

Veiling

After polygamy, probably the thing that most Westerners “know” about Muslim women is that they are never really seen in public—only their faces are ever seen. Otherwise they are completely hidden in folds of cloth. A friend of mine used to call these coverings “personal mini-tents.” Traditional Muslims often use the term *hijab*. A more generic term is “veiling.”

A veil, or *hijab*, always covers the hair, and in some cases part or all of the face. When I made Hajj (the Muslim pilgrimage), I traveled in a group with a young woman whose veil covered her from head to toe. I only once caught a glimpse of the woman beneath. The light hit her veil at the perfect angle, and I was astonished to see a real person there. I have often wondered if looking out through such a veil adds that same sense of unreality to the world.

When I was first exploring Islam, veiling was a stumbling block for me. I read my Quran for quite awhile before “taking the plunge” to formally become a Muslim. One of the main reasons for this delay was my distaste for veiling.

Even before I really became Muslim, I tried covering all but my face and hands. I felt so conspicuous that I was most uncomfortable in public places. I remember walking down the street, hoping that I would not meet anyone who recognized me. Fortunately I was spared the agony of trying to explain to an old friend why I was dressed that way. However, I never wanted to be seen in public like that again. Maybe that is the origin of the harem? The poor women were embarrassed into seclusion!!!

Not only that, but I was having enough trouble going through the bowing and prostrating movements of the Muslim Contact

Prayer which I was trying to learn, without having to worry about tripping over yards of billowing cloth.

Had I only known, the Quran makes dressing in a normal fashion quite easy. The following verse covers almost all of the elements of Quranic dress:

*And tell the believing women to subdue their eyes,
and maintain their chastity.
They shall not reveal any parts of their bodies,
except that which is necessary.
They shall cover their chests,
and shall not relax this code in the presence of other than their
husbands, their fathers, the fathers of their husbands, their sons,
the sons of their husbands, their brothers....
They shall not strike their feet when they walk
in order to shake and reveal certain details of their bodies....
(Quran: The Final Testament 24:31)*

The byword here is modesty. Muslim women should not dress to be seductive and sexually alluring. (Nor should Muslim men. See the Quran 24:30.)

Let me stop for a moment and clarify the translation of the above verses. Most translators have translated the Arabic word "*khomoorehenna*," which comes from the root word "*khimar*," as "veil." Thus they understand the verse to mean that a woman should cover her chest with the veil she wears over her hair. This is a cultural interpretation. "*Khimar*" simply means a cover – a bed cover, a tablecloth, etc. In reference to clothing it can apply equally to a dress, a blouse or a veil. Because of the cultural norm of veiling, people assume that the chest should be covered with the head veil.

The Quranic verses leave a great deal of leeway for a woman to find her own comfort zone. If she is more comfortable with a scarf, or a veil, it certainly is not forbidden. However, it is not required either. The only thing that is required in the above verse is modesty, that she not reveal more than is necessary, and that her chest be covered.

The definition of exactly what modesty means is different in each culture. To me, walking down most Western streets in full *hijab* is not actually modest because you are drawing attention to yourself. Likewise, dressing as you would in the United States would not be covered enough in most of the Muslim world. Once again, we are face to face with our old friend culture.

I believe that the fact that we should be dressing modestly, not necessarily veiled, is highlighted by this recommendation to elderly women:

*The elderly women who do not expect to get married
commit nothing wrong by relaxing their dress code,
provided they do not reveal too much of their bodies.
To maintain modesty is better for them....
(Quran: The Final Testament 24:60)*

Surely if God required women to cover their hair, that would have been at least mentioned here. Instead, God just tells these women not to “*reveal too much of their bodies.*”

It is interesting to note that the Arabic word *hijab*, basically translated as “barrier,” does occur in the Quran several times. Not once does it refer to women’s veiling.

If the Quran does not require veiling, where did it come from? I’ve read a number of differing theories on its origin. In the New Testament Paul argues that women should wear a veil during worship:

*...Any woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered
brings shame upon her head....
Indeed, if a woman will not wear a veil,
she ought to cut off her hair. If it is shameful for a woman
to have her hair cut off or her head shaved,
it is clear that she ought to wear a veil.
(1 Corinthians 11:5-6 - The New American Bible, 1970)*

Whether the requirement to veil originated with this Christian requirement, or came from some other source is questionable. It does seem fairly certain that it did not originate with

the Arabs. We know that Muhammad was born into the Quraish tribe, one of the nomadic tribes of the Bedouin Arabs. Bedouin women did not then, and do not now, always veil themselves. This fact is demonstrated by the next Quranic verse, which shows that women were not veiled nor shut away at the time of the Prophet Muhammad:

*It is not lawful for thee
(To marry more) women
After this, nor to change
Them for (other) wives,
Even though their beauty
Attract thee....
(The Holy Quran XXXIII:52 [33:52])*

How could Muhammad admire the beauty of a woman he had never seen?

Please do not misunderstand me, I have no objection to others veiling, if that is their desire. However, since the Quran does not require that I veil, I prefer to dress in Western society in an Islamic manner that is more acceptable for that society. If I lived in Saudi Arabia, the situation would be very different, because the culture is different, therefore what is modest is different.

There is one other important commandment in the Quran on the way women should dress in Chapter 33, Verse 59. Here women are told to lengthen their garments. How much do you have to lengthen? I believe that is determined by what you see around you, and your own comfort level. Each one of us is individually responsible to God, and each must decide for ourselves what He is indicating in the following verse:

*O prophet, tell your wives, your daughters,
and the wives of the believers
that they shall lengthen their garments.
Thus, they will be recognized (as righteous women)
and avoid being insulted....
(Quran: The Final Testament 33:59)*

Yusuf Ali translates this verse a bit differently:

*O Prophet! Tell
Thy wives and daughters,
And the believing women,
That they should cast
Their outer garments over
Their persons (when abroad):
That is most convenient,
That they should be known
(As such) and not molested....
(The Holy Quran XXXIII:59 [33:59])*

Using either translation, I believe that Quranic dress has the same function as all modest dress: helping to keep us out of uncomfortable or even compromising situations.

I might add here that the Muslim men I know who are following the Quran alone also dress modestly. It only makes sense; the best way for all of us to stay out of trouble is not to invite it!

There are certain circumstances where long clothing is not appropriate. Trying to swim in long flowing clothes is not only difficult, it is dangerous. It also seems unfair to keep young women from participating in physical education classes and sports because they may be required to wear gym suits. In this case, the intention seems important; no one is wearing those suits in order to be alluring.

Dressing modestly does not require us to be dowdy. Some of the Muslim sisters I have met from India, Egypt, and Iran, etc. are the most beautifully dressed women I have ever seen. Their dress is totally modest, but they have class and grace that far outshines most fashion models.



It is difficult for me to relate to the zeal with which veiling is enforced in some Muslim societies. Men who never pray or fast become apoplectic on seeing a woman who is not veiled. It has become

a symbol to them, but a symbol of what? For such people, the Quran is not a source of guidance; it is veiled in culture and tradition. The result is oppression in the name of religion. The following story shares a bone chilling reality for those of us who have always lived in freedom.

The Quran Veiled

I was born and raised in a Muslim family in Iran. My father always encouraged me to have a higher education, but he never imposed religion on me. I learned how to read the Quran in Arabic in grade school, but we didn't actually know the Arabic language because our native language in Iran is Farsi. The teachers in the schools told us that reading the Quran in Arabic would give us more credit with God.

The Quran played a very dominant role in Iranian culture during my upbringing in Iran. I would hear the Quran recited in Arabic during different occasions. The Quran was usually recited at funerals or after the death of an individual. The Quran would also be recited throughout the month of Ramadan. The Persian New Year was an event at which the Quran would be placed on a table along with other ceremonial items representing the New Year to bless the upcoming year. I had witnessed and participated in the custom by which when someone is leaving to go on a trip a Quran would be held above their heads and the traveler would walk under it to be blessed for a safe trip. This tradition was so important that the main archway to the city of Siraz has a giant Quran on top of it so that as the cars pass underneath it the passengers will be blessed.

About 25 years ago, my husband and I moved to the United States of America. A couple of years after we moved to the USA, the revolution in Iran broke out and then the Islamic Government took control of the country. At first it seemed that the people of Iran were very happy under the new Islamic Government. But within a few months our friends and family

in Iran were telling us about awful events that were happening under the new government. Some of the ignorant religious governmental leaders were doing unspeakable crimes in the name of Islam like stoning women for adultery.

In one tragic case, a government soldier killed a young 17 year old in front of her mother in the streets of Tehran. The two were going shopping when they decided that they wanted to change their head covers to match their long dresses. So they both went into a telephone booth so nobody could see them switching their covers. This is because during that time, Islamic clergy were enforcing a law which forbade women to show their hair in public. Unfortunately, as they were changing their head covers, a young soldier saw them, became very angry, and began yelling at them. The daughter, being fed up with the oppression, came out of the telephone booth without her cover on her head and said to the soldier, "So what if my hair shows?" The young man became so furious that he brought his gun out and pointed it at the daughter's head. The mother jumped in front of her daughter and asked for him to have mercy on her young daughter. But he didn't care and he pushed aside the mother and killed the daughter.

With so many negative and tragic incidents happening in the name of Islam, I started to question many things. I asked myself, "Are these the laws of God? Are they actually in the Quran?" This question was actually echoed by many Muslims in Iran who said, "If this is Islam, we don't want to be Muslim."

– *Patty, Iran*

[*Editor's note:* This is not the end of Patty's story. Please see the end of Chapter 14 for the conclusion.]

