THE TIMES

No drink, no drugs, no sex? No chance

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In the second-part of his revealing series on Muslim Britain, this writer describes life in London for liberal twenty-somethings and their attitudes to sex, alcohol and Metallica

MONDAY NIGHT at the Pontefract Castle in Wigmore Street, Central London, a hop, skip and a jump from Wigmore Hall, is usually a subdued affair. Last Monday, for example, at the bar downstairs, a small group of businesspeople was idly watching football highlights on a large-screen TV. One man sat alone in a corner by the front door, reading a newspaper. On the upper mezzanine level, a group of Spanish tourists squeezed three tables together and took over the entire floor. On the second floor, a group of women sat sipping red wine on a couch overlooking a makeshift balcony.

At a little past 7pm a small group of young Muslims walked upstairs, looked around for the person they had arranged to meet and, perhaps out of politeness, sat down and waited to be approached. As I walked over, Hana Al-Hirsi, 23, a striking young woman whose father is Yemeni and mother Irish-Catholic, rose to her feet. “We thought it might be you,” she laughed. “But we weren’t sure.”

As we found a quieter table, Al-Hirsi quickly introduced me to her friends — Ali Ali (so wide was his grin that it sounded as if he was introducing his unusual name for the first time), a boyishly but sometimes serious 24-year-old of Iraqi origin who has recently finished a post-graduate degree in Middle Eastern studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). Next to him sat Fadel Zayan, 26, studying international politics at SOAS. Zayan, who was born in Libya, said little for most of the evening — and when he did his speech bore all the gallows humour of a funeral home. “Yeah, I’m a real Muslim success story,” he says, dryly at one point in the evening. “I’m 26 and still living with my parents in Kilburn.”

Next to Zayan sat Waleed Al-Musharaf, 23, born in Sudan but raised in Cairo, also reading Middle Eastern studies at SOAS. Al-Musharaf often preferred to let Al-Hirsi and Ali do most of the talking.

As we armed ourselves with drinks — white wine for Al-Hirsi, lager for Ali and Cokes for Fadel and Waleed (the latter two drink only occasionally) — we thought it best to become acquainted first. Muslims meeting each other in social situations, especially where alcohol is involved, tend to be wary of each other initially. Pointed questions and dramatic confessions are often fired off into the conversation to probe the liberal waters.

To a degree, young Muslims living in London, much like young people of other cultures — living away from family and relatives — tend to live more freely because, for most of them, marriage will inevitably provide some degree of an endpoint. On Monday night, though, all agreed quickly that all closet-dwelling skeletons should be revealed.

Parental pressures inevitably surfaced in the conversation. Al-Musharaf told me of a recent visit by his parents. “They opened my bank statement and found out that I’d been to a strip club with some friends,” he said. Around the table, there was collective gasp at the thought of seeing your parents peer at the words Poledancers, Inc, printed neatly across a bank statement.

“The strange thing, though,” said Al-Musharaf, “is that they didn’t seem to mind. In fact, I think they thought I was getting something out of my system. Not that they agreed, but the fact that they don’t know what I get up to means that they can ignore it. For me, it would have been 100 times worse if they’d seen me on top of a girl.” He paused: “I just couldn’t believe that they’d read my statement. I’ll have to guard my mail much better from now on.”

As the table debated Al-Musharaf’s confession, Ali said that young British Muslims, especially those who have studied away from their homes, often feel torn between family traditions and their new-found liberalism. “Sometimes I feel as if there are two Alis,” he said. Al-Musharaf threw his head back and laughed. “I look forward to you reading that in the paper,” he says. This leads to a lengthy debate about Islamic values. All agree that alcohol isn’t strictly prohibited by the religion: pork, though, remains a no-no. “It’s just not right,” Zayan says. “I guess pork is one thing that most Muslims do still have a hang-up about. You’re just basically taught from an early age that it is a really filthy animal.”

Before they reached London, Al-Hirsi and Ali studied at Durham University together: a gap year involved a one-year study break in Syria. Ali said that for him it rekindled an interest in Islam. “You do the little things,” he says, putting down his pint. “I’m not the perfect Muslim. But I think of myself as a realist who can juggle both cultures.”

I asked them about their relationships with the opposite sex. Al-Hirsi revealed how she had been, in her late teens, engaged to a family relative for three years. She eventually broke off the relationship. “It was hard for a while,” she said. “Family pride got

into it. But it is better now. My family was great in that respect: they stood by my decision. I would say that if I met someone, I'd feel comfortable enough to introduce them to my parents." Later, she added: "University opened up my mind. You really find yourself when you're studying away from home."

"I was engaged, too," admitted Fadel. He added that now, while living at home, he was finding it difficult to meet girls. "There just isn't any privacy," he complained. "I do meet girls quite often. But it's always hard to keep up the relationship. You need to have your own place."

As we sat and talked about increasingly oblique subjects, I was struck by their libertarian attitudes. While some first and second-generation Muslims to Britain hold traditional views on homosexuality, alcohol and sex before marriage, the Pontefract Castle Four rarely shied away from a subject, no matter how controversial. "Sometimes there isn't enough debate within the Muslim community," said Ali. "So many things need to be talked about. We can't be scared to confront changes in our religion."

We strode towards Bond Street Tube station — at 11 pm Al-Hirsi said she was going to meet more friends — and, shaking hands, exchanged numbers and agreed to meet up again.

A FEW NIGHTS later, I meet Al-Hirsi and Ali again, this time at The Castle near Farringdon Tube in Central London. As I arrive at the bustling station, Al-Hirsi greets me like an old friend and introduces me to Rudaba Osmani, 23, an employment adviser and friend from Durham University. After I buy cigarettes, we walk into The Castle, where I order three glasses of wine. Al-Hirsi looks at me as the barman serves us our drinks: "Large or small?" he asks. "Large," I reply, and shrug. Al-Hirsi giggles. We find a quieter room at the back of the pub — at the bar the Friday-night drinking games have already begun — and wait for Ali.

"I guess I am not very religious in the orthodox sense," Osmani says. She flashes an impish grin, leaning forward to speak. "Personally, I always remember God in the morning and before I go to sleep. So God is on my mind — but that is the extent to which I practise religion. I just don't agree with the traditional view that you need to be overtly religious, praying five times a day, to be a good Muslim. What was practical 1,400 years ago just isn't the same today. Religions, like people, should evolve."

In her short life — she has been employed at Work Directions, a New Deal outfit, for only seven months — Osmani, born in Bangladesh, has lived in Finland and Belfast. On her arrival in London, she lived with her elder sister for a while. "My sister is not particularly religious, but I didn't feel that independent," she laughs. "So that was . . . interesting." Osmani now shares a flat with friends, and says: "Living independently is the best thing about London. I have the freedom to come and go as I choose."

"I feel exactly the same way," interrupts Al-Hirsi. "I just wouldn't be the same person if I didn't have my friends to socialise with. I like the diversity of London and all the different scenes. I'm glad I'm from an Arab background in that respect: you tend to find that Pakistanis in the UK especially are more old-fashioned in observing Islam."

I look up to notice the arrival of Ali Ali. As I return from the bar with another round of drinks, Ali takes his lager and sits down next to me. He looks tired. "A series of long nights," he explains. He needs to give no further explanation: in my experience, Arab cultures only really awaken near midnight. When everyone else has seemingly passed out because of exhaustion, Arab Muslims always seem to find a second, and sometimes even a third, wind.

As the girls continue to chat among themselves, I sit talking to Ali. We discuss the perils of nicotine addiction. "If someone said 'Here's a pill that stops you smoking for ever', people would take it immediately. It's such a bad thing to do." He sounds worn out: "Sometimes you can have too much of the best of both worlds. It's hard to find that balance."

Ali has never been to Glasgow, where I grew up, saying that his failure to cross the EnglishScottish border "does sound ridiculous". "But, then, while you keep saying you feel Scottish, I always think of myself as English as well as Iraqi," he adds.

It's a little past 8pm, and The Castle is heaving with Friday night partygoers, many of them City workers. As both Waleed and Fadel have not joined us, the conversation is more intimate. Osmani, especially, is keen to ask me about my Muslim beliefs: am I particularly religious? How often do I pray? Have I ever fasted during the month of Ramadan? I tell her of living in Pakistan for 18 months as a youngster at a time when, during a military dictatorship, religion made up a substantial part of the school syllabus. "So it turned you off it," she says. "I can see how that would happen."

By the time I return from the gents', cinema and pop music dominate the conversation. "I used to love Metallica," Ali says. The girls look on, horrified, as he continues: "All kinds of heavy metal actually, but especially Metallica." He laughs sheepishly, as if recalling thrash-metal anthems of despair such as *Sad but True*, *Master of Puppets* and *One,* before adding: "It sounds really sad now, but I couldn't leave the house in the morning without listening to Metallica. I went to see them play at the Sheffield Arena in 1996. I still think it was one of the best shows in my entire life."

I tell him I was equally obsessed with heavy metal when I was a teenager — to the point where I owned all 30 records by Kiss, the 1970s American rock band. Ali agrees when I add that "bad music is the dwelling place of people from all cultures". Al-Hirsi laughs: "I listen to all kinds of things," she says. "Recently, I've found myself listening to nu-metal." Ali shakes his head: the quietest of the group, he seems to prefer more introspective music.

The group, though, are at their most animated when discussing *The Passion of The Christ,* this summer's blockbusting violent biopic by Mel Gibson. On Monday night Al-Musharaf had, quite rightly, pointed out the lack of Muslim role models in Western cinema. "Where are the cool Muslims that are vigilantes and fighters?" he asks. "Why don't you see any cool Muslims in films like *The Matrix*? To me, projection is one of the most important things: young Muslims need to feel that we can look around and see ourselves being represented."

On the subject of *The Passion of The Christ*, Al-Hirsi says that the film almost reduced her to tears. Ali, though, becomes irate. “I haven’t seen it,” he says. “But I don’t think there is any good in making a film like that. It’s more divisive than anything else.”

Unperturbed, Al-Hirsi argues her case. “I’m not saying it’s the religious truth,” she says. “But it is one version of how it happened. As a cinematic experience, it was moving in that way.” Osmani, however, prevails with the most rational view. “It just looked too violent,” she says. “I wouldn’t really want to see anything like that.” She grins, sheepishly: “Sorry”.

I leave them, probably still debating Gibson’s fanatical depiction of Christ. I imagine that the conversation, as it did for most of Monday night, continued until late, and was most likely lubricated by more trips to the bar — and perhaps even a trip to a different hostelry. Al-Hirsi and her friends are fun and generous with their company. It strikes me as a shame that they represent only the more liberal, younger aspects of the Islamic community.

The group would undoubtedly struggle to live in a less tolerant community: Luton, say. Much like their white counterparts, who leave small-town England, Scotland and Wales to find refuge and work in a capital city, a melting pot that actively encourages and rewards individuality, Al-Hirsi and her friends are one indication of how successive generations of Muslims, juggling faith and modernity, prefer to live their lives.

THE YOUNG ONES

SOME 33.8 per cent of Muslims are aged under 15 years; 18.2 per cent are aged 16 to 24.

Parental decision over marriage partner: 49 per cent of Muslim men in the 16 to 34-year-old range; 67 per cent of Muslim women in the 16 to 34-year-old range.

According to a recent poll, British Muslims feel a strong sense of exclusion, with 69 per cent saying they felt the rest of society does not regard them as an integral part of life in Britain.

A British Council poll, taken across nine countries, shows that America and Britain remain the favourite nations of young Arabs and Muslims — about 68 per cent of those interviewed were “very favourable or mainly favourable” to the US, with 67 per cent approving of Britain.