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The Politics of Christian and Muslim Women's Head Covers

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*Figure 1. Women wearing abaya, shayla and face veil.
Richard Harris Photography, Doha, Qatar. 2007.*

At first glance, politics and dress seem to be strange bedfellows. Upon closer study however, it becomes clear that a wide variety of agendas are enacted through the medium of cloth and clothing. Examples abound throughout history of almost all countries of economic motivations and of social control over *who* may wear *what* in terms of style, fabrication and decoration, and even color. Dress is used to express wealth and status, or lack of those things, as well as affiliations, opinions, individual tastes and preferences, and even professions. In 1992, Barnes and Eicher stated that ‘dress as a cultural phenomenon has several essential attributes... a person’s identity is defined geographically and historically, and the individual is linked to a specific community. Dress serves as a sign that the individual belongs to a certain group.’¹ Therefore, ‘A cultural identity is... expressed, and visual

¹ Ruth Barnes and Joanne Eicher, eds., *Dress and Gender; Making and Meaning* (Oxford: Berg, 1992). p. 1.

communication is established before verbal interaction even transmits whether such a verbal exchange is possible or desirable.’²

Head covers, often called veils when referring to Muslim dress, communicate both cultural and religious identity, but historically communicated other roles as well. Shirazi stated that ‘veiling is not a recent phenomenon or an invention of Islam, but rather an ancient and cultural practice with a specific function and purpose.’³ Ahmed explains that function and purpose in ancient Mesopotamia:

The rules of veiling- specifying which women must veil and which could not- were carefully detailed in Assyrian law. Wives and daughters of “seigniors” had to veil; concubines accompanying their mistresses had to veil, former sacred prostitutes, now married had to veil, but harlots and slaves were forbidden to veil.⁴

Thus, female head covering in public places in that society signified economic and social status and indicated that the wearer was under the protection of a nobleman and therefore entitled to be treated with respect and deference, that is, not sexually harassed. Ahmed elaborates that the lack of a head cover ‘served not merely to mark the upper classes, but, more fundamentally, to differentiate between “respectable” women and those who were publicly available.’⁵ The punishment for a slave or harlot, who, if caught covering her head, was potentially flogging, having boiling pitch poured on her head or having her ears cut off for daring to misrepresent herself as a woman of elevated social standing.

More than two thousand years later, one of the most contentious topics between Muslims and Christians still concerns women and head covers, despite the fact that the Virgin Mary, one of Christianity’s most revered figures, is always depicted wearing a head covering, similar in style to what many observant Muslim women wear today. Elizabeth and Robert Fernea, noted Middle East scholars, stated in 1992 that ‘The veil is one article of clothing used in Middle Eastern societies that stirs strong emotions in the West.’⁶ Daly agrees and contends that ‘Numerous examples exist which critique the Islamic practice of ‘veiling’ or covering the head, but few examples provide an adequate description of ‘veils’ or head coverings as actual items or material objects.’⁷ This lack of definitive, descriptive terminology adds enormous confusion because the word ‘veil’ is defined by many cultures in a wide variety of ways and worn for many reasons. Depending on the culture, a veil can cover the head, the face, or the entire body. European and American brides traditionally wear white, tulle veils, and often, grieving widows from the same countries wear a black veil for at least the funeral rites. During several decades in the 19th and 20th century, face veils attached to hats were worn as fashion items or as protection from damaging sunlight, or the dust stirred up by riding in the early open motorcars. Catholic nuns ‘take the veil’ as a symbol of their commitment to a religious life with no repercussion or public censure for donning a head cover. Conservative women in the post World War II era in the United States seldom left the house without a head cover, and certainly always wore a hat or other head cover to church and many wear them in

² Barnes and Eicher, p. 1.

³ Faegheh Shirazi, “Islamic Religion and Women’s Dress Code,” *Undressing Religion*, ed. Linda B. Arthur (Oxford: Berg, 2000). p. 114.

⁴ Leila Ahmed, *Women, Gender and Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). p. 14.

⁵ Ahmed, p. 15.

⁶ Faegheh Shirazi, *The Veil Unveiled; the Hijab in Modern Culture* (Tallahassee, FL: University of Florida Press, 2001). p. 285.

⁷ M. Catherine Daly, “The ‘Paarda’ Expression of Hejaab Among Afghan Women in a Non-Muslim Community.” *Religion, Dress and the Body*. Ed. Linda B. Arthur. (Oxford: Berg, 1999). p. 160.

religious settings even today. Scarves and other decorative head wraps are worn for fashionable reasons, yet, nearly identical attire from the Middle East draws attention and sometimes concern, curiosity and fear. Shirazi confirms the multiple meanings conveyed by veils:

The veil is an enormously important symbol, as it carries thousands of years of religious, sexual, social and political significance within its folds. Its original purpose, to separate respectable women from prostitutes, and women of low status, has been blurred to a point at which it has different meanings to different people in different cultures, and even in the same culture.⁸

The current debate on women's veils and head covers has its roots in the colonial British rule of Egypt. Women there dressed in completely concealing attire, similar to the woman on the right in (figure 1). Lord Cromer, Consul General of Egypt was appalled and offended by the completely covered Egyptian women and in the late 19th and early 20th centuries actively encouraged them to demand emancipation and reject the veil as a primitive and uncivilized practice. He wrote:

Whereas Christianity teaches respect for women, and European men "elevated" women because of the teachings of their religion, Islam degraded them and it was this degradation, most evident in the practices of veiling and segregation, that the inferiority of Muslim men could be traced.⁹

It is interesting to note that while Lord Cromer did not support equal rights for women in England and actively campaigned against their right to vote, he was vociferous in his condemnation of the veil and the perceived abuse and lack of status of women in Egypt. As a result of Cromer's efforts, in conjunction with other British officials, missionaries, and western feminists, a movement arose to discard the veil, which Huda Shaarawi, an Egyptian feminist and nationalist, famously did in a Cairo train station in 1923. Her removal of her facial veil was the first step in the eventual rejection of any type of all covering clothing for women in Egypt.

Ahmed explains that 'Veiling- to Western eyes, the most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies- became the symbol now of both oppressed women and the backwardness of Islam.'¹⁰ As Europe and America established increased interaction with the Middle East, Turkey was the next country to succumb to westernizing influence. In 1924, Mustafa Kemal, later known as Ataturk, the father of modern Turkey, began to introduce dramatically modernizing social reforms and consistently denounced the veil, stating that it reflected poorly on Turkish men and made them appear uncivilized. Although he decried the use of the veil and said 'it was a spectacle that makes the nation an object of ridicule and it must be remedied at once', women did not immediately discard the veil.¹¹ European and American style dress was adopted slowly over a period of years and it was not until Ataturk's death in 1938 that both Turkish men and women universally wore western attire and the veil finally disappeared.

⁸ Shirazi, *The Veil Unveiled; the Hijab in Modern Culture*, p. 180.

⁹ Earl of Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1908). V 2, p 146, quoted in Ahmed, p. 156.

¹⁰ Ahmed, p. 152.

¹¹ John Norton, "Faith and Fashion in Turkey," *Languages of Dress in the Middle East*, ed. Nancy Lindisfarne-Tapper and Bruce Ingham (Richmond: Curzon, 1997). p. 165.

Iran followed suit in promoting the adoption of western dress as a public marker of international modernization and sophistication. The ruler, Reza Shah Pahlavi issued a proclamation in 1936 legally banning the veil and police were permitted to forcibly remove any headwear other than European style hats from women. Shirazi reports that ‘Many women from traditional families, afraid of being attacked by Reza Shah’s police, refused to leave their homes.’¹² According to Baker, female teachers and students from the medical and law school ‘were first allowed, then ordered to attend unveiled’ and it became increasingly difficult to obtain diplomas or renew official documents if a woman was veiled.¹³ This prevented many women from conservative families the ability to pursue education or any type of career. Shirazi notes that ‘The unveiling of women, which claimed to be an improvement for better life, did not encourage women to seek education or make any improvement regarding the illiteracy rate evident among a vast majority of women... Woman and her image was used then to announce the task of “visual modernization” of Iran to the world.’¹⁴ A few years later Allied powers Britain and the Soviet Union invaded Iran and forced Reza Shah to abdicate in 1941. He was replaced by his son, Muhammad Reza Shah, who, in an effort to win religious support, agreed to cease enforcement of the ban on veiling, so veils once again became a common sight in Iran, existing side by side with western fashionable dress. Thirty-eight years later, in 1979, Muhammad Reza Shah was overthrown in a political/religious coup and according to Shirazi, ‘the Islamic Republic of Iran forced women to adopt the veil because the Iranian clergy regards it as a sign of progress along the ideological path of Islam.’¹⁵ Thus, in less than half a century, the veil in Iran was first reviled as backward, and discarded or forcibly removed, and then readopted as a cultural and religious symbol.

With increased western presence, other Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar also adopted European and American fashionable dress in the 1950s and 1960s. Indigenous forms of dress and head cover were largely abandoned. Western fashion was particularly favored in Saudi Arabia where the country was a collection of former city-states who had been brought under the rule of the House of Saud in the 1930s. By encouraging western haute couture fashion in favor over distinctive regional dress forms, the oil wealthy Saudis were able to express their wealth, sophistication and modernity. This had the additional benefit of replacing tribal affiliations, recognizable by dress, and thereby transferring loyalty from the local tribe to the reigning government. This divide and conquer mentality has served the Saud government well as it maintains control of the vast part of the Arabian Peninsula.

In the late 1970s, a movement for conservative dress emerged in Egypt, coinciding with the development of a wave of political Islam. The dress movement was started by young female university students who wished to signal that they were conservative, observant Muslims, serious about their education and their religion. Although women wearing the conservative style are called *mutahajibat*, which translates as ‘the veiled one’, these women did not actually veil, but rather wore long sleeved, loose, ankle length robes which did not reveal the contours of the body. This was a pointed rejection and departure from the currently popular western 1970s fashion. Ahmed notes that many of these students were from rural families and away from home for the first time, indicating that the highly modest dress was a type of protection and visual signal of their conservatism and religious affiliation.¹⁶

¹² Shirazi, *The Veil Unveiled; the Hijab in Modern Culture*. pp. 90-91.

¹³ Patricia L. Baker, ed., *Politics of Dress: The Dress Reform Laws of 1920-1930s Iran* (Surry: Curzon, 1997). p. 185.

¹⁴ Shirazi, “Islamic Religion and Women’s Dress Code”, p. 123.

¹⁵ Shirazi, *The Veil Unveiled; the Hijab in Modern Culture*. p. 7.

¹⁶ Ahmed, p. 220.

Political Islam, known as *Islamism* continued to spread throughout the largely Muslim Middle East and triggered an gradual return to a far more conservative and covered dress style in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Although it may be difficult for westerners to understand, in interviews conducted by the author, many Middle Eastern women state their reasons for donning covered dress are religious expression as well as national and cultural pride and their firm belief that Middle Eastern countries should not have to adopt western styles of dress in order to be modern and accepted as equal partners in the international arena. Many observant Muslims in Europe and America also adopted or readopted concealing dress. This public affirmation and affiliation to Islam and deliberate rejection of secular western dress has ignited enormous debate between many groups, both religious and political.

According to O'Brien, as early as the 1980s, France 'initiated the discussion about prohibiting public school girls from wearing headscarves.'¹⁷ This culminated in the 2004 ban of 'conspicuous signs of religious affiliation in public schools.'¹⁸ So as not to target Muslims specifically, the ban included all overly large religious symbols, such as over sized crosses or Stars of David. Ironically, at the same time that this on-going struggle over religious identity in the form of head cover is occurring, Hermes, the famous French luxury scarf manufacturer is producing 140 cm (54") square scarves, seemingly aimed at the Muslim market. Recognized internationally as a status symbol because of their beauty and cost, a Hermes scarf denotes taste, wealth and sophistication and is worn by fashionable women all over the world, regardless of any religious association.

Head covering bans have also been enacted by the current secular government in Turkey where headscarves and other forms of Muslim dress are not allowed in government buildings, thus barring religiously conservative students who choose to cover from attending public schools and universities. The Turkish government is overtly resistant to any form of public religious expression lest it give rise to a coup and return the country to a political system run on conservative religious principles. One of the interesting dilemmas in Turkey is the growing observant Muslim middle and upper middle class population. They are joining together for political power in both government and business and the women from this population intentionally select modest dress. Gökarıksel and Secor conducted studies on Turkish Muslim dress and found that 'In the 1980s...the role of the headscarf and Islamic dress in Turkey entered into a new phase of political and cultural contention.'¹⁹ A five year study by Turkish Marketing professors Sandikci and Ger found that Muslim Turkish women feel that it is their duty, as well as their right to present an attractive appearance. Many of the women they interviewed have extensive wardrobes of headscarves. According to Sandikci and Ger:

The political symbolism of the headscarf is prevailing and strong. However, its material and aesthetic dimensions are as significant as its symbolism in complicating the relationship between religion, fashion and modernity. What appears initially as a contradiction emerges as a creative and skilful negotiation of the principles of Islam and the ideals of beauty and fashion. Paradoxically, the headscarf offers women possibilities as well as limitations in constructing a modern identity.²⁰

¹⁷ Ruth O'Brien, "Foreward," *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. vii.

¹⁸ Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 1.

¹⁹ Banu Gökarıksel and Anna Secor, "Between Fashion and Tassetur: Marketing and Consuming Women's Islamic Dress," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 6.3 (2010), p. 121.

²⁰ Sandikci and Ger, p. 80.

Turkey is not the only country where head covers that are usually identified as Muslim have become fashionable. Women in Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates wear the all covering black robe, the *abaya*, and a long rectangular scarf wrapped around their head and neck, the *shayla*. Previously entirely plain black, the abaya and shayla have emerged in the marketplace as fashion items, subject to seasonal offerings and trends. Many of these women shed the abaya and shayla when departing the Persian Gulf region, but a large number of them retain some sort of head cover, usually in the form of a large, colorful silk scarf that covers their head and neck. Conversely, respectful female visitors to the Middle East often cover their hair. Images are common on the Internet of Princess Diana, Princess Kate and other political representatives wearing scarves while on state visits to Muslim countries.



***Figure 2. Ethiopian Christian woman.
Photograph taken by author, Lalibela, Ethiopia, 2011.***

Not all Christians have abandoned head coverings as religious signifiers. Observant Coptic Christians still wear head covers in Egypt and figure 2 portrays Natalya, a Christian Ethiopian girl who was on a class field trip to visit the 12th century stone churches in Lalibela, Ethiopia. Some of her classmates are visible in the background and it is apparent that few of them wore a head cover. Natalya looked like any other 21st century teenager. She had fashionable braids, jewelry, modern athletic shoes and was dressed in a short skirt and school issued T shirt, but also wore the traditional large white rectangular shawl with a decorative woven edge that Ethiopian Christians wear. After gaining permission to take her photograph, I engaged her in a short conversation and asked her to tell me about her scarf. She related that she is Christian and always wears it. She feels it is part of who she is and shows her respect for her religion and her values. Her school does not require her to wear a scarf, but neither does it object if she chooses to.

In the United States, 21st century Mennonites, Amish, and women of other conservative Christian groups are easily recognizable by their ‘plain’ clothing. Their simple outfits, including a head cover, denote

their religious affiliation, piety and intentional separation from the world. Graybill and Arthur state 'Dress visually testifies to a woman's spiritual state in conservative Mennonite groups.'²¹ They assert that 'symbols such as clothing are used as evidence that she is on the 'right and true path.'²² The head covers of the Mennonite and Amish women are stiff, sheer caps often made from white Swiss organdy. They do not cut their hair, but rather pull it up into a bun at the back of their head. The translucent cap then covers the bun and most of their hair. Caps are readily available on the Internet for about \$15. Amish women also frequently wear black bonnets over their organza caps when out of the home.²³ These are similar in shape to classic early American prairie style bonnets with wide brims, soft backs and under the chin ties. Women who veer from approved dress quickly come under public scrutiny and social coercion to adopt or return to more conservative sartorial practice. Turner contends that this social control is rooted in 'the control of female sexuality by men exercising patriarchal power.'²⁴ Since dress is seen as an external expression of inner spirituality, those who do not conform run the risk of being expelled from their community.

Other head covers are popular all over the world. Open any current fashion magazine and there is likely to be at least one photograph of an actress or other international celebrity wearing a scarf tied around her hair in a decorative manner. These styles are similar to the way many modern Muslim women in wear scarves in Turkey, France and other countries. The question then becomes why is this acceptable, trendsetting and even featured in media as a desirable fashion look when the same scarf, tied in a similar manner and worn by a Muslim woman can create unease and even cause legislation to be written and enacted? If it were a matter of secular versus religious principles, why do Amish and Mennonite women's head covers cause no concern in the larger society? They might be viewed as a bit unusual or quaint in urban cities, but are not considered alarming, any more than a nun wearing a black veil.

There is no clear cut, simple answer. In Turkey, the rejection of women's Muslim head covers is likely the concern over the growing power of the conservative religious class and the fear that the country will return to a governmental system which operates under religious law rather than secular law. A religious regime would then impose its restrictions and requirements on the secular segment of Turkish society. In European countries in general and France in particular, the prevailing sentiment seems to be that Muslims should not set themselves so far apart from the largely Christian population. By identifying themselves as the 'other', they are apart from and not a part of that society and that culture. Muslims, on the other hand, feel it is their right to be able to express their religious convictions and cultural traditions by wearing identifiable dress just as any other religion is allowed to wear a cross, yarmulke or other religious signifier.

At the end of the debate, covering or not covering one's female head is about showing membership in a particular group and adhering to the requirements and controls, sartorial and otherwise, of that group. Debates and issues arise when those groups have conflicting ideologies and belief systems and attempt to impose restrictions on one another. It is fascinating that such a simple piece of cloth carries the weight of literally thousands of years of meaning.

²¹ Beth Graybill and Linda B. Arthur, "The Social Control of Women's Bodies in Two Mennonite Communities," Religion, Dress and the Body, ed. Linda B. Arthur (Oxford: Berg, 1999). p. 9.

²² Graybill and Arthur, p. 10.

²³ Jean A. Hamilton and Jana Hawley, "Sacred Dress, Public Worlds," Religion, Dress and the Body, ed. Linda B. Arthur (Oxford: Berg, 1999). p. 40.

²⁴ Bryan Turner, Body and Society (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984). p. 114.

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