## Islam, Conscience and Medicine

A recent development in the health-care field raises new issues

BY ABDULHAKIM AGHIL



medicine is ripe for conversation and research. For example, classical Islamic literature focused on the Muslim clinicians' adab (character) and the medical field's guiding maxim: "One neither causes nor reciprocates harm." This maxim is based on how the Prophet (salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam) interacted with other people, never overstepped the boundaries established by God and gave each person his or her fair due.

Refreshing our knowledge about the *deen* and reaffirming our emulation of the prophetic character is especially important in our present circumstances. As a medical student, I see an ever-increasing number of Muslims entering the health-care field and moving up the ranks in hospitals and clinics nationwide. However, what I do not see is an accompanying increase in the number of serious and informed discussions on topics like Islamic bioethics and what it means to be a Muslim in the health-care world.

Anecdotally, it appears that most of these Muslims keep their heads low and go along with the prevailing procedures and/ or policies. This is astonishing, as so much in health care relates directly to the abovecited prophetic maxim. Given that physicians, nurses and health-care workers make decisions about their patients' lives/futures all the time, how their personal religious and moral convictions fit into this puzzle is an essential matter that need to be addressed.

This was brought to a head by a May 2019 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services directive that protects health-care workers' moral agency and religious liberties. However, if practitioners make patient-care decisions based on religious convictions, how do we reconcile this with the fact that they may be harming the patient and thereby infringing upon the abovementioned maxim.

But before delving into all of this, we should dispel the notion that medicine and health care are morally neutral professions in which our personal moral convictions play no part. Previously, the only relevant Islamic discussions on this matter have been along the lines of "just go along and follow the standards set up by the profession." Perhaps our conscience is subservient to our duty to our patients, and thus our personal moral convictions take a back seat while in the hospital/clinic. However, if we truly believe that Islam is our way of life, then we must realize that each of our actions and decisions are either rewarded or not, that every action and decision has moral valence, for "Say, 'Surely my prayer, my sacrifice, my life, and my death are all for Allah, Lord of all the worlds" (6:162).

If we realize that every interaction with others is an opportunity to build our *akhirah* (eternal afterlife), then we will fully understand the seriousness of our position. Only at that point will we recognize Islam as our way of life and seek to emulate the prophetic character in this regard as best we can. Our goal should be that our conscience, ability to discern right from wrong and our inner force to do good is shaped by divine laws and nurtured by emulating the Prophet.

Most of the time, our conscience adheres to the expected professional norms of patient-care and health-care customs. Treating patients with respect and mercy, not causing harm and so on are important pillars of our obligation as health-care workers. However, following our conscience can be extremely tough at times, especially when our moral convictions differ from what the professional standards expect from a health-care worker.

This is where the DHHS's new directive becomes imperative, for it establishes that physicians and health-care workers have moral agency and can use their professional, medical and ethical judgment without being coerced into violating their religious and moral convictions. The rule protects individuals from discrimination on the basis of their exercise of conscience. While the DHHS singles out and focuses on conscientious objections to such hot button topics like abortion, sterilization and assisted suicide, this directive should be observed as having a much larger impact.

Muslim health-care workers and Muslims in general can derive two major points from this new DHHS directive. First, Muslim health-care workers in the U.S. can now implement their moral and religious convictions while working. Perhaps in the past they feared being fired or passed over for promotion, and thereby jeopardizing their careers, if they brought religion into the workplace. Hopefully, this directive will lessen the anxiety of choosing between professional obligations and religious convictions.

While it doesn't remove all obstacles to implementing one's religious convictions, moral agency is powerful. I hope that we, as a community, will step up and take advantage of this opportunity. This is less about what your conscience and moral convictions entail, and more about the fact that you

now have moral agency to act upon those moral and ethical convictions.

Second, and perhaps more pertinent, is that now would be a good time for introspection, to reexamine how our moral and ethical convictions affect our day-to-day decisions and actions, and to begin talking about how we interact with the surrounding society while holding steadfast to our moral and ethical convictions.

Muslim Americans have done a good job of bridging that gap by improving our respective practices through implementing the Prophet's virtuous character. However, we need to realize that the entire health-care profession can be improved if we present ideas found in the Quran and Sunna to our colleagues and peers.

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THIS ISN'T A CALL FOR PROSELYTIZATION. NOR IS A CALL TO INTERJECT A HADITH AND A QURANIC VERSE INTO **EVERY MEETING, FOR DOING SO DOESN'T MAKE OUR ACTIONS "ISLAMIC." WHAT WE NEED TO DO IS OFFER** THE NEW AND ORIGINAL IDEAS FOUND IN ISLAM'S CORE SOURCES AS WELL AS ENGAGE IN THOSE ACTIONS THAT EMULATE THE PROPHETIC CHARACTER.

As the directive is directed mainly toward Christian physicians, most of the language and examples of conscience and moral convictions are centered around them. Islamic scholars, clinicians, nurses and various professionals should now meet and reflect upon what it means to have a conscience in one's workplace, for it is one's conscience that so often spurs religious convictions. In addition, we should start analyzing what it means to truly embody the prophetic character in our workplace and which of our actions there are - and are not — permissible within the context of Islamic law.

Most importantly, we should examine how Islam, following the divine law and emulating the Prophet allow us to both better ourselves in this life and the next, as well as how it can improve our workplaces and professions as a whole. And then, after all of the talking has finished, comes the time to initiate concrete action(s).

In our capacity as Muslim health-care workers, we should be the first ones at the table to help chart the future of health care and health-care policy. We should convene programs on Islamic bioethics and health care for considered deliberation as to where we stand as part of our religious and civic duty. If not, all of our discussions, thinking and talking will just be more empty words.

Right now, there is a gap between our secular professional life in the hospital/ clinic and our personal religious lives.

into every meeting, for doing so doesn't make our actions "Islamic." What we need to do is offer the new and original ideas found in Islam's core sources as well as engage in those actions that emulate the prophetic character.

Ultimately, we must realize that these deliberations over Islam, Islamic bioethics and, in this example, conscience need to be global in nature. If we truly believe that Islam is the best way of life and that it leads to the best outcomes in this life and the hereafter, then we should be looking for ways to implement it among humanity at large. If we can recognize the aforementioned, then we can recognize that such discussions are meaningful on two fronts: We work to positively build our own akhirah through adhering to the divine law and to benefit others in this world by improving our respective professions.

In Surat al-Bagarah, God promises a heavenly reward to those who ask Him for good in this world and in the Hereafter. May He make us part of those people, as well as part of those who He uses to bring good to this world while simultaneously earning good in the Hereafter. in

Abdulhakim Aghil, a second-year medical student at the University of Kentucky's College of Medicine, attended the University of Chicago's Initiative on Islam and Medicine Medical Student internship program. A youth leader in his hometown of Lexington, Ky., he enjoys reading and learning about Islam, medicine and anthropology.

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## **Executive Director Position Available**

The Noor Islamic Cultural Center, a nonprofit 501(c)(3) based in Central Ohio is searching for an Executive Director who is motivated and enthusiastic about working for a nonprofit. The Executive Director will be responsible for the overall operations and programs of NICC, overseeing its administration, programs, and strategic plan. The candidate must demonstrate strong leadership ability, interpersonal skills, project management skills, and an ability to multitask.

Specifically, the Executive Director will:

- Facilitate a strategic planning process and oversee the development and execution of the strategic plan;
- Monitor programs, event budgets, donations, and expenditures;
- Create best practices to manage staff that includes employees, contractors and volunteers;.
- Directly supervise and evaluate the work of NICC employees:
- Support and empower the entire NICC team, including the Executive Committee, staff, program managers, and other volunteers, and foster a positive work environment and culture:
- Manage the Executive Committee and create a teambased environment that promotes clarity, cooperation, collaboration, alignment, and focus to meet NICC's Mission and Vision:
- Work with relevant committee(s) to develop effective and efficient guidelines, processes, and procedures for the Board of Director's review and approval;
- Work with the Board of Directors and the Finance Committee to ensure the fiscal integrity and financial
- Actively participate in NICC's fundraising needs;
- Manage and oversee the distribution of all NICC communication and marketing materials (including but not limited to newsletters, special event notices, press releases, and annual report);
- Negotiate (with cooperation and consultation with the Board of Directors and relevant Executive Committees) contracts and agreements with suppliers, distributors, and other third-party entities for final approval by the Board of Directors;
- Be responsible for Public Relations;
- Maintain NICC's status as a leading Muslim center in Ohio and the Midwest through maintaining an open and welcoming environment, and cultivating relationships with both Muslim and non-Muslim organizations;
- Manage all human resources related functions including recruitment initiatives, development of HR policies, records management, employee relations, performance management, and training and development;
- Work with the appropriate departments to ensure that the NICC property and facilities remain in safe and excellent

## **JOB REQUIREMENTS**

- Education: Minimum BS or BA required. Graduate degree in management preferred.
- Full understanding of and respect for the practices, traditions, theology, and structure of Sunni Islam as practiced in the United States.
- Experience working with and in nonprofit settings
- US citizenship/permanent residence status.
- Excellent verbal and written communication skills, and fluency in English.
- Strong interpersonal skills and ability to manage staff and volunteers.
- Strong public relations skills.
- Computer proficiency with Microsoft Office, including Word and Excel.

This position reports directly to the Board of Directors. We offer a competitive compensation package with health insurance benefits. Interested applicants should send a cover letter and resume to edjob@noorohio.org.