

Veiling

From privilege to oppression

By Reniqua Allen

When asked to describe a veiled woman, for many the image that comes to mind is that of a dark-haired, Middle Eastern, Islamic woman wearing a head covering. They may not think about the Virgin Mary of Christianity or the blushing, blonde American bride on her wedding day. Yet, these people are part of a global culture of veiling that has linked many religious and ethnic groups across the world for centuries.

Veiling, the act of covering the hair or face, didn't begin in the Muslim world as many now believe. Rather, its origins can be traced back to ancient Assyria. An ancient legal text dating back to the 13th century B.C. called for all upper-class Assyrian women to cover in order to protect and shield themselves from the glares of men, keeping them respectable. Women from the lower classes, like prostitutes, were forbidden from wearing veils.

Veiling has evolved over the years, moving from Greco-Roman cultures, to pre-Islamic Iran, Byzantium and the Abrahamic religions. Covering the hair began as an identifier of class, but was also used for political, economic and religious reasons.

"Different groups seem to use veiling for different practices, though much of it relates to women and modesty," says Carly Daniel-Hughes, a religious professor at Concordia University. "In Islam, it can mean women being modest. In Judaism, it relates to



Veiled Roman Catholic believers offer silent prayers during an early morning mass at Urakami Cathedral, Nagasaki, Japan.



Safad Butt, of Alabama, adjusts her hijab in a mirror at the 43rd annual Islamic Society of North America convention.

Photos from AP Images

the sanctity of marriage. And in Christianity it's used to distinguish different classes of women – virgins in marriage, or women married to Christ."

Jennifer Heath, editor of *The Veil: Women Writers on Its History, Lore, and Politics* says the veil may be used in many "non-traditional" forms. She says Ku Klux Klan robes, the Amish bonnet and special underwear worn by Mormon men can all be considered types of veils. "It has to do with revealing. The Jain people, they also wear veils because they don't kill anything ever and they don't want to be inhaling bugs. It goes on and on."

Veiling became particularly popular in the Muslim world after the Koran was revealed to the prophet Mohammed. While there has been debate over what constitutes veiling and how much women should cover themselves, many believe that modesty is a clear mandate from the Koran.

When European colonizers began dominating the Muslim world, veiling, known as the hijab – which is at minimum a headscarf – began to be shunned by westerners. Some veiling was seen as mysterious and exotic, but many began to think of it as a repressive trait in Islamic society.

During the first half of the 20th century, many customs involving veiling declined for both religious and political reasons. Women in Iran and Turkey were forced by the government to take off their veils. Catholic leaders allowed nuns to take off their habits, another type of veil.

After Sept. 11, veiling became popular again among many Muslim women. A poll by the Pew Research Center last year found that 43 percent of Muslim women in the United States wear a hijab most or all the time. Some say the hijab trend is a sign of solidarity against western values and a commitment to religious faith. Others say it's a way to preserve culture.

But Muslim women aren't the only ones going back to the veil. Conservative traditions that enforce modesty are becoming increasingly popular. Jewish Hasidism, in



An elderly Romanian orthodox woman waits during the Epiphany religious service in the village of Izvoru, Romania.

which women often wear wigs to cover their hair, and traditionalist Catholicism, which mandates the use of the chapel veil, are both experiencing a spike in numbers.

"I think there is a real hunger for the richest, fullest life that one can have," says Daniel-Hughes, "and wearing a veil or covering the head in the orthodox communities is a part of that, and many Catholic communities are tapping in the same need. It's already been in the tradition; people found it again."

Heath believes that as the veiling debate heats up, some may want to look into the practice as it relates to their own religious beliefs. They may find that the concept of veiling, which nowadays seems so politically charged and motivated, has roots in their own past.

"We need to look at ourselves before we criticize others," she says. "I grew up in both heavily Catholic and Muslim countries, and it was very interesting to see how an old Italian or Greek peasant woman was dressed exactly like an Egyptian peasant, all veiled and covered with scarves." ■