

Alcohol and Muslims

By Alyssa



Note: The word alcohol is derived from the Arabic word al-kohl, which means fermented grains, fruits, or sugars that form an intoxicating beverage when fermented. Khamr or khamrah is the word used in the Qur'an to denote a fermented beverage that intoxicates a person when he/she drinks it. It is sometimes translated as "wine."

Khamr in Early Muslim History

Pre-Islamic Arabs had harsh lives and felt that alcohol was an indispensable way to cope with their problems. Among the troubles that the Arab people had before Islam were: tribal warfare, excessive pride and competition, prostitution, insecurity, broken homes, and female infanticide. Women were treated as slaves, and children were deprived of affection, while men were expected to be tough and competitive. These were all factors that compelled people to drink.

Sale of alcohol was so common that the name for merchant, *tajir*, became synonymous with the seller of *khamr*. *Khamr* shops and bars were open 24 hours a day.

The first Qur'anic verse (chronologically) to deal with alcohol was revealed in Mecca before the *hijra*:

"And from the fruit of the date-palm and the vine ye get out wholesome drink and food: behold in this also is a Sign for those who are wise." (16:67)

After this verse, some Muslims started to wonder about the correctness of taking *khamr*. Revealed in Madinah a few years later, was this verse:

"They ask thee concerning wine and gambling, say: "In them is great sin, and some profit, for men; but the sin is greater than the profit..."(2:219)

Most Muslims continued to drink but some began to abstain or reduce their intake. Certain Muslims had been abstinent even in the pre-Islamic days, most notably, Uthman Ibn Affan, who later was the third Khalifa. Uthman said, "Al-khamr 'robs' the mind totally; and I have not yet seen anything which when entirely 'robbed' or curtailed will come back in its original intact form!"

Recent studies have shown that drinking alcohol can in fact cause permanent damage to memory and learning ability.

The third mention of alcohol by Allah (SWT) in the Qur'an occurred as follows:

"O ye who believe! Approach not prayers with a mind befogged, until ye can understand all that ye say, ..." (4:43)
 Now there was a great difficulty in being drunk, since a Muslim has to pray five times a day. The Prophet (SAW) is reported to have said, "Prayer is the pillar of religion. The one who performs it has erected religion and the one who abandons it has ruined (his) religion." Since the prayers are spread throughout the day, it is difficult if not impossible, for a good Muslim to ever get drunk.

If a Muslim failed to appear at the mosque in those days, his friends would think he was ill. He would then feel guilty that really, it was just his drunkenness that prevented him from coming. The religious brotherhood of Muslims helped encourage abstinence from alcohol in those days. It is still true today, that Muslims help each other be strong in resisting such temptations. The Muslim who falls away from the rest of the community becomes like a lost sheep among wolves, and risks being engulfed by sinful ways.

Since there were no drugs in those days to help ease the pain of withdrawal symptoms, alcoholic Muslims began to slowly reduce their intake. Honey was given to these alcoholics to help them restore vitamins to their bodies and ease the detoxification process. These two techniques (slow withdrawal and honey) have been shown in recent times to be effective and helpful in treating alcoholics.

During this period of weaning from alcohol, khamr sellers also began looking for a new means of livelihood.

"...The devil wants only to cast among you enmity and hatred by means of strong drink and games of chance and to turn you from remembering Allah and from prayer. Will you then desist." (5:90-91)
 These verses are the ones that declared total prohibition of alcohol to the Muslims. After this verse was revealed, the Muslim citizens of Madinah immediately began to spill their stocks of wine into the sand and streets; so that the wine ran through the streets of Madinah. Individuals who up till that moment were enjoying guiltlessly a glass of wine, quickly emptied their cups on the ground and spit out the alcohol from their mouths. They rushed to make ablutions in order to purify themselves.

Muslim Values Make Alcohol Unnecessary

Islam instilled family values and gave security to the people. Thus, with Islam, there is no longer a "need" to drink in order to relieve unhappiness and stress by slipping into a fantasy world. One American convert to Islam, who used to drink before in her pre-Muslim days, comments, "I think that being Muslim has made me face up to a lot of things, which is painful, but by working them out I feel much less need to run away from my problems, and alcohol is basically the best way to run away from problems."

The fear of God helps Muslims keep away from not only alcohol, but all other evils prohibited by the Qur'an, such as adultery, abuse of wives and children, and gambling. Peer pressure (brotherhood) also helps Muslims abstain from these sins.

Attempts to abolish alcohol in America (during the Prohibition period) and drugs (the "War on Drugs") were not successful, because the factors that cause people in America to drink and use drugs have not been eliminated.

What compels people to drink? A variety of factors, including people whose jobs bring them into contact with alcohol, or who find themselves in social settings where alcohol is available or even "pushed" on them. Also, being able to afford the luxury of spending money on alcohol and having the leisure time to drink it, as well as being beguiled by ads which allure a person to think that drinking alcohol is a way to have a good time, or appear sexy, rich, powerful and cosmopolitan. Finally, the example of other drinkers, usually friends or family can lure a person into thinking that it is okay to drink. Alcoholics (people addicted to excessive drinking of alcohol) tend to want immediate gratification and are addicted to this-worldly pleasure. They don't tend to care about the long term consequences.

Sellers of khamr in Madinah were given ample warning that they should find another trade, so the change away from an alcohol-laden economy was gradual and not disruptive. Today in America, much of the economy revolves around the alcohol industry. The government, for example, collects a hefty sum of money from taxes on alcohol. Do you think that the U.S. government today could be serious about wanting to get rid of alcohol? Companies which produce alcohol continue to spend grandly on ads and TV commercials, and then donate a portion of their profit to "help" some of the people whose lives have been ruined by consumption of their product.

A practicing Muslim will not touch alcohol out of fear of God. Those who do usually feel much guilt on breaking a Qur'anic injunction. Many drinkers will cease this activity during Ramadan. Sometimes, excessive drinkers find themselves so changed by the experience of Hajj (pilgrimage) that they never drink again.

In a true Islamic State, a person is not likely to ever reach the point of physical dependence on alcohol. Friends, family and neighbors will not just look away while a person destroys himself and his family. Muslims are supposed to be very involved in correcting wrongs that they see. Islam is a very community-oriented faith. There is no place for an individual to do what he wants to do, if it hurts others. And by hurting yourself through drinking, you inadvertently hurt others.

Too much guilt about drinking alcohol can make a person feel so bad that he or she drinks just to smother the guilt. To balance feelings of guilt, Muslims need to remember the mercy and forgiveness of Allah.

"And those who, having done something to be ashamed of, or wronged their own souls, earnestly bring Allah to mind, and ask for forgiveness for their sins, --- and who can forgive sins except Allah? --- and are never obstinate in persisting knowingly in (the wrong) they have done." (3:135)

Modern methods of curing alcoholics have not been very successful; many will regress to drinking again. Among the new methods of "treating" alcoholics is injecting the drinker with a drug like apomorphine, which makes the victim feel sick and vomit as soon as the drink is taken. This is done repeatedly over several weeks so that the drinker learns to associate drinking with nausea and vomiting. Temporary paralysis via scoline injection and electric shocks are other techniques Western doctors use to try to get heavy drinkers to quit.

What Alcohol Does

You may have heard that drinking wine in moderation (1 to 2 glasses a day), is beneficial in helping to reduce heart failure. Even if this is true, the harm from alcohol outweighs the good, so it should be avoided (verse 2:219 of Qur'an). If you want to help your heart, there are better ways to do it, like exercising and eating less saturated fat and cholesterol.

Alcohol acts on the CNS (Central Nervous System). Drinkers have more accidents (automotive, and in general) due to decreased ability to function while under the influence of alcohol. Long term alcohol abuse can lead to: hepatitis, pancreatitis, gastrointestinal bleeding, ulcers, heart disease, dementia, cardio-myopathy, vitamin deficiencies, and cirrhosis of the liver.

Cirrhosis of the liver can occur when a person drinks every day. Women who drink two or more drinks a day, and men who drink 4 drinks a day, are at risk for developing cirrhosis. A "drink" equals 1.5 ounces of 80-proof liquor, 5 ounces of wine or 12 ounces of beer. The liver gets used to a steady supply of alcohol, and chooses alcohol as its main source of fuel, leaving fatty acids (the preferred fuel of choice in a healthy liver) to collect in the tissues of the liver, which cuts off the blood supply to the organ. Liver cells begin to die and scar tissue is formed, deforming the liver. At the acute stage, the person will experience high blood pressure, an accumulation of fluids in the abdomen, vomiting of blood, hepatitis and possibly liver cancer.

CAT scans of the head show that heavy, long-term consumption of alcohol can cause the brain to shrink. Alcohol irritates the stomach and interferes with absorption of vitamins, minerals and other nutrients. It can contribute to obesity due to its high calorie content. The liver is damaged when alcohol causes accumulation of fatty deposits, which eventually leads to cirrhosis of the liver. High blood pressure and alcohol abuse often go together.

Recent research shows that the corpus callosum (the part of the brain that connects its left and right hemispheres) is smaller in alcoholics. Also it has been demonstrated that female alcoholics sustain even greater brain damage than men.

Risk of osteoporosis (weakened bone tissue) increases for female drinkers. There is also support in medical research to show an association between alcohol consumption and breast cancer risk. In addition, women who become drunk are more likely to be victims of rape and other violent crimes, while drunk men are more likely to be the cause of violent crimes.

Drinking alcohol during pregnancy can lead to birth defects in the baby. In fetal alcohol syndrome, the child will often display signs of mental retardation, and have closely set eyes, a small nasal bridge, epicanthal eye folds, heart valve lesions, microcephaly, small teeth and poor tooth enamel, limited joint movement and an inability to pay attention.

There is great wisdom in the prohibition of drinking alcohol!

Note: Any numbered references (i.e., "2:155") refer to chapter and verse in the Qur'an.

References:

"Islam and Alcoholism" by M.B. Badri, Dr. Scheuler's Home Medical Advisor, Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia, CNN, Medical Correspondent Jeff Levin, "The Wellness Encyclopedia" (UC @ Berkeley), "A Meta-Analysis of Alcohol Consumption in Relation to Risk of Breast Cancer," JAMA Vol. 260, #5, "World Medicine" by Tom Monte, et al, and the National Council for Alcoholism (212) 206-6770

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