

Islam and the Veil: Theoretical and Regional Contexts, edited by Theodore Gabriel and Rabiha Hannan. Bloomsbury, 2011. 224pp., Hb. \$136.00, ISBN-13: 9781441187352; Pb. \$39.95., ISBN-13: 9781441135193

Reviewed by Michael Grech, Junior College, University of Malta, michael.grech@um.edu.mt

Introduction

It may not be an intent shared by each contributor to the book, but the collection of papers *Islam and the Veil* edited by Theodore Gabriel and Rabiha Hannan undermines any notion that Muslims and non-Muslims may have regarding a shared essentialist understanding of Islam in general and the veil in particular. The book, containing thirteen papers and an Introduction, is divided in three sections. In theory, the three sections deal respectively with the issues of the *Hijab* and/or the veil in different Muslim contexts and in the texts of a number of Muslim scholars/authorities (the first section), the exegesis of those passages in the Qu’ran that concern clothing and covering (the second section), and issues the Muslim veil raises in relation to human rights and freedom of expressions (the third section). In reality most of the issues discussed (e.g. whether the Qu’ran does prescribe the wearing of certain types of garment for women; the meaning/s of the veil to those who wear it; their motives etc.) bridge the various sections.

As stated, the most obvious thing that emerges from the book is the impossibility of pinning down Islam and the Muslim veil to one understanding shared by all Muslims, starting with the very word that is associated to the Muslim veil, the Arab word *Hijab*. Many entries in the collection make it clear that the term *hijab* does not have a univocal or obvious meaning, as many normally assume. In her piece “Hijab: a Symbol of Modesty or Seclusion,” Kohla Hasan notes that the term actually means “curtain” rather than “veil” (2011, 115); a partition that separates two spheres. Various authors in the collection of papers give different interpretations as to the two spheres to be partitioned; male and female, private and public (Rabiha Hannan), secular and sacred (e.g. Theodore Gabriel) amongst others. Today the term *hijab* has been simplistically reduced to a term denoting a piece of clothing. Yet, even if considered reductively along these lines, the term and the item in question carry

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connotations that go well beyond dress. To many, particularly in the West, the veil has come to represent Islam even though, as Usama Hasan notes in her chapter “The Veil: Between Tradition and Reason, Culture and Context,” only six out of 6000 Qur’anic verses deal with clothing, and only two concern specific garments (2011, 65). Just as in the eyes of many in the West the veil represents Islam, Islam itself is considered by some of these as the quintessential “other,” as Scott-Baumann’s chapter “Unveiling Orientalism in Reverse” rightly notes (2011, 28); with some seeing Islam as the “Green Peril” that in the Western mindset has replaced the Red and Yellow perils of yesteryear (Malika Ghamidi “The Islamic Veil: a Focal Point for Social and Political Debate”). The veil then raises issues that do not concern mere clothing. It raises issues of integration and otherness, of rights and impositions, of religious world views and secular perspectives, of threats and co-existence.

The book, or rather the different authors whose papers are collected, addresses a number of issues. In what follows I refer to two. First, there is the issue of whether the Qu’ran does prescribe veiling for women. Some of the answers given are discussed in the section that follows. The book also discusses whether the veil is a means whereby women are oppressed or whether on the contrary, it is a liberating contrivance. This issue is considered in the subsequent section of the review.

The *Hijab* and/or the veil: Duty, discretion or accretion?

Most Muslims believe the Qu’ran to be the word of God directly transmitted at various times by the Archangel Gabriel to the prophet Muhammad. Being considered by Muslims as the word of God, the Qu’ran is held to be: “immutable [...] permanently valid and reliable” (Calleja 2000, 116). It is beyond doubt that, amongst other things:

1. The Qu’ran contains verses that relate to values, instructions and injunctions that concern behaviour.
2. That these verses and instructions are of concern not merely to the prophet Muhammad and to the earliest community, but to all Muslims regardless of the age and society where they live/d and possibly to all human kind if all humans are ideally called to join the *Ummah*.
3. This notwithstanding, particularly with regard to the instructions that concern behaviour, the language in which these are formulated does not always consist of clearly stated categorical

formulas. Moreover, many injunctions and instructions implicitly or explicitly relate to events in the life of the prophet Muhammad or that of the earliest community, as well as to the particular social, geographic and historical contexts in which the earliest community existed.

4. Given 2) and 3) religious interpretation (*tafsir*) is required to extrapolate explicit rules and injunctions.

These conditions are to be kept in mind in the debate that concerns the Muslim veil and the instructions and commands that supposedly concern it. As already stated, the number of entries in the Qu'ran dealing with clothing in general and the veil in particular is quite limited. Three entries are contained in *Sura Al-A'raf* (The Heights 7) where the Qu'ran refers to the "Children of Adam" being provided with "clothing to cover your shame as well as to be an adornment" (7: 26); where humans are warned not to be deceived by Satan who stripped Adam and Eve of "their raiment in order to expose their shame" (7: 26); and where Muslims are instructed to wear their "beautiful apparel at ever place of worship" (7: 31). *Sura Al-Nur* (Light 24) contains a verse whereby men and women are enjoined to "lower their gaze and guard their modesty" (24: 30). Women are also enjoined to draw "their veils over their bosoms and not to reveal their finery" except to their husbands, father, to other relatives and to female servants and to male attendants "lacking in sexual vigour" (24: 31). A verse in *Sura Al-Ahzab* (The Confederate Tribes 33) is addressed to Muhammad's Wives, his daughters and all believing women, instructing them to cast their *jalabib* (usually translated as veil) over their persons so that they are "recognized and not molested" (33: 59). The verse in *sura Al-Qasas* (The Narrative 28) is addressed to the wives of Muhammad. These are presented with a choice between "the life of this World, and its glitter" (28: 34), and being "devout in the service of Allah and His Messenger" (28: 34). They are advised not to be "too complacent of speech" (28: 34) and to "stay quietly" in their houses (28: 34).

Despite the limited number of verses that deal with clothing, many scholars, including some that contributed to this volume, believe that these entries suffice to provide both general and/or specific guidelines regarding dress, particularly with regards to women. Kholā Hasan for instance, claims that women have a duty to cover their heads and bosoms (2011, 115). Rajnaara C. Akhtar agrees in her chapter "Muslim Women, the Veil and Activism," though she notes that no single type of head covering should be prescribed

for all women. The command to cover their heads applies to all Muslim women, regardless of their historical context or society. Yet, it can be applied flexibly in light of the different contexts (cultural, climatic, historical, etc.) in which they live (2011, 149). The way in which a Muslim woman living in twenty-first century Britain ought to fulfill this command might differ from the manner in which a sixth century Arab woman would fulfill it. Even most of the respondents interviewed by Katherine Bullock, documented in her chapter on “Hijab and Belonging: Canadian Muslim Women,” believe that the Qu’ran clearly enjoins women to cover their heads.

Other authors and Muslim exegetes however, clearly disagree. In the chapter “An Exploration of the Debates Pertaining to Head Covering and Face Veiling of Women in the British Muslim Context” Rabiha Hannan claims that in the Qu’ran there is a general argument for modest dress, not for some specific piece of clothing. Even when injunctions appear to be specific (e.g. the verse from Sura *Al-Ahzab*), an examination of the context of these verses shows that these represent a specific application of a general principle, not necessarily a rule applicable to all women in all contexts. Hannan claims that what the notion of *hijab* entails is a demarcation between a public and a private sphere, not between males and females. This, she believes, is obvious if one considers the verse from Sura *Al-Qasas*. These verses concern Muhammad’s household and people who were entering the latter without permission, thus violating the privacy of the prophet of Islam and his wives (Hannan 2011, 84). In this context the *hijab*, which could mean a curtain and not necessarily a cloth, protected the privacy of these wives. To those who claim that these wives are a model that all female Muslims should follow, and hence Muslim women should veil and/or segregate themselves as they did, Hannan replies that Islam does not posit role models in relation to sex or gender. Islam recognizes one paradigm which all humans should imitate, Muhammad. He is the role-model for all humans, regardless of their sex. Usama Hasan adopts a similar approach claiming that even if one considers Hadits, Muhammad did not specify which parts of their body women should cover or display, but only emphasized the value of modesty and provided general guidelines. This value (modesty) and these guidelines are to be adapted according to the “time, context and culture” (Hannan 2011, 72) within which one lives. Simonetta Calderini, “Female Seclusion and the Veil: Two Issues in Political and Social Discourse,” refers the third Agha Khan, the former leader of the *Ismaili* Shiite Community, who held that the mandatory wearing of the veil is a later accretion; that it came into being after

Muhammad's death; and that it is inconsistent with the active role women played in Muhammad's time (2011, 52). What Muslims regardless of their sex should endorse is a "veil of the heart," meaning the value of modesty.

The Agha Khan's claim that the mandatory wearing of the veil is inconsistent with the active role women played in the first communities leads to the second aspect that I discuss in this review; the liberating/oppressive aspect of the veil. However, before moving to this aspect it is worth noting that the variety of interpretations regarding whether the veil is religiously sanctioned or not points to an important and vibrant issue; the issue of the interpretation of the Qu'ran (and Hadiths) and the implications for good Muslims. Should the Qu'ran be considered as, amongst other things, a depository of injunctions, to the extent that any injunction contained therein is to be applied *verbatim*, albeit with some technical adjustments relating to time and space? Or should one, as the Tunisian-Italian scholar Adnane Mokrani highlights elsewhere: "imitate and adopt the fundamental values, and distinguish these from the historical forms in which they were expressed" (Grech 2001). Or maybe one should seek both values and particular injunctions? And where does one draw the line if the two seem to conflict with each other? And what about the literary forms and linguistic conventions of the Qu'ranic texts? Should one adopt a literalist perspective, considering Qu'ranic verses as clear, unambiguous and obvious as a set of tool-box instructions would (should) be? Or should one consider, as Calderini notes is the case with the Agha Khan, an esoteric dimension of the Qu'ran; one that requires discernment and interpretation into the text to extract concrete principles? (Gabriel and Hannan 2011, 56) Or are the literary genres diverse and intermingled? And what role should the study of history, literary theory and hermeneutics play in these debates? These are vital and open issues which go beyond the mere issue of the female veil, and hence beyond the concern of the book. The book however, has the merit of pointing, albeit in an indirect manner, to these issues and their importance.

Empowering or oppressing?

The second aspect I consider is the liberating/oppressive aspect of the veil. A common perception in the West and not just is that the veil is a contrivance by which Muslim women are subjugated to males. This is seen by many as evidence that Islam itself is a religion that somehow oppresses and/or marginalizes women. The view that the veil is a means of subjugation (though not the idea that Islam marginalizes and oppresses

women) is accepted by some Muslims, including figures like the (already cited) Third Agha Khan, Feminists like Nawal al-Saadawi and a number of politicians.

Key terms in this debate are “liberation” and “subjugation.” We have a dichotomy between two possible states; one (negative) of subjugation and the other (positive) where the subject in question is free/achieves liberation. Yet what these states are is a matter of debate; what the meaning is and what the connotations of the term “liberation” are as well as what makes a person free or subjugated, are all issues that are open to debate. In relation to the veil, the liberation-subjugation dichotomy concerns women and their existence as women and/or human beings. The most obvious demarcation line in the veil debate is between those who consider the veil as a liberating garment and those who consider it as an oppressive device. In each of the two camps, thinkers differ as to why the garment in question is liberatory/oppressive.

Sayyid Mawdudi’s ideas on the issue are spelled out in Roy Jackson’s piece “Mawdudi, Purdah and the Status of Women in Islam.” He saw the veil in particular and the concept of *purdah* (curtain or veil) in general as liberatory for woman, in light of what he believes is the natural role of women and their natural characteristics, which roles and characteristics are attributable to God. For Mawdudi, males and females have different affective faculties, and different mental and cognitive abilities (2011, 39). Education and occupations in life should reflect these differences. Women are ideally to confine themselves to the domestic realm. This is in line with their God-assigned role. Women should leave their homes only if they cannot do otherwise. Equality understood in terms of equality of opportunity and of participation in public life is something that good Muslims should reject, since it would bring disorder to the Muslim community in particular and to humanity in general (Gabriel and Hannan 2011, 39). It would harm women themselves. Encouraging women to participate in public life is an extra burden on women rather than a liberatory gesture. (Gabriel and Hannan 2011, 44). The disorder that the participation of women in public life brings about is immense. One area of disorder concerns the greatest weakness humans have: their sexual instincts. Intermingling between males and females will only stimulate this instinct. Moreover, women who leave their households are likely to neglect their obligations towards their family, not merely because they will spend time outside their households but also because by achieving economic independence it will induce them to neglect their duties towards fellow family members if not encourage the

tendency for them not to marry. Employment outside the household can only be a source of promiscuity and sin (2011, 41). So women are to leave their households as rarely as possible, and possibly accompanied by male relatives. The veil serves to protect (and liberate) them from the public sphere.

Other thinkers and other Muslims (particularly women) also view the veil as a liberatory attire, yet not along the same lines as Mawdudi. Indeed, their approach is diametrically opposed. Kholā Hasan for instance, notes that rather than an attire which testifies to the domestic nature of Muslim women, the veil is a device through which women are empowered and encouraged to enter the public sphere, in a free and confident manner that allows them to guard their honour (2011, 115). For Hasan, the veil serves to protect women from “unwanted attention” while at work or elsewhere in public life (2011, 119) Along the same lines, Katherine Bullock adds that the *hijab* is a means through which the objectivization of women; their being considered as objects of desire, which consumerist capitalist society encourages; is resisted (2011, 161). Hence, the veil is a means through which a woman can fulfill her religious duties in the public sphere rather than outside of this. Indeed, Sariya Contractor writes in her chapter “Marginalization or an Opportunity for Dialogue?” that amongst British Muslim women, there are many who believe that the veil is a means that enables them a successful transition to modernity; it reconciles their identities as Muslims and as twenty-first century British women (2011, 136).

So one can see that both Mawdudi on the one hand and Hasan, Bullock and Contractor’s interviewees on the other, consider the veil as a liberatory device; the first as a means by which women are liberated from the public sphere by being secluded from this, the second as a means through which women are given the confidence to enter the public sphere in a manner that is consistent both with the dictates of religion and with ambitions they may nurture in relation to a job, an academic career or involvement in the public life.

Other views reported within the book however, disagree with both approaches either because i) they view the veil as oppressive and not really sanctioned by Islam or ii) because they believe that while the veil might have served liberating purposes in some contexts, this might not be a universal and universalizable feature of the veil. A case in point of the first approach is the third Agha Khan who considered the veil not merely as not religiously sanctioned, but as an active impediment to achieve a value

which the prophet Muhammad and the first community upheld; the active participation of women in public life. The Agha Khan notes the active role women played in the earliest communities, and draws from these episodes the value of female involvement which Islam ought to promote (Gabriel and Hannan 2011, 52). This led him to enjoin members of his community to advocate and promote female suffrage and education, making it a religious duty for Ismaili families to send their daughters to school and help them excel in their education (Gabriel and Hannan 2011, 53). It led him to encourage the adoption of Western dress (Gabriel and Hannan 2011, 57–59). Wearing of the veil was therefore discouraged.

Others adopt the second position, i.e. that the veil may be liberating in some contexts but not in all contexts. Usama Hasan for instance notes that while in the context of the first community the veil was a means through which women could “avoid hardship, social exclusion, alienation and resentment of neighbours” (2011, 77), this may no longer be so in all contemporary contexts. Moreover, while in certain societies features like the visibility of hair may have constituted sexual temptation, things may be different in modern western societies. Visibility of hair does not have the same sexual connotations that it has in other societies. In these contexts the veil would not serve the liberatory purpose it served in others. Hasan emphasizes that the veil is a means, not an end in itself. As with any other means, the value it has consists in the service it may provide in certain contexts, not in anything else.

So, very broadly, four approaches may be delineated; 1) the veil is liberatory because it creates a rigid demarcation between males and females that respects the natural differences between the two sexes; 2) the veil is liberatory because it enables women to mix with males in the public sphere without contravening the religious injunctions concerning modesty and sexual behaviour; 3) the veil is oppressive; 4) the veil may serve liberatory purposes in some contexts but not in others. This variety and divergence however, occurs within a somehow common broader context. Despite their difference, all approaches value attributes like modesty and consider negatively such things as sexual promiscuity and licentiousness, some associating these with some capitalist commodification of sexuality and the objectification of women. Yet, apart from the issue of whether sexual promiscuity necessarily entails commodification and the objectification of women, this view contrasts with an approach to sexuality that became popular in many Western societies following the 1960s sexual liberation movements. Here sexual promiscuity came to be viewed by many as

acceptable if not as outrightly liberatory (rather oppressive). This difference might point to other connotations that the veil has in the mind of many Western individuals, i.e. a piece of cloth indicative of a system of values and way of life that are inconsistent with Western values and lifestyles. But then again, even Western societies cannot be considered along essentialist lines. Even post-1968, pockets and sizeable groups of people exist in the West—Conservative Catholics, Conservative Protestants, Orthodox Jews, and secular individuals who do not adopt a permissive attitude to sexuality—who may share with these Muslims a similar approach to promiscuity and sexual licentiousness.

This liberatory/oppressive aspect of the veil is just one debate, though arguably the most controversial, that concerns this item of clothing. Other aspects include the religious aspect discussed in the previous section, the traditional aspect, the aspect whereby the veil is considered primarily a means through which a Muslim woman affirms her identity as a Muslim as well as others, all of which are considered thoroughly and expertly in the collection.

Acknowledgements

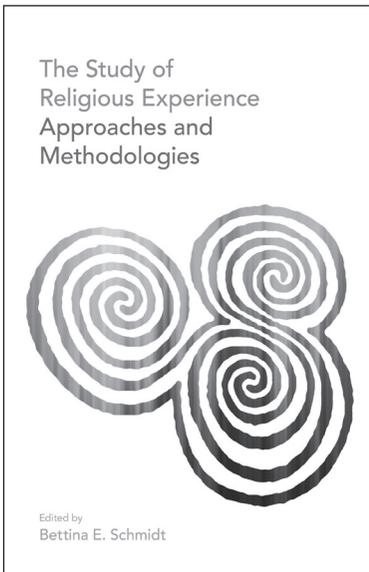
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