

## The Veil

Finally, let us shed some light on what is considered in the West as the greatest symbol of women's oppression and servitude, the veil or the head cover. Is it true that there is no such thing as the veil in the Judaeo-Christian tradition? Let us set the record straight. According to Rabbi Dr. Menachem M. Brayer (Professor of Biblical Literature at Yeshiva University) in his book, 'The Jewish woman in Rabbinic literature,' it was the custom of Jewish women to go out in public with a head covering which, sometimes, even covered the whole face leaving one eye free.<sup>[1](#)</sup>

He quotes some famous ancient Rabbis saying, "It is not like the daughters of Israel to walk out with heads uncovered" and "Cursed be the man who lets the hair of his wife be seen (...) a woman who exposes her hair for self-adornment brings poverty." Rabbinic law forbids the recitation of blessings or prayers in the presence of a bareheaded married woman since uncovering the woman's hair is considered "nudity".<sup>[2](#)</sup>

Dr. Brayer also mentions that "During the Tannaitic period the Jewish woman's failure to cover her head was considered an affront to her modesty. When her head was uncovered she might be fined four hundred zuzim for this offense." Dr. Brayer also explains that veil of the Jewish woman was not always considered a sign of modesty. Sometimes, the veil symbolized a state of distinction and luxury rather than modesty. The veil personified the dignity and superiority of noble women. It also represented a woman's inaccessibility as a sanctified possession of her husband.<sup>[3](#)</sup>

The veil signified a woman's self-respect and social status. Women of lower classes would often wear the veil to give the impression of a higher standing. The fact that the veil was the sign of nobility was the reason why prostitutes were not permitted to cover their hair in the old Jewish society. However, prostitutes often wore a special headscarf in order to look respectable.<sup>[4](#)</sup>

Jewish women in Europe continued to wear veils until the nineteenth century when their lives became more intermingled with the surrounding secular culture. The external pressures of the European life in the nineteenth century forced many of them to go out bare-headed. Some Jewish women found it more convenient to replace their traditional veil with a wig as another form of hair covering. Today, most pious

Jewish women do not cover their hair except in the synagogue.[5](#)

Some of them, such as the Hasidic sects, still use the wig.[6](#)

What about the Christian tradition? It is well known that Catholic Nuns have been covering their heads for hundreds of years, but that is not all. St. Paul in the New Testament made some very interesting statements about the veil:

*“Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head. 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, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head” (I Corinthians 11:3–10).*

St. Paul’s rationale for veiling women is that the veil represents a sign of the authority of the man, who is the image and glory of God, over the woman who was created from and for man. St. Tertullian in his famous treatise ‘On the Veiling of Virgins’ wrote, “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...” Among the Canon laws of the Catholic Church today, there is a law that requires women to cover their heads in church.[7](#)

Some Christian denominations, such as the Amish and the Mennonites for example, keep their women veiled to the present day. The reason for the veil, as offered by their Church leaders, is that “The head covering is a symbol of woman’s subjection to the man and to God”, which is the same logic introduced by St. Paul in the New Testament.[8](#)

From all the above evidence, it is obvious that Islam did not invent the head cover. However, Islam did endorse it. The Qur’an urges the believing men and women to lower their gaze and guard their modesty and then urges the believing women to extend their head covers to cover the neck and the bosom:

***“Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty (.....)And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what ordinarily appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms....” (24:30,31)***

The Qur’an is quite clear that the veil is essential for modesty, but why is modesty important? The Qur’an is still clear:

***“O Prophet, tell your wives and daughters and the believing women that they should cast their outer garments over their bodies (when they go out) so that they should be known and not molested.”(33:59)***

This is the whole point, modesty is prescribed to protect women from molestation or simply, modesty is protection. Thus, the only purpose of the veil in Islam is protection. The Islamic veil, unlike the veil of the Christian tradition, is not a sign of man’s authority over woman nor is it a sign of woman’s subjection to man. The Islamic veil, unlike the veil in the Jewish tradition, is not a sign of luxury and distinction of some noble married women. The Islamic veil is only a sign of modesty with the purpose of protecting women, all women. The Islamic philosophy is that it is always better to be safe than sorry. In fact, the Qur’an is so concerned with protecting women’s bodies and women’s reputation that a man who dares to falsely accuse a woman of unchastity will be severely punished:

***“And those who launch a charge against chaste women, and produce not four witnesses (to support their allegations) – Flog them with eighty stripes; and reject their evidence ever after: for such men are wicked transgressors.”(24:4)***

Compare this strict Qur’anic attitude with the extremely lax punishment for rape in the Bible:

*“ If a man happens to meet a virgin who is not pledged to be married and rapes her and they are discovered, he shall pay the girl’s father fifty shekels of silver. He must marry the girl, for he has violated her. He can never divorce her as long as he lives.”(Deut. 22:28–30)*

One must ask a simple question here, who is really punished? The man who only paid a fine for rape, or the girl who is forced to marry the man who raped her and live with him until he dies? Another question that also should be asked is this: which is more protective of women, the Qur’anic strict attitude or the Biblical lax attitude?

Some people, especially in the West, would tend to ridicule the whole argument of modesty for protection. Their argument is that the best protection is the spread of education, civilised behaviour, and self restraint.

We would say: fine but not enough. If ‘civilization’ is enough protection, then why is it that women in North America dare not walk alone in a dark street – or even across an empty parking lot? If Education is the solution, then why is it that a respected university like Queen’s has a ‘walk home service’ mainly for female students on campus? If self restraint is the answer, then why are cases of sexual harassment in the workplace reported on the news media every day? A sample of those accused of sexual harassment, in the last few years, includes: Navy officers, Managers, University Professors, Senators, Supreme Court Justices, and the President of the United States! I could not believe my eyes when I read the following statistics, in a pamphlet issued by the Dean of Women’s office at Queen’s University:

- In Canada, a woman is sexually assaulted every 6 minutes,

- 1 in 3 women in Canada will be sexually assaulted at some time in their lives,
- 1 in 4 women are at the risk of rape or attempted rape in her lifetime,
- 1 in 8 women will be sexually assaulted while attending college or university, and
- A study found 60% of Canadian university-aged males said they would commit sexual assault if they were certain they wouldn't get caught.

Something is fundamentally wrong in the society we live in. A radical change in the society's life style and culture is absolutely necessary. A culture of modesty is badly needed, modesty in dress, in speech, and in manners of both men and women. Otherwise, the grim statistics will grow even worse day after day and, unfortunately, women alone will be paying the price. Actually, we all suffer but as K. Gibran has said, "...for the person who receives the blows is not like the one who counts them."<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, a society like France which expels young women from schools because of their modest dress is, in the end, simply harming itself.

It is one of the great ironies of our world today that the very same headscarf revered as a sign of 'holiness' when worn for the purpose of showing the authority of man by Catholic Nuns, is reviled as a sign of 'oppression' when worn for the purpose of protection by Muslim women.

<sup>1</sup>. Menachem M. Brayer, *The Jewish Woman in Rabbinic Literature: A Psychosocial Perspective* (Hoboken, N.J: Ktav Publishing House, 1986) p. 239.

<sup>2</sup>. *Ibid.*, pp. 316–317. Also see Swidler, *op. cit.*, pp. 121–123.

<sup>3</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>4</sup>. Susan W. Schneider, *Jewish and Female* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984) p. 237.

<sup>5</sup>. *Ibid.*, pp. 238–239.

<sup>6</sup>. Alexandra Wright, "Judaism", in Holm and Bowker, ed., *op. cit.*, pp. 128–129

<sup>7</sup>. Clara M. Henning, "Cannon Law and the Battle of the Sexes" in Rosemary R. Ruether, ed., *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974) p. 272.

<sup>8</sup>. Donald B. Kraybill, *The riddle of the Amish Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) p. 56.

<sup>9</sup>. Khalil Gibran, *Thoughts and Meditations* (New York: Bantam Books, 1960) p. 28.

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