

## Discovering (not Uncovering) the Spirituality of Muslim Women

By Ingrid Mattson

It was almost midnight when I parked my car in front of the low plain building. Clearly there were no meaningful zoning regulations in this neighborhood where an Islamic elementary school backed onto the yard of an auto body shop. The Muslims were not complaining—after all, it was a regulatory vacuum in this unincorporated village just outside of Chicago that allowed them to build in the first place. Muslims in other, more organized suburbs had felt the power of zoning when their applications to build mosques and schools had been rejected. So I wasn't surprised to see a building like this—previously used as a warehouse or for small manufacturing—stretching out beside a residential home. I was a little surprised that this is where the women would be spending the night in prayer. I got out of the car, walked through the dreary foyer and into a large room where a dozen women stood praying on a sheet spread on the concrete floor.

The imam (“leader”) had a lovely voice. She stood in the middle of the line of women and recited Qur'an from memory. They listened quietly, said “amen” when she finished a passage and followed as she led them in the bowing and prostrating of prayer. Perhaps she was a *hafiz*—one who has memorized the complete scripture. In any case, it was evident that she had memorized at least a significant portion of the Qur'an, and was proficient in the art of recitation.

The women were friends from the neighborhood. All of them had been born in the Middle East or North Africa and had moved to the United States as young adults. Most of the women were in middle age; some taught at the religious school; most were homemakers. They were the kind of women who took pride in their cooking, in helping neighbors, and in maintaining a simple, but welcoming home. Whenever I visit my friend, who had invited me to the gathering when she heard I was in town, she always looks lovely and is ready to serve me homemade soup or bread fresh from the oven.

I joined their prayer that night, then sat with them for a while. They said they wanted to talk to me about being a Muslim in America. I thought this was a rather odd topic, given the length of time most of these women had been in the country. But they told me they had a hard time talking with people outside their community. They had realized, especially in the last few years, that so many Americans have a very negative image of Muslims. They wanted to make themselves better known. They were not interested in giving speeches or going to organized events—they just wanted to have friendlier encounters with the non-Muslim Americans they met in their daily lives. In their experience, this was difficult, and they were convinced that their dress was the main barrier.

When these Muslim women, who wear figure-flattering dresses at home leave the house, they wear a headscarf and a long, loose coat known in Arabic as *jilbab*. This practice of *hijab*—covering one's body in public—is practiced across the Muslim world. Its origin lies in the Qur'an and in the guidance given by the Prophet Muhammad to his community. Hijab is one aspect of a comprehensive system of behavior practiced by Muslim men and women to support chastity and propriety. Some people interpret the practice of hijab as a way to “control women's sexuality,” but this is a misunderstanding—or perhaps, an incomplete understanding. Islam requires both men and women to control their sexuality so that intimate relations occur only within marriage. But Islam does not encourage prudity nor does it demean sexuality. Sex is a vital part of marriage—it is an end in itself, not just a means to reproduction. To encourage intimacy in the home, these women change into

comfortable but attractive clothes as soon as they return home. To guard this special intimate relationship, *hijab* is worn upon leaving the house.

In America, we have been taught, “Don’t judge a book by its cover,” but as Derrida taught us, the book has no meaning except what we bring to it. So how do non-Muslim Americans “read” a Muslim woman covered in *hijab*? What meaning do we impart to the “veiled woman”? I fear that it is difficult for many Americans to free themselves of the long sad history of orientalist voyeurism associated with *hijab*. How many books and articles about Islam use these metaphors: “unveiling Islam,” “beyond the veil,” “behind the veil”? In the veil we see deceit, secrets, double lives but also mystery and exoticism. This spring, *US News and World Report* played on this creepy fascination with a special issue on Islam. Entitled, “Secrets of Islam,” the cover featured a close-up of a woman (or is it a man?) with her face and hair clothed in a black veil. The ambiguous gender of the model adds another level of discomfort. Perhaps this is a male terrorist dressing as a woman, or perhaps there is a more sinister aspect to the veiled Muslim woman than we realized.

Unfortunately, the politicization of dress in the modern Muslim world also affects our understanding of *hijab*. In Saudi Arabia, Iran and Afghanistan under the Taliban, women were forced to adopt a particular form of dress. Americans are given little context to understand these events. We may not be aware that these governments have also forced men to adopt certain forms of dress, nor are we aware that in most Muslim majority countries, men and women are free to dress as they like. Many women in these countries choose to observe some form of *hijab* because they believe it to be appropriate public dress. Most Americans are probably also not aware that in certain Muslim majority countries that espouse an extremist form of secularism, women are forbidden from wearing *hijab* in schools, colleges and government institutions. At Hartford Seminary, we have a number of young Turkish women who left their country because they could not continue their studies while wearing a headscarf.

All these associations came to mind, as I sat with the women that night in the industrial park outside of Chicago. I acknowledged their observation that *hijab* did present an initial obstacle to connecting for many Americans. Perhaps the most compassionate advice would be to tell the women to change their dress. But why should they have to strip themselves of something so important to them? After all, these were not just pieces of cloth, but one aspect of a way of interacting in the world that was essential to their sense of self, family and community. So I counseled the woman about ways to engage in small talk and how to use body language to allow others to relax around them. Certainly there would always be some negative reactions, but with patience, confidence and kindness, they should be able to connect to others.

I left the building just past midnight. It was a cold April night and the women would continue their devotions for some time. They met every month, spending the day in fasting and the night in prayer. I knew that their prayers were only for the sake of God. They did not care if anyone else knew about the rich spiritual lives they experienced behind the doors of this nondescript building. But I cared.

We hear so much about the oppression of Muslim women. Certainly Islam can be used as a source of repression. But this is true of any religion and any value system. The dominant normative discourse of any society will always be engaged to justify divergent actions and policies. In secular societies, nationalism and patriotism can as easily be used to justify oppression as Islam can be used for this purpose in Muslim societies. But this is not the essence of Islam, nor is oppression the normal experience of Muslim women. Islam is a deep source of spirituality and dignity for many Muslim women. Every place I have travelled

in the Muslim world, I find women who have organized themselves to express their sisterhood and develop their own models of religious leadership. Through prayer, fasting, and other rituals of Islam, these women experience the deep joy of connecting with their merciful Creator. We do not need to rip the covers off books to understand what is inside. We can only hope to understand something about a book if we have the humility to realize that it can teach us something new—perhaps even about ourselves.