



Hijab: Spotlighting Servitude to God

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Introduction

One of the most contentious debates about Islam and Muslim women in society revolves around the religious construct of *ḥayā*’ (modesty, shyness) and ironically, what has become its most discernible expression—the observance of *hijab*. The word *hijab* is linguistically derived from the meaning to be veiled, concealed, or protected¹ and can be used both in its literal and metaphysical sense, as it appears in the Qur’an.² However, the term has become synonymous today with the headscarf worn by Muslim women.

The staggering level of scrutiny on *hijab*, particularly in the wake of 9/11, thrust it undeservedly into the limelight of controversy. Its mere mention evokes a spectrum of reaction. Before we redirect the discourse toward the true essence of *hijab* as an act of servitude to God, it is important to first identify and deconstruct the factors that have contributed to the prevalent misconceptions about *hijab*. Widespread Islamophobia, global political self-interest, and present-day feminist thought each propagate their own socio-political agendas, which often misconstrue *hijab* as misogynistic and oppressive, and use it to negatively stereotype those who wear it. A study of Muslim women in the US who observe *hijab* sheds some light on the factors leading to the misconceptions of *hijab* and those who wear it.

The image of the *hijab* as the symbol of oppression and violence against women by the hands of the uncivilized Muslim man became the rallying point not only for American politicians, but for contemporary Western feminists as well. The body of the veiled, Muslim woman became the entity on which Western liberal neo-Orientalists superimposed their values, and it was the exposed female body, active in the public sphere, which became the marketable image of women in free market capitalism. Although feminist efforts have long been used as a method to deconstruct

¹ Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, bk. 1, pt. 2, p. 515–16, <https://archive.org/details/ArabicEnglishLexicon.CopiousEasternSources.EnlargedSuppl.Kamoos.Lane.Poole.1863/02.ArabicEnglLex.v1p2.let.5.6.7..Jim.Cha.Kha.Lane1865./page/n149/mode/2up>.

² See “When you ask his wives for something, do so from behind a *screen*: this is purer both for your hearts and for theirs.” Qur’an 33:53. And “And they say, ‘Our hearts are within coverings [i.e., screened] from that to which you invite us, and in our ears is deafness, and between us and you is a *partition*, so work; indeed, we are working.’” Qur’an 41:5.

patriarchal control over women, including their physical selves, many argue that such movements have found a strange bedfellow with capitalism that is reinforcing unfair expectations for women's bodies. Feminist movements have evolved from "state feminism," which advocated for policy change within the state, to "market feminism," in which the same goals are achieved in the private sector in concert with market trends.³

With the rise of liberalism came the call for religious reform and the prevalence and power of consumerism and social-media images, which heavily influence social trends and behavior through the exploitation and commoditization of *hijab*. Researching the complex relationship between Muslim women and consumer capitalism, a collection of papers published in the *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*:

collectively show that contemporary Muslim femininities are increasingly mediated through the market forces of consumer capitalism, impacting Muslim women's identities, lifestyles, and belonging in complex ways. What is meant to be a Muslim woman is constantly negotiated, defined and redefined through or in reaction to the images, narratives, and knowledges about Muslim womanhood constructed in the marketplace. As Muslim women stake out their own positions, they actively engage with given Islamic practice and knowledge as well as with modalities of capitalism... representations of self-determined, independent, and professional Muslim women conform to images of the ideal consumer. While the veiled images re-inscribe Islamic norms and identifications by emphasizing particular ways of being Muslim for women, they also transform the very content and contours of Islamic piety and femininity.⁴

Furthermore, it is as important to recognize the presence and impact of yet another factor—the cultural bias that has been passed down generation to generation in many societies, the Muslim world being no exception. This has further fueled misplaced criticism of *hijab* and Islam as being oppressive to women, when in fact,

³ Anderson Beckmann Al Wazni, "Muslim Women in America and hijab: A Study of Empowerment, Feminist Identity, and Body Image," *Social Work* 60, no. 4 (2015): 325–33, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swv033>.

⁴ Banu Gökariksel and Ellen McLarney, "Muslim Women, Consumer Capitalism, and the Islamic Culture Industry," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 6, no. 3 (2010): 2–3, muse.jhu.edu/article/394242.

Islam and *hijab* honor and empower women, as will become evident when we discuss the true purpose of *hijab*. Through misinterpreting and misconstruing deep-rooted cultural ignorance for religion, a number of practices—ranging from insensitive to unjust and extreme—have contributed to the erroneous marginalization and even oppression of Muslim women.⁵ For example, practices such as denying women their God-given right to education, their own wealth and property, or their own voices still exist in plain view. Sadly, abuse of women remains prevalent today across many nations and societies, irrespective of culture and religion.

Despite all of the above, vast numbers of Muslim women who wear *hijab* do so with purpose, as a badge of honor—one that is liberating, empowering, and brings solace because it is worn solely as a religious act of compliance to God. However, it should also come as no surprise that, for many Muslim women and young girls who must navigate the daily challenges of wearing it, *hijab* has become associated with struggle and doubt in terms of identity, spirituality, self-esteem, and body image. This struggle is only further complicated for those entering the fold of Islam with yet another dynamic—that of their own personal journey to the faith and acclimating to a new way of life, many times without the necessary support structure of family and community to get them through the spiritual and emotional challenges they often face. Unfortunately, the significance of *hijab* is itself in question, if not already lost, for those who have chosen to remove it, or who doubt or reject its validity and obligation.

Hence, the discourse on the true essence and purpose of *hijab* is increasingly buried deeper under the crossfire of these contentious debates, while *hijab* itself remains caught in the spotlight of controversy and misinterpretation.

The goal of this paper is to dispel some of the controversy and misinterpretation associated with the religious mandate of *hijab*. It is to empower the reader with the true purpose of *hijab*, in order to alleviate the many doubts and challenges Muslim

⁵ Mohammad Elshinawy, Roohi Tahir, and Omar Suleiman, “‘We Used to Have No Regard for Women’: Gender Equity & the Advent of Islam,” *Yaqeen*, July 17, 2019, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/roohi-tahir/we-used-to-have-no-regard-for-women-gender-equity-the-advent-of-islam>.

women and girls face in this regard. The topic will be addressed in terms of its most foundational aspect—one that firmly anchors modesty, and specifically the *hijab*, as an act of servitude to God. Once the primary objective of servitude is placed in the forefront and becomes the answer to every *why* and the lens through which all acts of worship and obedience to God are approached, it serves as the sole, proper, and timeless basis and motivation for every believer to then inculcate modesty (*ḥayāʾ*). In Islam, *ḥayāʾ* is an internally and externally expressed cornerstone of faith, which demands one’s conscientiousness and accountability, first and foremost, in the sight of God, with oneself, and in one’s outward demeanor.⁶ It is a religious mandate which calls for the observance of *hijab* to the one who understands the responsibility and accountability of servitude placed upon them by God, All-Mighty and All-Wise. The believer inherently strives to attain a beloved and noble status in the sight of God, and the reward of the Hereafter. This can only be achieved with acts of worship and obedience that are in accordance with the Qur’an and Sunnah, and the practice of the pious predecessors, from whom we take the correct interpretation of the sacred texts and religious practice as a whole. The following introduces the theological foundation of *hijab* in the context of one’s servitude to God. While this paper is dedicated solely to this aspect of *hijab*, it is important to note that servitude to God is the foundation upon which the comprehensive framework of modesty in Islam is built. Hence, the topic of *hijab* in its entirety is best appreciated in light of accompanying literature on the various aspects of *ḥayāʾ* for both men and women, gender interaction, and the specific legal rulings of *hijab*.

Know your purpose

O mankind, worship your Lord, who created you and those before you, that you may become righteous [2:21]

This is the first divine command to humanity, in the sequential arrangement of the Qur’an. When the renowned scholar of Islam, Ibn Taymiyyah (d.1328), was asked to explain this verse, he wrote a comprehensive response about the reality of worship or servitude to God (*al-‘ubūdīyah*). He explained that it “comprises

⁶ Mohammad Elshinawy, “Understanding Haya,” *Yaqeen*, forthcoming.

everything that Allah loves and approves of from the apparent and hidden sayings and deeds.”⁷ These sayings and deeds include all of the legislated ritual acts of worship the believer performs, as well as those actions within the prescribed moral code of sincerity, truthfulness, patience, gratitude, and good conduct in all aspects of life. Servitude is grounded in love and obedience to Allah and His Messenger ﷺ above all else.⁸ It is built upon hope in Allah’s mercy and fear of His displeasure and punishment—and in turning to Him in repentance. In fact, it is the very purpose of one’s existence, as He states: “And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me.”⁹

Hence, servitude to Allah is a state of complete submission and humility toward Him. The true servant (‘*abd*’) or worshipper of Allah submits to Him out of love for their Creator and Master. As Ibn Taymiyyah summarized:

One who submits to someone with hatred is not worshipping him. And one who loves someone without submitting is likewise not worshipping him; this is like a man who loves his son and friends. Therefore, neither love nor submission alone are sufficient in worshipping Allah. Allah must be loved most by *al-‘abd* and He must be the greatest of all in his sight. Nothing deserves complete love and submission except Allah. And whatever has been highly regarded without it being by the command of Allah, its glorification is rejected.

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The very essence of acknowledging the Oneness of Allah (*tawḥīd*) lies in recognizing and worshipping Him as the only One worthy of worship.

And We sent not before you any messenger except We revealed to him that, “There is no deity except Me, so worship Me [alone].” [21:25]

⁷ Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-‘Ubūdīyah: Being a True Slave of Allah*, trans. Abdallah M. Mekkaoui (n.p.: n.p., 1987), 13, archive.org/details/al-uboodiyahBeingATrueSlaveOfAllahswt--/mode/1up.

⁸ “Say, [O Muhammad], ‘If your fathers, your sons, your brothers, your wives, your relatives, wealth which you have obtained, commerce wherein you fear decline, and dwellings with which you are pleased are more beloved to you than Allah and His Messenger and jihad [i.e., striving] in His cause, then wait until Allah executes His command. And Allah does not guide the defiantly disobedient people’” (Qur’an 9:24).

⁹ Qur’an 51:56.

¹⁰ Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-‘Ubūdīyah*, 22–23.

Every prophet of Allah was sent with the mission of calling to this *tawhīd*. They are the most noble and worthy role models for humanity, who personified and perfected the role and status of the *‘abd* for us to emulate. The Prophet ﷺ himself is referred to by Allah with this most honorable and beloved title of *‘abd*, emphasizing his closeness to Allah: “Exalted is He who took *His Servant* [Prophet Muhammad] by night from al-Masjid al-Ḥarām to al-Masjid al-Aqṣá, whose surroundings We have blessed, to show him of Our signs. Indeed, He is the Hearing, the Seeing.”¹¹ Likewise, all of creation, and therefore, each of us too is an *‘abd* of Allah, as is stated throughout the Qur’an. Allah frequently calls upon us to reflect on our surroundings and reminds us that everything in the universe, all of nature, including the very makeup of our own bodies, down to the most microscopic level, fulfills its purpose in a state of perpetual submission to Allah.¹² He is the Creator, Master, and Owner of the Day of Judgment, to Whom each and every one of us will return—whether we choose to completely submit our God-given free will and intellect to Him or not. As Ibn Taymiyyah points out, the *‘abd* by definition is “one who is subdued, regardless of whether one admits that status or denies it, it is a meaning which refers to both the believer and the non-believer.”¹³ Hence, it is one’s willingness and sincere effort to submit oneself wholeheartedly in servitude to Allah that ennobles and separates the true *‘abd* from all others. Ibn Taymiyyah explains our fundamental need for obedience to Allah as the means to averting harm, likening it to our eating to avert hunger or our wearing extra clothing to protect ourselves from the cold.¹⁴ We can only then begin to appreciate the hope and potential for true servitude in every individual, and the love and mercy of Allah toward us in His addressing all of humanity as His *‘ibād* (pl of *‘abd*): “*My servants* who have harmed yourselves by your own excess, do not despair of God’s mercy. God forgives all sins: He is truly the Most Forgiving, the Most Merciful.”¹⁵

¹¹ Qur’an 17:1. See also 53:10, 72:19, and 2:23.

¹² “The seven heavens and the earth and whatever is in them exalt Him. And there is not a thing except that it exalts [Allah] by His praise, but you do not understand their [way of] exalting. Indeed, He is ever Forbearing and Forgiving.” Qur’an 17:44. See also 22:18 and 16:48–49.

¹³ Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-‘Ubūdīyah*, 33.

¹⁴ Ibn Taymiyyah, 45.

¹⁵ Qur’an 39:53.

Servitude to Allah is the pinnacle of human existence whereas servitude to any other (*shirk*) inevitably leads to oppression (*ẓulm*) of oneself or others.¹⁶ After all, who among the creation can be more just, merciful, and self-sufficient than the Creator? Hence, the servant of Allah (*‘abd*) is not enslaved to any other, nor to their ideologies, standards, and values, nor to his or her own whims and desires. In striving to attain this noble status, one is blessed with a true, deeper and lasting sense of liberation and empowerment to live the best version of oneself, to realize dignity and status in the sight of Allah, and in turn respect from others, and to attain the success of this world and the Hereafter. This is a crucial realization in the context of *hijab*, and one which effectively dismantles doubts and misconceptions. Connecting *hijab* to one’s servitude to Allah not only makes crystal clear why it is to be observed, in the manner it is to be observed, and for Whom, but also strengthens one with the faith, purpose, and self-confidence with which to overcome any challenges and personal struggle one may encounter in this regard.

What better example to look up to than that of Maryam (Mary), the mother of ‘Īsá (Jesus), who is recognized for her servitude and piety. She is the best among all women of all time,¹⁷ honored and admired the world over for the sincerity and strength of her faith in the face of tremendous challenge through her servitude to Allah—and its manifestation in her renowned modesty!¹⁸ The very same foundation of servitude formed the core belief to be instilled in the first Muslims in Makkah. It is important to note that the earliest verses of the Qur’an revealed during these first thirteen years focused heavily on *tawhīd*, on knowing Allah, and strengthening one’s faith and servitude, long before the majority of legislation, including the mandate of *hijab*, was revealed years later in Madinah.¹⁹ No doubt, of the apparent wisdom in this, which still holds true in our times, is the need to first

¹⁶ “And [mention, O Muḥammad], when Luqmān said to his son while he was instructing him, ‘O my son, do not associate [anything] with Allah (*shirk*). Indeed, association [with Him] is great injustice (*ẓulm*).’” Qur’an 31:13. See also 39:29 and 16:75–76.

¹⁷ The majority of scholars use the following verse as proof that Maryam is the best woman ever created: “And [mention] when the angels said, ‘O Mary, indeed Allah has chosen you and purified you and chosen you above the women of the worlds.’” Qur’an 3:42.

¹⁸ The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: “The best woman (of her time) was Khadījah and the best woman (of her time) was Maryam.” *Musnad Ahmad*, no. 938, bk. 5, hadith 365. See also Qur’an 3:37, 3:42–43, and 19:16–33.

¹⁹ Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips, *Usool at-Tafseer: The Methodology of Qur’anic Interpretation* (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, 2005), 102–103, 107–108, 153–64, <https://islamfuture.files.wordpress.com/2010/01/usool-at-tafseer-the-methodology-of-qur-anic-interpretation.pdf>.

nurture conviction and certainty in faith as the foundation upon which to build servitude and obedience to Allah—be it in the context of it facilitating sincerity, consistency, and ease in praying, fasting, giving in charity, or observing *hijab*. This will inculcate confidence and strength to overcome the challenges of any personal or societal pressure. Thus, in the context of *hijab*, it is in being grounded in servitude to Allah that one can successfully navigate through all the false propaganda, misconceptions, hardship, and fleeting societal standards and values in regard to the role of women, beauty, and self-image, by staying true to one's purpose as an 'abd of Allah. Only then will one discover one's true inner beauty and contentment in reaching one's full potential, far beyond all worldly standards.

Seek the most noble status

It is from our innate nature that we value dignity, honor, and respect. We are naturally drawn to admiration, praise, and the love of others. Status is often measured in worldly terms of wealth, beauty, and recognition. Life itself is a test and a constant struggle for the believer who is tasked with overcoming ego and desire in striving to perfect servitude to Allah, in order to attain something far greater and more satisfying than this fleeting world in which one is never satiated.²⁰ However, it is the true servant of Allah who has, in reality, attained the highest honor and status given to humanity as we note in the examples of the prophets of Allah, and countless among the pious who followed in their footsteps.²¹ The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is forever raised to the utmost pinnacle of dignity, respect, and nobility in the face of all that he endured of insult, injury, false accusation, and hatred. People of all walks of life, friend or foe, were drawn to his compelling character and demeanor.

It is through servitude that one is blessed with the “sweetness of faith.” The Prophet ﷺ said, “Whoever possesses the following three qualities will taste the sweetness of faith: 1) the one to whom Allah and His [Messenger] become dearer

²⁰ Allah's Messenger ﷺ said, “If Adam's son had a valley full of gold, he would like to have two valleys, for nothing fills his mouth except dust. And Allah forgives him who repents to Him.” *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6439, bk. 81, hadith 28, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/81/28>.

²¹ Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-ʿUbūdīyah*, 80.

than anything else; 2) who loves a person and he loves him only for Allah's sake; 3) who hates to revert to [disbelief] after Allah has brought (saved) him from it, as he hates to be thrown in fire.”²² Thus, the true servant of Allah is blessed with higher levels of faith (*imān*), piety and fear of Allah’s displeasure (*taqwá*), trust and reliance on Allah (*tawakkul*), certainty of faith (*yaqīn*), and patience and consistency (*ṣabr*) which serve to ease the way in perfecting one’s servitude and achieving lasting contentment. These are also the very characteristics of sound faith which naturally become a draw to others, in their beautiful outward manifestation of dignity, strength, and confidence. Putting one’s ego, desire, and limited perception of the temporary pleasures of this life aside are of the greatest tests and easier said than done for most of us. However, Allah gives us the example of the angels, who outperform humans in strength, size, number, and diligence in worship, yet never become too proud to humble themselves before Allah: “To Him belong all those in the heavens and the earth. And those nearest to Him are not too proud to worship Him, nor do they tire. They glorify [Him] day and night, never wavering.”²³ This is humility—and there is a vast difference between humility and humiliation. One who expresses humility to Allah stands tall and beloved in the sight of Allah. It is for this reason that prostrating before Allah (*sujūd*) is the most humbling yet noble act of worship—one that brings the servant closest to their Lord, becoming one of the greatest means of attaining accepted supplication (*du‘ā*).²⁴

The [true] servants of the Most Compassionate are those who walk on the earth humbly, and when the foolish address them [improperly], they only respond with peace. [25:63]

It is these true servants of Allah who will be protected from the ploys, distractions, and corruption of Shayṭān (Satan) for their belief and trust in Allah—and they will in turn be rewarded with eternal abundance in Paradise.²⁵

²² *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 21, bk. 2, hadith 14, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/2/14>.

²³ Qur’an 21:19. See also 7:205–206.

²⁴ The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: “The closest that a person can be to his Lord, the Mighty and Sublime, is when he is prostrating, so increase in supplication then.” *Sunan al-Nasā’ī*, no. 1137, bk. 12, hadith 109, <https://sunnah.com/nasai/12/109>.

²⁵ See Qur’an 15:39–40, 16:99–100, and 76:5–6.

Getting back to the topic of *hijab*, it is important to acknowledge those who struggle with being made to feel like the “other,” with negative self-image, and a lack of self-confidence in regard to observing *hijab* at a time when increasingly unregulated freedom of self-expression deems it liberating and even celebrated to remove it. It is important to acknowledge those who have felt humiliation when confronted by ignorance, hatred, and bigotry. All too often, these women are dismissed, stereotyped, blamed, and even misjudged as oppressed, or lacking sincerity, faith, and the fortitude to rise above it all. The tests are real, as are the struggles—and they are found in the narratives of real lives, in many forms and experiences, both physical and psychological in nature. Yet, every prophetic example teaches us that one need not fear humiliation because in reality, these true servants stand tall in the sight of Allah, for their sincerity, steadfastness, striving within their means, and their humility, despite the challenges they try to overcome. Turn to Him with certainty, for He is the most Merciful and most Loving, and the One most capable of protecting, healing, and placing respect and love for you in the hearts of the people.²⁶

The practical role of the Qur'an and Sunnah

You [alone] we worship and You [alone] we ask for help.
Guide us along the Straight Path [1:5-6]

Once one's connection to Allah is firmly established and becomes the focus of one's existence, it follows that one understands one's accountability before Him and that one acquires the necessary and fundamental knowledge that will enable them to strengthen their faith and practice it in accordance with the will and command of Allah.²⁷ The profound verses above, from the opening chapter of the Qur'an, are frequently repeated throughout the day, as an integral part of the five obligatory daily prayers. They serve as a powerful reminder of our servitude and absolute dependence upon Allah. The entire Qur'an that follows this request is the

²⁶ Allah's Messenger ﷺ said, “If Allah loves a person, He calls Gabriel, saying, ‘Allah loves so and so, O Gabriel love him.’ So Gabriel would love him and then would make an announcement in the Heavens: ‘Allah has loved so and-so therefore you should love him also.’ So all the dwellers of the Heavens would love him, and then he is granted the pleasure of the people on the earth.” *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 7485, bk. 97, hadith 111, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/97/111>.

²⁷ Qur'an 39:11–15.

light of divine guidance we pray for; it is a timeless and ever-relevant practical guidebook for life from the One who is our Creator and Master. These verses were revealed to the final Prophet and Messenger, Muhammad ﷺ who was sent by Allah to all of humanity to lead the way by example, and to instruct us as to how to implement the Qur'an in our lives.²⁸ Thus, the framework and bounds for a successful life revolve around both knowledge and action, and are to be taken from these two primary sources, the Qur'an and the Sunnah.²⁹

While there is ample allowance and flexibility within the Sharī'ah to accommodate custom and cultural norms, it is important to note that these cannot supersede the bounds and principles defined and set by divine legislation.³⁰ Who else can we entrust our lives to besides Allah, the All-Merciful, most Just and Loving, who knows us better than we know ourselves? He is the All-Knowing, Who sees all and hears all, and He is our Protector upon whose wisdom and capability we rely with utmost faith that His guidance and commands are by design good for us. They are aimed at our achieving excellence and true beauty in both moral character and outward appearance and behavior, and will never harm us or let us down. Rather, His is *the* Straight Path to success and lasting contentment. Contrast this with the unstable, man-made constructs of gender uniformity, beauty, freedom of expression, and fluctuating ideologies which aim to serve those who promote them, yet bring no sustainable benefit in this world or in the Hereafter. On the contrary, they often lead to harm. Hence, we must have faith and trust in Allah, with Whom we find the necessary holistic safeguards for the best life possible, though we are not always able to perceive them as such at all times.

Within our discourse on *hijab*, the next step toward answering *how is one to observe hijab correctly?* is to then establish that *hijab* can only be defined, understood, and practiced in accordance with the authentic teachings of the Qur'an

²⁸ Qur'an 33:21. See also 'Ā'ishah said: "The conduct of the Prophet ﷺ was entirely according to the Qur'an." *Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn*, no. 1847, bk. 18, hadith 40, <https://sunnah.com/riyadussalihin/18/40>.

²⁹ 'Uthaymīn Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ, *Explanation of a Summary of Al-Aqeedatul-Hamawiyyah of Ibn Taymiyyah*, trans. Aboo az-Zubayr Abdur-Rahmaan Harrison (n.p.: Tarbiyyah Bookstore Publishing, 2004), 9–15. Also, "in the terminology of *usul al-fiqh*, *adillah Shar'iyyah* refer to four principal proofs, or sources of the Shari'ah, namely the Qur'an, Sunnah, consensus and analogy." Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (n.p.: Islamic Texts Society, 1991), 19.

³⁰ Kamali, 27, 248–258.

and Sunnah, as with each and every mandate from Allah. The concept of modest shame is not new to Islam. It has been emphasized by Allah since the creation of man, and is central to the story of our parents, Adam and Eve. They were deceived by Shayṭān (Satan) into disobeying Allah, and found themselves uncovered and vulnerable, both in a literal and moral sense—firmly establishing the connection between servitude and *ḥayā*.³¹ Hence, looking back through Judeo-Christian history, we see its presence in scripture pre-dating the Qur'an, which then established the final legal rulings in this regard as the last divine revelation to humanity.³² The *sūrah* (chapter) *Nūr*, in which we find one of the verses commanding the believing women to observe *ḥijab*, contains at its core, the magnificent verse connecting the light of guidance from Allah to the heart of the believer. The *sūrah* itself conveys a central theme to all the believers, men and women, prescribing protection and preservation of morality and modesty for society as a whole, once again emphasizing that faith, servitude, and *ḥayā* go hand in hand.³³

While humans are blessed with God-given intellect and agency to obey Allah, as part of the test of this worldly life, and hence to choose to observe *ḥijab*, this leaves no room for one to freely interpret *ḥijab* outside these divinely legislated bounds, or as optional. Rather, choosing to disregard its obligation logically falls into disobedience, sin, and disregard of one's servitude to God, which in turn comes with its own accountability in the sight of Allah, just as it does for one who disregards any other religious obligation. Ultimately, the choice to observe *ḥijab* is indeed an individual choice—one that must be made consciously between obedience or disobedience to Allah.

However, as importantly, that choice is not to be interpreted as all or nothing. For example, one may struggle to pray every daily obligatory prayer with consistency and focus, but one doesn't give up praying altogether, nor is it a final judgment of one's level of faith or love for Allah. Rather, the sincere servant keeps striving to

³¹ Qur'an 20:115–23.

³² Zohreh Sadatmoosavi, W. Z. Kamaruddin W. Ali, and Mohammad Ali Shokouhi, "The Conceptions of Modesty and Modest Dress in the Scriptures of Abrahamic Religions," *Afkar* 18 (2016): 229–70, <https://doi.org/10.22452/afkar.vol18no2.6>.

³³ Qur'an 24:27–38.

the best of their ability to fulfill the obligations upon them, flawed in attempt as one may be at times, over abandoning them completely. It is from the limitless mercy and generosity of Allah that one never knows which of the smallest acts of sincerity, even just one prostration performed with humility, is so beloved to Allah that it becomes the means to forgiveness, guidance, abundant reward, and Paradise. Hence, the one struggling with *hijab* continues to strive to observe it consistently and correctly, despite any obstacles, human weakness, and imperfections, in accordance with the beautiful Prophetic instruction to us in all matters: “...if I forbid you to do something, then keep away from it. And if I order you to do something, then do as much of it as you can.”³⁴

Say, [O Muhammad], “If you should love Allah, then follow me, [so] Allah will love you and forgive you your sins. And Allah is Forgiving and Merciful.” [3:31]

Whose interpretation to follow?

Perhaps the greatest source of misconception and confusion in regard to the mandate of *hijab* is the erroneous interpretation of the sacred texts through which *hijab* has been legislated by God. As the Qur’an itself testifies, it was revealed to all of humanity in clear speech, in the Arabic language.³⁵ To this day, the reader is moved to awe and wonder, whether Muslim or not, even when reading a mere translation of this miraculous divine speech. While the Qur’an is, in great part, easily understood in its literal wording and meaning, there are a number of verses which, at the time of revelation, required explanation, elaboration, and demonstration (such as the rituals of prayer) by the Prophet ﷺ to the Companions; indeed, on many occasions, they explicitly asked him ﷺ for such explanations.

It is important to note that anything conveyed to us from the Sunnah, defined here as the speech, actions, and tacit approval of the Prophet ﷺ, is a form of divinely inspired revelation (*wahy*) that must be taken along with the Qur’an as authoritative, as the Prophet ﷺ did not act on his own behalf in regard to any

³⁴ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 7288, bk. 96, hadith 19, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/96/19>.

³⁵ Qur’an 26:192–95.

matter of the Shari‘ah.³⁶ Ibn Al-Qayyim (d. 1350) summarized this as, “If Allah made it a necessary element of faith for the Companions to seek permission to go somewhere when they were with the Prophet ﷺ, then it is even more obvious that it is a necessary element of faith for them not to adopt a view in [the] Religion without first seeking his permission...”³⁷

And We have not revealed to you the Book, [O Muḥammad], except for you to make clear to them that wherein they have differed and as guidance and mercy for a people who believe. [16:64]

The verses requiring further clarification may rely on a number of other factors such as the context and time of revelation, on grouping them in light of other verses related to the same matter, and in some cases, more specifically worded verses which must be taken into consideration. Additionally, attention is given to verses containing the evolution and abrogation of a particular ruling as ordained by Allah, and the language and practice of the people as it was understood and existed at the time, to name a few factors in determining the correct interpretation of the text.³⁸ This is a mere glimpse into the vast knowledge and methodology comprising the Islamic sciences which scholars of Qur’anic exegesis and Islamic jurisprudence employ to this day. It is sufficient for the purpose of our discussion to note that one cannot, therefore, take on the charge of arbitrarily reinterpreting the intention of Allah behind a particular ruling.³⁹ This holds true for every established ruling,⁴⁰ once it has been legislated and has precedent as to how it is to be understood and acted upon, from the Prophet ﷺ and thereafter, his Companions, who witnessed

³⁶ Muṣṭafā al-Sibā‘ī, *The Sunnah and Its Role in Islamic Legislation*, trans. Faisal Shafeeq (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, 2009), 73–76, 77–89, 443–59.

³⁷ As-Sibā‘ī, 84.

³⁸ Philips, *Usool at-Tafseer*, 19–29, 143–52, 165–86, 204–31.

³⁹ “The mainstream understanding of Islam transmitted generation after generation throughout the history of this *ummah*, therefore, carries immense epistemological weight. It is illogical for someone to posit that fourteen hundred centuries of Muslim scholars have been blinded from the plain sense meaning of the Qur’an or the core teachings of the faith and that only in the modern era have we discovered what Islam ‘really’ means.” Nazir Khan, “Difference of Opinion: Where Do We Draw the Line?,” *Yaqeen*, December 10, 2019, updated June 22, 2020, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/nazir-khan/difference-of-opinion-where-do-we-draw-the-line>.

⁴⁰ “Many of the objections being made today are against non-negotiable rulings. The prohibition of usury and certain forms of financial transactions; the clear laws of marriage, divorce, and inheritance; the requirement of the *hijab*; all such rulings are *qat’i*. They cannot be abandoned.” Amir Aboguddah, “A Sober Second Thought: When and How Should Changes in Islamic Law be Made?,” *Yaqeen*, July 30, 2020, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/amir-aboguddah/a-sober-second-thought-when-and-how-should-changes-in-islamic-law-be-made>.

firsthand and best understood it, and their noble successors among those the Prophet ﷺ instructed us to follow.⁴¹

While there is no denying the need for sensitivity, empathy, and emotional intelligence, from both male *and* female scholars when addressing this issue, it cannot be emphasized enough that *ḥayāʾ* is prescribed for every individual, both male and female, and is not intended to suppress or marginalize women. Once again, this objection indicates a disregard for the legislative authority of the Prophet ﷺ and his Companions, as well as the legacy of exemplary female Islamic scholarship, dating back to the female Companions who were among those first recipients of the revelation and rulings taught directly by the Prophet ﷺ.⁴²

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, “I have left two matters with you. As long as you hold to them, you will not go the wrong way. They are the Book of Allah and the Sunnah of His Prophet.”⁴³

Now that we have established that servitude to Allah can only be understood and practiced in the light of the Qurʾan and Sunnah, the two primary sources of Islam which contain the religion in its entirety for all time,⁴⁴ it is incumbent on the believer to recognize and understand the importance of adhering to the correct interpretation and practice of the text, as conveyed to us from the Prophet ﷺ to his Companions, who are the most noble generation of believers, and the following early generations known as the pious predecessors (*salaf*).⁴⁵ Hence, in his explanation of the verse, “[He] Who created death and life to test you [as to] which

⁴¹ “It is incumbent upon you (to follow) my Sunnah and the Sunnah of the Rightly-Guided Successors after me. Hold fast to it and bite on to it with your molars. And beware of the newly-invented matters, for every newly-invented matter is an innovation and every innovation is misguidance.” *Jamiʿ al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2676, and he said it is *ḥasan ṣaḥīḥ*. Also recorded by Abū Dāwūd (no. 4607), Ibn Mājah (no. 42), and Aḥmad (4/126). Ibn Ḥibbān and al-Ḥākim declared it to be *ṣaḥīḥ*. Ṣāliḥ, *Explanation of a Summary of Al-Aqeedatul-Hamawiyyah*, 9–10, 24.

⁴² Additionally, the concept of scholarly consensus (*ijmāʾ*) plays a role in further establishing the boundaries of acceptable opinion within Islamic legislation. “In the terminology of *usul al-fiqh*, adillah Sharʿiyyah refer to four principal proofs, or sources of the Shariʾah, namely the Qurʾan, Sunnah, consensus and analogy.” Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, 19, 155–68. And also the hadith of the Prophet ﷺ, “My community shall never agree on an error.” *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, II, no. 1303, hadith 3950.

⁴³ *Muwattaʾ Mālik*, bk. 46, hadith 3, <https://sunnah.com/urn/416890>.

⁴⁴ Qurʾan 5:3.

⁴⁵ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6429, bk. 81, hadith 18, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/81/18>. The Prophet ﷺ said, “The best people are those of my generation, and then those who will come after them (the next generation), and then those who will come after them (i.e., the next generation), and then after them, there will come people whose witness will precede their oaths, and whose oaths will precede their witness.”

of you is best in deed—and He is the Exalted in Might, the Forgiving,”⁴⁶ Al-Fuḍayl bin ‘Iyāḍ concluded that for any deed to be accepted by Allah, it must be done with sincerity in one’s heart and adherence to the Sunnah in one’s action. He said, “The best deed is that which is most devoted and most proper.” The people asked, “O Abū ‘Alī! How should it be most devoted and most proper?” He said, “For if the deed was devoted but was not proper it would not be accepted, and if it was proper but not devoted it would not be accepted; the devoted is to be for Allah Alone, and the proper is to be in compliance with [the] Sunnah.”⁴⁷

The only saying of the faithful believers, when they are called to Allah (His Words, the Qur’an) and His Messenger ﷺ, to judge between them, is that they say: “We hear and we obey.” And such are the prosperous ones (who will live forever in Paradise). And whosoever obeys Allah and His Messenger ﷺ, fears Allah, and keeps his duty [to Him], such are the successful ones. [24:51-52]

In regard to the correct understanding of *hijab*, it is sufficient for the purpose of this paper to point out that both textual evidence and precedent exist to confirm that the proper observance of *hijab* is an obligation as commanded by Allah and His Messenger ﷺ, and understood, and practiced by the Companions and those who followed them. Upon hearing the verses of *hijab* recited, the female Companions acted immediately, making it clear from their compliance that it was a mandate from Allah to henceforth modestly cover and veil themselves. These noble women who personally witnessed the time of revelation gave us accounts of how the verses were understood and acted upon, under the instruction and approval of the Prophet ﷺ. ‘Ā’ishah, the beloved wife of the Prophet ﷺ, Mother of the Believers, and great scholar and teacher to the Companions, said, “May Allah have mercy on the foremost women of the *Muhājirūn*. When Allah revealed the verse, ‘Let them draw their cloaks over their bodies,’ (24:31) they cut their sheets and veiled themselves with them.”⁴⁸ This and other such narrations, particularly taken collectively with the verses of Qur’an commanding *hijab* leave no room for

⁴⁶ Qur’an 67:2.

⁴⁷ Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-‘Ubūdīyah*, 63.

⁴⁸ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 4481, <https://abuaminalias.com/dailyhadithonline/2012/05/23/hijab-allah-reveals-ayat/>.

speculation. Furthermore, Allah states about those who still choose to deny His command:

These are nothing but names you have invented yourselves, you and your forefathers. God has sent no authority for them. These people merely follow guesswork and the whims of their souls, even though guidance has come to them from their Lord. [53:23]

Thus, divine revelation itself negates all false arguments made in favor of one who follows unqualified sources and reformist *fatwás* which stray outside these bounds, regardless of how popular and widespread, or rational they may appear, just as it negates deriving one's own interpretations and rulings based on one's desires.⁴⁹ Blind following and herd mentality, fueled to new heights in the digital era, are part and parcel of Shayṭān's deception which is strictly warned against. Ibn Taymiyyah describes those who indulge in such innovation to the religion under the category of, "legalizing the forbidden and blindly following the forefathers." He explains that: "The origin of the misguidance of anyone who went astray is in putting forward his rationale and not the text revealed by Allah, and putting forward the following of desire and not the following of Allah's Commandment."⁵⁰ The other side of the coin is that the digital era leaves no excuse for ignorance, particularly in light of the fact that humanity was commanded over fourteen hundred years ago with the following: "[Prophet], all the messengers We sent before you were simply men to whom We had given the Revelation: you [people] can ask those who have knowledge if you do not know."⁵¹

O Prophet, sufficient for you is Allah and for whoever follows you of the believers. [8:64]

Hijab as a means of liberation and empowerment

As mentioned earlier, there cannot exist a more just and beneficial system for life than the one prescribed by our Creator and Master. The entire religion serves to

⁴⁹ Heather Akou, "Interpreting Islam through the Internet: Making Sense of hijab," *Contemporary Islam* 4 (2010): 331–46, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-010-0135-6>.

⁵⁰ Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-ʿUbūdīyah*, 52–54.

⁵¹ Qur'an 16:43.

safeguard the fundamental needs of humanity for it to benefit and nurture healthy family and community life by way of an unsurpassed moral code.⁵² At an individual level, we have discussed the benefits of servitude to Allah, as the means to recognizing and living one's true identity as a servant of Allah, a means to dignity, self-esteem, and confidence—and ultimately, contentment. This further enables one to contribute to society; and in the context of *hijab*, women are no exception. In fact, it is moral consciousness and modesty, and hence *hijab*, that allow women their own unique space in society, free from objectification and the burdensome expectations of societal standards of worth and beauty.

Merely mentioning the contributions of Muslim women throughout history, dating back to the time of the Prophet ﷺ, is sufficient to debunk the false thinking that *hijab* is a means of oppression, or that it prevents women from having a voice or presence in society. Rather, it is within the safety and comfort of the boundaries of *haya'* and *hijab* that many women find themselves liberated and empowered to serve in many roles and capacities, free from superficial and untoward judgment. Maintaining proper *hijab* allows them to follow in the footsteps of the female Companions who were respected daughters, wives, mothers, students, scholars and teachers, at home and in the *masjid*, in the market and on the battlefield, decision-makers, entrepreneurs, and specialists in the sciences of their day; in servitude to Allah and in service to His creation.⁵³ They were luminaries and trendsetters, not for their outward appearance or *hijab*, but rather for their servitude to Allah and their contribution to society which left a rich and noble legacy etched in history that continues to inspire us. They were indeed the hallmarks of real and timeless beauty. They were recognized for the beauty and voices which emanated from within, far beyond the limited notions of beauty linked to the shackles of fashion and social media. Theirs was a presence of admirable dignity and excellence (*ihsān*) both in appearance and character—a demeanor empowered by

⁵² “The Islamic law is all about wisdom and achieving people’s welfare in this life and the afterlife. It is all about justice, mercy, wisdom, and good. Thus, any ruling that replaces justice with injustice, mercy with its opposite, common good with mischief, or wisdom with nonsense, is a ruling that does not belong to the Islamic law, even if it is claimed to be so according to some interpretation.” Ibn Al-Qayyim, as quoted in Jasser Auda, *Maqasid Al-Shariah: An Introductory Guide*, (n.p.: IIIT, 2008), 24–25, https://www.jasserauda.net/new/pdf/maqasid_guide-Feb_2008.pdf.

⁵³ Elmira Akhmetova, “Women in Islamic Civilisation: Their Rights and Contributions,” *Islam and Civilisational Renewal* 7 (2016): 474–91, <https://doi.org/10.12816/0035218>.

the ultimate source of true beauty and all good. The Prophet ﷺ said, “He who has, in his heart, an ant’s weight of arrogance will not enter Jannah.” Someone said: “[What if] a man likes to wear beautiful clothes and shoes?” The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, “Allah is Beautiful, He loves beauty. Arrogance means ridiculing and rejecting the Truth and despising people.”⁵⁴

Sadly, there exist more barriers today within our own communities, families, and even mosques which often erroneously, albeit unintentionally, marginalize and demotivate women and girls from realizing their God-given potential. This misinformed messaging, at times, itself a result of superficial judgment, stereotyping people, and the lack of acknowledgment of the many personal and societal challenges Muslims are increasingly facing, has contributed further to the faith crisis we see today.⁵⁵ In order to safeguard the faith of the present and future generations to come, it must be rectified with the proper knowledge, awareness, and empathy to effectively bring about change from within, and subsequently, to have a positive impact on the world around us. As the proverb goes, it takes a village to raise a child. Going back to the prophetic model, this begins with nurturing faith, conviction, and confidence in our children, as well as in our brothers and sisters alike—with the message of *tawhīd*, of knowing Allah, and of servitude as the foundation of one’s existence and identity as a true ‘*abd*’ of Allah. Worship, obedience, and specifically *ḥayā*’ in this case, will settle far more sincerely into practice once the hearts are inclined to Allah.

As for those who struggle in Our cause, We will surely guide them along
Our Way. And Allah is certainly with the good-doers. [29:69]

Conclusion

To the sister who is thinking about embarking on the journey of wearing *hijab*, or struggling to keep it on: Know that at the core of every action of the believer is their connection to Allah. Working to strengthen it will keep one steadfast and bring ease on the path to servitude. The servant of Allah never gives up. Remind

⁵⁴ *Riyāḍ al-Ṣaliḥīn*, no. 611, <https://sunnah.com/riyadussalihin/introduction/611>.

⁵⁵ Youssef Chouhoud, “What Causes Muslims to Doubt Islam? A Quantitative Analysis,” *Yaqeen*, February 18, 2018, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/youssef-chouhoud/what-causes-muslims-to-doubt-islam-a-quantitative-analysis>.

yourself of your purpose by remembering Allah by His names and attributes. He is the All-Merciful, All-Knowing, most Just, All-Wise, All-Forgiving, most Loving, *your* Creator and Master who is the source of guidance and legislation. Turn to Allah in prayer and supplication. He is with those who strive in His cause. Stay the course, and stay close to others doing the same.⁵⁶ No challenge is successfully overcome without faith and conviction in one's heart. To perfect one's servitude is the ultimate test of life, and one that does not end until death. *Hijab* is a struggle, on different levels, for many women. There is no good in the condescending behavior that some may show towards those who do not wear it, nor the outright denial of its place in Islam. It's a challenge, for some greater than others. But no challenge is without its due reward from the Lord of the Worlds. The safe harbor of servitude requires a deep trust in Allah and His promise.⁵⁷ The oars that will get one to safe harbor are built upon reliance (*tawakkul*) on Allah to guide the way with safety and ease. Allah makes a connection in the Qur'an between servitude and complete reliance on Him:

So We have sent you [Prophet] to a community—other communities passed away long before them—to recite to them what We reveal to you. Yet they disbelieve in the Lord of Mercy. Say, “He is my Lord: there is no god but Him. I put my trust in Him and to Him is my return.” [13:30]

Ibn Taymiyyah notes, in light of this and other verses that carry a similar meaning, that reliance on Allah is found in seeking His help, and that it is uniquely tied to servitude in that one cannot be a servant of Allah, nor worship Him without His help.⁵⁸ Finally, Allah reminds us that with every endeavor along His path, the true *‘abd* is conscientious and steadfast. While the world may have placed a spotlight on her *hijab*, her sight is unwaveringly set on the beacon of servitude. Good actions of worship and obedience, as diminished as they may seem in a world enslaved to man-made standards and values, are never lost with Allah, the One to Whom every

⁵⁶ “And hold firmly to the rope of Allah all together and do not become divided. And remember the favor of Allah upon you—when you were enemies and He brought your hearts together and you became, by His favor, brothers. And you were on the edge of a pit of the Fire, and He saved you from it. Thus does Allah make clear to you His verses that you may be guided.” Qur’an 3:103.

⁵⁷ The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: “Islam began as something strange and will go back to being strange, so glad tidings to the strangers,” *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, no. 3986, bk. 36, hadith 61, <https://sunnah.com/ibnmajah/36/61>.

⁵⁸ Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-‘Ubūdīyah*, 59 and 70.

sincere servant will return, to find everlasting reward for every effort made in this world.

...Indeed, he who is mindful of Allah and patient, then indeed, Allah does not allow to be lost the reward of those who do good. [12:90]