

Alcoholism and Islam

By Siraj Islam Mufti

(Extract from "Islam Provides Remedy to Alcoholism")

Islam is unique in its successful eradication of alcoholism in a people in whom excessive drinking was an established tradition and a psychological necessity in 7th century pre-Islamic Arabia. This unequalled phenomenon has continued in Muslim masses and therefore, its discussion is very pertinent in relation to our modern alcohol-saturated world.

The pre-Islamic Arabs consumed alcohol more than in any other society of their times. Their existence was centered on upholding their tribal honor. Arabic poetry, replete with songs glorifying excessive drinking as an insignia of manhood, would enthrall them in times of tribal wars and display of manly romantic passions in times of peace. Drinking would provide escape from deep-rooted personal insecurities and the instability of family life, just as it does today. The unstable family structure was due to general low esteem for women. Divorce was common; prostitution and promiscuity were rampant. Modern psychologists and psychoanalysts consider alcohol dependence the result of insecurities of childhood deprivation, emotional traumas and broken families – traits that were as common in pre-Islamic families as they are now.

Since the burgeoning Islamic society existed alongside their idolatrous cohorts, the difference in the two could be ascribed as due only to the practices of Islam. Muslims in Madinah under the leadership of Prophet Muhammad (*Peace be upon him*) served as one large experimental group where extraordinary revolutionary changes were taking place. The lessons learnt for developing willpower with negligible relapses in the change wrought by Islam towards alcohol could be summed up as follows:

A well organized plan for gradual change. The Islamic prohibition on alcohol was a logical final step of a well organized plan executed over a period of 3 years, communicated by the Quran and put into practice by the Prophet. Thus the heavy and problem drinkers were gradually weaned off this habit. We could assume this to have some resemblance to the present-day systematic desensitizing hierarchy used in behavioral therapy.

However, the most important factor was the believers whole-hearted readiness to give up drinking when the Divine command came: "Surely al-khamr (intoxicants; wine and alcoholic drinks) is forbidden." This command was enough to stop drinking instantaneously, throw away any and all drinks and to break up or empty existing pots, skins full and other containers of fermented date, palm, honey and grape in every gathering and household until the streets of Madinah flowed like streams of alcohol as a testimony to the greatest anti-alcohol

movement ever witnessed by humankind. It was an extraordinary exhibition of willpower installed by faith.

Strong motivation to change. Sociologists agree that people will comply with new social norms when they are convinced of their truth and validity. The real intrinsic motivation that caused success of anti-alcohol campaign was Islam as a religion and way of life. Thus the persuasion to give up alcohol did not occur only in 3 years - but actually commenced 13 years earlier with the coming of Islam. The Prophet first attacked the false beliefs and values of Arabs. These were the real sources of "ignorance" or *jahiliyyah* as the Quran calls them; drinking, gambling, adultery and other immoral acts were only the symptoms of this *jahiliyyah*. Thus the Prophet devoted the first 13 years wholly to correct their belief system until the sense of accountability before God, fear of punishment in Hell and reward of Paradise became vivid realities in the minds of believers. Once this understanding became part and parcel of their lives, their selfish sense of pride and their conflicts were substituted with the bonding of brotherhood or *Ummah*, their family structure revamped and strengthened along with eradication of all personal insecurities and social evils.

Other factors of social Persuasion. Within Islamic faith, the concepts of persuasion and incentives of reward and punishment get transcended to the level of revelation from God to man. Thus they invoke an effect that is far beyond the magnitude conceivable by secular sciences. Furthermore, the reward and punishment is carried beyond the imaginable limits of this world into the eternity of the Hereafter. A practicing Muslim realizes that no material gain or loss equals God's pleasure or anger. His immediate reward is apparent in psychological elation and personal fulfillment that accompanies the spiritual pleasure in complying with a Divine commandment.

Among other factors that Islam uses in its persuasion is consensus. Islam requires consensus in all matters concerning the family, society or state. Such group compliance must play a high role in exerting pressure within the family and society on the drinker to give up. The gradual process adopted for prohibition is also indicative of unanimous positive response obtained in such situations. Another factor is the cohesion and brotherhood fortified by Islamic teachings and practices that nurture care and consideration for those who falter. But by far the most important factor in these and all other cases must be the leadership role and example set for it by those who ask for compliance. The leadership of the Prophet and the example set by him inspired his followers then and now to emulate him in every aspect of their lives.

Despite the Western cultural invasion, even in those who are weak in faith, this potential understanding of Islam is very much ingrained in their inherited psyche. Malik Badri, a well-known Islamic psychologist recalls his use of this "potential power of Islam as a force of persuasion and aversion" with much success for Muslims who drink. Alongside this, Islam provides the consolation of repentance (*tawbah*) for the guilty. God is not only Merciful and Compassionate

but also *Tawwab*, Often Returning, no matter how often a man falters and sins but then repents sincerely, because He is Most Forgiving (*Ghaffar*).

The experience of a vast Muslim African-American community signifies the validity of Islamic approach: that it is much more successful than all other modern Western endeavors. James Baldwin in his well-known little book, *The Fire Next Time*, testifies to the "miracle" that takes place in African-Americans, as the "harassed alcoholic and drug addicts suddenly change when they convert to Islam." He goes to say: "And now suddenly people who have never before been able to hear this message hear it, and believe it, and are changed. [Islam] has been able to do what generations of welfare workers and committees and resolutions and reports and housing projects and playgrounds have failed to do: to heal and redeem drunkards and junkies, to convert people who have come out of prisons and keep them out, to make men chaste and women virtuous, and to invest both male and female with the pride and serenity that hang about them like unfailing light".

Dr. Siraj Mufti received several grants from the U.S. National Institutes of Health for his research on alcohol abuse. He is currently serving as an Islamic consultant to the Correctional Corporation of America in Arizona. Previously he worked as a research professor at the University of Arizona and a chaplain with the U.S. Department of Justice.