

1. A Brief History of the Veil in Islam

To this day, head coverings play a significant role in many religions, including Orthodox Judaism and Catholicism.

Islam began as a small faith community in the Arabian Peninsula. The community was established in Medina by the prophet Mohammed (c. 570–632 CE). From there it spread through the Middle East to Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa, to Central Asia, and to many societies around the Arabian Sea. After Islam was established in the Middle East and North Africa, it made significant inroads into Europe, as well.

Scarves and veils of different colors and shapes were customary in countless cultures long before Islam came into being in the seventh century in the Arabian Peninsula (which includes present-day Saudi Arabia). To this day, head coverings play a significant role in many religions, including Orthodox Judaism and Catholicism.

Since the seventh century, Islam has grown to be one of the major world religions. As it spread through the Middle East to Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa, to Central Asia, and to many different societies around the Arabian Sea, it incorporated some local veiling customs and influenced others. But it is only recently that some Islamic states, such as Iran, have begun to require all women to wear the veil (in Iran it is called the *chador*, which covers the entire body).

Critics of the Muslim veiling tradition argue that women do not wear the veil by choice, and they are often forced to cover their heads and bodies. In contrast, many daughters of Muslim immigrants in the West argue that the veil symbolizes devotion and piety and that veiling is their own choice. To them it is a question of religious identity and self-expression.

Types of headscarves:

- The **hijab** is one name for a variety of similar headscarves. It is the most popular veil worn in the West. These veils consist of one or two scarves that cover the head and neck. Outside the West, this traditional veil is worn by many Muslim women in the Arab world and beyond.



- The **niqab** covers the entire body, head and face; however, an opening is left for the eyes. The two main styles of niqab are the half-niqab that consists of a headscarf and facial veil that leaves the eyes and part of the forehead visible and the full, or Gulf, niqab that leaves only a narrow slit for the eyes. Although these veils are popular across the Muslim world, they are most common in the Gulf States. The niqab is responsible for creating much debate within Europe. Some politicians have argued for its ban, while others feel that it interferes with communication or creates security concerns.

- The **chador** is a full-body-length shawl held closed at the neck by hand or pin. It covers the head and the body but leaves the face completely visible. Chadors are most often black and are most common in the Middle East, specifically in Iran.





- The **burqa** is a full-body veil. The wearer's entire face and body are covered, and one sees through a mesh screen over the eyes. It is most commonly worn in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Under the Taliban regime in Afghanistan (1996–2001), its use was mandated by law.

What are the origins of the obligation to wear the Islamic veil (or *hijab* in Arabic)? Do all Muslim women wear the veil? Do they have to? Also, are all veils the same, or do they take different forms and shapes? And, finally, what objections does the veil raise in some countries in the West? Sociologist Caitlin Killian explains that, in the past as in the present, the tradition of veiling has been influenced by different religious interpretations as well as by politics.

Muslim religious writings are not entirely clear on the question of women veiling. Various statements in the Quran and Hadith (statements attributed to the prophet Mohammed) make reference to Mohammed's wives veiling, but it is debatable whether these statements apply only to the Prophet's wives or to all Muslim women.

While the need for women to be modest is mentioned, the area women must cover depends on the source and ranges from "the bosom" to the whole body except the face and hands. The veil is a vehicle for distinguishing between women and men and a means of controlling male sexual desire....Muslim men are also urged to be modest and to cover themselves between the waist and the knees....[In some Islamic societies] an immodest woman brings dishonor not only on herself but also on her male family members....The veil itself, however, predated Islam and was practiced by women of several religions. It also was largely linked to class position: Wealthy women could afford to veil their bodies completely, whereas poor women who had to work [in the field] either modified their veils or did not wear them at all.

The numerous styles of Islamic dress throughout the world today reflect local traditions and different interpretations of Islamic requirements. Muslim women in France, therefore, exhibit a wide range of dress and head coverings. Many wear nothing that distinguishes them as Muslims. A number of immigrant women practice modesty, not by donning traditional dress (i.e., the North African djellaba), but rather by wearing long-sleeved shirts and skirts that reach the ankles. For those who do veil, some simply wear brightly colored scarves on their heads, sometimes even allowing hair to show; others pin unicolor veils tightly around the face; and still others adopt long, flowing Islamic dress and occasionally cover the entire face except for the eyes. The girls at the center of the controversy usually wear Western clothing with a veil pinned around the face to cover their hair.

The struggle over Maghrebian women's dress began long before their immigration to France in the 1970s. French and British colonizers encouraged Muslim women to remove the veil and emulate European women. Consequently, in Algeria and other North African and Middle Eastern countries, the veil became a symbol of national identity and opposition to the West during independence and nationalist movements.

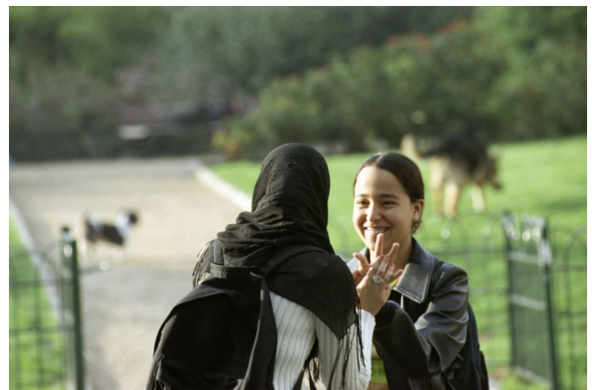
Discussion Questions

1. What religious or cultural symbols are important to you or your family? How important do you think they are for others? How would you feel if people pressured you not to display them?
2. How do you explain the fact that there are so many different interpretations of whether or not Muslims choose to wear the veil?
3. Why has the veil become such an important symbol and thus the focus of controversy? What everyday objects in your life have become political symbols? Why? What do you think the veil represents in the eyes of non-Muslims?

2. The Veil and a New Muslim Identity

“I function as a barometer of the popularity of Muslims.”

Many second- and third-generation immigrants from North Africa, feeling neither French nor foreign, see religion as an important part of their identity. Often, these young people have never formally learned about Islam, either because their parents stress the importance of assimilation or because they believed their children would pick up the tradition in the same way they did as children in North Africa. Therefore, many teenagers turn to the local mosque, the Internet, or neighborhood Islamic bookstores to learn more about Islam.



Two students exchange a friendly gesture as one returns to school fully veiled. Youth in France are challenging tradition and bridging divides through food, music, and sports at an unprecedented level.

Souad (last name not given) is part of this generation. She was born in France, shortly after her parents arrived from Algeria. She was not brought up to be especially religious, nor does she speak much Arabic. As a sign of her religious commitment, she recently began to wear the veil. In the following interview, Souad describes the journey she undertook:

Once I got to high school, friends told me about my religion, [and] I discovered an aspect I did not know; I studied, read books, [and] I found that enriching.

It was clear to me that the headscarf was an obligation, and I felt the need to please our Creator; it was in that spirit that I wanted to wear it, but the social conditions at high school presented problems. I had to prepare to be rejected by others. I studied my *bac* [the all important exam at the end of one's studies at school] and practiced my religion, but the *voile* [veil] was another thing. I always did my prayer, that's something very important for Muslims, and I am proud of myself there. But there was always that desire to go higher in faith, to go closer to the Creator, to please him. So I put on a small hair band so that people would get used to it, because before I wore mini skirts, long hair, but never drank alcohol. In effect I was a bit of a tomboy and hung out with guys, who considered me their little sister and made sure I did not veer toward drugs and night clubs.

One day I decided to become a woman, not a boy, and I changed my behavior because I had been very aggressive....I realized that it is hard to live in society as a woman, because there is a lot of sexism....So, to return to the zigzag, my behavior as a woman, the fact that God asked me to do certain things, so I decided to go in that direction while adapting myself to the society where I live, and I succeed [in] this, for when I am at work I wear the scarf not like I have it now but on top, swirled around like the Africans [makes gesture around her head]. That seems to work. I began wearing it as an intern and it worked. This shows that there are still people who are very tolerant. They knew me before and after the *foulard* [the veil], and their attitude did not change. They saw that my work did not change, even got better, and one said, if anyone criticizes you let me know and I will take care of it. I found that touching.

While for Souad the decision to wear the veil was religious, some believe that young people's decision to wear the veil is as much a reaction against feeling excluded as it is a rebellion against their parents' attempts to fit in.

Fariba (last name not given) was born in France, grew up in Algeria, and returned to study in France in 2001 as a young adult. She began wearing the veil, or hijab, at age 15 as a part of her religious beliefs. In an interview conducted with anthropologist John Bowen sometime after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, she argues that how she is seen is based on what is happening in the news:

Sometimes even when I have not been listening to the news, I know what has happened by watching how people regard me. On September 11th [2001], I returned home from work, turned on the television and saw the catastrophe. I was shocked like everyone else. The next morning, Wednesday, I had almost forgotten what had happened, I took the train to work, and the looks I got from others reminded me that it was the 12th, of what happened the day before. At first I did not understand, I looked myself over, to see if there was something wrong with my clothes, what did I do? And then I made the connection....

The other time it happened to me, it was when there was a French ship blown up, I had not heard about it, and I saw a great deal of aggression in people's stares, and said to myself I had better read a newspaper right away, and I saw the explanation. I function as a barometer of the popularity of Muslims. When there were sympathetic looks it was between the two votes for the president [in April–May 2002], when [right-wing nationalist politician] Jean-Marie Le Pen had done well, they felt guilty, and so in the subway if I was jostled a bit, people would say "Oh, excuse me, ma'am," as if to say, "I did not vote for Le Pen." So in some sense, I have never been spit on or struck or yelled at but I see a lot in those looks.

Fadela Amara, an activist-turned-politician, has protested racism and discrimination against immigrants (especially women) in France for many years. She warns that the headscarf is becoming the symbol of a militant Islam that poses a danger to French democracy. Amara, who was born to Algerian parents and grew up in an immigrant neighborhood, offers her own explanation as to why young women wear headscarves:

Among the young women in the projects there are those who seek recognition in a...return to ethnic community life and in particular by returning to Islam, for their identity. Some of them wear the headscarf by choice in the spirit of religious practice. But others have been subjected to pressures...from parents, religious leaders, or the [people in the housing] projects. As someone who is very attached to fundamental freedoms, I think religious practice is legitimate when it is a personal choice, without pressure or constraint, but above all when it respects the norms of secular society.

It is possible, in fact, to distinguish different categories of young women who wear the headscarf. First of all, there are those who wear it because they believe that the fact that they practice their religion affords them a legitimate existence. . . . They wear the headscarf as a banner.

But there are many young women who, forbidden any outward display of femininity, wear the headscarf as armor, supposed to protect them from male aggression. Indeed, women who wear the headscarf are never bothered by young [Muslim] men, who lower their eyes in front of them; covered by the headscarf, these girls are in their view untouchable.

Amara believes that something else is at stake, beyond issues of identity:

[There is a] third category of women who wear the headscarf....In general, these are women who attend university and...fight for a social project that is dangerous for our democracy. These are not disturbed kids, troubled or searching for an identity, who wear the headscarf because it shows they belong to a community. No, these are real militants! They often begin their justification for wearing the headscarf by explaining that, in their view, it is part of a process of emancipation. It bothers me to hear the talk about freedom of expression because behind this symbol is a [plan to create] a different society than our own: a fascist-like society that has nothing to do with democracy.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think so many second- and third-generation immigrants have adopted a religious identity? What does it offer them that other identities cannot satisfy?
2. How does Souad explain her decision to wear the veil? How did she expect others to respond? What responses did she get?



French author and feminist Fadela Amara (left) attends a party in Paris in 2008 with Rachida Dati, French Minister of Justice (right), one of the most prominent Muslim figures in France. Amara is currently serving as the French Junior Minister for Urban Affairs and is heading several initiatives aimed at improving life in the banlieues. Many French Muslims disapprove of her strong stance against the political use of religion.

3. How do different people in this reading explain why women wear the veil?

4. Why does Fariba feel that she is a “barometer for the popularity of Muslims”?

3. Debating the Ban of the Veil in Public Schools

“The girls who veil in France, especially the high school and junior high students, it’s first of all a question of identity, because these girls are born in France to foreign parents.”

– Isma, 36-year-old Algerian teacher

French citizens found themselves grappling with a number of pressing issues at the beginning of the new millennium. In predominantly French-Maghrebian neighborhoods, social unrest relating to poverty and discrimination was on the rise, compounding ethnic conflicts stemming from the real and imaginary differences between these North African French and the European French. Meanwhile, religious tensions surrounding the presence of a large Muslim population in a secular state flared, intensified by growing fears of Islamic radicalism following 9/11 and other terrorist attacks in Europe.

These tensions were especially sharp in public schools that had large numbers of Muslim students, and they soon seemed to focus on the Islamic veil. In 2004, roughly 70 percent of the nation felt that the veil was an obstacle to France’s national unity, to its secular and democratic tradition, and to its security. Both Left and Right agreed: the veil had to be banned in public schools.

The year before, President Jacques Chirac had called on Bernard Stasi, a former minister, to head a commission to study the veil and other aspects of Muslim life that affected France’s secular tradition. Lawmakers, school administrators, and the general public expected drastic actions.

However, little attention was paid to the question of why Muslim girls and women were wearing the veil. Sociologist Caitlin Killian attempted to answer this question. During the debate, she interviewed female Muslim immigrants about a range of related issues including racism, assimilation, school curriculums, and teachers’ attitudes toward the veil (or, in the case of men, the beards some Muslims wear).

The findings pointed to a broad spectrum of opinions regarding all of these issues. Focusing on the veil, Killian found, on the one hand, women who vigorously defended its ban in schools and, on the other, women who thought that the veil was a legitimate form of self-expression.

Some of the women Killian interviewed argued that there are much more urgent issues at school than the wearing of the veil (violence and poor behavior among them). According to others, the French are specifically targeting Muslim culture. They also thought that the proposed ban on headscarves in schools is driven by prejudice.

Yusra, a 31-year-old Moroccan, explained:

I find that it's really an attitude on the part of teachers that is really racist, truly. That, for me, is a racist act. We cannot exclude girls because they wear the headscarf....It's really pointing a finger at them, and then [at] the culture of the child, they say to her "your culture, it's not good." You don't have a right to judge like that.

While some of the interviewees viewed the French reaction to the headscarf affair as racist, others questioned the secularity of schools where most of the holidays and vacations revolved around the Catholic calendar. Some went on to suggest that instead of ignoring or banning Islamic traditions, teachers could use them to educate about the cultural and religious diversity of France's students.

Below are a few women's reflections:

Besma, a 34-year-old Tunisian: I'm going to repeat what a lot of Arabs say, there are schools in France, or universities in France, where there are no exams on Saturday because it's the [Jewish] Sabbath, in the public schools, in the secular schools, and nobody talks about it. All that it takes is for the universities to agree....The students manage to make an [informal] arrangement with the teachers....On Friday, they eat a lean meal, meaning a meatless meal because Catholics don't eat meat on Friday. We do Lent Friday in school cafeterias and nobody protests. Nobody finds anything to say. So I find it completely petty to hide behind arguments that don't hold up, that aren't at all convincing, and all of sudden there are different rules for different groups.

Nour, a 34-year-old Algerian: [Y]ou know the secular school, it doesn't miss celebrating Easter, and when they celebrate Easter, it doesn't bother me. My daughter comes home with painted Easter eggs and everything; it's pretty; it's cute. There are classes that are over 80 percent Maghrebian in the suburbs, and they celebrate Easter, they celebrate Christmas, you see? And that's not a problem for the secular school. And I don't find that fair....

I find that when it's Ramadan, they should talk about Ramadan. Honestly, me, it wouldn't be a problem. On the contrary, someone who comes into class...with a veil, that would pose a question actually, that we could discuss in class, to know why this person wears the veil....Why is it so upsetting to have someone in class who wears a veil, when we could make it a subject of discussion on all religions? Getting stuck on the veil hides the question. They make such a big deal out of it, the poor girls, they take them out of school; people turn them into extraterrestrials. In the end we turn them into people who will have problems in their identities, in their culture and everything....For a country that is home to so many cultures, there's no excuse.

Some of the women Killian interviewed argued that the veil is a symbol of a new identity, especially for the second-generation immigrants who experience rejection in their daily life in France. The veil, they suggested, is the response of those who seek alternatives to the French national identity. Isma, a 36-year-old Algerian teacher who now teaches in France, had this to say:

The girls who veil in France, especially the high school and junior high students, it's first of all a question of identity, because these girls are born in France to foreign parents....At a given time an adolescent wants to affirm himself, to show that he's someone, that he's an individual, so he thinks, I'd say, he thinks that it's by his clothes that he shows that he comes from somewhere [else], that he's someone [different]. So then, I think you should let them do it, and afterwards, by themselves, people come back to who they really are.

But other female immigrants argued that Muslims girls should assimilate or keep their traditions to themselves. Some felt that the veil promotes fundamentalism and intolerance, while others still saw it as a sign of female oppression:

Cherifa, a 44-year-old Moroccan: I believe that if they have to wear the veil then they should do it at home. Me, I'd be a bit radical. I wouldn't make concessions, because if I want to wear a djellaba [Middle Eastern cloak]...then I should stay in my country. I feel that when you are somewhere, you try to blend in. There's an old Moroccan proverb that says "do as your neighbor [does] or leave." That means that I shouldn't come to France to affirm my convictions, be they cultural or religious and all. If I want to wear babouches and put on the veil... well I should stay in my country, or I blend in. Otherwise, if I'm in France, well I'm sorry, I dress like the French. If I eat with them, live with them, if I go to their schools, I don't see why I'd make myself be noticed because I want to wear, um, they should wear it when they're at home or at friends. I don't have anything against it. But when she's at school and everything, I don't think so....No, I would totally agree with them outlawing the veil.

Deha, a 34-year-old Algerian: I come from a school [in Algeria] where the veil was already starting. It's not the way she dresses; it's what she is herself. The way she dresses implies a lot of things; so there are no sports, philosophy is forbidden....A girl who wears the veil [thinks that] she's pure and that the other who doesn't wear the veil, she's not pure. It's not that she's not pure; it's that she's a slut. You see? And it's there that you say to yourself, well, okay, the veil represents all of that.

Isma, a 36-year-old Algerian: I'm not intolerant; myself, I've suffered from intolerance, but dressing like that, you become yourself intolerant, because you want to impose. I'm sorry to say it, but it's often the one who wants to show that he's more Muslim than the other; he wants to impose it.

Discussion Questions

1. What ideas do you hear in the interviews regarding the veil, assimilation, and integration? What explanations did the women Killian interviewed offer for why some Muslim girls wear the veil? What accounts for the differences in their opinions?
2. In her interview, Nour said that discussing issues such as the veil creates an educational opportunity. What does she think students could gain from these conversations? What is lost when such issues are ignored? How do you create a classroom that allows for those kinds of frank discussions?
3. Do you think that forcing veiled Muslim girls to take off the veil in the classroom infringes on their religious rights? In the last excerpt, Nour seems to claim that it can breed hatred. What do you think?