIAN SCIENTISTS

Although the Church of Christian Science takes no specific position regarding organ or tissue donation, most Christian

Scientists rely on spiritual rather than medical means for healing. Most also feel that they can make their particular contribution to the health of society and their loved ones in other ways than through organ and tissue donation. The question of organ and tissue donation is an individual decision.

## GREEK ORTHODOX

According to Reverend Dr. Milton Efthimiou of the Greek Orthodox church of North and South America, *The Greek Orthodox church is not opposed to organ donation as long as the organs and tissues in question are used to better human life, that is, for transplantation or for research that will lead to improvements in the treatment and prevention of disease.*

## HINDUISM

Hindus are not prohibited by religious law from donating their organs according to the Hindu Temple Society of North America. The act is an individual decision.

## ISLAM

The religion of Islam believes in the principle of saving human lives. According to A. Sachedina in his *Transplantation Proceedings* (1990) article, *...The majority of Muslim scholars belonging to various schools of Islamic law have invoked the principle of priority of saving human life and have permitted the organ transplant as a necessity to produce that noble end.*

## JEHOVAH'S WITNESS

Jehovah's Witnesses do not encourage organ and tissue donation, but believe it is a matter for individual conscience, according to the Watch Tower Society, the legal corporation for the religion. Jehovah's Witnesses do not believe that the Bible comments directly on organ

transplants; hence: decisions made regarding organ transplants must be made by the individual. Jehovah's Witnesses are often presumed to be opposed to donation because of their belief against blood transfusion. However, this merely means that all blood must be removed from the organs and tissues before being transplanted.

## JUDAISM

All four branches of Judaism (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist) support and encourage donation. According to Orthodox Rabbi Moses Tendler, *If one is in the position to donate an organ to save another's life, it is obligatory to do so, even if the donor never knows who the beneficiary will be.* In 1991 the Rabbinical council of America approved organ donation as permissible.

Judaism teaches that all humans are created in the image of God and that every dignity must be extended to the human body in death as in life. Consequently, Jewish law sanctions the performance of autopsies only in certain, very limited circumstances. It is the consensus of rabbinical opinion that postmortem examination may be performed for the purpose of gaining specific information that will benefit the treatment of others already afflicted with a life-threatening illness. Similarly, most rabbinical authorities concur that a postmortem examination may be performed on a person who dies with a genetic disease in order to save the lives of children who may be afflicted with the same disease, even if the children whose lives will be saved have not yet been born.

## LUTHERAN

The Missouri Synod was the first denomination to encourage organ and tissue donation by adopting a supportive resolution and by distributing the largest number of donor cards ever through an issue of their magazine,

Lutheran Witness. The Reverend James W. Rassbach of the Board of Communication Services, Missouri Synod, says, *We accept and believe that our Lord Jesus Christ came to give life and came to give it in abundance. Organ and tissue donation enables more abundant life, alleviates pain and suffering, and is an expression of love in a time of tragedy.*

## PROTESTANTISM

While no one can speak with ultimate authority for Protestant Christianity because of the diversity of traditions and the lack of a single teaching authority, most denominations both endorse and encourage organ and tissue donation. At the same time, they stress respect for the individual conscience and a person's right to make decisions regarding his or her own body.

## SIKHISM

*The Sikh religion teaches that life continues after death in the soul, and not the physical body. The last act of giving and helping others through organ donation is both consistent with and in the spirit of Sikh teachings. (Lord Singh of Wimbledon CBE, Director of the Network of Sikh Organisations, UK. Endorsed by Sikh Authorities in Amritsar, Punjab). The Sikh faith stresses the importance of performing noble deeds, and saving a life is considered one of the greatest forms of noble deeds. Therefore, organ donation is deemed acceptable to the Sikh religion. There are many examples of selfless giving and sacrifice in Sikh teachings.*

*Due to the limited scope of this brochure, we are unable to include perspectives from all faiths. For those needing additional religious guidance, it may be helpful to discuss questions and concerns with your faith leader. While they may not have all the answers you are looking for, they will likely recognize and support your desire to contribute to a healthier tomorrow.*

For further information regarding Alzheimer disease or the importance of brain donation, please contact the **Indiana Alzheimer Disease Center.**

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