

Ghazala Ismail

Theology 107

Dr. William Myatt

April 21, 2014

Final Paper – The Internal Struggle

Islam is a religion that is not hard to follow but can sometimes be difficult to understand. My connection to Islam is what makes me who I am and I do not know where I would be without it. With that being said, there are parts of Islam I have questioned and I still question today. This, I believe, is a great part of being a Muslim. The constant questions and doubts keep me engaged with my religion instead of blindly following what I have been told. Over the last couple of years, my biggest question has been about the Hijab (the headscarf). Whether or not it is a commandment is not the question, but rather its interpretation. The Quran is so vague on a number of issues that the way people interpret it is, at times, questionable.

My journey began freshman year in high school. I had promised myself the summer before that I would start the hijab once freshman year started. It would be a fresh start and there could never be an easier time to begin. A week before school started, I panicked and did not go through with it. I live in Huntsville, Alabama where wearing the hijab is easier said than done. Wearing the hijab isn't easy anywhere, but in places like the south, the constant stares and threats are greater than in places like Chicago and New York. My parents understood my doubts and supported me; although I could tell my mom was a little disappointed in me, she did not show it. I went through high school without wearing it with the hopes that one day I would develop the courage to do so. My next milestone was

college and I knew there were four years before that day came, so the internal conflict of the hijab moved to the back of my mind. I went through the next four years of high school without worrying about it.

Next came the end of my senior year and the topic of the hijab came to the forefront of my mind again. This time I had no excuse. I was going to college and I was going to Chicago. There was no excuse of southern prejudice here, in a city where diversity is one of its strongest qualities. I did not have the excuse of being the only one wearing the hijab at a school like Loyola where the MSA presence is so strong. I didn't see a way out of it this time and nor did I want one. I was committed to the idea of wearing the hijab. Every time I went shopping, I would bring a new scarf home in excitement for the day I would start wearing them. My plan was to start wearing the hijab as soon as Ramadan started, which was at the end of July. At the beginning of the summer I was sure of my decision. I knew that it was the right thing to do and that there was a reason God had ordained it. I wasn't doing it because I wanted to make my mom proud or because I wanted to make a good impression in college, even though those were perks that came with the decision. I was doing it because I truly and passionately believed in it.

Ramadan started to creep up and as my family and I started making preparations for it, I started to panic. "Was I doing the right thing?" I kept asking myself. I began reading the Quran more and began to second-guess the reasons I had used to support my beliefs. The Quran has ordained so many rules for Muslims to follow, why is it the hijab everyone gets stuck on? The Quran says not to lie, cheat, steal. The Quran tells us to pray five times a day and to always remember our God. The Quran tells us not to backbite or cause harm to others. Muslims do many of these things on a daily basis. So why is it just the command of

the hijab that I follow so closely? Am I really doing the hijab for myself, or am I doing it to show others that I am a good Muslim? Wouldn't that defeat the purpose of the hijab?

People can't see whether I read my five daily prayers, or if I always tell the truth. These are things between my God and I, so why am I focused so much on outer appearances when I should be focusing on enhancing my relationship with God?

Another cause of my doubt was how the hijab is mentioned in the Holy Quran. The Quran simply states:

“Say to the believing women that: they should cast down their glances and guard their private parts (by being chaste) and not display their beauty except what is apparent, and they should place their ‘clothes’ over their bosoms” (Ch. 24, Vs. 31).

In my interpretation this means that women should show modesty and humility and cover up their private parts. It does not specifically say to cover one's head. In my opinion, I already show modesty and humility when talking to the opposite gender and I do not dress in a provocative way. I understand and agree with the idea of modesty because it prevents mixed signals from being given and is intended for the believer to focus on religion rather than on the beauties of this world. What I do not agree with is why does this concept only apply to women? Yes, men must show modesty as well but they do not have to wear a veil upon their head that screams that they are Muslim from a mile away. They can meet people without declaring their faith right away. This isn't to say that I am not proud of being Muslim, because that is not true. I just don't want it to be my defining factor. If I were to wear the hijab, people would know me as the Muslim girl before they would know me as Ghazala Ismail and that bothers me. Because I was starting college and moving to a completely new city, this was something I was really worried about. I want people to know Islam through knowing me, not the other way around. If the purpose of

wearing the hijab is to be modest and to not attract attention, doesn't wearing the hijab in today's world do the exact opposite? Without the hijab I am just another average citizen living an average life; once I place a hijab on my head I stand out amongst the crowd and I can be seen as a Muslim girl.

After these realizations, I realized that my relationship with God and Islam, one that used to be so strong, was faltering. I unconsciously stopped praying on time, fasting during Ramadan became a drag when it used to be a blessing, and I did not rely on God for help as much as I used to. I realized that because I was starting to resent the Hijab, I was starting to resent God and Islam; this was not a good place to be, especially right before starting college in a city so far from home. The religion I held so dearly was becoming a burden and I would rather save my religion than push myself to wear the hijab and sacrifice something much bigger, my love for Allah and Islam.

After taking Theology 107, my beliefs have become stronger. In this course, we have focused on a connection with God from the inside, rather than outer appearances. At the very beginning of the semester, we mentioned Jonathan Haidt who talked about the idea of self-transcendence. He mentions being aware of our surroundings and realizing that the world is temporary and something greater exists. He did not classify people who reached transcendence as dressing in a particular way to show their beliefs. Their transcendence was something between the believer and God. When we learned about Quran and Feminism, we learned that Islam is a religion that teaches equality between genders. It is true that the purpose of the hijab is not to oppress women, rather it is to protect them, but the way the hijab is presented does not come off that way. I don't see how women are any less protected when their hair shows but they are dressed modestly.

If genders are treated equally in Islam, than they shouldn't have to dress in a particularly different way. Through this class I have been able to solidify the conclusions I came to at the end of last summer. The strength of my relationship with God and my appreciation for my religion is far too great to be sacrificed by following a command I am not fully certain of. It is a command in the Quran, so I cannot avoid it for long but I believe that I should perfect other aspects of my life according to Islam before I start focusing on my outer appearance.

I have had conversations with many people over this dilemma, both hijabis and non-hijabis. One conversation that stands out most is one I had with a senior at Loyola a few weeks ago. She is a hijabi herself but did not start to wear the hijab until her junior year here at Loyola. We were both sitting in the musalla, the Muslim prayer area in Damon, when we started the conversation. She explained to me her struggle in starting hijab and how even members of her family were not in favor of her wearing it. Her brother was very strict and didn't understand the harsh struggle a woman goes through in putting on the hijab and her mother did not think wearing the hijab was necessary. Dealing with polar opposites in the house during a tough decision like this was very difficult for her. Even so, she gathered up the courage to do what she believed to be right. I was very impressed with her and felt that my struggle was nothing compared to hers. She reassured me that even my struggle is significant. The only reason she was able to go through with the decision was because she had firm faith in the hijab. If she did not truly believe the hijab was necessary, she would not have started wearing it either. She encouraged me to research it more and not start until I was fully confident in my decision. She also advised me to ignore what others had to say and to do what I believe to be right. People are going to be unhappy with

you regardless of what you try to do, so pleasing them should not be the goal, instead the goal should be to please Allah. This conversation has helped put my internal struggle in a different light and I hope that one day I am able to reach the point where I am confident in my faith and all that it asks of me.