

Teaching for **SOLIDARITY**

'The Veil'

Most of us are influenced by images and views portrayed in media. The power of the media is huge, shaping which people and issues are given importance, who is 'us' and who is 'them'. When you look at many of the stories in the media, you might notice that they are often, at heart, about people's identities - conflicts over religious or cultural symbols, fashion, and lifestyle are constantly debated. In a society like the UK, where rights are enshrined in law, it is inevitable that there will be disputes around respect, rights and responsibilities – and debate is crucial. Conversations soon turn to people's fears and tolerance of those they perceive as 'other.' Women who choose to wear 'the veil' have been the focus of much attention in the UK. The issue is sensitive and therefore needs to be discussed openly and in depth. Sarah Joseph, editor of *Emel*:

'People often say to me, condescendingly, 'I think of you as British.' Could that be because I am? And English too! Just because I cover my hair – a dress code that was a cultural norm in British public life (albeit with a hat) until the 1950s, some people think this conflicts with Britishness.....We scratch around, tie ourselves in knots and navel gaze about what it means to be British when any true Brit knows that is a wonderfully woolly term which keeps four diverse nations and a multitude of peoples together. (January 2007)

Na'ima B. Robert, a convert to Islam, describes and explains the overwhelming pleasure she feels when covered. In her book, *From My Sister's Lips*, we have an insight to the lives, thoughts and hopes of other women who wear the niqab:

'I had never had any problem with the idea of covering my face with the niqab. Even in those early days...I would sometimes wrap the cloth around my face when we were going to the chip shop. 'You're so extra!' my friends would say.. I enjoyed the feeling of anonymity it offered. I like the fact that people couldn't see my face, that I was a mystery to them...I came to the realisation that wearing the niqab was the least I could do as thanks to Allah who had done so much for me. It was on an afternoon that I remember as if it were yesterday: the buzz of busy streets of Whitechapel, the thought of my new marriage and wonderful husband, all the years that Allah had protected me from every danger, the good life he had given me, the blessings of guidance, of good friends, of security and now love. ' (*From my sisters' lips*, Na'ima B. Robert)

Most people reading this, will probably have a strong reaction to the idea and practice of wearing a hijab or niqab – whether for or against. The writer Joan Smith is very clear what she thinks of it:

'I can't think of a more dramatic visual symbol of oppression, the inescapable fact being that the vast majority of women who cover their hair, faces and bodies do so because they have no choice. Women don't wear the burqa in Afghanistan because they like to wear it; they wear it because they are afraid of being killed if they don't...Far from protecting women – it hasn't prevented

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alarming levels of rape in Afghanistan and Iraq...It establishes women as the sexual property of men – fathers, husbands, sons – who are the only relatives allowed to see them uncovered....Muslim women in this country may be telling the truth when they say they cover their hair and face out of choice, but that doesn't mean they haven't been influenced by relatives and male clerics....The niqab is... a human rights issue...In two senses, not just as a symbol of inequality, but because accusations of racism, cultural insensitivity and Islamophobia are commonly used to silence its critics.' (8.10.2006 *The Veil is a Feminist Issue*, *The Guardian*)

The journalist Simon Fanshawe offers another perspective:

The millions of reasons to see Islam in a new light

This is a conversation I had with a young Muslim woman. It started off at a conference in front of an audience of youth workers and continued on the phone. I know few practising Muslims, which is hardly surprising. After all, they're only 3% of the population. She has profoundly opened my mind about her faith.

Simon Fanshawe: If we were on the radio and I said to the listeners that you were wearing the hijab, they wouldn't see in their minds who I see in front of me now. [This is because she is wearing a bright pink hijab, a white jacket, pink flowing skirt and jewelled slippers].

Isra Jawad: I know. My friends and I call ourselves the Hijabi Barbies.

SF: That's the first Muslim joke I have ever heard.

IJ: Yes, it's been a bit dull since the 16th century.

SF: And that's the second ... What does the hijab mean to you?

IJ: I can't remember a moment when I decided to wear it. I often say it grew over my head. As I got older, and I know this sounds stupid, I realised how much we are judged by how we look. I know I am gorgeous, that I have a beautiful body. It's the bit of me that is clever and caring that you can't see. The hijab in a way makes you naked.

SF: Do you have lots of different coloured hijabs?

IJ: I think I have more hijabs than knickers. Sometimes I think that's going against what I am saying. But I don't claim to be a perfect Muslim. I rationalise that I am living in a western country, so do in Rome and all that. It's my way of bridging the gap. If I am

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sitting on a train, I am far less threatening to someone sitting next to me than someone covered from head to toe.

SF: What is your relationship with the Muslims we so often see in the news? [referring to Muslims described as 'Islamists or extremists']

IJ: I feel towards them the same as I feel towards the BNP [British National party]. I recognise that we share some things. With them I recognise that we have our faith in common. With the BNP that we live in the same country and watch the same TV programmes. But both groups are making my life really difficult.

SF: How?

IJ: These groups are making me into something I am not. When the radicals are aggressive about this country and the way of life, I feel very different. I have made this my country and I would die for it. Their actions are limiting me.

SF: I sense that you might find it difficult to criticise other Muslims in public?

IJ: Lots of Muslims want to change Muslim behaviour. But part of me still feels extremely defensive. When these debates happen in public I feel pulled in two directions. There is a certain amount of friction in public, which is damaging to Muslims when we are so misrepresented in the media. I wish more people would just say that there are millions of different Muslims because all of a sudden we became the same thing - associated with sects in Pakistan. I don't know what a madrasa [Islamic school] is!

SF: Do you find it difficult to criticise your leaders in public?

IJ: What they have done is important. Getting Muslim organisations into the mainstream is a way of bridging the gap. At the same time, do they represent me? They sure as hell don't sound like they do. (Guardian 15.11.2006)

Discussion:

Isra chooses to show her face, so as not to appear 'threatening' as she calls it, to other people in Britain. What is your response to that? Should she have to 'compromise' in this way? Is it her right to wear the niqab? Why do some people - including many Muslims - feel so hostile to the niqab in the UK?

Jack Straw MP asked one of his constituents to uncover her face when she came to talk to him in 2006. He said women who wear veils over the faces make community relations harder. Responses from British Muslims were mixed. Some said Jack Straw was showing discrimination, others said they understood his view. What is your opinion?