

The Veil Unveiled

Ben Adam

The Islamic veil or *hijab* refers to the loose-fitting, plain and opaque outer garments which cover a Muslim woman's body. While basically identical to the clothing depicted in traditional Christian representations of Mary (may God praise her and her son), and every nun who has sought to emulate her since, the *hijab* is readily singled out as sign of extremism, the supposedly inferior status of Muslim women.

What follows is a brief look at the status of women in Islam though comparing the role of the veil in both Islam and Christianity.

In what would form part of a "New Testament", St. Paul obligated the then common practice of the veil for all women:

"And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head - it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or shaved off, she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. For this reason, and because of the angels, woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head." (1 Corinthians 11:4-10)

St. Tertullian (the first man to formulate the Trinity), in his treatise, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, even obliged its use at home: "Young women, you wear your veils out on the streets, so you should wear them in the church; you wear them when you are among strangers, then wear them among your brothers."

So Islam didn't invent the veil, it merely endorsed it. However, while Paul presented the veil as a sign of man's authority, Islam clarifies that it is simply a sign of faith, modesty and chastity which serves to protect the devout from molestation.

"O Prophet! Tell your wives and daughters and the believing women that they should cast their cloaks over their bodies (when outdoors) so that they be recognised as such (decent, chaste believers) and not molested..." (Surah Al-Ahzab: 59)

In truth, the Muslim's veil is but one facet of her noble status - a status due in part to the tremendous responsibility that is placed upon her.

Simply put, woman is the initial teacher in the building of a righteous society. This is why from the most important individual obligations upon a person is to show gratitude, kindness and good companionship to their mother.

Love, Compassion

Women and men are different and marriage is the means by which both sexes can fulfill their different but complementary and mutually beneficial roles.



Palestinian judge Asmah Al-Wehidi (right) works at her desk at the Islamic Court in the West Bank city of Hebron. Picture: Reuters

"...They (your wives, O men) are a garment for you and you (men) are a garment for them..." (Surah al-Baqarah: 187)

Scholar and former nun Karen Armstrong writes, "Muhammad certainly did not think that women were sexually disgusting. When his wife had her period he used to make a point of reclining in her lap, of taking his prayer mat from her hand, saying for the benefit of his disciples, 'Your menstruation is not in your hand.' He would drink from the same cup, saying, 'Your menstruation is not on your lips' ... The harsh sexual punishments meted out to sexual offenders in some Islamic countries is because sexuality is valued and the ideal has been debased, not, as in the past in the West, because sexuality is abhor-

rent." (*The Gospel According to Woman*, 1986:2)

Imperialist Purge

Many of the resurgent pre-Islamic cultural practices that have tragically come to be associated with Islam, such as forced marriages, female genital mutilation, bridal (as opposed to groom-paid) dowries, honor killings and the criminalization of rape victims, only resurfaced following the disruption caused by colonialism and the resulting disconnect between the common Muslims and their sources of knowledge.

It is always the learned scholars of Islam, men and women, who are the first victims of an imperialist purge. Nevertheless, in light of the Quran and Sunnah, the veil of misinformation cloaking the true status

of women in Islam is easily removed. Moreover, Islam continues to grow faster than any other way of life with women, accounting for some 75 per cent of all European and American converts - ironic, given the widespread Western prejudice that 'Islam oppresses women!'

Today, many nuns and devout women of the Orthodox, Catholic, Near Eastern and African churches still wear the Christian veil. The Muslim woman too wears her *hijab*, declaring her faith in humility and servitude before God. Only those given divine sanction - her immediate family and other believing women - may view her bodily beauty. In effect, she is saying: 'Judge me for my faith, not my body - I give you no other choice.'

Religion of Islam

Scholars

As-Syafi'i's Legendary Works

The best known works of Asy-Syafi'i have been mentioned already. The first is *Al-Risalah*, which establishes a specialised branch of Islamic studies.

That is the one known as *Usul al-Fiqh*, or the methodology of Islamic law. The second is *Al-Umm*, in which he records his legal views on all questions. This is the book he continued to revise until his death.

Al-Risalah continued to receive much attention by scholars and it has been published many times with annotation. It is a middle-sized volume of great importance.

Al-Umm, which embodies the bulk of Asy-Syafi'i Fiqh has been published, but has not received the editing attention it deserves.

Recently, most of Asy-Syafi'i's books have been published together under the title, *Asy-Syafi'i's Encyclopaedia*, bringing 10 books together, in 10 large volumes. However, the work still needs more detailed editing and annotating attention.

The Syafi'i school of thought is distinguished by its richness in scholarly views, which made it easy to develop and enrich. Later scholars continued the process.

Over the many generations since Asy-Syafi'i, numerous distinguished scholars contributed to its scholarship, placing it at the same level as the Hanafi and Maliki schools of thought.

Today, it commands much following in Iraq, Syria and Jordan, although it remains second to the Hanafi school in these countries.

It is predominant in Egypt, and it has countless followers in Yemen and Persia, while it is followed by most people in Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Indonesia. It has practically no following in North African countries.

Asy-Syafi'i was a great scholar whose contribution to Islamic knowledge remains considerable, despite the passage of more than 1200 years since his death. May God bless his soul.

Adil Salahi/IMPACT

Islampaedia

The All-Seeing

"Have they not looked at the birds above them, with wings outspread and folded back? Nothing holds them up but the All-Merciful. He is the All-Seeing." (translation of Allah's Words in Al-Quran surah al-Mulk: 19)

Our human faculty of sight is limited. With the naked eye, we can see for only a few kilometers. But to achieve this, we need clear weather and to be standing on a high place. Yet no matter how convenient the conditions may be, we can see only a hazy image.

In some situations, and especially when people are alone, they assume that nobody sees them. Assuming that they will not have to account for their deeds, they feel encouraged to do whatever they wish.

Furthermore, they think they will never suffer any consequence for their wrongdoing. But this is a great delusion, for Allah sees even the smallest act.

While our eyesight is limited, Allah sees the room in which a person remains, the rooms surrounding that room, the entire house, the city and country that harbor that house, the continent in which that country is located, the entire Earth, all planets, space, and all other dimensions beyond it. In the Qur'an, Allah informs us that He is aware of everything:

"You do not engage in any matter, recite any of the Quran, or do any action without Our witnessing you while you are occupied with it. Not even the smallest speck eludes your Lord, either on Earth or in Heaven. Nor is there anything smaller than that, or larger, which is not in a Clear Book." (surah Yunus: 61) Harun Yahya