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Nancy Honicker

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Nancy Honicker
nancy.honicker@univ-paris8.fr

Taking the Veil

(an essay based on interviews with veiled Muslim students at the author teaches)

At the heart of Christianity are the words spoken by Jesus to his disciples in an upper room in Jerusalem, a few days before his death: I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. For the Muslim, there is but one God, Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet. Any mingling of the divine and the human – the Word made flesh – is sin. Can these two mutually exclusive positions be reconciled in a shared love of God and humankind?

I admit to not having the answer in regards to doctrine, but living and working in a community with a large Muslim population, I have had the opportunity to observe Islam in action and to get to know those who practice it in their daily lives. Rather than enter into a debate about what may be irreconcilable differences, I prefer to look at how Muslims live their faith. The context, in this case, is French. I am an associate professor in a state-run French university, the University of Paris 8, located a few miles north of the center of Paris, in the town of Saint-Denis, at the very heart of those dangerous suburbs where violence erupted in November 2005. Until 1789, Saint-Denis, with its magnificent basilica, was the seat of the spiritual authority of the French monarchy. Today

its churches are almost empty and the number of conversions to Islam is on the rise.

In a narrow street a few steps from the basilica, the Tawhid Cultural Center opens its doors to all those Muslims who seek to deepen their faith through greater separation from secular society. At all hours of the day, clusters of men gather on the sidewalk in front of the center. When it is the hour of one of the five daily Muslim prayers, the street is crowded, and often traffic is blocked as men and women flow in and out. Some of the men, though not a majority, wear the *kamis*, a tunic that descends to mid-calf, in imitation of the dress of the Prophet. The women are strictly veiled, with a white band covering that part of their forehead left uncovered by the veil. Though I have never visited the center, when I pass by, I get a sense of proselytising verve. Yet, movements such as “Tawhid,” which means the oneness of God, remain on the fringes when it comes to bringing new converts to Islam.

To understand the appeal of Islam, however, one must first understand that today in France, religious practice in general – and that of Catholicism in particular – is considered “*ringard*” – a word which is difficult to translate, for it means both old-fashioned and stale. Though France has an excellent Catholic daily, *La Croix*, and a very active and innovative Catholic press, religious practice is for the most part desultory. A majority of the French may be nominally Catholic, few go to church, and fewer still, especially among the younger generations, understand the fundamentals of their faith. I recently took a survey among my students to ask how many knew the significance of Ascension Day and Pentecost, both public holidays in France. Not a one had a clue.

When I began teaching at the University of Paris 8 in 1991, there was not a single veiled student on campus. Today I have at least one veiled student in every class; in some, a majority of students are Muslim, which does not mean most women wear the veil. Many of these students are foreign, from Algeria or Morocco, but many are also French, and some are converts to Islam. To understand the appeal of this religion, I decided to turn to the students themselves, beginning with Laetitia, a recent Catholic convert to Islam.

And I will begin by stating that Laetitia’s conversion does not surprise me. She was born in

the town of Saint-Denis, with its large Muslim population. She was also born into one of those nominally Catholic families, who never set foot in church. Despite the absence of any religious education, early on Laetitia was stirred by yearnings to learn more about God. As her family had placed her in a Catholic primary school – more for reasons of discipline and security than of religion – she was able to turn to the nuns to learn more about the Catholic faith. All her decisions – to attend catechism, to be baptized at age eleven, and to take first communion – were made on her own. Once she entered junior high school, many of her classmates were Muslim, and among them she met a girl who became her best friend. Though they did not practice the same religion, they shared the same love of God, which became the basis of a friendship that continues strong today.

Within her family Laetitia had been alone with her faith in God. Through Islam she came into contact with a shared *discipline*, a very important word in the context of French, and much of Western, society today: there were the fixed hours for prayer, the same prayers recited by millions all over the world, the same positions, standing or kneeling, in imitation of the Prophet, the same month-long fast, followed each evening by festive meals with family and friends. This is not to say that such a sense of shared community is absent from Christianity, but certainly it is absent from the practice of most French Catholics today. In many ways, Islam, the second religion of France, presents itself as a welcoming faith with the power to bring the believer closer to God through the structure religion brings to daily life. Laetitia insists on this dimension in her practice of the five daily prayers, a discipline which has become a gentle prodding, a reminder to take time out to think of God.

After much soul searching, Laetitia converted to Islam in March 2004. Like all Muslims, she accepts Jesus as a prophet, but today she sees Christianity as incomplete and rejects the divine nature of Christ. She would like to wear the veil as an outward sign of her religious convictions but refrains, in part for fear of hurting her mother, who has not easily accepted her daughter's choice. While Laetitia was studying abroad in spring of 2005, her father died. Today her mother fears she may have lost a daughter as well. To reassure her, Laetitia has chosen not to take the veil.

Living daily among women wearing the veil, I observe that it comes in many shapes and sizes, many colors and textures, and many different styles. In the street where I live, I often pass a woman covered in black from head to toe, her face covered with a veil of black gauze. At the university, however, the style that dominates is one of “spiritual elegance,” which has taught me to recognize the beauty of the veil and the inner beauty of the students who wear it. While interviewing Muslim students to prepare this article, I met Fatima, a thirty-year-old Moroccan student from Agadir, born into a practicing Muslim family, who has been studying in France since 2002. When she was sixteen, she was required to cover her head for medical reasons. After a few months, when it was safe to remove the scarf, she had grown so used to it that she decided to keep it on: the veil had become the reminder of God’s presence in her life. Sitting across from Fatima, looking into her thoughtful eyes, I feel that presence as well.

The day we meet her head is covered by a silk scarf the color of fine French champagne. The entire oval of her face is visible, her forehead, her dark eyes, a long thin nose and full, finely sculpted lips. The veil covers her ears and neck and is expertly fastened beneath the chin. She is also wearing a long-sleeved tunic of light beige cotton and matching slacks. She is, to my eyes, the epitome of “spiritual elegance”, a young woman at peace with herself, expressing inner and outer harmony, a force for good in the world. In her presence one forgets the divisions of Christian, Muslim or Jew.

Yet no religion is free of fear, and like the fire-and-brimstone brand of Christianity, Islam too knows how to instill fear in its believers. One of my students told me it was a sin not to wear the veil and the unveiled woman puts herself in danger of hellfire. In certain contexts the veil can also participate in the ongoing “culture wars.” Miniskirts and low-cut tops become “green lights,” and women who choose to wear them are declaring themselves “for sale.” Looking around at her scantily clad classmates, the woman wearing the veil may find it all too easy to be tempted by a sense of moral superiority. Even without going so far, many Muslim women are made uncomfortable by

certain aspects of French society which they deem superficial and demeaning to women.

Walking in the streets of Paris, where naked women meet and greet me from billboards all over the city, buying my newspaper at a kiosk where pornography takes precedence over the daily news, I can understand their point of view. The French may consider me puritanical and prudish, but at times I am literally hurt – I feel a stab of pain to the heart – by the use made of women’s bodies in advertising in France, hurt as well by pornography on display to adults and children alike. This is freedom of expression, one of the pillars of democracy, yet I ask myself: would these images be so blatantly displayed in a truly democratic society?

Thus, for some young Muslim women, the veil becomes protection and a sign of sexual purity. Laetitia told me she hopes to know and love one man alone. Though she does not wear the veil, her modest attire and her embrace of Islam have sustained her in her choice. Naima, another student, adds that Islam considers men the weaker sex and by choosing the veil, women help protect them from themselves. For Fatima, the veil is a “positive obstacle”: the respect of a Muslim man for a veiled woman includes recognition of his weakness.

On one point, all agree: the presence of the veil in the life of a Muslim woman brings her closer to God.

In her 1995 memoir *Dreams of Trespass*, Fatima Mernissi describes the life of a young girl born in 1940, in Fez, Morocco. Her father, a powerful patriarch, had the means to keep a harem, where his wives and daughters, though privileged and wealthy, lived among themselves, deprived of instruction and contact with the outside world. This was the traditional world of Islam, where the public sphere was reserved for men, and women spent their lives behind high walls and locked doors. Fatima Mernissi herself could have grown up illiterate had not the *madrassahs* of Morocco been opened to women in 1943, during the period of the country’s struggle for independence from France. Today she is a world-renown writer and sociologist, having published numerous books on

the relation of women to Islam.* To her, no development in the past century has been more important than the entry of Muslim women into the public sphere. And we are far from seeing the end of the changes this movement has brought about. In this context, the veil can become a symbol of liberation, and women may very well be the future of Islam.

Finally, to return to doctrine, if I were to sum up the significance of the Islamic veil to the students with whom I have spoken, I would say it is the Muslim woman's answer to Saint Paul's exhortation to "pray without ceasing." My students and I may have chosen different paths, yet we are all seeking – as best we know how – the same God of love.

* such as *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, *Beyond the Veil*, and *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World*.