

Beyond the Veil

BY EVELYNE A. REISACHER

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.

Even though for many non-Muslims the veil has become the characteristic symbol of modesty in Islam, the reality is more complex. In some places across the Muslim world women wear the veil but in other countries they do not. While Muslims may defend the veil or reject it, very few would argue against modesty. Modesty seems to be a much deeper value and the veil is only the tip of the iceberg.

As we explore the practice of modesty in Islam we immediately recognize a virtue that is at home in our own faith journey. Both Christianity and Islam have wrestled with this issue and come up with varying practices within their own context. By reviewing key Muslim texts to understand various facets of modesty throughout the Muslim world, we may discover new avenues for dialogue between Muslims and Christians on this issue.

THE CHARACTER OF ISLAM IS MODESTY

In a chapter on good manners (*al-Adab*), the traditionist Bukhari in the ninth century quotes the tradition that “The Prophet passed by a man who was admonishing his brother regarding [modesty] and was saying, ‘You are very shy, and I am afraid that might harm you.’” The prophet Muhammad replied: “Leave him, for modesty is (a part) of Faith.”¹ The eighth-century traditionist Malik includes a similar reference in his hadith collection, *Muwatta*, when he quotes the Prophet Muhammad saying, “Every

religion has an innate character. The character of Islam is modesty” (Muwatta, book 47, number 47.2.9).

In both passages, the Arabic term rendered by modesty is “haya.” This word is sometimes translated modesty, bashfulness, shyness, or shameful-ness. It has a positive meaning in Islam.

Other religious texts give us some insight into what “haya” means. The Qur’an says that when Moses came to the country of Madyan, one daughter of Shuaib “walked bashfully” toward him (Surah 28:23-28).² She is sometimes held up as an example of good manners for Muslim women to follow. In Bukhari it is said that the prophet was shy or more modest than a veiled virgin girl (book 8, chapter 77, section 6119).

The virtue of modesty informs the way Muslims dress, but also how they view life more generally, especially the relations between men and women. To take just one example, in the context of worship modesty requires that women wear a veil when they pray and that men dress properly. The Prophet Muhammad said: “Allah does not accept the prayer of a woman who has reached puberty unless she wears a veil” (Abu Dawud, book 2, number 0641). The Hadith indicate that in early Islam women were praying in rows behind men so that the latter would not see them in an indecent posture when they were bowing for prayer. This custom developed later into the practice of men and women praying separately in the mosque.

In Surah 24:30-31—often called the “modesty verses” because they talk about chastity, modesty in male and female interactions, and the female dress code—both men and women are asked to “guard their modesty.”³ This expression—literally “guarding or watching over one’s private parts”—means limiting sexual relations only to marriage.

Many practices of modest dress in Islam, which will be discussed below, are intended to create a private space for love and to protect marriage. Thus translators use “guard their modesty” to refer to a husband and wife’s chastity. The expression appears in several Qur’anic lists of the pivotal practices of Muslim believers who will be rewarded by God. For example, “guarding one’s modesty” is listed 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).

“Lowering the gaze” is another expression associated with sexual modesty. “Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them” (Surah 24:30). Women are also asked to “lower the gaze and guard their modesty” (Surah 24:31). The prophet Muhammad encouraged young people to get married because it helps “lower the gaze and guard the modesty” (Bukhari, book 7, chapter 62, section 4), and he warned believers, who would sit along the path in discussion with one another, to keep the eye

downward (Muslim, chapter 4, book 24, number 5293).⁴ In some parts of the Muslim world, men observe this practice literally and avoid gazing into women's eyes. In other places, believers interpret the expression more generally as a call to sexual purity.

The power of the gaze in enticing sexual attraction is acknowledged in most cultures. A well-known story of King David reminds us of its power: one night from the roof of his palace he saw Bathsheba bathing and he entered into an adulterous relationship with her (2 Samuel 11:2 ff.). "Everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart," Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount, and "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away" (Matthew 5:28-29a). And in Isaiah 3:16, God rebukes women for "glancing wantonly with their eyes" (or, as the New International Version translates the expression, "flirting with their eyes").

VEILS AND COVERINGS FOR WOMEN

The "modesty verses" include further requirements for women: "they should not display their *zeena* except what appears thereof" and they should not strike their feet "in order to draw attention to their hidden *zeena*" (Surah 24:31, italics added).

The word "zeena" has been interpreted in different ways over the years. For instance, one English translation of the Qur'an says "natural beauty and artificial ornament," but others translate "zeena" as the face, hands, or feet, which allows women to uncover these parts of their body and even more. "Zeena" also has been understood as beauty, make-up, jewelry, dress, and so on. This helps to explain why Muslim women wear various sorts of covering—it depends on the interpretation given of these key texts and a few others.

According to Surah 24:31, women may show their zeena to only a limited number of males, essentially close relatives and a few others who are outside the possibility of marriage. This explains why Muslim women dress differently at home rather than outside the house, where veiling is a rule. In regards to elderly women with no hope of marriage, they also must be modest and not make a wanton display of their zeena, but they can lay aside their outer garment (Surah 24:60).

This verse continues by saying women "should draw their veils over their bosoms." The kind of veil described here, a *khimar*, covers the chest and the neck. Some interpreters have suggested that pre-Islamic women did not cover the bosom, and it was considered immodest for Muslims to behave like that.

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. Thus one religious leader, discerning a specific

guideline about veiling, teaches that “The Qur’an only says that a woman must cover her head in a way that all hair is concealed,” while another commentator, Amina Wadud, writes, “The principle of modesty is important—not the veiling and seclusion which were manifestations particular to that context. These were culturally and economically determined demonstrations of modesty.”⁵ Both want to honor God, yet they interpret the texts differently.

Furthermore, different hadith may be used to support one practice over the other. Muslims who favor veiling may appeal to the tradition where the prophet Muhammad said “When a girl reaches the menstrual age, it is not proper that anything should remain exposed except this and this. He pointed to the face and hands” (Abu Dawud, book 32, number 4092). Those who are against veiling may appeal to other passages that show women did not wear the veil in early Islam or throughout Muslim history.

The Qur’an also instructs the wives and daughters of the prophet Muhammad, as well as female believers, 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. And God is Oft-Forgiving, most Merciful” (Surah 33:59). Here the “outer garment” is called *jilbab*, not *khimar*.

According to Muslim traditionists, God revealed this verse on the occasion that Umar bin Al-Khattab, who later became the second caliph, observed one of the Prophet’s wives at night “answering the call of nature” and told the prophet Muhammad to let his wives be veiled (Bukhari, book 8, chapter 6240, section 179). This passage suggests there was insecurity in the land and women were in danger of being molested, and that the veil was a symbol of being a respectable woman. Muslim women who advocate veiling and modest dress today often echo all of these themes.

Lest we dismiss as quaint these contemporary Muslim women’s effort to explore and appropriately adopt the practices of early believers, let’s not forget that a parallel conversation occurs in the Christian tradition about adornment and beauty. Wives in the early church were taught that “Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold

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jewelry and fine clothes. Instead it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit which is a great worth in God's sight," and were encouraged to adopt Sarah as their model, for "this is the way the holy women in the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful" (1 Peter 3:3-5a, NIV).⁶ Christians also struggle with how the Apostle Paul's request applies to their daily life: "I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God" (1 Timothy 2:9-10, NIV). Like Christian women, Muslim women may turn to religious texts in order to better understand the virtues that characterize them as believers.

SECLUSION BEHIND THE SCREEN

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. "Stay quietly in your houses, and make not a dazzling display, like that of the former times of ignorance," a Qur'anic verse says to the Prophet's wives, and then it directs others "When you ask for anything ye want, ask them [the wives of the Prophet] from before a screen [*hijab*]" (Surah 33:33, 53). Bukhari reports that the latter verse was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad as he hung a screen for privacy after his wedding guests had left his home (book 7, chapter 65, number 375).

The setting up of a screen is found in other contexts. For instance, in describing how Mary separated herself from her family in order to receive the angel's visit announcing the birth of Jesus, the Qur'anic passage says, "Mary placed a screen [*hijab*] from them and we sent to her our angel and he appeared as a man" (Surah 19:17).

Muslim religious texts also refer to *satr*—"concealment" or "coveredness"—a concept related to the privacy curtain (*sitr*) used in open apartments. Indeed, the rules for how and when a stranger enters a house in the early Muslim community stem from the fear of surprising someone who is not properly dressed.

Throughout the history of Islam there have been lively conversations about how to apply these passages. Some interpret the verses above, directed to the wives of the Prophet at the end of his life, as requirements for all female believers, and this leads to 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 economic demands, Muslims continue to reflect on these Qur'anic texts.

NAKEDNESS, SHAME, AND PURITY

Though the Qur'an prescribes women's dress more than men's, the Hadith offer detailed descriptions of how men should dress. Muhammad ordered men to cover their private parts (*awra*) with a garment when sit-

ting and gave further advice on dress code (Bukhari, book 8, chapter 42). Traditionally Muslims understand that the minimum covering required for men is from his navel to his knees.

The primary reasons for covering *awra*—which refers specifically to the genitals, and more generally to parts of the body that elicit sexual stimulation when they are viewed—are to avoid shame and prevent sexual corruption both in the person who is uncovered and others who observe. Muslims continue to debate the extent of the covering, of course, because what elicits sexual stimulation varies according to the context.

Likewise, the Bible contains rules concerning nakedness (Leviticus 18 and 20:10-21) and stories that warn about their violation. Ham is cursed for shamefully observing his father Noah's nakedness, while Shem and Japhet are blessed for covering their drunken father without taking advantage of him (Genesis 9:18-27). In the prophetic writings, flaunting their own nakedness is a powerful metaphor for the political and spiritual wantonness of the people of God, and intentionally exposing other nations' nakedness is a symbol for cruelly humiliating them (e.g., Ezekiel 23:17-21; Habakkuk 2:15-17). Indeed Ezekiel, struggling for language to show that God will permit the destruction of Jerusalem, shockingly describes God as stripping the idolatrous nation of Judah and exposing her nakedness to the invading Babylonians (16:36-37).⁷

Fortunately, a beautiful and contrary image—of God covering the people's nakedness like a lover tenderly protecting the beloved—is also in Ezekiel's repertoire (16:8), and this is the image that the writer of Revelation borrows to describe

God's gracious call for repentance to the wandering church of Laodicea (3:18-19). This loving response by God to human sin, of course, is the highlight of the first story of the Bible and the Qur'anic expansions of the account of Adam and Eve.

"They both ate of the tree, and so their nakedness appeared to them," according to one Qur'anic passage, and "they began to sew together, for their covering, leaves from the Garden" (Surah 20:121). After the first couple's sinful disobedience, says another passage, their shame "became manifest to them" (Surah 7:22).

The Qur'an says that raiment "came down" from God to "cover the shame" and "to be an adornment to them" (7:26). In the Bible, "The LORD

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God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them” (Genesis 3:21).

The Qur’an warns that the same thing can happen to the children of Adam: “Let not Satan seduce you, in the same manner as He got your parents out of the Garden, stripping them of their raiment to expose their shame for he and his tribe watch you from a position where ye cannot see them” (Surah 7:27).

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

CONCLUSION

Modesty is an important part of Islam, and our discussion suggests it can open many avenues for exchange between Christians and Muslims. Modesty defines our dress-code, shapes interactions between men and women, and influences the way we see our bodies. On all

these themes, we may explore commonalities and differences.

We may explore with Muslim friends the variety of dress codes in their communities, and discuss the limits to what Christians should wear. For example, missionaries who encountered societies in the past where nakedness was not a moral issue sometimes believed they needed to impose clothing requirements. Currently we are debating in our churches the immodest presentation of the body in popular culture.

We may explore with Muslim friends how we should read and apply Scripture. What is universal in our dress codes and how we understand the virtue of modesty, and what is culturally specific? I remember a conversation with a Muslim woman who was wearing the veil. She told me that were she to discard her veil, she would be very afraid of displeasing not her husband, or father, or any man—but of displeasing God.

How should modesty be integrated into our codes of law? Every society makes some rules about what parts of the body should be covered when in public. Walking naked in the street, for example, is not permitted in the United States. Some Muslim countries require veiling for women when they are in public. To what degree should law codes be based on specific interpretations of religious texts which then become standard for the whole population?

Many conversations between Muslims and Christians stop after they disagree about the veil. However, we have seen that 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.

Islam reminds us that modesty is more than a dress code; it is a way of life. Wearing the veil does not require having modest attitudes. 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. Even when covered from head to toe, we may do shameful actions. That makes it even more important to reflect with Muslims on modesty beyond the veil.

NOTES

1 Bukhari, book 8, chapter 73, section 139 (further citations from this and other collections of Hadith will be in the text). A traditionist (Muhaddith) is an honored scholar of the Hadith, which are stories about the sayings and religious practices of the prophet Muhammad. The nine-volume *Sahih Al-Bukhari* is the most respected collection of the Hadith. For English translations of the hadith referenced in this article, see www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/fundamentals/hadithsunnah.

2 For the most part, I rely on Yusuf Ali's translation of the Qur'an. Three English translations by Yusuf Ali, Pickthal, and Shakir, may be searched and compared online at www.al-islam.org/quran.

3 Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 92.

4 "In order for you not to stare at women," explains the translator of the English text.

5 Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 10. Reinhold Loeffler quotes the first religious leader in *Islam in Practice: Religious Beliefs in a Persian Village* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), 27.

6 Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

7 Ezekiel's violent description is an expansion of Hosea 2:3, an earlier pronouncement against the northern kingdom of Israel concerning its destruction by Assyria.



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