Many individuals wonder if agreeing to an autopsy or brain donation goes against religious beliefs. Though the answers vary from one denomination to another, the majority of religions do support post-mortem brain tissue donation and research. While some faiths have particular laws regarding the circumstances and processes of donation, the mandate to heal and the call to compassion are recognized as fundamental to all religions.

Here we cover perspectives from some faiths on organ and tissue donation for transplantation or for research. Please note that while some answers may cover both topics, the Iowa Brain Bank is for research only, we do not provide tissue for medical or therapeutic use. However, we would encourage you to discuss your questions and concerns with your own minister, priest, rabbi, or other spiritual leader while you are considering donation.

**Buddhism**

The Buddhists believe that the decision to donate organs or tissue is a matter of individual conscience. In Buddhism, the death process of an individual is viewed as a very important time that should be treated with care and respect, while preserving the physical integrity of a dead body is not seen as crucial. However, the definition of actual death may vary. For example, according to Tibetan Buddhism, the spiritual ‘consciousness’ may remain in the body for days after the breath has stopped, and the body must remain undisturbed until then, lest disturbance of this process affect the next rebirth. While there is no written resolution on the issue, Reverend Gomay 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."

**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, the free and informed consent of the donor or donor’s family is imperative. The 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 the remains of every human being. Therefore, organs and tissue should be removed only when there is sufficient reason to justify such an action.

**Christian Scientists**

Although the Church of Christ 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.

**Confucianism**

One of the key principles of Confucian society is the deep respect for parents. This could be a factor when family is faced with the decision or not to allow their parent’s organs to be donated. Confucian teaching maintains: “Body, hair and skin are gifts from parents; let no one damage them.” This line of thought would suggest that organ donation is disrespectful of parents. However, modern Confucian scholars have taken different views. They cite Confucius as saying sustenance of self is reliant upon the sustaining of others, indicating that the key principle of righteousness is valued more in Confucianism than preserving the integrity of the dead body, and therefore approve of organ donation.

**Greek Orthodox**

According to Rev. 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, i.e., 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, as the physical integrity of the dead body is not seen as crucial to reincarnation of the soul, according to the Hindu Temple Society of North America. This is considered an individual decision. An important tenet of Hinduism is to help those who are suffering, and selfless giving is seen as a virtuous act. Hasmukh Velji Shah of the World Council of Hindus stated: “The important issue for a Hindu is that which sustains life should be accepted and promoted as Dharma (righteous living). Organ donation is an integral part of our living.”

Islam
Violating the human body, whether living or dead, is forbidden in Islam. However, altruism is also an important principle of Islam, and saving a life is placed very highly in the Qur’an: “Whosoever saves the life of one person it would be as if he saved the life of all mankind (Chapter 5:32).” In this dilemma, the principle that reconciles the two is ‘necessity overrides prohibition’. According to A. Sachedina in his Transplantation Proceedings’ (1990) article, "...the majority of the 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." Donation for research is a more complex issue and is best addressed with an appropriate cleric or other authority.

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 are often assumed to be opposed to donation because of their belief against blood transfusion. However, donation may be permissible if all blood is removed from the donated organs and tissue.

Judaism
Jewish law sanctions the performance of autopsies only in certain, very limited circumstances. The Jewish faith places great importance on avoiding any unnecessary interference with the body after death, and requires burial of the complete body, typically within 24 hours. However, many Jewish scholars feel that concerns regarding organ donation are overridden by the urge to save lives as a fundamental value in Judaism, as Jewish law demands that one should violate almost all other commandments in order to save a life. 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. Opinions vary significantly within different strains of Judaism (Reconstructionist, Reformed, Conservative and Orthodox).

Lutheran
The Lutheran Church -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. Rev. 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 time of tragedy.”

Protestant (other denominations)
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.
Shintoism
In Shinto, the dead body is considered to be impure and dangerous and, thus, quite powerful. “In folk belief context, injuring a dead body is a serious crime...” according to E. Namihira in his article, Shinto Concept Concerning the Dead Human Body. Families often are concerned that they not injure the itai, the relationship between the dead person and the bereaved people.

Sikhism
The word Sikh implies learner. The ethos of a Sikh is that religion should be practiced in the living world by dealing with life’s day to day problems. Sikhs believe in life after death and a continuous cycle of rebirth. The physical body is not viewed as important in this process.

Taoism
Taoism is a philosophical tradition from Eastern Asia whose stance on transplantation essentially revolves around the ethos that changes made to Human form cannot truly affect the essence of life. Organ donation is therefore generally approved.

Additional resources:
https://academic.oup.com/ndt/article/26/2/437/1894177
https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3782236/
https://www.iowadonornetwork.org/understanding-donation/religious-views-regarding-donation-transplantation