

## Religious and philosophical aspects of organ and body donation: Experience report



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### ABSTRACT

The legislation defines the family as responsible for the donation of human organs and tissues for therapeutic or study purposes and constitutes a major challenge in Brazil. Objectives: To analyze and gather the views of various religious and philosophical currents on donation, to understand the possible influence on the decision to donate. Methodology: After a literature review, which included works published in the last 10 years, interviews with religious leaders and representatives of different cultures were conducted. The interviews were recorded and made available free of charge on social networks. Results and Discussion: The literature review totaled 92 studies in the following databases: Lilacs/BIREME/VHL (41), Scielo (26), PubMed (4), Mendeley (21). Representatives of the following religions participated in the interviews: Catholic, Evangelical, Pentecostal, Spiritist, Umbanda, Candomblé, Jewish, Buddhist, Islamic, Bahá'í Faith, and Hare Krishna Movement; as well as a representative of atheism. Some beliefs present a caveat to donation under the justification that the human body belongs to the creator entity and must complete the cycle of life by returning to earth (inhumation). However, the interviewees themselves report that solidarity is justified when there is the possibility of preserving a life. Donation represents an altruistic act related to an individual choice. Conclusion: In general, religions are favorable to donation, treating it with a benevolent and life-saving attitude. Its direct effects are the training of health professionals, promoting the improvement of health care.

**Keywords:** Organ donation, Body donation and religion.



## 1 INTRODUCTION

Brazil has the most extensive public organ transplant program in the world and ranks second in the number of transplants performed, behind only the United States (LIRA, et.al., 2018; AGÊNCIA BRASIL, 2019; BRAZILIAN ASSOCIATION OF ORGAN TRANSPLANTATION, 2021; De OLIVEIRA, et.al., 2023). About 90% of transplants in Brazil are performed by the Unified Health System (SUS), which offers full coverage of all costs involved in organ donation, transplants, and post-transplant follow-up. However, the Brazilian donation scenario has a long list of patients waiting for an organ transplant. The notification rate of potential donors per million of the population (pmp) was 57.7 in 2021, the highest ever obtained, being 5.5% higher than that of 2019 and 14% higher than that of 2020. However, the rate of effective donors (15.1) was 17% lower than in 2019 (18.1) and 4.5% lower than in 2020 (15.8). According to the interpretative rules of law, only when there is no prior manifestation of the potential donor should the will of the family prevail (LAW 9.434/1997 and LAW 10.211/2001). Once the patient meets the clinical criteria for brain death established in CFM Resolution 2,173/2017, article 13 of Law 9,434/1997 determines that it is mandatory for all health establishments to notify the notification, procurement and distribution centers of organs of the federated unit where it occurs, the diagnosis of brain death made in patients treated by them. And the sole paragraph of the same article adds: after the notification provided for in the caput of this article, *"health establishments not authorized to remove tissues, organs or parts of the human body intended for transplantation or treatment shall allow the immediate removal of the patient or franchise their facilities and provide the necessary operational support to the medical-surgical teams of removal and transplantation, in which case they will be reimbursed in accordance with the law"*. This recommendation is reinforced by Decree 9,175/2017 (CFM RESOLUTION No. 1,480/1997; LIRA, et.al., 2018; PIMENTEL, SARSUR, DADALTO, 2018; COELHO, BONELA, 2019).

Body donation provides 100% of the total bodies used for university teaching in anatomy in India, Australia, France, Germany, Sri Lanka, the United Kingdom, Spain, Japan, China, Africa, Taiwan, Denmark, and Austria (JONES, 2016; HABICHT, KIESSLING, WINKELMANN, 2018; ZHANG, et.al, 2020; FARSIDES, SMITH, SPARKS, 2021). Article 14 of the Civil Code (LAW 10.406/2002) validated the free disposal of one's own body, for scientific or altruistic purposes, after death, enabling the training of health professionals through the study of the human body. In Brazil, although most of the bodies used in teaching originate from the system of unclaimed bodies (LAW 8.501/1992, SIMÃO, et.al. 2016; CORDEIRO, MENEZES, 2019; VOLANEK, RISSI, 2019) a quantitative survey of body donation programs (PDCs) found a total of 28 PDCs in 2019 (Da SILVA, et.al., 2020) and 36 PDCs in 2022 (LUCAS, Da ROCHA, 2023). The highest prevalence is in public universities, preferably concentrated in the Southeast (Da ROCHA et.al., 2013). However, according to the Federal Council of Medicine (CFO), with 342 medical schools and the offer of 35,622 new



vacancies annually, and from 2009 to 2017, 1,158 new courses in the health area emerged that have anatomy in their curricular components (MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, 2019; FEDERAL COUNCIL OF MEDICINE, 2022).

The main motivation for organ donation is the possibility of saving a life immediately. Regarding the donation of the human body, it is known that one of the motivations is to have the body studied after death, prior to cremation or burial (VILELA, et.al., 2023). Other factors are pointed out, such as the willingness to collaborate with science, to provide better training for health professionals, or to express gratitude to the health team for the quality treatment offered. All influencing factors are related to the benefit of adequate qualification of health professionals for society. Therefore, the Higher Education Institution (HEI) seeks, with a Body Donation Program, to offer this third possibility of the body's destiny after death: the study of the human body by its professionals in training. To this end, it is necessary to involve the local community, through registration or enrollment in the program during life.

Public opinion about organ donation after death is associated with several demotivating factors, including lack of knowledge about protocols, traditional values, religious beliefs, compensation mechanisms, information on donor registration, and institutional credibility (TEIXEIRA, GONÇALVES, SILVA, 2012; AIJING, et.al. 2016). For Body Donation, the factors are not so well known, considering the small number of programs operating in the country and the population's lack of knowledge about the process. However, we can list concerns about the disfigurement of the body and delay in the funeral, the lack of benefits from the research findings, the fear of having the body recognized and inadequate treatment, religious objections, the lack of family consent, mainly due to lack of knowledge, pre-existing opinions due to the lack of clarification (FONSECA, et al., 2014; SIMON et al., 2016; Da ROCHA, et.al., 2017; HABICHT, KIESSLING, ANDREAS, 2018; VOLANEK, RISSI, 2019; CORDEIRO, MENEZES, 2019; JIANG, et.al. 2020; ZHANG, 2020). Considering that the demand for donated human biological materials, whether for medical treatment or for training health professionals, is representative in the country, this study gathered information from the literature and analyzed reports from religious leaders of different faiths to describe the context of spirituality in decision-making for Brazilian donors.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

A literature survey was carried out in the following databases: PubMed, Excerpta Medica (EMBASE), Virtual Health Library (BIREME), Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) and Mendeley. The search covered the period between 2011 and 2021, for works published in English and Portuguese, using only descriptors registered in the Health Sciences Descriptors (DeCS) of the Virtual Health Library, developed from the Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) of the United States National



Library of Medicine, which allows a single language in the indexing of publications. The following descriptors and their synonyms were used in a combined manner in Portuguese and English: organ donation, *body donation*, religion and *Brazil*.

The university extension action entitled "Spirituality in focus: The Donation of Human Organs and Bodies" (EV 008-2022) was approved by the Dean of Extension, Culture and Sport (PROECE) of the Federal University of Jataí with the aim of interviewing religious leaders and representatives of different faiths. The event was proposed in partnership with the TV and Radio Chamber and the School of Management and Legislative Efficiency (EGEL) of the Municipality of Jataí. An invitation letter was sent, along with the copyright assignment document and recording of the interview for TV and Radio Câmara. All positive responses were followed by the elaboration of the interview script with the interviewee. This document was shared for editing the questions and topics to be discussed. According to the interviewee's preference, the interviews took place in person or online, and were recorded and made available in open access on social networks.

### 3 EXPERIENCE REPORT

Usually, the philosophical understanding of the transcendent aspect of reality involves the expectation or certainty that human beings survive bodily death, as proposed, for example, by Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews in the ancient Greco-Roman tradition, native peoples of Africa and the Americas (MOREIRA-ALMEIDA, COSTA, COELHO, 2023). Moreira-Almeida, Costa, Coelho (2023) in the book "Science of Life After Death", emphasize the great impact on ethics and mourning of the idea of survival of the soul after death. The belief in life after death, and in the survival of the soul, is present in many cultures worldwide. The literature review resulted in 92 studies in the following databases: Lilacs/BIREME/VHL (41), Scielo (26), PubMed (4), Mendeley (21). The studies analyzed so far allowed us to outline the situation of organ donation in Brazil, as well as to analyze the influence of spirituality and religion on donation decisions. In general, all religions consider the possibility of saving a life, either through organs donated for medical treatment, or when bodies are donated for medical education, a benevolent action. Indirectly, there is an impact on society when trained health professionals offer quality care with greater possibilities of success in medical diagnoses and treatments.

It was possible to register the opinion of the following beliefs: Spiritist, Candomblé, Hinduism, Buddhism, Bahá'í faith, Catholic, Evangelical, Umbanda, Jewish, and Islamic. A member of atheism also accepted the invitation to the interview. Among the interviewees, some beliefs such as Candomblé, Umbanda and Judaism present a reservation to donation under the justification that the human body belongs to the creator entity and must complete the cycle of life by returning to the earth (inhumation). In Judaism, there is a ritual of preparation of the body after death known as "Tahara", which consists



of cleansing the entire body so that it returns to earth. In the Muslim faith, the body must be protected in a linen or cotton cloth to be returned to earth without a coffin. However, the interviewees themselves report that solidarity justifies not burying the body when there is a possibility of preserving a life.

For other religions, donation represents an altruistic act. Atheism considers giving to be an individual choice. Several studies emphasize the need to know the popular understanding and profile of potential donors, not only for the adoption of effective dissemination strategies, but mainly to ensure compliance with ethical issues important to the maintenance of body donation programs (RIEDERER, 2016). The population's lack of knowledge on the subject and the processes related to donation is the most cited impeding factor in the literature. In Brazil, Da Rocha et al. (2017), in an analysis of 400 donors registered in the PDC of the Federal University of Health Sciences of Porto Alegre (UFCSPA), observed that the majority were elderly women, single or unmarried, affiliated with religious groups, middle class and with at least complete high school or complete or incomplete higher education. and 60% of the donors were over 60 years old at the time of registration. Some studies point to the absence of religious affiliation among potential donors (RICHARDSON, HURWITZ, 1995; RIEDERER, 2016). In the study by Rocha et al. (2017), however, 89% of the donors registered in the CDP stated that they belonged to a religious community, which had no influence on the decision (BOLT, et.al., 2010). Therefore, knowing the donor's profile helps not only to identify this group to guide information campaigns about donation, but also to eliminate some myths about donation.

There is a consensus that there is a low amount of organ donation in relation to the population demand. In 2017, for example, while Brazil had a rate of 15.9 organ donors per million of the population (pmp), Spain had a rate of 46.9 pmp (PIMENTEL, et al, 2018; COELHO, BONELLA, 2019). Regarding lung transplantation, for example, in 2016 the Brazilian Transplant Registry (RBT), carried out by the Brazilian Association of Transplants (ABT) estimated a need for 1,636 transplants and only 92 were performed (ASSOCIAÇÃO BRASILEIRA DE TRANSPLANTE DE ÓRGÃOS (BRAZILIAN ASSOCIATION OF ORGAN TRANSPLANTATION, 2021). In this sense, the Senate Bill (PLS) 453/2017 proposes to amend the legislation in force in Brazil, making it explicit that family consent, in this case the donation of organs, tissues and parts of the human body after death, is only necessary when the potential donor has not, in life, expressed himself expressly and validly in this regard. which aims to reduce family refusal to donate organs (COELHO, BONELLA, 2019). Another bill, 10733/2018 and 3176/2019, proposes to amend Law 9.434/1997, to make every person an organ donor, as long as there is no manifestation to the contrary. In this way, the consent of the donation is presumed.

Other studies have shown a contrary relationship between religion and donation: Oktem et al (2020) 27.5% suggest religious motivation for resistance to donation; Bongiovani, et al (2020), state that about 14% to 18% of respondents agree that the removal of organs harms the body, and hinders





the process of passage when it leads the spirit not to rest because it is incomplete; Boima, Ganu, and Yorke (2020) identified cultural and religious beliefs negatively influencing people's willingness to donate kidneys for transplantation. On the other hand, Bolgeo, Ruta and Damico (2021) point out that the higher the level of spirituality, the more positive the attitude towards giving.

Therefore, it is evident that there is a lack of organs and biological materials available free of charge for therapeutic purposes or scientific benefit in Brazil. Among the factors that influence refusal to donate are religious beliefs. On the other hand, spirituality was shown to be a positive factor in the willingness to be a donor. It is important to emphasize the difference between spirituality and religion, since spirituality is a personal search to understand issues related to the end of life, its meaning, and relations with the sacred or transcendent, which may or may not lead to the development of religious practices or the formation of religious communities (KOENING, McCULLOUGH, LARSON, 2001).

Among the interviewees, only in Candomblé was a reservation to organ donation presented under the justification that the human body does not belong to the being, but to the creative entity of everything that grants life. However, the interviewee himself also said that there is also the premise of solidarity and maintenance of life within religion, which can ratify organ donation. For other religions, organ donation is not a negative attitude, but rather an opportunity to exercise charity and love for others. For atheism, donation is treated as an individual's own choice and, in the interviewee's own conception, the consent of family members also influences their own will. According to the representative of Hinduism, the donation of bodies is very welcome and represents an act against selfishness and that helps to serve others. Moreover, from the perspective of this doctrine, the body, as well as everything that is matter, belongs to God, which reinforces a position of detachment when associated with benevolence as a divine will. In the Spiritist and Catholic doctrine, a similar view was presented, so that the main point taken into consideration was the help to the life of others that can be provided by donation. Detachment from one's own body associated with the desire to help others, without any quid pro quo, must precede the decision to give.

Based on an altruistic premise, activity conducted for the purpose of saving human life is permitted by Islamic law (AASI, 2003). Obstacles preventing posthumous donation of vital organs for transplantation in Bangladesh include sociocultural and religious perceptions, which need to be addressed to save the lives of patients with end-stage organ failure (HA, 2003). Those who donate their organs to the Israel-based Halachic Organ Donation Society (HODS) receive the following statement on the back of the donor card: "With the approval of an authorized rabbi." Although, currently, there are still divergent opinions in Jewish law, religious authorities allow organ donation "to save lives" as long as the necessary criteria are met. Today, many religious authorities who were members of HODS have donated their organs, on the condition that the above-mentioned criteria have been met, and have also expressed their consent by adding the above statement on the donor card (ALALUF, 2020).



No religion has formally opposed the donation or receipt of organs from living or deceased donors for transplant treatment. However, the literature indicates that transplantation from deceased donors may be discouraged by Native Americans, Gypsies, Confucianists, Shintoists, and some Orthodox rabbis (OKTEM, et al, 2020; BONGIOVANI, et al, 2020; BOIMA, et.al., 2020). Some South Asian Muslims (scholars) and muftis (jurists) oppose donation from living and deceased human donors. The human body would be, for them, an "amanat" (guardianship) of God and should not be profaned after death, and research with xenotransplants is possible. No religion formally obliges to donate or refuse organs. No religion formally mandates to consider cadaveric organs "a social resource" or considers organ donation "a religious duty" (except for a few isolated Muslim and Christian rabbis and scholars). Due to the sacredness of human life, the Catholic Church is against donation from anencephalic donors or after active euthanasia. No religion formally prohibits xenotransplantation. As reported by Bruzzone (2008), in 1991, Pope John Paul II, addressing the participants of the First International Congress of the Society for Organ Sharing, commented on numerous issues of an ethical, legal and social nature that need to be investigated more deeply. Thus, the literature points out that religion can offer some influence in decision-making for organ donation (Da SILVA-JÚNIOR, VELUDO-DE-OLIVEIRA, CARVALHO, 2019).

#### 4 FINAL THOUGHTS

This report presents the results of a university extension event, which sought from the various religions and philosophies, the possible influencing factors in the decision making for donation, whether of organs for treatment, or of the body, in whole or in parts, for scientific purposes. Generally speaking, religions are in favor of both possibilities of bestowal, treating both with a benevolent attitude. The direct effect of organ donation on the maintenance of life is one of the main motivators in decision-making and characterizes the benevolent action of the donor. The effects of body donation on the better training of health professionals provide quality health care, directly impacting people's quality of life and indirectly reducing mortality. Thus, it is equally important to foster dialogue on the subject among family members, offer information to the community, and disseminate popular opinion and that of different religions.

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## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

We declare no conflict of interest.

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