

## 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 dog-chewed 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 two verses cover 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,  
the sons of their brothers, the sons of their sisters,  
other women, the male servants or employees  
whose sexual drive has been nullified,  
or the children who have not reached puberty.*

*They shall not strike their feet when they walk  
in order to shake and reveal  
certain details of their bodies.*

*All of you shall repent to God,  
O you believers, that you may succeed.*

*(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 cul-

tural 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.  
God is Hearer, Knower.  
(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. It seems 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.

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 long 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.  
God is Forgiver, Most Merciful.  
(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.  
And God is Oft-Forgiving,  
Most Merciful.  
(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.

