

# Should Islam Become More Tolerant to Alcohol?

Written by Ron Geaves

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RON GEAVES, NOV 22 2012

Last August, during the month of Ramadan, *The Economist* published an article entitled 'Islam and alcohol: tipsy taboo' (18<sup>th</sup> August 2012). The main thrust of the argument was that drinking alcohol was an everyday reality in most Muslim nations and remained persistent even where some states had made both production and consumption illegal. The writer seems to suggest that in the past alcohol consumption among Muslims was acceptable to Islamic scholars and at some point this transformed into a more hard-line position. This position is embodied in the line "Nobody knows exactly when Islamic scholars decided that booze was sinful". The writer seems to suggest that the transformation was relatively recent, citing the ban on alcohol in states such as Pakistan and Iran where 'political Islam' had become prominent; the increase in religious piety post 9/11 and rejection of western decadence. The article concludes by asking the question "should Islam become more tolerant of drinking?"

### The 'Real' and the 'Ideal'

The main problem with the arguments put forward in the article is that it conflates "Islam" and "Muslims". Islam is a way of life believed to have been revealed to the Arab people in the seventh century through the agency of the final Prophet (Muhammad) and as guidance for all human beings. It is not considered to be a new religion but a call for a return to the Prophetic tradition as enshrined in the exemplar figure of Ibrahim (Abraham). The Islamic revelation is considered the ideal through which a life can be lived in harmony with God's laws and leading to the condition of *taqwa* (piety). Muslims, on the other hand, merely refers to millions of people who by accident of birth are born into a particular familial identity. The religion of Islam has long recognized the difference between the "ideal" and the "reality". The "ideal" is represented in the religious teachings embodied in the Qur'an and the exemplary life of Muhammad (*Sunna*). The "reality" is the everyday life of countless Muslims over the last fourteen centuries who met the "ideal" to a greater or lesser degree, or not at all. There is no "original sin" in Islam and human beings fail to reach the "ideal" because of weakness and forgetfulness of Allah. Muslims, therefore, as per the examples cited in the article may well have consumed alcohol down through the centuries and may continue to do so in contemporary Muslim societies but this has nothing whatsoever to do with Islam, other than the fact that are engaged in an *haram* (forbidden) activity.

### Islamic Teachings

There have always been debates over what the Qur'an and the Hadith (sayings of the Prophet) actually permit with regard to alcohol consumption. The Hadith are problematic. Islamic scholars were engaged in a long process of determining the reliability of the proliferation of sayings of the Prophet in the early centuries after his death. As the Arab Umayyad empire advanced it took over vast territories of earlier civilizations where previous religions, political systems and cultural norms required adaptation to Islamic norms. Recourse to a prophetic tradition could be used to justify political decisions, accommodation with earlier religions and the pragmatics of governance. Consequently Islamic scholars of the eighth and ninth centuries were required to authenticate the Prophet's sayings and eventually created four collections deemed reliable. The primary rule on the content of the Hadith was that they could not be authentic if they contradicted the Qur'an. Today and down through the centuries the Hadith can be used to argue for and justify the polemics of various issues ranging from political systems, rights of women, morality and authentic religious practice and belief. However, with regard to alcohol use, there is a body of Hadith that prohibit its use unconditionally. Where such a body of literature exists in agreement, it is regarded that it is evidence of reliability

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(*mutawatir*).

The Qur'an is more certain but remains open to interpretation by scholars and individuals. For those who attempt to argue that alcohol is not completely forbidden, they look to the various verses that would appear to be in contradiction, ignoring the fact that the Qur'an was revealed over a period of more than twenty years. The clearest account of this process with regard to the verses on alcohol, that I have found is in the reference to the Qur'an commentary (*tafsir*) written by the jurist Imam al-Qurtubi (d1273) in his classical work *Tafsir al-Qurtubi* and used in response to the question "Alcohol NOT declared *haram* in the Quran?" (Ustadha Shaista Maqbool).

"The prohibition of alcohol occurred in stages and [after] many incidents, for they [the Arabs] used to love to drink it. The first [verse] revealed regarding the matter of alcohol was: "They ask you about alcohol and gambling. Say: 'There is great sin in both although there is some benefit for people...' [Baqarah:219] i.e. [benefit] in their trade. Hence, when this verse was revealed, some people left [alcohol] saying, "We have no need for that in which there is great sin," and some did not leave it saying, "We take [from its] benefit and we leave its sin." Thereafter, the verse was revealed: "Do not approach prayer while you are drunk..." [Nisa:43] So some people left it saying, "We have no need for that which distracts us from the prayer," and some drank it outside the times of prayer until the verse was revealed: "O you who believe! Alcohol, gambling, [sacrificing for] idols, and divining of arrows are only an abomination [of Satan's work...]" [Maidah:90-91] So [alcohol] became prohibited for them such that some of them said, "Allah did not prohibit anything as strictly as alcohol."

It is generally accepted by Islamic scholars that where there is a successive series of revelations on an issue, the rule of abrogation is applied with the final verse revealed replacing those that came before it. However, there have been some interpreters who have argued that the gradualist approach of increasing intolerance of alcohol use allows for new adherents to Islam to slowly moderate their behaviour to the ideal. Mohammad Khaleel reminds us that it is modern interpreters of the Qur'an that tend to focus on a gradual revelation rather than an 'incipient' one (Khaleel,2006:300).

## Interpretation of the Islamic Revelation

The writer of the Economist article would appear to belong to a school of thought that considers modernization of an ancient religion to be identical with the adoption of western culture. Religions of revelation have always had to consider a unique challenge. How does a religion which begins with a revelation from God that happens in one place, and at one historical moment, and given to one particular people, deal with change and development across time and cultures? (Geaves, 2005:55) There are also acute challenges sharpened by the rate of social change in the twentieth and twentieth first centuries. Muslim social values and economic policies will range across the spectrum with regard to alcohol but the revelation of God remains clear. Negotiations between divine immutability and the constant mutability of human society are built into the Abrahamic faiths. The Qur'an is not the only source of divine law. The prohibition of alcohol is reinforced by 'ijma, a consensus of most Muslim scholars that alcohol is forbidden. Maqbool also points out that traditional Islam does not rely upon the Qur'an alone but also considers the *sunna* (example) of the Prophet. The hadith may be more problematic with regard to authentication but in the case of the prohibition of alcohol consumption the concept of *mutawir* is applied. That is, the overall number of prophetic narrations would deem forgery unlikely and transparently clear that alcohol is forbidden.

In 1888 William Quilliam, a well-known Liverpoolian lawyer and philanthropist, and a staunch temperance supporter, converted to Islam in Morocco. He cited as one of the reasons for his conversion, the consequences of alcohol abuse in European societies. The author of the article in *The Economist* might want to consider whether in this instance, the cost to human dignity might be higher than 'progress' and that Islamic values on intoxication have a message for us.

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**Ron Geaves** holds a Chair in the Comparative Study of Religion in the Theology and Religious Studies of Liverpool Hope University. The author of nineteen books on religion, his research interests focus upon the transmigration of Islam into the UK. In recent works he has been arguing for the revival of Sufism globally (see

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2007, 2008, 2009 2009c) and, also, the history of the Muslim presence in the UK, culminating in his ground-breaking *Islam in Victorian Britain: The Life and Times of Abdullah Quilliam*, Kube Press, 2010 which has generated considerable interest from the media and led to two radio and one TV documentary. He is currently working on *The Collected Works of Abdullah Quilliam: A British Muslim of the Nineteenth Century*, to be published by Kube Press in 2013 and an edited collection ) *Transformations and Trends in British Sufism* to be published by Continuum also in 2013.

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