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Yasmin Alibhai-Brown: It's time for civilised and honest engagement

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Muslim medics are boycotting lectures on alcohol-related and sexually transmitted diseases, because, say the educated idiots, their religion forbids booze and free sex. A few are refusing to treat the opposite sex, so God help me if I am dying and one of them is on call in A&E. "Can't touch you, sister, no female doctor here tonight. Go to Paradise, better there anyhow."

Expel them, I say, plenty more where they came from, Muslims eager for just that chance. Last week, a handful of checkout operators were allowed by J Sainsbury to decline to scan alcohol bottles bought by customers. Notice the Übermensch tillers have not yet asked for their pay to be reduced by the percentage of profits the business makes on alcohol. When I was awarded an honorary degree at the Liverpool John Moores University, I witnessed with shame five graduate Muslim women in full burqua and gloves who snubbed the handshake of the vice chancellor. These fifth columnists are determined to incite an unending conflict between them and the rest of us.

We are appalled by the provocateurs. I speak of British Muslims, who, in spite of the collective guilt we are forced now to carry and the many impediments designed to keep us down and out, still feel this is our place. In my favourite Koranic verse, one I recite every morning, there is this plea: "O our Sustainer, grant us a life of peace and usher us into the abode of peace." There is more likelihood of us getting that abode here than in any Muslim country. There is nowhere else we would rather live and die, bad news for the BNP and their liberal surrogates, I guess, but hopefully heartening for Britons who believe we can and do belong in this nation of many voices, prayers, hues and songs.

Such civilised, honest engagement feels impossible at present, and there are times when the heart just wants to give up. I nearly did two weeks ago in this column. However, to surrender is to invite in the next dark age, only this time it will be a nuclear winter without ending. And I mean both real and metaphoric. We must keep the faith, even when, especially when, cynicism and odium threaten to overwhelm possibilities and hope.

We are crouching nervously, sheepishly, as packs of wolves try to blow our house down. At the front door are the Muslim fanatics, growling and exacting, these days as likely to be teachers, doctors, scientists, students, salesmen and social workers as one-eyed maddened Imams and fat, hairy crusaders. Most Muslims came to Europe to escape tyranny, economic failure and ignorance. Today their children seek tyranny, economic failure and ignorance. They hate Muslims at home in the West even more than they hate the West. We stand for a composite, open and evolving society. They want to drag us to the Bora Bora caves.

By this time, if he is reading the column, Martin Amis, will want to raise a glass to me. He has pitched himself against demonic Muslims and is at war with them too. He generously bought me two drinks at the Cheltenham Festival last year and seemed to believe we are on the same side. He should hold off the first sip.

For I see him as another kind of threat to the kind of society I stand up for. He is with the beasts pounding the back door, the Muslim-baiters and haters, these days as likely to come from the Groucho and Garrick clubs as the nasty, secret venues used by neo-fascists. This week, Julie Burchill said she hates Muslims. No one slams her. That's just our Julie, such a talent, so clever, so deliciously un-PC, and anyway it is understandable this view, is it not? Last month, Amis bared his expensive teeth and has just been denounced by the Marxist academic Terry Eagleton. Amis wants to strip-search anyone who looks Muslim (me too, then, Martin? Shall I lift my skirt the next time we meet to reassure you?).

He demands retribution, wants to make us suffer until we get "our house in order". How like Bin Laden he sounds, who wants innocent westerners to be punished for the actions of American, British and Israeli politicians. Also there howling are the convert neocons who want to force upon us their dodgy liberalism, their spun British values.

Beyond the commotion, there are others trying hard to save that house of reason and collaboration from falling to the baying enemies. Extraordinarily, thinkers and theologians are rising in every Muslim country and the conflicted West, too. The firmament grows and shines – read Reza Aslan, Ziauddin Sardar, Yahya Birt, Pervez Hoodbhoy, Sarah Joseph, many more.

In Physics Today, Hoodbhoy asks why the Islamic world is disengaged from science when from the 9th to the 13th Century it pioneered some of the greatest advances in mathematics and medicine. Religious fundamentalism is a key obstacle and anti-Muslim western prejudice too. Optimistically, he points out that Jews entering the US in the 20th century were described by intellectuals as "a hopelessly backward people". Didn't they just show them? We can, too.

The more thoughtful interventions planned and implemented by policy makers and politicians are also reassuring. Cameron assiduously avoided the usual thuggish, Tory assaults on migrants and Muslims. Gordon Brown's ministers – the women in particular – have brought down the national temperature during the most incendiary moments when terrorists were about to strike. The best among them is Hazel Blears, a woman I misjudged previously and was gratuitously rude about. I apologised to her recently after we had spoken on a panel at a fringe meeting and she was gracious. I hope I am not proved wrong and that as the pressure mounts from the Tories there will not be a return to the crass demonisation of Muslims.

Blears has been given the tough job of making social cohesion more than a threat or vague promise. And she is doing it with great skill and determination. Her team of officials – including some very bright Muslims, among them a woman in hijab – are inspired by her leadership. Her language is never punitive. Societal bonds need to be fixed, and are a national challenge for all. Blears does not present mutuality as a test or condition only to be taken and passed by Muslims. Others, too, in the media, judiciary, education, arts and culture are doing their bit to enhance our common humanity, to ensure things don't fall apart.

On Saturday, in Glasgow, about 800 family therapy experts had gathered from all around the world. I was asked to address them and I did. One of the delegates came up to me later and said: "This global heating is even more dangerous than the other, we must take it as seriously. I believe we can do something." Me too, though it all depends on whether the howling brutes will back off and in time.

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