

In the Name of Allah, Most Merciful.

Alcohol in the Dental Surgery

Written by Omer El-Hamdoon

In the modern world that we live in, tens of thousands of chemicals are being manufactured and harnessed for the benefit of the human; from foodstuffs to household; from medicinal to industrial.

And many chemicals need a solvent, for one reason or another. We won't go into the chemistry. Chemists have found that alcohol based solvents play an important role in the modern chemical industry.

The question that arises is: What is the Islamic ruling of this alcohol solvent? This is important for the Muslim dentist; as there is alcohol used in certain mouthwashes, medicines, disinfecting chemicals, hand washes and others.

This gives rise to the next question: what is the source of the alcohol? And is the alcohol used in manufacturing industry the same as the "khamr" mentioned in the Qur'an?

Allah, Exalted be He, says in the Qur'an:

"O you who believe! Surely, *khamr*, gambling, sacrificial altars and gambling tools are *rijs* from the acts of Satan; so keep away from it; that you may prosper." ¹

The word "rijs" means impure or filthy. Whether the word "filthy" is literal or metaphorical is one of difference. Some scholars affirm the principle that "The principle in relation to words is that they are literal." This means that whenever a word is pronounced or referred to, then we take it as literal; unless there is something that would lead us to believe that it is symbolic or metaphorical.

So, the first group would consider "khamr" as literally impure and filthy and would need to be washed off body, clothes, surfaces, etc. The second group hold the meaning of "rijs" as metaphorical, because the same verse mentions

¹ Quran: Chapter of the Table Spread; 5: 90-91.

“gambling and sacrificial altars” as rijs, and there is no dispute that these are not literally impure; thus this would extend to “khamr”.

This first point already indicates that amongst the scholars there is difference about whether “khamr” is literally impure/filthy or not.

Secondly; with regards to the word “khamr”. There is no reference in the Shariah texts to the term “alcohol”. The Shariah refers to the word "khamr". The term "alcohol" was later coined to describe the set of hydrocarbon chemicals, carrying a –OH sub group.

So, is “khamr” (which some consider filthy) synonymous with the term “alcohol”?

And does a material which carries the same chemical composition as another give it the same Islamic ruling?

Let us examine an example. There is no difference amongst the scholars that urine is filthy/impure; and needs to be washed off body and clothes. Urine is made up of a set of chemicals which include water, urea, salts, creatinine and other dissolved ions, inorganic and organic compounds.

But, what makes the urine filthy is that where and how it is “produced”; namely in the body and that it exits from the front passage.

If a chemist got the same chemicals and manufactured a liquid with the same composition as urine – in the lab – that liquid would not be filthy; because it is manufactured; and not produced in a way which would make it filthy.

The same can be extended to “khamr”. In the Arabic language, Khamr refers to fermented grapes or dates; and can extend to other sources.

So, the khamr in the Shariah terminology is not alcohol.

And hence, the verse refers to the fermented type of alcohol, which has been produced from the fermentation of fruit or other sugar source, like barley or malt.

If this is the case, then there is premise to say that the Quranic referral to khamr is indeed to this specific type of alcohol.

But, then the scholars say that the issue with khamr is that it covers one’s mind; and takes away his ability to exert judgement; and that’s what makes it

haram. And, thus in turn anything that causes intoxication carries the same ruling as khamr.

But, then there are types of solutions or chemicals which have the same effect as alcohol on the brain. Does that mean that they are khamr in the same context?

The opinion that I favour is as follows. Not all alcohol is filthy. Although scholars differ on this, some scholars are of the opinion that the haram alcohol is that which is made as an intoxicant like beer, lager, cider, wine, spirits and so on. Meaning that the haram and najis alcohol is that which is fermented sugar to be used for drinking.

The other type of alcohol is a manufactured one. Manufactured Alcohol isn't najis; and that is what is used for antibacterial wipes, for certain sprays, in perfumes, and in some foods.

The scholars differ about this; as they don't make the distinction between manufactured and fermented. But there remains leeway to accept that the alcohol in mouthwash is manufactured and not fermented; and hence a different ruling altogether.

Another Perspective:

As mentioned in the introduction, the modern chemical industry has found alcohol as a suitable and convenient solvent. But, there is always pressure to look for better and cost-effective alternatives.

In the dental sphere, we can note that some companies have managed to produce an alcohol free mouthwash; and most significantly an alcohol-free chlorhexidine mouthwash.

So, that means with a will from the demand of professionals, alternatives which don't carry a stigma will be developed; and everyone is happy.

And it is always, advisable that Muslim professionals demand alternatives; and modern chemistry is forever advancing to produce acceptable alternatives.