

## **What Mennonite Women can Learn from Veiled Feminist Muslims**

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Mennonites love dialogue. Along with borscht and quilts, it's one of the things that we do best. We dialogue within our congregations, we facilitate dialogues between offenders and victims, and we dialogue with people of other religions. Today, I'm going to focus on dialogue with Muslims, because that is the group with whom I have the privilege of being closely connected.

Throughout the Bible, there is a strong theme that encourages us to dialogue with people who know God in radically different ways. The Book of Ruth, as well as passages in Micah and Isaiah, show people of other nations and religions to be righteous and God-fearing. In the passage just read from John 16:12-13 Jesus lets his followers know that there is truth outside of our knowledge parameters. This is one of the reasons that talking with other people who are connected to God – sometimes in very different ways – has the potential to reveal new truth to us.

Too often, though, I believe we limit the impetus for dialogue with Muslims to a better understanding of one another, in order to promote peace. While I certainly have no opposition to such dialogue, I believe that we have a great deal to learn from Muslims – not just about who *they* are, but about who *we* are. I propose that Muslim theology has the strong potential to inform our own.

Mennonites, perhaps more than most other Christian denominations, can relate to Muslims. Both communities identify themselves outside of the mainstream, and both have earned the term “radical.” This is most visibly represented in attire, in that both

Mennonites and Muslims have a tradition of covering their women. It is a talking point that is immediately identifiable with both communities. In fact, many Muslim women explain part of their rationale for wearing the hijab as representing their religion: “When I go out in hijab, everyone knows I’m Muslim.” The current debate over Quebec’s proposed ban on the niqab (the Muslim face veil) brings into sharp relief how visible and contentious religious attire can be, even within the Muslim community itself. That being said, it is important to remember that Mennonites need not wade into the internal debates of the Muslim community in order to learn from their theology.

Let me be clear about what this is not: I am not calling for a re-institution of conference dictates on hem length or head coverings. I am not admonishing “frivolous young women” to dress more “modestly”. And I am not saying that all is perfect with Muslim women and that the veil has never been used as an instrument of oppression. It’s important to remember that a history of oppressive theology is wrapped up in discussions of Christian women’s dress. What I *am* saying is that feminist Muslim women, who are quite familiar with negative theology directed at themselves, can convey to us that there is a *possibility* of combining a self-empowering theology with a modest and particular one, demonstrated through their attire.

I propose that Christian women (Mennonites in particular) can learn a great deal from Muslim women on how to demonstrate their theologically based self-empowerment through their attire, without dismissing modesty or adopting legalistic and damaging mandates. This may seem like a conversation more suited for old order participants than the more mainstream churches, but in fact, that is my very point: engagement with Muslim women reminds us that this *is* an important issue.

But why? Why should we care? Why am I resurrecting this issue of “dress” when most Mennonites have given up dress codes, and only discuss the topic in reference to the Mennonite theological dark ages, where a skirt that hung above the knee was immodest, and therefore displeasing to God? Because, quite simply, how we dress and what we wear still has theological significance.

The subtle (and not so subtle) theological messages wrapped up in our clothing have the potential to shape our understanding of God. The old paradigm, that God wants us to look prim and proper, teaches us that God wants cleaned-up lives and happy masks. If, however, our church welcomes people in jeans, this message has the power to convey a God who wants us to “come as we are.” This theology teaches us that God wants us to come before our Creator in our brokenness, in all of our messiness, and that it is through broken vessels and not perfect people, that God works.

Yet is it not odd that a relationship with God would have no affect on our wardrobes? With all the time, money and energy that we invest in our clothing decisions, is there a way to honour our Creator in how we dress? Feminist Muslim women who veil often explain their choice as providing them with a sense of freedom and rightness with God. Is there a way for Christian women to have a similar experience through how we dress? This is a conversation that must walk a very fine line, for both Muslims and Christians. From the Christian perspective, it is very easy to slip into traditional concepts of “modest Christian dress,” that are in fact little more than attempts to control women’s bodies.

Within the Mennonite tradition, concern over beauty, and appearance in general, was considered vainglorious and sinful. “Fashion” was a worldly concept that

contradicted Mennonite non-conformity. With the rejection of Conference determined dress codes in the 1950s and '60s, Mennonite women were free to shorten their hair and their hemlines. But what if fashion could be embraced as *part* of a non-conformist theology? As Mennonites, we have not yet accomplished this. While there is a somewhat particular style of dress that characterizes some Mennonite congregations – vests and beards on the men, and scarves and peasant blouses on the women (both genders wear Birkenstocks), this manner of dress is really more of a reflection of tradition and secular style than theology.

Many Muslims, on the other hand, have embraced their theological particularity in manners of dress and have created culturally based haute couture. Muslims refer to this as “fashionably faithful.” If you Google this term, this Islamic fashion is simply stunning.

I am by no means suggesting that Mennonites adopt the hijab. Instead, I seek to move beyond mandates of starched shirts and learn from Muslim women’s appreciation of their own beauty.

Muslim women veil not out of shame but because they wholeheartedly believe that this is what God asks of them. Veiling is an act of submission, and it is this concept that Mennonites need to resurrect. This is where Christian feminists become uncomfortable (and I include myself in this). The term “submission” carries an almost insurmountable negative connotation, no matter how it is defined. What I seek is for Christians to reclaim submissiveness and yieldedness, not to be “thrown down and run over”, as John Howard Yoder put it. This submission stands in contrast to the blind community obedience that dominates individuals. It goes beyond gender, and applies equally to men and women. While I do not suggest that Muslims have mastered this

radical submissiveness, feminist Muslims feel no dischord in explaining wearing their hijabs as acts of submission to God, and as a means for being judged for who they are, rather than how they look. My hope is that through dialogue with Muslims

The believer's baptism rejects the notion that as individuals we make choices that have no impact on others in our communities. We choose to be accountable to the community of believers, but we have a say in what those standards are.

Our community has embraced the "come as you are" theology I began this paper with. The problem with this is that it does not require much, if any, preparation. Our lives are frantic and focused on ourselves. In church we have an opportunity to be still and focused on God. Muslims have a strong sense of this, performing ritual cleansing before each prayer, and wearing specific attire for both men and women. When we wear our street clothes to church, we can fail to appreciate the transition. Author Steve Lansingh provides a strong analogy: "It's kind of like the difference between dressing up for a big date and just hanging out with someone at home. The casual evening allows you to be yourself, but the formal event gives you time to anticipate and prepare and be ready to meet the other person."

Worship is not supposed to be limited to what we do on Sunday mornings. This is hardly a new concept in Mennonite theology, and used to be part of our dress. Unfortunately, through dress, Mennonite women encountered a faith that justified their subjugation. I want to reclaim this notion, however, that getting dressed each morning has the potential to be an act of worship. Exodus 28 provides a detailed description of the sacred garments Aaron must wear as the High Priest of Israel. Through this mandate of physical ritual, God is reminding Aaron to make preparations to meet with the Almighty

God. God is concerned with our hearts, not with our outward appearance, but the physical directly affects the spiritual.