

The Beer Mat Scheme That Went Awry

by Hugh Fitzgerald



In Germany, some well-meaning souls, members of an interfaith group, Orient Network, eager to spread the ‘truth” about much-misunderstood Islam to a most unlikely audience, came up with a scheme. They printed questions about Islam, of the *Ask-A-Muslim-Anything* anodyne variety, on one side of a beer mat, and on the other side gave an internet link where the answer could be found. They took great care to consult with Muslim scholars, who told them what questions to ask, and where to find the “right” Internet site that would supply the answer. They were careful, too, even to use regional dialects, including slang, in what they wrote on the mats, for easier apprehension by their intended audience of beer-drinkers. They then distributed the beer mats to pubs and restaurants. And ever since 2016 they have been doing this, without any objection from a single Muslim, until just now, when in one

small town the local Muslims objected to the use of beer mats to provide information about Islam.

The story is [here](#):

“Under the scheme, beer mats are provided to pubs and restaurants with questions about Islam. On the reverse is an internet link to the answers.

“Rather than using formal German, the beer mats are printed in regional dialect for each city, complete with local slang.

“Typical questions include “Mohammed, what was he like?” and “What is it with Muslims and pork?”

“The scheme has run in a number of German cities since it was first launched in 2016, and the beer mats have been translated into three dialects.

“But a bid to introduce it in the small central German town of Maintal, close to Frankfurt, has run into opposition from local Muslims, who say beer mats are an inappropriate way to educate people about a religion that forbids alcohol.

“They could have used postcards, or adverts on the side of a bus. Why did it have to be the pub?” Salih Tasdirek, the head of the local foreigners’ advisory council, told Spiegel magazine.

“The local council has defended the scheme. “We wanted to bring big social issues into conversation,” said Verena Strub, the council’s integration officer.

“I can understand if someone associates beer mats with alcohol, but not that anyone would associate Islam with alcohol just because the questions are on beer mats.”

‘The scheme is the work of Orient Network, a small German NGO that promotes interfaith understanding.

“We wanted to give answers in local language to the questions that our members, mostly Islamic scholars, are always asked,” said Raban Kluger, the scheme’s main organiser. “It is not our intention to associate alcohol with Islam.”

“The questions and answers on the beer mats were all drawn up by Muslims and checked by Germany’s Central Council of Muslims, Mr Kluger said.

“Tens of thousands of beer mats featuring the questions have been printed. So far, they have been translated into the local dialects of Saxony, the Baden region, and Hesse, where Maintal is located.

Comment:

It appears that Muslims in Maintal were especially thin-skinned, given that for three years these beer mats, distributed by the tens of thousands, have met with no objection from any other Muslims. They were the only ones making the very association between alcohol and Islam that they then objected to. It's a stretch. Think of all the other conceivable uses for those mats, to advertise a local realtor, or a museum, a children's petting zoo, or a men's clothing store –without anyone thinking that alcohol was somehow being endorsed by those realtors, that museum, that children's petting zoo, that clothing store..

No doubt it was believed that offering such questions-and-answers in such a setting was effective. People are sitting convivially around a table, seeing the questions every time they raise their glasses to drink. They might ask the others "what was your question?" in the same amused inquisitive spirit with which people at a Chinese restaurant ask each other "what was your fortune?" They might tentatively offer answers, and then check by clicking on the Internet link given on the reverse. It's actually a very good way to have a comfortably captive audience be exposed to carefully-chosen aspects of a sanitized Islam.

Those ask-a-muslim-anything beer mats are deplorable, but not for the reasons the Muslims in Maintal have in mind. The problem is the questions. You and I both know what kind of questions the Muslims who wrote them would come up with, and what kind of answers would be prepared in response.. Two were given in the article: "Mohammad, what was he like?" and the "What is it with Muslims and pork?" We can guess, can't we, what the answer on the Internet to the first question could –

most preposterously – be.

“Muhammad, what was he like?”

“Well, Muhammad was unafraid, when it proved necessary, to go to war, but it’s wrong to think of him primarily as a warrior. He loved peace and domestic tranquillity. Returning home from battle he famously said that he had returned “from the lesser to the greater Jihad.” He was a solicitous and caring husband. He was proud of his first wife, Khadija, for being a successful businesswoman, at a time when wives had so few options. His example, in supporting her in her choice of career, helped to improve the condition of other women who, in pre-Islamic Arabia, did not leave the house. Muhammad believed in the sanctity of marriage. At a time when so many men died in battle – before Muhammad established peace throughout Arabia –it made sense to permit polygyny, with one husband taking care of several wives, women who would otherwise be left alone and destitute.

Though fierce in battle, Muhammad nonetheless showed mercy to his vanquished enemies. He believed that non-Muslims should be treated fairly, and allowed to continue to practice their religion. He took seriously Qur’an 2:256: “There is no compulsion in religion.” All that was required of non-Muslims was the payment of a small tax which ensured that protection would be provided by the Muslims. He believed that men and women should be treated equally, in accordance with their capacities. It’s easy to see why Muhammad became known to the people of Arabia as “the Perfect Man” (al-insan al-kamil) and “the Model of Conduct” (uswa hasana).

That, or a variation of it, is what you might find on-line, by following the link provided on the reverse of those beer mats.

Let's try to imagine other questions that might have been asked, or may still be asked, on these beer mats, and the answers provided on-line. Here's a starter-kit of four:

Question: "What is the Jizyah?"

Answer: The Jizyah is a tax that non-Muslims paid to support the Muslim state that protected them. It can be thought of as the equivalent of the Zakat, the charitable tax exacted on Muslims. The main difference is that the Zakat was usually more than the Jizyah, so non-Muslims were getting a good deal.

Question: How many wives can a Muslim have?

Answer: In the 7th century, the first century of Islam, polygyny – meaning one husband and several wives – made sense. There was so much internecine warfare, so many men killed in battle, that this left many women without a spouse. The solution was simple: allow a Muslim man to have several wives, so these war widows would be properly supported. Nowadays, when there is far less fighting, and so less need for a Muslim husband to support plural wives, polygyny is dying out. You will find very few Muslim men nowadays with plural wives. In some places, such as Saudi Arabia, men who are often quite wealthy and can take on the burden of supporting several wives, do so. It's always the woman's free choice, whether to become one of several wives or not. Those marriages compare

favorably to the Western epidemic of adulterous liaisons and mistresses and so on. Plural wives support each other; they are sources of strength that help keep large families united. If they did not get along, the husband would soon enough divorce the trouble-maker.

Question: "What do Muslims think of Jesus and Mary?"

Answer: Next to Muhammad, Jesus is our most revered prophet. Not many Christians know that. Nor do they know that there is a whole sira in the Qur'an about Mary; it is named after her.. While both Jesus and Mary are revered by Muslims, many non-Muslims simply are unaware. And as for our Jewish brothers, few realize that Moses, too, is revered in Islam as a prophet. If more people understood our reverence for Jesus, Mary, and Moses, there wouldn't be this unhealthy, and quite misguided, dislike of Islam.

Question: Is there any antisemitism in Islam?

Answer: No, not in the accepted meaning of that term. There are some remarks in the Qur'an against those Jews who, at the time the Qur'an was revealed, were fighting the Muslims. These were not meant to be remarks about Jews for all time and in every place, but only about those who, in Arabia, violently rejected Muhammad and his message, and attacked the Muslims unceasingly and without warning. Of course, our present-day quarrel with the Jews of Israel is not religious but political: we believe that they have taken land from the Palestinians that did not belong to them, and we think it should be given back. That's the whole quarrel. Muslims are

deeply saddened by the Holocaust, but do not think the Palestinians ought to be made to pay the price for how Europeans mistreated the Jews. Muslim Arabs had nothing to do with any of that.

Those are a few questions that are likely to be found on those beer mats, with the kind of plausible and mendacious answers that could be supplied on-line.

Beer mats have been an effective propaganda tool, offering softball questions on Islam, and wildly misleading answers, for the past three years. Muslims in many areas of Germany found nothing wrong with them. Now the Muslims in one town, Maintal, object, not to the questions or answers,, but to the mere fact that beer mats have been the vehicle of dissemination and, so thy complain, a link is being made between Islam, which forbids alcohol, and beer. You and I object, too, to these beer mats, for we know exactly what kinds of bland questions will be asked, and what kinds of taqiyya-laden answers will be given.

So just for fun, let's compose our own questions for those beer mats. Answers, if you need them, can easily be found online:

1. Aside from payment of the Jizyah, what other conditions did non-Muslims have to meet in order to both stay alive and to practice their religion?

2 Why did Muhammad attack the Jews of the Khaybar Oasis?

3. Why did Muhammad say in hadiths that "war is deceit" and "I have been made victorious through terror"?

4. Why did Muhammad think it was alright if he consummated his marriage to Aisha – that is, had sexual intercourse with her – when she was nine?

5. What had Asma bint Marwan, Abu 'Afak, and Ka'b bin al-Ashraf done to Muhammad, to make him want them dead?

6. Why did Muhammad decide that the 600-900 prisoners of the Banu Qurayza should be killed,, and why did he personally take part in the killing?

7 If the Qur'an says there is "no compulsion in religion" why are Muslims who want to leave Islam threatened with death?

8. Why did Muslim conquerors kill tens of millions of Hindus in India?

9. How did Zoroastrianism disappear from Iran?

10. Why did Muhammad order the torture and murder of Kinana of Khaybar?

11. Why does the Qur'an 98:6 describe non-Muslims as "the most vile of created beings"?

12. Why have some Muslim males killed their female relatives, like Aqsa Parvez, for not wearing a hijab?

It is inconceivable that any of these questions – a disturbing dozen – would make it onto those Islamo-German beer mats. And that is why we should agree, though for very different reasons, with the Muslims of Maintal, ie. that the Islam-themed beer mats should be prohibited. It's not the connection to alcohol, but the lack of connection to the truth, that should madden us. Those beer mats are exercises in mendacity: easy questions, misleading answers. So ban away, oh Muslim men of Maintal. We're right behind you.

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