



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Beyond the Veil
(*Christianity and Islam*,
pp. 76-83)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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Christian Reflection

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Beyond the Veil

While for many non-Muslims the veil has become the characteristic symbol of modesty in Islam, the reality is more complex. Modesty is at home in our own faith journey, and by reflecting on this virtue beyond the veil, we may discover a fruitful new avenue for dialogue with Muslims.

Prayer†

Let us walk in peace.

May our way be resolute

and our purpose firm in your good counsel.

May we be granted, O Lord,

the benefit of gratefulness for your grace,

the beauty that belongs with your worship.

And may we be given pure and reverent hearts,

uprightness of character,

tongues that speak right,

and deeds that are worthy,

O Lord God. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 4:17-24

Reflection

"Every religion has an innate character," said the Prophet Muhammad. "The character of Islam is modesty."

Islam recognizes the central role of modesty is "to create a private space for love and to protect marriage," Evelynne Reisacher notes. Indeed, "guarding one's modesty," an expression for a husband and wife's chastity, "appears in Qur'anic lists of the pivotal practices of Muslim believers...along with praying humbly, avoiding vain talk, and exercising deeds of charity (Surah 23:1-5), and with surrendering to Allah, speaking the truth, persevering in righteousness, being humble, giving alms, and fasting (Surah 33:35).

Several religious texts have been interpreted as requiring specific forms of modest dress and behavior, including:

- ▶ *veils and covering for women.* Women are not to call attention to their *zeena*, which is variously interpreted as specific features of the body (the face, hands, or feet), natural beauty generally, or the adornment of make-up, jewelry, and dress. Thus, "the amount of a woman's body that should be covered has been debated over the years. Today different styles of veil are worn, and some Muslims even say the true 'veil' should not be an item of apparel, but an inner attitude of modesty."
- ▶ *female seclusion.* "The extreme case of covering for the sake of modesty is seclusion, the rule that a woman generally should stay in her house, but be covered if she must go outside," says Reisacher. Some passages mention a screen (*hijab*) hung for the privacy of Muhammad's wives, or a dividing curtain (*sitr*) used in open apartments. Those who interpret these verses "as requirements for all female believers, [encourage] women's seclusion from the public sphere. Other believers encourage women's limited access to the public sphere in order for them to care for children and manage households. As women's roles change due to new



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economic demands, Muslims continue to reflect on these Qur'anic texts."

- ▶ *modest dress for men*. Men should cover their private parts (*awra*) – specifically the genitals, and generally the parts of the body that elicit sexual stimulation. "Traditionally Muslims understand that the minimum covering required for men is from his navel to his knees.... Muslims continue to debate the extent of the covering, of course, because what elicits sexual stimulation varies according to the context."

Reisacher reminds us that in Islam, "modesty is not primarily about the veil, but about purity, marriage, male-female relations in the society, and our relationship to God. If we want to understand Islam, we need to be sensitive to the core values of modesty as well as to how these translate into dress practices."

Study Questions

1. What is at the heart of the Muslim concern for modesty in dress and behavior?
2. Is modesty a specifically religious virtue? Is modesty an unpopular virtue in western culture? Why?
3. What is universal in the virtue of modesty? What is culturally specific?
4. "Wearing the veil does not require having modest attitudes," Reisacher says. "Indeed, some women may wear the veil because they have to do it, yet their thoughts, relationships, and the way they dress under the veil may not be pleasing to God." Discuss this observation.
5. How can committed Muslims disagree about how to apply specific instructions in the Qur'an and the Hadith concerning dress and seclusion? Do you find similar debates among Christians over applying certain biblical instructions today?

Departing Hymn: "Purer in Heart, O God"

Purer in heart, O God, help me to be;
may I devote my life wholly to Thee;
watch Thou my wayward feet,
guide me with counsel sweet;
purer in heart, help me to be.

Purer in heart, O God, help me to be;
teach me to do Thy will most lovingly;
be Thou my Friend and Guide,
let me with Thee abide;
purer in heart, help me to be.

Purer in heart, O God, help me to be;
until Thy holy face one day I see:
keep me from secret sin,
reign Thou my soul within;
purer in heart, help me to be.

Fannie E. Davison (1877)

† Adapted from a passage by *Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali* (1058-1128) translated by Kenneth Cragg in *Common Prayer*, 80.

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Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To explore the meaning and importance of the virtue of modesty in Islam.
2. To consider how Muslims derive specific instructions on modest dress and behavior from the Qur'an and the Hadith.
3. To discuss the attitude toward modesty in western culture.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Christianity and Islam (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. Locate the departing hymn "Purer in Heart, O God" in your church's hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

In response to the tense situation in the community after 9/11, our pastor Raymond Bailey invited several Muslims to share the church's Wednesday evening fellowship supper. The president and two members of the local mosque made short presentations after the meal and answered our questions. As I studied the visitors, I was struck by the fact that while the two men wore western suits, the woman wore a beautiful, traditional *jilbab* — a long, flowing gown covering all her body except her hands and face.

"Does she really wear a gown every day in hot, muggy Waco," I was thinking, "or is she just trying to educate our church?" Finally a lady in the congregation popped the question, everyone's question, about the *jilbab* and I'll never forget the answer.

The woman was a lawyer and, yes, for religious reasons of modesty, this was her customary dress. "In my line of work," she continued with a genuine smile, "the *jilbab* is liberating. Judges, opposing lawyers, and juries take me more seriously. I find that it helps them to get past my gender and deal with me as a person."

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading aloud the responsive prayer in the study guide (the leader begins and the group responds with the line in bold print).

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Ephesians 4:17-24 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Providing an overview of Muslim dress codes and manners related to sexual modesty, Evelyne Reisacher says this virtue is central to Islam precisely because modesty is about much more than how we dress. Even as members deepen their appreciation for the Muslim concern for sexual modesty, they may want to explore (1) the neglect of the virtue of modesty in our culture, and (2) how we should apply biblical instructions and stories about modesty. They may discover in our common concern for sexual modesty, a fruitful new avenue for dialogue with Muslims.

Study Questions

1. The virtue of modesty in Islam speaks to sexual purity. It shapes the way people see their bodies, guides interactions between men and women, and underlies a right relationship with God. Despite the various ways that Muslims have interpreted the instructions and stories of the Qur'an and the Hadith concerning modesty, Reisacher notes a common desire for men and women to honor God, respect one another's bodies, and preserve the erotic for personal commitment and marriage.
2. The virtue of sexual modesty – the recognition and concern for propriety in dress, speech, and conduct – is a habitual attitude, a way of thinking and feeling about our bodies and our interactions with others. Some members might argue that modesty is based in human beings' natural and universal desires for privacy and for real sexual giving and intimacy. Wendy Shalit's *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue*, for example, says the rules of modesty allows people to control access to their bodies, preserve the beauty of romantic encounters, and channel sexual love into committed relationships.

Within the Abrahamic religions, sexual modesty also has religious roots. It is a way of putting first things first by honoring the holy God who dwells with us and by valuing the development of one's inner self – "the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God" (1 Peter 3:4).

Sexual modesty is a controversial virtue in western culture, where some suspect it unnecessarily restricts personal taste in clothing and relationships, suppresses sexual desire in unhealthy way, and represses women with a sexual double standard. Of course, modesty does set limits on behavior and judges desires, which may seem to some like a loss of freedom. Yet we might turn this suspicious attitude around and ask, "Has licensing immodest behavior brought onerous sexual expectations rather than freedom, more confusion about our bodies rather than recognition of what is truly valuable in the other, and less rather than more commitment to maintaining meaningful relationships?"

3. The virtue of modesty is universally concerned with such things as how our bodies are presented to others, our privacy is preserved, and our sexuality is properly expressed and not abused. Cultures differ on specific dress codes, expectations about privacy, guidelines for sexual flirtation, and decorum in relationships between women and men. Encourage members to share their experiences with the rules of modesty in different cultures of the world. If the rules of modesty vary from culture to culture, does this mean that the concerns expressed in the virtue of modesty are unimportant, or that any cultural rule of modesty is as good as any other in exemplifying those concerns?
4. Modesty is more than a disposition to dress modestly; it includes habitually feeling the proper emotions and thinking in the right way about our bodies and relationships. Compare Jesus' instructions in the Sermon on the Mount to cultivate the proper motives *as well as* do the right actions: for instance, we should not merely avoid adulterous affairs or murderous actions, but stop thinking about others with lust or believing they are worthless fools.

Among the unworthy motives for modest dress and behavior are: (1) being intimidated by others and fearing their reprisal, (2) desiring to impress others by appearing to be "righteous," and (3) being overly concerned to please others. When people object to modesty, are they assuming the modest person has one of these unworthy motives?

5. Muslims disagree on (1) the meaning of specific terms, (2) whether Qur'anic instructions are culturally specific, and (3) whether stories about Muhammad's family apply to all believers. Christians have similar debates over biblical passages about women's dress and adornment, worship guidelines, restrictions on divorce, submission to political authority, etc.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.