

## **Understanding Islam Series Two: Standing before God**

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### **Part Seven: Modesty: the special character of a Muslim**

It is reported that Prophet Muhammad on one occasion spoke of the special character of religions. The followers of Jesus, the ascetic and compassionate prophet, were to be characterised by their tender-heartedness, whereas, “My community will be characterised by modesty.” How then is modesty the special character of a Muslim?

One of the few Arabic words that spring to the tongue of non-Muslims is *hijab*. In many media stories, it is taken to relate to women’s dress. Often it is a pejorative term used to refer to certain aspects of dress, such as the wearing of an enveloping black cloak (*chador*) or a one-piece garment that covers from the top of the head to the ground with a gauze or lattice window through which to see (*burka*). In Muslim circles, it can be used simply to refer to a headscarf: “Does she wear a *hijab*?” or “Is she a *hijabi*?” In many contexts, *hijab*, meaning “women’s dress,” is spoken of as though it were the most important aspect of being a Muslim; more important than justice, care for the needy, not exploiting others, or promoting good and opposing bad in society! This is an area in need of investigation and deeper understanding.

To begin with, modesty is a much wider concept than what people wear, whether they are women or men. “I don’t care what they make me wear,” one Muslim woman said to me, “as long as I have my eyes free, I can flirt with any man.” One only has to walk behind some beard-sprouting Muslim youths to hear language that could not be described as modest. The way that one stands or walks or conducts oneself in public can all betray a rather confused understanding of “the special character of a Muslim.”

### **Exploring the term *hijab***

We meet the term *hijab* in the Qur’an with a range of meanings: division, partition, curtain, barrier or something that secludes. There is a *hijab* between heaven and hell that cannot be crossed [Q. 7:46]. There is a *hijab* between those who hear the guidance of the Qur’an and those who are deaf to it [Q. 41:5] and also between those who believe in the life hereafter and those who do not [Q. 17:45]. God speaks to Moses from behind a *hijab* because no human being can encounter God face-to-face [Q. 42:51]. When Mary was chosen to be the mother of Jesus, she put a *hijab* between herself and people; she set herself apart in seclusion [Q. 19:17]. Ultimately, the people of hell will be separated by a *hijab* from God; they will be alienated from God [Q. 83:15]. It is a characteristic of Paradise that the *hijab* between God and those admitted to Paradise will be lifted.

If we carry these meanings into our theme of modesty, then we can think of anything that partitions us, curtains us off or creates a barrier as being a form of *hijab* to

preserve human dignity or modesty by shielding us from the eyes of others. The curtain that is drawn across the entrance to a changing cubicle in a clothes shop would be a *hijab*. Similarly the bedroom curtains that one draws when going to change one's clothes during the daytime or the door to a shower or toilet cubicle would be examples of *hijab*. Modesty, in Islamic understanding, is something that ennobles the human being; it increases our dignity and self-respect.

The term *hijab*, in the sense of a modesty curtain occurs in the Qur'an [Q. 33:53]. The early sources recall the circumstances in which this verse was revealed. It was the evening of Muhammad's marriage to Zainab bint Jahash and he had invited people to come to share a celebration meal but they overstayed their welcome. The Prophet left them and went for a walk in the hope that they would get the message. Eventually they did and he drew a curtain across the space to seclude his private area, where he could be with his wife, from the public area where others came to consult with him. This modesty curtain in effect divided the space into two spheres: an intimate one and a public one. This verse goes on to speak about people not intruding into the intimate sphere but rather, if they need to ask something of one of the Prophet's wives, to do so from the public side of the curtain.

This idea of dividing human life into different spheres is helpful to understand the concept of modesty. There is the intimate sphere in which husband and wife are alone and secluded by a *hijab*. A certain code of dress, of speech and of conduct is appropriate in this sphere of marital relations that would not be appropriate elsewhere. Then there is a wider but restricted sphere that we can describe as that of the family. Here there is a code of dress, speech and action that is neither intimate nor public: "The curtains are drawn, we are all family together." The third sphere is that of general public interaction, where a more reserved code is in place: "I wouldn't wear these clothes in public!" or "That is a family matter not be discussed with outsiders" or "That is conduct appropriate to the bedroom but not on the streets!" We can see that there is a partition or *hijab*, either physical or moral, between these three spheres.

This is something essentially human that dignifies the human being, so that Islam would be opposed to public nudity as something that demeans all human beings. As modesty is the hallmark of the Muslim community, we see this in an exemplary way that points the whole of society to certain human values. Muslim etiquette requires that no adult, male or female, should appear naked before anyone other than their marriage partner and this is carried on beyond death, where the dead person is to be washed by people from the same sex, and even then, the modesty of the dead person is preserved by a sheet being held over their body with the washing taking place beneath it. The desire to have medical attention from a doctor or nurse of the same sex is obvious, and even then to limit the sense of being uncovered to a minimum. Muslim children are brought up in this spirit so communal changing rooms for sports are problematic. One Muslim father told me of his eight-year-old son being involved in a minor road accident and being rendered unconscious. When the hospital nurses drew back his clothing to see if there were any injuries, he unconsciously covered himself again when their backs were turned.

## **Modesty of heart and tongue**

When the Qur'an comes to speak about modesty, it addresses men and tells them to lower their gaze and guard their modesty, which will lead them to greater purity and God is well aware of what they do [Q. 24:30]. The following verse goes on to repeat the guidance for women. God, who alone knows the inner intentions of the human heart, knows best what they do, which implies that modesty is first of all a disposition of the human heart. This is the reason why the verses begin with the command to lower one's gaze; not to feast the eyes on things that do not contribute to human ennoblement. There is a Hadith that records Muhammad as saying to his son-in-law, Ali, "You are allowed the first glance but the second is against you and not in your favour." Islam knows the linkage between seeing images that lead to thoughts and thus to desires, which all too easily result in actions. Unfortunately, advertisers know this only too well also; this is the basis for filling our fields of vision with images that shock, entice or provoke desires so that we will buy their goods or services. The first stage of modesty is to regulate the heart and the eyes. Unless the heart, thus the intentions and the custody of the eyes, is in the right place, then there will be no spirit of modesty. We can think of this as the *hijab* of the heart.

The tongue is the principal organ for expressing the disposition of the heart. The idea of three spheres is useful as an indicator of modesty regulating the codes of acceptable speech from one to another. Muslim etiquette refers to modesty in manner of speech as well as content; the way that something is said can excite sexual interest just as much as the content itself. Islam is open about the natural desires and interests that people have for the opposite sex, which is why it needs to be controlled and kept within the parameters of marriage to prevent immorality. The body also expresses inward dispositions; we can gain an insight into someone's character by the way that they walk or stand. On the public transport vehicles in a crowded city, we are often much closer to strangers that we would choose to be, we regularly invade one another's personal space. Being conscious of this level of modesty can be thought of as the *hijab* of the tongue and body.

## **Modesty in dress**

The way that we dress affects both the person concerned, their dignity, honour and sense of self-esteem, and the people around who observe that person. Each individual has a responsibility to dress modestly for their own sake and for the sake of other people too. Again, the idea of different spheres is helpful: different codes of dress apply in the intimate, the family and the public spheres. This gives rise to two Islamic principles concerning the material and the cut of clothing: the material should not be "see-through" and the cut should not reveal the contours of the body. There is no such thing as "Islamic dress" as the climate and local culture will direct which materials and cut are chosen but these Islamic principles apply to someone living in the polar regions or the tropics and have been embodied in various loose-fitting styles worn by Arabs, Africans, Asians, Europeans and so on. An appropriately cut western business suit can fulfil these requirements just as well as an Arab robe hanging from the

shoulders (*abaya*) or the trouser/over-shirt suit of the Indian subcontinent (*shalwar/kameez*). Particular attention is given not to draw attention to the intimate mid-section, so tops (jackets, shirts, tunics) that come down to mid-thigh level are the norm. Loose-fitting, longer and flowing styles are favoured for men and women; they provide some dignity when sitting, especially if sitting cross-legged on the floor.

### **Being modest beautifully**

To dress modestly does not equate to looking dowdy or having no care about one's beauty or appearance. The verse of the Qur'an, addressed to all women and men, that speaks of clothing to cover one's nakedness goes on to speak about it being an adornment for us [Q. 7:26]. Muhammad spoke of God as being beautiful and loving beauty. Beauty is a quality of God that should radiate from the God-conscious human being. However beauty is seen as an inner quality that radiates from the person rather than something only on the outside; the same verse speaks of "the garment of *taqwa*." Ali, the son-in-law and cousin of Muhammad is reported to have said, "The adornment of your inner selves is more beautiful than the adornment of the outer." It is useful in this context to consider the difference between "being beautiful" and "being attractive or alluring or sexy." Help is given by a verse of the Qur'an speaking to women, "And tell them not to thump their feet to make known their hidden ornaments" [Q. 24:31]. It appears that the prostitutes of pre-Islamic times used to wear ankle bracelets that made a noise when the foot was struck on the floor to advertise their availability to potential clients. Thus the prohibition here is on provocative gestures, dress, perfume or ornaments to allure people of the opposite sex.

The idea of wearing beautiful clothes and "making oneself beautiful" for the sake of God and out of respect for others is part of Islamic etiquette [Q. 7:31]. Those who are preparing to go to the mosque, especially when there will be dense congregations such as on Fridays, are required to make themselves pleasant to be with in a confined place by bathing, having clean teeth and breath, and wearing clean clothes. It is common to find that when the separate men's and women's parts of the congregation have assembled, a bottle of perfume is passed along the rows to share the pleasant scent.

### **The general rule: cover-up!**

The general principle of clothes enhancing human dignity and preserving modesty applies to how much of someone's body should be covered. The general principle is to "cover up" except those parts that naturally are seen (face, hands and feet) but this can be relaxed if there is practical need. As a minimum the intimate areas of the body should be covered: for men, from the navel to below the knees, and for women, to include also the top half of her body. This allows for men being in a dirty workplace and rolling up trousers and sleeves or working in the heat and removing their shirts. Similarly, one could imagine women working in a water-logged field or having their arms in a washing tub. The general principles can be summarised as high neck-line, long sleeves and long trousers/skirts although some schools will interpret the precise

limits of these requirements differently. The key is not to put oneself on display to attract attention or disturb others' or one's own sense of modesty.

### **The hair included for women**

Covering the head for men and women was a natural part of life in the desert in Muhammad's time as it is today. It protects from the sun and wind and helps to keep the sand out of the ears, nose and mouth. It was common to have long ends that could be pulled across to shield the lower part of the face when the sand was blowing. The higher one's social class in seventh century Arabia, the more likely one was to cover up in this way. By the time that the Shari'a came to be written, the Islamic empire had spread well beyond the desert setting and ideas from Greek and Persian societies had had an influence, for example, high class Persian women would wear a face veil in public. The key verse of the Qur'an in this regard is Q. 24:31, which tells women not to display their *awra* in public except what ordinarily appears. The term *awra* here is not easy to translate or define, normally terms such as adornments, allurements or charms are used. Most scholars include the hair under this term and thus the practice of women wearing a headscarf when mixing outside the family circle (technically this is with men who are sufficiently removed in terms of relationship that they could be a potential marriage partner, for example, brothers are part of the family circle and one need not cover the hair in their presence but brothers-in-law could, under certain circumstances, be potential marriage partners, therefore one must cover up in their presence).

### **The face too?**

The overwhelming majority of Muslim scholars do not consider the face veil (*niqab*) to be an obligation for Muslim women. A tiny minority believe it to be desirable and a sign of piety. An even tinier minority believe it to be a requirement.

### **Closing remark**

Islam sees human beings as an integrated whole and thus provides guidance for every aspect of human lives. The wisdom of the Qur'an and *sunna* guides intimate, family and public spheres of life. Human dignity requires respect for oneself and others, and thus the high value placed on modesty. Our sexuality is a good and enhancing aspect of being human but it is powerful and needs to be under the restraint of marriage. Indeed, one way that Islam understands the teaching on modesty is that it neutralises the sexual attraction as a focus in relationships so that men and women can be judged by their characters, knowledge and conduct.