Honey, Hadiths, and Health Day
A Spectrum of Healing in the Daily Life of Boston Muslims

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Preface

In the weeks since composing and then presenting this paper at the 8 May 2001 Religious Healing in Boston symposium, at which we first presented our work, I have spent a great deal of time reflecting on my project on Islam and healing in Boston. I would like to share a few of my thoughts here to provide a wider context for the paper that follows.

The first issue that I have reflected on is my presentation of Islam. My interest is in what people do, what they say, and how they draw on religious resources in different ways. Individuals are always in the process of constructing their ideas about healing in Islam—they are not necessarily consistent and their thoughts change over time. Many people with whom I spoke, both during my project and after the presentation of my paper at the symposium, were concerned that I present the "true, pure Islam" accurately. There is a perception that certain practices of Muslims are "cultural," "folk," or "non-Islamic" and that these must be differentiated from the real Islam. However, my goal was not to present religious doctrine in a cohesive manner but, rather, to present the ways in which different Muslims live, speak, and behave. One of the stated goals of the Religion, Health, and Healing Initiative is to broaden understandings of what health is and to understand what religious communities can bring to the healing enterprise. Part of the hope is to broaden communication between biomedical professionals and religious communities. Given this, it is important to understand what, exactly, people are doing, rather than what they should be doing and saying according to religious doctrine. Understanding what people do will help biomedical professionals to be more receptive of and to incorporate different techniques when addressing illness.

Additionally, this was a survey project—I focused on getting a "snapshot" of what was happening in terms of healing in the Boston Muslim communities. I am certain that there are many more layers to understanding health and healing in particular communities. The goal, however, was to gain a sense of the variety and breadth of Islamic approaches to healing, and this paper reflects this goal. In taking this survey approach, I began by contacting Muslim students and faculty at Harvard, and they in turn suggested particular individuals in the Boston communities to contact. In general, the people I spoke with were well-educated Muslim professional men—doctors, consultants, engineers, and imams. Importantly, Muslim women were rarely recommended to me as knowledgeable individuals to speak with. Yet, I was able to speak informally with many women during social events and after prayers. I have a sense that there may be more healing activities done just by women and/or done in the home that I was unable to learn about, because it was typically not women who I was speaking with in an official capacity.

Given the reality of negative stereotypes about Islam in the United States, there likely was concern in the communities that I (as a non-Muslim graduate student) might use the information provided in an undesirable manner. I am certain that this issue both prevented people from sharing information and inspired people to share their thoughts with me. The backdrop of this concern regarding stereotypes must simply be acknowledged as something that affected the project in a broad sense. It is my hope that this paper helps to break down stereotypes and reflects the diversity of the Muslim community in America.

Introduction

I had the pleasure, over several months, of speaking with a number of Muslims in the Boston area regarding their conceptions of health as it relates to their religious faith. As I engaged in these discussions, I found a wide variety of responses and emphases regarding healing practices. This is primarily due to the diverse nature of the Islamic communities in the greater Boston area. There are large numbers of both African-American and Euro-

American Muslims, as well as Muslims who have immigrated to Boston. Muslims from areas such as Syria and Lebanon settled in Boston in the early part of the twentieth century, and in more recent decades Muslim immigrants have come from countries such as Pakistan, Turkey, India, Egypt, and Iran. Muslims in Boston participate in many different types of religious activities: a person might take Arabic courses at one of the three major Islamic centers, attend lectures at the Islamic Society of Boston, participate in *zikr*s with a Sufi organization, or do Friday Jumah prayers at the Masjid al-Qur'an.

Given the diversity of the Muslim community, there is a variety of approaches to health and healing; however, one important theme does broadly unify the Muslim population. This is the ability to draw upon biomedical and scientific approaches, traditional Islamic medicine, folk practices, American social service orientations, and scriptural commandments in a noncontradictory and fluid manner. In other words, these different resources for healing practices and conceptions of health are effectively sewn together in a seamless manner and all become part of an "Islamic" approach to health. I found this theme articulated repeatedly by people coming from different Muslim communities. I spoke with religious leaders and members of the Islamic Center of Boston, the Islamic Center of New England (both Quincy and Sharon branches), the Masjid al-Qur'an, the Islamic Society of Boston, the Nizari Ismaili Cultural Center, the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, and the Boston Sufi Order. I also spoke with Muslim chaplains and Muslim students and faculty here at Harvard. I formally interviewed some individuals, and others I spoke with more informally, either after prayers or during social events. Certainly, religious people draw upon a variety of sources when making ethical decisions, when thinking about health. Yet, what makes the situation distinct in the Boston Muslim community is the ease with which people bind disparate elements of their experience into a single, unique Islamic approach to healing and health.

The majority of the people I interviewed expressed a deep sense of awe and respect for Islam as a religion that is complete and bounded, as something that provides all the answers. There was a common assertion that contemporary science and medical practice only "discover" or "develop" ideas and techniques that Allah has provided, many of which are already written about in the Qur'an. Scientific discoveries only "prove" how amazing and correct the Prophet's recommendations were, or reemphasize the importance of Qur'anic law. This sense that everything links back to Allah and Islamic tradition allows for a seamless integration of social services, medical technology, and scientific discoveries into the Muslim perspective on health. Regardless of the ethnic, cultural, doctrinal, or membership differences among the people I talked with, the emphasis remained on the ability of Islam as a religion to provide all the remedies and answers, as well as to enhance (not contradict or supplement) other practices and beliefs.

To illustrate this point, I would like to draw upon information from an article titled "Alternative Medicines: The Miracle of Honey," which a member of the Islamic Society of Boston suggested I read. The article begins with a statement from the Qur'an in which God has inspired the bee. The Qur'an states: "There comes forth from their bellies a drink of varying color wherein is healing for men." Next, the article discusses a *hadith* in which the Prophet advises a man who has come to him with stomach problems to drink honey; the man drinks the honey and is cured of his ailment. The Prophet declares that honey can help with a variety of medical problems. The article then moves on to explain that "modern medicine" is just beginning to discover the healing power of honey. The article reads:

> Research has . . . shown that honey blocks the growth of oral bacteria. . . . Modern research shows that honey is effective when used in the treatment of gastric or peptic stomach ulcers. Research has also revealed that honey is effective in the treatment of various wounds and infections because of its antimicrobial (antibacterial, antiviral and antifungal) properties.[1]

What this article indicates is that Allah is the base, then the Prophet reiterates the healing power of honey, and then "modern scientific discoveries" also prove that honey is beneficial.

The title of my paper ("Honey, Hadiths, and Health Day: A Spectrum of Healing in the Daily Life of Boston Muslims") further reflects this overriding theme in Boston's Muslim communities: honey (as alluded to above) is commonly used to help heal cuts, remove acne, sooth the throat, and settle the stomach; *hadith*s (sayings or traditions of the Prophet) are drawn upon as a source for how to live a healthy life; and, finally, Health Day was an activity sponsored by the Islamic Center of New England in Quincy, for which pharmaceutical companies provided funding, booths were set up to explain the U.S. health care system and health insurance, doctors tested people for high blood pressure, and several imams gave lectures about healthy living. Each of these components—folk or traditional Islamic

medicine, textual or Prophetic references, and biomedical resources—are woven together into a total Muslim approach. There is no sense of science being at odds with religion; rather, the approaches mutually reinforce one another. Thus, as the Muslim community in Boston has grown, the people have mobilized a variety of resources to discuss what health means and which healing techniques can be used. A Muslim can draw upon a wide spectrum of resources because, ultimately, they are all derived from Allah.

Preventative Medicine and the Prophet as the Physician Exemplar

In asking Boston Muslims about health, one of the first things typically mentioned was something the prophet Muhammad said or did that related to healthy living. The Prophet's own way of living and his advice serve as a primary model for how to prevent illness, as well as how to heal people when they are sick. My questions often were framed around references to what the community would do if someone became ill or if a family member suffered from chronic illness. Instead of responding to my question about a specific time frame—i.e., the time when people were ill—I continually found people wanting to back up and establish a broader framework within which I could understand their responses. Most frequently, this meant understanding the emphasis in Islam on a clean, regulated, healthy lifestyle as exemplified by the prophet Muhammad. Thus, one could not understand what Muslims do when people fall ill without first knowing what it is Muslims believe and how they live when they are not ill.

In setting up the scenario of the healthy Muslim lifestyle, the emphasis was upon regulation of all aspects of life. The Qur'an and the Prophet emphasize how one should eat, how to behave in community, how to move throughout the day, when to sleep, when to pray, and so forth. All of these activities are equated with keeping a person—and keeping the society—in good health. The Prophet serves as the primary model for how to live a healthy life. In fact, many people used the term "preventative medicine" in association with all that the Prophet recommended. Further, the Prophet is sometimes referred to as a physician or medical doctor because he treated people's diseases and provided health care recommendations.

Many Muslims recalled that the Prophet recommended that, when one eats a meal, the stomach should be one-third filled with food, one-third with liquid, and one-third with air—meaning a person should never overeat because this leads to a host of medical problems. Also, the most potent foods (which are thought to prevent a person from falling ill) are honey, olive oil, and dates. The Prophet also prescribed certain times of the day that were better for sleeping.

Another technique designed to provide regular, daily healing are the five daily prayers; one's frame of mind and bodily positions during the prayers are key. Prior to the prayer, a person performs ablutions in which water is used to cleanse parts of the body; the emphasis here is on hygiene and on wiping away worldly concerns. During the prayer, a person assumes certain postures that improve circulation, digestion, and flexibility. At the same time, a person must focus on the prayer, focus thoughts and movements on Allah only.

People also made reference to those items that are *haram*—forbidden—in Islam. The items most frequently mentioned in relation to health were eating pork and ingesting alcohol. The aversion to these substances is profound, and there is great concern that if these are ingested—even unknowingly ingested—they will cause serious problems. In an adult Qur'an class that I attended at the Islamic Center in Wayland, Massachusetts, several mothers discussed how challenging it is to ensure that the products they buy for their families do not contain pork products or alcohol. The women discussed how pork is commonly used in the United States as a cheap substance that binds together medicines, vitamins, and even foods such as cheese. Also, many cold and flu remedies contain alcohol. The women talked about web sites that contain information for Muslim consumers, helping identify which products are acceptable for Muslims to use.

These examples indicate that lifestyle choices help keep a person from becoming ill and that the resources for how to live the correct lifestyle can be found in the Qur'an and in examples from the Prophet's own life.

The Muslim Community as a Body

One of the imams of the Islamic Center of New England linked the health of the individual to the health of the community as a whole. If an individual is behaving properly (following the preventative techniques outlined above) and doing that which is good (following Islamic law), then the society will be healthy. Conversely, if a person is not following the rules, behaving badly, and living improperly, then this affects the entire society. The community itself can be likened to a body—when one part is diseased, it harms the rest of the body. Thus, an

individual's behavior and state of health extend far beyond the individual—they hold importance for the entire community.

The imam shared this conception to show that when a member of the Muslim community becomes ill, everyone in the community feels the ramifications of this fact and suffers because of it. Yet, at the same time, precisely because everyone is connected, there is the opportunity to share the burden and difficulties related to illness. If one person is suffering from anxiety or stress, or has a physical impairment, others in the community seek to help relieve that individual of the problem. When one or two people in the community become ill, they are like a weak limb that everyone else must take care of in order for the entire society (the "body") to be whole and healthy again.

This highlights the importance of networks between families, relatives, and friends in the Muslim context. The ideal is for a person to be healthy, especially because a healthy person can perform all duties, such as praying, working, and giving alms. Thus, it is important for others in the community to try and restore a person to a fully functioning state; in this way, communities are always in the process of managing the health of individuals.

Sources of Illness

Everything comes from Allah, including health. The Muslims I interacted with emphasized that life and one's body is a gift from God (just as children, money, success are gifts). Individuals should never lament their physical condition or feel frustrated and ask, "Why is this happening to me? Why have I become sick?" It is necessary to be patient and not complain about illness; God is all knowing—God gives and takes with divine understanding, and humans cannot hope to comprehend all of God's reasons. Also, there is no ownership over one's body or of one's health—it is God's decision to provide the body and to take it away.

Upon further discussion with people, the "reasons" why they become ill began to emerge. Based on my conversations with Boston Muslims, I was able to discern the following three main reasons for illness:

1. *Cause and Effect Illness*. A person does something wrong (i.e., breaks a clear religious rule) and contracts a disease as punishment (because the person did not follow the proper route to maintaining wholeness and health).

2. *Illness as a Lesson, Warning, or Realignment*. A person becomes sick and is then forced to stop and review his or her activities and lifestyle. Often this means that, in the process, the person "relearns" or "discovers" that which is most important in life (health, family, kindness to others). For those who pass through this "test of illness," their faith will be stronger in the long run, and it will have far-reaching spiritual effects.

3. *Illness from Djinn*. A *djinn* can inhabit a person's body and cause sickness.[2] It takes time to remove the *djinn*, and a knowledgeable individual (such as an imam or sufi saint) usually must perform an exorcism to help remove it. Sufis and some Sunni/Shi'i Muslims in Boston believe in *djinn*/spirit illness, but others do not include this belief in their understandings of illness.

Though God is ultimately in control of human illness and wellness, humans play an important role in relieving illness. Though people must be patient and endure, they are also required to seek out the cure for their illness. The *hadith* most frequently cited to me by Boston Muslims states (paraphrasing) that "for every illness, there is a cure" (except death). This does not mean that people will always find the cure that corresponds to the illness they have, but it does mean the cure exists. Thus, people must always strive to find the cure and not give up hope. Many people phrased this as meaning that they are required to seek out medical (allopathic) doctors who can help them to find a cure. Cures are not "created" by humans; people realize or come to understand cures, but they were created by God and ultimately come from God. This belief that there is a cure for every illness provides the grounding for the theme prevalent among Boston Muslims: humans mobilize different resources to uncover the cures and answers that Allah has provided.

Healing Techniques

What do Muslims in Boston do when a person becomes ill? The first important response among Boston Muslims is to visit the sick person. Visiting the sick is a religious requirement and is considered to be a very important and respectable activity. The various mosques and Islamic centers in Boston will make announcements of who is ill in the community, and it is expected that community members will go to visit—even if they do not know the sick person. The act of visiting the sick person is thought both to bring joy and to help release the ill person from pain and, simultaneously, to bring benefit to those who are visiting. The prayers of a sick person are thought to be particularly meritorious and potent. This is because people who are ill are not completely in the everyday world; they are set apart by their potential closeness with death and by the

fact that they have had time to reflect upon their life. They are closer to God by virtue of their state of illness, and, hence, their prayers are more likely to be heard by God. Thus, a Muslim can help an ill Muslim brother or sister by visiting with them and making prayers; at the same time, the sick Muslim can make prayers for their visitors in the hopes that Allah will hear these prayers.

When asked about particular healing techniques, I noticed that many Muslims would reference techniques used in the past or those used outside of the United States. Examples include drinking the ink used by scribes to write pages of the Qur'an or taking pages of the Qur'an and wrapping them around a damaged body part for healing benefits. Such activities are known of here, but there is an emphasis that this is not done here (although some people I spoke with suspect it might happen). To use the Qur'an in this way is forbidden by the tradition (according to *hadith*); however, some Muslims do so despite this, in the hopes of deriving healing benefits.

Next, there are healing techniques that are used by some Muslims and rejected by others. These include the wearing of amulets to protect against evil *djinn* and visiting the grave of a holy person. Members of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship (a Sufi organization) make trips to the *mazar* (or grave site) of their shaykh who passed away in Philadelphia in the late 1980s. People visit this grave site for renewal, to make prayers for health, and to drink water from the well near the grave (which is said to be linked to the healing *zamzam* waters near Mecca).

The Qur'an itself and the word of God are viewed as healing agents. Opening the Qur'an, reading from it, hearing it read, and performing prayers are all forms of healing. Often, people will gather at the home of a relative of an ill person to read from the Qur'an and to pray for the ill person to regain good health. Sometimes, relatives will rise in the third watch of the night, just before sunrise, to do prayers for the sick person, because it is thought that this is the time in which people are closest to God and when the prayers are most likely to be heard. Salih Yucel, a Muslim chaplain, noted that he often brings tapes of the call to prayer to play for sick Muslims. Such prayers can be heard from hospital beds in predominantly Muslim countries, but in the United States, this situation must be recreated via a recording so that the beneficial healing effects of this can be provided to the sick person.

The friends and relatives of sick individuals can do *sadaka* (or *sadaqa*), which refers to charity, gift, or alms that are given in a ceremony that involves hosting a communal meal.[3] In Boston, some Muslims will do *sadaka* for the sake of the sick person in their family; this may mean giving money to someone who is needy or donating money for a public good, such as the construction of a school.

The Boston Sufi order holds a regular healing circle on Thursday evenings where prayers are made for ill people. One woman (Catherine Hayat Feist) coordinates the healing circle; she keeps a list of names that people give her throughout the week (via phone, e-mail, etc.) and then reads these names at the Thursday night meeting. The four elements are represented at the center of the room (fire—candle or incense; water—small bowl of water, which is drunk at the end of the service; earth—a plant in a large pot of soil; and air) and people gather around these in a circle formation. A prayer is said to open the service, then Hayat reads aloud the names of the sick people. The other people present concentrate and, as each name is read aloud, they imagine the person as a whole, restored, and healthy individual. This practice is thought to provide healing for those people whose names are read.

The final healing ritual practiced by some Boston Muslims is *zikr*—the remembrance of God by chanting the multiple names of God. *Zikr* is something that tends to be associated with Sufis, though Muslims who do not identify themselves as Sufi also do *zikr*. *Zikr* is a type of healing because it allows people to be on the straight path, meaning they will always keep Allah first and foremost in their lives. Chanting the different names of God repeatedly allows a person to let go of all other thoughts, stresses, and pressures and to realign with the truth of Allah. When people are ill, they are often blocked off from their relationship with Allah, and practicing *zikr* can help them to realign this relationship. *Zikr* can be done silently or in a vigorous, loud manner; it can be done alone or in a large group, sitting or standing. *Zikr* can be thought of as a technique for a sick person to practice or as a form of preventive medicine. Practicing *zikr* can help prevent things that cause illness (such as *djinn*, wrong eating habits, forgetting to follow God's rules, forgetting that life is a gift from God and that health is a blessing). By keeping Allah central and thinking of Allah with every breath and every heartbeat, the troubles of the world remain at a distance.

Future Directions: Social Services and Continued Growth

Navigating a uniquely Islamic way of life in Boston is a challenge. For many of the Muslim communities, the newest addition to their spectrum of healing resources are social services. Many of the mosques and Islamic centers were founded in the

1980s and 1990s and their initial focus was on providing physical space for prayer and then Islamic education, especially for children. The new challenge is to develop other services community members need, such as chaplaincy, support groups, and end-of-life services (especially ensuring that funeral preparation is done according to Islamic law). Some of this is already in place. For example, the African-American Masjid al-Qur'an has a volunteer-run health committee that attends to end-of-life services; however, more services are needed. Also, in the 1990s there was an increase in the number of Muslim chaplains who are affiliated with local Boston hospitals. Several Muslim doctors noted that many of the Muslim planning committees have discussed how to develop outreach groups, nonprofits, and social services based on similar American secular and other religious models. Yet, this all takes time, planning, and volunteer-based work. Perhaps the "Health Day" event can be thought of as a precursor to more concrete, regular services. Development of these types of services will be the next major focus in these communities over the next decade, and this will likely follow the pattern already well established by Boston Muslims: new services will be woven into the spectrum of Muslim approaches to health and healing in this city, which, in the end, points out that everything is derived from Allah.

Notes

1. Taylor, Vivian bint Joan. "Alternative Medicines: The Miracle of Honey," <http://www.islamzine.com/health/honey.html> (20 March 2001).

2. A *djinn* is a spirit created from fire (angels are made of light, humans are made of mud and clay, while *djinn* are made from fire). *Djinn* tend to affect people mentally, and are sometimes said to be the cause of madness. There are good and bad *djinn*, with the bad ones affecting humans. Sometimes a person can control a *djinn* and use the *djinn* to cause another person to become ill.

3. Vincent Crapanzano, *The Hamadsha: A Study in Moroccan Ethnopsychiatry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 185.

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Resources from the Pluralism Project, Harvard University

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