

Includes the catalogue of the exhibition

Veiling / Unveiling: The Headscarf in Christianity, Islam and Judaism

Proceedings of the UN Geneva Side Event

Held on 23 February 2018 and Lessons Learned



GENEVA CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS ADVANCEMENT AND GLOBAL DIALOGUE

مركز جنيف لحقوق الإنسان والحوار العالمي

CENTRE DE GENÈVE POUR LA PROMOTION DES DROITS DE L'HOMME ET LE DIALOGUE GLOBAL

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The Geneva Centre for Human Rights
Advancement and Global Dialogue

Veiling / Unveiling: The Headscarf in Christianity, Islam and Judaism

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PALAIS DES NATIONS

List of Abbreviations

BC	Before Christ
ENAR	European Network Against Racism
EPLO	European Public Law Organization
EREN	Evangelical Reformed Church of the Neuchâtel Canton
EU	European Union
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
OIC	Organization for Islamic Cooperation
Q&A	Questions & Answers
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations

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The Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue organized, in partnership with the Permanent Mission of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria a panel discussion on the theme of "Veiling/Unveiling: The Headscarf in Christianity, Islam and Judaism." The side-event was held on 23 February 2018 at the United Nations Office in Geneva, and was organized on the margins of the 37th Session of the Human Rights Council.

Bringing together experts on the three Abrahamic faiths, Islam, Christianity and Judaism, this initiative sought to counter misconceptions and to deconstruct stereotypes by revealing the role of the headscarf as a bridge between cultures and religions, rather than a source of divergence, of intolerance or of exclusion. The speakers shared the practice of women donning headscarves in their respective traditions, shedding light on the true symbolism of the headscarf, and breaking the vicious circle of misconception that depicts it as a form of submission by, or violence against, women.

The diversity of traditions and of headgear in these contexts was illustrated by an exhibition organized on this theme at the Palais des Nations, in coordination with the panel discussion.

The present publication offers, in its first part, the summary of the discussions that took place around this theme, as well as the lessons that can be drawn from it, including an analysis of the topic from the standpoint of scholars of each religion discussed, namely Christianity, Islam and Judaism. The second part of the publication provides a graphic illustration on the said theme, through a catalogue of the exhibition that was organized at the Palais des Nations during the same period.

Part 1:
Summary record of the panel discussion
“Veiling/Unveiling” and lessons learned

FOREWORD

By Ambassador Idriss Jazairy

In the current context of rising xenophobic tensions fostered by populist political discourse, religions often find themselves between the hammer and the anvil. On the one hand, religions have been grossly manipulated by extremist groups so as to justify the resort to violence, while on the other hand, religious symbols and other public expressions of faith have been vilified by a reductive, wrongful interpretation of secularity, seeking to erase the richness of multi-religious societies and placing it in the straightjacket of an exclusive ideology of secularism. As a result of these multi-layered distortions, the societal debate has veered away from the broadening of the consensus space for freedom of belief and interaction within the State between the secular and divine components of nations. Instead, the debate tends to focus on keeping State and society at “safe” distance from religion writ large, and from some religions selected for opprobrium in particular.

Against the background of the resulting heightened fear of the *Other*, with societies turning inwards and moving away from diversity and tolerance, the headscarf has been manipulated and politicized, depicted in the mainstream media of some advanced countries as a symbol of oppression and of submission of women, incompatible with democratic values and human rights. Politicians in countries far and wide have waged a relentless war against this religious symbol that has been around for millennia, either by advocating its prohibition and thus undermining article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, or by legislating to forcibly forbid its use by women. In such situations, the headscarf was manipulated into an element of discord and a pretext for discrimination and exclusion, whilst History reveals it as a point of convergence, at the crossroads of cultures and religions.

Over the past few years, a series of European countries have proceeded to adopting legislation restricting the wearing of the headscarf. Most recently, in Switzerland, in the Saint-Gallen canton, a referendum on the adoption of a law forbidding *burqas* in public was held in September 2018. A total of 67% of the voters endorsed the ban. Only around 350,000 of Switzerland’s 8.3 million inhabitants are Muslim, accounting for less than 5% of the total population of the country, and none of whom, outside anecdotal occurrences, wear the Afghan type of integral veil called a *burqa*. However, the *burqa* and the headscarf seem to catch the imagination or fantasies of Western politics.

The obsession of European policy-makers about the headscarf seems disproportionate, and may stem from stereotypes and misconceptions that do not reflect the reality of Muslims living in Europe. This phenomenon has an important negative societal impact, reflected in increased discrimination and Islamophobia, as the headscarf becomes associated with something unwanted, rejected by society, and incompatible with Western societies and values.

The propagation of biases and stereotypes in the media and the political discourse exacerbates the vulnerability of Muslim women who wear a headscarf, as they often find themselves at the intersection of multiple discriminations. These women suffer on the one hand, a psychological impact, feeling excluded and alienated from society, and an important economic impact on the other hand, as structural

discrimination often leads to unemployment and financial precariousness. This exacerbates underlying gender discrimination ingrained in most societies.

Pursuing its mission to combat stereotypes and to build bridges between cultures through dialogue, the Geneva Centre for Human Rights and Global Dialogue has joined forces with the Permanent Mission of Algeria to organize a panel discussion and an exhibition as a side-event to the 37th session of the UN Human Rights Council, entitled “*Veiling/Unveiling: The Headscarf in Christianity, Islam and Judaism*”. This initiative, which benefited from the presence of experts on the three abovementioned monotheistic religions, sought to trace the history of the headscarf and to reveal it as a connecting thread between these faiths. It reflected the Geneva Centre’s objective to break down barriers built on prejudice, by providing an objective and truthful representation of the headscarf.

I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate the Geneva Centre’s long-term goal to contribute to the advancement of the status of women in the Arab region and beyond, by breaking down stereotypes and building bridges across cultures and religions. The Arab region has crossed important milestones in this regard in recent years, with some countries progressing more than others in this respect. The Geneva Centre is committed to objectively showcase this progress and to continue to promote women’s rights and gender equality, by encouraging open discussions and giving a voice to women themselves. Over the past years, women worldwide, propelled by a growing determination for change, have been striving for the recognition of their rights and of their place in societies. The time to transform this momentum into action is now. The time has also come to work together to empower women and to offer them equal opportunities. This is indeed a challenge for the Arab region, but it is not less a challenge for all other societies, whatever their culture or religion, and whatever their level of development.

I. INTRODUCTION

In her work on the history of the Islamic headscarf, researcher Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli noted that “*a headscarf is but a veil, it should not be a source of fear, nor should it divide or exclude; it should rather bring comfort and beauty*”¹.

However, the polemic around the Islamic headscarf has been gaining momentum over the past few years, particularly in Western countries. Some European countries have proceeded to adopting legislation on the headscarf. Very often, the debate conflates the “*veil*” and the “*headscarf*”. A veil is usually an article of clothing that covers the face and that is at odds with the Western way of life. However, a headscarf is not. By calling a “*headscarf*” a “*veil*”, the purpose is to ban its use for the wrong reasons.

Austria adopted in September 2017 a law prohibiting facial coverings including *niqabs* and *burqas* in public. While the rule applies to some non-religious facial coverings, such as surgical or ski masks, it is mostly perceived to be directed at the clothes worn by a minority of Muslim women. Muslim groups in Austria have criticized the law as restricting women to the household, criminalizing them and thus in no way advancing their status or rights. Previously, in March 2017, the European Court of Justice, the EU’s highest Court, had ruled that employers could ban staff from wearing headscarves, in its first decision ever on this issue.

In September 2017, in Switzerland, a national initiative in this sense succeeded in gathering the required 100,000 signatures to push it to a public vote. Previously, the canton of Ticino had voted in favour of a ban in a cantonal vote in 2013, and the associated legislation came into force in 2016². More recently, in the canton of Saint-Gallen, a referendum on the adoption of a law forbidding *burqas* in public was supported by the majority of the population, in September 2018. Similarly, Quebec’s government voted in October 2017 a law barring public workers from covering their faces and obliging citizens to unveil when receiving services from government departments, municipalities, school boards, public health services and transit authorities.

Paradoxically, the above-mentioned Austrian law adopted in September 2017 is expected to affect just 150 women—that is 0.03% of the Austrian Muslim population and 0.002% of the entire population. Similarly, in France, which was the first European country to ban the *burqa*, government statistics showed that the ban affected 1,900 women, 0.04% of the French Muslim population and 0.003% of the total population.³ In Switzerland, only around 350,000 of the total population of 8.3 million inhabitants are Muslim, accounting

1. “Histoire du voile des origines au foulard islamique”, Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli, Bayard Editions 2017.

2. Switzerland to hold referendum on whether to ban burqa after successful far-right petition, 15 October 2017: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/switzerland-burqa-referendum-vote-ban-muslim-veils-far-right-petition-a8001591.html>

3. In October 2018, two landmark decisions by the United Nations Human Rights Committee found that France violated the human rights of two women by fining them for wearing the niqab. The Committee found that the criminal ban on the wearing of the niqab in public introduced by the French law disproportionately harmed the petitioners’ right to manifest their religious beliefs, and declared that it was not convinced by the French authorities’ claim that the ban was important from a security standpoint. Moreover, the Committee concluded that the ban, could contribute to the marginalization of veiled women, by confining them to their homes and impeding their access to public services. More on these decisions can be found at the following link: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23750&LangID=E>

From the perspective of the Geneva Centre, the issue with the French law, and with any other legislation aimed at prohibiting the headscarf, is that it involves the enactment of laws in response to a non-issue, for anecdotal disparate cases. The responsibility of legislators rests in creating law that applies to real problems and phenomena that affect society as a whole, and this is not the case with the headscarf, hence the discriminatory nature of such legislation.

for less than 5%, and a *burqa* is unknown to most of them.

These low percentages show that the obsession of European policy-makers about the *burqa* and by extension of the headscarf is disproportionate, and stems from stereotypes and misconceptions that do not reflect the reality of Muslims living in Europe. It is a non-issue that is being inflated into a massive urgency, requiring restrictive laws. This obsession has however an important negative societal impact, reflected in increased discrimination and Islamophobia.

The stereotypes propagated with regard to women wearing the headscarf raise a significant issue related to intersectional discrimination. In a panel discussion on “*The impact of multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and violence in the context of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance on the full enjoyment of all human rights by women and girls*”, organized by the UN during the 36th session of the UN Human Rights Council, in September 2016, the issue of intersectionality was widely addressed. Today, most victims of acts of Islamophobia are women - predominantly women wearing a *hijab* or on very rare occasions, a *niqab* (hiding the nose and the mouth), who find themselves doubly discriminated in various aspects of everyday life. In this regard, the vulnerability of Muslim women wearing headscarf was highlighted.

In a UN Report on the issue of intersectionality issued by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in 2017⁴, it was highlighted that attacks against women who were visibly Muslim (hence wearing a headscarf) had been increasingly reported from a number of countries in Europe. As concerns the labour market, a study conducted by the European Network Against Racism (ENAR) found that 44% of employers in Belgium agreed that wearing a headscarf could negatively influence the selection of candidates.⁵ In her think-piece *The Islamic Headscarf: From the Symbol of Submission to Feminist Commitment*, included in this publication at page 48, Dr Malika Hamidi, PhD in Sociology at the *École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) Paris*, and author of numerous studies on Islamic feminism describes at large the effects of discrimination against Muslim women, and highlights the emergence of a new wave of feminist activism amongst them.

The headscarf is thus widely recognized as a trigger of discrimination against women in society. This is mainly due to the stereotypes fuelled by discriminatory legislation and by Islamophobic campaigns. Oftentimes, the headscarf is depicted as a catalyst of interreligious and intercultural discord, or as an object of contention, exclusively pertaining to Islamic culture. It does not, however, “*originate in the East, nor in the West: it belongs to a widespread dress code, in the present-day and in the past as well. In the cultures of the Assyrians, of the Greeks, of the Romans, as well as in the Judaist, the Christian and the Muslim cultures, the headscarf has covered women’s heads throughout the centuries, and often in analogous circumstances.*”⁶, as pointed out in the previously mentioned study by Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli.

What is often forgotten by those who immediately associate the headscarf with Islam, is that the headscarf is deeply entrenched in Christianity and, moreover, that the interpretation of submission and modesty associated with it originated in St. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians. St. Paul clearly emitted the obligation for women to cover their heads when going to church or praying; moreover, the use of the

4. Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights “Impact of multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and violence in the context of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance on the full enjoyment of all human rights by women and girls”, issued in April 2017, available here: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G17/097/49/PDF/G1709749.pdf?OpenElement>

According to the report, in France, an experiment showed that women with a Senegalese sounding name had 8.4 % chance of being called for an interview when applying for a job, compared with 13.9 % for men with a Senegalese sounding name and 22.6 % for women with a French-sounding name.

5. Factsheet by ENAR available here : http://enar-eu.org/IMG/pdf/factsheet9-european_lr_1_.pdf

6. “Histoire du voile - des origines au foulard islamique”, Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli, Bayard Editions, 2017: “*Le voile n’est ni d’Orient ni d’Occident: il appartient à un code vestimentaire très répandu de nos jours comme dans le passé. Chez les Assyriens, chez les Grecs, chez les Romains, dans les cultures hébraïques et chrétienne comme dans la culture musulmane, le voile s’est posé sur la tête des femmes tout au long des siècles, et dans des circonstances souvent analogues*”.

headscarf by Christian women during the first ages of Christianity, as well as numerous sumptuary laws that regulated the dress codes of women and the nature of their headdress at the time, originated from this text. The headscarf was also a common element in art, particularly religious art throughout Europe. Ms Elisabeth Reichen-Amsler, Director of the section “Church and society” within the Evangelical Reformed Church of the Neuchâtel Canton (EREN) has provided in her think-piece entitled *The Veil In Christianity: A Historical Perspective*, which can be found in the chapter on *Drawing Lessons From The Panel Meeting*, at page 31, a comprehensive historical overview of the headscarf in Christianity.

Similarly, veiling is important in Judaism, as it is in Christianity and Islam. The donning of the headscarf by Jewish women is regulated by the laws of the Torah and is part of the Jewish laws on modesty (*tzniuth* in Hebrew). It differentiates Torah-observant women from others, as well as married women from unmarried women. Historically, as expressed in some texts of the rabbinic tradition (Talmud), Jewish women would have to wear a headscarf after marriage because traditionally, married women were not allowed to appear in public with their hair uncovered. In her think-piece *Obligation, Exemption, And Gender: Head Covering And Other Items Of Clothing In Judaism*, available at page 41, Dr Valérie Rhein of University of Bern details the specificities of headscarves and other headgear, for women and for men, in the Judaist tradition.

The headscarf is worn today for various reasons and motivations, pertaining to the personal, cultural, or religious sphere. Labelling Muslim women who wear a headscarf as necessarily submissive and helpless, abused or controlled by men, and obsessively enacting laws seeking to ban it and to punish those who wear it, is therefore a sign of gross ignorance and of discrimination. The politicization of the Islamic headscarf that is being witnessed in recent decades can be considered as part of the larger, worrying phenomenon of growing Islamophobia that has been gaining ground in Western societies. Disguised in the supposedly altruistic desire to save and unshackle these women from submission, this attitude only reinforces stereotypes and prejudice, and further dictates women what to do or what to wear. It overlooks the fact that, whilst one woman can liberate herself by taking off the headscarf, another one can do the same thing by choosing to wear it. The key is in women’s freedom to choose.

By organizing the panel discussion and the exhibition “*Veiling/Unveiling: The Headscarf in Christianity, Islam and Judaism*” in close cooperation with its partners, the Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue sought to deconstruct the persisting myths and the stereotypes fuelled by stigmatizing depictions that abound in Western societies. The side-event aimed at presenting the headscarf as a connecting thread between Islam, Christianity and Judaism, rather than as a catalyst for division, controversy or conflict. It also aimed at delivering a history of the central role played by women and femininity in the development of these religions and cultures, by providing the audience with an objective, truthful representation of the headscarf.

II. SUMMARY RECORD OF THE PANEL MEETING⁷

7. The present report provides a summary record drawn up by the Geneva Centre on the discussions which took place during the panel meeting. It does not commit the authors of the remarks themselves, whose statements were recorded and are reproduced in full in the annex to the report.

Ambassador Idriss Jazairy, *Executive Director of the Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue* and moderator of the session, noted that the debate was organized to mark the inauguration of an exhibition on the same theme, organized as a side-event to the 37th session of the UN Human Rights Council. Ambassador Jazairy expressed gratitude to the Permanent Mission of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria to the UN, the co-sponsor of the event, as well as to the panellists, on behalf of H. E. Hanif Al Qassim, *Chairman of the Board of Management of the Geneva Centre*, who could not attend the meeting personally.



The discussion commenced with the screening of a brief video of Australian member of Parliament Pauline Henson attending a parliamentary session, in August 2017, dressed in a *burqa*. With this display of Islamophobia and cultural insensitiveness, Senator Henson had intended to demand Attorney-General George Brandis to ban the *burqa* in Australia. The Attorney-General's reply set however the record straight, noting that the *burqa* would not be banned and that mockery of religious garments was appalling.⁸

Ambassador Jazairy commented the abovementioned video, stating that the headscarf was often wrongfully described as incompatible with feminism and with women's rights. He remarked that the headscarf was associated with *Otherness* and submission, and that Islam was depicted as oppressive and unfit for Western societies. These attitudes nurtured Islamophobic tension and acts of violence, which had been on the rise over recent years.

Ambassador Jazairy further noted that, at the other end of the spectrum, a movement of protest was growing against the legal obligation to wear a headscarf. He deplored the fact that the headscarf had become a "*lightning rod for xenophobia*", whilst its history stretching over centuries, across cultures and religions, had been dwarfed by sensationalist interpretations.

The moderator of the panel reiterated that the objective of the Geneva Centre was to counteract these views and to reveal the headscarf as a connecting thread and an element of convergence between Christianity, Islam and Judaism. The key message was that the solution was not to ban or to impose the headscarf by law, but to uphold women's personal freedom of choice of what they decide to wear.

Ambassador Jazairy reiterated that denying women their right to wear or not to wear the headscarf contradicted Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. He also highlighted recent developments towards "normalizing" the headscarf, citing the American department store chain Macy's clothing line of *hijabs* and *abayas*, L'Oréal's new shampoo advertisement featuring a Muslim model wearing a *hijab*, and Nike's 2017 high-performance *hijab*.

Mr Toufik Djouama, *Deputy Permanent Representative of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria to the United Nations Office at Geneva and other International Organizations in Switzerland*, delivered opening remarks and expressed the support of H. E. Boudjemâa Delmi, Ambassador of Algeria, for the panel discussion and exhibition. He joined Ambassador Jazairy in deploring the fact that the headscarf

8. The video is available on Youtube : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3VdxufqUss>



had become subject to misperceptions and misunderstanding. A false and degrading image about the Islamic headscarf was unfortunately cultivated by some media and scholars, for different reasons. Mr Djouama noted that forcing a woman to abandon her headscarf, or discriminating her because of wearing it, was the opposite of helping her to become emancipated and well-integrated in society.

He remarked that, for the great majority of Muslim women, wearing a headscarf was a personal choice, and many saw it as a part of

their identity and cultural heritage, as a traditional dress or as a symbol of decency. It was therefore the shared responsibility of governments, civil society and academia, to join efforts to counter misperceptions and stereotypes and to promote tolerance, respect of diversity and understanding among peoples from different cultures and religions. Mr Djouama further stated that, in the spirit of tolerance, the UN General Assembly had adopted in December 2017, at the behest of Algeria in partnership with the Soufi Alawiyya International Association chaired by Cheikh Khaled Bentounes, a resolution declaring the 16th May the annual International Day of Living Together in Peace.



Ms Elisabeth Reichen-Amsler, *Director of the section "Church and society" within the Evangelical Reformed Church of the Neuchâtel Canton (EREN)*, described her project entitled "Veiling/Unveiling" from its inception. Her exhibition was initiated in 2012 and sought to retrace the history of the headscarf at the crossroads of religions and cultures. Ms Reichen noted that her own unawareness with regard to the headscarf had encouraged her to initiate this research project. She noted that, whilst today

wearing the headscarf was associated by a vast majority of people with Islam, this vision was an oversimplification. There was broad evidence of the headscarf being used in ancient cultures in Mesopotamia, Ancient Greece, and Ancient Rome. In fact, the obligation for married women to wear a headscarf had already been attested in an ancient piece of law dating back to 1120 BC, written by an Assyrian king. Ms Reichen highlighted that women's hair used to symbolise fecundity, and was often depicted as dangerous or seductive.

In our days, Ms Reichen further noted, multiculturalism was feared in some countries for being an alleged source of insecurity. According to her, in order to prevent this from happening, people should take more interest in others and in their history, and should research further into their own roots and origins, so as to better comprehend and acknowledge convergences between cultures and religions. She emphasized the importance of respecting the *Other*, whilst enjoying our own individual freedoms. On this note, Ms Reichen underlined that the reasons behind wearing a headscarf or publicly displaying one's cultural or religious identity, were numerous and various. She also remarked that in all three monotheistic religions, certain passages from the sacred texts had led male religious authorities to interpretations that obliged women to cover their heads. She noted however that it was only Christianity that explicitly formulated this obligation in a sacred text – namely, in the Letter to the Corinthians by Paul of Tarsus. Ms Reichen underscored the evolution of the headgear used by women with time, remarking that the headscarf itself had been replaced by various types of hats, worn by Christian women and men alike.

Even though the three monotheistic religions had more or less the same origins, they had known different paths of development in history, in the Western world and in the Middle East. The Western world had known the Enlightenment years that had ultimately led to the separation of Church and State and that, according to Ms Reichen, had contributed to the progressive “unveiling” of women. The road to gender equality was however very long and, according to Ms Reichen, the issue of the headgear turned out not to be the whole story, as Western societies were still patriarchal and dominated by a hegemonic masculinity. Moreover, Ms Reichen deplored the fact that women’s image had become, mainly in Western societies, exploited to the point that their “unveiling” no longer resonated with freedom, but rather with dependency.



Ms Reichen concluded that the sacred texts in all religions had been interpreted exclusively by men. Equality between women and men had to be advocated also in the field of reading and interpreting these sacred texts, with a view to respecting femininity. Ms Reichen reiterated the importance of awareness of other cultures and religions, in order to build bridges between traditional and modern cultures.



Dr Valérie Rhein, *PhD in Judaism at the Institute of Jewish Studies, University of Bern*, recalled the first love story featured in the Bible, between Rebecca and Isaac. She noted that the Bible described how Rebecca took a veil and covered herself. Dr Rhein noted that the custom for a Jewish bride to veil her face before the marriage ceremony was rooted in this biblical passage. Dr Rhein underscored the importance of analysing what Jewish men wore as well, because in Judaism, what women wore (headscarf or hat) had less significance than what women did not wear, from a religious

standpoint.

According to Dr Rhein, neither the Bible, nor the Talmud transmit a law according to which men are required to cover their heads, but over the years the custom to do so had become more common. In present time, Orthodox men wear a hat or a *kippah*, as a sign of respect towards God. Dr Rhein underscored that men covered their heads in order to acknowledge the presence of God and as a symbol of belonging to Judaism. On the other hand, Jewish women were required to cover their hair after marriage, even though the Bible did not transmit this obligation. Neither the Bible, nor any of the Torah books explicitly formulated the obligation for women to cover their head.

In the Jewish tradition, as noted by Dr Rhein, there was a huge variety of coverings: hats, headscarves and wigs. She noted that the garment that men were obligated to wear was called a *Talit*, a traditionally white prayer shawl with blue or black stripes and fringes. Men were obligated to wear it for the Morning

Prayer, whereas women were exempt from this obligation. The fringes reminded men of their religious obligations, according to Dr Rhein. She added that, in the Jewish ritual practice, the more commandments a person had to fulfil, the better, and that Jewish men and women were not obligated to the same amount of commandments.

The fact that a wife had to cover her hair was a rule rooted in the Talmudic modesty law. Dr Rhein added that also according to this law, a man was not to say the famous *Shema* prayer in presence of a woman whose hair and neck were not covered. Basically, according to Dr Rhein, the obligation for women to cover their hair was rooted in setting the appropriate conditions for the men's prayer. This meant that the dress code of Jewish men emphasized their relation with God, while in contrast, the dress code of Jewish women served the purpose of giving men a dignified medium within which they could express their own relationship with God. The dress code of Jewish men focused therefore, according to Dr Rhein, on the bond between man and God, while the dress code of a Jewish woman focused on the woman-man bond.



Dr Malika Hamidi, PhD in Sociology at the *École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) Paris*, author of “*Un féminisme musulman, et pourquoi pas ?*” (L’Aube, 2017), recalled that the headscarf was a symbol continuity and should not constitute itself an obligation. The Islamic headscarf is also a particular challenge to mainstream feminist movements, according to Dr Hamidi, who further noted that some of the most persistent movements of opposition to the headscarf were concentrated in francophone Europe, notably in France and Belgium.

Referring to her book “*A Muslim feminism, and why not?*”, Dr Hamidi explained that the title was a tribute to Christine Delphy, an important figure of French feminism and a friend of Simone de Beauvoir. In 2005, during a symposium bringing together feminists from a variety of backgrounds, some of the participants were Muslim women wearing a headscarf. The message that was sent by these women activists was that the headscarf was not a symbol of oppression, but of women's empowerment from a socio-political standpoint, and that this garment was not confining women, but indeed allowing them to freely express their identities and to fully engage in society. As a conclusion to the conference, Ms Christine Delphy underlined the undeniable link between Islam and feminism, which later inspired Dr Hamidi for the title of her publication. The Quran itself carries an emancipatory message and an ethic that paves the way for gender equality. This, according to Dr Hamidi, constitutes the source of Muslim feminism.

Dr Hamidi further noted that one of the manifestations of Muslim feminism was related to the reinterpretation of sacred texts by women. Women had played an active role during the golden age of Islam: women poetesses, philosophers, musicians, theologians had been close to the Prophet and had contributed to the development of Islam. There was therefore a need for a reinterpretation of the sacred texts in order to reveal the foundations of equality that could be found in the Quran.

Dr Hamidi further deplored the secularist trend in francophone Europe, which imposed a very literal interpretation of secularity, a “combative secularity”, which depicted the headscarf as a tool used to undermine women's rights and their dignity. In the same vein, the verses of the Quran related to the headscarf were challenged by some as being out of context in the current world, in an attempt to prove the need to “unveil” women and to combat the headscarf in European societies.

9. *A Muslim feminism, and why not?*, Editions de l’Aube, France, 2017.

Dr Hamidi reiterated however that the real reason behind the uneasiness caused by the headscarf was largely due to the fact that it crystallized all the fears and anxieties of a European continent fearing a gradual loss of its own identity. Dr Hamidi underlined that Europe was experiencing a spiritual, religious awakening which was causing just as much uneasiness. The problem was not Islam, but the fact that the return to spirituality and religiosity, if not religion, was actually a sign of a profound loss of meaning in European societies. This sparked controversy about all religious symbols according to Dr Hamidi, who gave the example of the debates regarding the presence of crucifixes in classrooms in Spain. She reiterated that this religious effervescence was perceived as problematic and even dangerous by some, because the literal interpretation of secularity sought to impose secularity itself as the sole religion.

Reverting to the issue of Muslim feminism, Dr Hamidi remarked that the current generation of Muslim women had reached unprecedented political and intellectual maturity, and mastered topics related to international affairs, which propelled them to occupy the media space and to become more visible and empowered. This new wave of Muslim feminists was perceived by the public opinion as, at the same time, reassuring and challenging, according to Dr Hamidi, hence the manipulation of issues like the headscarf. Dr Hamidi remarked however that these Muslim activists were showcasing their capabilities and skills, and no longer accepted to be marginalized in European societies. On the contrary, they asserted their full belonging to these societies and their right to engage and to speak up for themselves.

Ambassador Jazairy, moderator of the discussion, reiterated the importance of distinguishing between secularity and secularism, the former representing an inclusive concept, whilst the latter was an exclusive ideology seeking to deny and to erase the richness of diversity. He underlined the fact that religions had no nationality, one could be Jewish, Christian, or Muslim and be either French or Swiss at the same time for instance, and hence stating that a religion was foreign to a country or a society was in itself, an oxymoron.

Debate

A representative of the *Women Human Rights International Association* raised the issue of women's rights in Iran, from the standpoint of the headscarf. She emphasized that there could be no discussion on women's rights if the issue of fundamentalism was not included. She noted that Iranian women were abused, facing physical violence, and imprisoned should they refuse to wear the headscarf.

Ambassador Jazairy reiterated, as mentioned in his opening remarks, that the panel discussion sought to firmly condemn legislations that obliged women to wear the headscarf, as well as laws aimed at prohibiting its wear. From his standpoint, the objective of the discussion was to show that it was fundamental to respect women's right to choose freely what to wear, and not to impose on them any dress code whatsoever.



Ambassador George Papadatos, *Permanent Observer and Head of mission of the European Public Law Organization (EPLO)*, reached beyond the historical and sociological aspects that had been elaborated by the panellists and spoke of a real-life example of discrimination against women wearing the veil. He referred to his own experience with an intern in his organization who wore the headscarf. Oftentimes, women wearing the headscarf were discriminated against at the preselection phase and in job interviews, hence they were faced with the dilemma of wearing it - but

substantially reducing their chances to a job, or abandoning the headscarf so as to increase their chances on the job market.



Mr Kevin Playford, *Human Rights Counsellor from the Permanent Mission of Australia to the UN Geneva*, welcomed the initiative of the Geneva Centre to organize a discussion exploring the historical and cultural roots of the headscarf. The notorious event in Australian politics presented at the beginning of the discussion was, according to Mr Playford, an obvious political stunt, designed to marginalize members of the Muslim community within Australia. Mr Playford highlighted that there had been an immediate strong reaction from Attorney-General George Brandis, and from other

political speakers after this incident. He further noted that Australia was a country built on migration, by migrants. One in four Australians was born overseas, and one in two was born from migrant parents. Mr Playford also emphasized that Australia was proud of its rich multiculturalism and religious diversity, and

as such, there were numerous governmental programs designed to build social cohesion and respect within the community for people of different faiths, while respecting freedom of expression. Finally, he reiterated that there was no prohibition on the use of the veil as an expression of religious faith in Australia.



Another representative of *Women Human Rights International Association* remarked that, as a French woman living in the suburbs, she had seen the headscarf being imposed on girls and women in these areas. In this regard, she noted that there was a significant gap between

scholarly discussions and the reality outside, and the experience that people had with this issue in everyday life.



Ambassador Jazairy replied by reiterating that the politicization of any religion was devastating for the population. Religion had been manipulated by terrorist groups claiming that they had linkage with Islam.

Dr Hamidi returned to the issue of violence faced by Iranian women in relation to the obligation to wear a headscarf. She reiterated that the headscarf should not be subject to any legal obligations. Dr Hamidi reiterated the importance of reinterpreting the Islamic scriptures, in order to replace the

conservative readings that had been imposed for too long, and to combat their patriarchal dimensions. She spoke of movements like *Musawah*, which greatly contributed to this work of appropriation and reinterpretation of the sacred texts. She also mentioned the significant advances in the field of women's rights in the Arab region. In Tunisia for example, Dr Hamidi praised the 2017 legislation that allowed Muslim women to marry a non-Muslim man. Dr Hamidi also mentioned the *Moudawana* introduced in Morocco in 2004 (also known as the Family Code), as a result of relentless advocacy work by women activists. She also referred to constitutional reforms enforcing minimum quotas of 30% for women in elected bodies in Algeria.

Dr Hamidi further noted the need to firmly condemn those who pressure young women into wearing the headscarf. She noted that she was involved with associations working in the suburbs on raising awareness. The suburbs were, according to Dr Hamidi, the place where mentalities were evolving, and there was a need for Muslim women to engage in conversation, especially in the educational field, in suburban schools, so as to ensure the link between Muslim families and the educational community.

Dr Hamidi paraphrased Franz Fanon who has said that, in order to dismantle a society, one should start with unveiling women. In this regard, she noted that the neo-colonial feeling was the source of the anti-headscarf movement. Finally, she deplored the fact that media played an important role in disseminating a discourse displaying ignorance of the facts and thus contributing to the exacerbation of the problem. She remarked that mainstream media did not show Muslim women activists engaged in the fight for their rights, and contributed to stereotyped images. She referred to the “*Forgotten Women: the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim women*” report, a project of the European Network against Racism (ENAR) that took place in 8 countries in the European Union (Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Sweden and United Kingdom), aiming at documenting the disproportionate effect of Islamophobia on women so as to better address the intersectional discrimination affecting Muslim women.¹⁰



H. E. Ms Nassima Baghli, *Ambassador and Permanent Observer of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva*, referred to the restrictive interpretation of secularity mentioned by previous speakers and noted that this was affecting all religions, including Christianity and Judaism. In this regard, she asked Ms Rhein and Ms Reichen about their reactions to these limitations imposed on the religious sphere, and to the imposition of secularism. Ms Rhein echoed Ambassador's Baghli

concerns and noted that these were important challenges to all religions, which should respond in unity and in convergence to defend their place in today's societies. Ms Reichen remarked that the Canton of Neuchâtel in Switzerland had hosted in 2017 an important event on the topic of secularity and multi-religious discourse. According to Ms Reichen, Switzerland was not in a situation of secularism, but instead welcomed and respected the specificities of all citizens. She reiterated that knowledge and awareness of the *Other* represented the foundation for a cohesive society, living together in harmony.

Ambassador George Papadatos, *Permanent Observer and Head of mission of the European Public Law Organization (EPLO)*, remarked that there were two elements in discrimination: one was ignorance, and the other one was prejudice. Ignorance could be tackled in various ways, but Ambassador Papadatos noted with concern that prejudice could not be helped by laws. The dilemma for Muslim women was therefore whether to wear the headscarf when going for a job interview. Ms Hamidi agreed that many Muslim women were faced with having to choose between their headscarf and education, or a job. She noted that education and knowledge were an obligation for all Muslims, and education should always be prioritized in this regard. She reiterated the need to change mentalities and to accept the fact that in present days, Muslim women had excellent skills, they obtained PhDs and reached high levels of education, even if they wore the headscarf. Ms Hamidi remarked that her combat was to pave the way for new generations of Muslim women, who would no longer have to choose between wearing a headscarf or having a bright future.

10. Report “*Forgotten Women: the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim women*”, available on the website of ENAR: http://www.enar-eu.org/IMG/pdf/forgottenwomenpublication_lr_final_with_latest_corrections.pdf

III. DRAWING LESSONS FROM THE PANEL MEETING

- A. The Veil in Christianity: A Historical Perspective,
by Elisabeth Reichen
- B. Obligation, Exemption, and Gender: Head Covering and Other Items of
Clothing in Judaism,
By Valérie Rhein
- C. The Islamic Headscarf: From a Symbol of Submission
to Feminist Commitment,
by Malika Hamidi

A. THE VEIL IN CHRISTIANITY: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Elisabeth Reichen¹¹

“... and the husband is the head of his wife. 9. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man. 10. For this reason a woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head ...” (First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, chapter 11: 2-16)

Is the veil referred to in the above passage one that a woman must wear as a symbol of dependence on a man?

The term is not clear. However, it can be inferred that it is likely to be the case, since the wearing of the veil is widespread in ancient societies, regardless of the region.

Where does this custom come from and why? Moreover, why has it been preserved in Christianity for almost 2000 years, even though Paul’s argument seems rather unconvincing and confusing?

The oldest law ordering the donning of the veil

The oldest law ordering the veil is attributed to the Assyrian King Teglath Thalazar I (1115-1077 B.C.):

*“Married women of an a’ilu (family), widows or Assyrian women do not leave their heads unveiled... When they stand alone in public squares during the day, they veil themselves in any case. A priestess who has married is veiled in the public square; a woman who is not married remains without veil... A free woman (harimtu) does not veil herself, she leaves her head without veil, and a slave does not veil herself.”*¹²

This same custom still exists today in the East.

One can find several meanings concerning the veil: in some cultures, it is attributed to the goddesses and symbolizes their independence and the inaccessibility of the sacred. The same meaning can be applied to unmarried priestesses like the Roman Vesta, who watch over the ritual space, protected from outside eyes by curtains. On the other hand, in secular spaces, the veil is worn by married women to showcase their belonging to a man and thus, to distinguish themselves from prostitutes to whom it is formally forbidden, under threat of severe punishment, to wear the veil¹³.

Why should women show their belonging to a man or to a sacred place?

The magic of hair¹⁴

In ancient times, it was thought that a woman’s hair was the source of her sexuality (as mentioned in, among others, the Greek myth of the Gorgon-Medusa). The long hair symbolized sexual magic and fertility. It was also known to be attractive and dangerous. Due to these interpretations, many cultures introduced specific rituals: the hair had to be covered, especially for married women.

Why was this rule applied above all to married women? The magical power of hair was linked to the

11. Ms Elisabeth Reichen, Director of the section “Church and society” within the Evangelical Reformed Church of the Neuchâtel Canton (EREN)

12. Quoted in Gaëlle Benhayoun’s article “*Que dévoile le voile*” de 2006/2007 <https://www.yumpu.com/fr/document/view/16561561/que-devoile-le-voile-par-gaëlle-benhayoun-memoire-in-extenso> and in Christina von Braun’s *Verschleierte Wirklichkeit (Veiled Reality)*, Aufbau edition 2007.

13. cit: Christina von Braun, Bettina Mathes Veiled Reality.

14. Ibid, p. 62/63

sexually active woman. Virgins were not considered to be sexual beings.

Hair: a glory for the woman (Paul of Tarsus)

First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, chapter 11: 13-16.

“Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God.”

Paul finds the image of the veil in “the very nature of things”. He does not interpret long hair as a cultural expression of female representation, but he sees this custom of women wearing long hair as a *natural* veil in itself. Then why was it required to cover the hair?

It is a long story that is rooted in a patriarchy, which today’s researchers assume to be universal, and that has been so since the dawn of time.

What is the origin of hierarchical thinking between genders?

The anthropologist Françoise Héritier hypothesized that this hierarchy was formed by a certain way of thinking and does not correspond to a biological reality: “... *it is less a handicap on the female side (fragility, less weight, less height, handicap of pregnancies and breastfeeding) than the expression of a willingness to control reproduction on the part of those who do not have this particular power. Which brings us to procreation.*”¹⁵

She is not alone in making that assumption. Other well-known researchers have put aside traditional explanations and have demonstrated that there is indeed a link between reproduction and gender hierarchy. *“It is striking that such a relationship would logically imply a supremacy of women over men, since it is their bodies that bear children. Nature originally endows women with a power that men do not have, so to speak.”*¹⁶

How is it then possible that our societies still refer to the masculine as the hierarchically superior?

According to Françoise Héritier, it is difficult for men to admit that women can reproduce the opposite sex: *“Men and women have the same physical, cerebral and intellectual abilities. But the domination of men, which structures all human societies, started from the observation, made by our prehistoric ancestors, that only women could have children: girls, which is a fact that seemed normal to them, but also boys, which is another fact that amazed them.”*¹⁷

The researchers have sought an answer to this questions in narratives related to the creation of the human species. Indeed, the latter offers symbolic representations of a world where gender difference originally did not exist. This non-differentiation is described as a heavenly state. Once differentiation is made however, the evil enters the world. This would mean that mythical androgyny would be a heavenly state.¹⁸

In various myths related to creation, human beings are described as androgynous. According to Persian mythology, the first human couple, light and darkness, lived together in one body until it was separated by *Ahura Mazda*. Similar narratives exist in Greek mythology. Prometheus formed an androgynous human being from earth, and Athena gave him life. In one of the creationist stories, Zeus separated the androgynous being and took a small part of the female body out of the earth to put it on the man.

In Hinduism, *Ardhanarishvara* is an androgynous figure of the Hindu divine world. It is composed of *Shiva* and his wife *Parvati*.

15. Françoise Héritier, I, p. 25, Edition Odile Jacob, 1996.

16. Eglantine Jamet-Moreau, Le curé est une femme, p. 33, L’Harmattan Edition, 2012.

17. Interview with Françoise Héritier: We must destroy the idea of an irrepressible male desire, 5-11-2017, Le Monde.

18. cit, p. 39.

The First Testament also sets a good example with its second account of creation. The first account of the more recent tradition (sacerdotal) only states that “*male and female He created them*”¹⁹. The story from the older (*Yahwist*) tradition, more widespread, speaks of an androgynous Adam, since God shaped the body of Eve from the body of Adam²⁰. Just as they recognize themselves as sexual and different beings, they must leave the paradisiacal place. The woman is blamed because she violated God’s prohibition.²¹

*“The double narrative of the creation of sexual genres in Genesis, as well as the Jewish and Christian exegetical traditions arising therefrom, thus seem to express the masculine ambivalence confronted with the “worrying strangeness” of the feminine. The three figures of the “first woman” in Jewish tradition (the two Eve and Lilith) correspond to various ways of overcoming a certain male panic in the face of what is perceived as the biological mystery of the female on the one hand, and of the prospect of social gender equality on the other.”*²²

In his letter to the Corinthians (11:8), Paul uses the second account from Genesis to justify the man’s dominant role over women. He demonstrates that the subordination of women is a “divine order”.

Before speaking more specifically of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians and of its consequences, let us observe the Greek philosophers, particularly Aristotle, who strongly influenced Christianity, from its beginnings until the late Middle Ages.

His view of the world was dualistic. The male principle was active, perfect and complete, in contrast to the female principle, which was incomplete and deficient. The man’s body is taken as a model according to Aristotle’s definition. Compared to the woman’s body, he could only be superior. On the other hand, being deprived of the power of “giving life” that men do not possess, could generate, according to Françoise Héritier, the desire for appropriation.

Aristotle’s definition can be an example of this phenomenon of appropriation. According to him, the man transmits the breath of life and the woman’s sole role was to act as a receptacle. The man’s “frustration”, forced to use the woman in order to reproduce his image, would include at the same time a lack of understanding of the female mystery.

To correct the “natural inequality” in favour of male domination and to the detriment of the position of women, the founding myths and philosophy have put forward all kinds of arguments. Not possessing a capacity as important as that of reproduction requires appropriating it. In ancient Rome, for example, the patrician owned his “wife’s belly” and “the fruit of that belly”. In the event of a divorce, his ownership of that child was maintained²³. In many cultures, it was possible to drive out one woman or take another woman, if “she” was not “capable” of giving birth to a male child (see also the patriarchs’ stories in the first Testament).

As regards the obligation of married women to cover their hair, this rule refers therefore to women of childbearing age, who are said to have had magic in their hair. Covering their hair was to indicate commonly the respectability and the social status of a married woman who belonged to her husband.

Christianity could have modified this inequality of status, commonly established in the patriarchal society, since Jesus advocated the equality of the two human genders before God. “*But his later disciples failed to translate this rule. But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is the man, [a] and the head of Christ is God.*” (First Corinthians 11:3).

This brings us back to the veil in Christianity. What has made the veiling of women last for millennia in the

19. Gen 1: 27b.

20. Gen 2 : 21-23.

21. Eglantine Jamet-Moreau *Le curé est une femme*, p. 41.

22. Centre d’Études en Civilisations, Langues et Lettres Étrangères : <https://cecille.univ-lille3.fr/l-equipe/annuaire/annuaire-chercheurs/batsch-christophe-articles-en/article/les-deux-recits-de-creation-de-la>, seen on the 4th of March 2018.

23. Eglantine Jamet-Moreau, *Le curé est une femme*, p. 34.

West as in the Middle East (Mediterranean basin)? The origins of Christianity, along with the writings of Paul of Tarsus, contain part of the answer.

Paul and the veil of women²⁴

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (11:2-16) links theological tradition and customs of the world. According to Rosine Lambin, author of an article on this excerpt, it is the first writing originating from monotheistic religions that links the veil worn by women to their relationship with God.

Thus, Christianity imposes the veil on women by presenting religious arguments. The veil becomes a visible sign of the subordination of women to men, which seems contrary to Paul's theological tradition, which insisted on the fundamental equality between the baptized.

*"In the monotheistic scriptures, the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and the Quran, only the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians (11:2-16) justifies the wearing of the veil by women by applying it to the relationship of men and women to God. The particular importance of this text is the narrative on the dress of women emerging therefrom. Moreover, it has durably imposed on them to cover their heads throughout the Christian period, whereas the veil of women was prior to this only a piece of clothing of pagan origin, typically worn in the cities around the Mediterranean, as well in the West as in the East."*²⁵

Until the end of the twentieth century, a veil or a scarf- and subsequently, a hat- are still often worn by Christian women of the three major denominations, from different Mediterranean countries and the Christian East. We can see in the comments of most of the Fathers of the Church the confirmation of the continuity of Paul's text. Even today, men must take off their hats when entering a church.

The Apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, 11:2-16 (ecumenical translation):

"2 I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the traditions just as I passed them on to you. 3 But 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. 4 Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head. 5 But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head—it is the same as having her head shaved. 6 For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head. 7 A man ought not to cover his head, [b] since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. 8 For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; 9 neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. 10 It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own[c] head, because of the angels. 11 Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. 12 For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God. 13 Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? 14 Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, 15 but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. 16 If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God."

Comments²⁶

Wanting to legitimize the veil by using this kind of arguments weakened the Pauline theology, which was nevertheless very liberating and innovative for its time. Apparently, Paul could not (or did not know how to) rid himself entirely of the customs of the world to which he belonged, a world which was significantly marked by the submission of women.

"... He indeed resumes the essentially pagan custom of the veil of women to control Christian women who might have believed that freedom was offered to them on equal terms with men. He cannot accept that his

24. Summary of the article of Rosine Lambin, *Paul et le voile des femmes*, Clio, issue 2-1995, *Femmes et Religions*, [Online], put online on 01 January 2005. URL: <http://clio.revues.org/index488.html> . Seen on the 2nd of February 2012

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid

theology can lead to practical consequence, namely, to gender equality.”²⁷

Contemporary commentators have often pondered whether Paul was referring to Jewish, Roman, Hellenistic or local customs. However, no known dress custom of the time was as clear-cut as Paul’s orders. The customs practiced in different regions during the first century of our era were very diverse.

*“... men not only used to cover themselves when they were reading or taking part in the Temple services, but also when they went out. In the Mediterranean world, married women living in the cities generally covered themselves either with coats (himation, palla), or with a veil, to go out into the street. However, fashion varied by region. In port cities like Corinth, women were either covered or not covered. In the countryside, they often went bareheaded, no doubt, because they needed more liberty in their movement to accomplish their tasks. Large coats and draperies in which the women of the city wrapped themselves would have made it difficult.”*²⁸

By openly contradicting Jewish customs (in v. 4 for example, since Jewish men covered themselves and did not disapprove of abundant hair), Paul wanted to distinguish the young Christian community from Jewish customs in order to make it more accessible for the Greeks.

Paul thus imposes a new law on women in the first Corinthians: *“by subjecting them to the custom of the veil, the wearing of this cloth gives them a lower status compared to men in their relationship to God: all the baptized are equal, in short, except women. If men have the same religious rights as women, women do not have the same rights as men. The veil of women is one superfluous piece of cloth that affected excessively, in Paul’s theology, the freedom and sovereign equality of Christians”*²⁹ since it imposes a distance away from God. Men had the monopoly of the direct relationship with the divinity and women must pass through men to have a relationship with God.”

Further on, in the first Corinthians 14:34-36, Paul will once again restrict the freedoms that he had granted by forbidding women to speak in assemblies and will abrogate their right to prophesy mentioned in the first Corinthians 11:2-16. This tension between Paul’s theological tradition and the customs related to women’s submission that he wanted to maintain in nascent Christianity led him to support absurdities to justify the wearing of the veil by women.³⁰

Paul insists on the need for subordination of women, on the fact that God has established an order that includes the hierarchy of the sexes, using the Greek word *kephalé* (head, *chief*) in the sense of “superior” several times.

Other sources arouse curiosity: God is superior to Christ, and in many other encounters (Romans 9:5; 1st Cor 8:6; II Cor 4:4) Paul affirms the fundamental equality between Christ and God. However, what role do angels (v.10) play in his argument?

*“Why should a woman cover herself because of them (the angels) in Corinthians 11: 10, while in the first Corinthians 6: 3, all Christians, regardless of sex, will one day judge the angels? (...) Men suddenly need the supernatural help of angels so that women cover themselves in assemblies. This is the first step Paul used in order to give the female veil a religious status and to make it necessary for women, as part of their relationship with the Divine.”*³¹ Moreover, he uses the word *exousia* to designate a woman’s hairdressing and yet *“this word means strength, freedom, power, authority, independence and it never has the meaning of domination in Greek...”* According to the meaning of this passage, Paul gives this term an opposite meaning: the person does not act by himself, but submits. He could have used a different word, one that is not confusing. This particular choice might indicate some hesitation on Paul’s part. He does not wish to demean a woman completely, but neither does he wish to grant her full freedom. This explains the

27. Ibid

28. Ibid

29. Ibid

30. Ibid

31. Ibid

hesitation and even the confusion between his theology of equality and the traditions and customs of the society in which he lived.

A new ambivalence still emerges with v. 11 and 12. Indeed, the conclusion according to which: “*everything comes from God*” is tempting, but does not succeed in providing cohesiveness or a logical basis to the fact that women originally came out of men: “*whereas nature testifies that it is from women that men come out.*”

Paul and Paganism

Paul also used paganism in justifying the use of the veil. When Paul says in v. 13: “*Is it appropriate for a woman to pray to God without being veiled?*”, we are entitled to ask ourselves whether Paul, a Roman citizen and a great traveller, could have been unaware of the existence of the ritual veil that men and women used to cover themselves as a sign of devotion in Rome, during prayer and sacrificial rites. The Roman sacrificial veil is an indispensable element of the rite and suggests the consecration to the divinities of the person who wears it, that person’s initiation and their separation from the profane world. It is the *consecratio capitis* or *obnubilatio capitis*. The ritual of the Roman wedding dress, where the bride is veiled, preserved in the Christian context and extended to the consecration ceremony of Christian virgins in the 4th century, expresses the same idea: the bride to be is initiated to her husband’s domestic cult as a sign of submission to the husband himself.

In Italy, during the 4th century, the Fathers of the Church who introduced the *velatio* of virgins as a rite of consecration imitated the Roman ritual of the veil of the brides and the Vestals. If the Christian liturgy of the 4th century so easily assimilated the inescapable pagan rite of the veil of sacrifice involving the submission of a woman to her husband, is it not because Paul left the door wide open to such possibilities?

*“From a historical point of view, the text of the first Corinthians 11:2-16 is of capital importance: it reflects the internal struggles of the young Christian community seeking to determine its own identity. The veil of women, whatever its origin, should, according to Paul, partake of this identity. In the centuries that followed, the veil became the symbol of the devoted virgin and the sign of the Christian woman throughout the Christian world; the rebels of Corinth had been defeated.”*³²

The veil of the virgins. Tertullian of Carthage (160 -222)

In his writings entitled *De virginibus velandis*, in 216 A.D. , the Latin language writer Tertullian, who came from a Romanized and pagan Berber family and converted to Christianity³³, says that the chastity of young women should be protected with a veil: “... *that because you married Christ, to him you gave your body.*”

Here are some parts from his text:

“The limits of the veil end where the garment begins (...) for it is the shoulders that must be submissive; it is because of them that “the woman bears on her head the mark of her subjection”. The veil is the yoke of women.”

“We are scandalized, say worldly girls, because others walk around veiled (...). Good things only scandalize perverse minds. (...) If a woman must bear on her head the mark of the power that a man has over her, then she does not wear it more appropriately than when she is a virgin (...).”

Virgin weddings

In the 4th century, an eschatological and exalted climate increasingly takes hold of society. Wasn’t the coming of the Lord supposed to be imminent? This is followed by excessive and irrational actions such as the mission of martyrdom, the obsession with virginity and asceticism or even isolation in the desert. Therefore, many girls choose to remain virgins in order to avoid being impure at the time of the Last

32. Abstract of the article of Rosine LAMBIN, *Paul et le voile des femmes*, Clio, issue number 2-1995, *Femmes et Religions*, [Online], put online on 01 January 2005. URL: <http://clio.revues.org/index488.html>. Seen on February 02, 2012.

33. Translated by E.-A. de Genoude.

Judgment. Many couples practice apotactic³⁴ marriages (from the Greek expression “I renounce”) and become ascetics, renouncing all worldly goods.

The veil of the nuns

The word monk comes from the Greek *monacos*, which means solitary. There is a difference between the monk and the nun and other ecclesiastics: the monks live in retreat from the world to devote themselves solely to searching and praising the Lord, while the nuns are more in touch with society.

The Christian custom of the veil is part of the ancient tradition of the “*velatio capitis*” which marks the offering to the gods of children or young girls (Roman vestals). By virtue of an *indult* or a special dispensation granted by the competent ecclesiastical authority, it will subsequently become an element of the garment of nuns belonging to an institution, where they pronounce solemn or simple vows.

Symbolically, covering one’s head is tantamount to giving up, as a sign of humility and of renouncing.

The bride’s veil

The bride’s veil symbolizes separation. It creates a boundary between the inside and the outside, between male and female.

In many countries, the tradition of marriage requires that the young woman be wrapped in a white veil. The veil recalls the close bond between the child and the mother, “*the cocoon, the fullness, the fear of the unveiled that is the fear of freeing oneself from childhood... In this sense, the veil as a symbol extends far beyond the boundaries of a palpable object; it goes beyond its internal reality*”³⁵.

Mary - a new goddess?

Mary’s veil is often mentioned as an example to demonstrate its strict use in Christianity. Painters of the Middle Ages generally referred to the contemporary dress. It is therefore not surprising that Mary and the holy women are veiled, since Paul of Tarsus’ order to wear a veil is authoritative and translates a profound obedience to scripture. One must not forget that Western society was largely Christianized at the time.



Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God Courtesy TBD

(equivalent to love) seems nevertheless credible.

Mary, in Greek *Mariam*, in Aramaic *Maryam*, in Hebrew *Myriam*, a Jewish native of Judea, is the mother of Jesus of Nazareth. The Catholic and Orthodox Churches give a special place to Mary, whom they call the Holy Virgin, Our Lady (more often among Catholics) or Mother of God (more often among the Orthodox). She is the subject of particular devotion.

Many interpretations of the etymology of this name have been given, but so far, none has been imposed. The Egyptian root *m.r.y*

34. Apotactics is the name of a sect of ancient heretics who, in order to follow the evangelical precepts on poverty as practiced by the Apostles and the first Christians, renounced all their possessions and houses. In order to avoid any “error” or “sin”, they advocated chastity and virginity. From this movement of exile in the desert were born the first monasteries with the idea of creating heaven on earth (“we must be like angels”, Jean Climacque, 7th Century) or the idea of creating a heavenly city.

35. cit. : Mémoire of Gaëlle Benhayoun

Another interpretation, also very common, is “*noble, superior*”. On the other hand, the interpretation given from the Hebrew *mar yam* (“*drop of the sea*”), Latinized into *stilla husis*, which finally gave the name *Stella husis* (“*Star of the sea*” referring to 1 King 18: 41-45, the sacrifice of the prophet Elijah), should be considered purely poetic³⁶.

Mary is the female role model, the virgin, the pure, the mother, the goddess, submissive and, at the same time, elevated. The Marian iconography was based on the known motives of the ancient goddesses. In Egypt, the oldest representations of Mary refer to Isis breastfeeding.

After the Council of Ephesus in 431, Mary is not only the one begetting Christ but also God Himself.

Thus, she acquires a more important, autonomous status. Shortly afterwards, she found herself in the position of “*living throne*”, a throne of eternal Wisdom (*sedes sapientiae*) holding forth the son of God³⁷.

Has Mary’s role been diverted?

Mary, a young woman without a past, is raised beyond the destiny determined for her in traditional society. Mary or *Marie*, a rather poor young girl, gets pregnant without being married: at the time, this meant exclusion from society. The evangelist Luke depicts this woman without a past, a single mother (at first) who brings into the world the liberating child of an oppressed society. It is precisely this child, born of a miraculous conception - seen as occurring without the involvement of a man - who will play a decisive role for a completely new religious tradition. The “*enhancement of the status*” of this young woman is the expression of a hope that a reversal of the world is possible and that it has already begun. This is expressed through the “*Magnificat*” (Luke 1:47-55) which the evangelist attributes to her - a psalm of bold hope anchored in the long Jewish tradition and previously sung by Anna, the mother of the prophet Samuel.



Saint Mary - Orthodox Icon

Mary receives an authority and an active role for humanity, contrary to the patriarchal vision of the submissive woman. This is a new way of conceiving and of teaching coexistence and social justice. She embodies femininity, the counterpart of a male God. The integration of the female as an equal partner into a society based on male values is the sign of a profound change in the dualist thinking system, male-female, black-white, good-wicked, etc. There is no longer any need to think *in silos*.

Taking into account the needs of a patriarchal Christian Church in having educational models, the image of Mary will be adapted according to the perspective of the moment. She will be venerated, through motherhood, and idealized. She is put on a pedestal, which is not by any means positive for “*common*” women. Much to the contrary, it is a new discrimination since this female model of exemplary purity will never be attainable. Moreover, the assignment of women to exist only as wives and mothers, and not as individuals in their own right, only means making them more submissive and constitutes a manner of exclusion³⁸.

36. Source : [fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie_\(mère_de_Jésus\)](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie_(mère_de_Jésus)), seen on 15-5-12

37. Source : Bible & Orient, *Eternel féminin*, p. 137

38. Eglantine Jamet-Moreau, *Le curé est une femme*, p. 37

Consequently, the full integration of the feminine and the masculine could not be achieved within societies influenced or dominated by the three monotheistic religions. Thus, the revolutionary image of this young woman, Mary, is too often misunderstood.³⁹

Gender hierarchy: a key for interpretation⁴⁰

“For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.” (First epistle of Paul to Corinthians 11:8-9)

In the discourse of the Christian theology on the origin of gender, the role of the woman is interpreted as the effigy of the man, or in other words, the copy of the original. In the middle Ages, people argued for a long time about whether women were equal to men before God or not. Did they have a soul? Would they be saved by Christ? At the time, men were convinced that women should be beaten like animals. Moreover, they were suspected of plotting with the devil and, thus, denounced and prosecuted as witches. One needed a scapegoat for collective misfortunes such as the plague, the nutritional crisis and a global cooling which was undermining society at the end of the Middle Ages.

The Reformation of the 16th century helped to reshape society. It was a transition period when governments acquired more power, with the development of colonial empires in addition to some changes which occurred in the religious-cultural field. The role of men was strengthened. Henceforth, man became responsible as a husband and a father. He had more authority, privileges and influence. Historians call this the evolution of masculinity; a *“hegemonial masculinity”*.⁴¹

Since men’s role as family heads was strengthened, women also needed to find a new definition for their own role. As marriage was being revalued, the wife was recognized as a mother and a faithful helper of her husband. The reformers introduced new rights for women, such as the right to divorce. Calvin urged men not to hit their wives because it did not amount to Christian behaviour. Each Protestant believer was responsible for his own actions and faith, and could no longer rely solely on the help of a community.

At that time, women often lead large households and are responsible for the education of their children. For this reason, schooling for boys and girls is becoming increasingly compulsory. For Luther, the task of being a mother, an educator and a governess was the most noble and the most valued in the world.

Luther confronts Aristotle’s theory (see above) with the Genesis 1:27 to defend the creation of man and woman as equals before God. According to Luther, women are to be considered as a Divine Construct since men become *“noble and great”* through them. However, his line of thought also implies a hierarchy, including the character of Eve who succumbed to temptation. This is the justification for a woman’s submission to a man; it is her punishment for *“sinning”*.

How did the situation evolve towards unveiling in Western Christianity^{42?}

The Age of Enlightenment will change the debate in society, by creating public spaces open to critical expression. Political changes followed giving rise to the French Revolution. New lay symbols will be introduced, such as the allegorical figure of Marianne climbing the barricades of the French Republic. Her bare breasts make this female figure the *“foster mother”* of the Nation, but also a symbol of emancipation and freedom.

Its allegorical representation had a retroactive effect on European women. The two strong symbols of freedom and equality conveyed by her played a key role in the subsequent and rapid uncovering of the female body⁴³.

39. Luise Schottroff, *Lydias ungeduldige Schwestern*, 1994

40. Ibid p. 152-154

41. Martin Dinges, *Männer – Macht – Körper. Hegemoniale Männlichkeiten vom Mittelalter bis heute*, Frankfurt am Main, 2005, cité par Helmut Puff dans *Hör nicht auf zu singen*, p. 207, TVZ, 2017

42. Christina von Braun, *op.cit.*, p. 152-154

43. Christina von Braun, *op.cit.* p. 27

In the 19th century, sophisticated techniques of visualization developed considerably in the West: truth can henceforth be “seen”. Western society only believes what it sees, which has often led to a certain voyeurism. It wants to reveal everything, to expose everything, whether it is the human body or the secrets of nature or other fields. What is the driving force behind this obsession? Would it have a link with the very heart of Christianity, the religion of unveiling *par excellence*? Indeed, the narrative⁴⁴ tells us that with the death of Christ, the curtain of the Sanctuary is torn and gives access to the holiest place. God is no longer hidden there, but shows himself as a vulnerable human, a human made vulnerable, in other words, as Christ.

1961 is the year of the real gender revolution generated by the introduction of the contraceptive pill. For the first time in human history, women can choose if, when, how often and with whom they want to procreate. They become fully empowered actors again.

However, the nudity of Western women, displayed in today’s streets and magazines, has little in common with nature or with the ideal of freedom and equality. This is the consequence of many social constraints, which make women wear this nudity as a new garment.

Conclusion

This study shows that religions and cultures have influenced each other, as well as their holy scriptures.

We should not turn a blind eye to the fact that for a very long time – indeed for millennia - holy texts were written, read and interpreted *exclusively* by men, which influenced and often biased their interpretation.

To bridge this gap, it is important to defend equality with regards to the reading and the interpretation of Holy Books, and to remain open to women’s sensitivity in this regard.

This subject is fascinating and endless. It is important to read, learn and discuss different points of view, since this theme of the veiling and unveiling offers the possibility of building a bridge between traditional and modern cultures. This process will not necessarily succeed between the West and the East, but within each society itself. Everyone has the right to defend his or her roots and their place in society. It is not a question of taking sides with either tradition or modernity, but of opening one’s eyes to the reasons and mechanisms of a society or religion. It creates a momentum by integrating both traditional and modern aspects in a union that will ultimately prevail. This dynamic is based on a society capable of integrating diverse cultural impulses, and not on the creation of a homogeneous society that precludes diversity.

44. Mark’s Gospel, 15:38 *Et le voile du Sanctuaire se déchira en deux du haut en bas.*

B. OBLIGATION, EXEMPTION, AND GENDER:

HEAD COVERING AND OTHER ITEMS OF CLOTHING IN JUDAISM

Valérie Rhein⁴⁵

When and why do Jewish women cover their hair? What kind of head coverings do they wear? And does the headgear worn by Jewish men serve the same purpose as that worn by Jewish women? These questions are examined in the present study. Other garments and their religious implications will be addressed as well. Oftentimes in Judaism, when discussing the shaping of religious space, what women do wear – such as a hat or a headscarf – turns out to be less significant than what they do not wear.

The image of a veiled woman can be found in the very first book of the Bible, the Genesis. The reference to the veil is embedded in the Bible's first love story. In chapter 24, Rebekkah and Isaac marry, and the text mentions expressly that "*he loved her*" (Genesis 24:67).⁴⁶ The wedding is preceded by the couple's first encounter. It is said that:

And Rebekkah looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel, and said to the servant, "Who is the man over there, walking in the field to meet us"? The servant said, "It is my master". So she took her veil [za'iff] and covered herself.

Genesis 24:64–66

This story is told from Rebekkah's perspective, and it is the bride-to-be who decides to cover herself. For neither in Genesis nor in any of the other four books of the Torah (*Pentateuch*) is there a law that obligates women to put on a veil or otherwise to cover their heads. This changed only much later, when the rabbis of the *Mishnah*, a core work of rabbinic Judaism completed by the early 3rd century of the Christian Era, introduced a custom-based law that requires married women to cover their hair. It should be noted, however, that the Bible does indicate in several places that it was common for women to cover their hair. Unveiling or loosening a woman's hair, as described in Numbers 5:18, for example – the case of a woman whose husband suspects her of adulterous behaviour (*sotah*) – was understood as a humiliation or even punishment.

Covering the bride

In contemporary Judaism, a bride is usually veiled before the marriage ceremony. This custom, called "*bedeken di kale*" (Yiddish for "covering the bride"), has been practiced by Ashkenazi Jews at least since early medieval times⁴⁷ and is rooted in the biblical episode of Rebekkah's and Isaac's first encounter (Genesis 24:66). The blessing that is said during this ceremony – "*May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads*" – also originates in Rebekkah's story. It is with these words that Rebekkah's brother and mother say goodbye to the bride-to-be (Genesis 24:60).

In the *bedeken* ceremony, however, the bride does not veil herself; rather, it is usually the groom who veils his future wife. This evokes associations to Jacob's first wedding ceremony, in which he unintentionally marries the veiled (and fatefully not uncovered) Leah instead of her younger sister Rachel (Genesis 29:18–25). By looking at his bride's face before veiling her, the contemporary groom insures that he will marry

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46. Translation of biblical texts are based on *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version, With The Apocrypha*, eds. Michael D. Coogan et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

47. "Veil," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* [Second Edition; Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2007], 20:489.

the right woman.

There is yet another aspect that cannot be ignored when discussing the Jewish wedding ceremony: a groom looking at his bride's face before veiling her for the ceremony seems to echo a regulation transmitted in the *Mishnah*. In the beginning of the tractate of *Kiddushin*, the *Mishnah* discusses a free man's "acquisition" (*kanah*) of a number of "items," including women, slaves, cattle, and goods (*Mishnah, Kiddushin* 1:1–6). The parallels in the descriptions of how these four categories of "belongings" are acquired might suggest that an acquiring man examines women in much the same way as he examines slaves, cattle, and goods.

Moses' veil

Veils are usually associated with women. Nevertheless, the Torah also transmits the story of a veiled man, namely Moses, descending from Mount Sinai:

As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. (...) When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil [mas'veh] on his face; but whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with Him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with Him.

Exodus 34:29–31; 33–35

In contrast to Rebekkah, who puts on her veil in the context of interacting with her future husband, Moses puts on his veil in the context of interacting with God and with the people of Israel. Parallels to these different biblical purposes of covering oneself can be found in rabbinic Judaism as well, as will be discussed below.

Women and men

When it comes to Jewish law, reflections on the veil or the headscarf must be looked at from a broader perspective: it is necessary to examine other items of clothing and to look at Jewish men as well. In Judaism, what women do wear – such as a hat or a headscarf – has, religiously speaking, less significance than what women do not wear. Before this can be explained, a brief historical overview of men's head covering and women's hair covering is indicated.



Yarmulke (kippah)

As regards men, neither the Bible nor the Talmud – the core work of rabbinic Judaism completed by 500 of the Christian Era – transmits a law according to which men are required to cover their heads.⁴⁸ But over the years the custom of doing so has become more and more common. In contemporary Judaism, men wear a hat or a *yarmulke* (*kippah*) as a sign of respect towards God. They cover their heads in order to acknowledge that God's place is above them.

Today, Orthodox Jewish men cover their heads all day every day, while Reform Jewish men usually do so only when attending a religious service. Thus, wearing a *yarmulke* or a hat at all times has become a symbol of belonging to observant Judaism.

In Judaism, only married women are required to cover their hair. The source of this rule is the *Mishnah*. The rule is embedded in the rabbinic discussion on the consequences of a wife disregarding her obligations towards her husband. The discussion focuses on the circumstances under which he may divorce her without having to pay her the amount stipulated in the marriage contract (*ketubah* - a kind of prenuptial agreement, the purpose of which is to provide a female divorcee a certain degree of financial security).

And these [women] are divorced without a ketubah: She who transgresses the Law of Moses [dat moshe;

48. See, for example, Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 30b.

Torah law] and [she who transgresses] Jewish custom [dat yehudit]. (...) And which is [a woman who transgresses] Jewish custom? She goes out with her hair uncovered, or spins in the street, or talks to any man.

Mishnah, Ketubot 7:6⁴⁹



The *Mishnah* makes it clear that this obligation was not transmitted by the Bible (Law of Moses; *halakhah mi-de-oraita*). Rather, the rule that a married woman has to cover her hair is rooted in post-biblical law that was shaped by the rabbis (*halakhah mi-de-rabbanan*). This is noteworthy, as biblical law is usually considered to be of higher significance than rabbinic law.⁵⁰

The way Jewish women cover their hair has changed over the centuries. Today, there is a huge variety of head coverings, including hats, snoods, caps, headscarves, and wigs.

Covering their hair serves Jewish women as a sign of being married, as well as a symbol of belonging to observant Judaism. Most Reform Jewish women do not cover their hair, and when they do, it is usually only during religious services.

In the last couple of years, a peripheral phenomenon has been observed in a very small number of Israeli *haredi* (so-called “ultra-Orthodox”) communities. In these few communities, women have started to cover their faces with a black garment resembling a *niqāb*. Even though no more than a total of a few hundred women veil their faces, this development cannot be looked at in isolation from the broader tendency toward gender segregation in Israel among *haredi* Jews – with radical implications for broader Israeli society and legislation.⁵¹

Obligation and exemption

Hats, snoods, caps, headscarves, and wigs are part of the Jewish woman’s “dress code”. But when it comes to clothing, the crucial question in Judaism is not if, how, and when women cover their hair; rather, the crucial question concerns the garments men are obligated to wear (and women are not). For example, the



Tallit



Fringes (tzitzit)

49. Translation based on Mishnah: *A New Translation with a Commentary* by Pinhas Kehati, Seder Nashim, vol. 1: Yevamot, Ketubot, translated by Edward Levin (Jerusalem: Eliner Library, 1987).

50. Menachem Elon, *Jewish Law: History, Sources, Principles*, vol. I (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994), 212.

51. See, for example, the reference on “Women of the Wall” below; on gender segregation and on veiled women in Israel see Elana Maryles Sztokman, *The War on Women in Israel: A Story of Religious Radicalism and the Women Fighting for Freedom* (Naperville: Sourcebooks, 2015), 3–30; 67–86.

tallit, is traditionally a white prayer shawl with black or blue stripes and fringes in its four corners (*tzitzit*).

Men put on the prayer shawl every day for the morning prayer (*shacharit*).⁵² They also wear a similar but smaller version of the prayer shawl, called a *tallit katan* (small *tallit*). Its fringes are attached to the four corners of a square piece of white material that is worn underneath regular clothes. Men wear the small *tallit* all day every day, some with the fringes exposed, others with the fringes tucked in.⁵³ The purpose of the fringes on both of these garments is to remind men of their religious obligations.

Whereas men are obligated to wear both a *tallit* and a *tallit katan*, women are “exempt” (*patur*) from wearing fringed garments. Women’s exemption from this obligation is transmitted in the Babylonian Talmud (*Kiddushin* 33b).⁵⁴ To be exempt means to be “not obligated”; it does not mean “not permitted.” Other sources, though, suggest that women are not merely exempt from wearing fringed garments, but rather that they are virtually forbidden from doing so. One of the reasons appears to be the biblical prohibition on women wearing men’s clothes.⁵⁵ Since the late 20th century, members of the group “Women of the Wall” have been struggling to assert the right to wear, among other ritual objects, a *tallit* when praying at Jerusalem’s Western Wall, and repeatedly, women wearing a *tallit* have been arrested in the Western Wall area.

Conversely, in today’s Reform Judaism, many women choose to wear a *tallit* (as well as a *yarmulke*). Their prayer shawls often differ from the male version, as they exhibit colorful feminine designs. This is not only a manifestation of fashion and style, but also a contribution to the transformation of this traditionally masculine garment into a feminine piece of clothing. For even today, many women have to get over their own inhibitions before they can feel comfortable wearing a *tallit*, as for centuries, the prayer shawl has been affiliated with men. The next generation of women (and men), however – at least those who identify with Reform Judaism – might handle this with increasing ease, as in that environment today’s *bat mitzvah* girls, just like *bar mitzvah* boys, are given a prayer shawl when celebrating their coming of age and are invited henceforth to put on a *tallit* during morning prayers.



Obligation and privilege

Tallitots for women

Why is it necessary to point out garments that men are obligated to wear and women are not? Why does it matter that women are exempted from these garments?

In rabbinic Judaism, the obligation to more commandments is a privilege, and this privilege is associated with higher social status. Manifestations of this hierarchical thinking can be found, for example, in the

52. In addition to the morning prayer, the *tallit* is worn during the entirety of the Day of Atonement (yom kippur) as well as by prayer leaders for all religious services.

53. It is a widespread custom for boys, too, to wear a *tallit katan* (but not a *tallit*), even though they are not obligated to do so until they reach age 13.

54. See also Jerusalem Talmud, *Kiddushin* 1:7 (61c).

55. See for example Targum Yonatan Ben Uziel on Deuteronomy 22:5; men, too, are prohibited from wearing clothes associated with the opposite sex; the Torah does not, however, explicitly define what it means by “men’s” or “women’s” clothing.

Talmud and in the *Tosefta* (parallel work to the *Mishnah*):

As Rabbi Hanina says: Greater [is one who] is commanded [to do a commandment] and performs [it] than one who is not commanded [to do a commandment] and performs [it].

Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 31a⁵⁶

Rabbi Judah says: “A man must recite three benedictions every day: (...) Praised [...] who did not make me a woman.” (...) for women are not obligated [to perform all of] the commandments.

*Tosefta, Berakhot 6:18*⁵⁷

This conception is diametrically opposed to how duties in general society are often taken – namely as an inevitable, but not necessarily readily accepted, task. Take, for example, housekeeping responsibilities, where the attitude can be described as “the fewer, the better”. In traditional Judaism it is the other way round: the more commandments a person has to fulfil, the better.

From the disparity in religious commandments emerges a hierarchy between women and men. Subsequently, women, as they are obligated to fewer commandments than men, are considered to be less privileged. And even if they choose to voluntarily fulfill obligations they are exempted from, this action is considered less worthy than if they were obligated. This has radical implications regarding Jewish women’s ritual life as well as their status. For no matter how many commandments women choose to fulfill, they will never be able to attain the same level of “greatness” as men (unlike boys and male converts, who ultimately attain the – higher – status of a male adult Jew). Note that the systematic distinction between commandments for men and commandments for women is introduced by the rabbis, whereas the Bible usually does not differentiate between the sexes when it issues commandments.⁵⁸

Modesty rules for Jewish women

As mentioned above, a Jewish man’s head covering serves as a sign of respect towards God, and a Jewish woman’s head covering serves as a sign of being married. This leads to another issue which needs to be addressed when examining Jewish “dress codes”, namely, modesty (*zniut*). The rule according to which a married woman has to cover her hair is not a Torah-based law, but rather a law rooted in Talmudic modesty regulations, as, for example, stated in *Mishnah Ketuvot* 7:6. The term “Jewish custom” (*dat yehudit*) that appears in this Mishnaic passage is used primarily in discussions of women’s behavior, and it is based on the social conventions of the time. An example of this perception of woman’s modest demeanor can be found in *Genesis Rabbah*, a commentary (*midrash*) from the early 5th century on the biblical book of Genesis, discussing the creation of the first women:

“(...) [I will create her] from a place on the man that is private, [that] even when a man stands naked, that place is covered.” And with each and every limb that [God] created in [the woman], He would say to her, “Be a modest woman, a modest woman”.

*Genesis Rabbah 18:2 on Genesis 2:22*⁵⁹

Referring to the second biblical creation story in Genesis 2:18–23, this commentary argues on the basis of the hidden, i.e. modest place of a body’s rib, from which women originate. As women are created from

56. Translation based on *Talmud Bavli*, The Noé Edition, Hebrew/English, Commentary by Adin E.-I. Steinsaltz; vol. 22: Tractate Kiddushin (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2015).

57. Translation based on *The Tosefta: Translated from the Hebrew with a New Introduction* by Jacob Neusner, 2 vols. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002).

58. See Valérie Rhein, „In den Fussstapfen des Priesters: Betrachtungen zu Gesetz und Gender in Tora und rabbinischer Literatur am Beispiel der Befreiung der Frau von zeitgebundenen Geboten,” in *Chilufim* 21 (2016): 5–74.

59. Translation based on *Midrash Rabbah: The Midrash With an Annotated, Interpretive Elucidation and Additional Insights*, eds. Chaim Malinowitz et al., vol. 1: Genesis (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 2011–2014). It is common in rabbinic literature to transmit a variety of views. This is also true for the comments on Genesis 2:22 (“And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man”) in *Genesis Rabbah*. A comment favorable to women, for example, goes as follows: “Rabbi El’azar said in the name of Rabbi Yose ben Zimra: Greater [powers of] understanding than [those of] the man were given to [the woman]” (*Genesis Rabbah* 18:4 on Genesis 2:22).

Adam's "veiled" rib, women should dress (and behave) modestly, and this becomes manifest in being, to a certain extent, invisible in public. In contrast, the first creation story in Genesis 1:27, in which male and female are equal – "*So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them*" – is irrelevant in this setting.

Women's codes of modesty are also an issue when it comes to men's prayer settings. In the context of a discussion of the daily recitation of the prayer "*Shema Israel*" (opening with the words "*Hear, O Israel*") – from which women are exempt – the Talmud transmits the following statements:

[Along these lines,] Rav Hisda said: [Even] a woman's [exposed] leg [is considered] nakedness (...). Shmuel [further] stated: A woman's [singing] voice is [considered] nakedness (...). Rav Sheshet stated: [Even] a woman's hair is [considered] nakedness (...).

Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 24a⁶⁰

According to one rabbi, a man reciting the "*Shema Israel*" may not see a woman's exposed leg, according to another rabbi, he may not hear a woman's singing voice, and according to a third rabbi he may not see a woman's hair.

What started off with regulations in the context of a particular prayer has been extended over the years to praying and non-praying situations. It has become standard practice in observant Jewish daily life for women who are married to cover their hair and for all women, married or not, to dress modestly, i.e., to cover their elbows and knees.

Relationship man–God / woman–man

In sum, the following insights can be highlighted:

- Men are obligated to put on certain ritual garments such as the *tallit* or the *tallit katan*.
- Women are exempt from these commandments.
- Obligation to a greater number of commandments is considered a privilege in rabbinic Judaism.
- Even by voluntarily performing commandments from which they are exempt, women will never attain the privileged status of obligated men.
- The garments women are required to wear, such as hair coverings, do not serve a ritual purpose for women (but may do so for men).

Thus, the "dress code" of a Jewish man emphasizes his relationship to God. The prayer shawl, for example, that is worn for the morning prayer as well as the smaller fringed undergarment that is worn all day are supposed to remind him of his religious obligations. And a man's head covering serves as a symbol of respect towards God. In contrast, the "dress code" of a Jewish woman regulates interactions between men and women and serves the purpose of giving men a dignified space within which to express their relationship to God. David ben Yosef Abudarham, a 14th century scholar, outlined these different roles of Jewish women and men accordingly. Explaining why women are exempt from some of the commandments – usually so-called time-bound commandments (*mitzvot aseh she hazman gramah*) such as wearing fringed garments – he said:

And the reason women were exempt from time-bound commandments was because a woman is subject to her husband to attend to his needs. Were she under obligation to carry out the time-bound commandments, it might happen that while in the process of performing one of them, her husband orders her to do his bidding. Were she then to persist in doing the commandment of the Creator and neglect her husband, woe to her on account of her husband. However, were she to do his bidding and drop the commandment of her Creator, woe to her on account of her Creator. Therefore the Creator exempted her from the commandments

60. Translation based on *Talmud Bavli*, The Noé Edition, Hebrew/English, Commentary by Adin E.-I. Steinsaltz; vol. 1: Tractate Berakhot (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2012).

*so that she will have peace with her husband.*⁶¹

A similar pattern applies to the male and female biblical figures introduced at the beginning of this paper. Rebekkah puts on her veil when seeing her future husband for the first time,⁶² Moses puts on his veil to cover his shiny face after his encounters with God. In other words: the “dress code” of a Jewish man focuses on the man-God bond, while the “dress code” of a Jewish woman is focused on the woman-man bond. And that is why in Judaism, what women do wear – such as a hat or a headscarf – has, religiously and legally speaking, less significance than what women do not wear – such as a *tallit* or a *tallit katan*.

Jewish “dress code” and free will

These observations on head coverings and other items of clothing concentrate on Jewish law and custom and do not focus on head coverings that Jews were forced to wear.⁶³ Nevertheless, the question has to be raised if wearing or not wearing a hat, a cap, a snood, or a *yarmulke* is a choice of free will for Jewish women and men. On the one hand, it is a free choice. In countries where the majority of the 21st century’s Jews lives – in North America and Israel, but also in Europe – they are neither prohibited nor forced by local laws to do the one or the other. On the other hand, it has to be taken into consideration that Jewish men covering their head and Jewish women covering their hair reveal their religious affiliation. Non-Jews can identify them as Jews, while Jews can identify them as observant. Thus, depending on their surroundings, this might influence the choices made by Jewish men and women. At its best, wearing or not wearing headgear is a personal expression of identity. Depending on the social or political conditions, however, this decision may be more or less free.

Conclusion

Rebekkah, meeting her future husband, “took her veil and covered herself.” Moses, being aware of his shiny countenance after having encountered God, “put a veil on his face” before interacting with the people of Israel. Technically, these two biblical narratives are legally irrelevant. Nevertheless they anticipate what rabbinic law and custom defined over time. Women, underlining their married status, cover their hair, and men, expressing respect towards God, cover their heads. Additionally, men wear fringed garments, reminding them of their religious obligations. Women, who are obligated to a smaller number of religious commandments than men, are exempt from wearing fringed garments and from other laws. This leads to a law-based hierarchy and creates a situation in which – from a religious and legal perspective – what Jewish women do not wear turns out to be more significant than what they do wear.

© Pictures: Valérie Rhein, Peter Bollag

61. Sefer Abudarham, Blessing on Commandments; translation based on Pamela Barmash, “*Women and Mitzvot, Y.D. 246:6*,” in The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards Teshuvot, ed. The Rabbinical Assembly (April 2014), 16.

62. Another example is Tamar: She veils herself before interacting with her father-in-law Judah (Genesis 38:14 and 38:19).

63. On headgear that Jews were forced to wear, see, e.g., Naomi Lubrich, “The Wandering Hat: Iterations of the Medieval Jewish Pointed Cap,” in *Jewish History* 29 (2015): 203–244.

C. THE ISLAMIC HEADSCARF:

FROM A SYMBOL OF SUBMISSION TO FEMINIST COMMITMENT

*Malika Hamidi*⁶⁴

After a first phase of remaining in the shadows during the 1960s, then of coming out in the open and gaining visibility during the 1980s, Islam has finally entered a new age: the age of citizenship. A new generation of women is currently asserting their Muslim faith in the heart of Europe.

Today, we are witnessing the emergence of the first generation of European women of “Muslim faith” and in particular, of “these new Muslim and feminist figures” in the public sphere, who do not hesitate to engage with the media and to stand their own in the political arena, as well as within feminist movements.

To be “European, Muslim and feminist” is the credo of these women, who became fully empowered through education, while questioning at the same time the silent and discreet shadow into which their fathers and mothers had submissively withdrawn, assuming that they were only passing through Europe.

This new generation of Muslim women who feel deeply European, wants to connect their religious affiliation to the European society that they now consider theirs, and to the contemporary world. These women, in particular, are struggling to flourish in European societies. They set out to prove with determination that it is now possible to live one’s spiritual convictions and to respect Muslim ethics while simultaneously leading the life of an active citizen. That being said, the challenge is fraught with danger.

The issue of donning the Islamic headscarf by European Muslim women in the so-called secularised contemporary societies is crucial in the context of the numerous challenges that they are confronted with.

This analysis addresses the theme of the headscarf in Islam against the backdrop of Francophone Europe. It draws on the divine prescription in the sacred texts and other religious precepts or presumptions, describing the way in which European Muslim women express themselves today as regards different methods of understanding the wearing of the headscarf, and also refers to the interpretation of the underlying Quranic principles. Finally, the analysis addresses citizen and henceforth feminist participation that reveals all the subtlety of a negotiated relationship that these women maintain within the dynamics of the social and political transformation currently under way.



*United Arab Emirates figure skater Zahra Lari models Nike's new hijab.
Photo credit: Vivienne Balla / Nike*

64. Dr Malika Hamidi, PhD in Sociology at the École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) Paris, author of “*Un féminisme musulman, et pourquoi pas ?*” (L’Aube, 2017).

I. THE SPIRITUAL MEANING OF THE ISLAMIC HEADSCARF

1. What is the headscarf according to Scriptural sources?

By way of introduction, the terms “veil”, “headscarf” and “*hijab*” should be defined.

In the Quran, the term ‘*hijab*’ literally means “something that hides”, an expression mentioned in Verse 53 of Sura 33, Al-Ahzab (The Coalitions).

In this Verse, God asks the believers who are friends of the Prophet and who entered his home at any time of day to be more discreet, more polite and not to linger too long with him for no reason.

They are also ordered not to approach the Prophet’s wives, considered as “the mothers of believers”. Any soliciting addressed to them must take place behind a *hijab* or a curtain:



Model Halima Aden wearing a hijab
Photo credit: Getty Images

“And when you ask [his wives] for something, ask them from behind a partition. That is purer for your hearts and their hearts. You must not hurt the feeling of the Messenger of Allah...”

The *hijab* in this particular case concerns the Prophet’s wives who have to be above any suspicion. Over time, *hijab* took the significance of the scarf covering women’s hair.

In the French language, this scarf pejoratively described as a veil when Muslim women are concerned, is literally defined as a piece of cloth aimed at covering or hiding.

“To don the veil” means, in the Catholic context, “to become a nun”. The so-called “Islamic” headscarf is the sign of Muslim identity that some women wear today to refer to their cultural belonging or to their commitment to Islam, in the same way that some men of Jewish faith wear the *yarmulke*.

2. A divine prescription

With regard to the religious aspect of modest clothing, Verse 59 of Surah 33 or Surah *Al-Ahzab* (the coalitions) says:

“O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to bring down over themselves [part] of their outer garments. That is more suitable that they will be known and not be abused. And ever is Allah Forgiving and Merciful.”

The Verse 31 of the Surah 24, *An-Nûr* (the Light), revealed shortly after the Sura of *Al-Ahzab* according to the Quranic chronology, stipulates the necessity of modest clothing and specifies its significance and objective:

“And tell the believing women to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts and not expose their adornment except that which [necessarily] appears thereof and to wrap [a portion of] their headcovers over their chests and not expose their adornment except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands’ fathers, their sons, their husbands’ sons, their brothers, their brothers’ sons, their sisters’ sons, their women, that which their right hands possess, or those male attendants having no physical desire, or children who are not yet aware of the private aspects of women. And let them not stamp their feet to make known what they conceal of their adornment. And turn to Allah in repentance, all of you, O believers, that you might succeed.”

From the earliest available sources on this subject until today, Muslim scholars seem to agree, more or less, on the fact that a pubescent Muslim woman must cover her hair and neck, which are parts of her adornments.

Thus, prophetic tradition confirms this obligation through the *hadeeth* delivered in this circumstance. The most famous is the one in which the Prophet explains to Asmâ' (the sister of Aïsha, the Prophet's wife) how a girl, once she has reached puberty, should only let her face and hands appear from her body (the Prophet showed her this by using gestures).

Evoking this Islamic prescription outside the context of faith is irrational and represents even an aberration according to some Muslim women, who consider that we cannot speak of a religious obligation without harbouring faith in one's heart, which is necessary so that this duty can become an act of devotion and love.

According to these women, the prescription of modest clothing dates back to the 15th year after the beginning of the Revelation. During 15 years, Muslim women devoted their time to worshipping God and once they were apprised of the above verse, they did not hesitate to submit to this divine prescription. Above all, this was an expression of their commitment to their faith.

Indeed, according to a *hadeeth* narrated by Aisha, one of the prophet's wives, as soon as the verse was revealed to Prophet Muhammad, they hastened to fetch the cloth garments to cover their hair and breast.

Similarly, many Muslim women express the need to espouse with wisdom and serenity a spiritual message urging modesty, decency and respect. In the other two monotheistic religions and according to the law of the Talmud, the veil reflects decency and modesty. Furthermore, in the Bible, according to Saint Paul, a veil encourages piety and self-restraint.

II. WHAT THE "VEIL" REVEALS

Many debates regarding the "veil" often downgrade Muslim women to a merely oppressed "Other". This results from the fact that the Islamic headscarf is perceived as a sign of subjugation and submission.

Among Muslim women in Europe, there are, on the one hand, those who claim that the headscarf is a form of protection against a social Westernization, denying the right of Muslim women to manifest their religion in the public space, and on the other hand, those who reject it as garment that erases the features of their femininity.

1. The headscarf and the principle of freedom

Let us go back to the objections raised against Muslim women regarding the wearing of Islamic headscarves in the West, particularly when they engage in socio-political activities.

The major objection lies in the fact that the Islamic headscarf would violate the right to freedom, which is a fundamental right that cannot be questioned. In this specific case, the headscarf allegedly threatens the dignity of women and would therefore be contrary to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

It is in these terms that an activist within a political party in Belgium echoed the remarks of non-Muslim members of her party, during debates on the headscarf, and demanded that "*this religious principle disappears so that the respectability, and the right to freedom of Muslim women is no longer violated.*"

Another current objection to "veiling" lies in the contextualization of the verse 53 of the Surah 33, Al-Ahzab (The coalitions). This brings us to the third objection made to the headscarf, namely that it would cause Muslim women to be secluded to the private sphere. Nevertheless, activists who support the headscarf advocate the view that God gave women the ability to engage in society just like men. According to Muslim women engaged at the grassroots level, God gave them "*a reason to think and an active intelligence to reform societies*", as one of them testified.

Activists consider that the ethical dimension of this Islamic principle, which encourages them to respect a certain line of behaviour in society, constitutes in no way a form of slavery or submission and does not run counter to human freedom and dignity.

2. The feminist movement in question

In France as in Belgium, the debate on the Islamic headscarf develops by reflex a stance among some

feminists who are part of the mainstream feminist movements advocating the need to create feminist and political solidarity today, by allying themselves with the so-called Muslim minority.

In francophone Europe, the debates around the headscarf have made it possible to create this type of political space for feminism, in order to rethink the struggle based on new issues and revisited approaches. This new feminist movement includes issues that challenge and question the postures of major feminist movements on the one hand, and, on the other hand, feminists who are open to debating the power structures in a globalised society.

Today, more and more Muslim women experience the Islamic headscarf as a gain in power and autonomy.

The headscarf, as a source of power, covers many realities. Muslim women claim that the headscarf gives them a new type of freedom in their social relationships, by allowing them to assert themselves by means of their mind and intelligence, rather than their body.

However, the negative connotations related to the headscarf weigh heavily on the challenges facing Muslim women mainly in continental Europe. It is a question of genuinely transforming the headscarf into a form of socio-political partaking in power, or even into a symbol that reflects a socially open vision, inspired by democratic and egalitarian principles, in order to be understood by Western feminists and the West. It is also important to recognize that the headscarf implies no restriction on the activities of women in the professional, social and educational fields, and that there is therefore no objective reason to oppose it. Furthermore, it is necessary to stimulate an evolution of mentalities and of attitudes in society. The *hijab* is currently triggering a debate that goes “*beyond the veil*”, discussing complex concepts and taboos, such as colonial unconscious prejudices that still survive in European societies.

In fact, the *hijab* has revealed a deep philosophical, ideological and political crisis around concepts that were once incontrovertible (the Republic, democracy, secularity and women’s emancipation) and that have divided social movements, as well as civil society.

Finally, in France as in Belgium, Muslim feminists have questioned the universality of feminism, by deconstructing dominant theories to make room for diversity, and by reconfiguring the “*mapping of feminisms*” through their political and identity claims, in the framework of their common desire for liberation from different structures of domination.

Tensions have thus emerged in the open, and tongues have broken loose.

Indeed, the religious symbol of the “veil” has led to discussions that go beyond the very question of religion.

3. The Islamic headscarf in the age of secularity

Since the dawn of times and beyond the Muslim world, women have had to fight tirelessly to achieve and to enforce their rights. In the French-speaking context, a fight put up by Muslim women to enjoy the right to wear a headscarf in a secular environment has created an unbecoming and unexpected debate, fuelling the wave of Islamophobia that is sweeping across Europe.

This claim of religious exclusion raises the question of the complex relationship between the diversity of religions and secularity.

Some interpretations of religions are incompatible with any form of acceptance of plurality, just as some interpretations of secularity are incompatible with any form of religious manifestation.

Thus, Muslim women are torn between, on the one hand, a fundamentalist interpretation of the religious corpus, and on the other hand, a totalitarian and exclusive interpretation of the concept of secularity (“neo-laicity” explained by Emile Poulat⁶⁵ or the “*secularist*” ideology, an expression used by Edwy Plenel).

In the European context, it should be recalled that Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

65. French historian and sociologist.

authorizes a rights-holder, by virtue of his right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, “*either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance*”.

In this context, particularly as regards religious practice, the questions that must be asked are the following: Between religion and secularity, how can women’s rights be defined while respecting the specificities of each woman? How can one finally reconcile secularity, religion and women’s rights in the light of a new reality, namely a Muslim presence emerging at the heart of Western societies?

Committed activists and intellectuals have been bringing to light a disturbing and constantly evolving idea for about twenty years. On the one hand, Muslim communities are “revisiting” religion in order to support women’s struggle, by developing a feminist approach while at the same time, regaining control over the religious corpus, with a view to promoting a contextualized interpretative framework of the sacred texts related to women. On the other hand, activists challenge the zealots of the concept of secularity, marked by an exclusive secularist ideology rather than by an inclusive secularity, in violation of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The question of gender and secularity is certainly subordinated to national cultural contexts, including in Europe. The Muslim presence must lead the intellectual and political class to envisage a peaceful and all-encompassing secularity, in view of a constantly evolving European context.

Indeed, a restrictive and literal interpretation of both religion and secularity can lead to a denial of the rights of everyone, in the same way that an evolving interpretation based on protean social realities can liberate and reform mentalities.

The challenge is however significant, as it entails promoting a “liberationist” interpretation of these two concepts without systematically opposing them, in order to advance women’s rights.

Secularity has contributed to the advancement of women’s rights, but it is definitely not a “magical formula” that has eliminated all forms of discrimination or domination against women either by men or by institutions. The year 1905 revolutionized relations between politics and religion, but did not come near ending the civil and political exclusion of women.

In the same way as Florence Rochefort⁶⁶ demonstrated the important role of Protestantism in the evolution of women’s rights around 1905, when it was a question of defending women’s votes (which was then defended only by a minority), Ferdinand Buisson provided through his writings significant male support, coming from a very atypical, forward thinking and individualist Protestant.

Today a new reality is emerging: a generation of women who call themselves Muslims, feminists and secularists who denounce the status quo and engage politically in combating the damage of a totalitarian and overpowering secularism, all the while rejecting all patriarchal interpretations of divine texts.

III. TOWARDS A “FEMINIST” HEADSCARF

This generation of women of Muslim faith is becoming autonomous and more visible on the political scene and in the media, through extensive voluntary work, from the grassroots to the academic and political spheres. They are becoming agents of change, armed with an unexpected and disquieting political and intellectual maturity.

The most striking example in this regard was undoubtedly related to the “headscarf issue”, in the particular context of a feminist and secular movement that was divided on this matter, because Muslim women in France and in Belgium questioned the founding principles of “anti-clerical” secularism and of a homogenized form of feminism.

It is during the years 2000 that appear new cohorts of Muslim women, who aspire to achieve a process of

66. Research fellow at “*Sociétés Religions Laïcité*” Group

emancipation, first through the language of religion, and then from a feminist perspective, in the French-speaking area.

The appearance of this new kind of religious awareness gives rise to tension in the prevailing socio-political context.

In the aftermath of the events of 9/11, the world witnessed the emergence of sustained harassment and discrimination against Islam in politics and in the media, with Muslim women becoming “hostages” of political debates, but also of the Islamist discourse.

It is in light of these tensions that societies are witnessing the emergence of new forms of feminist activism that are structured and organized to face the challenges emerging in the public sphere, as well as in their own community of faith.

It is also in this context, in particular, that a phenomenon that runs counter to the mainstream ideas of prevailing feminism emerges, first in France and then in Belgium: the formation of groups of Muslim activists committed to both an Islamic and a feminist perspective. The tone was therefore set: “*Feminists and Muslims, Why not ?*”⁶⁷

1. Feminists and Muslims: an impossible identity?

According to some intellectuals and activists, feminism and Islam seem to be in a conflicting relationship in the ideological and political fields. Both claim a vision of women’s emancipation according to two ideological currents, considered to be contradictory.

Furthermore, the sudden emergence of religion, through the visibility of the Islamic headscarf in the public sphere is seen, despite article 18 of the Universal Declaration, as a threat and an affront that would subject women to a moral norm imposed by religion.

This trend of thought demonstrates that Muslim women are becoming themselves the actors as well as the subjects of these profound changes. They challenge the patriarchal interpretation of Islam that affects the daily lives and what the future holds for Muslim women.

They focus on an “Islamic critique from a feminist perspective”, which can be associated with a certain traditionalist trend. They contextualize the interpretation of the Quran in light of spatial and temporal realities.

From their point of view, promoting a contemporary interpretation of the Quran is both inevitable and justified given the current issues and debates related to women in Islam. Nevertheless, they also rise against patriarchal visions that claim to speak in their place, to confirm their desire to “free Muslim women from the headscarf.” How numerous are the pale, male and stale pedantic orientalists who express themselves in this way on television screens! However, how rarely are women wearing headscarves invited to participate in these debates!

2. Political instrumentalization of the issue of women in Islam

In France, the heated debates on the controversial issue of the “Islamic headscarf” have, on the one hand, divided feminist movements, and, on the other hand, highlighted the racist and colonialist imprint in the discourse of some activists and intellectuals, who remain unconsciously or consciously influenced by their country’s colonial past. The latter affects not only their way of thinking, but also their relationship with European descendants of immigrants from former colonies.

The political manipulation of topics concerning women when addressing “veil issues” in France as in Belgium, and recently in Austria, has justified stigmatization and Islamophobic laws that continue to marginalize a generation of women of Muslim background, though the latter feel wholeheartedly European.

67. The famous “Why not?” or “*Pourquoi pas?*” by Christine Delphy, historical figure of the French feminist movement, at the CEPT meeting at the Trianon on 4.2.2004 on the hybrid identity under construction of Muslim feminists in France

According to these women, such discriminatory reactions are the reproduction of race-conscious and colonial attitudes that continue to gain traction and to divide women according to their social and racial affiliation, superimposed on gender discrimination.

In this perspective, the challenge of an inclusive feminism stands in developing solidarity strategies of resistance in order to counter these neo-colonial mind-sets between women.

However, it is first of all through the conceptualization of non-imperialist feminist thinking and by advocating a common “decolonized” struggle, that it will become possible to plead for a form of feminism that is both inclusive and anti-racist.

Today, women from different backgrounds are fighting for the promotion of diversity within the feminist agenda and for the multiplicity of liberation strategies within women’s movements worldwide, which have as a common objective women’s emancipation. This process begins with their own situation of subordination, whether women wear a headscarf or not, towards a truly universal form of all-encompassing feminism where all women would find their place.

Conclusion

Over recent years, hopes for reconciliation between Islam, secularity and feminism have been hesitantly emerging. Nevertheless, this will inevitably require strong political leadership that upholds the principles of secularity and the respect of free religious practice, in full compliance with Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

Muslim women in Europe refuse to be cornered into an exclusive debate on the Islamic headscarf, in which a woman’s body becomes the major political stake in this “war of civilisations”, a debate that generates fear and mistrust leading to the exacerbation of xenophobia. Muslim women commit themselves to resist this worrying evolution and to take up the challenge of working towards a promising reconciliation between Islam and the West, with some Muslim women choosing to discard the “*hijab*”, while others proudly wear it and henceforth consider it to be “feminist”. For the latter, it is a headscarf that liberates and introduces pro-faith women as an opportunity for Europe in its unity founded on diversity.

With reference to the journalist Ian Buruma⁶⁸, and to plans in Europe to ban any visibility of religion in the public space, such as headscarves, minarets and the *burqa*, this vision would emerge in reality from fear not of Islam, but rather of a Europe whose identity is questioned by Muslim presence, on the one hand, and by religious sentiment on the other.

Globalised Europe finds itself in the midst of an identity crisis. The process of secularisation, where many have emancipated themselves from their faith, brings out the disturbing visibility of this “Islamic” headscarf in the public space. The problem may be not so much about the headscarf as about the loss of spirituality in large parts of Europe.

68. Anglo-Dutch journalist.

Part 2:
Catalogue of the exhibition “Veiling/Unveiling”

EXHIBITION and PANEL DISCUSSION

veiling unveiling

*The Headscarf in
Christianity, Islam and Judaism*



The Geneva Centre For Human Rights
Advancement and Global Dialogue



Permanent Mission of the People's Democratic
Republic of Algeria to the United Nations Office
at Geneva and other international organizations
in Switzerland



FONDATION ADLANIA

veiling unveiling

Travelling Exhibition

Presented at the UN Geneva
from 23rd February to 1st March 2018
On the margins of the 37th session of the
UN Human Rights Council

Coordinated by the Geneva Centre for Human Rights
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Mission of the People's Democratic Republic
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FOREWORD

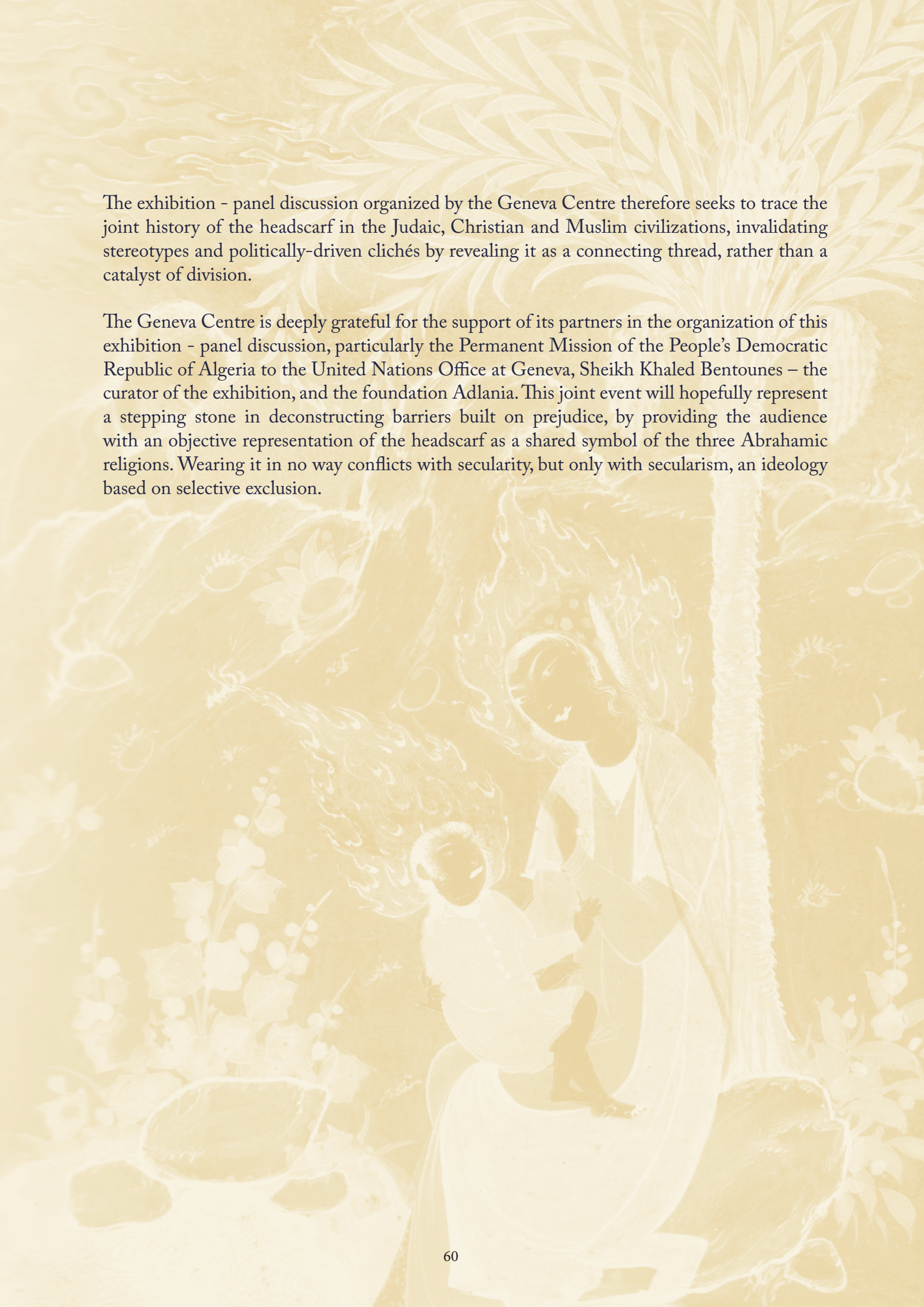
By Dr. Hanif Hassan Ali Al Qassim

Chairman of the Board of Management of the Geneva Centre

The Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue acts as a platform for intercultural and interreligious dialogue, by building bridges between the Global North and the Global South. The cornerstones of its work are the respect and the protection of human rights for all, the promotion of tolerance and, above all, the enhancement of commonalities and convergence between cultures so as to encourage cooperation and understanding.


In response to the growing phenomenon of Islamophobia and other forms of xenophobia, racism, and intolerance that have been on the rise over the past decades, the focus of the Geneva Centre's work over the past few years has revolved around topical social issues such as women's rights, migration, deradicalization and Islamophobia. Ultimately, the objective of the Geneva Centre is to provide true and depoliticized facts and figures about, and to promote an objective understanding of, these topics. This may not preclude challenging the mainstream narrative that in the present instance may wrongfully depict Islam and the countries in the Arab region as fundamentally different and incompatible with Western societies and values, and even with human rights and democratic principles.

In light of these goals, the Geneva Centre has joined forces with the Permanent Mission of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria to the United Nations Office at Geneva and other international organizations in Switzerland to organize an exhibition and a panel discussion on the margins of the 37th session of the UN Human Rights Council, on the headscarf in the three Abrahamic religions – Islam, Christianity and Judaism. The exhibition, entitled "Veiling/Unveiling", seeks to shed light on the polemic around the Islamic headscarf that has been gaining acuteness in non-Muslim countries. The negative depiction of the headscarf contributes to the creation of a fertile ground for discriminatory practices and violence, of which women are the main victims. It is claimed to be irreconcilable with secularity and with women's rights. This manifestation of Islamophobia, seeking legitimacy in alleged compassion with Arab women, feeds on stereotypes and ignorance. Moreover, against the current trend to challenge gender inequality and discrimination against women around the world, these postures associated with the headscarf have a broader adverse impact: they discredit the movement for women's rights and equality in the Arab region, as well as the tireless work of Arab women activists, many of whom choose to wear the headscarf themselves.



The exhibition - panel discussion organized by the Geneva Centre therefore seeks to trace the joint history of the headscarf in the Judaic, Christian and Muslim civilizations, invalidating stereotypes and politically-driven clichés by revealing it as a connecting thread, rather than a catalyst of division.

The Geneva Centre is deeply grateful for the support of its partners in the organization of this exhibition - panel discussion, particularly the Permanent Mission of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria to the United Nations Office at Geneva, Sheikh Khaled Bentounes – the curator of the exhibition, and the foundation Adlania. This joint event will hopefully represent a stepping stone in deconstructing barriers built on prejudice, by providing the audience with an objective representation of the headscarf as a shared symbol of the three Abrahamic religions. Wearing it in no way conflicts with secularity, but only with secularism, an ideology based on selective exclusion.



This flagship exhibition invites us to travel across centuries to discover the cultural and spiritual sense of "Veiling/Unveiling". There are different sides to the same reality that constantly escape our eyes.

The exhibition is conceived as a space for reflection, aiming at:

- Deconstructing myths accumulated throughout human history around the feminine energy;
- Reclaiming history, by highlighting great feminine figures who marked the history of monotheistic traditions and who are essential links in the chain of transmission of the divine message;
- Reconnecting with the feminine energy as a harbinger of peace, by evoking the joint responsibility of women in the great adventure of Humanity;
- Reiterating the collective responsibility to restore for the benefit of current and future generations, the historical legacy of women that has been durably concealed, thereby educating all to build a society steeped in a culture of peace and shared living.

Women since the beginning of humankind

The African Eve

Going back to Prehistoric times, one discovers that one of the oldest humanoid skeletons discovered so far in Africa had belonged to a woman. The famous «Lucy», a 3.2-million-year old female skeleton was named Danikenesh, which literally means in Ethiopian, "You are wonderful".

Engravings and rock paintings

The oldest representations from Prehistory, such as those of the Chauvet Cave (France) or the frescoes of Tassili (Algeria), allow us today to capture a more vivid and more realistic image of the activities and roles of our distant female ancestors.

Menhirs and statues

A great number of menhirs and statues evoke the woman in various situations. Thus, Çatal Höyük (Turkey), is represented seated, while giving birth to a child. She is the mother goddess of fertility, closely connected to the development of agriculture.



The White Lady of Aouanghet, reproduction of a rock painting from Tassili n'Ajjer, Algeria



Çatal Höyük, 6000-4000 BC JC, terracotta, 11 cm high, Hittite Museum of Ankara, Photographer Dagli Orti G.

Women in Antiquity

Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean provide the oldest references to veiled women.

Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent

Originally, the headscarf was a prestigious garment worn by goddesses, then priestesses and finally, married women.

According to Mesopotamian sources, the goddess Ishtar is the august Queen of Heaven, the female Sovereign of the countries, the creator of Gods and of all Humanity. She is a veiled bride whose primary characteristics are purity, chastity, prudence, wisdom and great beauty.



Tablet of Assyrian Laws, 12th century BC
terracotta, Assur, current Iraq,
© Pergamon Museum, Museum of Antiquities of
the Near East, Berlin, Germany



Isis and her son, the God Horus, statuette in
bronze, 664-252 BC © 2014 Museum of
Sacred Art from Pont-Saint-Esprit, France

The first written proof of the obligation to wear a headscarf by married women comes from Mesopotamia and is inscribed in paragraph 40 of the Assyrians laws of King Teglath-Phalasar the First (1115 – 1077 B. C.). Married women were thus distinguished in public areas from prostitutes and slaves, who did not wear headscarves.

Pharaonic Egypt The Mother-Goddess Isis

Isis is the protective and the redeeming goddess of Egyptian mythology. The removal of her headscarf - or rather her headscarves - means revealing the light, and succeeding in lifting the headscarf makes one immortal.

Women in Antiquity

Pre-Islamic Arabia

The custom of wearing the headscarf in Arabia is very ancient. The Christian moralist theologian of North Africa, Tertullian of Carthage (160-222), named pagan women from Arabia who veiled their bodies and their faces as examples for Christian women.



Nemesis, al-Latt and the dedicant, votive low-relief with small Palmyrenian style, 2nd century or the beginning of the 3rd Century. © 2014 Museum of Fine Arts of Lyon, France

The Arab Goddesses

In pre-Islamic Arabia, there was a sanctuary in Mecca containing 360 idols. Among them, the goddesses Al-Lat, Manat and Al-Uzza formed a trinity whose worship was widely spread. They were seen as the daughters of Allah, and people sought help and intercession from them. It should be reiterated in this context that “Allah” is the Arab name of God, and not the God of the Arabs.

Women in Antiquity

The Greco-Roman Civilization



The Sophoclean, wrapped in her himation: terracotta figure, 330-200 BC. AD © 2009 Louvre Museum / Anne Chauvet

Ancient Greece

In everyday life in Greek antiquity, the headscarf worn by women was essentially a sign of respectability. Plutarch (v.46-49 / v.125) points out that it was contrary to general custom for a woman to expose herself in public. Veiling also had a spiritual and a symbolic meaning: a headscarf of initiation covered the fiancée during nuptial ceremonies. It was also sometimes used in other initiatory rituals, worn by certain priestesses.

Ancient Rome

The symbol of the headscarf is closely related to marriage in Ancient Rome: the word *nubere* means “veiling” and “getting married”. *Nupta*, which literally stands for veiled, means “wife”.

There is a distinction between the traditional feminine headscarf and the religious headscarf. Many Roman goddesses are veiled, and the veil appears as an essential object in sacrificial rituals, for both men and women.

Monotheism

The emergence of monotheism gives rise to a new vision of the notion of the divine and of the human. This vision is based particularly on the belief in the revelation of the One, Universal God, and of Humanity born from a single couple, Adam and Eve.

The original couple

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, Eve is created for Adam and from one of his ribs. The disobedience of Adam, the responsibility of which is attributed to Eve, will later reflect on Eve's female descendants. Perpetually wrongful, women will thus wear a headscarf in order to hide their shame.



Adam and Eve expelled from Paradise,
detail of a fresco, Masaccio, 15th century,
Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence, Italy

The Hebrew Tradition

The headscarf in Judaism

The Old Testament refers to the veiling of women without however making it a legal requirement. Nevertheless, in some texts of the rabbinical tradition (Talmud), married women are required to cover their heads outside the family home, out of respect for husbands.

Women's veiling in the Biblical tradition

Jews, as, later on, Christians, take ownership of the pagan headscarf and confer on it a divine or social normative character. In both cases, women's veiling is imposed in order to mark the difference between the two sexes, and implies a hierarchical relationship.



Women at the Wailing Wall

The Hebrew Tradition



The involvement of theology in the explanation of the donning of the headscarf by women seems to have occurred later in Judaism [...]. In these texts, the woman is to be considered a flaw in the process of divine creation [...] God enumerates the disadvantages of creating the woman because of her intrinsic vanity. As such, God's creation escapes him and, in spite of all these precautions, a woman cannot resist being vain.

Jewish bride of Fez,
Jean Besancenot, 1942

"I will create her from a hidden part of the man, which remains covered even when he stands naked. And for every one of the members that He created, He said to the woman: "Be modest, be modest!" (Genesis I, 17)

Woman in Jewish tradition,
lithograph, Algeria,
private collection

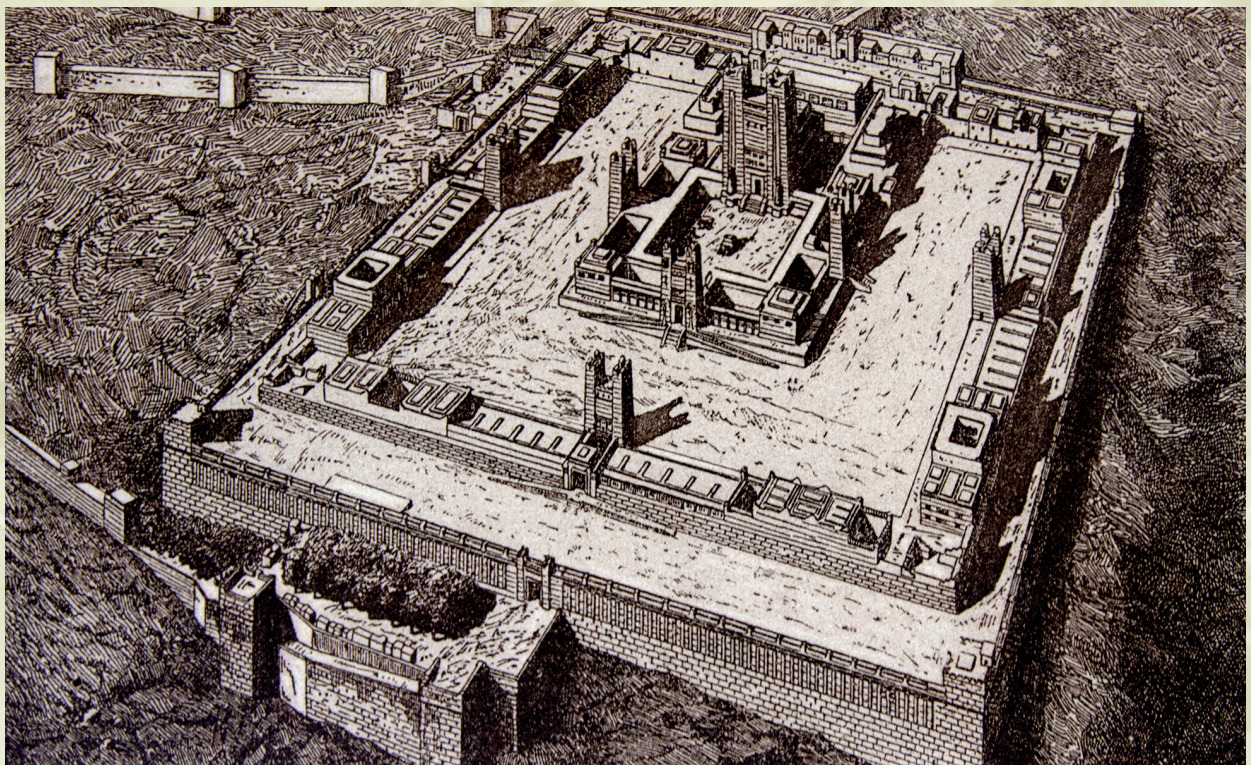


The Hebrew Tradition

The Beloved in Solomon's Song of Songs

" How beautiful you are, my darling!
Oh, how beautiful!
Your eyes behind your veil are doves.
Your hair is like a flock of goats
Undulating on the slopes of Gilead.
Your teeth are like a flock of sheep to be shorn,
coming up after bathing.
Each one has its twin;
not one of them is therefrom deprived.
Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon;
your mouth is lovely.
Your cheeks behind your veil
are like the halves of a

pomegranate.
Your neck is like the tower of David,
rising proudly from its stand;
on it hang a thousand roundels,
all of them shields of gallant warriors.
Your breasts are like two fawns,
the twin fawns of a gazelle
that browse among the lilies.
Until the day breaks
and the shadows flee,
I will go to the mountain of myrrh
and to the hill of incense.
You are altogether beautiful, my darling;
there is no flaw in you."



Restored image of Solomon's Temple

The Hebrew Tradition

The great female figures of the Jewish tradition

The founding writings of the Hebrew tradition highlight outstanding women who distinguished themselves through their human and spiritual qualities, and through their major role in biblical memory. Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and her sister Leah represent the four matriarchs of the Jewish tradition. They are considered the female ancestors of the Children of Israel.



Meeting of Isaac and Rebecca;
Friedrich Bouterwek,
Private coll.

Sarah

Sarah, Abraham's wife, is the first of the matriarchs. She gives birth to Isaac when elderly, the latter becoming the heir of the line of prophets of Israel. She asks Abraham to send into exile Hagar and their son Ishmael. Abraham, who hesitates, receives this biblical command: «All that Sarah will tell you, listen to her voice. (Genesis 21:12)



Abraham, Sarah
and Hagar,
illustration in a
Bible, 1897

Tomb of Rachel,
located near the city of
Bethlehem, postcard,
private coll.



The Christian Tradition

The headscarf in Christianity

It is Saint Paul who, in his First Letter to the Corinthians, inscribes the headscarf in a theological demonstration, transforming it into a legal obligation. For him, the headscarf marks the « natural » hierarchy that exists between man and woman.



St. Paul,
Bartolomeo
Montagna, 1482,
Poldi Pezzoli
Museum, Italy

11.2 I praise you so that you remember me in all things, and so that you keep my instructions as I delivered them to you.
11.3 But I would have you know that Christ is the leader of every man, that man is the leader of the woman, and that God is the leader of Christ.
11.4 Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonours his leader.
11.5 On the contrary every woman, praying or prophesying, with her head uncovered, dishonours her leader: it is as if she were shaven.
11.6 So if the woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. Or if it is a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered.
11.7 Man must not cover his head, in as much as he is the image and glory of God: while the woman is the glory of the man.
11.8 For, the man was not pulled from the woman, but the woman was pulled from the man;
11.9 and neither was the man created because of the woman, but the woman was created because of the man.
11.10 For this cause the woman, because of the angels, must have a mark of authority on her head that she can depend on.
11.11 Nevertheless, in the Lord, neither the woman is without the man, nor is the man without the woman.
11.12 For, as the woman was pulled from man, even so the man only exists because of the woman, and all things come from God.
11.13 Judge by yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered?
11.14 Doth not even nature itself teach you that it is a shame if a man has long hair,
11.15 but it is a glory if a woman has long hair, because the hair is given her as a veil?
11.16 But if anyone likes to take issue, we have no such custom, neither do the churches of God.

The First Letter to the Corinthians of Saint Paul
(11/2 – 16)



Virgin Mary and the child Jesus,
postcard, private coll.



Veiling, lithography,
private coll.

The Christian Tradition

The Fathers of the Church

The arguments of the Fathers of the Church from the 4th to the 7th century concerning women are unequivocal and do not differ from those of their predecessors. The dress code that banned going out with the head uncovered was observed until the middle of the 20th century.



Marble sculpture, Raffaele Monti (1818-1881)



The sermon of St. Mark in Alexandria, excerpt, G. Bellini, Milan Brera, Italy



Coptic woman, postcard, 1899, philatelic Museum of Egypt, Alexandria

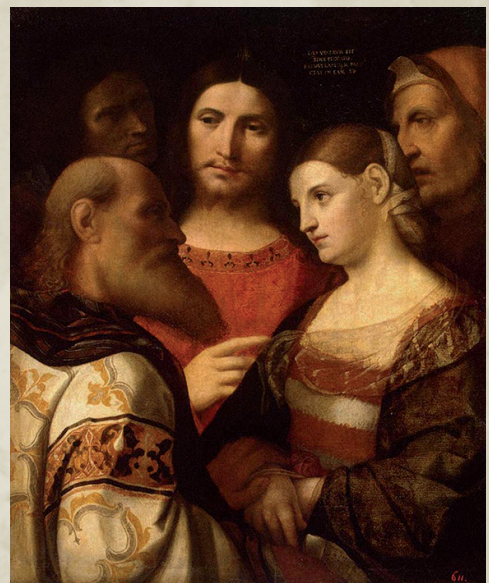
The Christian Tradition



Mary's tomb, postcard,
private coll.

Women in the Gospels

The Gospels refer to some exceptional feminine figures such as Virgin Mary, blessed among all women, and Mary Magdalene, to whom the Archangel announced the resurrection of Jesus.



Jesus and the adulteress, 1510-1511,
Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

The adulterous woman

The Pharisees wanted to put Jesus in a difficult situation by subjecting the adulterous woman to his judgment. He would have had to choose between absolving the guilty woman, and condemning her to stoning, as dictated by the precepts of Jewish law. Jesus answered, "*He who has never sinned, let him cast the first stone*" (John 8: 7). All of the present withdrew at this point, and he remained alone with her. He then said to her, "*Now go and sin no more.*" (John 8:11)



The farewells of Bethany,
postcard, private coll.

The Muslim Tradition

Islam, the third monotheistic religion, affirms the supreme and absolute Unicity of God, emphasizing the continuity of the legacy of the Biblical Prophets up to Prophet Muhammad.

The original couple according to Islam

Unlike other traditions, Islam affirms that Adam and Eve were both created from a unique soul. This founding principle of gender equality, which is paradoxically perceived today as entirely absent from the Islamic tradition, is, on the contrary, at the very heart of the Islamic message.

The creation of Eve

Although the representation of Eve's conception "from Adam's rib" originates in the Judeo-Christian tradition, many Muslims have adopted it as well. Yet, there exists no confirmation of this version in the Qur'an.

The exile from Paradise

The Biblical concept of the "Original Sin" is entirely absent from the Qur'an. As a matter of fact, a completely different approach is presented in the latter, as both Adam and Eve are seen as responsible of their own disobedience, of which in addition they will be entirely absolved. As such, nothing in the Qur'an blames Eve, nor any other woman, simply by reason of her gender.



Adam and Eve in Paradise,
c. 1560, Qazvin, Iran



Tomb of Eve in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia,
postcard, private coll.

The Muslim Tradition

Women in the Qur'an



Jesus and Mary watched over by Zacharie, illustration of a Persian version of "Narratives of the Prophets" of Tha'labi; Nichapur, Iran

Women play a major role in the Qur'an. The eternal feminine is revealed through their history and their specificities. Among these feminine references there is Mary, God's chosen one, who gives her name to the 19th Surah; the mother of Moses, receiver of a divine revelation; the Queen of Sheba, a model of wisdom, and Hagar, Mother of Ishmael, a symbol of one of the fundamental rituals of the pilgrimage to Mecca - the fifth pillar of Islam.

The Muslim Tradition

The Prophet and women

Like all the other messengers, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) had a circle of male and female disciples (sahabat and sahabiyat). The disciples actively participated in the preservation, conservation, and transmission of his teachings.

Filial love

The Prophet worked all his life towards restoring the dignity of women, particularly that of mothers. He said: "Paradise is under the heels of mothers".

Love as a gift from God

In marital relations, the Prophet taught that love towards women should be a source of mercy.

Knowledge and education as obligations

Far from the prevailing patriarchy, from misogyny and from the separation of genders, the Prophet asserted that "Knowledge is an obligation for every Muslim man and woman."

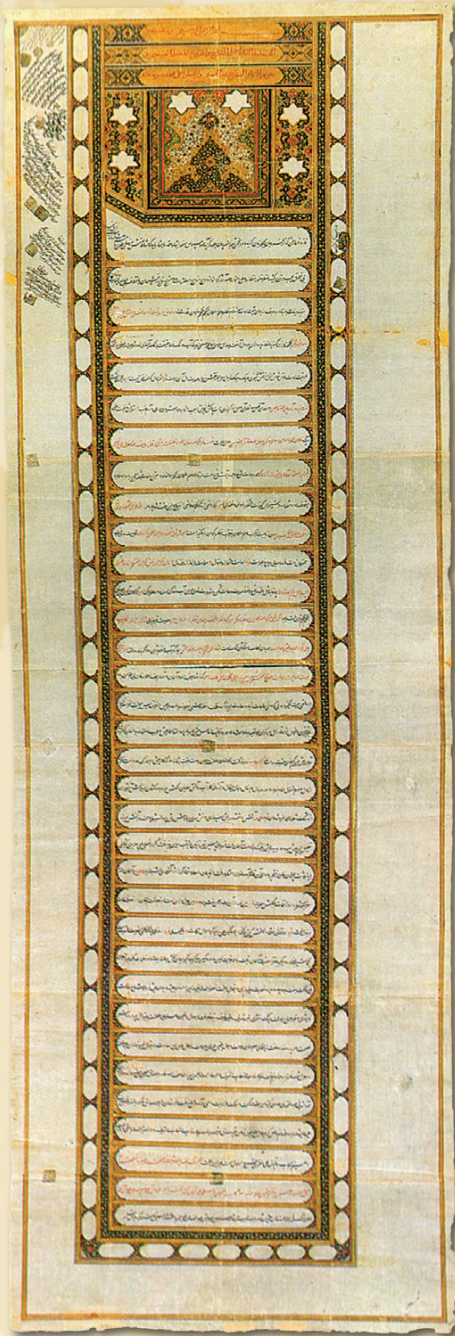
Gender equality

The Prophet tried by all means to achieve equality between men and women, affirming that "women are the equals of men."



A couple in love, 1646, Iran |

The Muslim Tradition



Marriage contract with finely illuminated title, 1853, Teheran, Iran.

The Prophet: legislator and protector of women

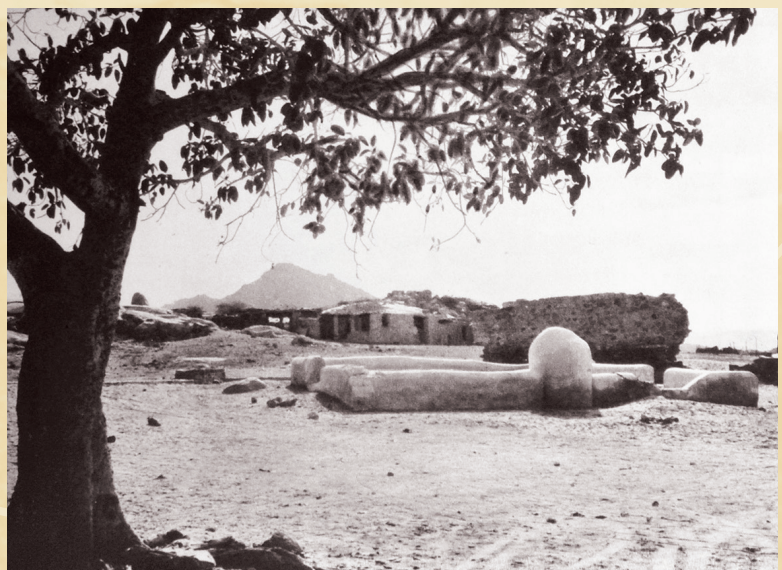
The Prophet abolished femicide, introduced the dowry and the marriage contract, as well as the right to inheritance for women, and allowed the separation by divorce. The Prophet was fundamentally opposed to violence against women, and clearly stated "Do not hit your women."

The Prophet's Farewell Preaching

In his Farewell Sermon, the Prophet recommended to his community to be considerate towards women, repeating his advice thrice.

The Prophet's female disciples

Among the Prophet's disciples were the first women who had entirely freely pledged allegiance to Him. This pledge indicates the active participation of these women in Arabia's social and political life during the 7th century.



Place of the first pledge of allegiance before the Hijrah

Veiling and unveiling according to the Mystics

The headscarf as a dress code connected to local customs and traditions does not play a major role in the tradition of Muslim Mystics. They rather perceive it as a veiling of the heart to the sight of God in the real world as well as beyond.



"You were certainly unmindful of this, and We have removed from you your cover, so your sight, this Day, is sharp." (Quran: 50, 22)

Sufi woman, ceramic tile, Iran,
private collection.



Tomb of Muḥeddine Ibn Arabi,
Damascus, Syria.

Veiling and unveiling according to the Mystics



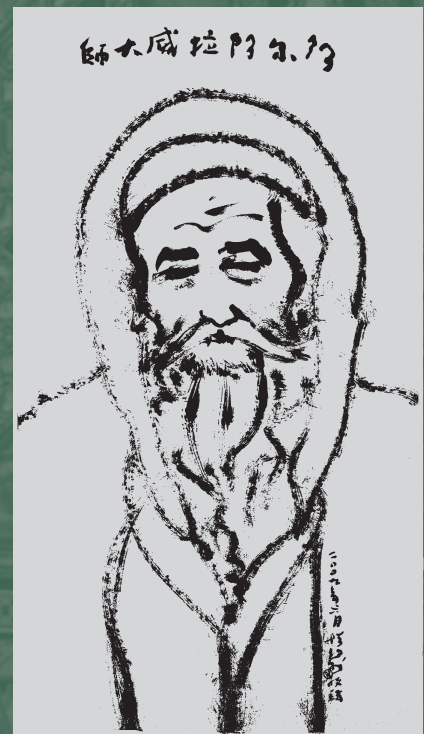
For the mystics of Islam, the notion of the veil is at the heart of their initiatory journey. As the perceptible and temporal world is depicted as a set of veils hiding the real world, the pursuit of the aspiring mystic engaged in the right path (sulûk) consists in lifting these veils that stand between himself and the Truth.

Retreat of Sayyida Nafisa,
Cairo, Egypt

Sheikh Mustapha al-Alawi (1869-1934) reveals: *“Your veil is closeness, through which you are sealed off from Reality (God). God manifests himself through screening and is hidden by the glare of His splendour!”*

*“The veils disappeared completely
When my Beloved appeared to me.
Oh you, lovers,
This is the moment of Sighting!
Hardly had I pronounced the name of “Allah”
That my veil was shredded!”
And, he adds:
“Have you through the effect of grace, dispelled
the veils?
Have you raised the cloak and the curtain?”*

Sheikh al-'Alâwî.



Sheikh Mustapha al-Alawi,
by the great artist Swie Han Tan,
Singapore

Confiscated memory

More than nine thousand names of women, which are currently being listed, have been erased from collective memory.

Muslim women were historically at the forefront of the building and the development of Islamic civilization. Many women left their imprint on the spiritual, religious and scientific heritage of the Muslim world.

Century	Women scholars in Islamic sciences	Women political figures	Women activists	Women patrons
	Name	Region	Name	Region
6 ^e			Umm Haram	Arabia
7 ^e	Sayyida Nafisa	Egypt	Sayyida Aïcha bint Abī Bakr	Arabia
			Nusaybah bent Ka'ab	Arabia
			Khawla b. al-Azwar	Arabia
8 ^e			Umm Hiram bint Milhan	Arabia
	Umm Al-Darda	Damascus		
	Aminah Ramliya	Irak		
	Abida al-Ma-danyia	Medina		
				Zubeida bint Jaf'ar
				She oversaw the construction of an aqueduct to bring clean water to Mecca. She offered financial support to great literary figures, scientists, poets of the time.
				Tarūb
				Founder of the Tarūb Mosque.
				

Century	Women scholars in Islamic sciences		Women political figures		Women activists		Women patrons	
	Name	Region	Name	Region	Name	Region	Name	Region
9 ^e							<p>Fatima el Fihriya Founder of the Mosque and University El-Qa-rawiyyin in Fez</p> <p>Meryem el Fihriya Founder of the Andalusian Mosque Al-Sifa</p>	
							Morocco	
10 ^e	<p>Shaykha Shuhdah Iran</p> <p>Samānah bint Hamadan</p> <p>Amat al-Wahid bint al-Mahāmali</p> <p>Fatimah bint 'Abd al-Rahman</p> <p>Jum'ah bint Ahmad</p> <p>Fatimah bint Hilal al-Karji</p> <p>Umm Salamah</p> <p>Fatimah bint Abu Bakr</p> <p>Fatimah bint Muhammad al-Sairafi</p> <p>Muniyyah al-Kātibah</p> <p>Tahirah bint Ahmad</p> <p>Amat al-Salām bint Qadi Abu Bakr</p>						<p>Umm al-Muqtadir-Billah Irak</p> <p>Created a tribunal and designated a woman judge.</p>	
								
11 ^e	<p>Karima al-Marwaziyya Arabia</p> <p>Fatéma Bint al-Hus-seyn Bint Ali</p> <p>Khadijah bint Musa</p> <p>Jabrah al-Sawdā'</p> <p>Satitah bint Qadi ibn Abu 'Amr</p> <p>Khadijah bint Muhammad</p> <p>Hamdah bint Wathiq</p> <p>Rābi'ah bint Mahmud Is-pahan</p> <p>Fatimah bint 'Ali</p> <p>Zaynab bint Hasan</p> <p>Malakah bint Dawūd</p>		<p>Arwā Bint Ahmad As-Sulayhiyy Yemen</p> <p>Asma bint Shihab as-Sulayhiyya Yemen</p> 					

Modern times



Huda Shaarawi,
Al-Akhbar, Egypt

Modern times

During the 19th century, the “Al-Nahda” (Renaissance) movement puts forward an adaptation of the Qur’anic message to modern times through a political, social, cultural and religious review. The issues approached concern the reasons for the political decline and the technical lag of the Muslim world, made worse by a religious interpretation of Islam increasingly inward-looking and fanatical. The thinkers of this period are in search of a middle way between stagnation and the blind imitation of the West. At the heart of this review stands the emancipation of women through education and learning.



The newspaper “L’Intransigeant – Journal de Paris”, August 9, 1935

Muhammed Abduh surrounded by Imams and students in Baghdad, Iraq



Modern times

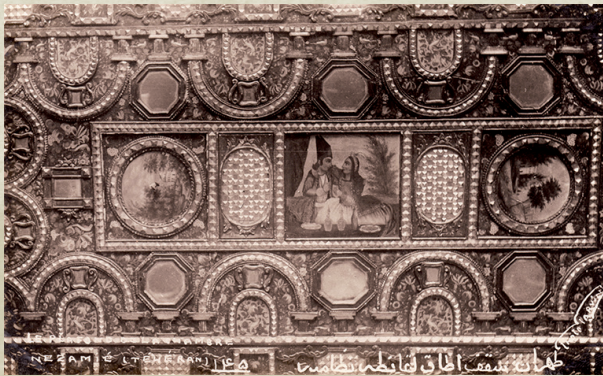
In Syria

Nazîra Zayn al-Din, theologian (21st century), states in her work *"For or against the headscarf"* (*Al-sufur wa-l-hijab*), that she was against the headscarf as she considered it to be foreign to religion. She invited men and women to show good judgement and to reflect on the prescriptions of the doctors of Muslim law before applying them blindly.



MONT LIBAN (Syrie) L. M. 5.
Beit-Eddin : Palais du Gouvernement du Liban construit par l'Emir Bechtel Chehab.

Beit-Eddin, Palace of the Government of Lebanon, Mount Lebanon, Syria, 20th century, postcard, private coll.



Nezamie, Tehran, 20th century, postcard, private coll.

In Iran

Reza Chah Pahlavi (1878-1944) tries, following Kemal Atatürk's model, to modernize his country. He forces men to wear Western clothing and opposes the headscarf. Several women are thus torn between these coercive laws and the pressures from a part of the population that remained very attached to tradition.

In Iraq

Jamil Sisqî al-Zahawî (1863-1936), son of the Baghdad mufti, poet and professor of law, was one of the first to criticize the total subjection of women, and repeatedly demanded a nobler attitude towards them. He stated that: "Woman and man are nothing less than equal in value. Educate the woman, because the woman is the symbol of culture."



Al-Rashid Street, Baghdad, Iraq, 20th century, postcard, private coll.

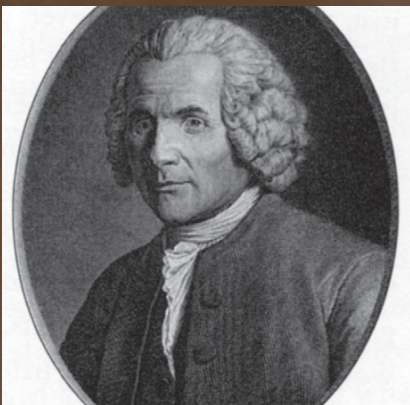
Woeful statements which even mar “Enlightenment”



Portrait of Dostoevsky by Vasily Perov, 1872, Tretiyakov gallery, Russia



Bust of Voltaire by J.-A. Houdon, 1778, National Gallery of Art, USA



Engraved portrait of Rousseau, after the original by Angélique Brazeau

Through the ages and across various cultures, women are very often depicted through masculine representations, as an inferior being or as a mere object of desire, and even as evil personification.

Whether the tone is one of ridicule, humour or erudite commentary, many quotes testify to a degrading image of women, deprived in particular of their intellectual and spiritual faculties, and more generally, of their freedom and human dignity.

This obscurantist blindfold has paradoxically not spared the times of the Enlightenment, as both the relations of domination and of contempt towards women are deeply anchored in the subconscious mind of men, or still fully assumed by them.

Pythagoras (c.580 BC- 495 BC) “There is a good principle that created order, light, and the man; there is an evil principle that has created chaos, darkness and the woman.”

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) “The woman represents the addition of trouble, the subtraction of the purse, the multiplication of enemies and the division between men.”

Victor Hugo (1802 - 1885) “God has become a man; likewise, the devil has become a woman!”

Federico Garcia Lorca (1898 - 1936) “To be born a woman is the worst punishment.”

Sacha Guitry (1885 - 1957) “I would gladly agree that women are superior to us, if that could discourage them from claiming to be our equals.”

Anatole France (1844 - 1924) “The head is not an essential organ for women.”

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778): “Woman is made to submit to man and to endure even injustice at his hands” (From “Emile, or On Education”).

The Politicization of the Headscarf

The tradition of the headscarf constitutes a shared heritage for all cultures and all civilisations.

The Quran calls for decency and warns against ostentatious behaviour and makes no reference to a standard of specifically Islamic clothing.

The political exploitation of the headscarf has created a climate of tension and misunderstanding that takes us away from the spirit of the Quranic text that everyone interprets and evokes to others, in order to feed an endless controversy.

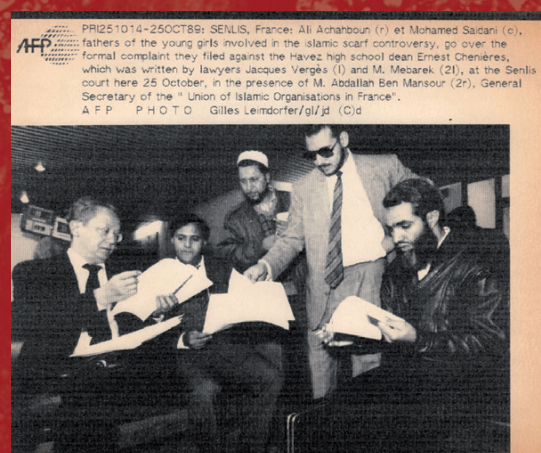
Isn't the true veil that of ignorance? Does it not prevent men and women from reasoning, thinking and adapting to their time while living their faith and spirituality to the full? Is this not what invites us to the essential message of Islam and the universal wisdom of humanity?

According to Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, *"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes (...) freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief."* In this regard, the donning of the headscarf should be a private choice for women, and the attempt of repressing this right is a source of politicization and a catalyst of strife in the society.



Muslim women in headscarves demonstrate on the 22th of October 1989 to protest against the ban on wearing headscarves in public schools

AFP Photo by Gilles Leimorfer



Ali Achahboun and Mohamed Saidani, fathers of the girls involved in the controversy of wearing the veil at school, with the famous lawyer Vergès, file a complaint at the court.

The headscarf in all its forms



Young girl from Touraine, France, 19th century



Young oriental woman, France, 19th century



Woman from Burgundy, France 20th century



Women of Ouled Nail, Algeria, 20th century



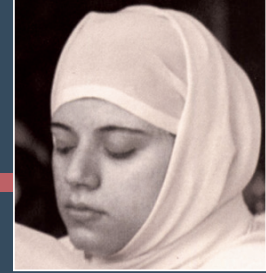
Children in Alsace, France, 20th century



Children in Ouled Nail, Algeria, 20th century



Portrait of a young woman, Germany, 16th century



Young woman praying, Srinagar, India, 21st century



Muslim city dweller, Egypt, 20th century



Catholic city dweller, Corsica, France, 20th century



Sudanese woman, 20th century



Woman from the South of Algeria, 20th century



Woman from Chatellillon, France, 20th century



Woman from Mostar, Former Yugoslavia, 20th century



Woman from Normandy, France, 20th century



Woman from Mali, 21st century



Ottoman Woman, Turkey, 19th century



City dweller from suburbs of Venice, Italy, 20th century



Young girl, Algiers, Algeria, 20th century



Woman from Bou-Saada, Algeria, 20th century



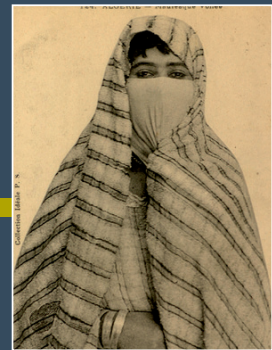
Women in Jaipur, India, 21st century



French nuns, 20th century



Catholic city dweller, Skhodra, Albania, 20th century



Woman with haik, Algeria, 20th century



Women from Oran, Algeria, 20th century



Arab woman from Oman



Muslim city dweller, Cairo, Egypt, 20th century



Woman from Tagmout, Morocco, 20th century

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