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# THE OATH OF THE HIPPOCRATIC PHYSICIAN AS AN INDO-EUROPEAN FORMULA

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MIGUEL BEDOLLA

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ABSTRACT. The oath of physicians (*orkos*) is an indo-European formula reflecting the beliefs of this culture. It was written when the authority of the Indo-European worldview was declining. To support this thesis the paper shows that: (1) the Greeks were Indo-Europeans; (2) Indo-Europeans had a world vision that understood the cosmos as a society of gods and men, whose activities were grouped in three functions: Priests-lawyers, warriors and husbandmen. (3) Harmony in this society was maintained by *rta*, a force that set up a field of tension that aligned all ideas; (4) *Rta* demanded that gods and men be bound by the **Principle of Reciprocity and Exchange** creating a true friendship between them; (5) Each function had its own gods and responsibilities and its own brand of medicine; (6) Each Indo-European god has an equivalent among the Greek gods, and in particular those mentioned in the Oath; (7) The commitments in the oath are those of two of the Indo-European functions; (8) The oath ends with a formula that is Indo-European. The paper concludes with a reflection on the conditions that led to the writing of the oath, and what this meant for the faith of the people.

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KEY WORDS. *Orkos*, Hippocratic oath, Indo-European worldview, *rta*, Principle of Reciprocity and Exchange, history of medicine, medical ethics.

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## INTRODUCTION

A new ritual was added to American medical education in recent years; it is called the White Coat Ceremony. It usually takes place on the first day of the Freshman Year. During the ceremony, each freshman is given a white coat, imaginably the symbol of medicine, by the dean of the school. The freshmen are then asked to stand and recite an oath. In many, if not most cases, the oath is called "The Physician's Oath of Hippocrates." But, the oath that they recite is not the one that some physicians, "...a small and isolated group," pronounced during Classical Antiquity<sup>1</sup> It is a politically correct oath that resembles the ancient one in rhythm, only. The modern oath says:

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Department of Family and Community Medicine, The University of Texas Health Science Center, San Antonio, Texas 78229, USA. / Bedollin@aol.usa

I do solemnly swear, by whatever I hold most sacred: that I will be loyal to the profession of medicine and just and generous to its members. That I will lead my life and practice my profession in uprightness and honor; that into whatsoever house I shall enter, it shall be for the good of the sick to the utmost of my power, holding myself far aloof from wrong, from corruption and from tempting others to vice; that I will exercise my profession solely for the cure of my patients, and will give no drug, perform no operation for a criminal purpose, even if solicited; far les suggest it; that whatsoever I shall see or hear of the lives of all persons which is not fitting to be spoken, I will keep inviolably secret. These things do I swear. While I continue to keep this oath unviolated, may it be granted to me to enjoy life and the practice of my art, respected by all, in all times. But should I trespass and violate this oath, may the reverse be my lot<sup>2</sup>.

The original oath is different; it states clearly the commitments that the student of medicine makes. Fundamental to them is to practice medicine, not with loyalty or generosity, or in uprightness and honor, but in a manner that keeps the physician's life, and medicine itself, pure and holy. This commitment has disappeared from the modern version. Students who pronounce the modern oath make what is basically a commitment to be loyal to other physicians, to be good, and not to engage in any criminal activity. The ambiguity of this last commitment is very frightening. One must remember that the Nazis have taught us is that absolutely anything can be criminalized, or de-criminalized, by those who have the power to write and interpret the laws<sup>3</sup>.

The origins of the ancient oath have been studied by a number of scholars; best known by English readers are Edelstein, and Carrick. They have usually studied it as a purely Greek formula, that is, as a formula that emerged from the mind of Greek physicians fully formed, as Athena did from the head of her father. They usually conclude that the oath is the formula of a Pythagorean medical sect because its commitments resemble those that would have been made by the followers of Pythagoras<sup>4</sup>. Again, this is said as if Pythagoras and his followers were the sole source of their ideas.

The thesis of this paper is that the ancient oath was written by a group of Greek physicians, but that what they wrote is an Indo-European formula that reflects some of the fundamental beliefs of this culture. This group of physicians, but not all Greek physicians, asked their medical students to recite the oath at a time when the authority of the Indo-European worldview was declining.

To support its thesis the paper will first present a brief description of the role of medicine in Greek culture and the text of the oath; it will also compare it to that of another Greek oath in order to show that Greek oaths had the same general structure. It will also elucidate the nature of oath

saying among the Greeks and discuss the possibility that the oath could have been borrowed from another culture. The paper will, then, present evidence to support the idea that the oath is an Indo-European formula by showing that: (1) the Greeks were an Indo-European; (2) Indo-Europeans had a unique ideology; (3) the Indo-European ideology saw the cosmos as a society of gods and men whose activities are grouped into three functions. (4) that harmony in this society of gods and men was maintained by a force named *rta*, that sets up a noetic field of tension with which all other ideas have to be aligned; (5) that *rta* demands that gods and men be bound to each other by what has been called the Principle of Reciprocity and Exchange from which emerges a true friendship between the gods and men<sup>5</sup>; (6) that each function had its own gods and its own responsibilities toward the maintenance of the harmony of the cosmos, and each had its own brand of medicine, and that each of these Indo-European gods has an equivalent among the gods of the Greeks, in particular among the gods mentioned in the oath; (7) the commitments made by the sayer of the oath are essentially those of two of the Indo-European functions; (8) the oath ends with a formula that is Indo-European; (9) the writers of the oath were influenced by Pythagoreanism, which is not a mystery religion but the doctrines of a remnant of the same priesthood from which the *rex-flamminis* or Rome and the *raj-brahman* of India originated. The paper will conclude with a brief reflection on the conditions that led a group of physicians to write the oath, and what this writing meant within the context of the faith of the people that shared Indo-European culture.

#### GREEK MEDICINE

Medicine played a significant role in shaping Greek culture; it certainly had impact on the development of philosophy<sup>6</sup>. Greek medicine was the first to be technical. This was not enough for some of the physicians; they also consecrated themselves to practice it in such a manner that their lives and medicine would be—*agnos de kai ousias*—pure and holy<sup>7</sup>. They committed themselves to this by pronouncing the oath.

We do not know when the oath was first pronounced, but we know that it was being pronounced between the beginning of the fifth century and the middle of the fourth century BC. These dates also coincide with the emergence of the first Greek schools of medicine<sup>8</sup>. The oath was pronounced by the medical student upon the termination of his studies<sup>9</sup>. This led Plato to believe that physicians were the "...the embodiment of a professional code which is rigorous enough to be a perfect model of the proper relation between knowledge and its purpose in practical conduct<sup>10</sup>." The oldest text of the oath that we have is written in the Ionian dialect<sup>11</sup>.

Since Hippocrates was alive some time during the period in which the oath was first pronounced, the physicians that first pronounced it are called "Hippocratic."

TEXT OF THE OATH

The oath consists of three parts: the beginning or *arche*, the participation or *metalepsis*, and the *telos* or purpose for which the oath is being said. Oaths may have had this general structure. They were said in the names of the gods that were related to the actions being performed.

The *arche* begins with an invocation to the gods of Greek medicine to become the witnesses of the oath-sayer, and then it states the principle to be followed in keeping the oath:

I swear by Apollo Physician and by Asclepius and Hygieia and Panacea and all the gods and goddesses, making them my witnesses that I will fulfill according to my ability and judgment this oath and this covenant.

In the *metalepsis* or participation, the student made the commitments that would allow him to lead his life in a manner that is pure and holy. There are two sets of them, and most scholars consider them to be superficially connected<sup>12</sup>. The first set will be called "economic" because they regulate the relations of the physician to his teacher, to his teacher's male children, to his own children and to all others that may want to study medicine. The second set will be called "clinical" because they state they regulate the relations of the physician toward his patients, his patients' relatives and servants and what he may see or hear during the practice of his profession.

These are the economic commitments:

To hold him that has taught me this art equal to my parents and to live my life in partnership with him, and if he is in need of money to give him a share of mine, and to regard his offspring as equal to my brothers in male lineage and to teach them this art—if they desire to learn it—without fee and covenant; to give a share of precepts and oral instruction and all of the other learning to my sons and the sons of him who has instructed me and to pupils who have signed the covenant and have taken an oath according to medical the medical law, but to no one else.

These are the moral commitments:

I will apply dietetic measures for the benefit of the sick according to my ability and judgment; I will keep them from harm and injustice. I will neither give a deadly drug to anybody if asked for it, nor will I make a suggestion to this effect. Similarly I will not give to a woman an abortive remedy. In purity and holiness I will guard my life and my art. I will not use the knife, not even on sufferers from stone, but will withdraw in favor of such men as are engaged in this work. Whatever houses I may visit, I will come to the benefit of the sick, remaining free from all intentional injustice, of all mischief and in particular of sexual relations with both male and female persons, be they free or slaves.

What I may see or hear in the course of the treatment or even outside of the treatment in regard to the life of man, which on no account one must spread abroad, I will keep to myself holding such things shameful to be spoken about.

The *telos* or purpose for saying the oath was stated with the following words:

If I fulfill this oath and do not violate it, may it be granted to me to enjoy life and art, being honored with fame among all men for all time to come; if I transgress it and swear falsely, may the opposite of all of this be my lot<sup>13</sup>.

The oath is called *orkos* in Greek, a word that simply means “the object by which one swears, the witness of an oath<sup>14</sup>.” The word seems to derive from *erkos*, which refers to what constrains one to the truth<sup>15</sup>. In the case of the oath it is what constrains the physician to the truth of action, as I believe Aristotle would have said<sup>16</sup>.

#### THE TEXT COMPARED

When an Athenian *ephebos* began his military service he pronounced an oath with its own *arche* in which a principle was stated, a *metalepsis* which stated the manner in which the principle would be lived and a *telos* enunciating the reason for saying it:

I will not shame the sacred arms [I have been given] nor will I desert the man at my side wherever I am positioned in line. I shall defend what is sacred and holy and will not pass on to my descendants a diminished homeland, but rather one greater and stronger as far as I am able and with the assistance of all. I will offer my ready obedience at any time to those who are exercising their authority prudently, and to the established laws and to those laws, which will be judiciously in force in the future<sup>17</sup>.

The pronunciation of an oath by anyone, a student of medicine or an *ephebos*, was always taken seriously. Sophocles says that “When an oath has been added, a man is more careful, for he guards against two things, the criticism of his friends and committing a transgression against the gods<sup>18</sup>.”

When a medical student, or an *ephebos*, prepared for taking the corresponding oath he faced a choice between that was pious and what was impious but may bring social or financial gain. “For this reason the maintenance of oaths, at the popular level, was often treated as the key element of personal piety<sup>19</sup>.” Saying an oath was frequently accompanied by a libation, or it occurred in the presence of the victims of a sacrifice<sup>20</sup>. This was to remind the oath-sayer that once the oath had been pronounced it could not be retracted. Saying an oath transformed the oath-sayer in a very radical way. It separated him from his old community and integrated him to a new one<sup>21</sup>.

## IS THE OATH BORROWED?

The Greeks learned many of their medical ideas and techniques from the peoples of the Middle East and North Africa. Is it possible that they could have borrowed the oath? To answer the question one must remember that it was said freely and without legal compulsion, and because there is no punishment, other than infamy, for perjurers, the oath is an ethical document. The commitments can be kept only if the physician who pronounces the oath has the required *ethos*, character.

According with Darrel Amundsen, "medical ethics ...is even less apt to be borrowed by members of one society, from another culturally alien to it, than are its medical theory and concomitant technique <sup>22</sup>." Thus, although the Greeks may have borrowed their medical techniques from others, it is highly unlikely that the physicians who wrote the oath borrowed it from another culture. The oath must express an ethical view that is fundamental to its Greek writers.

THE EVIDENCE IN FAVOR OF THE OATH  
AS AN INDO-EUROPEAN FORMULA

## THE GREEKS ARE INDO-EUROPEANS

The first piece of evidence in favor of our thesis is the fact that the Greeks are Indo-European. The term refers to a language and a culture, not to a race<sup>23</sup>. The Greeks themselves appear not to be native to Greece, but to be the descendants of intruders that imposed themselves on a native population. They came into Greece sometime between 2 200 and 1 600 BC. The later Greek speakers emerged from them. Their earliest texts can be dated around 1 300 BC in the late Bronze Age<sup>24</sup>. The ideology of the Indo-Europeans that moved into Greece was tripartite; it consisted of what G. Dumézil has called the three functions.

The first function was concerned with acts of sovereignty, and with sacred and legal matters. Its Indo-European gods were *Mitra* and *Varuna*. *Mitra* personified the concept of the contract and governed the legal aspects of authority. *Varuna's* domain was magic and religion. The gods of the Greeks seem to have developed from these Indo-European deities. Among the gods of the Greeks there is no clear equivalent to *Mitra*; but Apollo became the divinity of the oath and of contracts, thereby assuming one of his fundamental responsibilities. Meanwhile, *Varuna* among the Greeks became the god *Ouranos*. The persons who fulfilled this function have been called *oratores*<sup>25</sup>. In Greece the *oratores* included the priests and the magistrates.

The second function had to do with the use of physical force and acts of war. The Indo-European god of this function is *Indra*, the god of physical force. He relies on warriors who can use their force offensively

and defensively. *Ares* seems to be the Greek god equivalent to *Indra*. The persons who belonged to this function have been called *bellatores*<sup>26</sup>.

The third function had to do with fertility, sustenance, wealth, and health. The Indo-European gods of this function are the *Asvin*, they twins. Twinhood was a symbol of fertility and abundance. They were known as *dive napata*, which means the sons of *Dyaus* or *Zeus*. This expression translates into Greek as *dios kouroi*. One is portrayed as a domestic and wise, tender of cattle, while the other is a horse-training warrior<sup>27</sup>. Although *Apollo* seems to take at least some of the responsibilities of *Mitra* he is always paired with *Dionysus*. Together they are called *dios kouroi*<sup>28</sup>. Like the two *Asvin*, *Apollo* and *Dionysus* complement each other.

The concern of the *Asvin* with health and fertility is evident in the following incident. *Namuci*, one of the gods deceived *Indra* into drinking a liquor and *Indra* lost his strength. He called upon the *Asvin*, and the goddess *Sarasvati*, who healed him and restored his virility<sup>29</sup>. The *Asvin*, are frequently accompanied, as in this case, by "...at least a goddess, who recalls the feminine, maternal aspect of the function<sup>30</sup>."

Each of the *Asvin* fathered another set of twins. *Apollo* is the father of of *Asklepios*, the second god mentioned in the oath; he took his son to *Cheiron*, the horse-shaped physician, who taught the boy the art of healing<sup>31</sup>. Finally, the *Asvin*, whose name means "horsemen" assumed the shape of horses, during battle<sup>32</sup>. All of these events do not establish a strict parallel between the *Asvin* and the gods of Greek medicine, but simply seem to point to the fact that such divinities fulfill responsibilities associated with the gods of the third function. In that role, the goddesses Health and Panacea accompany *Apollo* and *Asklepios* in the oath. The rest of the gods are mentioned in *passim*.

The *Asvin* relied on herder-cultivators to perform the responsibilities of their function. These men are the *laboratores*<sup>33</sup>; the artisans and laborers of Greece emerged from them<sup>34</sup>. The physicians of Classical Greece were considered to be artisans. The Greek word for artisan is *tekhnites*.

The three functions of the societies that shared Indo-European culture were often arranged hierarchically<sup>35</sup>. However, it seems that only in India did these functions become social classes<sup>36</sup>. Thus, contacts between persons who were responsible for the different functions must have been very frequent. The harmony of their contacts was due to *rta* and its noetic field of tension.

#### RTA AND THE INDO-EUROPEAN NOETIC FIELD OF TENSION IN THE INDO-EUROPEAN WORLDVIEW

Eric Voegelin seems to have introduced the idea of a "noetic field of tension." Such a field appears around values and beliefs that are fundamental to a culture. Every other value and belief that comes later has to be

aligned, in one some form or another, within the field of tension. A field like that originated in the ideas expressed by Anaximander in his poem:

And the source of coming-to-be for existing things is that into which destruction, too, happens, 'according to necessity; for they pay penalty and retribution to each other for their injustice according to the assessment of Time <sup>37</sup>.'

The Anaximandrian idea of time structured by the justice of a coming-to-be and destruction, of *genesis* and *phthora* in Greek, created a field of tension that, once established, forced every later Greek thinker to align his ideas within it <sup>38</sup>.

A noetic field of tension existed around the Indo-Iranian belief in *rta*, a word which is usually translated into English as truth and which is the origin of the Greek word for justice: *dike* <sup>39</sup>. *Rta* also is a liturgical prayer, and the power ensuring the continual return of the dawn, and the order established by the cult of the gods, and law—in short, it comprises a collection of meanings that seems to go beyond our common sense understanding of truth. M. Detienne says that with the word *rta*, "what seems simple is replaced by complexity, and, moreover, complexity is organized quite differently from our own <sup>40</sup>." Following J. Haudry it may be said that the noetic field erected by *rta* organizes a religion and a culture of truth, in which there is respect for contracts and oaths, hospitality, and fair sharing of what is available <sup>41</sup>.

*Rta* is the cosmic and ritual order which the gods have created, which they uphold and which they enforce. *Rta* is their principle of action and in some cases it is their passion. *Rta* is in them <sup>42</sup>. Sin is the opposite of *rta*, because it is the violation or negation of *rta* and the word for it is *anrta* <sup>43</sup>. This word seems to be the root of the Greek word *amartia*, which means failure, fault, error and ultimately, also sin. Plato and Aristotle use it to mean to miss the mark, to be in error, and to do wrong. *Amartia* is related to the meaning of the words *adikia* which means injustice, *miasma*, which means pollution and *asebeia* which means impiety <sup>44</sup>. From the word *rta* come a multitude of words of the Indo-European languages, words such as: *ordo*, *ritus*, *arithmos*, *armonia*, *arete*, to mention some <sup>45</sup>. Certainly the Latin word for truth, *veritas*, and our words "truth" and "right" seem to be derived from it.

THE PRINCIPLE OF RECIPROCITY AND EXCHANGE  
AND FRIENDSHIP IS FUNDAMENTAL TO INDO-EUROPEANS

All Indo-European acts of worship and sacrifice that are properly performed, become "...acts of trade, an execution of contracts of exchange between man and divinity <sup>46</sup>..." This is the Principle of Reciprocity and Exchange. It was expressed compactly by the Roman formula *do ut des*: "I give you that you may give me". Further, as Dumézil points out, this



obligatory exchange of gifts is also a sign of the friendship between the gods and men because it creates peace, and collaboration, with alternating duties and rights<sup>47</sup>. This principle solves one of the puzzles of the oath: how are its two sets of commitments connected. The physician who has just completed his studies is simply stating the manner in which he will reciprocate his teacher for his education; and he does this before he states his commitment toward his patients.

THE ECONOMIC COMMITMENTS ARE AN EXPRESSION OF  
THE INDO-EUROPEAN PRINCIPLE OF RECIPROCITY AND EXCHANGE

In making the economic commitments of the oath the student clearly states that his teacher will become his father, his teachers sons his brothers and that the student will share his income with mentor if he needs it. These commitments also prescribe clearly with whom the student will share the knowledge that he will gain from his teacher. As Dumézil points out, the Indo-Europeans

...have presented us with societies that are equivalent in this respect, since all have systems of divided, stable and hereditary property. In their case, the wealth of each person, or at least of each autonomous group (of the gens, for example) is fundamental and sacred. And all types of relations, even those between man and god and god and man, are conceived in accordance with one and the same model: the ceding of property with precisely specified compensation. The ideal of such societies is a division of wealth kept as strict and as clear as possible, with a view to peaceful enjoyment of it<sup>48</sup>.

Thus, the economic commitments of the student are the expression of a belief that is fundamentally Indo-European.

THE THREE TYPES OF MEDICINE PRACTICED  
BY THE INDO-EUROPEANS AND THE GREEKS

The tripartite ideology extended even to medicine. There was the medicine that brings about healing by the use of words—charms in this case—which is the medicine of the *oratores*, the men who are in charge of the religious and the legal affairs of the culture. There was the medicine of the *bellatores*, the men in charge of the use of physical force. Their medicine used the knife an instrument that the students that say the oath vow to never use. Finally, there is the medicine of the *laboratores*, the men who are in charge of health, wealth and abundance. They use single herbs and mixtures of them<sup>49</sup>.

Are these three types of medicine reflected in the clinical commitments of the oath? An initial analysis of the oath does not seem to reflect the medicine of the *oratores*. On the contrary, the oath seems to reject, by failing to mention them, the use of words and magical formulas for use in healing patients. Within the purview of this same analysis the oath would seem

to be, like that of the *ephebos*, military. Scribonius Largus, one of the ancient commentators, believed that it was<sup>50</sup>. But the commitments made by the medical student cannot be commitments of the *bellatores* associated with *Indra*. The healing method of this function relies on the use of the surgical knife, while the student who pronounced the oath promised not to use such instrument. Thus the oath recognizes the existence of the medicine of the *bellatores*, but the oath-sayer will not practice it.

The parallel between the gods of the third function and the gods invoked to witness the oath has been mentioned. Further evidence of the connection between the oath and the gods of the third function is provided by the nature of the clinical commitments, essentially to use judgment and ability to heal and protect the patient from all harm and injustice. Even further evidence of this connection is provided by the oath-sayer's concern with protecting life and fertility. This is expressed in the oath by the commitment to not prescribe a woman an abortifacient; that is clear enough, but this concern finds an added expression when the physician who swears says that he will not use the knife even on those who suffer from stone. The stone is probably located the bladder of the patient. The operation with which it was removed was frequently followed by sterility and infertility. Thus, the medicine that the oath-sayer promised to practice seems to be that of the *laboratores*.

There is still at least one problem to be solved. The physicians of the oath use the word *diaitemassi*, diet, as the word for treatment. Treating the sick with diet relies on the words that have to be used to build a persuasive argument. This is a strategy of the first function. Further there is the commitment to practice in a manner that will keep the physician's life, and medicine itself, pure and holy; the commitment not to have sexual intercourse with the patient or anyone in his or her household, and the commitment to keep professional secrets. This reveals the possibility that the *oratores*, and the gods of the first function influenced the writers of the oath. This influence could have come into the oath from the teachings of Pythagoras.

#### PYTHAGOREANISM

Pythagoreanism is usually treated as a "mystery religion." It was "founded" by Pythagoras, who was born in Samos and lived in Southern Italy during the second half of the sixth century. He was active in Croton, the place where Alcmeon, one of the great physicians of Antiquity, practiced medicine. A number of beliefs and practices are associated with this movement. Perhaps the most important of these beliefs is that of the "immortality of the soul," which among Pythagoreans leads to the belief in metempsychosis.

The practices associated with this cult are numerous. There were rules that prohibited eating the parts of certain animals that had been sacrificed ritually; rules to demonstrate exceptional piety. There are prescriptions concerning burials, and a multitude of regulations for everyday life. One of the most extraordinary is that a husband is forbidden extramarital sexual intercourse; one of the most bizarre is that which forbids the ingestion of beans and prescribes wearing white clothing. Pythagoreanism was associated with dietetic medicine, that is, with medicine of the first function<sup>51</sup>. However, what seems to be a “mystery religion” may in effect be nothing more than a remnant of the Indo-European traditions from which the *Brahman* of India and the *Flammines* of Rome evolved. The *Flammines* and the *Brahman* were expected to regulate their lives in a very precise way, they were expected to lead exemplary marital lives, and they were always dressed in white and were forbidden to eat beans<sup>52</sup>. Thus, either Pythagoras himself or some Pythagorean physicians seem to have influenced the writing of the oath’s text<sup>53</sup>. Thus, in the end, the text of the oath seems to state the commitments of the *laboratores* and the *oratores*, while it leaves out the *bellatores* entirely.

#### CONCLUSION

##### THE DECLINE OF THE AUTHORITY OF THE INDO-EUROPEAN VISION: THE CASE OF THE POET SIMONIDES

Why did these physicians write the Oath? The physicians who wrote the Oath did it in reply to the decline of the authority of the Indo-European vision. This decline is evident in the case of the poet Simonides.

According to Watkins, “the Indo-European poet is the professional of the spoken word, the curator and custodian of the power of the spoken word, and on occasion its unleasher.” In the early Indo-European language the feelings, values and beliefs of the culture are transmitted from one generation to the next by formulaic expressions. These expressions are the verbal symbols of the totality of the Indo-European cultural tradition. The role of the poet was to be the custodian, and transmitter of these formulas. The pronunciation of the formula by the poet is an act of truth<sup>54</sup>. In archaic Greece there were three persons who dispensed *aletheia*, the truth. These were the diviner, the bard and the king of justice<sup>55</sup>. A bard, like Hesiod was able to share the truth with others only because the muses had revealed it to him<sup>56</sup>. And it was a goddess that greeted him kindly that told Parmenides that it was proper that he should learn all things, both the heart of well-rounded truth (*Aletheia*), and the opinions of mortals, in which there is no true reliance<sup>57</sup>. Anyhow, the age in which the writers of the oath lived is an age of disorder and untruth, one is then tempted to say that *rta* and its noetic field of tension had disintegrated. We can begin to judge the magnitude of the disorder of the age when the oath was

written by briefly analyzing, as Marcel Detienne suggests, the work of the poet Simonides.

Simonides of Ceos was born circa 557-556 BC and was the first to treat poetry as a money-making profession. He composed poems for a fee. With Simonides, as Detienne says, the muses that had inspired Hesiod and had led Parmenides to his discoveries had become greedy and mercenary<sup>58</sup>. To satisfy his greed, Simonides declared himself not a master of the truth, like Hesiod and Parmenides, but breaking with the ancient tradition that inspired the poets, he declared himself to be a master of *apate*, that is, deceit. Simonides rejected categorically the concept of the poet as the prophet of the muses who revealed to men the truth revealed by them; he allowed himself to be ruled, by not by the heart of well-rounded truth, but by deceit<sup>59</sup>.

We probably cannot have a better opinion of the Athenian populace than the one we have of Simonides. As Voegelin says, that populace, which appreciated the works of Sophocles and Euripides, is made up of the corrupt slaughterers and conspirators "who committed the atrocities described by Thucydides<sup>60</sup>."

We do not know the name or names of the physicians of such period that were equivalent to Simonides; nor have I encountered any descriptions of the manner in which these physicians participated in the conspirations and slaughters. But the text of the oath itself implies that at the time it was written, there were physicians who did not use treatment to benefit the patient, nor did they treat their patients according to their ability and judgment; gave their patients toxic medications when these patients asked for them and they even suggested that other may be administered these same toxic medications; gave women medications that produced abortions; performed procedures for which they were not competent; entered the houses of their patients with evil intentions; had sexual intercourse with their patients and anyone else in the patient's house; divulged what had been confided to them. It may be said of these physicians, as it was said of Simonides, that they had rejected the belief in a society of gods and men ruled by *rta*, right action, and they had rejected the traditional belief of the *laboratores* from whence they came, as those who through right action ensured the continuation of life and the fertility on the earth. Their rejection was motivated by greed<sup>61</sup>.

It was said earlier that in taking the oath an individual always faced a choice between what was pious and what was impious but may bring social or financial gain. It must be, therefore, that these physicians had abandoned their ancient beliefs and traditions in order to achieve a good social position or financial gain.

REVOLT AGAINST A CORRUPT POLIS  
AND THE RISE OF INDIVIDUAL CONSCIENCE AND THE OATH

Pythagoreanism can be understood as a protest movement against a corrupt polis <sup>62</sup>, one in which the standard is no longer truth, but deceit. It is at this time that Solon said: "My heart commands me to teach the Athenians this: that unrighteousness (*dysnomia*) will create much evil, while righteousness (*eunomia*) will make things well ordered and proper." His words for this are *eukosma kai artia* <sup>63</sup>. The last word being one clearly derived from the Indo-European *rta*. Pythagoreanism drew its power to influence the oath from the moral authority that it inherited from the worldview of the Indo-Europeans.

THE OATH IS A STATEMENT OF FAITH  
IN THE SOCIETY OF GODS AND MEN RULED BY *RTA*

Faith—*sraddha*, among the Indo-Europeans, *pistis* among the Greeks—is a state of mind that has to do with the Principle of Reciprocity and Exchange. It is required to offer a sacrifice. It is made up of two elements: knowledge to perform the sacrifice correctly and knowledge that when the sacrifice has been performed correctly it will produce the intended effect. It is said of Numa that he "...had hung his hopes so exclusively upon the divine that, one day when someone came to tell him that the enemy was drawing near he laughed and said: I do sacrifice <sup>64</sup>." Thus faith is the knowledge that the contract and friendship that exists between gods and men will be kept by both

In his article "The Beginning and the Beyond" Eric Voegelin says that divine reality is being revealed to man in two fundamental modes of experience: in the experience of divine creativity in the cosmos; and in the experience of divine ordering presence in the soul. The two modes are permanent structures in man's consciousness of divine reality, but they are not always conscious in the form of reflected knowledge. The experience is the area of reality, where the revelatory appeal from the divine side meets with the questing response from the human side, and reflective meditation on the response is preceded by millennia of less reflected response in the form of cosmological symbolization. Only late in history, when man becomes aware of himself, of his spirit and intellect, as an active partner in the cognition of divine reality, will the two modes be discerned and adequately symbolized. Only when the response becomes luminous to itself as a quest for the divine ground, and when the quest becomes an act of reflective questioning, will man find himself moving either in the direction of divine creativity towards a beginning of things, or in the direction of the ordering presence within his soul toward a divine Beyond as its source <sup>65</sup>.

The reflection of the millennia that precede the moment of discernment and adequate symbolization, like that expressed in the oath, become avail-

able to a man or a group of men only if he and they are willing participants in the tradition that makes it available. Perhaps this is why Yaroslav Pelikan says that tradition is the living faith of the dead<sup>66</sup>. A living tradition requires a clear memory of the skills, feelings, values and beliefs that determined the manner in which, those who are now dead, participated in the construction of the human good they shared with others, and their appropriation<sup>67</sup>. It requires a clear memory of what Lonergan has called incarnate meaning<sup>68</sup>. Memory, *Mnemosyne*, was the Greek goddess who revealed the truth<sup>69</sup>.

A tradition is alive when it is remembered and those who do the remembering are also loyal to it. The Latin word for loyalty is the word *fides* that is also the word for faith, which is also the belief that the Principle of Reciprocity between gods and men will be kept. What is expressed in the oath is what was revealed to a man or a group of men, at the moment of discernment in which he or they became fully conscious of the divine creativity of the cosmos and the divine ordering presence in his or their soul. The occurrence of this moment of discernment and adequate symbolization was possible only because, in one way or another, the Indo-European *laboratores*, and a remnant of the *oratores*, and their healing traditions were still alive in Greece. The oath is a statement of faith in a society, and it is a statement pronounced in the *metaxy* in which gods and man, as friends, speak with the same word!<sup>70</sup>

## NOTES

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