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THE OATH
historical, pastoral-liturgical, typical and ritual landmarks

PHD THESIS

ABSTRACT

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The doctoral thesis entitled ***"The Oath: Historical, Pastoral-Liturgical, Typical and Ritual References""*** started from the desire to have a more complex study on the notion of oath from a theological point of view, and with broader openings towards linguistic, literary, historical, biblical, patristic, liturgical, canonical, typical and ritual directions, within a systematic framework.

Chapter One explores the concept of the oath from linguistic, semantic, historical, and etymological perspectives, analyzing how this concept has manifested across various languages and cultures. The oath is seen as a speech act with transformative power, invoking deities to guarantee the truth of a statement or the fulfillment of a promise. Essential in ancient societies, the oath served as a means to legitimize declarations in the absence of other forms of evidence. Oaths are of two types: assertory (confirming a past or present fact) and promissory (a commitment to a future action). Defining elements of an oath include: a solemn verbal declaration, invocation of a superhuman power (divinity), and the imposition of a conditional self-curse if the statement is false or the promise is broken. The oath is a universal institution, present across all cultures and religions. In Christianity, while permitted in the Old Testament, oaths are discouraged in the New Testament in favor of absolute sincerity and credibility ("yes, yes; no, no" – Matthew 5:37).

From an etymological standpoint, there is no common Indo-European term for "oath"; each language uses a distinct expression, reflecting the cultural diversity and significance of the concept. The Greek ("ὄμνῡμ" "ὅρκος"), Latin ("ius", "iurare"), and Hebrew roots are analyzed in detail. The oath is often associated with notions such as justice, sanctity, or ritual formula. It serves multiple functions: legal, religious, social. It is a sacred rite, a form of solemn commitment, always accompanied by an act of sacralization and invocation of a higher entity. Despite terminological and formal variations, the purpose and essence of the oath are constant across civilizations.

Chapter Two examines the evolution, meaning, and rituals of the oath in three major ancient cultures: Jewish, Greek, and Roman, highlighting its religious, legal, and social roles.
In Jewish tradition, the oath was a deeply serious act, made before God. Jews considered breaking an oath to be a grave sin, which is why oaths were not made lightly and were strictly regulated by religious laws. Rash or pressured oaths could be annulled through a religious procedure called *Hatarat Nedarim*. However, some oaths, especially those involving God or moral obligations, could not be annulled. On holidays such as Yom Kippur, Jews recited

special prayers for the annulment of unfulfilled promises. The spoken word was considered sacred, and children were taught from an early age to honor promises and oaths.

In Ancient Greece, the oath held a central role in both religious and public life. Greeks believed that an oath was guaranteed by the gods, particularly Zeus, protector of oaths, and that breaking it would incur divine punishment. Oaths were often spoken at altars, accompanied by solemn gestures and sacrifices. In classical Greek literature, such as the *Iliad*, heroes swore by gods, weapons, or sacred symbols. Even the gods themselves made oaths. However, Greek philosophers like Thales, Pythagoras, and Solon advised against frequent oath-taking, advocating instead that a person be trustworthy without needing to swear. A notable example is the Hippocratic Oath, recited by physicians in ancient Greece, which called for practicing medicine with responsibility, respect, and discretion. Though now adapted without religious references, the form of the Hippocratic Oath has endured.

In Roman society, the oath was used in a variety of contexts: political, military, legal, and diplomatic. Magistrates and soldiers took oaths of loyalty to the Republic or Emperor. In treaties, Romans made oaths accompanied by sacrifices and solemn formulas. In court, an oath could even replace a judicial decision. Romans swore by gods, sacred objects, family, or their own life. Over time, however, the value of the oath declined, and perjury became more frequent, despite warnings from philosophers like Cicero and Seneca, who emphasized the sacredness of one's word. In all three cultures, Jewish, Greek, and Roman, the oath was more than a simple promise; it was a sacred commitment, reinforced by divine presence, meant to ensure truth, loyalty, and societal stability.

Chapter Three addresses the oath in the context of the Old and New Testaments. In the Hebrew biblical tradition, the oath is a long-standing practice deeply rooted in the spirituality and social life of the people of Israel. Far from being forbidden, the oath was accepted and even encouraged in the Old Testament, though it was reserved for the most serious situations. Taking God's name in vain was forbidden, making every oath a sacred act before God. Biblical texts show that both people and God made oaths. God swore by Himself, having no higher authority, thereby reinforcing promises made to the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Thus, the oath becomes an expression of divine faithfulness and a guarantee of the fulfillment of promises.

Oaths were used in various contexts, from individual alliances to collective commitments to the Law and God. A specific ritual existed: placing one's hand under the thigh, as seen in Abraham's servant's case. The oath was not just a solemn promise but an act with legal, religious, and moral weight.

The issue of oaths in the context of the New Testament, highlights the essential differences from the Old Covenant. Lord Christ, in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:34–37), categorically forbids oaths, calling instead for speech that is sincere and unconditioned by external guarantees: "let your 'yes' be yes and your 'no' be no." This prohibition has a moral aim: to establish truthfulness in daily life. New Testament examples of oaths, such as those by Christ or St. Paul, are considered divine or prophetic exceptions. Human oaths, on the other hand, are often tied to moral weakness (e.g., Peter, Herod), and presented as negative examples. Apostles like Matthew and James reiterate the prohibition, emphasizing that integrity and sincerity must define a Christian's word.

Chapter Four analyzes the practice of the oath in the Byzantine Empire and the stance of the Church Fathers. Initially inherited from Roman tradition, the oath became a fundamental political and legal instrument in Byzantium, crucial for loyalty to the emperor, administrative functionality, and public order. Despite the Gospel's prohibition of oaths, Byzantium institutionalized them in civil, military, and ecclesiastical life. Civil servants, soldiers, citizens, and even patriarchs swore allegiance to the emperor, emphasizing imperial power as divinely ordained.

Patristic thought, strongly influenced by Christ's command in Matthew 5:34–37, largely condemned oath-taking. Church Fathers like St. John Chrysostom, St. Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, and Gregory Palamas unanimously viewed the oath as a relic of a fallen world and an offense to divine truth. Chrysostom argued in many homilies that oaths betray a lack of sincerity and moral weakness, advocating instead for a life of virtue, where a Christian's word alone should suffice.

Chapter Five investigates the presence and theological significance of oaths in Orthodox liturgical writings, especially those found in the *Euchologion* and other service books. Although Orthodox doctrine, faithful to the Gospel (Matthew 5:34), discourages oath-taking, the research shows that the term and practice are present in specific contexts, particularly in exorcistic prayers.

One liturgical setting examined is the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, where phrases like "I adjure you by God" (translating the Greek *ἐξορκίζω*) are used in renunciations and exorcisms. These also appear in the prayers of St. Basil the Great and St. John Chrysostom, especially in cases of possession or evil influence. It is suggested that terms like "I implore you in the name of God" be preferred, as supported by specialized dictionaries.

In Confession and Holy Unction, the oath appears as a serious sin, akin to a curse, requiring specific forgiveness. This underlines both its spiritual impact and the penitent's personal responsibility.

In Matrimony, the study dispels the common misconception of a "wedding oath." Liturgical and theological analysis confirms that no such oath exists in the Orthodox rite. The priest's phrase "Behold, my spiritual children..." is a late rhetorical addition influenced by Slavic traditions, not a formal vow. The Orthodox view sees the wedding as a blessing and sanctification, not a contract.

In Ordination, rather than a formal oath, there is a "solemn declaration," approved by the Holy Synod, expressing the candidate's free and conscious commitment to priestly service, but not canonically considered an oath. Though oaths are not explicitly practiced in Orthodoxy, their terms and formulas appear in liturgical language, especially in exorcistic or penitential contexts, where they serve to reinforce spiritual authority or assume guilt.

Chapter Six examines the complexity and ambiguity of the oath in contemporary society, analyzing the tension between the Orthodox theological tradition (which forbids oaths, cf. Matthew 5:34; James 5:12) and modern societal practices, which preserve it as a tool of public accountability. It considers informal oaths in daily speech (e.g., "may my mother die") and formal oaths in medicine, justice, public administration, military, or education. The chapter addresses theological debates on the legitimacy of oaths in modern Greece and Romania, where swearing on the Bible is still practiced, an act viewed by some Church Fathers as contrary to Christ's command. Civil oaths based on conscience and honor are explored as ethical alternatives supported by recent legal provisions. Opinions from modern theologians (Mantzaridis, Epiphanios Theodoropoulos) emphasize the sinful nature of oath-taking in Christian life and call for truthfulness without solemn formulas.

The legal and symbolic dimension of the oath is also explored, emphasizing its role as a solemn act serving the common good and professional integrity. The chapter includes an overview of current oaths in various institutions (doctors, pharmacists, witnesses, military, presidents, parliamentarians, public servants) and a historical analysis of their evolution in Romanian political regimes. The importance of maintaining a balance between the sacred and civic responsibility is emphasized, advocating for a reevaluation of the oath in light of religious freedom, individual conscience, and social credibility.

Special attention is given to two specific services: one marking the oath at the end of theological university studies and the other the sacralization of the military oath. These appear

in recent editions of Church service books approved by the Holy Synod and are currently in use.

This thesis investigates the concept of the oath from an interdisciplinary perspective, tracing its evolution in linguistic, historical, biblical, theological, and liturgical dimensions. The study shows that while the oath was originally seen as a solemn act of commitment before a divine or communal authority, it also reflects a crisis of interpersonal trust and a decline in moral consciousness. A diachronic analysis reveals that in Greco-Roman and Judaic traditions, the oath served clear social, religious, and legal functions. In Christian thought, especially the New Testament and patristic literature, the oath is categorically forbidden, replaced by an ethical imperative rooted in truth and integrity without the use of solemn formulas. The need for oaths historically emerged with declining interpersonal trust and, theologically, with distancing from divine revelation.

The study warns against the abusive use of oaths in daily life and the differences in perception between ancient traditions and Christian thought. Theologically and ethically, the oath is deemed unnecessary and even problematic in a society where one's word should suffice to guarantee truthfulness. The thesis also explores the practical dimension of the oath in contemporary settings, such as academic and military ceremonies, analyzing related rituals through liturgical theology. The overarching conclusion is that the Christian moral ideal is not tied to the act of swearing, but to living authentically in truth, in accordance with the Gospel command not to exceed the limits of sincere and responsible speech.