

Religious Beliefs and Attitude towards Organ Donation: A Study of Christian Perspective in Medical Ethics

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Abstract

The advancement of organ donation has become a significant medical practice across the globe. In Nigeria, as in other parts of the world, Christianity, and other religious beliefs, tends to shape attitudes to organ donation, both on an individual and communal level. This work examines the practice on organ donation across several Christian denominations in Nigeria - Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, Baptists, and some Pentecostal teachings - within theological and ethical frameworks, as well as the Christian Church traditions pertaining to the organ donation practice. In exploring Christian teachings, the author examines Christian theology, ethical discourse, and the teachings of other faiths and denominations within the context of ethical reasoning. A further discourse on Christian life and teachings spans the ethical discourse of the organ donation practice—the teachings on the sanctity of life, and the ethical tension within life donation—the balance between autonomy and coercion. Most traditions within Christianity in Nigeria tend to embrace forcible organ donation as an act of charity, hence the donation and doctrines embrace donation within the practice. The author presents the harmonization of health and faith as a guide to develop policy, ethics in medicine, theological education, and research.

Keywords: Organ donation, Christian ethics, Nigeriandenominations,theological foundations, medical ethics, donor consent

Introduction

Organ donation is providing an organ or tissue to another living individual for transplantation or providing it to another person after one's death and donating vital organs such as heart, liver, kidney or non-vital body tissues like corneas and bone marrow. Donation and transplantation of organs have become important parts of life saving medical procedures, and enables patients living with organ failures, death or prolonged suffering. With the improved donation and transplantation methods, organ donation has become an ethical and humanitarian issue around the world for more people as the technology improve and become more available.

Organ donation and donation culture is in the developing stages within Naigeria and this is seen through the various ethical and culture and religious determinants such as Christianity. Nigeria has a lot of Christians, with the latest Pew report showing over 46% of the population as Christians. The decisions made within the organ donation such as health, body, death and other medical interventions are also greatly influenced by religious beliefs. Understanding these beliefs while improving the organs donation systems is crucial for ethicist, medical practitioners and policy makers.

Literature Review

1. Christian Perspective on Organ Donation

Christian theology emphasizes the gift of life and the stewardship of the body: human

beings are the ultimate owners of their bodies. Organ donation can be understood as an expression of sacrificial love as well as an act of charity toward a neighbor (John 15:13). For centuries, Christianity has been at the forefront of moral reasoning and discourse about the ethics of euthanasia, genetic engineering, and transplantation, forming and integrating upholding and defending a value-based moral system within the broader framework of medical ethics (Sulmasy, 2017). While the act of organ donation is not specifically discussed in the Bible, the Christian ethics of love, stewardship, and respect for human dignity inform reasoning that would encourage and support the practice.

Christianity upholds and values the dignity of every human life, as each person is created in the image of God (*imago Dei*) and holds inalienable worth (Genesis 1:26–27). This theological anthropology was the basis of Christian ethics and, by extension, Christian medical ethics, including organ donation. As Christian bioethics teaches and advocates for the respect of life, the charity of others, and stewardship of one's body (Sulmasy, 2017), the donation of an organ is not viewed as a medical act but as an expression of Christian love and self-sacrifice.

The fundamental ethical tenet for Christians regarding organ donation is love for one's neighbor. Jesus teaches this in Luke 10:25–37 in the parable of the Good Samaritan. He expects charitable action. John 15:13 also states, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." Donation of organs is taken during life or after death as an expression of love in the sacrificial sense (Gorsuch, 2018).

Christian scholars invoke the principle of stewardship as another ethical reason for organ donation. The body, while alive, is also considered a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). God expects

service to God and humanity, but stewardship does not end at death. Thus, donating one's organs is a final act of stewardship of Faith (Meilaender, 2016).

The Bible does not specifically reference organ donation; however, its general theological principles lend support to the moral permissibility — and even commendability — of donating one's organ. Christian ethicists like Ramsey (1970) and O'Donovan (1998) assert that the resurrection of the body does not negate organ donation, as the Christian hope is not bound to physical organs but to God and His redemptive works.

Within the Nigerian context, the influences on Christian views on organ donation include biblical interpretation, teachings from different denominations, and cultural views on the body, death, and the afterlife. Ojo and Olatunji (2021) elaborate on the common view held by Nigerian Christians which equates the integrity of the corpse with the Christian belief of resurrection. Despite these challenges, pastoral teachings and theological education continues to shape these views and encourages organ donation to be viewed as a charitable act, aligning with Christian values.

2 Specific Denominational Views in Nigeria

Roman Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church has been unambiguous in providing some of the clearest theological guidance on organ donation. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994/1997) states:

"After death, organ donation is to be encouraged as an act of generous solidarity, a noble and meritorious deed" (Section 2296).

Pope John Paul II (2000) referred to organ donation as "a genuine act of love" and an entitled of the respect of every human

person and the principle of informed consent.

In Nigeria, the Catholic Bishops' Conference has also promoted similar views, framing organ donation as a charitable deed which is Catholic moral teaching (Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria [CBCN], 2015). The Church maintains that organ removal must be performed post mortem, real death, the donor must be a willing and informed consent and the act of body parts commercialization must be prohibited. Catholic hospitals and chaplaincies in Nigeria have offered instruction in pastoral care and the training of medical ethics on these ethical principles.

Anglican Church

In the Communion of Churches (including Church of Nigeria, Anglican Communion) supports organ donation as a Christian duty of love and service. The Lambeth Conference of 1988 promoted organ donation, characterizing it a "life-giving act of Christian generosity."

In Nigeria, Anglican Church leaders soliciting organ donations and affirming the Christian mission of healing and love for one's neighbor (Adebayo, 2019). Anglican Church constructed and sketched first grandchildren bioethics pastoral guided, prayerful, voluntary, and dignifying the human body, as appropriate concerning body human her (Okoh, 2020).

Anglican Church emphasizes resurrection theology and transformation of the body (1 Corinthians 15:42–44). 1 Corinthians 15:42–44). Transformation of the body, resurrection, and the participation of the body as a whole, negating the fear of dead body organ removal before resurrection and disrespect of dead body, and additional supports advocacy respectful organ removal.

Baptist Churches

Regarding the Nigerian Baptist Convention, as well as other Baptists in the country, the importance of personal conscience in conjunction with the authority of the scriptures on ethical issues remains the focal point. Without a centralized magisterium, differences of opinion may arise across the various congregations. Nonetheless, the majority of Baptist scholars seem to consider organ donation a morally permissible act provided the necessary conditions of voluntariness and informed consent are met (Adesina, 2018).

In terms of Baptist ethics, the one principle that remains dominant and must always be emphasized in any discourse is that of love and stewardship. Many Nigerian Baptist congregations continue to preach stewardship of the resources God has provided to serve the community, i.e. organ donation to a recipient in need. In spite of this, cultural beliefs and attitudes toward organ donation and blood donation are steep in the rural parts of the country (Olaleye, 2021).

Pentecostal Churches

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3. Biblical and Theological Foundations

Christian reflections on the ethics of organ donation are not informed by overt biblical commands, due to the fact that organ donation as a practice did not exist during the biblical times. Rather, Christian reflections are founded on the theology of love that informs biblical canon, Christian doctrine, the moral teachings of the church, and individualized moral decision-making by believers.

Biblical Canon and Organ Donation

The affirmation of human life and the moral call to love and to render self-sacrificing service to others is the central message of the canon. Organ donation as a practice is formed by several biblical texts which provide the ethical underpinning.

a. Neighborly love

The moral imperative of organ donation is captured in the call to love one's neighbor as oneself (Mark 12:31). The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) illustrates love concretized in acts of mercy and care for others. By donating one's organs, a person donates life and health to those who critically need it.

b. Sacrificial love

In Christian bioethics, Jesus' statement in John 15:13—"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends"—is put forth as a theological justification for organ donation (Gorsuch, 2018). Although the reference is to self-sacrifice of Christ, the ethical ramifications for organ donation abound as acts of self-

sacrifice, including during life or after death.

c. Stewardship of the Body
In 1 Corinthians 6:19–20, Paul writes about how the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and how should believers should respect their body as an act of worship. While stewardship emphasizes the responsible use of the body, it also speaks to the use of the body in ways that are pleasing to God. To save a life by donating an organ could be an expression of faithful stewardship (Meilaender, 2016).

c. Compassion and Healing Ministry

Healing and compassion characterized the ministry of Jesus (Matthew 9:35–36; Luke 4:18–19). To follow the Christian call to be like Christ, one must engage in caring for the sick and aiding the suffering. Organ donation provides a tangible way to participate in this aspect of Christ's ministry and to the healing to those whose organs are failing.

d. Resurrection Hope

The bodily resurrection for saints is a part of the biblical teaching, and particularly with 1 Corinthians 15, is a teaching that should encourage Christians. This hope also encourages Christians to believe that organ donation will not hinder their bodily integrity in the afterlife. The resurrection is an act of God's creative and redemptive power (O'Donovan, 1998) and not the preservation of the physical organs.

Considering the foregoing biblical teachings, one can conclude that organ donation remains ethically and morally positive within the Christian context. Organ donation can also be seen as an act of profound love, an emotional investment, stewardship, and cooperation with God in His work of healing.

Theological Perspectives

Beyond individual biblical texts, Christian attitudes toward organ donation is informed by broader theological doctrines.

a. Doctrine of the Imago Dei (Image of God)
All human beings created in the image of God according to Genesis 1:26-27, possess dignity and worth. This doctrine justifies the Christian commitment to protection and preservation of human life. Organ donation affirms the worth of life and human solidarity (Ramsey, 1970) toward both donor and recipient.

b. The Theology of the Body

Christian theology recognizes the body is not an expendable possession but an integral part of the human person and of God's creation. Furthermore, the body is a gift to be used in service of God and of others. Organ donation testifies to the body's ability to love and serve even beyond earthly life (Meilaender, 2016). In Nigerian theological discourse, this is often linked to cultural ancestral and burial practices, which calls for pastoral care.

c. Resurrection and Eschatology

For Christians, the resurrection gives hope that in the future, the earthly body does not need to be physically preserved. Paul states, "the body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable" (1 Corinthians 15:42). This is especially beneficial to Nigerian Christians. Organ donation, according to this belief, should be theologically rationalized. Organ donation should be accepted in the Christian tradition without fear of forfeiting one's eschatological destiny. This is especially beneficial to Nigerian Christians. Resurrection should be rationalized theologically to the Nigerian Christians as explained by Okoh (2020).

d. The Theology of Gift and Charity

In Christian ethics, organ donation is framed as an extending of oneself. God gives to all and organ donation is an extension of that giving. Pope John Paul II stated, "Organ donation is a genuine act of love" (2000). The theology of the gift strongly intertwines with the Christian notion of grace and

charity. Organ donation is an opportunity to participate in the redemptive work of God.

e. The Church as a Healing Community

Theological reflections highlight the dimension of community within Christianity. The Church should strive to be a community of healing and solidarity, advocating for the compassion of Christ in the world. Encouraging organ donation within Christian communities fosters this organized communal ethic in the world, making the Church a moral agent in public health ethics as noted by Adebayo (2019).

4. Nigerian Contextual Theological Reflections

Nigeria's cultural perceptions of the body and traditions surrounding burial and funeral rites intersect with biblical and theological views concerning the organ donation discourse. For many Nigerian Christians, the body should remain whole and preserved for a "proper resurrection" or for the marker of memory (Nwafor, 2020). However, a growing number of Nigerian theologians focuses on biblical texts concerning resurrection and stewardship to directly confront and aid the decline of this perspective (Adesina, 2018).

In Nigeria, Catholic and Anglican institutions of theological education have integrated the discourse on organ donation into the bioethics module as a means to contextualize global Christian teachings for Nigerian realities (CBCN, 2015; Okoh, 2020). Pentecostal theologians have begun addressing the intersection of the doctrines on the Holy Spirit, empowerment, and healing and ethical organ donation; however, in certain circles, the emphasis is still on divine healing and the exclusion of medical treatment (Eze, 2020).

In conclusion, the cultural realities in Nigeria notwithstanding, organ donation as an act of Christian love, stewardship, and hope in the resurrection, is theologically and

biblically justified. Cultural beliefs may make acceptance more difficult; however, theological education and pastoral practice, as integrated, should harmonize faith with the ethics of medicine in this domain.

5. Ethical Considerations in Organ Donation

The nexus of organ donation involves ethical inquiry into theology, medicine, and human rights. While Christian theology determines the moral parameters, it is the ethics discipline that seeks to answer the application of these principles. The most salient ethical issues include the value of human life, autonomy and coercion, informed consent, and donor respect. These considerations are fundamental in ensuring organ donation is consistent not only with Christian moral principles, but also with contemporary medical ethics.

a. The Sanctity of Life

The sanctity of life is the most fundamental ethical principle within Christianity. Life is sacred, as God created human beings in His image and likeness (Genesis 1:26–27). This articulates the principle that determines Christian perspectives on all medical interventions, including organ donation.

Ethical organ donation, to an extent, also preserves and enhances life, thus it upholds the sanctity of life. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, describes organ donation as a “noble and meritorious act” that affirms human solidarity and the dignity of life (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994/1997, §2296). The Anglican Church in Nigeria also seeks to support organ donation as an ethical act of charity consistent with the Christian mission of healing (Adebayo, 2019; Okoh, 2020).

For the first organ donation, the Christian ethical tradition considers the ‘sanctity of life’ and ‘organ donation’ moral conundrums. This is because organ donation

is the only Christian act where one life is literally sacrificed in the name of love. Evangelicals in ancient times defended organ donation in the name of bodily resurrection. But, as John Paul II stated, it is unethical and illegal to donate bodily ‘remains’ while one is still ‘alive’- organ donation ‘traffic’ harms the ‘donor’. The ‘donor’ is the most important person in the ‘operation’. Organ donation is ethical as long as one gets ‘remains’ only after ‘true death’ in reliable medical terms.

Transparency in organ donation procedures and ethical guidelines fundamental for Christian communities can ease skepticism in the Nigerian context, where concerns about ethically unethical organ donation and removal have been rampant in Christian communities (Nwafor, 2020).

b. Respect to Coercion

Autonomy is one of the Christian ethical principles, which states that an individual is the ultimate and final authority over one’s body. It is in this principle that organ donation is encouraged to be voluntary, motivated by emotions, love and benevolence (Meilaender, 2016).

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In Nigeria, sociocultural forces, particularly within families and communities, affect living organ donation decisions. Although interdependence and cooperation are ideals, the Christian traditions warn against reliance on hierarchy of decision making. Nab Catholic, Baptist, and Anglican Communion traditions, organ donation within these traditions should be given freely without coercion (Cardinal of Nigeria, 2015; Adesina, 2018).

Whereas, Pentecostal churches highlight on the guidance of the Holy Spirit to aid personal decision making. This can be instrumental to help church members resolve the personal and public external pressures of the community, for and against organ donation (Eze, 2020). Ethical pastoral counseling becomes instrumental to clear the coercion of the community, from rational and non rational threats.

c. Donor Consent

Informed consent is a tenet of the Christian faith and medical practice. It requires the potential donors, or family members for posthumous donation, to be apprised of organ donation's ramifications for the life of the donor and other relationships. This is consistent with Christian ethics of truthfulness, respect for the human person, and social responsibility (Sulmasy, 2017).

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that organ donation should be grounded on “informed and free consent” (Catechism §2296). The Anglican and Baptist churches in Nigeria similarly follow this teaching and advise that organ donation be approached with “clarity of mind and understanding” and with “prayer” (Okoh, 2020; Olaleye, 2021). In the Pentecostal context, pastoral leaders typically advise that believers should balance seeking “personal conviction” with medical advice and guidance alongside “prayer” (RCCG Health Policy, 2019).

In Nigeria, the challenges to informed consent include low healthcare related literacy, intentional misinformation, and culturally rooted fears of bodily desecration and fears of the dead (Ojo & Olatunji, 2021). To avoid ethical misconduct, healthcare practitioners must explain medical interventions in simple, non-technical language, while theological leaders in the church should provide pastoral support through appropriate, clear theological explanations.

d. Posthumous Donation and Family Consent

In addition to family consent and determination of death, posthumous organ donation presents unique ethical challenges. According to Christian ethics, organ donation after death is permissible as long as there is a definitive determination of death and the organs are removed in a respectful manner (Ramsey, 1970).

In Nigeria, family decision-making is also very important. Organ donations, even when legally signed while an individual is still alive, can be halted by family members due to cultural misconceptions. The Anglican Church encourages pastoral care to families by explaining resurrection theology and the principles surrounding the donation process (Okoh, 2020). Catholic ethics similarly encourages families to treat the deceased's wishes as a last gift of charity to the deceased (CBCN, 2015).

6. Commercialization and Exploitation Concerns

The unethical practice of organ trade and commercialization in Nigeria gets little mention in literature. Christian ethics and the Christian traditions recognize the inviolability of the human body and the dignity of the human person, thus, organ trade and exploitation of the poor and vulnerable, in whatever form violates Christian ethics (John Paul II, 2000; Meilaender, 2016). Exploiting the conscience of the poor and the vulnerable is particularly unethical in the unregulated environment of Nigerian healthcare as pointed out by the Nigerian Baptist Convention and Pentecostal fellowships (Adesina, 2018; Eze, 2020).

The minimalistic Christian approach to ethics suggests organ exploitation is averted by encouraging legal, transparent, and government-sponsored regulations that facilitate altruistic organ donation.

Involvement of Christian ethics in organ donation pivots on the issues of life, voluntary donation, informed and discretionary donation, and exploitation. Nigeria's cultural disposition, theological, and institutional integrity pose the greatest challenges. Churches must provide this moral compass; besides, the legal and ethical standards in the medical profession must be keenly observed to foster trust within the Christian community.

Findings

The analyses of the study gave a theological, biblical, ethical, and denominational perspective on the following findings:

1. Organ donation is consistent with fundamental Christian tenets of love, compassion, and service.

Christian beliefs, regardless of denomination, highlight self-giving love (agape) and the duty to relieve suffering. Particularly in Nigerian Christian communities and among Catholics and Anglicans, organ donation is regarded as a 'living donation' as love and neighborly aid of Christ (Nmah, 2018; Okafor, 2020).

2. There is a strong theological support to claim within the Christian tradition and the scriptures that organ donation is morally acceptable.

The biblical expression of John 15:13, 'Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends' and the Pauline emphasis on the body as a temple and instrument of service (1. Cor. 6:19–20; Rom. 12:1) morally justifies the act of voluntary organ donation. Nigerian theologians describe the act of 'living donation' in relation to these scriptures as preserving life and safeguarding dignity (Ekeopara & Ogonnaya, 2019).

3. Donation positions may vary in emphasis but on the whole support organ donation as ethical and voluntary.

For the Nigerian Roman Catholics, the organ donation, as an act of charity, is supported as long as there is free donation and no commercialisation (CBCN, 2017).

The Anglican Communion of Nigeria also solicits donation as an extension of Christian stewardship and love, although pastoral education continues to be important (Akinola, 2016).

The Baptist and Pentecostal Churches are broadly sympathetic, yet the conscience of the individual and pastoral counsel are primary, as some members may have cultural and spiritual doubts (Ajayi, 2018; Adeboye, 2021).

4. Some ethical issues remain problematic in Nigeria.

Christian ethics supports organ donation, yet issues around lack of permitted scrutiny of donors, the fear of donation being coercive, non-open medical systems, and the prospective commercialization of body parts negatively impacts acceptability (Olatunji, 2019). Some section of the congregants perceive organ donation as comparable to ritual practices, thereby necessitating intensive theologically driven teaching.

5. In numerous churches, the level of public awareness and theological education is inadequate.

Many Christians in Nigeria do not know the formal position of their denomination regarding organ donation. Misconceptions and cultural taboos continue to persist, and these significantly impact the willingness to donate (Eze, 2020). This illustrates the gap between the grassroots and the theological position of the church.

Conclusion

An organ donation ethics evaluation through the Christian ethics lens helps one conclude that organ donation practices align with all Christian ethics attributes of love, stewardship, and the sacredness of human life. Organ donation allows one to practice

the Christian love ethics of stewardship. All Christian ethics traditions uphold the voluntary donation ethic along with dignity and worth of the individual. The encouragement to practice selfless love in the biblical texts is the practical embodiment of the theoretical love Christian ethics advocates.

With regard to organ donation, the pastoral care and ethics of all Nigerian Christian traditions, including Catholic, Anglican, Baptist, and Pentecostal, is to promote and protect the act as morally permissible and even meritorious within the confines of self-donation's rational, non-commercial, and enforced limits. There seems to be little social practice that is in harmony with the Nigerian Christian traditions. There would appear to be little in the way of social practice in regards to Nigerian Christian traditions and social ethics as would be in harmony with the Christian traditions.

Christian ethics social practice would promote the organ donation act as the moral ideal with more than the instrumental ends of the surgical act. The social practice of all Nigerian Christian traditions, including Catholic, Anglican, Baptist, and Pentecostal, would need to promote and protect the act as morally permissible and even meritorious within the confines of self-donation's rational, non-commercial, and enforced limits. There seems to be little social practice that is in harmony with the Nigerian Christian traditions. There would appear to be little in the way of social practice in regards to Nigerian Christian traditions and social ethics as would be in harmony with the Christian traditions.

Recommendations

From the findings and conclusions, the following recommendations should be made.

1. Theological Education and Awareness Initiatives:

Nigerian Christian denominations should expand the scope of public theological education on organ donation and integrate it into sermons, Bible studies, workshops, and church bulletins. This can dispel misinterpretations surrounding it and emphasize its biblical and ethical foundations.

2. Denominational Policies and Pastoral Role: Clear church policies should be formulated with pastoral guidelines on the theological and medical aspects of organ donation. Pastors should be empowered to counsel church members on organ donation and be adequately trained to offer "theological" and "ethical" guidance.

3. Engagement with Local Health Systems: Clergy and medical practitioners in organ donation and transplant medicine should engage in partnerships to secure ethical guidelines of practice in the Nigerian context, focusing on informed consent, voluntariness, and coercion.

4. Teaching the Ethics of Organ Donation in Seminaries: Ethics of organ donation should be included in the curriculum of seminaries and theological schools so that leaders of the future church are able to address the bioethical challenges of the church.

5. Cultural Context of Engagement: Addressing the cultural myths and stereotypes that are predominantly the source of fear surrounding organ donation should be of ultimate concern to the church and be executed through contextual theology and inculturation. This can harmonize biblical teaching with cultural ley.

6. Legal and Policy Advocacy: Nigerian Christian bodies should advocate for policies on the protection of the rights of donors, the governance of organ transfer, and the criminalization and trafficking of organs for the alignment of medical practices with Christian ethics.

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