The Notion of Modesty in Muslim Women's Clothing: An Islamic Point of View

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Discussion Paper—An Insider's View

The Notion of Modesty in Muslim Women's Clothing: An Islamic Point of View

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This essay looks at the religious reasons for the wearing of clothing that conforms to the guidelines provided in the Islamic teachings. It discusses the inner character of Islam and explains how all permissible Muslim behaviour flows from the basic concept *hay'a*, or modesty. The explanation of these ideas in English-language writing is discussed; and also how some misunderstandings and misrepresentations result. The purpose of this work is to make clear the religious reasons Muslims, especially women, choose the form of dress they do, wherever they reside—even in New Zealand.

Is Islam just a religion? Is it scientific, in that it consists of many terms that are technical and explicitly defined and that often suffer through poor translation from one language to another? Is it a way of life (*din*), in that it teaches a complete, holistic and comprehensive way of life, and a Muslim's primary duty is to learn the *din*, and act on what is learnt?[2]

Wherever an adherent Muslim is, he or she will refer to the Islamic sources of guidance, the Qur'an, Sunnah (the recorded sayings and behaviour of the Prophet Muhammad)[3], and scholarly rulings[4] and act in accordance with them as much as possible. However, some knowledge of the concepts central to Islam would answer many questions other New Zealanders may

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[2] In fact a Muslim may be defined as a follower of Islamic *din*. When in quotes it may be spelt *deen*.
[3] The oral tradition of the Prophet scientifically recorded is called *hadith* (pl. *ahadith*).
[4] Called *quiyas* and *ijmah* in Arabic, they are two different kinds of scholarly rulings for things that were not ruled on at the time of the Prophet, such as invitro fertilisation and smoking. The former uses analogy to make a ruling, and the latter scholarly consensus.

have about Muslim manners, clothing and behaviour. Perhaps the most central of these concepts is *hay'a*.

Physical Modesty

The concept of modesty is addressed in Islamic teachings from many angles. In physical terms, modesty is connected with the *awra'*, an Arabic term meaning 'inviolate vulnerability' (El Guindi 1999:142), or 'what must be covered' and consisting of the private body parts of a human being. For men, the *awra'* is from the navel to the knee (or mid-thigh in some rulings) (Al-Qaradawi 1995:154). For women, the *awra'* is more extensive and a more complicated matter entirely. A woman's *awra'*, with respect to men outside her *mahrem* (family members and those forever ineligible for marriage to her) and non-Muslim women, consists of her entire body, with the exception of her face and hands. There are twelve categories of *mahrem* and these people may see a woman's 'hair, ears, neck, upper part of the chest, arms and legs. Other parts of her body, such as the back, abdomen, thighs and two private parts, are not to be exposed before anyone, man or woman, excepting her husband' (Al-Qaradawi 1995:160). Some scholars have also ruled that a woman's *awra'*, with respect to other Muslim women, is 'the area between her navel and knee' (Al-Qaradawi 1995:160).

We may consider the areas of *awra'* as 'navel to knee' for men, and 'women's whole bodies excepting her face and hands' (Al-Qaradawi 1995:154). In practical terms, this means that these areas of the body are not to be shown to anyone except the spouse (or, if necessary, a doctor) and, in the case of women, it refers to what she must cover when in public—not when she is at home or with her family members in a private area. (The definition of 'public' from an Islamic viewpoint will be considered later.)

As a result of the *awra'* concept, Muslims are very physically modest, and many *ahadith* relate to situations where modesty should be observed:

> The Messenger of Allah[5] saw a man washing in a public place without a lower garment. So he mounted the pulpit, praised and extolled Allah and said: Allah is characterised by modesty and concealment. So when any of you washes, he should conceal himself. (Sunan of Abu-Dawood 4001)[6]

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[5] In the original text this reference to the Prohet Muhammad is followed by the honorific formula 'Peace and Blessing of Allah upon him'.

[6] All *ahadith* quoted in this work are referenced from *The Alim* CD-ROM unless otherwise specified.

Marriage as an act of Modesty

Marriage is encouraged in Islam, and marriage is seen as the 'completion' of every human being as well as an act that protects modesty. 'In general Muslims regard marriage as an essential of life . . .. The family, whether the extended or the nuclear family, is considered to be the main institution of society' (Roald 2001:213). 'Marriage is worship by which man completes half of his *deen*' (Sabiq 1998 Vol. 2:8). Two *ahadith* relating to this are:

> Whoever Allah blesses with a righteous woman then He has assisted him with half of his *deen*, then let him fear Allah with regard to the other half. (Sabiq 1998 Vol. 2:8)[7]

> O young people! Whoever among you can marry, should marry, because it helps him lower his gaze and guard his modesty, and whoever is not able to marry, should fast, as fasting diminishes his sexual power. (Sahih Al-Bukhari 7.4)

In Islamic teaching, the only permissible (*halal*) intimate physical contact between a man and a woman occurs within marriage. Any other intimate contact is forbidden (*haram*). Obviously, legal marriage comes with responsibilities and rights for both parties, and these are also clearly addressed in the teaching.

Haya' as a Form of Faith

Modesty is also considered an important part of faith. As it says in these *ahadith*:

> Faith consists of more than 60 branches. And *haya* is a part of faith. (Al-Bukhari 1.8)

> Avoid being naked, for with you are those who never leave you . . .; so observe modesty before them and honour them. (Al-Tirmidhi 3115)

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[7] Additional translations by Zakaria Boulanouar.

The reference to 'those who never leave you' may seem odd but, as the religious writer Karen Armstrong notes, Muslims have a very pervasive 'God-consciousness', which makes them ever aware of the 'unseen' and the omnipresence of Allah. This focus on Allah and, as a consequence, the afterlife, makes for a very different way of looking at the world from that most common in Western societies (Armstrong 1993:4).

Speech, Thought and Action

Humility and a lack of verbosity are other forms of modesty and are highly valued as these four *ahadith* illustrate:

> Modesty and inability to speak are two branches of faith but obscenity and eloquence are two branches of hypocrisy. (Al-Tirmidhi 4796)

> Modesty is part of faith and faith is in Paradise, but obscenity is a part of hardness of heart and hardness of heart is in Hell. (Al-Tirmidhi 5077)

> Indecency disfigures everything and modesty (*haya*) enhances the charm of everything. (Al-Tirmidhi 1741)

> Coarse talk does not come into anything without disgracing it and modesty does not come into anything without adorning it. (Al-Tirmidhi 4854)

For these reasons, such acts as swearing, lewd speech or connotation, showing off, watching intimate acts on television or in movies or performing them in public and the like are contrary to Islamic teaching.

Obviously protecting one's modesty requires knowing what that means in Islam and then taking self-disciplinary steps to do so:

> An Islamic principle is that if something is prohibited, anything which leads to it is likewise prohibited. By this it means Islam intends to block all avenues to what is *haram* (prohibited). For example, as Islam has prohibited sex outside marriage, it has also prohibited anything which leads to it or makes it attractive, such as seductive clothing, private meetings and casual mixing between men and women, the depiction of nudity, pornographic literature, obscene songs and so on. (Al-Qaradawi 1995:28)

Similarly, it is the reason Muslim men or women observe gender boundaries, and will not accept that kindly offered ride home on a rainy evening (or offer one) if those involved are not *mahram* (ineligible for marriage to each other); and will not exchange a handshake or hug, even with someone they like very much, if it crosses a gender boundary. It is also the reason for the lack of physical affection shown between Muslim spouses in public. Affection is a private matter, and one of *haya'*. Modesty is so central to Islam that the Prophet (PBUH) said:

> Every *deen* [way of life] has an innate character.
> The character of Islam is modesty. (Al-Muwatta 47.9)

Islamic Clothing

As Islam is a *din* and modesty is central to it, modesty in clothing is an obvious component. The discussion on clothing presented here focuses mainly on women's clothing, and women's clothing in the public sphere (i.e., clothing that is worn in the company of strangers, non-*mahrem*). This means that the public sphere is defined here as 'in the company of strangers' rather than 'outside the home', although often these two situations coincide. Therefore, the definitions of 'public space' and 'private space' in Islam differ from those in a Western paradigm (Tavris 1992:17; El Guindi 1999:82).

There exist several requirements and prohibitions concerning clothing in Islamic teachings. Fundamentally, the *awra'* must be covered, but the method or style of coverage varies greatly from country to country and person to person:

> Islam permits, in fact requires, that the Muslim be careful about his appearance, dress decently, maintain his dignity and enjoy what Allah has created for the purpose of clothing and adornment. From the Islamic point of view, clothing has two purposes: to cover the body and to beautify the appearance . . . Islam has made it obligatory on Muslims to cover their private parts . . . cleanliness is the essence of good appearance and the beauty of every adornment . . .. Beautification and elegance are not merely permitted but are required by Islam, and in general it repudiates any attempts to prohibit them:

> 'Say: Who has forbidden the adornment of Allah which He has brought forth for His servants, and the good things of His providing' (*surat*[8] Al Araf, The Heights, #7, *ayat* 32).

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[8]A *surat* is a 'Chapter' and an *ayat* is a 'Verse'.

> . . . Islam makes it *haram* (prohibited) for women to wear clothes that fail to cover the body and which are transparent, revealing what is underneath. It is likewise *haram* to wear tightly fitting clothes which delineate the parts of the body, especially those parts which are sexually attractive . . .. The general rule for the enjoyment of the good things of life, such as food, drink and clothing, is that their use should be without extravagance or pride. (Al-Qaradawi 1995:79-87)

To this list a prohibition on perfuming the clothing may be added (see also Al-Albani 1994:37).

The standard components of Islamic clothing requirements for women are a head covering and loose-fitting, non-transparent clothing that covers the whole body, maybe with the exception of the hands and face. How these requirements are satisfied depends on the culture of the woman, and personal likes and dislikes. Typically in Egypt, for example, Muslim 'women wear full-length *gallabiyyas* (*jilbab* in standard Arabic), loose-fitting to conceal body contours, in solid austere colours made out of opaque fabric' (El Guindi 1999:143).

Traditional clothing for Muslim women in Malaysia is the *Baju Kurong*—'a Malay dress with long skirt, long sleeves and tight neck . . . and to cover one's head with a scarf or a small headdress, the *mini-telekung*' (Lie 2000:33), or to wear 'loose-fitting long tunics over *sarongs*' (Ong 1990:261).

In Morocco it is the *jellaba*—'a long-sleeved, floor-length garment which also has a hood' (Davis 1987:26), although in recent times the *jellaba* can also be hoodless. It is similar in style for both sexes, with material and detail (embroidery etc.) providing differentiating characteristics: 'women cover their bodies when they go out. They wear either a *jellaba* (long robe) and veil, or a *haik*, a large piece of fabric which they wrap around themselves so just their hands, feet and eyes remain visible' (Davis 1983:61, in El Guindi 1999:61):

> The *haik* is a variation on the wrap worn in certain traditional circles by women (from all racial groups) in rural and urban areas of the Middle East. In that sense, it is both an ethnic and a gender marker. The hooded *jellaba* . . . on the other hand, is worn by both sexes and is similar in appearance. As a clothing item it is dual-gendered, bringing out the nuanced variability of clothing as used by men and women. (El Guindi 1999:61; cf. Stillman 2000)

Head Covering in Islam

One of the most visible, and controversial, aspects of Islam in a Western context is the clothing code—particularly the headscarf. There are a number of reasons for this. Some are based on misunderstanding, some on politics and some just on the incongruity of the Islamic and current Western dress codes. The requirements for clothing are clearly enunciated in Islam and clothing is mentioned many times in the Qur'an. Clothing is mentioned in many contexts, including suitable clothing for men, women and the elderly; rights and obligations in terms of the provision of clothing; metaphorical uses of clothing terms to describe situations; and the correct clothing in which to conduct the *hajj*. Islam's other guidelines—the *Sunnah* and the rulings of the scholars—also refer extensively to clothing.

In a recent meeting on this topic, the well-known Moroccan Islamic scholar, Professor Mustafa Benhamza, dismissed direct Qur'anic referencing without adequate explanation or understanding. He said that the requirement for men and women to cover, and for women to cover their heads, is noted throughout Islamic literature and is a universally held view among those who are qualified in Islamic scholarship.[9] Roald also makes the point: 'Among Islamic scholars there is a consensus with regard to female covering but there is no consensus for the actual form of the covering' (Roald 2001:271). The few very direct references in the Qur'an that are frequently cited by others will also be discussed here.

Qur'anic References to Women's Clothing

The word *hijab* is used several times in the Qur'an, but only once does it refer to women's clothing. The two items of clothing mentioned for women are *khimar* (the head-veil) and *jilbab* (a long gown), which had not been newly introduced by Islam but were most likely already part of the wardrobe of the time (El Guindi 1999:139).

Surat Al Nur (Qur'an 24:1) opens with the verse:

> [This is] a chapter which We have revealed and made obligatory and in which We have revealed clear communications that you may be mindful.[10]

This *ayat* is understood to be referring to the content of the whole *surah*, which deals with the conduct of Muslims, especially that between men and

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[9] Professor Benhamza was interviewed in April and May 2005 in Oujda, Morocco.
[10] The meaning used here is that of Mohammed Shakir 1999.

women, that is obligatory (*fard*). The explanation (*tafsir*) of this verse is given below. Within Surat Al Nur is an often quoted Qur'anic verse (meaning in translation[11] below), which specifically refers to the Islamic dress code for Muslims:

> Say to the believing men that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts; that is purer for them; surely Allah is Aware of what they do. (Qur'an 24:30)
>
> And say to the believing women that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts and do not display their ornaments except what appears thereof, and let them wear their head-coverings over their bosoms, and not display their ornaments except to their husbands or their fathers, or the fathers of their husbands, or their sons, or the sons of their husbands, or their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women . . . and let them not strike their feet so that what they hide of their ornaments may be known; and turn to Allah all of you, O believers! so that you may be successful. (Qur'an 24:31)

Another direct mention of suitable dress occurs in Surat Al Ahzab:

> O Prophet! say to your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers that they let down upon them their over-garments; this will be more proper, that they may be known, and thus they will not be given trouble; and Allah is Forgiving, Merciful. (Qur'an 33:59)

The Qur'an is a difficult book to understand—especially when it is in translation—but also, in its original Arabic, for modern-day native speakers. The Islamic tradition does not allow for individual interpretation of the Qur'an, and so any reference to it by someone who is not a fully trained and qualified Islamic scholar should be accompanied by a *tafsir* (explanation):

> The Prophet said:
> If anyone interprets the Book of Allah in the light of his opinion even if he is right, he has erred. (Abu-Dawood, 3644)

Keeping this in mind, a well-regarded *tafsir* by the renowned Egyptian scholar Mohammed Ash-Sharawy shall be provided here for the verses above. The word *surat*, which is translated as 'chapter' in terms of Surat Al

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[11] Please note that the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic, and so any translation is a translation of the *meaning*, thus not the Qur'an itself.

Nur (meaning the chapter of light), also means 'boundary' or 'perimeter'. So, '[t]his is a *surat*/chapter which We have revealed and made obligatory' (Qur'an 24:1) actually means that the whole *surat* or chapter is obligatory, and the contents of the chapter are bounded—from beginning to end what is contained within the chapter is obligatory. This is the only *surat* in the Qur'an that begins this way, and it is universally agreed by the scholars that what is contained within the parameters of this *surat* is obligatory.

Verses 30 and 31 of this *surat* deal with modesty: verse 30 is directed at men and 31 at women. Here the believing women are told to 'cast down their looks' or lower their gaze—which is just what men are told to do in Verse 30. Interestingly, in Arabic idiomatic usage the image means to avoid something in your field of vision—a part of the whole of what you can see—rather than to stare at the ground as if ashamed or chastened. The head covering should be fastened and opaque and should cover the whole chest area. The verse addresses all believing women; the explanation is that *khimar*—translated here as head covering—means any cover that meets the requirements of 'fastened, loose, large and covering the head, neck and chest'. The *surat* recognises that beauty is inherent in women and that the selective exposure of it is desirable. Similarly, what is worn under the covering should not be 'exposed' by way of sound (such as jewellery with bells, etc.) or any other mode.

Concerning Surat Al Ahzab (Qur'an 33:59), the command is oriented first to the wives, then the daughters of the Prophet (PBUH), and then to the other female believers. This means that he does not command his nation in anything that excludes himself. The inclusion of the word 'say' proves that the command is from Allah and not from the Prophet (PBUH), because it is an unnecessary word if the Prophet just needs to convey this information to his family himself. This reinforces that the Prophet (PBUH) is no more than the messenger; he is not the issuer of the command, just the transmitter of commands from Allah. The family of the Prophet consists of all Muslims, so the command extends to all Muslims. The word used for women here is *nisa'*, which is a plural form; and there is no singular form from its root. The root of *nisa'* is *annasi'*, which means 'delayed', and refers to the creation of Hawa (Eve) coming after that of Adam.

'Let down upon them their over-garments' is an example of the jussive mood (which is a feature of the Arabic language), and is a command for the second person (i.e., the wives, daughters and believing women). So, the first person command was 'say' (direct to the Messenger) and the command for the second group was 'let down . . .'. The second part of this is a response to the first (see, for another example of this, Surat Al Hajj) (Qur'an 22:27). The wives, daughters and other Muslim women have been commanded to cover; if they do not, a condition of *iman* (faith) within them becomes imperfect or deficient. The root of the words 'let down upon them their over-garments' is

dannia', which means 'low and near'. So, this section means that women's clothing should be near the ground. And *aleihin* (upon them (female)) means that it includes the whole body, and that it is wrapped around (the body), dropping to the ground (Al-Sabooney 2002:461-462). The 'over-garment' (*jilbab*) must be long and covering, and should fulfil the clothing requirements (non-transparent, loose etc.). The last part of the verse explains the wisdom behind the command: Muslim women will be known by their clothing and their modesty (Ash-Sharawy 1991:12160-12168).

Muslims in Majority Muslim Lands

Muslims wearing Islamic clothing are 'in context' in majority Muslim lands—there is no distortion in terms of the basic communicated meaning; the 'meaning' sent by the clothing is understood by both the 'sender' (wearer) and the 'receiver' (viewer) (Belch and Belch 2004:139).

In a series of interviews I conducted recently in Morocco as part of my fieldwork, the basic question 'why do you cover your head?' was included in a schedule of questions for women who do so. The first and most common response was that it is *fard* (see also Roald 2001:294; Azzam 1996:226). This is an Arabic term which best translates as 'obligatory' (required by Allah). A similar sentiment expressed in response to this question, usually along with the response *fard*, was that of *takwa*.

The term *takwa* is often translated into English as 'fear of Allah'. However, an 'angry God' is not how *takwa* is understood in a Muslim context. First, Allah does not have human characteristics and so does not get angry or feel anger as a human does. Secondly, *takwa* has a double meaning, because *takwa* has two roots—one can be translated as 'safeguard' (*it-tiqa'*) and one as 'power' (*quwwa*). So, the summary of the *din* from Adam until the last Prophet is 'do this and do not do that'. Take positive actions and don't take negative actions; so, as there is a negative and a positive, we take from the positive what is beneficial (power) and we push away the harmful negative (safeguard). It means that you fear what Allah has forbidden, and you need to push away the harm, and also to attract the good. This is consistent with the Islamic understanding that Allah, who is without human characteristics and is genderless, does not favour one gender over another, and gives the guidance he does as practices to be followed which are 'better for you and for them'.[12] Therefore, wearing Islamic clothing—defined as clothing which meets the standards set out in the texts and rulings—i.e.,

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[12] This concept refers to the Islamic idea that all people have a limit as to what they can bear, but that people also have a responsibility to each other. So, the Islamic *adab* (etiquette or manners) is a guide for the benefit of every individual member of the society and also for the benefit of the whole.

loose, covering, non-transparent, subdued, clean, neat and tidy—is an act of worship and submission to Allah (Ash-Sharawy 1991: Vol. 4:1977-1978).

Misunderstandings Based on Translations

As mentioned earlier it is often difficult to obtain quality translations. Translations depend on the culture, knowledge and background of the person doing the translation (Roald 2001:128). For instance, *hijab* is not the Arabic word for 'veil'. 'It is not a recent term; but neither is it that old. It is a complex notion that has gradually developed a set of related meanings . . . the term had a well-defined meaning by the ninth century AD . . . [and] it had become part of the Arabian Arabic vocabulary in early Islam' (El Guindi 1999:152). Amongst Muslims it is the word commonly used for the head-covering Muslim women wear, although in some countries it is used to refer to a complete ensemble that conforms to Islamic clothing rules. Both Muslim men and women are encouraged to use coverings (women by adopting *hijab* and men by adopting a beard), both as a form of protection and modesty, and also as a clear sign that they are followers of Islam (Roald 2001:262):

> *Hijab* is derived from the root *h-j-b*; its verbal form *hajaba* translates as 'to veil, to seclude, to screen, to conceal, to form a separation, to mask'. *Hijab* translates as 'cover, wrap, curtain, veil, screen, partition'. The same word refers to amulets carried on one's person (particularly as a child) to protect against harm. Another derivative, *hajib*, means 'eyebrow' (protector of the eye) and was also the word used during the caliphal periods for the official who screened applicants who wished for audience with the caliph. The European term 'veil' (with its correlate 'seclusion'), therefore, fails to capture these nuances, and oversimplifies a complex phenomenon. (El Guindi 1999:157)

However, '[t]he Western word "veil" is "sexy" and marketable in the West. It thus tends to be overused, invariably out of or without context, in titles of books, articles, conferences, press, films and popular literature in a way disproportionate to the relative significance of the veil in Middle Eastern (Muslim) affairs, and irrespective of the quality of knowledge about the veil . . . the veil has come to replace the earlier obsession with "harems" and *hammams* (public baths). "Harems" and *hammams* then, and the "veil" now, evoke a public sexual energy that early Christianity, puritanist Western culture, and contemporary elements of fundamentalist Christianity have not been able to come to terms with, comprehend, or tolerate. In the West

harem/veil/polygamy evoke Islam and are synonymous with female weakness and oppression'. (El Guindi 1999:10; see also Roald 2001:254 and Stillman 2000)

El Guindi has 'harems' in quotation marks, because this is another very good example of mistranslation and misrepresentation. 'Harem' is a term which evolved from the Arabic *harim*, referring to the women's wing of the house, a private place 'off limits' to non-*mahrem* men (El Guindi 1999:25).

Misunderstandings Based on Paradigms Employed

The Qur'an states:

> Surely the men who submit and the women who submit, and the believing men and the believing women, and the obeying men and the obeying women, and the truthful men and the truthful women, and the patient men and the patient women, and the humble men and the humble women, and the almsgiving men and the almsgiving women, and the fasting men and the fasting women, and the men who guard their private parts and the women who guard, and the men who remember Allah much and the women who remember—Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and a mighty reward. (Qur'an 33:35)

This verse begins with describing *Islam* (those who submit) and is followed by *Iman* (those who have faith). It was revealed to illustrate that the Qur'an addresses all Muslims, unless it specifies one gender or another (Sunan Al-Tirmidhi #3211 and Musnad of Iman Ahmad Vol. 6, #301305). Another important point to touch on in this *aya* is that all aspects are referred to for both men and women except for the reference to private parts. This personifies the dignity and respect accorded women and their privacy by the Qur'an. A further example here is the use of the word *lahum* (them, male—rather than them, male and female) in the last line above, which also offers women protection to honour them (Ash-Sharawy 1991:12029-12034).

Every address in the Qur'an that is directed to the believers concerns males as well as females, except when the ruling is of concern only to women (Ash-Sharawy 1991:2501). Clearly God does not separate spiritual worth into classifications of gender, but:

> What we so often forget is that God has honoured women by giving them value in relation to God—not in relation to men. But as Western feminism erases God from the scene, there is no standard left but men. As a result, the Western feminist is forced to find her value in relation to a man. And in so doing, she has accepted a faulty assumption. She

has accepted that man is the standard, and thus a woman can never be a full human being until she becomes just like a man—the standard . . .. And yet even when God honours us with something uniquely feminine, we are too busy trying to find our worth in reference to men, to value it or even notice it. (Mogahed 2005:4)

Many writings on Islam or Muslims are confused about or unaware of this. Some researchers have claimed that because Muslim feminists such as Fatima Mernissi and Riffat Hassan have disputed the use of the veil as an Islamic custom, there is no Islamic consensus on female covering in Islam. 'I strongly refute this allegation as in Islamic law there are certain criteria (concerning education and proficiency in Islamic knowledge) with regards to being an Islamic scholar, which obviously the Muslim feminists in question do not fulfil' (Roald 2001:313).

Two very prominent writers in English are the Moroccan Fatima Mernissi and the Egyptian Leila Ahmad. Ahmad claims head-covering regulates only the wives of the Prophet, and Mernissi that it is not required at all (Roald 2001:256). Woodlock agrees, stating:

Both Mernissi and Ahmed took historical approaches to the issue of women's equality in Islam that relied heavily on Western feminist inspired readings (in particular for Mernissi) and orientalist scholarship (in particular, for Ahmed). For example . . . Mernissi's thesis is one directly influenced by Western colonial and feminist scholarship: that *hijab* is oppressive to women and an obstacle to their freedom. Thus for Mernissi it becomes vital to explain away *hijab* as a failure of the Prophet's egalitarian vision . . .. Both unconsciously reflect the Western notion of the division and superiority of public space over private and link the former with men, the latter with women. The natural extension of this dichotomy is that it becomes necessary for women to compete with men over control of public space (see also El Guindi 1999:81), rather than re-valuing diversity of spatial roles for both men and women and avoiding essentialising roles to gender. As such, they both miss the more subtle opportunities to interpret the Qur'an as demonstrating equity and equality of results rather than the mistaken notion that equality means for women to be equal to men, which still holds the male as normative (see Tarvis 1992:17). (Woodlock n.d.)

We return here to the linked linguistic point of privacy. In a Western context, private spaces are personal, individual or secret whereas public spaces are collective and open—private is home and public is out. In Arabic, the concept of privacy exists, but not in the same form:

> Privacy concerns two core spheres—women and the family. For both, privacy is sacred and carefully guarded. For women it is both a right and an exclusive privilege, and is reflected in dress, space, architecture and proxemic behaviour. Their economic and marital autonomous identity is not connected to domesticity. A woman is guardian of the sanctity that is fundamental to the community . . .. Arab privacy is about neither individualism nor seclusion. It is relational and public. (El Guidi 1999:82)

A Different Paradigm

Islam is not amenable to deconstruction or the isolation of its facets. This misrepresentation is one of perspective. When people are familiar with one way of doing something, they use what they know to examine things outside of their own experience. However, this often leads to incorrect attributions and complete misunderstandings. Common examples are 'political Islam' as a category apart from (holistic) 'Islam' and imagery associated with women. 'The emphasis on political Islamic thought in contemporary research on Muslims might also be attributable to the fact that religion in a Western context tends to be considered as belonging to the personal sphere, which might make it difficult for researchers reared in such a tradition to wholly grasp the idea of Islam as "a comprehensive system" (Roald, 1994)'. (Roald 2001:10)

> There is a tendency to:

> Ethnocentrically impose Christian constructs on Islamic understandings . . .. Both Islam and Christianity provide moral systems to restrain improper and disorderly behaviour that threatens the socio-moral order: Christianity chose the path of desexualising the worldly environment; Islam of regulating the social order while accepting its sexualised environment. (El Guindi 1999:31)

The Western dichotomous paradigm of thought (feminine versus masculine, material versus spiritual), which evolved from the Greeks (Nisbett 2004:154), involves 'the modernist opposition between subject and object' (Firat and Dholakia 2006:132), is very rigid and is also dominant in the English language. Applying these paradigms to every group studied has definite disadvantages at the very least and leads to extremely misleading 'understandings' at best. Throughout history this has been a problem with Orientalist scholarship on the 'occident' (Said 1978) and Western scholarship

on Islam (Ghannoushi 2005). Islamic teachings support a continuum rather than a dichotomy:

> The Islamic view of life differs from modern Western ideals not only in providing different answers but even more, in asking entirely different questions. Even many of those who regard themselves as genuine Muslims who wish to promote the cause of Islam, can only think in Western terms. The question of 'backward' versus 'progressive' or even 'primitive' versus 'civilised', is just as *irrelevant* to the Islamic view of life as the 'equality' of women or the right to absolute 'freedom' of thought and action. (Jameelah 1978:63)

Muslims in Minority Muslim Lands

Just as Muslims are 'in context' in some countries, they are 'out of context' in others—usually when they are in the minority. The 'communication' of the clothing message does suffer from distortion in these contexts. Often the 'message sent' by the wearer is not understood by the 'receiver'—or is understood to have a very different meaning from that intended (or sent) by the wearer. This emphasises issues of identity for minorities:

> For example, a Syrian Muslim woman living in an urban area in Syria would probably emphasise neither her nationality nor her religion. For the same woman to live in Britain, however, her 'Muslim-ness', her nationality, her class and probably her gender would be matters of concern, and she would identify herself in these terms. In Muslims' encounter with non-Muslims, Islam therefore tends to become the identity marker no matter what relation the person has to Islamic rules and regulations. As long as one is part of the mainstream culture or belongs to the majority in society there is no need for an urgent quest for identity, but in minority situations these matters tend to be contrasted with mainstream opinions or characteristics and are rendered problematic. (Roald 2001:14)

More personally for the individual:

> Identity can be divided into smaller components. It has as much to do with how one views oneself, i.e. one's self-definition, as it has to do with how one is perceived by others. In certain situations, self-definition might concur with others' perceptions. In minority/majority conflicts, however, others' perceptions tend to be expressed in stereotypical terms. Self-definitions also tend to change according to

circumstances. For an Arabic-speaking Muslim woman living in a Western European country, her self-awareness of being a Muslim would be pronounced in an environment of non-Muslims . . .. A Muslim immigrant woman would often stress her Muslim identity in her meeting with Western researchers. Sociologically speaking she is defined as a Muslim, and according to *sharia'* (Islamic law) she would be defined as a Muslim. (Roald 2001:16-17)

Translated into the context of clothing, the extreme visibility of Muslim women observing Islamic clothing requirements in a Western society becomes a very big identity issue—especially if the social reactions to her dress are hostile or negative:

As interaction between Muslims and the majority population in most of the West European countries seems to be limited, the apparent, i.e., the outstanding, characteristics of the other cultural group become those which are highlighted in comparison with one's own ideological stance. Apart from judging one's own group according to an ideal standard and judging outsider groups according to their actual practice or behaviour, individuals belonging both to the majority and the minority group tend to 'stereotype themselves as well as others in terms of their common attributes as group members' (Turner and Giles 1981:39). (Roald 2001:6)

Moreover, Roald observed that there is a tendency on both sides to perceive the other group in terms of what is most 'extreme' in relation to one's own stance or practice (Roald 2001:6). Roald goes further, using the work of Kenneth Ritzen to show that the members of the majority society who have contact with immigrants and 'transmit their impressions to the rest of society' are likely to be those, such as social workers, who work with people who have problems, and this, combined with the vested interests of the media (there not being much news value in harmony or homogeneity), can lead to a harsh misrepresentation of the minority group (Roald 2001:6).

This is especially true if symbols (such as the Islamic head-covering), which have a very specific meaning in Islam, are divested of their accepted contextual meanings and invested with other or foreign meanings usually by those who do not cover their heads. This brings us to the 'oppositional' paradigm. 'The veil' has various connotations in a Western context:

A Christian nun wearing a veil might be seen as an image of sincere religiosity, purity and peace, whereas a Muslim woman wearing a veil is likely to be seen as a symbol of the oppression of women and as making a political-religious statement . . .. The visibility of her

religious commitment may be seen to signal a 'holier than thou' attitude and thus evokes resentment in the non-Muslim. In . . . many . . . Western countries, religion is regarded as a private matter. Thus a common statement is that 'religiosity should not be visible but should be a matter of the heart and one's inner-most feelings'. The acceptance of the nun's veil seems unaffected by such complaints against the Muslim woman's veil, even though both share the same visibility. Why? Because the nun represents commitment to the prevailing religious tradition. She is an 'insider'. The Muslim woman, on the other hand, symbolises the intrusion of alien beliefs contrary to the prevailing religious tradition. This response is further reinforced by negative media reports about Muslim immigrants or Muslims in other countries. (Roald 2001:254)

El Guindi also makes this point:

In 1931 Crawley wrote: 'A Muslim woman takes the veil, just as does a nun' (1931:76). This is an example of a very commonly presumed analogy that results from examining the veil as an object with universal (Christian) meaning. So the veil of the nun and the veil of the Muslim woman are presumed identical. Nothing can be more different than these two veils. The difference is in the meaning, the symbolism, the ideology, the constructed womanhood, and the notion of sexuality. (El Guindi 1999:31)

This 'deconstruction' of symbols leads to misrepresentations on both sides. 'The instrumentalist interpretation of the phenomenon of Islamic veiling has its base in the nature of in-group/out-group communication . . .. [W]hen Islamist [13] women meet non-Islamist or even non-Muslim women, their discussions are governed by what they perceive are the "premises of the other". For example, in discussion with a researcher, Islamist women might try to convince her of the benefits of veiling on rational, apologetic grounds. Thus socio-political arguments might be used'. (Roald 2001:258)

Religion is not used as a unit of analysis in the consideration of Islamic veiling. 'The analysis of Islamic veiling by social researchers must be understood in the context of recent social research which abandons religion as an instrument of analysis' (Roald, 2001:257). This clearly limits the explanation. 'Secularist-bound scholars either deny the existence [of the Islamic feminist movement's use of the veil as protest] or ideologically dismiss any scholarly discussion of such formulations (even empirical studies) as apology' (El Guindi 1999:184). With regard to the veil as protest,

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[13] This is Roald's classification, not the author's.

a commonly quoted instance is the act in 1923 of the Egyptian feminist Huda Shaarawi who, upon returning from a conference in Rome, '. . . pulled off her veil. There was a gasp of disbelief. Then by the hundreds others started removing theirs. The "de-veiling" of the Arab women had begun . . ."' (Lamb 2002:146). In Shaarawi's own memoirs, however, the incident looks somewhat different: she '. . . drew back the veil from her face' (Shaarawi 1986:7). This was, in fact, an act against cultural norms and separations between economic classes: 'Early Egyptian feminism not only challenged the patriarchal order but was an ideology that superseded class and was all the more threatening to the old order because it was grounded in Islam' (Shaarawi 1986:21). The 'veil' Shaarawi removed was the face veil; she did not remove her head-scarf, nor did she reject Islam.

Consider this example: 'In the face of modern women who exhibit their femininity by the care they give to their bodies and clothes, Muslim women conceal their femininity behind veiling and thus present the "sacred body" against the "aesthetic" one . . . Veiled women, like their predecessors, enter into public life with the slogan "Personality But Not Femininity"' (Göle 1996:130). The total lack of understanding of the observed phenomena here is astounding. Furthermore:

> The overarching assumptions of feminist theory have generally been Eurocentric and ethnocentric. These limitations are especially apparent in the generally reductive and ahistorical scholarship on Middle Eastern women, which commonly centres on the harem, the veil, gender segregation, arranged marriages, clitoridectomies, and other presumed pathologies of Islamic culture. (Haj 1992:762)

Fundamentally, 'it is important not to overlook the fact that the *hijab* is worn by women out of sincere religious conviction and is primarily meant to convey piety and respect for religious values rather than political radicalism and anti-Westernism, but the potential for it to symbolise a political stand is very powerful' (Azzam 1996:226). This is an interesting quote from Azzam, because she acknowledges the religious motivation. Azzam uses both the religious and the political in her debate but, by including the religious, she offers a seldom considered perspective (Roald 2001:259).

Clearly, Islamic teachings on modesty and normative social clothing practice in Western societies clash; but the Western paradigm sees women 'who cover' as opposing them, when in fact the 'social interaction' component of Muslim women's clothing choices is often considered a distant second to 'vertical concerns'. This point is expanded below in the discussion of *sharia*'.

In Islam the head-covering is not a sign of celibacy, but the opposite. 'The moral standards of Islam are designed to accommodate enjoyment of

worldly life, including a sexual environment. [The head-covering] posed no tension between religion and sexuality' (El Guindi 1999:31). 'Within Islam, a woman's sexuality does not diminish her respectability. Islam in fact supports this combined image of womanhood' (El Guindi 1999:137). This point is most easily illustrated by the fact that young Muslim women are required to observe suitable dress (including head covering) from the age of puberty.

Vertical Relationship

The emphasis on a 'vertical relationship' for an adherent Muslim is the key to a complete understanding of the clothing (and other Islamic) codes. If the 'perceived legislator' is Allah, then the laws of Allah are the guidance:

> The *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* are the two main sources of *Shari'a'* (Translator's Note, Al-Qaradawi, 1995:14).

> *Shari'a* [is] the Islamic law [which] switches between two dimensions: the horizontal and the vertical. The horizontal dimension covers legislation in the social sphere, where rights, responsibilities and obligations are drawn up in terms of inter-human relationships (*mu'amalat*). The vertical dimensions have to do with the human being's relationship with God (*ibadat*). The latter is thus the overarching aspect of the law, as even social relations are regulated by belief in God as the Creator of all things (Roald 2001:104-105)

Some women, commonly described as 'apologists', employ the Western paradigm and accepted parameters in an attempt to explain Islamic phenomena in a way that can be understood by a Western audience:

> Veiling, which in an Islamic context is regarded as a religious phenomenon, is likely to be explained in worldly terms in discussion with non-Muslims. Muslims often explain to non-Muslim researchers that Muslim women cover their hair due to the importance of securing the family system or because of the need to see women in terms of their intellect and behaviour rather than their appearance. In such a discussion it is important to be aware of the various levels of argument that a respondent to questions might decide to use. (Roald 2001:11)

> A Muslim researcher might be given the motivational answer that veiling is an Islamic injunction, whereas a non-Muslim researcher might be offered apologetic answers since the interviewee would

attempt to convince the researcher from a 'rational point of view'. (Roald 2001:294)

Overall, the last word on these misunderstandings must go to the famous Islamic scholar Dr Yusuf Al-Qaradawi:

> It is my observation that [some] contemporary researchers and writers about Islam [have] been blinded by the glamour of Western civilisation. Overawed by this great idol, they worship it, approach it imploringly, and stand before it humbly, with downcast eyes, accepting Western principles and customs as unassailable and proven beyond doubt. Accordingly, if some aspect of Islam agrees with these principles and customs, they praise and extol it, while if some aspect opposes them they try to find similarities and agreements, offer excuses and apologies, or resort to far-fetched explanations and distortions, as if Islam had no choice except to surrender to the philosophy and customs of Western civilisation. When we examine their views, we find that they permit things which Islam has prohibited such as statues, lotteries, interest, being in privacy with a non-*mahrem* woman, a man's wearing silk, and so on. They frown upon things which Islam has permitted, such as divorce and plurality of wives, as if, in their view, whatever is legal in the west is *halal* and what is illegal is *haram*. They forget that Islam is the word of Allah and that His word is always uppermost. Islam came to be followed, not to follow; to be dominant, not subordinate. How can the Lord of men follow men and how can the Creator submit to the whims of His creatures? (Al-Qaradawi 1995:2-3)

Summary

As Haddad (2002) points out:

> One of the most contentious issues for immigrant women in almost all countries to which Muslims have moved is, of course, that of Islamic dress and, specifically, the headscarf. Ironically, while Islamic dress (long skirts, long sleeves and the scarf) renders most of the female figure invisible to the eyes of strangers, it also serves to dramatically raise the visibility of women who choose to wear it . . .. And wearing the scarf continues to be the sign of modesty. Other women are choosing new forms of Islamic dress, often very modish at the same time that it is appropriately concealing. Many recent immigrants, particularly political refugees and asylum seekers, are from countries that have cracked down on religious practices and banned the veil from

the official public space. For these women, the West, at least theoretically, provides the freedom to be Muslim in the way that one chooses . . .. Has the West in fact fulfilled the hope of many Muslim women that they will have the freedom to dress as they choose? Certainly not in all cases. In nearly all countries where Muslim minorities are growing and becoming more visible, there are clear instances of discrimination against the veil. (Haddad 2002:xiv)

Similarly, the anthropologist Talal Asad said:

It is easy enough to be tolerant about things that don't matter much. That tends to be the rule in liberal societies. Increasingly what you believe, what you do in your own home, whether you stand on your head or decide not to, is up to you as an individual in liberal democracies. So who cares? The liberal tolerates these things because the liberal doesn't care about them. Yet tolerance is really only meaningful when it is about things that really matter. (Asad 2002)

The clothing of the Muslim then, seen through the lens of Islam, and the current Western mode of dress could be viewed as coming from opposite perspectives. All efforts at beautification and adornment are undertaken inside the home for the benefit of yourself and your family and loved ones; all efforts at coverage and modesty are for outside the home, and for the unsanctioned gaze of passers-by or anyone who comes into 'your space'—wherever that is:

People in the West manifest their sexuality in an enlarged dimension through embellishing themselves, but this in fact impoverishes sexuality. We do the opposite of what they do at all possible levels, and we confine sexuality to certain spheres as much as we can. That is, we try to take sexuality away from attention in the outside life, the streets, and in the public realm. (Student interviewee quoted in Göle 1996:95)

Within Islam a woman's sexuality does not diminish her respectability . . . what Islamic morality forbids is the public flaunting of sexuality . . .. Having chosen not to sublimate sexuality theologically or ideologically (as have, for example, some major trends in Christian theology), Islam poses the opposite challenge to individual Muslims, that is to accommodate both human qualities—sexuality and religiousness—as normative while they strive to fulfil the ultimate ideal of socio-moral behaviour. (El Guindi 1999:136-137)

So, modesty of dress itself reveals only the most superficial aspect of that commitment. The clothing worn represents a concern for Islamic *haya'* in *all* things and, with some knowledge, viewers can see much, much more than simply a covered woman.

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