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Shawn Baldwin for The New York Times

Sheikh Abdel Hamid Tantawy speaks with a man at the Azhar Fatwa Committee inside of Al Azhar Mosque in Cairo, one of two authorized places in Egypt where Muslims can go to seek out Fatwas.

By MICHAEL SLACKMAN Published: June 12, 2007

CAIRO, June 11 — First came the breast-feeding fatwa. It declared that the Islamic restriction on unmarried men and women being together could be lifted at work if the woman breast-fed her male colleagues five times, to establish family ties. Then came the urine fatwa. It said that drinking the urine of the Prophet Muhammad was deemed a blessing.

For the past few weeks, the breast-feeding and urine fatwas have proved a source of national embarrassment in Egypt, not least because they were issued by representatives of the highest religious authorities in the land.

"We were very angered when we heard about the Danish cartoons concerning our prophet; however, these two fatwas are harming our Islamic religion and our prophet more than the cartoons," Galal Amin, a professor of economics at the American University in Cairo, wrote in Al Masry Al Yom, a daily newspaper here.

For many Muslims, fatwas, or religious edicts, are the bridge between the principles of their faith and modern life. They are supposed to be issued by religious scholars who look to the Koran and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad for guidance. While the more sensational pronouncements grab attention, the bulk of the fatwas involve the routine of daily life. In Egypt alone, thousands are issued every month.

The controversy in Cairo has been more than just embarrassing. It comes at a time when religious and political leaders say that there is a crisis in Islam because too many fatwas are being issued, and that many of them rely on ideology more than learning.

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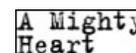
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The complaint has been the subject of recent conferences as government-appointed arbiters of Islamic standards say the fatwa free-for-all has led to the promotion of extremism and intolerance.

The conflict in Egypt served as a difficult reminder of a central challenge facing Islamic communities as they debate the true nature of the faith and how to accommodate modernity. The fatwa is the front line in the theological battle between often opposing worldviews. It is where interpretation meets daily life.

"It is a very critical issue for us," said Abdullah Megawer, the former head of the Fatwa Committee at Al Azhar University, the centuries-old seat of Sunni Muslim learning in Egypt. "You are explaining God's message in ways that really affect people's lives."

Technically, the fatwa is nonbinding and recipients are free to look elsewhere for a better ruling. In a faith with no central doctrinal authority, there has been an explosion of places offering fatwas, from Web sites that respond to written queries, to satellite television shows that take phone calls, to radical and terrorist organizations that set up their own fatwa committees.

"There is chaos now," Mr. Megawer said. "The problem created is confusion in thought, confusion about what is right and what is wrong, religiously."

Governments have tried to guide and control the process, but as they struggled with their own legitimacy, they have often undermined the perceived legitimacy of those they appoint as religious leaders. In Egypt, there are two official institutions responsible for religious interpretation: the House of Fatwa, or Dar Al-Ifta, which formally falls under the Ministry of Justice, and Al Azhar University. All court sentences of death must be approved by Dar Al-Ifta, for example.

"These people in fact are defined as agencies of the government," said Muhammad Serag, a professor of Islamic Studies at the American University in Cairo. "They are not trusted anymore."

While that view is disputed by officials from both institutions, everyone acknowledges that those who issue fatwas serve as mediators between faith and modernity and as arbiters of morality. They are supposed to consider not only religious teachings, but the circumstances of the time.

The position is without parallel in the West, and it combines the role of social worker, therapist, lawyer and religious adviser.

In fact, the relationship between the Koran and a fatwa is a matter of dispute. Some Muslim scholars view the Koran's words and ideas as fixed, with little room for maneuvering. Others see their job as reconciling modern life with the text by gently bending the text to fit new circumstances.

A second issue is the basis for interpretation. The sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, known collectively as the Hadith, also serve as the basis for many fatwas. But those sayings, of which there are thousands, have been passed down orally and may or may not be genuine. Some seek to limit fatwas to the written Koran, as a result.

A sign hangs on the back wall of a small room that serves as a fatwa center for Egyptians looking for guidance: "Brother Citizens, the Azhar Fatwa Committee welcomes the masses of citizens and announces that fatwas are free of charge and of fees."

Tucked just inside the entrance of the historic Al Azhar Mosque in downtown, the center is open six days a week from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. It is a worn room with a soaring ceiling, tattered black couches patched up with packing tape and rickety metal kitchen chairs. Five sheiks sit on the couches and receive people.

Sheik Abdel Aziz el-Naggar has been offering fatwas for 17 years as an employee of Al Azhar. Like other sheiks, he rotates each month to committees that operate in each of

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Egypt's regional governates. Over the years, he said, the vast majority of the visitors have asked for help with their marriages.

"The greatest ill in society I observe is the lack of trust and knowledge between husband and wife," he said. "A man will think masculinity is being a dictator."

At 11:30 one recent morning, a young woman entered and sat in the chair opposite him. She held her son, about 4, on her knee as she explained that her husband had married another woman (four wives are allowed in Islam) and that the new wife was only 18. "He said he would spend five nights with her and one with me," the woman complained. "Can I ask for a divorce?"

Under Islam, the sheik advised, all wives must be treated equally. So if she could not work the matter out "peacefully, then yes, she could ask for a divorce."

That was her fatwa.

A couple approached. The man's clothes were tattered, and his wife looked distressed. Their 9-year-old son's clothing was clean, his hair gelled, his smile bright. The man explained that they had adopted the child when he was 9 months old, and that they had just heard that under Islam their son had to be put out of the house, because the mother had not given birth to him or breast-fed him.

He would reach puberty as an outsider, and could not, technically, be around the woman he knew as his mother. The imam at their local mosque said it was haram — forbidden under Islam — to live with the boy.

The sheik said yes, that was right, that the boy could not live with them. The father leaned in, disturbed, and said, "And that's it."

The sheik seemed stuck and referred them to another sheik for another opinion.

That was their fatwa.

A man wanted to know if he could keep money he had found. Another wanted to know if he needed to testify at a trial if called. A third wanted to know if it was O.K. to buy a car on an installment plan. A mother did not like her son's wife and wanted to know if she could do anything about the marriage.

Each consultation took a few minutes. Such questions have been asked for generations.

Should ancient statues be destroyed or preserved? Should women be allowed to drive, to work, to travel without the permission of men? Can boys and girls attend school together? Is it permissible to buy insurance, to wear a sports jersey with a cross design, to shake hands with a non-Muslim, to take pictures, to view family photographs?

All of this has been addressed in fatwas.

"We are the conscience of the nation," said Abdel Moety Bayoumi, a member of Al Azhar Research Committee, a state-sanctioned body that issues religious opinions and is often behind decisions over which books should be stripped from store shelves and banned.

In Egypt, and other Muslim countries, where laws must abide by the Koran, fatwas by government-appointed officials can have the weight of law. "We have to be clear what is at stake here," said Egypt's grand mufti, Sheik Ali Gomaa, in a recent speech in London. "When each and every person's unqualified opinion is considered a fatwa, we have lost a tool that is of the utmost importance to rein in extremism and preserve the flexibility and balance of Islamic law."

In his own role and practice, the grand mufti embodies many of the issues that have arisen around the fatwa practice. He has issued rulings that have been deemed by some as so progressive that they were offensive, and others that were so literal as to be considered offensive.

Sheik Ali issued the urine fatwa, now notorious, in a book, "Religion and Life." It was published six years ago and told the story of a woman who drank the prophet's urine. He had his own book taken off the shelves, and said the controversial statement was not a fatwa but his opinion, which was offered in response to a question.

"The reality is that the mufti is now 'burned' and lost religious recognition and the trust of the Muslims and his fatwas will not gain anything but carelessness from all the Muslims; as some will hate it as they hate drinking urine," wrote Hamdy Rizk in an opposition newspaper.

But he was also criticized — and praised — earlier this year after he had issued a fatwa saying that it was permissible for women to have reconstructive hymen surgery before marriage to conceal that they were no longer virgins. He said that since it was impossible to tell whether a man was a virgin, women should have the same option.

But he took his opinion a step further, when he said that if a married woman had sex with another man, regretted her action and asked God for forgiveness, she should not tell her husband. The goal, he reportedly said, was to preserve the family.

The breast-feeding fatwa came in mid-May. A religious scholar, who headed a department that studies the Prophet Muhammad's teachings at the Foundation of Religion College of Al Azhar University, wrote that there had been instances in the time of the prophet when adult women breast-fed adult men in order to avoid the need for women to wear a veil in front of them.

"Breast-feeding an adult puts an end to the problem of the private meeting, and does not ban marriage," wrote the scholar, Izat Atiyah. "A woman at work can take off the veil or reveal her hair in front of someone whom she breast-fed."

The ruling was mocked on satellite television shows around the region, and was quickly condemned at home. Mr. Atiyah was suspended from his job, mocked in newspapers and within days issued a retraction, saying it was a "bad interpretation of a particular case."

Mona el-Naggar contributed reporting.

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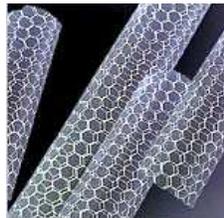
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