

The rise of religious exemptions from vaccines

By [Kelly J. Baker](#)

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In January, a [measles outbreak](#) at Disneyland caught the media's attention. [Over 114 cases](#) appeared not only in California, but in six other U.S. states and parts of Mexico. Even though measles was officially [eliminated](#) from the United States in 2000, there have been more and more cases of the disease in the last seven years, with over 600 in 2014 alone. That year, one outbreak in an Amish community in Ohio included [383](#) diagnoses of measles. This particular religious community [reconsidered](#) its previous relaxed stance on vaccines. The Amish weren't opposed to vaccination, but rather didn't realize that measles was still such a threat to public health.

Despite the outbreak in Ohio, in general the rise in measles has not necessarily been tied to religious movements, but rather to increasing numbers of religious and personal [exemptions from vaccines](#). Only West Virginia and Mississippi refuse to grant vaccine exemptions for religious reasons. The burgeoning [anti-vaccine movement](#) is a constellation of parents who exempt their children from vaccines for a variety of reasons: fears about the links between vaccination and autism (based often on a British study that has since been proven [false](#)), concerns over toxins, theories about government conspiracy, and claims about individual autonomy versus governmental control. Religious exemption is defined differently in each state, but it often just requires parents to claim that religion is the reason their child won't be vaccinated. This type of exemption has come [under fire in recent weeks](#) because of concerns that parents are avoiding vaccination by using religion as an excuse.

What is striking to me as a historian of religion is how these outbreaks in recent years prove to be different than previous outbreaks of measles in the 1980s and 1990s that were primarily associated with religious communities, particularly Christian Science.

In 1879, Mary Baker Eddy founded the Church of Christ, Scientist, which emphasized the healing ministry of Jesus and antagonism toward medicine. Eddy warned followers of the dangers of medical treatment for the spiritual body. In *Science and*

Health with Key To The Scriptures (1875), she explained that spirit is truth, while matter (including the physical body and medical interventions for it) is error. Humans emerged as spiritual creatures enmeshed in sinful matter, so we need to cure what ails the spirit, not the body. Healing the mind and freeing one's self from sin and error improve one's condition.

Despite this nervousness about the physical body, Eddy vaccinated her grandchildren and encouraged Christian Scientists to follow the law regarding vaccines. Massachusetts, where Christian Science was founded, was the first state to require vaccinations, in 1855. Despite the founder's tacit acceptance of this tiny bit of matter and medicine, Christian Scientists have not necessarily followed her example.

Before the outbreak among the Amish in 2014, the largest measles outbreak occurred 20 years earlier at a Christian Science college in Jersey County, Illinois, and a boarding school in St. Louis County, Missouri. Some Christian Scientists opted for religious exemption on the childhood vaccination requirements, which meant that these educational institutions faced *five outbreaks* of the same disease in 1978, 1980, [1985](#), 1989, and 1994. In 1994 alone, 190 people contracted the disease, with all cases occurring among unvaccinated people. While discussing these outbreaks among Christian Scientists in 1994, the [CDC noted](#) that this particular outbreak showed the challenges of "groups that do not routinely accept vaccination" for getting rid of the measles in the U.S.

Christian Science, however, has become more open to [medical treatment](#) in the last five years. This can partly be attributed to the decline in membership and the attempt to bring more into the fold. Yet Christian Scientists also want to counter the anti-medicine stance of the church. Alongside a measles outbreak in the 1990s, Christian Science also became infamous because of [legal actions](#) regarding the death of children of Christian Scientists. An 11-year-old died of obstructed bowels, a consequence of untreated diabetes. His parents, who relied upon prayer rather than medical care, were found guilty of [involuntary manslaughter](#). In their appeal to the Supreme Court, the prosecuted parents claimed a violation of their [religious freedom](#), yet the high courts refused to hear their appeal.

I can't help but wonder if parents who exempt their children from vaccines will face the same legal challenges that Christian Scientists have. Will they claim religious freedom? Or will the courts end up deciding the importance of vaccines for public

safety outweighs the personal choices of parents?

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