

Newsletter for OCTOBER 2013

Give me the wings of faith, to rise within the veil...

wrote Isaac Watts, in a hymn we shall probably sing at **All Saints-tide** next month. Lately there has been much in the media, from left and right, about Muslim women who wear the *niqab*, veiling their faces apart from an eye-slit. There are specific issues (such as giving evidence in court, security in public places, teaching and other workplace activities, and driving), but it has also become a paradigm of how society - and indeed *niqab*-wearers themselves - should appropriately negotiate the wider inter-cultural issues. As various law reports I have been reading demonstrate, there is considerable variety in the way countries around Europe handle both the specific and the general issues, and it's helpful to separate them. It's more complex than a simple division between 'women should be free to dress as they wish' and 'women should conform to what society expects'. It all depends on the context.

Some say it's a non-issue because the number of face-veilers is very small. However, that is not so round here, particularly if you travel on the buses at certain times of day: on the D3 there are often several *niqab*-ed women, standing or sitting in aisle seats to avoid male contact. It's hard not to let specific instances colour one's view, but a while ago I claimed a seat next to one and when I said 'good morning' she replied 'You have no right to speak to me' (and then got out her mobile). Impolite and untypical, I know, but it made its impact. Yet when I walk over to school, most mothers (and not all from our own school, who may know me), whose hair is modestly, and often attractively and colourfully, veiled but whose faces are not, smile and say *hello!* while those who are face-veiled (in black) invariably ignore my gaze and look away. I can't help wondering, which is the better, more cohesive, way? Which most honours women? (I should add that some of the dads greet me as well; and - praise God - children are universally friendly.)



Some religious traditions have very specific requirements about clothing. Judaism, Christianity and Islam all commend, with various degrees of strictness, modest apparel, particularly for women. Most cultures reflect this: in the past, respectable East End women would never go out without a headscarf, and I recall how the 'old' residents of Kirkby in Liverpool were scandalised that the residents of the new estates went into town on the bus without hats. There are also public policy issues, for men as well as women: too little clothing (nudity, and skimpy attire), and too much (eg hoodies) - both rightly attract regulation (though children's balaclavas in winter months so far remain acceptable) And some 'western' modes of (un-)dress, which exploit women, make it more difficult to raise the same charge against those who cover themselves up, though the issues are not dissimilar.

But covering the face raises more difficult questions, since this is deliberately intended to limit communication with others. The *niqab* is, in effect, a compromise - the eye-slit allows the wearer to see where she is going (compare the Saudi Arabian *burqa*, where the eyes also are covered with a semi-transparent cloth), but does not enable proper communication. You need to see the whole face to communicate (and not only if you are deaf and need to lip-read). The comparison, sometimes made, with telephone conversations is beside the point, since these are not face-to-face meetings; nor should we to draw a parallel with those who have unchosen physical or psychological disabilities that hinder contact. This demeans *niqab*-wearers.

So is female face-veiling in public places a religious requirement of Islam? The prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) certainly never said this, and indeed did much to promote the equality of women; but some Muslim women believe it is an expression of their purity and closeness to God, and deliberately choose face-veiling as a blessed liberation from the gaze of men (though may not realise that some men might find seeing eyes only as a turn-on!) It's therefore difficult for courts to determine whether this is truly a 'religious' or a 'cultural' imperative. Reports imply that the majority of women who wear the *niqab* - on the increase - choose this freely, rather than as a requirement of husbands/male relatives whose 'property' their bodies are. The balance is hard to determine, though round here one can clearly distinguish between those

who walk a few steps behind their husbands, carrying the shopping, and those on their own who stride out confidently, mobiles to their ears.

What then are the messages that face-veiling women give, intentionally or otherwise?

- *please don't look at me, I am another's property* (for those who don't choose the veil)
- *I am a proper, pure, devout Muslim* (they deny that this is passing judgement on their non-face-veiling sisters, yet in practice it make life harder for them, in various ways)
- *I claim the right to be invisible and incommunicado when I am out and about, inhabiting a parallel universe beyond the gaze of men* (are men entitled to find this insulting? is this opt-out in the common good? does it promote the inter-cultural agenda?)
- *yet I am also a visible sign of my faith* (and witness against 'western society'?)

To sum up, it is all somewhat baffling! We should recognise that there are difficult religious and cultural issues for Muslim women to negotiate (and for their menfolk to honour, and for their *imams* to pronounce on). But we can also rejoice that as Christians we are set free from so many of these debates about garments and gender, and about the separation of women and men because we can't be trusted to handle the issues of sex: *There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus* (Galatians 3.28).

Harvest Festival weekend - 4-6 October



This year's Harvest Festival will focus on the work of **Us**, the new [slightly confusing] name for **USPG**, the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, one of the two principal Anglican missionary societies, of which our parish is a long-term supporter, with personal links through Alex Nelson, our churchwarden, who served with USPG in Bangladesh and has maintained strong links with the church there. They ask us to tell the story of Pancy and her friends in the Philippines, under the title of 'Bring what you have', linked with the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand (John 6.1-14). This we will do at our **all-age Harvest Festival service** on 6 October, and will be sharing these stories with St Paul's School when they come to church, with their harvest gifts the previous Friday. In between, we have our **Harvest Social**, on Saturday 5 October, with a bring and share meal and games - **ALL WELCOME!**

Other news

- Thanks to all who have shared with Jan and Michael (for example, by looking at some of the many pictures that have been produced) in recent momentous family events: the **marriage** of Judith (their youngest) and Marty, on 25 August, and the birth of **Peter** to Joseph (their eldest) and Carolyn on 15 September!
- **Ride+Stride**: churches open to visitors on bike or foot, on 14 September, produced several distinguished visitors: Bishop Adrian, at 10am, and several others who had called at the Finnish Church in Rotherhithe, to the delight of the Rector [we shall be welcoming more Finnish visitors in October]
- On 30 September the **Players of St Peter** being their rehearsals for this year's production, from the Chester cycle of plays, to be performed on 2-6 December.