

Oath of a Muslim Physician*

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Webster's dictionary defines an oath as (a): a solemn, usually formal calling upon God to witness to the truth of what one says or to witness that one sincerely intends to do what one says. (b): a solemn attestation of the truth or inviolability of one's words.

Within all human societies, members of religious, political and professional groups have taken oaths since time immemorial. The oath of Hippocrates¹ has been solemnly taken by all physicians upon the undertaking of their medical professional duties. Even today, most graduating medical classes take this oath all around the world as a well established medical tradition. Other oaths have been proposed; the oath of a Hindu physician,² the oath of Maimonides,³ and more recently, the Geneva oath⁴ adopted by the World Medical Association. We present some of these oaths in greater detail and analyze them from a Islamic point of view. It will be clear that neither the traditional Hippocratic oath nor the contemporary Geneva oath are acceptable as the oath of a muslim physician.

(1) Oath of Hippocrates

Hippocrates (fl. 400 B.C.), the famous Greek physician and the author of a number of medical works known as the Hippocratic Collection is traditionally regarded as the "father of medicine."

The major source of material on his life is the biography written by Soranus, a Greek physician of the second century A.D. According to Soranus, Hippocrates was born on the Island of Cos off the coast of Asia Minor at a date corresponding to 460 B.C. Both Soranus and Plato speak of him as a member of the sect, family, guild, or society known as the Asclepiadae (i.e. sons of Asclepius).

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The character and abilities of Hippocrates as a physician have been held in almost universal veneration by medical men in the ages which followed. Nevertheless, early references to him are very scanty. He was mentioned only twice by Plato (in the dialogues Protagoras and Phaedrus). In view of the fact that Plato was his younger contemporary, it is surprising that he does not mention Hippocrates more often - especially in the Timaeus, which deals with physiologic subjects. Aristotle mentioned the name of Hippocrates only once (in his Politics) but a number of parallels can be discovered between works of the Hippocratic Collection and those of Aristotle, most frequently in Aristotle's *Historia Animalium*.

The historical uncertainty about Hippocrates himself in no way alters the significance of the so-called Hippocratic Collection, brought together probably not long after 300 B.C. by the Alexandria School. The Collection as a whole embodies the philosophy of the school at Cos. The Collection includes the Hippocratic oath, the Aphorisms and works on various aspects of medicine - on epilepsy, on epidemics, on the treatment of head wounds, on ancient medicine, etc. There are excellent English translations by W.H.S. Jones (1923) and by J. Chadwick and W.N. Mann (1950).

Hippocrates taught and practiced in Thrace, Thessaly, Delos, Athens and elsewhere and died at Larissa at an advanced age. He formulated the oath that was to be taken by all physicians after him. Its text follows:

"I swear by Apollo, the Physician, by Aesculapius, by Panacea, and by all the Gods and Goddesses, calling them to witness that according to my ability and judgement I will in every particular keep this, my oath and covenant: to regard him who teaches this art equly with my parents, to share my substance, and, if he be in need, to relive his necessities; to regard his offspring equly with my brethren; and to teach them this art if they shall wish to learn it, without fee or stipulation; to impart knowledge by precept, by lecture, and by every other mode of instruction to my sons, to the sons of my teacher, and to pupils who are bound by stipulation and oath, according to the law of medicine, but to no other.

I will use that regimen which, according to my

ability and judgement, shall be for the welfare of the sick, and I will refrain from that which shall be baneful and injurious. If any shall ask of me a drug to produce death, I will not give it, nor will I suggest such counsel. In like manner I will not give to a woman a destructive pessary.

With purity and holiness will I watch closely my life and my art. I will not cut a person who is suffering from a stone, but will give way to those who are practitioners in this work. Into whatever home I shall enter, I will go to aid the sick, abstaining from every voluntary act of injustice and corruption, and from lasciviousness with women or men . . . free or slaves.

Whatever in the life of men I shall see or hear, in my practice or without my practice, which should not be made public, this will I hold in silence, believing that such things should not be spoken.

While I keep this, my oath, inviolate and unbroken, may it be granted to me to enjoy life and my art, forever honored by all men; but should I by transgression violate, be mine the reverse."

(2) Oath of Maimonides

Maimonides (Mūsā Bin Maimōn) (1135-1204 A.D.) was a Jewish philosopher, physician, and master of rabbinic literature. His full Arabic name was Abū Aḥram Mūsā ibn Ibrāhīm 'Ubid Allāh and was also known from his initials with his title rabbi, as Rambam. He was born in Cordoba, Spain, of an illustrious Jewish family and educated by his learned father. When Cordoba fell to the Almohads in 1148, the family emigrated first to Morocco, then for a short while to Palestine and finally to Egypt. Maimonides eventually settled in Fuṣṭāṭ, a suburb of Cairo, where he attained the position of "NAGID" of accredited leader of Egyptian Jewry. He was appointed as a court physician to Sultan Ṣalāḥuddīn. Maimonides formulated an oath/prayer, whose text follows:³

"Thy eternal Providence has appointed me to watch over the life and health of thy creatures. May the love of my art actuate me at all times; may neither avarice, nor the thirst for glory, nor for great reputation engage in my mind, for the enemies of truth and philanthropy could easily deceive me and make me forgetful of my lofty aim of doing good to thy children.

May I never see in the patient anything but a fellow creature in pain.

Grant me strength, time and opportunity always to correct what I have acquired, always to extend its domain; for knowledge is immense and the spirit of men and extent infinitely to enrich itself daily with new requirements. Today he can discover his errors of yesterday and tomorrow he may obtain in new light on what he thinks himself sure of today.

O God! thou has appointed me to watch over the

life and death of thy creatures; here I am ready for my vocation. And now I turn unto my calling; O! stand by me, my God, in this truly important task; grant me success for - without thy loving counsel and support, man can avail but naught. Inspire me with true love for my art and for thy creatures. O! grant that neither greed for gain, nor thirst for fame, nor vain ambition, may interfere with my activity. For these I know are enemies of truth and love of men, and might beguile one in profession from furthering the welfare of thy creatures. O! strengthen me. Grant energy unto both my body and soul, that I might ever be ready to mitigate the woes, sustain and help the rich and poor, the good and bad, enemy, and friend. O! let me ever behold in the afflicted and suffering, only the human being."

(3) Geneva Oath

The World Medical Association during its general assembly meeting in Geneva adopted a modern version of the Hippocratic oath upon the urging of Dr. Cibrie (France), and Dr. Pridham (England). This was called the Geneva oath and was officially adopted on September 9, 1948. Its text follows:⁴

"Now being admitted to the profession of medicine, I solemnly pledge to consecrate my life to the service of humanity. I will give respect and gratitude to my deserving teachers. I will practice medicine with conscience and dignity. The health and life of my patient will be my first consideration. I will hold in confidence all that my patient confides in me. I will maintain the honor and the noble traditions of the medical profession. My colleagues will be as my brothers. I will not permit considerations of race, religion, nationality, party politics or social standing to intervene between my duty and my patient. I will maintain the utmost respect for human life from the time of its conception. Even under threat I will not use my knowledge contrary to the laws of humanity. These promises I make freely and upon my honor."

Ethics of an Oath

It is interesting to note that two of the oldest codes of medical ethics i.e. the oath of Hippocrates¹ and the oath of a Hindu physician,² stress certain personal behavioral and ethical qualities of the physician which may not necessarily be related to his profession. In addition to the professional requirement of applying proper care, protecting life, helping the sick and not divulging confidential matters related to the patient, Hippocrates requires the physician to express his gratitude to his teachers in all possible ways, while the Hindu physician is expected to be chaste and abstainous, to speak the truth and not eat any meat.

The above mentioned personal features indicate a high personal moral quality and a good degree of spiritual and physical discipline. The wise physicians

of old apparently realized that personal behavior in private life can not be separated from behaviour in one's professional life.

In addition to stressing the oneness of a person's ethical standard, both at private and professional levels, these two codes of ethics definitely indicate the presence of a higher Divine Being who is the observer and watcher over the physician. Hippocrates starts his oath by swearing by various ancient Greek gods,¹ while the Hindu physician ends his message to his fellow physicians by saying: "In face of gods and men, you take upon yourself these vows. May all the gods aid you if you abide thereby; otherwise may all the gods and the sacra, for which you stand, be against you, and the people shall consent to this saying: "so be it."²

We, as Muslims recognize the grave errors in Hippocrates' oath and the Hindu statements believing in multiple gods as they were influenced by the prevailing polytheistic religions. However, they at least recognized the essential role of a Higher Being, and did not, erroneously and arrogantly, fully rely on their ownelves for the security and assurance of their pledge. The contemporary secular codes of ethics such as the pledges of the American College of Surgeons,³ the International College of Surgeons,⁶ and the Geneva Declaration of Medical Ethics,⁴ provide the only guarantee and assurance of the commitment by saying: "I pledge myself." Instead of reducing the multiple gods to one God, they abolished everything which could directly or indirectly relate to a higher Divine Being. The Soviet physician goes even further and adds to the list of commitments in his oath the following statement:⁷ "to conduct all my actions according to the principles of the Communistic Morale," a statement which totally destroys the ethical value of his oath.

Maimonides' oath clearly emphasizes the role of God, and the humility of Man before his Creator. It is quite obvious that Maimonides' upbringing in an Islamic environment and his exposure to the writing of Islamic philosphers at the time of the zenith of Islamic civilization had great influence on his oath.

Another interesting change in the pattern of medical ethical codes was the elimination of injunctions implying sexual restrictions. Such injunctions could only be found in the ancient codes. Hippocrates said in his oath: "Into whatever house I enter, I will go into it for the benefit of the sick and will abstain from any voluntary act of mischief, especially from the seduction of women and men, slaves or free."¹ This valuable statement was completely omitted from the Geneva version of the Hippocratic oath, as modified in 1948.⁸ The Hindu physician made a similar statement in his oath: "You must not seek another's wife or goods. Do not treat women except when their men be present. Never take

a gift from a woman without her husband's consent."² Although it is still considered an ethical requirement to have nurse or a relative present while examining a female patient, we have not been able to find this rule written in any of the contemporary codes of ethics. As a matter of fact, according to some contemporary thinking, such a requirement could be regarded as sex discrimination. (For further discussion see Dr. El-Kadi's article that follows).

We, Muslims believe in the sound traditions of the Sunnah and above all the irrevocable truth revealed in Qur'ān. As the condition of an oath being solemn, sincere, and meaningful, how can we take the Oath of Hippocrates which calls upon Apollo, Aesculapius, Hygeia, and all the gods and goddesses of Greek Panacea, "na'ūzubillāh." To take this oath is a violation of our essence as Muslims, the irreverant revocation against Tawhīd, the ignominious voicing against the Oneness of Allah, subhānahu wa ta'ālā (SWT), whose absolute unity represents the unity of Truth, the unity of Justice, the unity of Reality, and the Universe.

Because the Geneva Oath leaves out God, with its modern inclinations towards atheistic humanism, it also cannot be considered as a solemn and meaningful oath. For this oath places the humanity's or society's trust upon the feeble human conscience or the so-called honor of men in the context of relative values of a materialistic philosophy of life. Man's history has shown again and again that the human conscience cannot truly and solemnly abide with a covenant or an oath which it makes only with its ownself. No oath or covenant can be made by a Muslim and be binding unless it is made with the one and only incomparable God, Allāh (SWT) from whose infinite wisdom emanates all truth, all justice and all love.

Any oath we take, any covenant we make, if it is not with our Creator, is not absolute, is not binding, is not solemn, is not sincere, is not meaningful, and is nothing but hypocrisy. It is with this conviction that an oath for the Muslim physician, is proposed. It is a composite of writings from Ibn Sīnā, Luqmān al-Hakīm and other contemporary Muslim physicians, that was compiled by one of us (B.A.Z.)

The Oath of A Muslim Physician

Praise be to Allāh (God), the Teacher, the Unique, Majesty of the heavens, the Exalted, the Glorious, glory be to Him, the Eternal Being who created the Universe and all the creatures within, and the only Being who containeth the infinity and the eternity. We serve no other God besides thee and regard idolatry as an abominable injustice.

Give us the strength to be truthful, honest, modest, merciful and objective.

Give us the fortitude to admit our mistakes, to

amend our ways, and to forgive the wrongs of others.

Give us the wisdom to comfort and counsel all toward peace and harmony.

Give us the understanding that ours is a profession sacred that deals with your most precious gifts of life and intellect.

Therefore, make us worthy of this favored station with honor, dignity and piety so that we may devote our lives in serving mankind, poor or rich, wise or illiterate, Muslim or non-Muslim, black or white with patience and tolerance, with virtue and reverence, with knowledge and vigilance, with Thy love in our hearts and compassion for Thy servants, Thy most precious creation.

Hereby we take this oath in thy name, the Creator of all the heavens and the earth and follow thy counsel as thou has revealed to Prophet Mohmmad (PBUH).

“... Whoever killeth a human being, not in lieu of another human being nor because of mischief on earth, it is as if he hath killed all mankind. And if he saveth a human life, he hath saved the life of all mankind...”

Editor's note:

This oath was presented at the 9th Annual Convention of the Islamic Medical Association in Newark, N.J., 1976, and was adopted as the official oath of the Muslim physician by the Islamic Medical Association in the 10th Annual Convention, 1977. This oath will be proposed for adoption as the oath

for all Muslim physicians to be taken upon graduation, or entry of medical societies.

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