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Yasmin Alibhai-Brown: The closed minds that deny a civilisation's glories

Muslims are seeing Koranic injunctions where none exist

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Confused Dad Mohamed from somewhere in the US sends his dilemma to an Islamic guidance website through whom Allah apparently communicates his orders – on how we dress, what we do minute by minute, unholy TV programmes, wicked vitamins and even wicked relations between males and females.

I paraphrase Mohamed's frantic appeal for clarity. His children watch cartoons, and have stuffed toys, quilts and pillow cases with Mickey Mouse on them. Is all that halal? Now many of us detest the addictive and manipulative Disney brand which targets young children. But this fully grown, procreative adult cannot trust his own mind and seeks instructions from unverified voices of authority. How abject is that?

These global sites control people, push through Maoist "cleansing". Miserable mullahs are closing down the Muslim mind and heart the world over. Meanwhile "true believers" desperately seek enslavement and thank their enslavers. The questions posed are startling in their naiveté. May we sing? Is it OK for a man to listen to a woman singer? Do I watch a female newsreader? Yes, says a wise one – as long as she is properly covered up and not wearing perfume. Don't laugh. It is tragic, not funny.

Somehow in the last decade or so, millions of believers have been persuaded that they are repositories of sin because they watch films, love music and paintings, read books, experience temporal pleasures and ecstasies. Remember the ferocity with which the Taliban destroyed all pre-Islamic treasures? Saudi Arabia is guilty of similar vandalism. Thus they seek to recreate the piety of triumphant Islam. Well they didn't have cameras, mobile phones, cars and computers then. Should these be banned too?

Muslim children are now programmed to obey – robbed of imagination, independent thought and refinement. UK Muslim parents are increasingly coming out against school visits, music and drama, novels, exercise, scientific facts. Teachers know these parental demands leave Muslim children under-educated and emotionally numbed, rendered unresponsive to artistic words, sights and sounds.

This is a travesty of our history, our love of truth and beauty, the intellectual energy that throughout history uplifted Muslim civilisations. The current [Science Museum exhibition of Muslim inventions that shaped the modern world](#) proves we were never the barbarians promoted in Western demonology. Some of the earliest manuals on surgery and optics, astronomy and flying machines came out of Muslim regions. And those same places were creative hubs producing great works of art, incredible buildings and intricate crafts.

There is no Koranic injunction against the depiction of the human form, yet pictures from previous ages would today not be painted – a kneeling, sensual angel by an Ottoman artist in the mid-16th century, a man filling his cup of wine. Passion plays were performed through the centuries in all main Arabian conurbations. Poetry was written and recited by both men and women. Music, devotional and romantic, was in every household. All that is under threat today.

The Pakistani blogger Raza Rumi writes: "Who are these butchers of culture? What religion do they follow? They have no religion except barbarism." Exactly. British Muslims for Secular Democracy (of which I am chair), supported by the British Council, is tomorrow organising a conference on artistic and cultural freedom at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. Speakers include Miss Pakistan (who is also a professor), fashion designers, the entrepreneur Saira Khan, painters, stand-up comics, musicians, writers, others who are concerned. The event is open to all. Check the BMSD site. We will be launching an advisory guide for teachers on protecting the interests of the Muslim child.

Many sagacious websites will warn that mixing with us, people with faith who are also freethinkers, is definitely haram (a sin). That will keep away the born-again religious troglodytes. But our hope is that the nervous and undecided will turn up to listen to artists and entertainers – and throw off their chains.

One artist I know put it beautifully: "Allah gave me my mind, my hands my eyes, my patience, my selfhood. I use all these gifts and show people the wonders of the world. How can that be wrong? Does God want us to be deaf, stupid and blind?"

No, but God's army sure does.

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