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“I am a Muslim and My Dad is an Alcoholic -- What Should I Do?”: Internet-Based Advice for Muslims about Alcohol

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Abstract

This article analyzes 113 fatwas (pieces of advice from Muslim scholars) in response to Internet user-contributed questions about correct behavior in situations involving alcohol. The fatwas are from IslamOnline.net, a popular Islamic Web site. Most of the questions on the English site are submitted by individuals living in non-Muslim countries, who are more likely to confront difficult situations relating to alcohol. In spite of the general condemnation of alcohol consumption in Islam, many individuals face ethical dilemmas and feel the need to request advice about proper behavior in situations involving alcohol, relating to the family, society, work, and bodily purity, as well as more abstract theological questions.

Keywords

Alcohol; Islam; Muslim; Fatwa; Mufti

The Internet boom in the last decade has both fueled research into subjects previously taboo, and opened up access to information by ordinary people seeking answers to complicated, seemingly unique problems. One such area concerns Muslims and alcohol, and it is covered on Web sites created by Muslim organizations to offer advice about correct Islamic behavior. One way for a Muslim to seek advice about correct behavior is to make a formal inquiry to an Islamic scholar (in Arabic, a *mufti*), who issues a religious opinion (in Arabic, a *fatwa*).¹ In recent years, Muslims have had increasing recourse to the Internet to inquire about correct conduct, including many questions relating to alcohol.

Initially it might seem that there could be no questions about correct behavior for Muslims with regard to alcohol, because drinking is forbidden in Islam. The Qur'an (which Muslims revere as the direct revelation of God to humankind²), the *hadith* (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), the *sunna* (the example of the Prophet's conduct), and *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) all generally agree in condemning alcohol. There are some minor

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¹In Arabic, the plural of *fatwa* is *fatawa* and the plural of *mufti* is *muftun*, but for readability in English we render the plurals here as *fatwas* and *muftis*.

²*Allah* is the Arabic word for *God*, or *The God*. In English, some Muslims retain *Allah* instead of *God* to stress the differences between the Islamic, as compared with the Jewish and Christian concepts of God. Others use *God* to emphasize the similarities, since Islam accepts the revelations of Judaism and Christianity as legitimate and since all three religions worship the same God. We prefer the latter.

disagreements; for example, the Hanafi tradition of Islamic law interprets *khamr*—the word for the forbidden beverage in the Qur'an—to mean only certain specified beverages, rather than all intoxicants.³ However, the dominant belief in Islam is that, not only is the consumption of alcohol in any of its forms forbidden, but Muslims should avoid even indirect association with alcohol. A well-known *hadith* attests that God has cursed ten different behaviors—not only the drinking of alcohol, but nine kinds of acts that facilitate the drinking of alcohol:

Truly [God] has cursed [alcohol] and has cursed the one who produces it, the one for whom it is produced, the one who drinks it, the one who serves it, the one who carries it, the one for whom it is carried, the one who sells it, the one who earns from the sale of it, the one who buys it, and the one for whom it is bought.⁴

Yet, as the high number of questions raised on Internet Web sites attests, alcohol-related situations arise often in modern life and can be ambiguous, contradictory, and confusing to Muslims—especially in settings in which Muslims live as a minority group. In such situations judgment must be exercised, and the advice of Islamic religious experts becomes necessary and frequently solicited. For such advice, many turn to the Internet, both for ease of response and for anonymity.

This article examines advice about alcohol for Muslims on the Internet. After providing an overview of textual background on the genre of fatwas and the topic of “Islamic advice,” the discussion turns to IslamOnline.Net, a popular Islamic Internet site offering advice to Muslims. The study examines 113 alcohol-related fatwas posted between 2000 and 2007, which shed light on Muslims’ religious understanding and practice in a diverse and changing world through interactive advice-seeking on the Internet. The article concludes with what one might learn from this Islamic advice genre, with particular attention to relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in an increasingly globalized world.

What is a “Fatwa?”

Islam has a long literary tradition of advice about correct behavior from religious specialists, and Islamic advice Web sites are a modern extension of that tradition. In Islam—and in other world religions—situations sometimes arise which do not neatly fit existing rules, in which moral principles are in conflict. This is especially true when a religion spreads to a new setting with different customs, or when new technologies give rise to new problems and choices. For solutions, Muslims turn to their tradition of questions and responses. The individual who seeks guidance poses a written question to a specially trained Islamic scholar, who issues a formal response, called a fatwa.

Linguistically, the Arabic word *fatwa* comes from a root verb which in its causative form means “to give a formal legal opinion, to furnish with information, to expound.” UCLA Islamic Law scholar Khaled M. Abou El Fadl (2001) defines a fatwa as “a non-binding legal opinion issued in response to a legal problem.” As such, it is not personal advice about a personal problem or merely an answer to a question. The query must be a legal problem about which there is “a conflict of evidence and a need to weigh and evaluate the evidence.” The person who delivers a fatwa is a *mufti*, a word that derives from the same root. A mufti is more than a scholar of religious law, because a mufti has the sanction of the religious community or the state. Only a mufti can issue a fatwa. There is some variation throughout the Muslim world today with regard to how religious legal authority is organized, but a legitimate mufti is someone with recognized standing, such as the Grand Mufti of Al-Azhar University in Cairo (Abou El Fadl, 2001).

³There are four accepted schools of law in Sunni Islam, of which Hanafi is one.

⁴Cited in the Hadith collections of both Tirmidhi and Ibn Majah, who are considered highly reliable.

Differences exist between Sunni and Shi'ite legal organization (about 90% of Muslims worldwide are Sunni), including variations in how legal authority is organized. For example, the Shi'ite leader Ayatollah Khomeini issued a famous fatwa condemning to death Salman Rushdie for insulting the Prophet Muhammad in the novel *The Satanic Verses*. The position of ayatollah, a supreme religious leader in the Iranian Shi'ite-majority state, however, does not exist in Sunni countries, where religious decisions tend to be more consultative. Many muftis, both Sunni and Shi'ite and in Iran and elsewhere, disagreed with this fatwa, which was nullified after Ayatollah Khomeini's death. A mufti differs both from a *qadi* (a judge in a religious court who applies religious law but does not rule on questions of doctrine) and from a *alim* (a member of the *ulama*, a council which deliberates questions of doctrine) although, again, Islamic institutions vary.

The plethora of fatwas issued, and the variety of sources from which they stem has given rise to some concern about the validity of the fatwas and of their issuing muftis. Contemporary scholar Abou El Fadl (2001) deplores the fact that "Muslims in the United States issue fatwas left and right without any regard to conditions, rules, traditions, sources, or anything else for that matter," and he cautions against the "hundreds of self-declared muftis who, after reading a couple of books on *hadith*, become the viceroys of *fiqh* on this earth." He quotes approvingly a 9th century jurist who said that "the most ready to issue fatwas are the most ignorant." He also gives the example of an 8th century jurist who "would be asked about fifty issues and he would perhaps respond to one," replying 'I don't know' to all the others." Abou El Fadl looks with particular disdain upon a toll-free service that gives fatwas by telephone, writing that "a dial-a-fatwa 800-number implies that the law of God is just a phone call away" and that one can request a fatwa like ordering a pizza (2001). Abou El Fadl undoubtedly would not approve of the many Islamic websites which now offer instant fatwas, but the proliferation and popularity of Internet sources offering such advice merit analysis.

Azza Khattab (2000) discusses the confusion that arises when different Muslim legal scholars provide conflicting fatwas. One well-known state institution empowered to give fatwas in Egypt is the Dar El-Iftaa (a body of religious scholars), which since its founding in 1895 has issued around 5 million fatwas. Al-Azhar University in Cairo is also authorized to give fatwas, and the fatwas of al-Azhar and Dar El-Iftaa sometimes contradict each other. Furthermore, muftis sometimes change their minds and issue fatwas reversing their earlier fatwas. Dr. Abdel Moneim El-Berry of al-Azhar states that, in cases in which "jurisprudence gives more than one alternative, people are allowed to follow their instinct regarding which fatwa to choose" (Khattab, 2000).

In addition, Muslims sometimes seek advice from people unqualified to give it. The imam of a mosque, for example, is qualified to lead prayer and deliver sermons, but not to issue fatwas. Dr. Soad Saleh of al-Azhar University in Cairo, one of the leading female authorities on Islam, says that muftis should have memorized the Qur'an, its meaning and interpretation, know the practices of the Prophet and the fatwas of his disciples, study the different branches of Islamic jurisprudence, and have "strong religious beliefs and fear of God," thus preparing them to issue responses to believers' questions (Otterman, 2006). Saleh herself has a satellite television program broadcast from Cairo (*Women's Fatwa*) where she fields questions from female viewers.

One can see analogous genres to the fatwa in other religions. In the Judaic *responsa* tradition, for example, rabbis respond primarily to questions about doctrine. In Catholicism, a fatwa would be closer to advice from a priest than an edict from the Pope, because Islam has no equivalent to the Pope. Islam is more like Protestantism, emphasizing an unmediated link between humans and God with a relative absence of hierarchy. This unmediated nature of the

relationship between a Muslim and God, along with the absence of a distinct hierarchical clergy, has fostered the development of muftis adhering to several different schools of religious law.

An Islamic Web Site: Islamonline

Data for this study were derived from IslamOnline, a Web site focusing on Islamic topics, oriented primarily toward Muslims. The information presented here on IslamOnline was compiled through interviews by two of the authors: Michalak interviewed staff in Doha, Qatar, in March 2007 and Katz interviewed staff in Cairo in April 2008. In addition, Bettina Gräf has published a detailed overview of IslamOnline in the freely available online journal *Arab Media and Society* (Gräf, 2008).

We chose IslamOnline as the focus of study for two reasons. First, it is a popular Islamic Web site whose staff and constituency are both international. And second, it has a large database of fatwas—especially fatwas about alcohol—in both English and Arabic. Among its services, IslamOnline offers world news and in-house editorial commentary, several discussion forums, pilgrimage travel services, a service for Muslims seeking marriage partners, directories of Islamic banks worldwide, international telephone codes, a Gregorian/Islamic date converter, searchable texts of multiple English translations of the Qur'an, and—of relevance here—counseling in the form of fatwas promulgated by an international committee of Muslim scholars.

IslamOnline has a “Fatwa Bank”—a database of thousands of past fatwas. These fatwas are in an easily readable question-and-answer format and the site is searchable by title, topic, keywords, or the name of the mufti who issued the fatwa. Over a hundred muftis appear as the sources of these fatwas, plus about a dozen groups of scholars, such as the al-Azhar House of Fatwa, the European Council for Fatwa and Research, the Fiqh Council of North America, and others.

Although Gräf's (2008) article was published only recently, the rapidity of development of the website has already rendered some parts of her article outdated. She noted that the Web site was founded in 1997 as a project at the University of Qatar and grew quickly. Al-Qaradawi, a frequent contributor of fatwas to IslamOnline, is quoted as having described IslamOnline site as “a project for the entire community,” and “the jihad of our era” (Gräf, 2008). In mid-2005, the Cairo office of IslamOnline had 125 employees and “ranked eighth among the top ten of the most-visited Arabic-language websites worldwide,” with a number of hits comparable to the *New York Times* or *Al-Jazeera*. There were 180 employees by April 2007, and by the time of our interview in Cairo in April 2008, the number of employees there had risen to 250. In Cairo, IslamOnline currently rents office space in four different buildings, but they plan to move into a new building that is being constructed for the Web site in the desert satellite city of Sixth of October City (Medinat Sit Oktober). The Doha office has about 30 employees.

IslamOnline currently maintains two Web sites, one in English and one in Arabic. In Gräf's article, the general thinking at IslamOnline was that Arabic-speaking Muslims living in Arab countries use the Arabic Web site, while non-Arabic-speaking Muslims and those living in the West use the English Web site (Gräf, 2008). IslamOnline intends to help Muslims meet the challenges of living in the West, where lifestyle differences have consequences for religious observance. One lifestyle difference is the greater prevalence of alcohol in Western societies. How should a Muslim behave in a Western environment in which alcohol might be served? How should a Muslim working in a hotel or restaurant deal with serving alcohol to non-Muslim guests?

What is the procedure for producing a fatwa at IslamOnline? The Living Shari'ah Department receives the question and is responsible for furnishing a fatwa about how to live more closely

to the precepts of Islam. When a question comes in, it is directed to a member of the *ulama* for a response. If the person is writing from a non-Muslim country, the question will be answered, at least in part, by Muslim scholars living outside of Muslim-majority countries. This is done to ensure that the scholars respond in a culturally appropriate way. As noted above, the thinking at IslamOnline is that Arab Muslims in Arab countries will likely turn to the Arabic Web site and be answered by *ulama* from within that cultural context. Finally, the Living Shari'ah Department has staff who edit the responses from the muftis to make them suitable for the Web site. Due to staffing limitations, the Live Fatwa questioners are limited to certain days and certain times when they can pose questions, usually in windows of 10-20 minutes. One who wishes to pose a question must sit vigilantly by the computer and type it in during the short window of opportunity. Once the question is answered by the *ulama*, trained editorial staff in the Living Shari'ah Department edit it for posting. Editors often respond to questions at a very basic level, or draw upon answers to similar questions that have previously been posed and answered on the site.

The Arabic and the English sites have large numbers of participating muftis, both as individuals and as members of groups, to whom readers can direct their queries. These muftis have wide-ranging backgrounds. Most have advanced degrees in theology and many have doctorates in the social sciences, counseling or medicine. The muftis listed on the Web site are mostly men, but at least two well-known women muftis participate (Gräf, 2008).

Methods

We searched the English language IslamOnline Web site using the keyword "alcohol" and specific terms "beer" and "wine". These terms yielded alcohol-related texts in different areas of the Website. We then limited our retrieval and analysis to the "Fatwa Bank." That section maintains detailed Islamic advice on general behavior as well as relating to questions about alcohol. These fatwas are issued after deliberation and are deemed significant enough to record and store in this archive.

This search yielded 113 fatwas on alcohol which appeared in the IslamOnline Web site between January 28, 2000, and May 31, 2007. We then used grounded theory to develop categories. This process resulted in five categories: (1) alcohol and the family, (2) alcohol and work, (3) alcohol and society, (4) alcohol and bodily purity, and (5) alcohol and Islamic theology.

In the presentation of the data, the key fatwas have been cited by date. In most instances, a reader will be able to retrieve the specific fatwa by searching by date since there are only three or four fatwas a day at most. Where available, we have also given the country of origin of the questioner; not all fatwas in the bank include this information. Other demographic information is occasionally available or can be inferred. We will first summarize the categories of questions and fatwas to demonstrate IslamOnline's approach, followed by analysis.

Results

Alcohol and the Family

Twelve of the fatwas concern alcohol problems in the context of the family. The title of this article is based on one such example. A woman named Sarah wrote (10/7/2002), "My father is an alcohol addict. How do I behave towards him? Is it my duty to visit him and receive him in my home? Should my father contact my children?" For the questioner, there is a conflict here between two important Islamic principles. How can she show respect to her father and at the same time protect her family from the polluting effects and bad example of her father's behavior?

Addressing the questioner as “Dear Sister in Islam,” the mufti began by acknowledging that “Islam orders us to be kind and loyal to our parents.” In the Qur’an, the command that Muslims respect their parents is so important that it is paired with the most fundamental tenet of Islam, the injunction to monotheism. The mufti counseled Sarah to visit her father and invite him to her home, but not to serve him alcohol and not to let him bring any into her home. He further advised her to discuss the situation with her children: “Talk to them about this sinful act and explain to them how they should behave as children towards their grandfather.” The mufti concluded by recommending that the questioner emulate the behavior of the Prophet Muhammad, who kept good relations and showed respect to his uncle, even though his uncle rejected the message of Islam and remained a polytheist throughout his life.

Two other cases from the Fatwa Bank involved conflicts between parental obedience and the alcohol prohibition. In one, a father “arrives from abroad, having bought a bottle of some expensive alcoholic drink and asks his son to deliver it to a friend or neighbor.” The mufti counseled the son to refuse his father’s request. It is permissible to congratulate non-Muslims on their festive occasions and to exchange gifts with them, but only “on condition that these gifts are not unlawful in themselves, such as being alcohol or pork.” Similarly, a Muslim in Switzerland (7/21/2002) had a mother who asked him to take her to Indian concerts at which there was alcohol. The mufti counseled him to tell his mother that what she was doing was wrong, but to treat her with respect and pray for her, and politely refuse if there is a conflict between the commands of his mother and the commands of God.

A group of siblings asked how to deal with their older brother, who used to drink a lot and had a stroke about ten years earlier (8/30/2000). He had eleven children whom he neglected. The siblings collected rents for their brother but instead of giving the money to him they gave it directly to the man’s children, since they knew that their brother would use the money for alcohol. The mufti confirmed that they were doing the right thing with the money, citing a Qur’anic precedent: “Give not unto the foolish (what is in) your (keeping of their) wealth, which [God] hath given you to maintain; but feed and clothe them from it, and speak kindly unto them.” The mufti added that they should not cut off communications with their brother, but do their utmost to get him to stop drinking.

Another category of family alcohol problems concerned spouses. A woman wrote that her husband began to drink (10/15/2002), neglecting his religious obligations such as prayer. Because he was no longer a practicing Muslim, should she refuse his bed? Here again, two important principles are in conflict. The mufti advised that her husband is still a Muslim, albeit a sinful one, so she should continue to fulfill her conjugal duties, but at the same time advise him to embrace Islam fully. Some of the spouses were from religiously mixed marriages. The muftis ruled that questioners can attend a Christmas or Thanksgiving meal if there is no alcohol or pork served. One such questioner wrote, “My family is Christian and want me to attend Thanksgiving dinner, although it is in the month of fasting. Can I break my fast in so doing?” The mufti answered that a Muslim can attend the meal if “no unlawful food such as pork or alcoholic drinks are served,” but that he is not allowed to break his fast until sunset. Another questioner inquired whether he should allow his Christian wife to eat pork and drink alcohol (9/15/2002). The mufti answered that a correct understanding of the Bible is that both wine and pork are forbidden as unclean. The Bible forbids pork, and Paul’s assertion to the contrary is a misunderstanding of the teachings of Jesus. Since the Bible forbids drunkenness, the Muslim husband should also “prevent [his wife] from drinking wine that intoxicates.”

Alcohol and Work

There were twenty-five fatwas relating to alcohol issues in the workplace. The group of fatwas makes clear the challenge for Muslims living in non-Muslim-majority countries, where alcohol may be prevalent. For example, a Muslim in Belgium (2/21/2000) wrote, “I have a grocery

store in which I sell alcohol too; I want to know if Islam allows me to do so.” In his reply the mufti cited the earlier mentioned tenfold prohibition of alcohol-related behaviors, including a curse on “the one who sells it.” He warned the questioner that if he abets the consumption of alcohol he “will be leaping into the fire with his eyes open.” In another fatwa (5/21/2006), a mufti corrected a questioner who mistakenly believed that the Hanafi school of Islamic law allows Muslims to sell alcohol in non-Muslim countries. In reply to a Muslim in the UK who is an employee of a store that sells alcohol, a different mufti wrote that a Muslim can continue to work in a store that sells alcohol if he does not handle alcohol and does not sell it to Muslims (6/9/2003).

A Muslim asked (9/25/2002) if it was permissible to work in a restaurant “which serves alcohol and other [forbidden] food.” The employee did not serve alcohol or forbidden foods, but only set and cleared tables, “offered cheese powder (which is not *halal* [permitted]),” and got a share of tips. The mufti replied (from Toronto) that this work was not allowed because “it is not only considered [forbidden] to consume what is [forbidden] but the prohibition also extends to promoting or condoning or aiding or assisting in the commission of the act.” The mufti acknowledged that this may be a painful injunction to put into practice, since “you would undoubtedly be concerned about losing livelihood,” but he exhorted the questioner to use his imagination to find purer work options, and reassured him that “[God] will provide us with substitutes.” The mufti concluded by advising that “a penny of *halal* [permitted] is better than a million dollars earned through *haram* [forbidden].” In a similar fatwa, a Muslim hotel employee (5/14/2006) in London was advised that it was forbidden for him to deliver alcohol as part of room service.

A questioner asked if it would be permissible for him to buy shares “of a gas station in the USA, but this gas station sells, besides gas of course, alcoholic drinks and pork products in its small supermarket as part of its business.” The mufti answered that such a partnership is forbidden, although there is the option of discontinuing the sale of the forbidden products (undated fatwa answered by Mufti Zoubir Bouchikhi). The mufti added, although the questioner had not asked, that the selling of lottery tickets was also forbidden because it is a form of gambling. In the same vein, another questioner asked if he is allowed to run a store in the US which sells beer. The mufti answered that it was forbidden, and that, if you work in such a store “it is still forbidden for you to carry it, put it on shelves or in bags of customers, or sell it as a cashier.” Another questioner asked if he can buy stock in an oil company, since the company owns gas stations with convenience stores that sell alcohol. The mufti replied that if the oil company franchises the stores rather than running them directly, it is not responsible for what is sold in the stores, particularly since the stores account for only a small fraction of the oil company’s income.

Since Muslims are not allowed to facilitate alcohol consumption by others, a Muslim taxi driver (9/11/2002) asked what he should do if a customer enters his taxi and requests to be driven to a bar or a gambling establishment. The mufti replied that a “taxi driver is obliged by his work to accept the fares given to him” so he should comply with the customer’s request, which does not fall under the curse against helping someone to drink alcohol. However, the money from that customer is not clean and the driver should seek “forgiveness” and “give charity to clean his money.” Can a taxi driver accept a customer who is carrying alcohol? The mufti replied yes, since this is not one of the specifically forbidden alcohol-related behaviors, but if there is a line of taxis the Muslim driver should be allowed to refer the customer to the next taxi in the line.

In a question that combines both work and social themes (5/31/2007), a Muslim inquired whether it would be permissible to join a labor union, since he feared that the union might hold functions at which alcohol and pork products are served. The mufti replied that the Muslim

can indeed join the labor union and request that *haram* [forbidden] food and drink not be served, but he is not obliged to withdraw from the organization if his request is not honored.

Alcohol and Society

Social occasions involving alcohol present difficulties for Muslims, and this category accounts for 14 of the fatwas. For example, a questioner wrote (1/28/2000), “Recently, I attended my cousin’s wedding party in which, [to] my surprise, alcohol was served;” should he have attended? The mufti replied categorically that “the Muslim is ordered to stay away from drinking parties or gatherings at which drinks are served,” adding that “if the Muslim sees evil he must eradicate it or, if he is unable to do so, he must stay away from it, leaving the place where people are engaged in such things.” The mufti illustrated with an anecdote about the Caliph ‘Umar ibn ‘Abdul’aziz, who “used to flog not only those who drank but those who sat with them as well.” Once, after ‘Umar had ordered that a group of men from a drinking party be flogged, he “was told that a person who was fasting was among them. ‘Begin with him,’ he said.”

A questioner asked (2/19/2003), “Can a Muslim who doesn’t drink go to have dinner in a restaurant that serves alcoholic drinks?” One can do so in USA or Europe because almost all restaurants on those continents serve pork and alcohol, and “you can hardly find a restaurant that does not have these things,” but “if you are in a Muslim country you have a different option and you are under different rules and circumstances.” Another mufti replied to a similar question that the mere entering of a place, such as a hotel or restaurant where alcohol is served, is not forbidden, unless it is a pub or bar that is dedicated solely to serving alcoholic beverages. Yet another mufti wrote (6/9/2003) that a Muslim can eat in a restaurant that serves alcohol, so long as he does not share a table with one who drinks.

Regarding presents a questioner asked (5/12/2000), “I have some non-Muslim friends who appreciate receiving alcohol as gift. Am I allowed to do that?” The mufti replied that it is *haram* [forbidden] for a Muslim to give alcohol as a gift to anyone, “such as a Christian or Jewish friend.” He then recounted the story of a man who brought a cask of wine to the Prophet as a gift. The Prophet informed him that it was prohibited. “Shall I not sell it?” the man asked. The Prophet replied that it was forbidden. “Shall I not give it to a Jew as a gift?” The Prophet replied again that it was forbidden. “Then what shall I do with it?” asked the man. “Pour it on the ground,” the Prophet replied. This advice is repeated in a later fatwa (9/29/2003). One of the more unusual questions was (5/10/2006): If a man steals a bottle of alcohol from a non-Muslim, must he return it? The answer is: If he still has it, yes, and if he has destroyed it, then he must compensate the man from whom he stole it.

An ecumenical question about alcohol (10/15/2000) came from a student whose university wanted to provide an interfaith prayer room for Muslims and students of other religions, and wondered “what requirements should we have for such an arrangement?” The questioner specified that the locale was “clean, with no alcohol at any time, no images, and no religious symbols (crosses, crucifixes, stars, etc.).” The mufti, writing from Toronto, approved. The place should be “clean and should not be contaminated by *najasah* or filth. It should be free of idols and statues” although, under conditions of necessity, an interfaith room can be used if “you cover up the images with a wrapper or curtain.”

Alcohol and Bodily Purity

Twenty-eight of the alcohol-related fatwas relate to the human body and the use of alcohol in food, drink or medicine, or for cosmetic purposes or other external use. Purity and pollution is a universal concern in all human societies (Douglas, 1966), and this category included some of the most detailed fatwas.

The association of some foods and drinks with alcohol puts them into liminal categories that raise doubts on the part of Muslims—vinegar, for example. Vinegar was once wine, which is forbidden. But after the wine has turned to vinegar, is it still forbidden? After all, the alcohol has been transformed and is no longer present. Responding to such a question from Germany (6/13/2000), one mufti gave a seven-page answer, concluding that, just as wine was once a “lawful substance”—i.e., grape juice—and then changed to an unlawful substance, “so it follows that once it changes anew becoming devoid of intoxication its unlawfulness would cease and it would then restore its original legality.” However, he added, the vinegar is only “lawful and pure” if the wine “turns into vinegar by itself” (i.e., through an act of God), but “if it undergoes a deliberate process that causes it to turn to vinegar”, then “it is subject to various judgments made by the jurists.”

In an alcohol and food question, some French Muslims asked if they are permitted to eat a meal prepared with wine “since the wine is burned.” The mufti answered no, because “not all the alcohol content is removed with heat; it depends on the type and time of cooking.” The fatwa cited other authorities as well as the Mayo Clinic that in flamed dishes 75% of the alcohol may remain, that 1.5 hours of simmering leaves 20% of the original alcohol, and that even two or more hours of simmering still leaves 5 to 10% of the original alcohol. Another mufti responding to a similar question from the U.S. (4/27/2002) conceded that “once cooked, it is true that the wine may not retain its alcoholic elements,” but he argued that nevertheless “according to the Qur’an a Muslim must shun it and must not come near wine and drinking.”

A questioner asked (5/14/2002 & 9/26/2004) for “a fatwa regarding the use of alcohol in soft drinks such as Coca-Cola.” The reply cited the Fiqh Council of North America that “it is well-known that some soft drinks, such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola, contain among their ingredients a tiny amount of alcohol, which is used to dissolve some constituents of the drink.” However, the alcohol concentration in the resulting drink was “no more than two to three parts in one thousand (0.03-0.02%),” and was therefore “permissible (*halal*) from the Islamic point of view.” The reply cited Ibn Taymmiah and a 1997 Medical Fiqh Seminar in Morocco that “if a small amount of a prohibited substance X is mixed with a dominant permissible substance Y until substance X loses all its attributes such as taste, color, and smell, substance X loses the qualifications of being impure and prohibited by having been dissolved in substance Y.” In another fatwa (5/31/2007), though, the mufti ruled against non-alcoholic beer because by law it can contain up to 1% alcohol.

What about Kava, a common drink in Fiji and other South Pacific Island countries, which is increasingly exported? The questioner (3/24/2000) explained that the “root or stem” of a certain plant was “dried, pounded, and then mixed with water in a thin cloth acting as a strainer;” the “muddy extract” which remained “makes a person very lazy and slow” and causes the mouth, tongue, and face to twitch (but the drink apparently contains no alcohol). The reply was based upon a saying of the Prophet that “not only is wine prohibited but the definition of *khamr* extends to any substance which intoxicates, in whatever form or under whatever name it may appear.” This argument by analogy with alcohol is used by Muslim scholars to forbid heroin, marijuana, cocaine, and other intoxicating drugs which did not exist at the time of the Prophet and thus were not specifically forbidden. Islamic scholars are still arguing about the permissibility of chewing of qat leaves (Michalak & Trocki, 2006). When coffee began to spread from Yemen into other parts of the Middle East, probably around the early 16th century, there was a lively debate among Islamic scholars over whether it should be permitted (Hattox, 1985).

Medicines in alcohol tinctures for internal use were the subject of some of the fatwas. Questioners (4/23/2001 and 12/14/2006) asked if it is “permissible to take medicine containing alcohol.” The mufti replied that jurists disagree about this, but that medicine containing alcohol

was permissible if three conditions were met: (1) the medicine must be “necessary for the life of the person who takes it,” (2) “a knowledgeable and trustworthy Muslim physician should recommend such type of medicine,” and (3) “there are no other lawful medicines available.” A reply to a similar question (1/28/2000) said “do not use anything *haram* [forbidden] as medicine,” but the mufti allowed “the exempted case of necessity” if “a man’s life were in danger.”

Alcohol products for external use were generally approved. To a question about using alcohol (6/16/2002) for “rubbing over an injury, cologne or perfumes that contain alcohol, toothpaste that contains alcohol and using any soap or any cleaning material that contains alcohol,” a mufti replied that, not only are these products for external use only, but they use denatured alcohol, which is different from the ethyl alcohol used in beverages; however, he recommended the avoidance of “toothpaste or mouthwash that contain alcohol,” because “they go inside the mouth.” Another mufti (4/5/2003) suggested that mouthwash with alcohol can be used if there is no choice, provided that none is swallowed and that one rinses with water afterward.

To a questioner who worried that cosmetics containing alcohol (3/14/2001) could be “absorbed into the skin,” the mufti replied that “the kinds of alcohol that are instilled in cosmetic products have nothing to do with drinking wine and other alcoholic beverages,” so they can be used. Another questioner (6/7/2000) worried that alcohol from perfume could be absorbed through the nose, but the mufti confirmed that this was “external use” and not forbidden. Other fatwas (7/1/2000 and 9/2/2003) stated that Muslims are allowed to use hair gel or hair regrowth products (11/16/2005) that contain alcohol because they were for external use although, again, it is always best to avoid that which is doubtful.

Polluted vessels also pose problems for bodily purity. For example, if a glass or a plate has touched alcohol or pork, is it permanently polluted? Or can it be cleaned and used for *halal* [permitted] food and drink? One fatwa (7/31/2002) quoted an al-Azhar scholar, Sheikh ‘Abdul-Majeed Subh, that “it is permissible for a Muslim to eat and drink from these plates and glasses that were used in serving swine and alcohol as long as they are cleaned to the extent that nothing is left over and the traces are completely removed.” Alcohol and Islamic Theology

Some of the questions posed to the muftis have more to do with theological matters than ethical dilemmas. That is, they are more about orthodoxy (correct belief) than orthopraxy (correct practice); 34 of the fatwas can be classified in this category.

The most basic alcohol-related question, arising repeatedly in different forms, is why alcohol is forbidden in the first place. For example, a questioner wrote that he knows that “it is *haram* [forbidden] to drink [alcohol],” but what specific dangers are there? Mufti Qaradawi (5/12/2002) explained that alcohol has harmful effects on health, religion, work, and the family, as well as in the spiritual, material, and moral domains. Alcohol accounts for a staggering number of cases of hospital patients “suffering from mental disorders, delirium tremens, nervous breakdowns, and ailments of the digestive tract, to which are added the statistics of suicides, homicides, bankruptcies, sales of properties, and broken homes related to the consumption of alcohol.” He reviewed the stages in which alcohol became prohibited in early Islam, and more recent attempts at prohibiting the drinking of alcohol, pointing out that only Islam “has succeeded in combating and eradicating” alcohol. The mufti noted that some Christians believe that “drinking in small quantities” can have positive benefits,” but he rejected this idea because “a small amount leads to large amounts and one glass to other glasses, until one becomes addicted to it.”

Other fatwas (7/12/2003) added other reasons for avoiding alcohol, such as that it weakens the reproductive system and leads to birth defects. In the Web site’s section on “Ask About Islam,” a non-Muslim questioner asked why alcohol was forbidden (1/24/2007). A detailed response

was given covering theological, health, social, and other aspects of alcohol, contributed by Idris Tawfiq, a convert to Islam and a former Roman Catholic priest. Tawfiq particularly focused on the use of alcohol to enhance social relaxation:

...So, the answer to why alcohol is forbidden is clear: It is harmful to us. It is harmful to us, physically, and it also harms us as people. Why would we, as Muslims, need to take solace in drink? One of the saddest features of life in the Western world, for example, is how workers look forward all week long to the end of the week when they can go out together to the pub. How sad that many people, because of loneliness and depression, turn to drink and to drugs to fill in that desperate need for affection or fulfillment in life. What a tragedy that alcohol has torn apart families and broken many lives and careers. ...In a world where they feel loved and respected, people would not need these artificial stimulants to make them feel good. One of the amazing features of the Muslim world is that Muslims can go out together for fun and can be genuinely happy, without even thinking of the need for alcohol.

Some questions related to the punishment for drinking. One questioner asked (9/26/2002), what is the punishment for drinking and smoking? The response was, tobacco was unknown until many centuries after Islam was introduced and was not mentioned in the Qur'an, but alcohol was known and is explicitly forbidden. The consensus of Islamic scholars is that tobacco and other harmful drugs are forbidden by analogy. But, the mufti continued, "you cannot expect Islam to be a religion which carries a big stick for everything." Thus smoking is *haram* but is "left to the moral sense of the person." Drinking was first punished by forty lashes "with anything that came to hand;" subsequently the caliph Umar increased the punishment to eighty lashes, the same punishment for false witness, since drinking can cloud the mind and lead to false witness.

In none of the fatwas was there any questioner who admitted to being a drinker. The sole item of this nature was a non-Muslim making a query (6/4/2002) in the "Ask About Islam" section. The questioner self-described as an alcoholic but wanted to become a Muslim: "Is it possible for me to be a Muslim seeing that I am an alcoholic? I know you don't like people drinking." The response was very supportive:

My dear brother, we are all human beings and as humans we commit mistakes, we often do wrong things. I have done wrong in my life too. So, I simply cannot dislike you for doing wrong. ... We have to deliberately plan to tackle our "enemy" in the most effective way. Here I give you a little plan as to how you can wrestle with your enemy (the habit of drinking) and defeat it ultimately, if God wills.

The counselor (in this case, an English professor from India) recommends a treatment plan of bowing to God and praying for help with his addiction, gradually working up to five times per day.

That wine is one of the promised rewards of paradise in Islam presented a paradox to a questioner (9/19/2002) who wondered how it is that things forbidden on earth—such as wine—are nevertheless permitted in heaven. In a detailed reply, the mufti acknowledged that, indeed, this might seem strange. The Qur'an says, "Is the reward of goodness ought save goodness?" (LV/Rahman: 60). So one might ask: Since wine is not good, how can it be the reward for goodness? The mufti answered that, as Creator and Sovereign "[God] forbids whatever He wills in this world to His people," and "it is not permissible for anyone to object to [God's] ruling." In any case, he adds, "the wine of the Hereafter is wholesome, unlike the wine of this life, which causes loss of mind, hangover, and stomachache."

Discussion and Conclusions

In these fatwas, one finds much to compare, contrast, and observe, in both the questions and the responses. A look at the questions posed demonstrates that some Muslims, especially those living outside of Muslim-majority countries, feel the need for guidance about proper behavior in their personal lives with regard to alcohol, despite the seemingly clear religious injunction against drinking. While a few of the questions may seem trivial, most often they are genuine expressions of ethical and moral dilemmas—messages from Muslims seeking help in deciding the right thing to do. The Muslim scholars who respond seem sincerely desirous of helping, and their answers are often quite detailed, providing rationales and precedents. While all the fatwas cite the *hadith* on alcohol, the muftis also bring in rationales for avoiding alcohol related to health, personal safety, and better social relationships. The questioners are given not only specific actions to take but also suggestions on demeanor and attitudes. For instance the young man whose mother wanted to go to entertainments that served alcohol was told: "...tell [her] that what she is doing is wrong, but treat her with respect and pray for her, and politely refuse if there is a conflict." The fatwas consistently encourage the questioners to preserve key familial and friendship even if others are drinkers. The fatwas also encourage the faithful to avoid occasions where alcohol is present if no important kinship or business link makes it necessary.

These fatwas illustrate how thoroughly the injunction against alcohol applies in Islam. Taken as a whole, these fatwas advise constant vigilance in all life roles from child to parent to worker and covering domains from personal hygiene to food to medications. This all-encompassing approach helps to illustrate some of the social mechanisms that might be at play in encouraging life long abstinence.

It has long been recognized that religion is a key factor in abstinence from alcohol and thus confers protection against risks associated with alcohol consumption. However, while many churches and religions have such injunctions, they vary considerably in the extent to which members adhere to these strictures and what social processes are involved. According to the National Alcohol Survey, about 80 percent of Muslims in the US are life-long abstainers, one of the highest proportions of any religious group. While Mormons and evangelical groups also have high rates of abstinence, only about half of Baptists and Methodists are abstainers even though they were once known for their prohibitions against drinking (Michalak, Trocki, and Bond, 2007).

Some non-Muslims might find much in these fatwas that seems strange. For example, it might seem strange that drinking alcohol is placed in a more serious category of punishments than murder, or that drinking is more prohibited than smoking (even though smoking is bad for health, but moderate drinking may be healthy). The wordings of the fatwas might sometimes seem odd because they are translated from Arabic.

Particularly unusual is the fatwa counseling the Muslim husband to prevent his Christian wife from drinking alcohol, on the grounds that the Bible forbids drinking. This is inaccurate since the Bible forbids drunkenness, not drinking. Nevertheless, the mufti's views are not far from those of American Christian denominations that ban wine from their churches and celebrate the sacrament instead with grape juice. Christian groups once led a movement—Prohibition—to impose their anti-alcohol views on everyone in the United States (Levine, 1983). To this day some counties are still completely "dry" due to this movement and some states have laws against selling alcohol on Sunday. Like Saudi Arabia and some other Muslim countries today, the United States from 1919 to 1933 was a county in which manufacturing, possession, and sale of alcohol was illegal. Mormons today are even stricter than Muslims, banning not only alcohol but drinks containing caffeine, such as coffee, tea, and Coca-Cola.

The muftis who write the fatwas for IslamOnline have little margin for interpretation. The Qur'an explicitly forbids drinking and a reliable *hadith* forbids even indirect association with alcohol; working from these principles, muftis have no choice but to tell some questioners that they must quit their jobs although they do not have to divorce their spouses or shun family members who drink. The same challenge faces all major religions, to find the right balance between loyalty to unchanging principles and the need to adapt to new eras and cultural contexts.

Our analysis is subject to some limitations and qualifications. Most importantly, we do not know the reaction of the petitioner to the mufti's response. Another limitation is that the scale of alcohol use cannot be determined. For example, those family members described as "alcoholics" might not be considered alcoholics by non-Muslims. When the daughter refers to her father as an "alcohol addict," it could be that he is a moderate drinker, since in Islam there are no distinctions made across light, moderate, and heavy drinking. If even a drop is forbidden, every drinker is a problem drinker—in a way, an alcoholic. This contrasts with the limited, ritual role of wine in Judaism and Christianity (Fuller, 1996).

Another limitation is the difference between theory and practice. In practice, some Muslims drink, although they are a minority. Drinking is normative in three-quarters of the non-Muslim world but only three Muslim-majority countries (Albania, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan) have high consumption (United Nations, 2004). Some Muslims drink lightly, some moderately, and some are problem drinkers. As with other religions, normative and actual Muslim practices with regard to alcohol diverge. However, as the fatwas of IslamOnline make clear, Islamic normative practice is and will likely remain abstention from alcohol.

Another limitation is the extent to which IslamOnline might avoid controversial topics. IslamOnline occasionally encounters mild government opposition to content on the Web site, but in principle the editors do not change anything. Director of Outreach and Cooperation at IslamOnline Nadia El-Awady commented that the print press faces more severe government censorship than Web sites. Despite the avowed Islamic centrism position taken by IslamOnline, some governments, for example Syria and Tunisia, have banned IslamOnline altogether.

While Muslim countries which socially or legally limit alcohol use have relatively few alcohol-related problems in general, some of those who do drink deliberately seek intoxication, which is an abusive drinking pattern. In the cited UN report (2004) one North African country was noted for having bars where men would drink as many as eight drinks in two hours after work and before the bars closed. Because there are so few drinkers in these countries, there is little police involvement and no public information campaigns about the harms of drunk driving or other hazards to the general public. Muslim-majority countries also have few prevention or treatment programs since alcohol problems are assumed to be nonexistent.

The existence of IslamOnline and other widely used Islamic Web sites indicates the extent to which Muslims today have embraced the revolution in information technology, as they maintain the role of Islam in their lives. Muslim conservatives in Saudi Arabia once considered the radio to be an impermissible innovation but were won over when the radio was used to broadcast the Qur'an, demonstrating that new technologies can be put to good religious use. Muslims today have little hesitation about disseminating their ideas through modern media such as radio, television, audiocassettes, videocassettes, email lists and, in this instance, Internet Web sites (Anderson and Eickelman, 1999).

It seems logical that questions of correct Islamic conduct are more likely to arise in locations where Muslims are a minority. Migration and conversion to Islam in non-Muslim countries are bringing Muslims and non-Muslims into ever-closer proximity. Migration by Muslims to non-Muslim majority countries has the added effect of creating ethnic diversity within Muslim

communities. For example, mosques in Europe and the United States bring together Muslims of different cultural origins, such as Arabs, Turks, Persians, Afghans, South Asians, and European and American (especially African American) converts (Esposito, 2002). Under such circumstances, questions of correct Islamic practice are more likely to arise.

A final observation about the alcohol fatwas is that it is significant that all five categories include questions about interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims -- family fatwas about mixed marriages; fatwas about relations with non-Muslim co-workers; social fatwas about permissible gifts for non-Muslim friends; fatwas about how to remain bodily pure when surrounded by impurity; and theological fatwas. There runs, through all the fatwas, a thread of willingness to accommodate to multifaith and multicultural settings. Both the muftis and their Muslim questioners seem to recognize that life in a diverse society has special constraints. The fatwas are often about sharing space and interacting with non-Muslims: Give your non-Muslim friend a gift, but make it something other than alcohol. In America it is acceptable to have dinner at a restaurant that serves wine and pork; just eat your way and let them eat theirs. And if there are items sacred to other faiths in the shared prayer room, just cover them up when it is your turn to use the room. In an age of increasing globalization, the fatwas at IslamOnline are an encouraging sign that Muslims are working to find ways to live in harmony with non-Muslims.

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