Learning in Retirement

History of Alcohol, March-April 2020

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These sessions will explore the history of alcohol so as to put modern alcohol cultures – patterns of drinking, regulations, attitudes toward drinking – in context. The sessions will focus on Europe and North America for the most part, although other parts of the world will be considered from time to time. The main themes will be the relationship of alcohol to social order, individual and public health, religion, and gender.

Session 1: Introduction

What is alcohol and why is its history important? The early history of alcohol and the important themes: Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome. Beer and wine as markers of social status.

Session 2: Alcohol and religion: the Middle Ages, Christianity, and Islam

Why did some religions (notably Christianity) embrace alcohol (wine) while others (notably Islam) rejected it? The significance of the Christian church in spreading the production and consumption of alcohol.

Session 3: The alcohol revolution: distilled spirits and fears of social breakdown

Distilled spirits (first brandy, then cereal-based spirits such as whisky and gin) had much higher alcohol levels than beer and wine and presented new challenges to the authorities. A key example is the so-called ‘gin-craze’ in England in the early 1700s.

Session 4: European alcohol in new worlds: the Americas, 1600-1800

Spain extended wine production to Central and South America from the 1590s, while other European powers introduced wine and beer to their North American colonies. New drinking cultures emerged in the European colonies, with spirits replacing wine as a popular alcoholic beverage.

Session 5: The anti-alcohol movements: temperance and prohibition

From the early 1800s there was a reaction against alcohol consumption, especially in the United States and northern Europe. Encouraged by Protestant churches, governments everywhere began to introduce restrictions on alcohol production, sale and consumption.

Session 6: The 20th century

Alcohol was especially important in World War I, when many governments introduced restrictions on civilian drinking while supplying troops with alcohol. Following the war, various
countries (notably Russia and the United States) adopted Prohibition or near-Prohibition policies but from the 1930s alcohol was normalized.