

The Veil Again
Rev. Diane Rollert
The Unitarian Church of Montreal, 22 November 2009

It is night in Istanbul, the hour of the final evening prayer. The neighbourhood mosque is lit up in the darkness and the call to prayer begins. The chanting reverberates from the minaret of one mosque to the next, until it overwhelms the sound of the city and nothing else can be heard. Then there is silence and the din of the night-time traffic reasserts itself. I'm expecting to see crowds lining up to enter the mosque, but nothing has changed. The restaurants are filled. People are out walking or waiting for the bus. The city goes on.

I am walking with one of my hosts, a young woman in her late twenties. She has immigrated to Quebec from Turkey, and this is her first trip home in several years. It is a hot summer night, but she wears a long-sleeved jacket, a long skirt and a colourful headscarf, a hijab or *turban* as the Turks call it, carefully arranged with a special white cloth beneath so that not a hair on her head will be visible.

We talk. To speak English is a strain for her, but she wants to improve. I ask her about Turkish law regarding the veil. Yes, the hijab is still illegal in the universities, schools and for teachers. Turkey still has laws in effect that prohibit religious dress in public, yet wearing the veil in most other places is now quietly tolerated.

My host tells me about a female journalist who did an experiment in Istanbul. For ten days she moved about the city wearing a veil. For the next ten days she wore a miniskirt. At the end of her experiment, the journalist concluded that a woman in a mini skirt had it harder in the city. My host tells me that the article made her angry. "What does this woman know of my experience?" she asks me.

In university, my host was forced to remove her headscarf. When she became a teacher she was forced to do the same. "The woman in the miniskirt has a choice, while I do not have the freedom to choose what I will wear. It is a complex situation in Turkey," she tells me, and then she apologizes that her English isn't good enough to explain.

As I travelled through Turkey, I found myself obsessed with the way women dressed. For the most part, men dressed the same way everywhere we went: nondescript shirts and pants, nothing to distinguish their religious or political affiliations. Yet it was the physical appearance of women, the way they dressed, that announced the politics and religious temperament of each city we visited. It was summer and there were days of oppressive heat that accentuated the contrast from one location to the next.

In Izmir and Antalya, where the liberals held more power, bareheaded women in sundresses well outnumbered women in scarves. In Istanbul, a city that literally has one foot in Europe and the other in Asia, the standoff between liberals and conservatives was palpable. It seemed as though half the women went covered, while half did not.

Then there was Konya, the city where the 13th Century mystic Rumi lived and gave birth to Sufism. It seems funny now to think that I was surprised to discover that Konya is a very conservative city. Except for the random tourist here and there, all the women you see wear headscarves and are modestly dressed. Their constant presence visibly announces the religious importance of this holy city. Pilgrims come from all over the world to stand in front of Rumi's shrine, holding their hands in front of their faces, silently chanting prayers for his soul. Women come dressed in beautiful long gowns and headscarves in vibrant colours: Turquoise blue and sequins, bright yellow with pink and purple flowers, flaming red with black and white swirls.

In the market adjacent to the tomb, stall after stall sells satiny scarves in every colour and pattern imaginable. Mannequins dressed in long tailored coats line the storefronts. Even in the blistering heat of July, you see many women dressed in these coats, their heads and necks covered by the scarves.

Some evenings during our trip we are invited to share dinner in the homes of local families. Air conditioning is rare. Wives, mothers, sisters immaculately dressed in hijabs and long sleeves, serve us sumptuous meals despite the heat. I have taken my guidebook's advice. My clothes are light, my head is bare, but I have made sure to cover my arms and wear long skirts. I am sweltering, but these women, who so graciously welcome us, appear cool and serene beneath their many layers. They are modestly dressed, but hardly shy or retiring.

Returning to Montreal, I find myself suffering from culture shock. Everywhere I go I am struck by the way women are dressed in this city. "They are wearing so little clothes," I catch myself thinking. "Their heads are so bare." I find myself rejoicing to be home, and at the same time, I miss the world I have just left. It takes a while for my equilibrium to return.

Back in Quebec, I discover that the debate over Muslim women and the veil is still raging. In May, the Fédération des femmes du Québec (FFQ) had voted in favour of maintaining Muslim women's right to wear the veil. Djemila Benhabib, author of *Ma vie contre-coran*, was vehemently opposed to the decision. She called it a betrayal of women's rights, and now she has hit the road lobbying for a *charte de laïcité*, a charter of secular rights, that would require women to remove the veil in the public arena.

Two members of the church had come to visit me in my office seeking assistance to respond to what they considered to be a reactionary force. Djemila Benhabib was gaining traction here, but they felt that she did not understand the Quebec Charter of Rights. Take away one group's free choice in wearing religious symbols and you open the door to removing other freedoms. This is not the way to ensure equal rights. Take away the veil and you force women into hiding. This will not improve their lot. If anything, it will make it worse. Why is it that we think that if we control what women wear they will be liberated? Oh, if only equality were that easily granted.

The debate over the veil is nothing new, as Leila Ahmed explains in her book *Women and Gender in Islam*. She writes that the West has long told a story of "the quintessential

otherness and inferiority of Islam” that places the practices and treatment of women at the centre. By the nineteenth century, the colonial powers, especially Britain, used the image of the oppressed and veiled woman as a rallying cry to justify the domination of Muslim lands and resources.

To Western colonial eyes, the veil was the most visible marker of what they called the backwardness of Islamic societies. Men like Lord Cromer, argued that Christianity “elevated” women while Islam degraded them. These observations had little to do with the women themselves, and much to do with British imperial needs, Ahmed argues. I can’t help but mention the irony that Lord Cromer, who called for the civilization of Muslim women, was also a “founding member and sometime president of the Men’s League for Opposing Women’s Suffrage” in England. Clearly, there was a double standard.

There are Muslim feminist scholars and sociologists who are now doing much work to place the veil within the context of history and the Qur’an. That is a whole other conversation, worth pursuing another day. Suffice to say that it was the colonizers who framed the discourse and loaded the veil with political meaning. By the 20th Century the lifting of the veil had become a symbol of imported Western feminism, while the wearing of the veil had become a symbol of anti-imperialism. In Turkey, this tension was especially acute.

When Mustafa Kemal Atatürk came to power in 1923, he sought to modernize (in other words Westernize) the newly liberated Turkish nation. This meant creating a secular state out of what had been an Islamic empire. Among Atatürk’s many reforms was the banning of the veil. Given this act, the veil, which had been a cultural and religious symbol, quickly became loaded with political meaning.

In her book *Forbidden Modern*, the Turkish sociologist Nilfüler Göle writes that the Iranian Revolution in 1979 “utilized the veiled bodies of women as a political symbol to show its difference from the Western world.” The revolution in Iran set off a debate among women in Turkey. Educated young women going into university demanded the right to wear headscarves. While the ban was not removed, the changing political environment led to growing numbers of women asserting their right to veil.

In the 1990s, this movement was especially strong among middle class, intellectual women who came from smaller towns and were entering the urban universities. Their parents were often shocked to see their daughters cover themselves. These were young women who argued “that equality between women and men in fact existed in the Golden Age of Islam,” and that “the unequal division of sex roles and the oppression of women [resulted] from the misinterpretation and mispractices of Islam.”

Women in Turkey on both sides of the debate were taking action on their own behalf. To this day, women continue to be more than silent symbols of a political conflict. They are the visible social actors. This is what I was witnessing on the streets of Istanbul, even if I could not understand it at the time.

I had read Göle's book many years ago when I had even less knowledge of Turkey than I do now. Returning from my trip, I found her observations held deeper meaning for me. As I travelled through Turkey, I could not help but define my own otherness in contrast to the women I met. Our individual relationship to gender is formed by our earliest experiences. It is not easy to step out of who we are to understand another culture.

What is it about the way that women's bodies are covered or uncovered that expresses so much about a culture? What is it that makes us so obsessed with what women do or don't wear? Göle writes that how we in the West understand our bodies is different from how the body is understood in Islam. In Islam there is a "rhythmic quality (veiling, ablution, worshipping, praying)" that creates a sacred order in relationship to the body. This intrigues me. It is hard for me to imagine what it would be like to live my life tuned to the rhythm of washing, preparing and then praying five times a day.

Göle writes that "Western culture locates the human body under the aesthetic and hygienic command of human willpower and the increasing submission of the human body to the spheres of science and secularization." Islamic culture, on the other hand, locates the body in a religious sphere. "Private life in Muslim societies is directly associated with the sexuality of women and the forbidden zone itself. The translation for the word 'forbidden' is *mahrem*, which means 'intimacy', 'privacy', 'secrecy', and 'silence'."

Göle interviews women who have chosen to veil and who tell her that the veil protects them as they go out into the wider world. It conceals their departure and enables them to remain in the "inside," to still be part of the private *mahrem* sphere. Göle writes that, "in the face of modern women who exhibit their femininity by the care they give to their bodies and clothes, Muslim women conceal their femininity behind veiling and thus present the 'sacred body' against the 'aesthetic' one. They once again mark their difference from Western modernism."

Göle ends her book by wondering if Muslim women are making a significant sacrifice. They veil to make a political statement against Western modernism, yet they seem to accept male domination that makes them invisible. Still, she concludes, the veil enables them to step out into the public sphere and they become actors on their own behalf. They are forging a new world on their own terms.

I cannot remember who it was who said that, like Christianity, Islam will have to go through its own Reformation. I can't help but think that women may well be some of the key actors in reform. Here in Quebec, I wish that we would act thoughtfully. There's a big difference between making people aware of their rights and restricting them from making personal choices. Denying a women's right to wear a veil is not an act of liberation.

Walking through the streets of Istanbul at night, my young host finishes her story about the journalist who tried to see the world through her eyes. She turns to me and she says, "I have no desire for the woman in the miniskirt to wear a scarf. All I want is to wear the hijab without discrimination." And then I ask her if she'd like to stay in Turkey. "No, it is better in Canada," she says. "I have more freedom there."