

Alcohol and Politics in Muslim Culture: Pre-Text, Text and Context

Rudi Matthee

University of Delaware

Introduction

Islam, as the cliché has it, knows no distinction between religion and state, *din wa dawla*, and as a result everything Muslims do or don't do, including choosing or declining to drink, is inherently political, bound up with governance and the public realm. In Islamic culture and history alcohol indeed is entangled with politics in many different and often surprising ways. However, although Muslims themselves often emphasise the absence of any differentiation between what is God's and what is Caesar's, norm and practice in real life vary widely, inherently so. After all, if everything is political, exposed to the public gaze, the inner world of privacy, where contradictions abound and don't have to be resolved, can indeed offer inspiration and generate creativity, recedes and ultimately disappears, making life unlivable.

In his *The Wet and the Dry: A Drinker's Journey*, published in 2013, travel writer Lawrence Osborne does not engage with this conundrum as he uses the Muslim world as a backdrop to a series of witty and wistful musings on the psychology of the itinerant alcoholic.¹ Osborne visits Beirut and the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, the Pakistani capital Islamabad, the United Arab Emirates, the heavily Muslim southern parts of Thailand, as well as Malaysia and Egypt. Whenever he is not in Christian company, as in Lebanon, or ensconced in the bar of some international hotel frequented by expats, as in Dubai, the atmosphere he depicts is furtively nostalgic and melancholic, as in Cairo, or grimly clandestine, as in Pakistan. 'You can get a drink in most Islamic countries', Osborne concludes, but it is either not easy, sometimes even for a foreign national, or one has to find a (dwindling) non-Muslim recess of society.

Osborne, being little more than a transient tourist, travels in the public realm. He never enters people's homes, the private *Muslim* recesses of society, and so does not discuss—does not seem to notice—the yawning gap between 'public' and 'private' in the societies he touches and leaves behind.

Osborne's ephemeral experience points up the astonishing dearth of literature on drinking in Muslim environments.² It also makes the contrast with the pre-twentieth century past appear stark indeed. The premodern Islamic world seems awash in alcohol. Wine before the onset of the modern age is ubiquitous, both in real life and in much of the normative literature, not to mention in poetry and painting. It is perfectly possible to write a history of at least the eastern half of the lands that originally fell under the sway of Islam as a history of *razm-o bazm*, of royal fighting and feasting, producing the equivalent of *Vodka Politics*, the title of a recent study of the history of Russia seen through the prism of its leaders' disturbing drinking habits.³ Water was the beverage of choice for Muslims in some parts of the early modern Islamic world, such as Afghanistan, Baluchistan and the Arabian Peninsula, where virtually no one seems to have consumed alcohol; yet in most other places, and especially among the elite, water was clearly considered subservient and inferior to wine.⁴ One modern scholar calls wine the 'Islamic beverage par excellence'.⁵

Drinking at the Muslim Courts

Surely the most conspicuous example of Muslim drinking is to be found at very heart of the early ninth-century Abbasid caliphate, in Baghdad, at the celebrated court of Harun al-Rashid. Baghdad retrospectively came to represent the classical age of Muslim civilization, both in the Islamic imagination, which fondly harkens back to its presumed political, military and scientific power and preeminence, and in the Orientalist Western mind, which over time created its own fantasy of the splendour and sophistication of early Islamic rule coinciding with a brutishly primitive early Medieval Europe. When Baghdad ruled the world, its caliphs and their entourage engaged in a life style filled with

song, wine and dancing girls involving symbols and rituals that owed a great deal to the pre-Islamic, Persian and, especially the Sasanian past.⁶ In this milieu an existing, originally pre-Islamic brand of bacchic verse, the so-called *khamriyya*, was allowed to thrive by being composed and declaimed in public, becoming a recognized genre in Arabic poetry.

One could adduce pretty much any period in the pre-nineteenth-century Muslim world to make the same point. Take the Turkic dynasties that came to rule much of the eastern Islamic world—today's Iran and Afghanistan—in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the Ghaznavids and their successors, the Seljuqs. Just as influenced by pre-Islamic, Persianate patterns as the Abbasids, the rulers of both dynasties invariably drank banquet style, heavily and openly, even while, as rustic Turks, they sought to establish their credentials as good Islamic rulers.⁷

Or consider the Ottomans, the leading Muslim dynasty in the more than five centuries between 1453, the year they seized the Byzantine capital, Constantinople, and turned it into Islamic Istanbul, and their demise following World War I. The English soldier-traveller Thomas Herbert in the seventeenth century insisted that the Iranians drank whereas the Turks didn't.⁸ That may have been true of the common people and the commercial elite, but it certainly does not apply to the political ruling class, the sultan and the court in first place, except that at the Sublime Porte the consumption of alcohol was uncommon at official, public functions. Sultan Selim II (r. 1566-74), nicknamed '*meş'*, the 'sot', and Sultan Ibrahim (r. 1640-48), who was known as '*sarhoş'*, 'drunkard', were extreme but not unique. With few exceptions, Ottoman rulers were real toppers, in addition to indulging in the consumption of opium and other psychotropic substances. The same can be said of the Mughals, the dynasty that ruled much of the Indian Subcontinent between the sixteenth and the nineteenth century.⁹

Let's take a closer look at neighbouring Iran, which in the sixteenth and seventeenth century was ruled by the Safavids. The nine successive shahs of this Twelver-Shi'i dynasty, from Shah Isma'il in the early 1500s until the last effective one, Shah Soltan Hoseyn (r. 1694-1722), who lost, first his throne and

then his life, all consumed alcohol; at least four drank heavily, and two were alcoholics and almost certainly died at a young age because of excessive drinking. As with the Ottomans, the use and abuse of alcohol among the Safavids knew the multiplier effect that comes with a 'larger cultural complex involving other drug substances'.¹⁰ Among those, opium and its many derivatives were paramount—as the only effective painkiller, as a form of self-medication, and as a way to find oblivion from the sorrows of life.¹¹

Certainly in the beginning, when they still operated as a semi-nomadic war band, Safavid rulers drank the way the Mongols drank: banquet-style, with abandon, raucously. As the Safavids suffered military defeat, lost their divine aura, and embarked on Weberian routinisation, they had to boost their religious credentials. This entailed the need to give up drinking, at least rhetorically; and, indeed, almost all Safavid shahs at one point or another renounced the cup and issued prohibitionist decrees, symbolizing a switch in the ruler's image from incarnation of the divine to that of trustee of the Imam, from law-defying force to guarantor of orthopraxis.¹² Yet only one, the fastidious Shah Tahmasb (r. 1524-76), engaged in a self-styled and lasting 'Sincere Repentance'—which included a ban on 'all blameworthy activities that cause good governance to founder'. All his successors fell off the wagon at one point or another in the course of their reigns. The result was that later shahs continued to drink, even if they no longer drank in the previously unselfconscious manner.¹³

Shahs (and sultans) imbibed and invited or, rather, forced their courtiers to follow them in this for various reasons. Drinking was a token of manliness, of being able to hold one's liquor, in a tradition that is manifest anywhere in history where men have been engaged in boozing collectively. The ruler in this setting was the leader of a war band, and the drinking was ceremonial, a physical contest, a sign of maturity and strength. One chronicler explains that the reason why Shah `Abbas II (r. 1642-66) took up the cup was 'in order to remove the doubts from the hearts of men of little faith', referring to the shah's young age and his presumed inability to take the reins of state so prematurely.¹⁴

Shahs also drank to celebrate victory in battle, their own or that of their allies against their opponents. Shah `Abbas II thus ordered the royal goblet to be brought out to toast to the victory of the Austrians against the Turks at the Battle of St Gotthard in August 1664.¹⁵

In a tradition that goes back to antiquity, as reported by Herodotus, wine moreover was a way for Safavid rulers to remove inhibitions so as to pry secrets from the lips of courtiers they suspected of disloyalty. For this purpose, they often used an oversized gold ladle akin to the Russian ‘Great Eagle’, called *bez̄ar-pīsha*, a ‘thousand crafts’ or ‘professions’—after the remarkable feats those who finished its contents were said to be able to perform. The shah would force whomever he chose to empty this ladle, at times with fatal results.¹⁶

This worked both ways, as illustrated in the example of Shah Soltan Hoseyn. This famously pious ruler in 1694 commenced his reign by declaring drinking, in addition to a series of other frivolous pastimes, illegal. But he was soon tempted to try alcohol by his great-aunt, the formidable Maryam Begom, who was addicted herself, with the excuse that it would be good for his health. The result was that he, too, became a heavy imbiber. The ones who seemed to have derived the greatest benefit from his bibulousness were the court eunuchs who, according to one observer, didn’t like a ruler who didn’t drink and thus would be harder to bamboozle.¹⁷

Throughout, drinking was and remained a source of raucous fun and rollicking spectacle at the Safavid court, with rulers amusing themselves as fuddled courtiers were carried out horizontally.¹⁸ Shah Soleyman (r. 1666-94) offers the most vivid example of the burlesque element, which comes across as a watered-down version of Peter the Great’s ‘Drunken Synod’. This rather reclusive ruler had an especially complicated relationship with his long-serving grand vizier, Sheykh `Ali Khan. Relying—and dependent—on his competence, the shah left Sheykh `Ali Khan in charge of state affairs as he himself spent most of his time in the seclusion of his harem. Soleyman, however, seems to have admired his grand vizier’s abstemiousness and the probity it represented as much as he resented it, leading to scenes

that were as farcical as they were disturbing, judging by various occasions when the ruler humiliated Sheykh `Ali Khan by forcing him to drink or by cutting off his beard, only to show great remorse the morning after.¹⁹

Excessive wine consumption often resulted in rowdiness and occasionally in real violence. Drunken officials are said to have argued and hurled insults at each other in front of the newly acceded Shah Safi in 1629. A few years later the same ruler, in a grisly scene reminiscent of the story of John the Baptist and the daughter of Herodias, had the head of Imam Qoli Khan, his main general who was also his main competitor, and those of the latter's three children served up in a surprise dish during a drunken banquet.²⁰

Above all, drinking at the Safavid court in its heyday was done without any apparent guilt, indeed with bravado. We thus encounter the paradoxical scene of the Spanish envoy, the elderly and rather ascetic Don Garcia de Silva y Figueroa who, attending a banquet given by Shah `Abbas I in his honour in 1618, disapproved of the copious quantities of wine being served on the occasion for being frivolous.¹¹ The Safavid palace well into the seventeenth century was far from reclusive, retaining its steppe legacy far longer than the Ottoman court. Both Abbas I and Abbas II were quite outgoing and would routinely invite Western visitors, envoys, missionaries or merchants, to partake of their drinking sessions, allowing them to drink from their own goblet. One such instance occurred in late 1665, when the members of the first official French delegation to Iran, representing Louis XIV, were hosted at one of Shah Abbas II's palaces for an evening of entertainment, including the watching of fireworks. The French Jesuit missionary in attendance claimed that the libations included 'excellent Shiraz wine,' of which the guests were offered several rounds in gold cups, after which Abbas II promised that he would henceforth every year send some to the great monarch of France, on French ships.²¹ At an unspecified point in this reign, the same ruler, having been told that Europeans drank with their heads uncovered, from crystal glasses which they subsequently would throw down, did the same, and even removed his

turban, in an act that was highly unusual and would otherwise be considered an outrage, and ordered his boon companions to do the same in honour of his ‘very close friend, the emperor of the Romans’.²² The custom subsequently became known as *abbasiyana*.²³

Islam and Alcohol

Where does all this leave Islam with its presumed ban on alcohol? With seemingly everyone in an elite Muslim environment drinking, and many drinking with abandon, without hesitation and compunction, Islam appears to be rather irrelevant or at most a pious incantation.

Of course, upon closer inspection the issue is not clear-cut even at the theoretical, normative level. The early Muslims clearly wrestled with the issue. The Qur’an itself evinces some ambiguity about wine that can only be resolved by reading its various verses involving alcohol in a temporal sequence representing a trajectory from celebration and acceptance to growing restrictiveness and ultimately total prohibition—suggesting that the Prophet Muhammad had a problem with his bibulous inner circle. And even the total ban that ensued in a sense merely signifies deferment. At one point the Qur’an calls wine one of the divine blessings, and what awaits the believer in paradise are four rivers, of water, milk, honey and wine—which does not inebriate.²⁴

Later jurists long debated the nature of the proscription, arguing over the definition of *ḵhamr*, the term used for wine in the Qur’an, and reaching different conclusions. The result was a protracted debate that was only resolved in the fourteenth century. Some legal scholars limited proscription to drinks made from grapes and dates, declaring all other ones permissible as long as they were not consumed to the point of intoxication, turning the last cup into the crucial one. Using logic and etymology, they exempted certain types on the basis of an apparent lack of intoxicating power. They varied by school of interpretation, *maḏhab*, of which there are four in Islam). The most lenient school was that of the Hanafis, whose founder, the jurist Abu Hanifa (699-767), authorized the consumption of

intoxicants. The Hanafis held out the longest, but they, too, perhaps under influence of the other schools, came around to total proscription. A general trend towards total interdiction is thus discernable, perhaps in order to differentiate Islamic communities from the Christian counterparts.²⁵

Such debates were, however, scholarly ones, conducted at an elevated level with little or no discernable influence on the practice of Muslims.

Other forms of theoretical discourse tended to be rather frank and unapologetic about alcohol. A well-known literary genre in the classical and post-classical Persianate world is the so-called *Nasihat-nama*, the *Mirror for Princes* manual of statecraft and etiquette, advice literature for rulers similar to Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Mainly written to acculturate the new Turkic rulers, tribes originating in Central Asia, into the norms of Islam, they are very open about drinking as a pastime integral to the lifestyle of rulers and their entourage. There is no obfuscation, no casuistic justification in the *Nasihat-nama*: drinking is naturally part of youth, something to be enjoyed. Consuming wine, like hunting, also is a necessary form of relaxation for kings. This comes out unambiguously in the best-known example of the genre, the *Siyasat-nama*, Book of Politics, written by Nizam al-Mulk, who served Sultan Malik Shah (r. 1072-92), the most famous of the Seljuq rulers, as grand vizier. Nizam al-Mulk praises good-quality wine, considering its serving at the court as a sign of royal lavishness and hospitality, and presents the image of the king surrounded by his boon companions and the relaxed atmosphere this creates as vital to good governance.²⁶ The *Qabus-nama*, an eleventh-century manual written by Qabus b. Vushmgir, a vassal of the Ghaznavids and a boon companion of one of that dynasty's rulers, for his son and successor, is similarly exemplary in its humanism. 'I will not tell you to drink', Qabus admonishes his son, 'but I can't tell you not to drink either'; after which the author proceeds to give his offspring advice about the etiquette of drinking.²⁷

A later example of the same genre, the *Anis al-nas*, *The Good Companion*, written in Shiraz in the fifteenth century, offers similar advice. In keeping with a common association, the (poorly known)

author of this manual for the ‘honest man’ pragmatically calls wine one of the indomitable urgencies of youth. In his chapter on wine, the author turns vice into a virtue by emphasizing, right from the outset, that *towba*, repentance, is important, indeed essential, for the drinker, for a ‘man without repentance is like a fish on dry land’. He then proceeds to list the proper rules of etiquette that the drinker should take into account and live by.²⁸

Other premodern Muslim literati are even more naturalizing and normalizing in their approach to alcohol. A good example is Abu Zayd Ahmad b. Sahl al-Balkhi, a ninth-tenth-century intellectual who, as his name suggests, was from the region of Balkh in modern Afghanistan, and who authored a series of geographical works that set the tone for the genre in the Islamicate world. Abu Zayd also wrote a medico-ethical treatise titled *Kitab masalih al-abdan wa al-anfus* (Book of Welfare of Bodies and Souls).²⁹ He speaks of the threefold benefit of wine: it is a wholesome digestive agent; it is an elixir of conviviality; and it has therapeutic qualities against illness and infirmity. There is no trace of guilt or shame in al-Balkhi’s treatise: wine is fully integrated into a Hellenistic worldview that fosters health and celebrates conviviality.

A final author of advice literature is the late twelfth-century Muhammad b. `Ali b. Sulayman al-Rawandi. His *Rabat al-sudur wa ayat al-surur* (Comfort of High Officials and the Sign of Enjoyment), composed in 1205, is a history of the Seljuq Empire but also a manual designed to ‘acculturate the Anatolian Seljuq Ghiyath al-Din Keykhosrow to the norms of the court practices of this Great Seljuq relatives’.³⁰ This includes instructions about such important pastimes as chess and backgammon. With regard to wine, the author opens his discourse by stating in no uncertain terms that drinking and drunkenness are unlawful in the *shari`a*. Yet he mitigates this admonishment by arguing that wine is really only banned if consumed in excess and for the purpose of inebriation. Engaging in a syllogism, Rawandi first lists the many benefits of wine and subsequently argues that if it is demonstrated, as he has, that wine is beneficial, it must be permissible according to the *shari`a*.³¹

The Fullness of Historical Islam: Flexibility and Openness

In sum, as with other aspects of life and society, the issue of drinking in an Islamic environment was never clear-cut, simply conforming to the presumed straightforwardness of religiously prescribed behaviour. According to the German Islamicist Thomas Bauer, it was rather part of the multiplicity of life, officially proscribed but effectively tolerated at the margins, the beneficiary of a certain ‘perspectivism’ reflecting a much greater tolerance for practical ambiguity than that found in contemporary Western societies, which presumably emphasized linearity and uniformity.³²

In a brilliant new book, *What Is Islam?*, the late Shahab Ahmed goes further than Bauer. Ahmed takes issue with the notion that Islam is all uncompromising law and that whatever doesn’t fit that mould is not Islam but mystical Islam, or outside of Islam, ‘secular’ Islam, denoting deviance rather than the norm.³³ Surveying a premodern world extending from the Balkans to Bengal, he discerns a vast land of ‘dazzling diversity’, of far greater ethnic, linguistic and religious variety than post-Roman Europe ever exhibited, a universe of ‘intrinsic pluralism and complexity’, yet unified in a ‘common paradigm of Islamic life and thought’.³⁴ Islam, Ahmed argues, is capacious, capable of embracing contradiction. Islam in its pre-disenchanted state is a protean faith and way of life, open to wonderment and exploration, embracing a variety of mutually opposing statements.³⁵ Cosmopolitanism, a way of being open and flexible to the world, permeated premodern Islam. Internally, Muslims have been dealing with difference, diversity and disagreement for fourteen centuries, Ahmed insists.³⁶

Ahmed laments the disappearance of this element in modern Islamic discourse, and the almost exclusive focus on textual-legalism with its stark and simplistic *halal* and *haram*, permissible and impermissible, dichotomy that has taken its place. He sees this loss—which really represents the demise of the mystical element in Islam—in part as a function of the passing of the Persian language with its attunement to nuance and ambiguity as the lingua franca of Muslim elites from Bosnia to the Deccan.³⁷ Only in modern times, as the cultural universe of the Persianate world receded from view have we—and

especially Muslims—narrowed our vision of what Islam is and stands for. Modern scholars, including the present author, are to blame, too. They attempt to break out of the religious-secular binary only to fall right back into it. Or they just expose hypocrisy by positing a public-private realm divide with Muslim authorities tolerating a ‘contingent’ private sphere in which formally proscribed behaviour was allowed to exist as long as it remained indoors and did not disturb the public order.³⁸ Ahmed pursues a different, inclusionary and capacious approach. He invites Muslims to a hermeneutical engagement with Revelation, which, he argues, comprises not just text, the Qur’an and the Hadith (the Prophetic sayings), but what he calls Pre-text, Text and Context, as the terrain to explore.³⁹ Ambiguity and contradiction may be extraneous to the text, the norm, but they are inherently part of, embedded in and coherent with, the Prophetic Revelation if and when we regard this as more than literal text.⁴⁰

Ahmed elucidates his argument with a wonderful miniature from Herat dating from the 1520s that illustrates a verse from the famous fourteenth-century Persian poet Hafez, ‘The Angels of Mercy raised the cup of the pleasure of intimate company’. To him, this painting, titled *Worldly and Otherworldly Drunkenness*, ‘represents the denizens of both the Seen and Unseen worlds *engaged in the same activity*; wine-drinking. Wine is, in other words, *diffused* through the *entire canvass of existence* depicted in the painting: one might say that the cheek of the entire page is suffused by its hue’. Yet the author also contends that the function—the effect and the consequence of the activity of drinking wine, and thus the meaning—operates on various levels. At the lowest, terrestrial level wine serves as a medium of social intimacy. At the second level, that of the spatial hierarchy of existence, wine is raised up via a knotted rope to become a source of meaningful conversation and contemplation. On the most ethereal level, wine finally is transmogrified into the drink of the unseen world, indeed, the drink of paradise, a drink that links the world of the seen to that of the unseen—representing the two sides of Revelation of Truth.⁴¹

Ahmed sees in the wine-cup another example of what he calls the ‘*mutually-constitutive* relationship between wine and Islam in history’. He points to the celebratory inscriptions on various wine vessels

made for or acquired by the Mughal Emperor Jahangir (r. 1605-27), which proclaims this wine-bibbing ruler not just a defender of Islam, a ‘world-seizing’ Muslim warrior (the meaning of ‘Jahangir’), but an illuminated ‘knower of the signs, real and metaphorical’. A (rare) gold coin that depicts the same ruler with a wine cup conveys the same message, connecting him to Alexander and the Prophet Khizr, two powerful symbols of eternal fame and immortality.⁴²

One might dismiss Ahmed’s learned disquisition as either an exercise in nostalgia, an effort to retrieve a capacious Islam that never was as capacious as he makes it out to have been, or a desperate attempt to salvage Islam in the face of its current radical manifestations. That, however, would be to dismiss a vast literature, both prescriptive treatises and belles letters, as well as ubiquitous practice, that cannot but be called ‘Islamic’. It is true that throughout its premodern history the Islamic world was far more diverse than Europe at any time after the fall of the Roman Empire, rubbing shoulders with and having to adapt to, a multitude of other faiths—from Christianity in the European West to Hinduism in the Indian Subcontinent, to Buddhism and Shamanism in Central Asia. Repudiation or annihilation through assimilation by way of wholesale conversion was not always an option; not in the case of Christianity in Europe, and certainly not in the case of Hinduism in India. Malleability and openness to osmosis were the more successful strategies.

Ahmed’s is a legitimate way of seeking to restore Islam to its premodern fullness—with two caveats. One is that the loftiness of Islam that he proclaims to be the essence of its premodern manifestation is not exactly borne out by reality. The *practice* of drinking in the Muslim Middle East evinces little of the ‘ethereal’, life-affirming qualities that he argues are inherent in ‘true’ Islam. Countless observers throughout the ages stated, affirmed and reaffirmed that drinking in a Muslim environment, precisely because it was a furtive activity for being textually proscribed, was a matter, not of a refined and sophisticated ambience, of discerning consumers savouring superior wines, but of getting tanked-up, as fast as possible, by way of the strongest possible liquid.⁴³ Like earlier Islamic dynasties, from the

`Abbasids to the Ghaznavids and the Timurids, Safavid rulers often organized a *majlis*, a festive gathering similar to the Greek symposium. The stated purpose of the *majlis* might be learned and elevated discourse, *sobbat*, during which the initiated discussed matters of faith and philosophy in an ambience of privileged, entitled conviviality, enlivened by wine. But the actual *majlis* most often seems to have dissolved into carousing fueled by high-volume drinking.⁴⁴ As for ordinary Muslims who imbibed, they tended to indulge in shady taverns run by ‘minorities,’ tucked away in the back alleys of Christian or Jewish quarters or located on the edge of town, in the shadows, out of sight.

The other caveat is one that Ahmed brings up and acknowledges himself: Wine in Islamic history served to mark the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion at the centre of power, thus gainsaying or at least problematising Islam’s self-proclaimed egalitarianism.

Ultimately, drinking, like other types of behaviour, followed a hierarchical division, that between the *khass* or the *khassa* (pl. *khawass*) and the *`amma* (pl. *`awamm*), the elite and the commoners. This division denotes eligibility, entitlement and privilege and their obverse, exclusion. In a division that aimed at the properly organized society in which hierarchy flows from space, *khass* stood for ‘inner, private space’, order and security. *`Amma* represented the ‘outer’ realm, chaos, the uncontrolled.⁴⁵ Drinking is the preserve of the *khass*, the people of merit and morality, the ones in the know, the initiated, capable of discerning the higher, hidden truth.⁴⁶ In practice this meant the sultan or the shah and his entourage, courtiers and high officials.⁴⁷ The *`amm* were the multitude, the masses. There is a different register of truth for different classes. As Ahmed puts it: ‘The khassah are, by virtue of their superior knowledge and understanding, more capable of governing themselves; the `amah, owing to the lack of the self-same qualities, are not—if left to their own devices, without legal prescription, proscription and supervision, they will descend into chaos’.⁴⁸ This represents a common way of classifying society in Islamic texts, inherited from and commensurate with, Hellenistic, neo-Platonic ideas of the truth descending in stages from the divine to the terrestrial. At its core, there is the mystical

idea that the ultimate goal of the initiated, the merger of the mystic with the object of his burning desire, the divine, is a secret that cannot and should not be divulged to the common believer.⁴⁹

Muslim elites, the politically engaged ones as much as the mystically inclined ones, have often approached drinking like the eighteenth-century British elite, who, at the same time that they saw themselves entitled to boozing for being members of a discerning class, decried the alarming rate of drunkenness among the undisciplined lower classes for fostering imbecility and creating social unrest. This fundamental distinction between the privileged and commoners allowed both groups to have their wine and drink it too: the powerful from a sense of entitlement, the poor and the marginal from a sense of irredeemability. Yet, the Text was still there, and it had a way of reasserting itself in the face of a different type of defiance. Drinking, even drinking in excess, was accepted, treated as unremarkable, seen as integral to power and or even as positively symbolic of the mystical bond of humans with the divine—as long as the elite was involved and as long as the lower-class variant on imbibing didn't spill too much out into the open. Indeed, Islam's general connivance at 'private drinking' becomes explicable if we see it in its traditional incarnation as a civilization that preserved the legacy of antiquity more faithfully than Christianity.⁵⁰ This includes the notion that the consumption of alcohol is natural, a bodily need, as well as a view of the private sphere, the household, as the realm that caters to biological necessities and that thus needs to be free from preying eyes. With wide internal variations, the Islamic world held on to this approach until the intrusion of European ways led to an increasing self-awareness about the existence of inexplicable contradictions between practice and theory, a self-awareness that was followed by a growing focus on the norm as laid down in the Text in the course of the modernising twentieth century. In the process, the flexibility, the live-and-let-live tolerance, the capacity for ambiguity that had marked premodern Muslim life got lost and became overwhelmed by full-fledged denial-cum-hypocrisy. In a modern world that blurs the distinction between the private and the public realm and

that demands transparency by ordering the hidden to reveal itself, this fullness is unlikely to come back any time soon.

¹ Lawrence Osborne, *The Wet and the Dry: A Drinkers Journey* (New York, 2013).

² Peter Heine, *Weinstudien. Untersuchungen zu Anbau, Produktion und Konsum des Weins im arabisch-islamischen Mittelalter* (Wiesbaden, 1982), 111; and P. A. Norrie, “The History of Wine as a Medicine,” in Merton Sandler and Roger Pinder, eds., *Wine. A Scientific Exploration* (London and New York, 2003), 21-55, esp. 35-36.

³ Mark Lawrence Schrad, *Vodka Politics. Alcohol, Autocracy, and the Secret History of the Russian State* (Oxford, 2014).

⁴ The British colonial administrator Henry Pottinger in the early nineteenth century insisted that there was no alcohol among the Baluchis, but elsewhere in his travelogue remarks that the people from adjacent Makran drank large quantities of an intoxicating beverage made from fermented dates. See Henry Pottinger, *Travels in Beloochistan and Sinde* (London, 1816), 63, 267.

⁵ Geert-Jan van Gelder, ‘A Muslim Encomium on Wine. The Racecourse of the Bay (Halbat al-Kumayt) by al-Nawagi (d. 859/1455) as a post-Classical Arabic Work’, *Arabica* 42 (1995): 222.

⁶ See F. B. Flood, ‘A Royal Drinking Scene from Alchi. Iranian Iconography in the Western Himalayas’, in Robert Hillenbrand, ed., *Image and Meaning in Islamic Art* (London, 2005), 75-76.

⁷ Willem Floor, ‘The Culture of Wine Drinking in Pre-Mongol Iran’, in Bert G. Fragner, Ralph Kauz and Florian Schwarz, eds., *Wine Culture in Iran and Beyond* (Vienna, 2014), 165-210.

⁸ Sir Thomas Herbert, *Travels in Africa, Persia and Asia the Great (1677)*, ed. John Anthony Butler (Tempe, AZ, 2012), 698.

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- ⁹ Meera Khare, ‘The Wine-cup in Mughal Court Culture—From Hedonism to Kingship’, *The Medieval History Journal* 8 (2005): 143-88.
- ¹⁰ Peter Weston Black, ‘Anthropology of Tobacco Use: Tobian Data and Theoretical Issues’, *Journal of Anthropological Research* 40:4 (1984): 475-503.
- ¹¹ See Katib Chelebi, *The Balance of Truth*, ed. G. L. Lewis (London, 1957), 62, where the author proclaims that ‘Opium, laudanum, and other drugs belong to the category of remedies’.
- ¹² Abu’l Mafakher b. Fazl Allah al-Hoseyni Savana-negar Tafreshi, *Tarikh-e Shah Safi*, ed. Mohsen Bahramnezhad (Tehran, 1388/2010), 22-23.
- ¹³ For this, see Rudi Mathee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure: Drugs and Stimulants in Iranian History, 1500-1900* (Princeton, 2005), ch. 3.
- ¹⁴ Quoted in Giorgio Rota, ‘Some Remarks on Wine Consumption as a Political Factor under the Safavids’, in Fragner, Kauz and Schwarz, eds., *Wine Culture in Iran and Beyond*, 227.
- ¹⁵ Bedros Bedik, *A Man of Two Worlds. Bedros Bedik in Iran 1670-1675*, ed. and tr. Colette Ouahes and Willem Floor (Washington D. C., 2014), 222.
- ¹⁶ Jean Chardin, *Voyages du Chevalier Jean Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l’Orient*, 10 vols. and atlas (Paris 1810-11), 3:216-17; Hans Hoppe, “Die diplomatischen Missionen des schwedischen Gesandten Ludwig Fabritius nach Moskau und Isfahan gegen Ende des 17. Jahrhunderts,” in Hans Hüls and Hans Hoppe, eds., *Engelbert Kaempfer zum 330. Geburtstag* (Lemgo, 1982), 161. The Dutch in 1664 report how Heydar Beg died from excessive drinking forced upon him by Shah `Abbas II. See Dutch National Archives (NA), VOC 1248, Gamron to Batavia, 30 Aug. 1664, fol. 3046. For the Russian “Great Eagle, see Schrad, *Vodka Politics*, 42-46.
- ¹⁷ Thaddeusz Juda Krusinski, *The History of the Revolutions of Persia*, 2 vols. (London, 1728), 1:72.

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- ¹⁸ Lettre du Réverend Père H. B. à Monsieur Comte de M., in *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* (Toulouse, 1810), 4:118. For this tradition in the wider Islamic world, see Heine, *Weinstudien*, 110-11.
- ¹⁹ Chardin, *Voyages*, 454-59; 9: 330; John Malcolm, *A History of Persia*, 2 vols. (London, 1815), 1:589-90; and Rudi Matthee, 'Administrative Stability and Change in Late-17th-Century Iran: The Case of Shaykh `Ali Khan Zanganah (1669-89)', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26 (1994): 77-98.
- ²⁰ NA, VOC 1106, Overschie, Isfahan to Heren XVII, 8 May 1633, unfol.
- ²¹ Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, Rome, Gall. 97ⁱⁱ, Claude Ignace, Isfahan to Claude Bouchier, Rome, 10 Nov. 1665, fols. 331-32.
- ²² Bedik, *A Man of Two Worlds*, 222-23.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 223.
- ²⁴ Qur'an, Surat al-Nahl, 16:67.
- ²⁵ Kathryn Kueny, *The Rhetoric of Sobriety* (Albany, 2001), 65-67; and Najam Haider, 'Contesting Intoxication: Early Juristic Debates on the Lawfulness of Alcoholic Beverages', *Islamic Law and Society* 20 (2013): 43-89.
- ²⁶ Nizam al-Mulk, *The Book of Government or Rules of Kings. The Siyar al-Muluk or Siyasat-nama*, tr. Hubert Darke (Richmond, Surrey, 1960; repr. 2001), 119.
- ²⁷ Kay Kavus ibn Iskandar ibn Qabus, *A Mirror for Princes. The Qābūs nāma*, tr. Reuben Levy (New York, 1951),
- ²⁸ Shoja`, *Anīs al-Nās*, ed. Iraj Afshar (Tehran, 2536/1977), ch. 7, 189-204. For an analysis of this work, see C. -H. de Fouchécour, "'The Good Companion'" (Anīs al-nās), a Manual for the Honest Man in Shirāz in the 9th/15th Century', in Kambiz Eslami, ed., *Iran and Iranian Studies: Essays in Honor of Iraj Afshar* (Princeton, 1998), 42-57.

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- ²⁹ Hinrich Biestefeldt, 'Ein Philosoph trinkt Wein', in Thomas Bauer and Ulrike Stehli-Werbeck, eds., *Alltagsleben und materielle Kulture in der arabischen Sprache und Literatur. Festschrift für Heinz Grotzfeld zum 70. Geburtstag* (Wiesbaden, 2005), 89-103.
- ³⁰ A. C. S. Peacock, *The Great Seljuq Empire* (Edinburgh, 2015), 174.
- ³¹ Neguin Yavari, *Advice for the Sultan. Prophetic Voices and Secular Politics in Medieval Islam* (Oxford, 2014), 77.
- ³² Thomas Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität. Eine andere Geschichte des Islams* (Berlin, 2011), passim. Bauer overstates his case, contrasting what he sees as a premodern Islamic penchant for ambiguity and the flexibility that results from it too starkly to a presumed Western tendency to emphasize linearity and uniformity, but his book is important nonetheless. Interestingly, he draws his examples almost exclusively from the Arab world and more particularly the Mamluk period, and largely disregards the traditional eastern Islamic "Persianate" world, whose culture arguably is even more given to ambiguity than the Arab lands.
- ³³ Shahab Ahmad, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, 2015).
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 175, 01.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 278.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 147.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 524-25, 531.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 223-34, 381-82.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, ch. 5.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 365-66.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 415-24.

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- ⁴² Ibid., 66-70, 420-22, 442. For a similar analysis of the meaning of the wine cup in Mughal society and art, see Khare, 'The Wine-cup in Mughal Court Culture'. The Prophet Khizr refers to the Qur'an, Surat al-Kahf, 18:65-82, where Moses meets an unnamed 'servant of God', who in late lore became known as a prophet named Khizr or Khidr who attained immortality by drinking from the spring of eternal life.
- ⁴³ For examples, see Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure*, 44-66, 177-204.
- ⁴⁴ For the *majlis* and its different manifestations, see Dominic Brookshaw, 'Palaces, Pavilions and Pleasure-Gardens: The Context and Setting of the Medieval *Majlis*', *Middle Eastern Literatures* 6 (2003): 199-222.
- ⁴⁵ Leslie P. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem. Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York and Oxford, 1993), 9.
- ⁴⁶ Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 371-72.
- ⁴⁷ Roy P. Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and leadership in an Early Islamic Society* (Princeton, 1980), 115.
- ⁴⁸ Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 375.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., 371, 373.
- ⁵⁰ For this, see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1958; 2nd edn., 1998), 29-30.