

Medical Ethics in the views of Imam Khomeini (ra)



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Abstract

This text presents views of Imam Khomeini (ra) on various aspects of medical ethics. Imam (ra) with his divine insight, sublime ethical values and *taqwa*, opens new avenues for the doctors, nurses and other health care professionals in caring for the patients and performing their duties towards God, their own profession, their fellow human beings, their religion and their country. Imam's (ra) viewpoint on different aspects of doctor-patient relationship and its *malakuti* aspect reveals yet another hidden characteristic of his multidimensional personality and his compassionate spirit.

In essence, Imam (ra) views the medical profession as an invaluable means to worship God and serve creatures of God. According to Imam (ra), seeking divine pleasure should be the primary aim of physicians and nurses caring for the patients and providing other services. It is hoped that the views of Imam Khomeini (ra) will serve as guiding light for the physicians, nurses and health care professionals in fulfilling their responsibilities and their success in this world and hereafter.

1. Addressing the Physicians and Nursing Staff and Employees of Hospitals of Tehran, Imam Khomeini (ra) said:

"In the name of God the beneficent, the merciful

I thank you brothers and sisters for your visit here to show your kindness towards me and I beseech God for your health and success. You physicians have a great responsibility. Physicians, nurses and employees of hospitals, all have great responsibilities and that is the responsibility of taking care of patients, responsibility of nursing and responsibility of treatment..in the same manner as a father treats his child, a mother nurses her kids. You should consider patients as your own relatives, your own sons and daughters and treat them with love and affection and nurse them with care in the same way as a mother cares for her kids.

Those who have becomes patients are like your kids, your brothers and your sisters. They should be nursed and cared in a proper manner. And in hospital they should be cared and nursed in the same manner, as Islam likes them to be cared and nursed and attended with responsibility. And I am hopeful

that with the establishment of Islamic Republic, our difficulties will be *InshaAllah* solved. Difficulties at all places and at all levels will be solved. May God protect you and you will be successful, for the service of your country, for the service of your religion Islam, for the service of your brothers. *InshaAllah* all of you will be successful and victorious.

I pray God for all of you and I am a servant of the whole nation. And I hope that I can do my service completely and find opportunity to do this service perfectly till its end. I hope for prayers from you friends, brothers and sisters that you will pray so that we can move forward on this way and reach its end. It's difficult...the road is full of hardships and difficulties. With the will of God, the Almighty and the most high, we have reached at this point...and with the help of all strata of nation, *InshaAllah* we will reach the target. Peace be upon all of you. May you all be successful¹.”

2. Addressing the Minister of Islamic Guidance and the Members of Committee for the Propagation of Islam and Committee for the Celebrations of 10 days of Dawn, Imam Khomeini (ra) said:

“...This is very important that our specialists have relied upon their own skills and expertise. You are aware that how Muhammad Reza tormented the spirits of our physicians. His attitude towards the physicians was insulting. For example, even for a minor treatment he went outside Iran. This was itself demoralizing for our specialist doctors at that time and they thought that in all specialized fields (of medicine), we are backward. Today we must vow firmly that in all disciplines, we will strive to be at the forefront...²”

3. Addressing the Professors of Tehran University, Imam Khomeini (ra) said:

“...The difference between the monotheistic schools of thought, among which Islam is the greatest, is that Islam in the very same nature wants a new reality and in the very same science of medicine seeks a new pragmatism.³”

4. Addressing the Minister of Road and Transport and Officials of the Organizations related to the Ministry, Imam Khomeini (ra) said:

“.....In addition to that, spreading health and medical services is must towards the deprived people (of the villages)...⁴”

5. Addressing the Families of Martyrs of Medical University, Iranian and Foreign Students from Seminaries of Qum, Members of Health Committees of Islamic Consultative Assembly (Parliament), Army Personnel responsible for providing services to injured during the Iran-Iraq War and People from different walks of life, Imam Khomeini (ra) said:

“...I must thank physicians and request them that God the Almighty and the most high has a very lofty station for those who fight and struggle in His path and a *mujahid* has high station in the way of God.

One of those stations is related to those who for the sake of God's pleasure, relieves the suffering of a human being in distress. Especially in the present time and the present place that we are, in reality your services are a struggle in the way of God. But you must think and pay attention that this should be struggle in the way of God, must be for His sake. When it is for His sake, it will be eternal.

Things that are done for God are perpetual and never-ending. Things that are done for world and materialistic aims, themselves go away with materialistic things and world. And those who work for them, they will also perish with world and materialistic things. You physicians as it must be said are the like *mujahids* in the way of God, and must pay attention that your aims should not be worldly aims. Your aims should be Godly. Have Godly aims, worldly aim is behind Godly one, but (understand that) this materialistic aim is behind Godly and that's why it is behind it. If you are possessed by worldly aims, no matter how much you say it is for God, it will never be correct.”⁵

6. Addressing the Members of Islamic University Jihad Organization, Faculty of Industrial Technology, Members of Industry and Technology Research Organizations, Imam Khomeini (ra) said:

“...Islam perfectly agrees with acquiring specialization, with knowledge, but specialization and knowledge that are for the service of nation. The service must be for the interests of Muslims. One talk is that we shouldn't have specialists, and some people link this issue to the propagation (of Islam).

For example, Muslims when they say that the University should have revolutionary Islamic culture and it is must that the Universities should be Islamic, these people immediately derive the meaning from it that the Universities shouldn't have required physicians, don't need any specialist doctors, don't need any specialists in advanced industries, just they must go to universities and talk about Islamic laws and problems. This is one of the evil plots that perhaps some of the people or groups attribute to Islam and Islamic Associations.”⁶

7. Addressing the Physicians, Nurses and Staff of the Heart Hospital and some common people, Imam Khomeini (ra) said:

“In the name of God, the beneficent, the merciful

Thanks to the physicians, nurses and employees of the hospital. I, during the time that I was in the hospital and was a source of trouble to you all and now I am departing from you gentleman, I thank you all and I pray for you all. I hope that we all during this time, and during these sensitive moments that our nation is passing through and conspiracies that are hatched against our nation and country, whole nation, all class of people should put hand in hand together and make the conspiracies ineffective.

I am very thankful all of you, the employees and the workers of the hospital and respected physicians who during this time showed their high love and care for me and like a son who nurses for his old father, nursed me. I am thankful. May God protect you all and protect all of nation.”⁷

8. Addressing the President, Speaker of the Parliament, Prime Minister, Friday prayer leader and Governor of Isfahan and common people, Imam Khomeini (ra) said:

“...Prophets also used to speak (praise) for themselves for something, because it was for guidance not that it was for them. The way of guidance was with one with knowledge of unseen...Like a physician who is free from all selfish desires but observes that if he doesn't mention his knowledge of medicine, people will be exhausted of disease, will be exhausted because of one disease and so he is forced to glorify himself because of the circumstances regarding his medical knowledge that I am an expert in the treatment of this disease, although he doesn't want to praise himself.”⁸

9. Addressing the Clergy of Tehran, Imam Khomeini (ra) said:

“...Medicine cannot be effective without a physician, it needs a physician. It needs a specialist. Islam without spirituality is similar to medicine without physician.”⁹

10. Addressing the professors of Tehran University, Imam Khomeini (ra) said:

“...The science of medicine has gone from the East to the West.”¹⁰

11. Addressing the Student Members of the Islamic Association, Faculty of Law and Teacher's College Ardabil, Imam Khomeini (ra) said:

“...West has acquired everything by colonialism...medicine through colonialism, culture via colonialism.”¹¹

12. Addressing the Minister for Culture and Higher Education and Faculty of Universities and Institutes of Higher Education, Imam Khomeini (ra) said:

“...You two groups (clergymen and University teachers) are the mentors of the society. If there is a foundation, educational and scientific training is must. If you want to correct a physician, it should not be (only) with the view that how good this physician will be tomorrow. This physician will tomorrow be a professional...a professional who will (may be) earn money by delaying a patient's treatment for getting more money for visits! What a good physician he is!

Though with regards to medicine, he is a very good specialist! But since his character was without good morals, he was not refined, he was not pious, he was not a godly person, this physician delays the treatment of a patient, today he writes a prescription, he has an agreement with the pharmacist and so writes an expensive prescription....makes this poor patient suffer more. When this prescription doesn't work today, tomorrow he writes another one! And more and still more! Though he was a good physician from the point of view of medical knowledge...”¹²

13. Addressing the Members of Islamic Foundations of Ministry of Public Health and Welfare and people from different walks of life, Imam Khomeini (ra) said:

“...Today that Islamic foundations of ministry of public health and welfare, and similarly the physicians and workers of public health in Khuzestan and respected nursing staff of the province have come here, I will say one thing to you physicians, nurses, public health workers and health care officials all over the country...”

“...And that is practicing medicine and nursing and serving these patients who are lying in these hospitals, is, very difficult but a very worthy service. Nursing patients is very difficult and good nursing is very meritorious and in the same manner medical practice and caring for the patients, and injured and maimed and struggling to provide care for them is difficult...but doing the proper action is commendable. All the other departments must do all the jobs correctly and correctly done work has its worth, but hospitals have their special importance. You are concerned with the care of an isolated or detached one...you and specially nurses who are caring patients, those patients whose hearts are broken, are in need of nursing of spirit, need of spiritual tranquility and you should provide all love and care to these patients, nursing like a mother, a sister and brother and father. T

his influences the spirit of patient and in getting better and influences patients in getting better much quicker and in the court of God the Almighty, the most high serving these people, serving these servants of God is very worthwhile. And that what I must request to nurses, physicians and staff and those providing services at the hospitals in Khuzestan and other war-stricken areas that your services in those hospitals are more valuable than all other places. Services there are done under dangers and you are there to provide services and face-to-face with a group of people who are not merciful towards hospital and not merciful towards schools.

This (service) is very noble and very valuable. And nursing someone who has lost his health, his limbs, his safety in the way of God is a great valuable service in the court of God, the Almighty, and the most high. But there must be very much attention that the environment of hospital should be an Islamic environment and also that your behavior towards these patients, these maimed patients should be like the behavior of a mother, a father, a brother and a sister. This work is very difficult and valuable and demands a lot of responsibility. The work of Islamic associations is also valuable and its responsibilities are also great.

This is why, my request, my advice to all the Islamic associations all over the nation and also to the physicians, nurses and health care workers, especially in the war-stricken areas and the areas that are in danger is that with all your strength and abilities try that your actions should be Islamic, your manners should be noble and your behavior be humanitarian and Islamic. May God the Almighty and the most high, grant reward to you all brothers and sisters, reward that was for those women who at the time of advent of Islam nursed the army of Islam. *InshaAllah* in your book of deeds those rewards will be written too.13”

14. Addressing the Students of Faculties of Literature and Foreign Languages, Imam Khomeini (ra) said:

“...Medicines that are banned there (in western countries), their use is allowed here (in third world)...these are sent to the third world countries....A doctor who is banned to practice there is sent here and is allowed medical practice...these doctors who learn medicine there, many of them are not given permission (to practice medicine) there... get certificates or diplomas with the condition that you have no right to practice medicine here, and you should go to your own country and practice medicine there. This is because in the eyes of colonialist countries, third world countries have no value. All the things that they want for themselves, they don't want them for us. To us they give another thing.”¹⁴

15. Addressing the Health Minister and the Workers of the Ministry, Imam Khomeini (ra) said:

“In the name of God, the beneficent, the merciful

I am hopeful that you gentleman who are in one ministry, are serving for the afflicted, for the patients, for the sick, for the injured. May God bless you with more opportunities and may God bless you with sincerity so that your services be only for God and for God you take these worthy hardships and you only hope for the rewards of these hardships from God the Almighty, the most high. The problem of health is one of the most important matters. Physician too is important, Nurse too is important; also health care staff of this organization is important....

“...And the thing that is very important for the physicians, the nurses and those who are involved in the care of the patients, sick and injured is that they should have a compassionate spirit. One of the things that helps to heal patients and recovery to their normal health is that their physicians, their nurses provide them with spiritual strength. If a person has a belief that he will recover from this disease, this will help him to towards becoming healthy and if he had a view that he will not recover from this illness, this will take him towards death faster. And this is the responsibility of physicians and nurses.

Whoever female nurses are caring for female patients and whoever male nurses are caring for male patients; this point has to be kept in mind that an affectionate attitude towards them and giving hope to them and promise of health with the order of God for them, helps them to their health. In your care and the services that you perform, behave kindly to them, for you there is a reward from God, the Almighty and the most high. Suppose there is a patient that according to your view will definitely not recover from an illness except firstly, that the hidden hand (of God) is also working. That is beyond the vision of our similitudes and you must not lose hope. And secondly, it will be better that a patient who is going to leave this world, he should go with a happy heart with you, he should be with hope. Not like that he should be told that you will not recover.

These will contribute to his dying earlier and making his illness prolonged and with a depressed heart he will leave this world. But if you gave hope to him, be affectionate towards him, pat him gently, served him sincerely, fulfilled your duty with a cheerful face to those patients who are mostly depressed, if it is done in this manner considering that he is although passing from this world, he should go with a hopeful and pleasant spirit and this would be very much invaluable for you.”

Physicians must pay very much attention to the fact that their work is very important. Your work relates to the life of people and bears very much significance. And with all expertise that you possess, do your work and although many of our physicians are out of this country or have gone out of Iran, or are staying there and are not coming back to their own country and this is one of the problems that these physicians who are outside must pay attention to that their own country needs their presence. They are grown up in this country, they have acquired education in this country and gone abroad and are the citizens of this country and people have rights on you. Islam has regards for you.

This nation of Islam, which is now with all the sorrows that they have inflicted and with all catastrophes that is brought forth upon them by the destiny, they are in distress. And you physicians who are abroad, we suppose that you make your life long and do welfare also. For what? Isn't it better that to be in service of those who are afflicted? To be in the service of patients of your own country? In the service of this country that is oppressed and that remained under the oppression for long years and today it wants to come out of the domination of east and west. All of them are putting pressure on it...from all sides they are putting pressure. Aren't these pressures enough for you?

You physicians look outside and see that here, there is shortage of physicians. At all places we have shortage of specialist physicians, and you who are specialists and in these difficult conditions, and in this difficult situation your fathers earned a living and yourself too and are now without any difference and living in a foreign land and observe till patients here and those who were maimed at war, who suffered at war and going through sorrow and you in your conscience are in peace? I don't think so that if you contemplate for one hour to awaken your conscience and then you will decide to stay there."

"...I am hopeful that the situation of hospitals will also be better than present and more attention will be paid to hospitals. It should not be like that a patient enters a hospital and he is not treated. This is one of the matters that is against the human conscience, against justice, against the pleasure of God. It is must that very much attention be paid to these problems. A patient comes to a hospital and he needs to be hospitalized, and if from the same place it is, God forbid, said to him that it cannot be done here, and the patient goes to another place and they also say that it is not possible here, and if, God forbid, during these entering and leavings, he dies, the responsibility will be on those persons who do these types of actions.

You all must be very careful, especially, during these conditions that your services are very valuable. Your services in front of God are very worthy and at the same time responsibility is also very much. It is must that you should be perfectly attentive to discharge your duties. And I hope you will be successful to carry out your duties towards these oppressed and especially those who have arrived from war front and have lost their health in order to protect you and see what this divine destiny does to Muslims.

We must on our own, take care of ourselves. In all things we must ourselves take care of our affairs...and we, in the matter of health and welfare must ourselves think on our own. We shouldn't wait as in past that we go abroad and bring from there. We must think attentively and make efforts, with our

own hard work, with our own sufferings, bear this weight and carry it to destination. And hope for the favor of God that God is with you. And God will bless you with opportunities so that you carry out all the works in a proper manner.

And especially I repeat that with the patients, be very compassionate, that is like someone who is a servant of the house...at the place that has physician and nurse, attitude must be a polite attitude...behavior should be tender. Just imagine that you yourself are a patient and go to a clinic for treatment....what do you expect from there, from the staff workers, from the physicians there, from the nurses there. Same expectations that you yourself have from them, all patients also have from you. Thus it is must that there should be attention towards these ethical matters and I hope that you will be successful, assisted by God and victorious in this task.”

“And one of the necessary aspects is the prevention of disease. Its importance is more than the treatment itself. We can and you can, try to adopt method so that the disease becomes less. Measures should be adopted in the country that the waters be cleaned of pollution. Foods shouldn't be contaminated. Physicians must order the method and it be implemented so that the disease is prevented. Not that we wait for the disease to come and then we remove it away from us. We must adopt preventive measures so that the disease doesn't come and this is one of the important matters that must be paid full attention. And I hope that in this matter, the responsible officials will be successful. And in all matters trust God.”¹⁵

16. Addressing the Members of Islamic Association of Physicians, Isfahan, Imam Khomeini (ra) said:

“...You are physicians... May God protect you. You must be like a father to the patients and you should take interest in the patients so that they become healthy again. In the same way, if God forbid your own child falls sick, how much you become (emotionally) attached and do the same work. These are also your brothers, your sisters. God has ordained a tie of brotherhood between the believers: ***The believers are brothers***¹⁶. The one who is sick has become your brother. The one who is sick here is your sister. Treat them with perfect kindness and behavior. Nurses should also do (their services) in the same manner.”¹⁷

17. Addressing the Physicians and Nurses, Imam Khomeini (ra) said:

“....I am thankful to you gentlemen for in these difficult times, you worked hard for the patients, and cared for the injured and sick and were with them. I am thankful to you and I hope that God becomes happy with you. You in these times in history were band of God. For the sake of God you did all your duties. I am thankful to all the respected ladies and the gentlemen. May God bless you with honor, health and success.”¹⁸

18. Addressing the Physicians and Workers of Red Crescent Society of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Imam Khomeini (ra) said:

“...Today all the work that you do will be reckoned in front of God. Open the account (of your deeds) for God. And since your profession is the one that directly relates to the service of group of oppressed who are in need of help, from this point of view, you are in a sensitive situation that demands you to serve...It is very valuable...and if God forbid, you are negligent of duties...it amounts to evasion. We all have duty that a country that has lost everything and they have looted it, we ourselves be busy to reconstruct it..”

“...I request this to the association of physicians, the association, that the students, doctors, those who are volunteers to provide (health) services and this feeling is a responsibility thatWe are talking in the presence of God. You practice medicine in the presence of God, busy in serving. If you expand this vision, and see it's the presence of God when you go to see a patient, observe that this patient is from God and here is the stage of God. In presence of God you are practicing medicine, in presence of God you are doing service. If this feeling is awakened in a human being and he perceives its real meaning, and his conscience remains at the same level all the time, during all his activities that we are in the presence of God, the Almighty and the most high, that human being adopts moderation in all his actions.”

“...We have to do the work in the best possible manner and if everyone has the same feeling, the one who is caring for the patient, or physician and does his work in a good manner, examines the patients well, thinks deeply, doesn't differentiate between human beings for example between a poor and a wealthy patient. He favors poor more than the other one because poor patient feels deprived and needs more assistance and care. For example, gives injection to that (poor) person, thinks that this is a service, service that is to be delivered to him, and this he does in a good manner. He takes his salary for the services. If he didn't do it well, his salary is (*haram*) illegal for him and same thing for all of us, all of you and all of nation and me.”¹⁹

19. Addressing the Traditional Medicine Doctors, Students, and Employees of Shiraz University, Imam Khomeini (ra) said:

“...After we have solved these fundamental problems and have secured the foundations of your country, then you can search for Traditional medicine. They also go for the modern medicine. Today is not the time for you to spend your energies that whether Islamic medicine, as you say, or Traditional medicine of Abu Ali Sina or Razi be adopted in practice or other systems of medicine. This should not be considered now. Now you are present in a situation that is threatening the very existence of your country.”

“...At the moment this is the time to see the (overall) condition of the University, Traditional medicine or Modern medicine, what is their present state...”

“...One of the problems is the problem of ancient medicine. They all, with all the illness that also exist now, used to treat with herbal medicines and this method of treatment was one of the fundamentals and Europe benefited from the medicine of Abu Ali Sina till near past... perhaps still in present times...but

they never confess it openly....”

“...They want to make us think that we are nothing and they are everything and thus they want us to be removed from the stage of humanity. They say we don't have anything in reality. Now you know we have physicians, specialists, but when someone gets a disease, he goes to England, or goes to America, though it is possible to be treated here, but they go outside.”²⁰

20. Addressing the Physicians of Qum, Imam Khomeini (ra) said:

“...You gentleman who are physicians and doctors know better than us what difficulties they have brought upon us. You were a better witness to these difficulties than us. And both of us have faced whatever happened during last fifty and few years and witnessed many difficulties...”

“...And one of the big problems that for this nation is that they have made our nation distrustful towards their own people. Such as if we have a patient in Tehran, they will also say to him that the disease cannot be treated here...You should go to, for example, England, go to Paris! This is one of the problems that they have created for us...”

“...You imagine that the physicians there are such that if someone goes there (anticipates) what (new) will happen! The same patients who are here can be treated with little more attention. When they go there it is not known whether they are treated fairly or not. It is not that the physicians there do a miracle and physicians here are not like them...”

“...One of the blessings of this revolutionary movement is that it has brought us together. We were apart from each other. This was also one of the plots that separated us. Now that we are working together...we are the physicians of spirit and you are the physicians of body. Both are physicians of human being. We must be attached together, like a body that has a spirit as well as a corpus (flesh). Clergymen and physicians are also like one body in such a way that one has an aspect and other one has another aspect...”

“...May God protect you all and may enlighten us all with our responsibilities. And I thank you all physicians that during this movement that took place, and during these hardships that your relatives went through and also the people of your city, you endured difficulties and suffered sorrows.”²¹

21. Addressing the Physicians and Nurses of Islamic Foundation, Members of Imam Khomeini Medical Services, Imam Khomeini (ra) said:

“In the name of God the beneficent, the merciful

Human being is free in choosing his profession and other ... He is created free. And Islam has offered freedom to him. But the human beings themselves are different in choosing the profession. And this difference is influenced by the variation of the state of mind and their inner morality. Some choose stealing as a profession, the others choose plundering as a profession, someone chooses selling heroin

and narcotics and such things as his profession. This preference of selection is based on the freedom, which is influenced, by the state of mind of persons. The state of human mind is different from creation and becomes more different due to difference of upbringing and surroundings. In a surrounding you see different trainings that are against humanity and against ethical norms and in other surroundings they are humane.

“...One of the very sacred professions is the practice of medicine. It’s a profession in which if the physicians fulfill their humanitarian duties then this profession would be so honorable as an act of worship. And also nursing, it’s one of the most honorable professions in which if a person carries out his lawful and humanitarian duties, it is worship of top grade. Of course it has some responsibilities towards physicians, nurses and all the staff members of the hospital. Physicians shouldn’t do services for gathering materialistic things. They should provide services aiming to serve the servants of God in order to make the profession an act of worship. Those benefits that are associated are the consequences of worship. But if God forbid, they deviate (from this path) and sometime this deviation reach a point that can put the lives of people in danger.” Then such a person is a criminal....”

“...And also nurses, nursing a patient is such a difficult matter, but it’s invaluable. “...If a human being takes care of a patient with kindness, like a brother, like a sister, and performs this as a humanitarian divine duty, then it is an invaluable act of worship. Be careful, that your profession is a very honorable one and on the other hand it has many responsibilities. You yourself can discharge your responsibility towards the patients by kindness. They need kindness more than they need medicine. One patient who has come from his home to the hospital, this patient thinks of himself as a stranger. If the nurses behave with him with affection, with humanitarian attitude, kindness, like a brother and sister, then this feeling of being a stranger will depart from him. And bring tranquility for him; this spiritual tranquility helps in his recovery.

Be careful that God forbid don’t pollute this profession with materialistic tendencies, worldly tendencies. Otherwise you have done the job but will not get reward from God. You must act in such a way that your profession becomes divine, for the sake of God. It’s not contradictory that it should be for the sake of God and they also remunerate you. These two things are not contradictory. Be careful, behave well with these patients. Help them. Console them. They are depressed; you must be affectionate towards them. Your profession is such an invaluable profession.”²²

Conclusion

Medical ethics had special status in the views of Imam Khomeini (ra) and Imam (ra) during almost ten years of his leadership of the Islamic Revolution emphasized various ethical aspects of medical profession. In his speeches delivered to specialist physicians, general medical practitioners, nurses, officials of health ministry, experts of traditional medicine and health professionals from other organizations, Imam (ra) highlighted their duty and laid great emphasis on medical profession as a service to humanity and that the doctors should behave gently, consider ethical and spiritual aspects of

their profession, rather than paying attention to material and financial gains.

To Imam (ra), intention and behavior of a physician, nurse or a health care professional is more important than the treatment or service he or she provides for a patient. Rather, in Imam's (ra) views, it is a part of the treatment. Finally, according to Imam (ra), medical profession is not a profession *per se*, rather it is a means to serve God and do service to His creatures.

Acknowledgements

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