



Veiling as a Rite of Passage

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Abstract

Rites of passage are used to mark transitions from one life stage to another, signifying that an individual has changed their status or identity within a community. Some rites of passage leave lasting, visible symbols of this change. This article argues that the putting on of the *hijab* is a rite of passage that leaves an ongoing, visible symbol at key times of identity transition. At puberty, the donning of the *hijab* marks the start of a Muslim girl's womanhood, or it can be adopted by Muslim women who seek to be publically recognised as 'authentic' Muslims. Immigrant Muslim women grappling with their identity in foreign cultures may begin wearing it to show allegiance to, and find belonging in, a new Muslim community. This article details some examples of public ceremonies that accompany the first putting on of the *hijab*. Just as the putting on of the *hijab* can be seen as a rite of passage, so too can its removal—women who choose to no longer wear it are also making a visible statement about a change in their identity. Finally, the article explores what visible, ongoing symbols different Christian traditions have used to mark changes in their religious identity, and considers the implications for believers of Muslim background.

Rites of Passage Defined

All human beings pass through life stages. Life stages are key points of transition which shape us as individuals within our families, communities, and broader societies. Some life stages are common to both males and females in all cultures, whereas others are specific to one gender or another, one culture or another. In many cultures rites of passage mark the transition from one stage of life to another. Classically, these rites are marked by stages of separation, transition (or ‘liminality’), and reintegration.⁴⁹

During the first stage of separation, an individual detaches themselves, often through symbolic actions or rituals, from their former identity or status. In the second stage of liminality, the individual has left their old identity and is moving through a period of limbo or undefined status—they are on the threshold⁵⁰ of a new identity/status. The reintegration stage, where the individual takes up their new identity/status in the community, is often marked by rituals or ceremonies which act as visible symbols of an otherwise often invisible change in status.⁵¹

The example of a traditional British wedding may help us visualise the three stages involved in rites of passage. Traditionally, a woman gets dressed and ready for the wedding ceremony at her family home. Only her close family and bridal attendants are allowed to see her—she is thus kept ‘separate’ from the rest of the community. A veil is worn as a further symbol of ‘separation’ from others. The bride’s father walks

⁴⁹ A.H. Mathias Zahniser, *Symbol and Ceremony: making disciples across cultures*, Innovations in Mission (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1997): 92.

⁵⁰ Liminality comes from a Latin word meaning ‘threshold.’

⁵¹ For more on life stages and rites of passage, see Zahniser, *Symbol and Ceremony* and W. Jay Moon, *Intercultural Discipleship: Learning from Global Approaches to Spiritual Formation*, Encountering Mission (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017).

her down the aisle and presents her to her husband-to-be, relinquishing his parental role and acknowledging her new status as a wife. The groom lifts the veil, ending the bride's separation. The focus of the ceremony is about the transition that the couple are making: moving from two individuals with a certain status and place in society, into a couple, a wife and husband with a new status and place in society. When the celebrant presents the couple to the assembled family and friends as "Mr and Mrs" and they walk back down the aisle together, they are starting the process of reintegration into their new identities and statuses.

As mentioned above, the rituals or ceremonies that accompany rites of passage are often the only symbol that a person has passed from one status to another, and there is no further, ongoing visual sign of that change. However, in some rites of passage, a more ongoing, lasting visible symbol is bestowed as part of the ritual. As part of a traditional wedding ceremony, for example, the bride and groom exchange rings, which act as lasting visible symbols which indicate to all that the wearer is married.

The act of wearing the *hijab*⁵² for the first time can be considered, in some circumstances, to be a rite of passage.⁵³ While it does not follow the classic stages of separation, transition, and reintegration, the donning of the *hijab* for the first time

⁵² It is beyond the scope of the article to discuss the many and varied forms of head coverings which Muslim women wear. The use of the word *hijab* indicates all forms of Islamic head covering which keep the face clear while covering the hair. I acknowledge that for many women, *hijab* is not simply a piece of cloth, but that it also encompasses an attitude, a way of life, and values that are consistent with an individual's understanding of Islamic teachings.

⁵³ While this article seeks to explore the wearing of the *hijab* as a rite of passage, it does not intend to detail the many and varied reasons women wear it, some of which could not be categorised as a rite of passage. The article is also not seeking to minimise the fact that for many girls and women the wearing of the *hijab* is imposed upon them by their families.

demonstrates an individual's transition from one life stage to another—from girlhood to womanhood at puberty, or to a new identity where one is committing, or recommitting, oneself to one's faith in a new way. Similarly, the act of unveiling, of choosing to no longer wear the *hijab*, can be a rite of passage that marks the individual's transition to a new identity which is different from their previous one. In both these instances, the *hijab* acts as a visible symbol of an internal change in status or orientation.

Puberty and Coming-of-Age

A key time in the lives of Muslim girls is when they reach puberty and transition from being a girl to a woman. At puberty in many orthodox interpretations of Islam, girls become accountable to God for their sin, and from then on receive punishment and rewards from God for their actions. South Asian and Middle Eastern women who have spoken with participants in the When Women Speak... I-View courses⁵⁴ emphasise that at puberty girls must start acting like respectable women—not mixing with boys, not going out on their own, and being quieter and more “ladylike” to show their piety and demureness. In many Muslim cultures girls begin to wear the *hijab* at this time as an outward symbol which marks their transition and signifies their change in status. “A

⁵⁴ The When Women Speak... I-View Courses started in 2016. They are online courses for women working among Muslim communities who want to connect with others and share their learning about women's experiences of Islam. The courses consist of readings or videos around a topic, and some questions for women to then explore with those in their community. Those in the course then share their learning and questions in order to better understand the communities of Muslim women they are engaged with.

physical change impacts your spiritual status and your spiritual status impacts how you should now dress and behave in the community.”⁵⁵

Some girls welcome this transition, as they desire to be like their mothers.⁵⁶ Mothers in many Muslim societies play an important role in their children’s religious upbringing. They are often the ones who are teaching their children how to pray and perform other religious observances, as well as how to act and behave appropriately in society. Just as young Western girls may enjoy dressing up in their mother’s clothes, shoes and make-up, Muslim girls whose mothers wear the *hijab* may want to copy their mothers.

If wearing the *hijab* is a visible symbol that a girl has reached womanhood, girls may also want to show that they have “grown up.”⁵⁷ Those who do not wear it may feel as though they have not reached adult status—either within themselves or in the eyes of others. Woldesemait reports that even girls in their late teens, who did not veil at puberty, did not feel like “adult women” until they began wearing the *hijab*: “When I started to wear the *hijab* I finally felt like a woman. It is exciting because you throw away your childish clothes, you get new clothes.”⁵⁸

In contrast, Rabha, an Arab Muslim, reports that although putting on the *hijab* was expected of her as soon as she turned eleven, she tried to delay it, fearing that it

⁵⁵ I-View course participant, Middle East.

⁵⁶ Lindsey Moon, “Iowa Reporter Becomes First Woman in U.S. to Wear her Hijab On- Air,” *Iowa Public Radio*, March 29, 2018, <https://www.iowapublicradio.org/post/iowa-reporter-becomes-first-woman-us-wear-her-hijab-air#stream/0>.

⁵⁷ Fida Adely, *Gendered Paradoxes: Educating Jordanian Women in Nation, Faith, and Progress* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012), 74.

⁵⁸ Mihret Woldesemait, “Unfolding the Modern *Hijab*: From the Colonial Veil to Pious Fashion,” (Undergraduate Honors thesis, Duke University, 2013), 92, <https://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/dspace/handle/10161/7554?show=full>.

would end her childhood. She states that “My parents were anxious for me to grow up, being the oldest of five. They wanted a responsible adult among their children, and I was designated the ‘responsible’ one.”⁵⁹ An I-View course participant spoke of a 12-year-old Middle Eastern girl who was very upset and agitated about the onset of puberty because she knew she would be expected to adopt *hijab* and behave in a certain way. Her older sister had already (voluntarily) begun wearing *hijab* by her age and was quieter and more “ladylike,” and the older women all approved and admired her demureness and piety. The 12-year-old didn’t want to wear the *hijab* and felt both sad and rebellious that she wasn’t like her sister.

Authentic Muslim Womanhood

Muslim women who choose to wear a *hijab* at a later life stage are often doing so to mark their identity as Muslims in a new way. In these contexts it is a rite of passage which marks the “exit from a secular life into being aware about leading a fully committed religious life.”⁶⁰ Amina Wadud asserts that once she had made her declaration to become a Muslim, she began to wear the *hijab* “to identify this transitional moment.”⁶¹

Schmidt sums up the decision of many young American Muslim university students to wear the *hijab* as being a “rite of passage into authentic Muslim womanhood.” She argues that for these students, it often signified “the transition

⁵⁹ Rabha, “An Expression of Faith,” *Analysis and Expression* (Blog), November 2, 2011, <https://analysisandexpression.wordpress.com/taq/rite-of-passage/>.

⁶⁰ Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir, Alexius A. Pereira, and Bryan S. Turner, *Muslims in Singapore: Piety, politics and policies*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 91.

⁶¹ Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women’s Reform in Islam* (Oxford, UK: OneWorld, 2006), 222.

from the safe, controlled family environment to the less controlled and even ‘sexually disturbing’ campus environment.”⁶² This was particularly noticeable when girls moved into dorms or began taking part in campus activities. A girl who chose to wear the *hijab* assumed an authority in the community, and a responsibility within that community as a representative of an “ideal” Muslim woman.⁶³

In Southeast Asia, many Muslim women begin to wear the *hijab* later than at puberty, often stating that they wear it when they are “ready” to do so. This is the time when they are prepared to identify more fully with their faith, to show that they are “serious about religion,” and to demonstrate that they are “good.” Sari, a university student, started wearing a *hijab* to demonstrate that she had changed from being a “bad girl” who did “bad things” into someone who wants to be “good and to be perceived by others as good.” Part of her desire to be “good” was to please her family who had invested money in her education. Singaporean girls are not permitted to wear the *hijab* in the state school system, and thus may wear it “part-time” outside of school hours. Making the choice to veil full-time in her 20s, one woman said she felt “Ready to commit myself fully to Islam and the Islamic way of life.”⁶⁴

As a visible symbol of this change in identity, the *hijab* conveys messages to those who see it. In part, it signals to other Muslims that the wearer is “chaste and modest ... no need to spell it out for them, they can see. And they treat me accordingly. ... men ... don’t expect me to shake their hands.”⁶⁵ Even the style of *hijab* that is worn

⁶² Garbi Schmidt, *Islam in Urban America: Sunni Muslims in Chicago* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 106.

⁶³ Schmidt, *Islam in Urban America*, 107.

⁶⁴ Nasir, Pereira, and Turner, *Muslims in Singapore*, 91.

⁶⁵ Nasir, Pereira, and Turner, *Muslims in Singapore*, 94.

can potentially signal the religious status of the wearer. Southeast Asian Muslim university students told me that they sometimes felt judged by other women for wearing fashionable clothes and *hijab*, as if they were only wearing *hijab* for fashion reasons, rather than to be authentically Muslim. A Southeast Asian house helper felt criticised by a neighbouring house helper for not wearing a *hijab* and visibly identifying as an authentic Muslim. In the end she decided not only to wear a *hijab* to and from work, but throughout the day as well—effectively ‘outdoing’ the neighbouring helper who, for practical reasons, did not wear her *hijab* while working.⁶⁶

Times of transition, particularly those of potential crisis or when there is a fear of something going wrong, can also precipitate a new or renewed commitment to the faith. For example, women in Southeast Asia who are nearing the end of their pregnancy, or who are wishing to fall pregnant, have been observed to adopt more religious practices, including wearing a *hijab*.⁶⁷

Identity Marking

This desire to participate more fully in the community as an “authentic” Muslim is tied up with a girl’s (or woman’s) desire to find, or change, identity. A Southeast Asian woman who was divorced because her husband found another wife was observed to have “reformed her identity by becoming more ‘religious’,”⁶⁸ which included wearing the *hijab* for the first time.

⁶⁶ This illustration was told to the author by an expatriate co-worker in Southeast Asia.

⁶⁷ I-View course participant.

⁶⁸ I-View course participant.

While the wearing of *hijab* as a visible identity marker is important for women in majority Muslim countries, it is even more poignant for women in immigrant communities. People define themselves and others by referring to markers such as their ethnicity or nationality, their gender, their roles in a family, their job, what groups they belong to, and their religion. How important each one of these markers is, and which a person might draw on to define who they are and where they belong changes depending on the context. For immigrants, many of those markers have to be redefined, leading to a sense of confusion and uncertainty about identity. A person may go from being an engineer to being a taxi driver, or from being a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law with defined roles in her extended family, to an outsider with only her nuclear family facing very different models of those roles around her.

Immigrant Muslim women may begin to veil as a way of identifying, visibly, with the *ummah*, the worldwide community of Muslims, where they find teachings and models that are familiar, and can enjoy the benefits of an extended ‘family.’ For some women—such as those interviewed by Inger Furseth in Los Angeles, most of whom started to wear the *hijab* once they were living in the United States—their religious identity may become more important even than their original ethnic identity. Instead, these women emphasised their common identity as American Muslims.⁶⁹ Veiling enables them to deal with “alienation, estrangement, and marginalization” in the

⁶⁹ Inger Furseth, “The Hijab: Boundary Work and Identity Negotiation among Immigrant Muslim Women in the Los Angeles Area.” *Review of Religious Research* 52, no. 4 (2011), 372, 376. <https://www.istor.org.virtual.anu.edu.au/stable/23055567>.

places where they now live—a way they can find their identity when other markers of it have been taken away.⁷⁰

For many North African Muslims born in France where the wearing of the *hijab* is contested and the full-face veil banned, the veil has become a visible symbol that demonstrates the wearer's pride in her ethnic identity.⁷¹ Many of these women have struggled with their identities, and have felt the need to “affirm their identity publicly as a way to stand up to the dominance of French culture.”⁷² Similarly, Palestinian-Australian Amal Awad was a frustrated university student when she decided to don the *hijab* for the second time—“the only thing that made sense was my heritage.”⁷³ She wanted to be able to identify with a community and a group in order to feel as though she belonged somewhere. In choosing to identify as a Muslim by wearing the *hijab*, women receive acceptance into a community⁷⁴ and a distinct identity that can act as a buffer to the perceived threats of the outside world in which they now live.⁷⁵ When Awad adopted it, her more devout friends were “as giddy as bridesmaids at a wedding. I had arrived. I was one of them now.”⁷⁶

⁷⁰ Roksana Bahramitash, “CHAPTER 23: Revealing Veiling and Unveiling,” *Counterpoints* 220 (2004): 202, <http://www.jstor.org.virtual.anu.edu.au/stable/42978307>.

⁷¹ Caitlin Killian, “The Other Side of the Veil: North African Women in France Respond to the Headscarf Affair,” *Gender and Society* 17, no. 4 (2003), 572, <https://www.jstor.org.virtual.anu.edu/stable/3594658>.

⁷² Killian, “The Other Side,” 584.

⁷³ Amal Awad, *Beyond Veiled Clichés: the real lives of Arab women* (North Sydney: Vintage Books, 2017), 94.

⁷⁴ See, for example, Firdaus Arastu, “Returning Hijabi: A Passage to Identity,” *Patheos*, May 6, 2015, <https://www.patheos.com/topics/rites-of-passage/returning-hijabi-firdaus-arastu-05-06-2015>, and Jen’Nan Ghazal Read and John P. Bartkowski, “To Veil or Not to Veil? A Case Study of Identity Negotiation among Muslim Women in Austin, Texas,” *Gender and Society* 14, no. 3 (2000): 403, <http://www.jstor.org.virtual.anu.edu.au/stable/190135>.

⁷⁵ Tabassum F. Ruby, “Listening to the Voices of Hijab,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 29 (2006), 8, <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.689.8087&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

⁷⁶ Awad, *Beyond Veiled Clichés*, 105.

Some Muslim women choose to wear the *hijab* in one culture, but not in another, in order to fit in. Ina, a Southeast Asian Muslim studying in a Western country, complained that some female Muslim students start living like Westerners when they arrive in their host country. In their efforts to blend in and belong they remove the most visible marker of their religious identity, their *hijab*. When they return to their home country, they replace their *hijab* and once again visibly identify as Muslim in order to belong back in their home community.⁷⁷ Canadian-Iranian Roksana Bahramitash explained her choice to veil in Cairo, where she was living, as not because she had become religious but because,

Wearing the veil enables me to blend into the local scene and gives me a sense of belonging. I do not particularly like standing out as a tourist. Veiling myself to look as non-Western as possible is one way of dealing with this unwanted feeling of being a stranger here.⁷⁸

Teenagers of Muslim immigrants in Western countries may seek to define who they are and express themselves by becoming more committed to their religious practices.⁷⁹ In the process of teenage rebellion they are undergoing a rite of passage, one in which they transition into the person they choose to be rather than the person their parents want them to be. Zarqa Nawaz states that she desperately wanted to be different from her immigrant Pakistani parents by being more Muslim than them.

⁷⁷ Ina is a colleague of the author's.

⁷⁸ Bahramitash, "Revealing Veiling," 192.

⁷⁹ Adely, *Gendered Paradoxes*, 84.

Because she had found out about the *hijab* on her own, rather than through her parents, wearing it “was the answer.”⁸⁰ Suraya Ali, the daughter of immigrant Indian Muslims, also shocked her parents by putting on the *hijab*. “It was my way of flipping the world off, saying, ‘I can be what I want’.”⁸¹ Amal Awad first wore the veil as a teenager “with nowhere to put her energy and angst,” against her mother’s wishes— “negative reactions only strengthened my resolve.”⁸² Isma, an Algerian high school teacher in French schools noted that girls born in France to immigrant North African parents want to “affirm” themselves, show that they are “someone” and are “individuals,” and they do this by the clothes they wear.⁸³ Besma, a 34-year-old Tunisian living in France commented that

It’s almost a required rite of passage for them to sort out who they are. “Who am I? What culture do I belong to? Where do I come from? Where do I live? Where am I from? My culture is completely undervalued, and I get back an image of my culture, of the civilization of my parents, that is so negative and so everything, that somewhere I have a duty to myself, to prove that I exist.”⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Zarqa Nawaz, “Zarqa Nawaz: My Hijab Rebellion,” *National Post*, June 25, 2014, <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/zarqa-nawaz-my-hijab-rebellion>.

⁸¹ Andrea Useem, “Loving and Leaving the Head Scarf: what hijab’s revolving door says about the religious mobility of American Muslims,” *Slate*, May 12, 2008, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2008/05/how-muslim-women-decide-to-put-on-and-take-off-hijab.html>.

⁸² Awad, *Beyond Veiled Clichés*, 91.

⁸³ Killian, “The Other Side,” 579.

⁸⁴ Killian, “The Other Side,” 580.

Marking the Act

Just as other rites of passages are sometimes marked by ceremonies, in some contexts the first wearing of a *hijab* is also marked in this way. In Iran nine-year-old girls are initiated into society through a ceremony called *jashn-e taklif*. “They give you a chador, tell you what a big girl you are, teach you how to pray and what it means to be a Muslim.” “It was something really exciting, better than a birthday party. I remember that my mom sewed me a white chador. ... I remember feeling very happy and grown-up.”⁸⁵ After the ceremony, girls are expected to follow all the religious obligations required of them, such as veiling, daily prayers, and fasting.⁸⁶

At the al-Zahra mosque in Syria, a ceremony to mark girls’ first wearing of a *hijab* is documented in the video *The Light in Her Eyes*.⁸⁷ The Syrian girls in the video are interviewed by Houda al-Habash, their Qur’an teacher, to ensure they understand the reasons behind their choice. If Houda considers a girl to be too young (a girl of eleven, for example), she is told she is not yet mature enough to wear the *hijab*. Houda also ensures their mothers agree with their decision. During the ceremony, the girls who are going to start wearing the *hijab* stand in front of the assembled girls and women. Houda makes a speech about the importance of wearing the *hijab* and the reasons behind it. Then, as Houda pins a white *hijab* around each girl’s head, a song celebrating them, blessing them, and asking God to protect them from envy, is sung.

⁸⁵ Marketa Hulpachova, “Hijab: A woman’s rite of passage in Iran,” *The Guardian*, December 19, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2013/dec/19/iran-hijab-islamic-veil>.

⁸⁶ Malihe Maghazei, “Iran” in *Teen Life in the Middle East* ed. Ali Akbar Mahdi (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2003), 28.

⁸⁷ Julia Meltzer and Laura Nix, dir., “Rules about Hijab,” *The Light in Her Eyes* (New York: Cinema Guild, 2012), DVD.

In Turkey, a reader wrote to a local newspaper columnist about “headscarf-donning ceremonies being held in large wedding halls for young girls in rich, conservative neighbourhoods [in Istanbul].”⁸⁸ The columnist and staff at the newspaper office had never heard of such events prior to receiving the letter, and the reader herself was unaware of their existence until she was invited to a ceremony for her neighbour’s daughter. The reader’s letter described the ceremony:

It was like a wedding party. A full meal was served to the guests, with several sweets, etc. The Quran was chanted, followed by a lady speaking about the verses in the Quran about covering oneself. She also talked about the importance of hijab. After a chat with the guests on the importance of the headscarf, the young girl set to don the headscarf for the first time walked to the stage accompanied by religious songs. Then the ceremony started. The first headscarf was put on the girl by the lecturer with chants of “Allahu Akbar.” ... Then the guests started giving gifts to the newly covered young girl.⁸⁹

The author of the English-language article that picked up the story described the ceremony as “the Muslim version of the Jewish coming of age ritual for girls, the Bat Mitzvah” and said that she liked the idea that the ceremony could provide the girls

⁸⁸ The reader’s letter was written to Turkish columnist Fatma Barbarosoğlu at the Turkish-language daily newspaper *Yeni Şafak*, on October 24, 2014. The English-language *Hurriyet Daily News* picked up the story and added commentary: Belgin Akaltan, “Headscarf Ceremonies for Muslim Girls in Istanbul,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, October 25, 2014, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/headscarf-ceremonies-for-muslim-girls-in-istanbul--73430>.

⁸⁹ Reader’s letter translated by Akaltan, “Headscarf Ceremonies.”

with some fun and recognition of their own coming-of-age, given that such lavish ceremonies are usually reserved for boys' circumcision.⁹⁰ It would be interesting to explore why these ceremonies appear to be gaining popularity among certain pious families in Istanbul. While the neighbour in the story gave the explanation that such ceremonies are essentially a replacement for birthdays ("we do not celebrate birthdays, because birthdays are Christian traditions."⁹¹), other reasons to publicly demonstrate a daughter's piousness might include bringing honour and status to the family within the community, and even potentially improving the marriage prospects of the daughter.

Even for adults, the act of first putting on a *hijab* can be celebrated communally. Garbi Schmidt describes one such celebration among university students in Chicago in 1996. Following a potluck dinner, congregational prayer and singing, organised by the Muslim Women's Association at the University of Illinois at Chicago, women who had started wearing the *hijab* (either because they had converted to Islam or because they were committing to wearing it) were presented to the audience. Each was given a gift and asked to make a speech about why they had decided to wear the *hijab*. After each presentation, the audience applauded and shouted praises to God. Schmidt comments that

What these young women experienced can easily be seen as a "rebirth," a remodelling, an experienced re-creation of the individual. The audience

⁹⁰ Akaltan, "Headscarf Ceremonies."

⁹¹ Reader's letter translated by Akaltan, "Headscarf Ceremonies."

*emphasized, validated, and authorized the power of the experience by allowing each young woman to present her experience from the stage, by giving her gifts, ... and by elevating her in space, honor, and experience before the community.*⁹²

Identity Reversed

While putting on the *hijab* can be a rite of passage for Muslim women, so too can the decision to remove it. As a new believer in Jesus, a friend of mine struggled with doubts and questions for many years, wondering whether to return to Islam. After finding peace and assurance, through prayer, that Jesus was the way, she told me that she decided “this is how I want to live. This is who I want to follow.” Following that decision, she removed her *hijab* because “it was no longer part of my identity.”

Reem Abdel-Razek, an Egyptian blogger living in New York, came to the realisation that she felt like a “thing” to be protected by the *hijab* rather than a human. “...the only way I could take my life back was by unveiling, not only my hair, but also my true nature. I would have to obliterate the persona that I was so carefully molded into in order to discover who I really was.”⁹³ Slma Shelbayah states that “I removed it to understand myself for who I truly am beneath the scarf ... I removed it to find myself.”⁹⁴ Andrea Useem recounts the story of a woman who moved across America in order to leave “the tight-knit Muslim community she felt was suffocating her and the

⁹² Schmidt, *Islam in Urban America*, 107–108.

⁹³ Valerie Tarico, “Unveiled: Three Former Muslim Women Look Back on the Hijab,” *HuffPost*, March 24, 2014, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/unveiled-three-former-mus_b_5010742.

⁹⁴ Slma Shelbayah, “Removing hijab, finding myself,” *CNN*, November 11, 2015, <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/11/06/opinions/shelbayah-removing-hijab/index.html>.

scarf that pledged her allegiance to it.”⁹⁵ Useem also quotes Saleemah Abdul-Ghafur, author of *Living Islam Out Loud*, as saying “Taking it [the *hijab*] off expanded my identity—it was exciting, like a new haircut.”⁹⁶

As discussed above, many immigrant Muslim women decide to wear the veil in order to identify with the *ummah* and the local Muslim community in their new locations. Others, however, choose to unveil in order to blend in, to not look like strangers, and to avoid the harassment that can come with visibly identifying as a follower of Islam.⁹⁷ Some feel that integration into their new society, by not visibly defining as a Muslim, is important. Of the North African Muslim women in France who Killian interviewed, the women who were most likely to adopt this attitude were those of an older, less well-educated generation who had followed their husbands to France to find work. They felt that religious identity should be found in the internal attitude of the heart and outward behaviour, rather than in the visible symbol of the *hijab*.⁹⁸

Equivalent Christian Rites of Passage?

The question was posed to an I-View course participant: “When Christians become accountable to God, is there a visible symbol of that transition?” For Protestant Christians, the answer is usually no. While baptism is certainly a significant rite of passage, after the ceremony there is often no remaining visible sign of an individual’s identification with their faith and Christian community, other than the fact that a

⁹⁵ Useem, “Loving and Leaving the Head Scarf.”

⁹⁶ Useem, “Loving and Leaving the Head Scarf.”

⁹⁷ Bahramitash, “Revealing Veiling,” 202.

⁹⁸ Killian, “The Other Side,” 584–585.

person's actions or attitude may be evidently altered as a result of the Holy Spirit's work within them. For some, it could be the wearing of a cross, though it is usually not as visible as the *hijab*. Furthermore, many people wear a cross for more decorative purposes, rather than it carrying the same weight of meaning as the *hijab*.

In other Christian traditions, however, there are some visible, lasting symbols that signify a change in identity. Arnold van Gennep describes the rite of passage that Catholic women go through when they become novices in some orders of nuns. This involves the bishop blessing the veils (along with rings) which they will wear from that time forward. The veils symbolize the novices' rejection of and separation from the world, and their new identity as a spouse of Christ.⁹⁹ Similarly, nuns in Eastern Orthodox Christian traditions take on the veil, indicating that they are setting aside their old selves and putting on a new identity in a life of chastity, poverty, and obedience.

With regard to identity among immigrant populations, Katherine Kelaidis describes shifts in practice among Greek Orthodox women. She states that her grandmother, who grew up in America, wore headscarves as a young girl and into her married life: "They were the outward visible witness of her inner self, signaling to the world, not just that she was a Christian, but that she was a lady, modest and chaste."¹⁰⁰ Later, however, along with others of her generation and of the generation afterwards, she abandoned the practice outside of church, preferring to assimilate,

⁹⁹ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, Routledge Library Editions—Anthropology and Ethnography (1960. Reprint, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2004), 99.

¹⁰⁰ Katherine Kelaidis, "Headscarves, Modesty, and Modern Orthodoxy," *Public Orthodoxy*, May 17, 2018, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2018/05/17/headscarves-modesty-orthodoxy/#more-4398>.

avoid the pressures of xenophobia, and not call attention to oneself. Kelaidis bemoans the practice of many non-Greek American converts who, in the 1990s, began to then re-veil, not just in church, but all the time, in an effort to demonstrate their “zeal.” In response to this piece, Orthodox Father Lawrence Farley argues that such converts are veiling in an effort to “avoid assimilation,” and that it is one component of them trying to “build a healthy counter-culture in which to live and raise their children.”¹⁰¹ Both Kelaidis’ grandmother, and the American converts to Greek Orthodoxy, sought to change their identity in some way, and to mark that change with either the donning of, or removing of, the visible, lasting symbol of a head covering.

Women in various Anabaptist traditions also wear head coverings as visual signs that they are separate from the rest of the world, and to outwardly identify as belonging to a particular community. However, the practice of head covering varies among different communities,¹⁰² and there is no clear standard practice which indicates that the adoption of a head covering signifies a change in status or identity—it is therefore not a symbol which accompanies a rite of passage. Having said this, one Mennonite woman does state that she began wearing a head covering when she was

¹⁰¹ Fr. Lawrence Farley, “Headscarves, Modesty, and Scolding Modern Orthodox Women,” *No Other Foundation*, July 25, 2018, <https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/notherfoundation/headscarves-modesty-and-scolding-modern-orthodox-women/>.

¹⁰² For example, the age at which a girl begins to wear a head covering varies among different Amish communities. Amish Wisdom Admin, “When do girls start wearing head coverings?” *Amish Wisdom*, August 30, 2016, <http://amishwisdom.com/girls-wearing-head-coverings/>.

baptised,¹⁰³ while another says that little girls in a Mennonite community in Oregon begin to wear it at puberty.¹⁰⁴

Returning to Protestant Christians, even if we are unable to answer the question about whether or not we have an equivalent visible symbol of our commitment to Jesus, it is worth thinking about what Christian values we do affirm and what we could say about those values to women we know as they either put on, or take off, the *hijab*. This is particularly relevant for women who become followers of Jesus—do they need to remove their *hijab* in order to identify as Christians? If, or when, they remove it has to be resolved by the individual believer. Some may choose to continue to wearing it as a sign of modesty and ongoing allegiance to their social community and family. Others may wear it for a time, and, like Indah mentioned above, decide to remove it when they reach a new point of identity. Still others, like a Southeast Asian student who chaffed against the strictures of her parents and what she was told were the rules of Islam, may remove it immediately. At all times we need to be listening to the women in front of us, not making assumptions or imposing our ways of being on them, but walking alongside them.

Conclusion

As a rite of passage, the wearing of the *hijab* demonstrates a girl's or a woman's transition from one life stage to another. It may be marked, as many rites of passage

¹⁰³ Shirley Showalter, "Mennonite Bonnets and Covering Stories: Part One," *Shirley Hershey Showalter* (blog), February 19, 2014, <https://www.shirleyshowalter.com/mennonite-bonnet-and-covering-stories-part-one/>.

¹⁰⁴ Comment Four, "Religious Head Coverings," *Headcovers@Unlimited*, September 22, 2018. <https://www.headcovers.com/resources/hats-scarves/religious-head-coverings/>.

are, by public ceremony, or it may be an internal choice which is not celebrated in a ritual way. As she puts on the *hijab*, a girl becomes a woman, taking on all the expectations of that new-found status within her family and community. As she puts on the *hijab*, a woman commits herself to a new stage of submission to God and female modesty. As she puts on the *hijab*, a woman forges a new identity, and is accepted into a larger, worldwide community. And as she removes her *hijab*, a woman marks her transition to another new life-stage and identity. As Christians wishing to connect with Muslim women, we should be sensitive to the significance of veiling as a rite of passage and an ongoing visible statement of identity. Throughout the Old Testament, God is powerfully present in communal and individual moments of liminality, sometimes revealing himself in unexpected ways. We can pray for God to be at work through our words and interactions as we explore with women its meaning in their lives.