

## **The Islamic Dress Code**

What would you think of a home that provided no shelter and no privacy? What would you think of a meal that provided no nourishment and no energy? It does not take much to realize that if one were in the business of selling any of these he would go bankrupt very quickly. Yet, amazingly the rules seem to be different when it comes to another basic need: clothing, especially women's clothing. Every year fashion centres in Europe and America come up with the latest designs. And what have they designed? Another way of *not* covering the body; the dress equivalent of the home that provides no shelter and no privacy.

One might ask, if a person did not want to cover themselves why would they buy anything, least of all expensive fashions, to achieve that? If we think about it, we may see the tension between two forces. All human beings (except for the handful of deviants who call themselves naturalists) have an inborn sense of shame. People of all religions agree on the need to cover themselves in public. Yet we also find a force that promotes nudity. Large segments of humanity are caught between two impulses: to cover or not to cover. Our clothing designs reflect different levels of compromise between these opposing forces.

### **Why? What is going on?**

Science cannot answer the question. It cannot trace the origins of forces that take place deep in our mind. In addition, most of the scientific establishment is still dominated by the followers of Mr. Darwin and Darwinism is a system of belief not science. Their beliefs keep them from dealing honestly with a simple fact: while all other animals have a skin that provides them protection against the elements, human beings don't. Monkeys can live without clothing, human beings cannot.

The Qur'an answers the question. Our bodies did not develop our skin--- so thin and fur free that it requires external covering for protection---because of some unexplained evolutionary accident. Our Creator designed it this way so we will always need clothing. He also put in us the sense of shame that forces us to cover ourselves.

On the other hand, the first act of Satan was to cause Adam and Eve to expose themselves: "So by deceit he brought about their fall: when they tasted of the tree, their shameful parts became manifest to them, and they began to sew together the leaves of the Garden over their bodies." [Al-A'raf 7:22].

This is the source of the tension we see. Two opposing forces. Good and evil.

With that background we can understand the importance of clothing. "Oh Children of Adam! We have bestowed raiment upon you to cover your shame as well as to be an adornment to you. But the raiment of righteousness---that is the best." [Al-A'raf 7:26].

The address here is to all humanity, emphasizing thereby the universal human need to cover ourselves properly. The Qur'an then warns that Satan was not finished after his first attempt: "Oh Children of Adam! Let not Satan seduce you in the same manner as he got your parents out of the Garden, stripping them of their raiment, to expose their shame." [Al-A'raf 7:27].

Once we realize the nature of the dress issue, it is natural that we should turn to our Creator to seek guidance for the proper dress code. Qur'an and Sunnah have provided ample guidance on the subject which can be summarized in four essential principles.

1. Our dress must cover our body adequately. Again we cannot determine what is adequate coverage on our own, as any witness to the misery of those who have tried it can readily ascertain. Shariah, as always, takes us out of this misery by defining it for us. For men, it is the middle part of the body from navel to knee. For women, it is the entire body except hands and face. These parts must never be exposed to any other person (except in case of genuine need e.g. medical treatment). In addition, the cloth must be neither see-through nor tight fitting.
2. Our dress should provide adornment. It should provide for decent appearance. Our appearance should not be an eyesore for decent human beings. For men, this extends the coverage requirements to include most of the body. For women, the essential requirement is that their dress should identify them as respectable ladies who would be honoured not harassed. Additionally, *hijab* rules aim at protecting them from the gaze of other men. (At the same time, the hallmark of *hayā'* indicates that a woman's clothing is an embodiment of decency and not a magnet for attraction. Any form of adornment which attracts undue attention, whether through application of eye liner or through beautification of ones Abaya/Jilbaab, will be impermissible.)
3. Our dress should establish our Islamic identity. At the least it should not identify us as followers of another religion. But, additionally it should positively identify us as Muslims.
4. The design of our dress must avoid three deadly sins: show off, arrogance, and self-indulgence. These are very serious diseases of the heart in their own right that we must avoid at all times. Our garments provide an easy opportunity to nurture them. Hence the need to be extra cautious. One Hadith states "Eat what you feel like and wear what you feel like. But avoid two things: extravagance and arrogance." [Bukhari]. At the risk of stating the obvious one should be reminded that this Hadith establishes an overriding concern that limits our choices within the realm of what

is considered *halal*. It does not do away with the distinction between *Ḥalāl* and *Ḥarām*.

As one implication of this general requirement, men are also required not to wear their lower garments below the ankle. (Many well-meaning Muslims today have been persuaded that this is a petty issue. This misgiving can be put to rest in a hurry if we just refer to the Hadith of Jabir bin Sulaym, Radi-Allahu anhu, in Abu Dawood. He asked Nabi (Sallallahu Alayhi Wa Sallam) for some advice when leaving him after his *very first meeting*. Of the six pieces of advice given him one was: "Never let your lower garment go below the ankles because that *is* arrogance. And Allah does not like arrogance." Another was "Never belittle a good deed."

Islam has not prescribed a particular dress style, giving us ample room to accommodate our needs, circumstances and tastes. However, these principles are for everyone and forever. Any garment that accommodates these principles will be Islamic dress. This is Islamic formula to dress for success. Eternal success.