

Veiled Truths

During the past weeks, an excited debate has kept European Muslims busy: the debate about the "veil" - be it the headscarf as in Germany or France or the niqab or face veil in Britain. Temperaments were clashing for and against it, both loaded with imagination about what the Others' true intentions might be and assumptions about "their" real agenda, both accusing the Other of not respecting women's dignity, both with passionate statements that are not always to the point, both in the name of freedom and human rights. The catchword hijab is catching the attention of Muslims and non-Muslims alike in a way that neither seems to be proportional for a small piece of textile nor leaves much space in people's minds to address more essential questions of coexistence. One gets the impression that, again, a spectre is haunting Europe.

The debate is indeed symptomatic. The underlying force is something that is often carefully avoided: a deep fear for one's identity in a world that is constantly changing. It does not matter whether it is an "Islamic" or a "European" identity we are talking about: it is the fear that comes up when one's emotional home suddenly seems to turn into an exile. Ambivalent symbols are then focussed on instead of the roots of the problem: a feeling of insecurity and loss, and a lack of a vision for the future.

A typical Muslim reaction is to turn to the Qur'an for advice and help. On this symptomatic level, references to women's clothes are quoted and interpreted in support of a variety of views. Men and women are to "lower their gaze and preserve their chastity" and especially women are advised not to display their charms in public. They are also advised to dress in a way that "they are recognized and not molested". It makes perfect sense. Mutual respect between men and women is certainly an important value for society. But I shudder when I come across instances where these simple, reasonable rules are used to generalize a particular style of dress and behaviour as "Islamic" or as proof texts for women's liberation or patriarchal oppression respectively.

Meanwhile, looking up the word hijab (lit. veil, curtain, screen, barrier, distance) in the Qur'an doesn't get us to those aforementioned verses because the word is not used there. We rather get a completely different perspective. True, two of the eight references are connected with women in some way and could be and have been understood in a literal sense: Mary screening herself from her relatives when pregnant with Jesus; and the injunction to be considerate and direct requests to the ladies of the Prophet's household "from behind a screen". But then the word is used to tell us about the barrier between the righteous and those who reject faith

and human responsibility on the Day of Judgment, a barrier that is even present here and now between those who make an honest effort to read and understand Revelation and those who refuse to open themselves to any vision of a better future. Besides, we learn that God speaks not only through inspiration and messengers, but also "from behind a veil". What material would that veil consist of?

In his mystical treatise *Mishkât al-Anwâr* (The Niche of Lights) that is basically a commentary on the Verse of Light in the Qur'an, al-Ghazzali describes how God is hidden behind seventy thousand veils of light and darkness. There are quite a few things that we would not necessarily express in the same way today, but the main points outline a process of seeing behind the phenomena and getting a deeper insight. What al-Ghazzali describes as a materialist attitude allows only a superficial view of the phenomena in themselves - good enough for technology but with no spiritual dimension whatsoever.

Then there starts a process of gradually looking beyond the surface. It is an individual journey transcending formal religious affiliations. At first there is a stage of idolatry when multiple phenomena are confused with the Divine that starts revealing itself behind them, especially when selfish interests and wishful thinking influence the view. But as the traveller continues step by step, the veils of darkness give way until the Divine is perceived as One and only veils of light remain. Here starts the path of increasing insight into the fabric of the created world that at same time reveals and conceals the One.

In a similar way, it has always been a concern for our sages to deal with the Veils in our minds. In mystical poetry we frequently come across the image of the lover asking the Beloved to lift her veil and heal his longing by granting him a glimpse of her divine beauty. On a more practical level, part of the mystical training has always been to see through the veil of first impressions, gut reactions, stereotypes and prejudices. Beyond clothes and habits and bodies, there are human beings, each of them a unique manifestation of creative imagination, carrying a spark of light from the One Source of all Being. Beyond fear and aversion and aggression, there is a brother or sister, if not in faith then at least in humanity, sharing the same responsibility for the world in which we live and very often the same concerns and worries about the future of human society and our planet.

Rather than getting sidetracked with endless, energy-consuming controversies on the surface, let us train ourselves to see through the veils of changing, sometimes unsettling phenomena that need to be dealt with in a reasonable manner, to the One Light beyond that provides guidance, insight and a spiritual home that gives us security and peace.