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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Opinion: White evangelicals are wary of the vaccine. It shouldn't come as a surprise.

Opinion by **Michael Gerson**

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As the United States engages in the monumental task of vaccinating the vast majority of its population against covid-19, there are two main pockets of public resistance. One consists of African Americans, who are overcoming particularly horrible memories of medical exploitation and abuse. The other consists of White evangelical Christians, who are the most hesitant of any faith group. While 69 percent of Americans say they will definitely or probably be vaccinated, just 54 percent of White evangelicals say the same.

From a historical perspective, this is not particularly surprising. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, evangelicalism was born as a revolt against elites. The Congregationalist and Anglican establishments required ministers to hold academic degrees, dress in proper garb and preach with controlled gravity. The Baptist and Methodist religious insurgents believed that ministers and exhorters were chosen through a direct, divine calling that could come to anyone. They regarded old-line clerics as arrogant, stuffy and even unsaved.

And the skepticism about elites did not stop with the clergy. In "The Democratization of American Christianity," historian Nathan O. Hatch describes a populist revolt against the legal and medical professions as well. The Second Great Awakening in the early 1800s was accompanied by the rise of natural remedies and botanic medicine as an alternative to the norms of traditional medical education. One popular practitioner, Samuel Thomson, argued that Americans "should in medicine, as in religion and politics, act for themselves."

From the mid-19th to the early 20th centuries, evangelicals developed a strained relationship with modern science. Geology revealed ancient fossils and an old Earth. Biology traced the course of human evolution. Cosmology attributed the beginnings of an expanding universe to a Big Bang. For many evangelical believers, the scientific description of reality did not look like the universe of their imagination. The scientific profession became an object of suspicion. And this distrust was only exacerbated by a resurgence of fundamentalism in the late 20th century.

These tensions have occasionally emerged in controversies surrounding vaccination. During a 2011 Republican presidential debate, former representative Michele Bachmann of Minnesota attacked the routine administration of the vaccine for human papillomavirus (HPV) as "innocent little 12-year-old girls" who were "forced to have a government injection," which she later claimed might lead to "mental retardation." Her description of this safe, easy, effective way for women to avoid cervical cancer was remarkable for its level of destructive ignorance. But it was also typical of some evangelical opinion.

informational virus on the public). But this hesitancy is also the symptom of a much broader alienation between evangelicals and the scientific enterprise. Vaccine skepticism remains part of a populist revolt against elites whom evangelicals regard as hostile to their values.

In a highly technological society, however, there is often no alternative to social trust. None of us can master the highly specialized fields that help assure our well-being, including medicine and epidemiology. And it can be highly destructive — to ourselves and others — if we prefer our intuitions to the experts.

Building trust in coronavirus vaccines will require outreach from both scientists and evangelical leaders. And it is happening. Francis S. Collins — director of the National Institutes of Health and himself an evangelical — has been making an effective Christian case for coronavirus vaccination. Recently interviewed on the Christian Broadcasting Network, he said: "This is a 'love your neighbor' moment, where we all have a chance to do something not just for ourselves but for everybody around us." From the side of the religious community, seminary professor Curtis Chang has created a video series that deals carefully and sympathetically with evangelical questions about the vaccines.

The problem is time. The current challenge of the campaign against covid is an insufficient supply of vaccines. But at a pace close to 2 million vaccinations a day, the difficulty will eventually be finding enough willing arms to get the United States to herd immunity, which translates to approximately 70 percent vaccination coverage. If only 54 percent of White evangelicals were to be vaccinated, achieving herd immunity would be made far more difficult.

Collins's perspective is the proper one. Evangelicals are in the process of determining not just their scientific views, but also their social role. Will they undermine the common good by giving in to (unjustified) fear? Or will they assume some inconvenience and a very small risk for the sake of their neighbors? A choice this stark — with a quantified outcome — will display the quality of their moral beliefs. One way or the other.

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