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Ban on Hijab; 'Intellectual'
sophistry or ignorant
'philosophy'?**

by

Shaikh Riyadh Nadwi M.A., PhD.

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A Muslim Think Tank in the West

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By Shaikh Riyadh Nadwi M.A., PhD.

Compulsion v Freedom

A group of people in Britain, recently describing themselves as 'Muslim intellectuals', have called on the Islamic community to accept the French ban on hijab. They argue that, even if all the Muslims were to start wearing hijab and growing beards tomorrow, our worldwide problems would not be solved, as if to assume that our problems *could* be solved if we were to give up our beards and remove the hijab. This argument is obviously intellectually impoverished. It seeks to divert attention away from the real issue at hand, which is the future of freedom to practice Islam in Europe. The issue is not one of 'compulsion versus choice' in the eyes of the *Ulama* but of 'compulsion versus freedom' in the actions of policy makers and politicians (who, incidentally, claim to be the vanguard of liberty and freedom). Forcing anyone to wear hijab is beyond the remit of the *Ulama*. Our job is simply to encourage and convey the message of the Quran, as practised by the Prophet (S.A.S). He was the *tarjuman al-Quran* (the exemplar of the Quran).

Throughout the history of Islam, the obligation of wearing hijab has been universally accepted as valid by all traditions. There are varied opinions with respect to the covering of the face, but when it comes to the question of hijab, i.e. the covering of the head, neck and chest, the scholars (male and female) of the four main Sunni schools of thought (*Hanafi, Maliki, Shafii* and *Hanbali*) have remained in agreement on its validity. This is a consensus upon which there has been historical consistency for over fourteen hundred years.

Manipulation and Fabrication of Shallow Roots

The group of 'Muslim intellectuals' has called for a soul-searching debate on CIA activities in Afghanistan during the 1980s, which is an issue I had raised concern about in my lecture on 11 September 2004 in Cardiff (to listen, visit www.occri.org.uk). However, I believe the focus of this discussion should not be restricted to the actions of certain *Ulama*, for many from the so-called English speaking *elite* were equally involved in the mediation and manipulation that took place at that time.

In this context, we also need to examine the track record and consequences of manipulation by the so-called 'intellectuals', such as their soliciting of death warrants (*fatwa*) from Imam Khomeini. As Muslims, we need to demonstrate the mental capacity to think for ourselves and refrain from regurgitating quasi-academic analyses. We cannot call ourselves intellectuals while we rely on spin produced by non-Muslims with an agenda. A good example of this is the

preposterous idea that hijab only became an issue of importance after the Iranian revolution in 1979. Apart from demonstrating a serious lack of familiarity with Islamic history, this spin argument is part of an on-going attempt to create detachable components within Islam by fabricating shallow roots to replace genuine foundations. When a component is traceable all the way back to the Prophet (S.A.S) it is immeasurably more difficult to uproot. One cannot challenge the validity of a practice traceable through *sanad* back to the Sahabah. Therefore the tactic that some (e.g. Bernard Lewis, Daniel Pipes *et al*) have come to rely on is to fabricate artificial roots further down the line in order to provide the appearance of recency. With this, they convince the simple-minded 'intellectuals' among us that various aspects of Islamic practice such as hijab, etc, have surfaced only recently, i.e. only a few decades ago. Hence, it becomes reasonable to ask Muslims to dispense with large chunks of their faith and practice. My sincere advice to these people is that if they wish to indulge in any 'intellectual discussion' they should avoid reliance on neo-conservative spin.

The Spin of Modesty v Hijab

Another bundle of spin that is being disseminated is the accusation against anyone who tries to defend the right to wear hijab of being guilty of neglecting the need for modesty. This is a perfect example of the phenomenon of 'spin', where the truth is turned upside down to produce what appears to be a rational argument. An apparently dubious statistic of girls in hijab being equally prone to teenage pregnancy is offered to substantiate the accusation. Even if this were true, it would not be a reason for supporting the ban on hijab in France. On the contrary, it would be a reason to increase hijab consciousness, which teaches control of the eyes and a sense of dignified bashfulness. Neither of these is brought any closer by the uncovering of our daughters. The public display of beauty in one's hair, neck and chest is not necessarily a gesture of modesty. We must remember that teenagers face an enormous amount of peer pressure coupled with the intense biological vigour of youth. There is an unquestionable correlation, irrespective of gender, between the extent of exposure of the human body and sexual attraction. We cannot complain about teenage pregnancy whilst advocating more exposure and expect to appear consistent. Modesty is not merely a cognitive activity; it has to manifest itself outwardly, in a way that communicates and confirms its presence. If not, then it would be of no value to the individual or society at large.

Dress and Dividing the Community?

Emphasising the need for freedom to practise Islam is not an automatic denial of the importance of *taqwa*; heart and body go hand in hand. The heart does not exist in isolation from the body; indeed, the postures and actions of the body often reflect the condition of the heart. This is the reason why companies spend billions of dollars every year to get people to fall in love with their products through advertising, so that they will act out this love by purchasing their products. The importance of outward manifestation of dress is demonstrated in the very fact that politicians are seeking to outlaw certain forms of garment in Europe. Our problem today is compounded by groups of so-called intellectuals who denigrate the Sunnah of the Prophet (S.A.S) with vile words such as 'fetishism' whilst they themselves emulate the likes of Peter Stringfellow in appearance. These are the people who are now trying to use fear of disunity to

force the Muslims into accepting the ban, along with their tastes in clothes and sense of morality.

They should remember that for over fourteen hundred years the Muslims have always loved the Prophet (S.A.S) more than they could ever love fading idols of dubious popularity. The 'Peter Stringfellow look' is unlikely to appeal to anyone whose heart is genuinely filled with the love of Allah and his Prophet (S.A.S). Muslims in love deserve the freedom to emulate their beloved. Essentially, it is a question of the heart. We should inquire: why are we being asked to agree to a ban on following the Sunnah of our beloved while the right to emulate ageing playboys remains unquestioned?

As for splitting the community, at the moment we have near global uniformity under the umbrella of a handful of madhaahib (schools of thought). If these translation-dependent, sunnah-resistant and heart-transplanted deformers calling themselves 'intellectual reformers' are allowed free reign, we will see not only a split in the community but a disintegration of the Ummah into thousands of dissimilar and unrecognisable religions. Islam has been held together under the umbrella of madhaahib over the centuries. Any attempt to discredit or replace them will result in catastrophic consequences for our sense of identity and the future of our children as Muslims.

Playing the blame game

Another argument that has been raised by these 'intellectuals' is that Muslim affairs in the world would have turned out otherwise if the *Ulama* had agreed to replace the Islamic curriculum in India during the 19th century with an English curriculum. Those who have studied this history will know that this was not simply a question of language. The *Ulama* resisted the proposal to include English after becoming concerned about the intentions of the British in India, especially when Lord Macaulay, during the debate in the British Parliament of India on 02 February 1835, declared that:

"...I am quite ready to take the oriental learning at the valuation of the Orientalists...I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia...it is impossible for us [the British Raj], with our limited means, to educate the body of people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect".
(Macaulay, Thomas Babington; *Complete works of Lord Macaulay*, 1899. Houghton Mifflin, . p.729)

The British had destroyed Shah Waliullah's Madrasa Rahimiyya in Delhi and the Ulama wanted to ensure that the tastes, opinions, morals and intellect of the Madrasa students remained Muslim.

In reality, large numbers of Muslims were indeed taught English in a network of colleges (e.g. Delhi College 1792, The Government College, Lahore 1896) and instead of serving the interests of the Muslim community, many were used as puppets to further the aims of the British Raj in India. Some were encouraged to declare that the Quran was superstition. The Ulama were being cautious with good reason. In addition, they were not opposed to modern science *per se*. The

Nadwatul Ulama Movement (1893) debated and passed a resolution to include subjects such as astronomy, mathematics, geography etc in the curriculum. English language is taught as part of the curriculum in *Dar al-Ulum*, Nadwatul Ulama at Lucknow.

However, taking the Japanese as a case in point, one can see that language is not the main criterion for modernisation and progress. They have surpassed most nations technologically, without having had to change their language or discard their traditions. To progress, we need to be more confident in ourselves and less dismissive of our core heritage. The Japanese cherish the islands of Japan as their core heritage. As Muslims, our core heritage is Islam. When we blame Islam for our failures and ridicule those amongst us who have dedicated their lives to preserving it, we create a negative and nebulous vision for our own future. That is the vicious cycle that must be broken if we are to succeed in both this world and the Hereafter.

ربنا ءاتنا في الدنيا حسنة وفي الآخرة حسنة وقنا عذاب النار

"Our Lord! Give us good in this world and good in the Hereafter, and defend us from the torment of the Fire"(Al-Baqarah 201)

Sh. Riyad Nadwi
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Oxford, UK



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