

The Veil

by Elsie Maxwell

Is the media targeting Muslims? Since the eleventh of September 2001 and even more so since the London bombing in July 2005, Muslims in Britain feel that they are the victims of a campaign against them personally and against their religion Islam. Why did Jack Straw, the leader of the House of Commons, raise the issue of wearing the veil? Why now? What is behind this? Some are saying it is a conspiracy to help Britain become more secular like France and not allow people of different faiths to distinguish themselves from others either by jewellery or clothing. (At this same time, there is also the case of a woman worker with British Airways who was asked not to wear a small silver cross.)

The issue of wearing a veil raises many questions. Shouldn't we be tolerant and sensitive to all people, to minorities, to religious groups? Shouldn't we let people wear whatever their culture considers to be right? Is the veil cultural or religious, or is it both? Or is it a statement about identity? Do Muslim women *have* to veil? Is it a command? Is the Qur'an the source of the command to veil?

1. Let us begin by examining the Arabic words which surround the topic:

- *Hijab* – from the verb *hajaba*
The meaning is *to cover, to conceal*. It can refer to curtains as well as to veils. (For most people, this is generally just a head covering, but for some it refers to a full covering of the body.) The word occurs seven times in the Qur'an. The sura references are: 7:46, 17:45, 19:17, 33:53, 38:32, 41:5 and 42:51. Several interesting definitions are found in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*¹. One explanation given by mystics points to the barrier of separation from God.
- *Niqab* – *face covering*
- *Jilbab* – *the garment that covers the body, with a hood covering the head and a veil, or niqab, over the face.*
- *Khimar* – *a garment that hides or conceals*. The word is from the verb *khamara*. In other verb forms, this can mean *to ferment*, but the second verb form means *to hide, cover, conceal*.
- *Burqa* – *a head-to-toe covering*. Generally, this is the garment worn in Pakistan and Afghanistan.
- *Ghita* – another verb for *cover*.
- *Satara* – another verb meaning *to cover, to veil*. It is also used for curtains, as well as meaning *to shield, to protect*.

2. Here are the Qur'anic verses that establish the source or command concerning the wearing of a veil:

O Prophet! Tell
Thy wives and daughters,
And the believing women,
That they should cast
Their outer garments² over
Their persons (when abroad)
That is most convenient,
That they should be known
(as such) and not molested...

Sura 33: 59

(Translation by Yousuf Ali)

¹ *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., Vol. III, 359-361.

² *Jilbab* = cloak

Say to the believing men
 That they should lower
 Their gaze and guard
 Their modesty: that will make
 For greater purity for them:
 ...
 And say to the believing women
 That they should lower
 Their gaze and guard
 Their modesty: that they
 Should not display their
 Beauty and ornaments except
 What (must ordinarily) appear
 Thereof: that they should
 Draw their veils³ over
 Their bosoms and not display
 Their beauty except
 To their husbands, their fathers, their
 sons . . .

Sura 24: 30-31

(Translation by Yousuf Ali)

These verses are understood in several different ways.

Conservatives read these verses as saying that Muslim males have the right to ask Muslim women to don a covering because women's bodies are sexually corrupting to those who see them. Thus, the veil shields men from viewing women's bodies.

- Al Tabarai (d. 923 CE) held that both sexes could show those parts of the body that were not pudendal, such as the face and hands.
- Al Baydawi (d. 1286 CE) ruled that the entire body of a free woman was pudendal, except during prayer, medical treatment or when bearing witness (she needs to show her identity clearly).⁴
- Al Khafaji (d. 1659 CE) decreed that even the face and hands were to be covered.

Modern Muslims have the following opinions:

- This Qur'anic legislation was revealed in Medina not Mecca, in the last six or seven years of the prophet's life.
- Other writers note that these words/ verses were addressed to the Prophet's wives at the time of Zaynab's wedding and are not binding on all women.
- Fatima Mernissi⁵ quotes Ibn Sad⁶ and attributes the philosophy of the veil to 'Umar rather than to the prophet.⁷
- Mernissi also remarks that the Arabic words used in these verses have a very general meaning. *Jilbab* in the old dictionary *Lisan al-'Arab* is rather vague and designates numerous pieces of clothing, ranging from a simple chemise to a cloak or just a large piece of cloth worn by a woman. Another definition describes the veil as a piece of material used to cover the head and bosom; it can be sort of a cloak or a shawl.

The veil marked free women but slaves were not veiled or protected. Men from the pre-Islamic or *Jahilia* period could abuse slaves but were not to abuse free women. If the free woman was not distinguished by her clothing, she could be subjected to abuse.

³ *Khumur* = the word *shawl* in this case

⁴ Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an*, 94

⁵ Mernissi, *Women and Islam*, 180ff.

⁶ Ibn Sad, *Al-Tabaqat*, 176.

⁷ Mernissi, *Women and Islam*, 185-186.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the Egyptian Qasim Amin thought that these institutional restrictions on women such as sexual segregation, domestic seclusion and the face veil should change. Women should be able to have mobility outside their homes and receive an education. There was a call to not veil and in many countries women gave it up. These views were expressed by those who had a Western education. Later on, taking off the veil was seen as coming from a Western/secularist view of life, which was not fitting for Eastern Muslims.

Moreover Abu'l Ala al-Mawdudi wished to keep the former conservative views as this would avoid the evils of the secularisation of culture that had happened in the West. He wished the dress to cover the full body, hands and face. His efforts are seen as a drive for purity and non-secularisation.

Leila Ahmed, a professor of women's studies in the United States, sees the present drive to veil as being addressed to urban career women who are educated and working. The matter concerns the garments worn outside the home. The other issue involves the expression of religious identity in the presence of others. So in their eyes, the veil becomes a statement of who they are; it is not about their segregation. It is a 'badge of both morality and also cultural authenticity, while performing new tasks in the public sphere.'⁸

3. The issue of the veil is connected to the issue of sexuality in Islam.

Firstly, it relates to how the woman is seen. Is she seen as a beautiful symbol to be protected or as a symbol of danger to protect others from? (This problem is not unknown in our present time; women are often portrayed in the media as sex symbols.)

Many women writers give a strong defence of Islam as teaching equality and mutuality of the sexes. They state that sexual morality or purity is not an issue of sexual identity nor does it come from the function of one's nature, male or female, but from one's behaviour. Some of them even attribute the source of these wrong views to Christian and Jewish ones, which they see as being very derogatory towards women. The Qur'an has no premise for the woman's body being corrupted or corrupting, nor does it make any pejorative claims about women or sex, as do Jews and Christians⁹. Barlas' opinion is that Christians attribute the cause of sin to women, while the Qur'anic account of the event in the garden between Adam and Eve does not present the story in that way. Jewish ideas of women as polluting led to them being barred from the temple during menstruation.

Yet Muslim patriarchies (male commentary writers and male authors of the Hadith) seem to have read into Islam many of these ideas: viewing sex as unclean, women as sexually corrupt, and men as having a hyperactive libido whose satisfaction necessitates polygamy and leads them to see women as passive receptacles for men.¹⁰ This view is still commonly expressed by many Muslims from whatever source they give.

The second set of verses (Sura 24:30-31) is about modesty for both men and women. The description of the covering is general and mentions only the bosom and the woman's beauty. Beauty is then taken to mean the hair and face. The gaze was seen by some commentators to mean the messenger of fornication. The veil protected men by covering and segregating the women.

Segregation is another aspect of the veil. Women are separated from all men except for family members. In the past when this was strictly observed, a women's world developed apart from

⁸ Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an*, 131.

⁹ Barlas, 'Believing Women' in Islam, 56, 138, 150.

¹⁰ Sabbah, *A Woman in the Muslim Unconscious*.

the men's world. The women's world was the home, inside, while the men's world was the public domain, outside. So when women entered the men's world, they needed to be covered and not seen. In some countries, it is still not easy for women to work in the men's world. The new Islamic faith schools are teaching boys and girls separately and young girls are dressed as women even before the age of puberty.

4. What are the reasons given for wearing the veil?

The major reason cited over and over is that it incites men to see the body of a woman and especially her hair. Thus the wearing of the *hijab* (the veil) is related to *zina* (illicit sexuality), which must be controlled. This paradoxical view of woman as wife and mother, emphasizing the need to protect and preserve the purity of the family line and the identity of her children, is held along with the idea that if she is uncovered, she may incite trouble and cause *fitna* (chaos). The veil and segregation are the means to solve this problem. Some of my Arab women friends will jokingly say, 'Why not veil the men?'

The veil is also a symbol used by fundamentalists in their efforts to restore the practice of Islam as a more pious, pure faith where the people follow the patterns of Muhammad from the Hadith, rather than those of the Western world. It becomes a symbol or marker of this renewed identity: 'I am a Muslim. I may be British, Egyptian, Somali, Malaysian or American, but above all, I am a Muslim woman.' The percentage of such women is only about 2%, but interestingly, it is growing and is a feature of modern Muslim women in the West.

In discussions about the veil, I have not found writers speaking about how wearing it affects relationships with non-Muslims or causes difficulties in communication. They do not mention the problematic role of the unseen face when the person speaking is wearing a covering veil. It is clearly an acceptable fact that the face has a role in communication, identity and relationships. People desire to know someone face to face in an authentic relationship. Speaking on the phone or sending an email does not allow one to really know the person unless you have met previously. Speaking from behind a veil gives the impression that the woman can not really be known because she is not allowing you to see her. Face to face communication is preferable in order to really know a person and to fully understand their feelings and emotions, not just their words. Facial expressions such as smiling or not smiling while speaking are important in the communication. These are part of the message and can imply things not verbally said. A veil is clearly limiting and can give a false impression as the non-verbal parts of communication are missing.

In a few short interviews in the magazine *emel, the Muslim Life Style Magazine*,¹¹ several young Muslim women agreed that the *niqab* interfered or inhibited communication and as a result, they have chosen not to wear it. But one woman dentist considered it no different from her face mask while working on patients. However, nearly all these women objected to non-Muslims discussing the issue.

When I think of Christianity, I see our God who revealed himself to us by sending his Son in the likeness of man that we might behold him. The veil seems to speak to us of things hidden, things not yet known, but in the New Testament, Christ has opened the way by rending the veil so we may come directly into his presence. He wants us to know him, and we speak of seeing him face to face and knowing him and He us. The nature of believers is openness, living in honesty and truth and not seeking to hide in any manner. Our honour is to walk openly without fear.

¹¹ emel media ltd., *emel magazine* (London) Issue 26.

On the issue of modesty, we are encouraged to make it a characteristic of our manner of dress but there is no description of specific clothing. The matter of purity in I Peter 3 is not centred on the outward covering but rather on the inner being, the heart and the behaviour. The Islamic view often seems related to the externals and not to the inner cause of the problems and issues.

Of course, even before Islam, head coverings were worn by many people, and in many countries, a head scarf was part of a woman's apparel. Wearing a veil can be seen differently, however, from wearing a scarf, as a scarf does not cover the face. Today some Arab Christians are not comfortable unless they wear a scarf in public. Other Christians feel the need to wear a head covering for worship and prayer in public or even at home.

As we look at the discipleship of new MBBs, we see that along with prayer, Bible reading, church life, etc, they need to learn about the biblical roles of men and women. They will learn a new set of values to include the issues of purity and modesty, the joy of open communication and the possibility of pure relationships because God can keep them pure.

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