

Veiled Integration: The Use of Headscarves among a Christian Minority in Sweden

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Abstract

In this article, we trace a specific 'situated bodily practice', namely the 'act of covering' the head with a scarf during liturgy, in a church that has migrated from the Middle East to Sweden. This 'veiled tradition' is interpreted as a 'ritual of migration' that can cast light on the complexities of re-producing traditions in a new setting, functioning as a 'cultural prism' for the question of integration. The broader aim is to nuance the symbolic value given to the veil in political discourse in the West, as a sign of (non-)integration. The empirical basis for this study has mainly been film analyses of liturgies in Syriac Orthodox congregations in Sweden. Building on an analysis of this material, four different usages of the headscarf could be traced: as ordinary dress, that in theory should cover the hair, but seldom did; as festal dress, resembling an accessory; as liturgical dress, used both as a token of piety and spiritual authority, and not to dress in a headscarf, resisting gender discrimination. These usages are compared to, but not fully explained by the idea of 'new veiling' among Muslim women, and therefore broaden the understanding of veiled traditions in a migration context.

Keywords: *Integration; religion; tradition; veiling; Syriac Orthodox Church; Sweden*

Introduction: Veiled Traditions

It is strange how a small piece of cloth can become emblematic of so much, but the Muslim headscarf has become a “persistent symbol” of many things in the West, not least a perceived lack of integration among migrants into Europe (Heath 2008:19; cf. Bucar 2017:1). Academic studies have followed the modern history of the ‘veil’: how it was a token of the ‘other’ already in Western colonial discourses (Ahmed 2003; Mohanty 1984; Fanon 1965), how it was later suppressed in many attempts at modernization in the MENA region to the point of being forbidden, and how it became increasingly popular again from the 1970s onwards in a kind of countermove, known as the “new veiling” (cf. Macleod 1991, 14; cf. van Wichelen 2012; Ahmed 2011; Kahf 2008). What started in places such as Egypt came to America and Europe in the 1990s (Crăciun 2017; Minganti 2007; Mahmood 2005). In Europe, the topic has become strongly politicized, to the point of being reduced to a feature seen as typical of segregation (e.g. Jakku 2019 (Sweden); Barskanmaz 2010 (Germany); Scott 2007 (France); Fernando 2010 (France); Özdalga 1998 (Turkey)).

If the characteristics of this political story are familiar, comparatively little attention has been given to the actual practices of different Muslim women, and even less to those of women – and men – wearing headscarves in other contexts. More generally, it should be emphasized, religion and religious practices have long escaped the study of migration. Only recently have these nuances started being

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taken into account, as in Elisabeth Bucar's study of Islamic "pious fashion" (Bucar 2017; cf. Almila 2019; Almila & Lewis 2017; Lewis 2015; Daly 1999). There still are many other traditions that are veiled, in the sense of unseen, either because they are outside of the Islamic orbit, or simply because they have not been studied to any extent. Among this plurality, there are also Christian usages of the headscarf, which have hardly been studied at all, including some which have made the same journey to Europe as their Muslim counterparts in the last half century. One of these will be the focus of the present investigation, which aims at broadening, nuancing, and problematizing the interpretation of headscarves as a symbol of integration. With an in-depth analysis of the usage of headscarves among Christians in Sweden, and more specifically among women belonging to the Syriac Orthodox Church, one of the so called Oriental Orthodox churches, we hope to contribute to the "demystification of the subject matter" (Almila 2019:199). The main question here is *how* headscarves are used among these women; but the more tentative question regarding explanations of these usages will also be addressed. To our knowledge, this material, perspective, and set of questions are unique.

Contextualizing the 'Christian' Headscarf

So far, we have talked about the 'Muslim' and the 'Christian' headscarf, but one should rightly be careful about the "transformation" of a specific practice "into religious categories" too quickly, especially if it contributes to a negative perception (Schinkel 2017:164). It should be remembered that not long ago a headscarf was "a very widespread accoutrement" around the Mediterranean and the rest of Europe (Heath 2008:7; Sjöberg 2014). If the practice was so general it does not really make sense to speak in terms of a specific 'religious' practice. The headscarf has such a long history in Christian environments that it is impossible to disentangle religious motivations from cultural, social or functional in any easy way (cf. Bondeson 1988:88ff; Hughes 2017:48f and 112ff). Nevertheless, a few words must be said about this history.

Even today, Paul's enigmatic statement in the New Testament (1 Cor 11) can serve as authorization for wearing a headscarf during prayer, but its original meaning is less than clear. Already in the early Christian era, there are examples of conjugal and monastic veilings (Upson-Saia 2011:53; cf. Tariq 2013:494), the trajectory of which extends to recent years, so much in the latter case that a veiled woman still might be perceived as a nun in a Christian context (cf. Michelman 1999 for a modern debate). Only with industrialization, it seems, was there a break with the custom of head covering for married women in Europe (cf. Hughes 2017). Part of this history is the tradition of covering the head while going to church, a practice that will be further discussed in this article. Occasionally, men also wore something on the head (Hughes 2017:111ff), but across ecclesial borders, it was a common norm for women to wear a head covering during the Sunday liturgy in Europe well into the 20th century (Hughes 2017: 48f, 112ff; Franks 2001:145, Lewis 2008:126). Thereafter, a thousand years of usage vanished "in undramatic silence" (Sjöberg 2014:118; cf. Bridgewood 1999). If there is a breach in this longstanding tradition, therefore, it is rather recent.

Nonetheless, there still are Christian contexts in which veiling is important. For example, there are Protestant revivalist milieus in which the headscarf can be worn for the purpose of being outspoken, as part of an attempt to live counter-culturally in a secular society, much like the 'new veiling' of Muslim women (2001). In Orthodox diaspora settings, some women also argue for the significance of the practice, although one study shows that it is the converts from a Protestant background rather than the "cradle Orthodox" who support the practice (Riccardi-Schwartz 2021:252; cf. 249). In both these cases, it seems, there is a 'new veiling' also in Christian settings, i.e. a defence and promotion of the practice in light of a modern or post-modern situation.



Theory

The practice of wearing a headscarf is basically about clothing. Still, Mary Ellen Roar and Joanne Eicher argue that dress is not simply what is worn in order to protect the body, but also “the *act* of covering the body” (1965:1; cf. Carter 2017:175; Entwistle 2015:54). To dress is to communicate with others, and dress is a “sensory system of nonverbal communication” (Eicher 1995:5; cf. Carter 2017; Barnard 1996; Flügel 1930). In order to understand “the complex dynamic relationship between the body, dress and culture”, Joanne Entwistle has defined dress as a “situated bodily practice” (Entwistle 2015:11); a notion that neatly encapsulates how the use of specific dress, like a headscarf, is individual and social at the same time, and that context is key in order to understand it (cf. Bucar 2017:2; Goffman 1990 [1965]). As we will see, a headscarf might be regular dress, a fluctuating fashion, or a liturgical practice.

In this study, a specific bodily practice, the wearing of a headscarf, is situated in a specific location: a church. Although this is a ‘sacred’ space, in which certain rules apply (Almila 2019:137–140; cf. Hamilton & Hawley 1999:47f), it is clear that it cannot be separated neatly from other social, cultural, or functional spaces. The space we are examining, therefore, is a hybrid one in which power positions are negotiated, as are for example issues of gender and ethnicity. Dress can become a way to uphold and reproduce existing power structures, but also a way through which social hierarchies might be challenged (cf. Barnard 1996).

The reason for studying a church setting is because rituals can be understood as “rituals of migration” in the words of the anthropologists Marianne Holm Pedersen and Mikkel Rytter (Pedersen & Rytter 2018).³ They argue that the process of relocating a ritual in a new context is such a complex one that “ritual performance can be used as a ‘cultural prism’ to shed new light on processes of change and continuity in migration” (p. 2). In light of such an interpretation, a ‘situated bodily practice’, such as the wearing a headscarf in a church, is therefore involved in a kind of “micro-politics”, through which rituals of migration not only create and negotiate identity and belonging, but also becoming, in a new setting (pp. 3-4; cf Gardner & Grillo 2002).

Material and Method

The empirical basis for this study is a larger research project about integration and tradition, in which three congregations in Sweden belonging to the Syriac Orthodox church have been studied. In a Swedish context, the Syriac Orthodox church was established in the early 1970s, and is today one of the largest immigrant based churches in Sweden, with 48 congregations and about 49 000 members. Initial fieldwork was exploratory and inductive, and not directly concerned with headscarves, but more broadly with the reinterpretation of tradition. Between June 2018 and June 2020, 99 interviews and 83 observations were conducted in search for the processes of integration in relation to traditions.

In this material, headscarves turn up in nine interviews and 44 observation protocols, all of which have been analysed. Additionally, we have gathered a large body of film material from liturgies, with consent from the congregations. As researchers not affiliated with the church, we came from the outside and our perspective is mainly *etic*, although we strived at being as reflexive as possible during observations and interviews, and analysing the material. In general, we also felt that we were warmly invited into these congregational spaces and that people spoke openly and honestly with us, sometimes even helping us setting up the film devices. In most cases, we carried out the filming

³ Since this has been an established group in Sweden for the last 50 years, one could speak about “rituals of diaspora” as well as “rituals of migration”.

ourselves with a fixed position film camera from a back row of the churches. Out of this material, 32 recordings, or in total ca. 52 hours of film, were chosen for analysis. In all of these recordings, the use of headscarves by people participating in the liturgy, and their use in the context of the services as a whole, can be clearly observed. These recordings have therefore provided detailed knowledge about the use of headscarves at these specific occasions. Research ethics have been followed and were approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board (Dnr 2018/246).

A content analysis was conducted, in which the recordings were studied both with regard to how many women from different age groups wore the headscarf at a particular point in the liturgy,⁴ and with regard to the headscarves themselves, what they looked like and how they were worn. Specific points in the liturgy, especially communion, were examined closely, as well as the pattern of a number of individuals, who were followed throughout the whole liturgy, and occasionally, in more than one liturgy. Incorporating the aforementioned theory and previous research in this area, the content analysis was followed by an interpretive and reflexive analysis, in which four different types of headscarf usage in this setting were distinguished.

Although interviews complemented observations, corroborating the impressions, the focus has been the actual usage of the headscarf, rather than the reasons for wearing it. As such, it has been studied as a “sensory system of *nonverbal* communication” (Eicher 1995:5, our emphasis). While a more focused interview material might have identified articulated concerns about different practices, we would argue that our approach has other important benefits, not least making it possible to go beyond predetermined narratives, discourses, and opinions on a topic that is already sensitive and to a high degree politicized (cf. Bucar 2017). In reality, this rationale was confirmed by the interviews, because whenever the topic came up, there were few responses that went beyond stereotypical explanations.

Four Headscarf Usages among Syriac Orthodox Women in Sweden

As mentioned above, Roar and Eicher argue that dress is not simply what is worn, but an “act of covering the body with clothes and accessories” (1965:1; cf. Entwistle 2015:54). Such a definition of dress as covering serves the aim of highlighting how dress can protect the body, although what needs protection will be interpreted differently from time to time and place to place. Therefore, such a definition is not merely addressing functional reasons to cover, to protect the body against weather and wind, but also moral, aesthetic, and religious reasons. In this way, a dress that covers, such as a headscarf, can be practical, modest, beautiful, or pious, but also several of these at the same time (cf. Ron 2018:188; Bucar 2017:2–3; Graybill & Arthur 1999). However, as a form of dress that covers, we are reminded that the use of headscarves is not necessarily limited to a sacred space, but that the same practice, and the same dress codes, may apply outside of a church as well as inside of it.

1. Dress

To begin with, we will consider how the ‘act of covering the body’ with a headscarf during liturgy can be interpreted as *ordinary dress*. This way, practical, moral, and ethnic reasons for wearing a headscarf will be addressed.

Reviewing a number of occasions, during the liturgies a clear majority of women wore a headscarf, often 80 percent or more. Occasionally, there were fewer wearers. In one common Sunday liturgy, for example, we observed less than 50 percent of the women having a headscarf at the outset. One

⁴ We could not be certain of the exact age of all of these women, but after having carried out field observations for a long period of time we knew the age of some of them; the rest are “educated guesses”.



possible explanation, indicated by the presence of many unfamiliar faces in the observation protocol, was a higher number of people who did not normally attend the services in this congregation. During a Christmas liturgy in a large cathedral, we estimated that 90 percent of the women in the front nave, who had come early to attend the whole service, had a headscarf, in contrast to only 50 percent of those at the back of the church.

Out of all these women, only a few wore a headscarf before coming to church, i.e. as part of their ordinary dress. For most women, therefore, the practice did not seem to be part of an everyday practice, or related to an idea of veiling while in public. Still, there are a couple of important exceptions. Not surprisingly, the age group that deviated from this general impression was the oldest generation, i.e. women most probably older than 70 years, who during evening prayers were the larger part of the congregation, and who also shaped the Sunday assembly, because many came early. On several occasions, we watched these older women entering the church with scarves that they had worn outside of the church as well. It did not seem to matter whether they came to attend a religious service or an activity for elderly people; it was the same kind of kerchief. Most of the time, these kerchiefs had a more solid fabric and darker colours than the headscarves of the younger generations, reflecting a practical use. In addition, they were often tied under the chin, although not always covering all the hair, especially not at the forehead. Only in a few exceptional cases was the hair totally covered, e.g. a few elderly women who wore a bandana beneath the scarf, and a nun visiting one of the congregations. Sometimes, a scarf was combined with a second scarf during the liturgy, one out of thin lace: in these instances, it seems there was need for an additional, liturgical scarf, next to the ordinary one.

The ordinariness of the scarf can be exemplified by a group interview with older women, in which they were asked what they called that thing on their heads. In this multilingual group, in which Swedish was spoken alongside a local dialect of Aramaic and Arabic, they at first seemed confused. There was no specific word, they said: a “scarf is a scarf”. The words thrown out in the room reflected the general nature of the topic. One suggested “voile”, the French word for a veil, the next said *miṣḥā*, the Arabic word for a scarf, and a third one the Syriac word *mandil*, another word that can mean scarf, but which also has an Arabic equivalent.⁵

Since dress is related to covering the body, it is important to note that it was highly unusual to see scarves that covered the hair completely. And yet, the topic of covering, or even *veiling*, surfaces on a few occasions in interviews. Once, a man acting as a host during a festal liturgy, came forth to explain the event to us, mentioning in passing the “tradition” of the headscarf, which served the purpose of not letting a woman’s hair “distract” men. In another conversation, a woman complained about “half-naked” women in the church, with bare backs and mini-skirts, who do not understand that they should sit at the back in order not to be seen by the men. She also discussed headscarves, and said that walking into the church without a headscarf is “like being naked in God’s home”. In this instance, there is a strong connection between headscarf and dress that covers properly. One of the priests made the same link as the woman, and clearly prioritized proper dress over a headscarf, which he called “veil”:

⁵ Here, one is reminded of the many different terms that are also employed for the Muslim “veil” (cf. Bucar 2017:7–8).

P: I don't judge anybody, whether they come with the veil, or not. I have to do my job, and whoever comes with a veil, or without veil, I have to... [...]

I: So, how you dress is not of importance?

P: But of course... they cannot come with a bikini to the church... [...] They have to come with a decent dress.

What kind of dress is considered decent naturally depends on several factors, for example, age, how one is dressed outside of church, and what is deemed a covered or uncovered body. Nonetheless, although it contains different opinions, there is a discourse of decency related to dress and headscarves in these instances. There is tension between show and tell, between the idea that 'tradition' prescribes that a woman cover her hair, and the fact that this seldom is the case.

From a more analytical view, these examples evoke a larger cultural background, in which the headscarf used to be part of daily dress. A "normal-sized scarf... used to protect just the head, without any special attention given to the idea that the hair should be covered" is still common in places such as Turkey (Özdalga 1998, xvii), and this type strongly resembles that of the older women whom we studied, some of which come from the Tur Abdin region in South-Eastern Turkey.

Part of the same broader background is the question of decency in gendered spaces. In Tala Jarjour's careful study of women choirs in present-day Syria, she considers the church as a "strongly gendered social space" in which "the female body ... falls under strict confines by socially engendered configurations" (Jarjour 2018, 54; cf. 53). While the female voice can be heard in the liturgy, the body should remain veiled, to the point of being invisible - in some congregations in the Middle East, women sit at the back of the church rather than in pews next to the men's pews. Jarjour connects these ideas to an underlying emphasis on female modesty in many Arab societies, expressed not only through head attire, but also by gestures and manner. In this regard, the Muslim veil has been considered an "anti-sign" rather than a symbol, because it "covers the actual sign: the female body" (van Wichelen 2012:207). In our material, the headscarf raised similar questions regarding the visibility of women. Even though the headscarf does not cover the hair, there is still a discourse of decency regarding dress for women. Therefore, the issue of covering seems to remain even when the headscarf does not veil.

The mention of a common "tradition" by one person is another factor to take into account, since it points to group identity. Here, studies of dress and ethnicity in a number of religious contexts might remind us of their close interrelation, and how a head-gear can be laden with emotion (e.g. Bradley 1995; O'Neal 1999). Even when the headscarf does not cover, therefore, it can still remain a signifier of the group that meets during the liturgy, whether it is thought of as a 'church' or an 'ethnicity' – and both were referred to by our interviewees (cf. Atto 2011). On a number of occasions, we observed how people *not* belonging to the congregation were singled out as 'guests', and therefore as different, and a woman from the outside, like a researcher, was not expected to wear the scarf.

In light of these analytical considerations, two things can be said: first, that the headscarf is still part of an ordinary, daily dress for some of the older women, but the question arises whether it is not only a matter of time until this link to an everyday costume is lost. If that is the case, a shift is taking place before our eyes, in which the headscarf is turning from ordinary dress, with practical functions, to something else. Secondly, issues of gender and group identity have been observed. There is a discourse of decency, related to gender separation, which concerns the use of the headscarf, but is not identical with it. In this sense, the headscarf in this environment seems less an anti-sign, like the



veil, than a sign, signifying both female identity and belonging to a church and an ethnicity, while also clearly being a marker of age.

2. Dress up

In a second step, we will consider ways in which the wearing of the headscarf during liturgy can be interpreted as *festal dress*. Roar and Eicher distinguish between “dress” and “adornment”, saying that the first, as we have seen, “underscores *the process of covering*”, while “adornment stresses the aesthetic aspects of altering the body” (1965:1, cf. Hamilton & Hawley 1999:47). Although too neatly divided (cf. Entwistle 2015), the distinction still marks a shift in emphasis, from disguising to displaying, that is reflected in costumes used for different kinds of celebration. A festal dress is often used for showing off to a greater extent than everyday dress is, in short, for a communication related to beauty (Entwistle 2015, chap. 6). Still, it is important to remember that festal dress can be something different in an overarching religious space.

Many people in our recorded material were clearly dressed up in some kind of church clothes, often in sombre colours. In this there was generational difference, so that older men, for example, were more likely to wear a suit than younger ones. Now, one might ask to what extent headscarves matched the rest of these outfits, as an accessory highlighting Sunday dress.

In the recorded material, we could observe a large number of different scarves, from small ones hiding almost nothing of the hair, to large ones covering hair and part of the shoulders. The most common were white, black, or black-and-white; less common were yellow, blue, lilac, or brown scarves. According to one interviewee, colour does not matter, but the preference for more subdued colours, as opposed to red, for example, suggest that it does to many. There were plain, dotted, striped and checkered ones, and other with flower motifs. Most scarves were of thin lace, but as mentioned above a few women also wore scarves of a thicker fabric, resembling scarves used for outside leisure activities. Quite common were pilgrim scarves with an image of the Virgin Mary, together with the text “Lourdes” or “Jerusalem”, thereby indicating a context for buying and selling these scarves as well.

While the oldest generation often wore the kerchief already described, women in their fifties most commonly had the thin-laced fabric that only partly covered the hair. Although not consistently, there was also a group of younger women in their thirties, singing in the choir, who had yet another kind of headscarf which was white or transparent, but much longer than those of other women, so that it fell down on their chests. These nuances suggest that each generation brings different perceptions of which headscarf is the most suitable, and that the look of the headscarf matters. In short, there were different fashions related to specific age groups (cf. Almila 2019:8; Hole 2005).

As far as we could tell, the headscarves were often fitted aesthetically with the rest of the clothing and hair set. In one interview, a woman confirmed this impression, saying with a laugh that “each Sunday I have (a new) one, going with my clothes”. There was a plurality of designs, which one young woman described as a “sense of taste”, mentioning how some sew their own scarves after having bought a fine piece of cloth. They do not, she claimed, wear specific scarves to particular church feasts, as if there was one for Easter and another one for Christmas; rather the headscarf matched the dress.

As mentioned above, the fact that many headscarves did not sit tightly, but floated around on the head, directs attention to the hair rather than hiding it. On repeated occasions women had to restore a headscarf to its original place on the head and hair after it had slipped away. If the scarf was small,

light, and transparent it could even be said to highlight a careful Sunday hairdo, much like other hair accessories, for example hair ribbons, flowers or small hats. In any case, small pieces of cloth were not interfering with the hairstyle, and could easily be taken off without having changed the coiffure (cf. Jarjour 2018:54).

Analytically, the attention to the headscarf as an accessory used to dress up raises awareness of ideals that seemingly contrast those that were discussed in the previous category. When the scarf directs attention to a specific hairdo it is very far from the idea that the hair should be covered. Next to ideals of modesty and female seclusion, there are apparently also ideals of beauty and exposure. Individual women wore clothing that would have worked at a party as much as anywhere else. The fact that women sit in another place than the men does not automatically put them out of focus, but paradoxically makes them more visible as a group. So, there is deliberate tension between these usages, possibly representing different aesthetic and moral norms. Nonetheless, at the same time, they might reflect similarly gendered norms. After all, one factor distinguishing the ‘new veiling’ in Muslim settings from the old is how it is fashion designed “for getting out *into* the modern world” (Kahf 2008, 35–36). Furthermore, approached as a family feast, like a wedding or a funeral, these Sunday liturgies are situated in an ethnic as much as a religious space, a place in which people of the same kind (from an emic point of view) meet, allowing a safe space for mutual attraction between the sexes, or, equally, for family self-representation. What is seen as an aesthetic ideal, whether that is a modest, ‘veiled’ appearance, or something more extroverted, will of course differ, but on the basis of our observations it is likely that a headscarf can be used to meet both ends (cf. Goldman 2013).

3. Dress for the occasion

Thirdly, the wearing of the headscarf will be considered as *liturgical dress*, i.e., as the kind of dress that is essential for this specific occasion, namely the celebration of the Sunday liturgy and other celebrations in the Syriac Orthodox Church. That a ritual lens is applied does not, however, mean that we now enter a solely religious space. The topics already discussed are all deeply engrained with religious ideas and ideals as well, and in a corresponding way, issues of gender and ethnicity, for example, are still valid in this space.

First of all, it should be remembered that for most women the headscarf is only worn within the walls of the church building, and specifically during the Eucharistic liturgy. For many, it seems to function as a tool of ritualization, which distinguishes the sacred and the profane, religious celebrations from everyday practices (Bell 1992: 88–93). From the point of view of our observations, there is a correlation between touching the scarf, or settling it correctly, and the moods of the liturgy. Before a specific prayer, such as Our Father, the scarf can be settled correctly, while not being touched during these intensive prayers (cf. for this tactile sensation, see Daly 1999, about the *chaadar*). But women also put it on at different times. Speaking in ritual terms, there are different thresholds in the liturgy which seem to determine the nature of the act of clothing (Turner 1969; Carter 2017).

A first threshold is the entrance to the church nave, which for many is a place to bow or kiss the door post. The difference between inside and outside is heightened by the informal nature of the outside, which could be an indoor entry area with a cloakroom and a few tables around at which people could sit and talk and have coffee, also during the liturgy. In all congregations, a basket with headscarves was placed at the entrance, as a formal reminder of the fact that it ought to be worn on the inside. However, it goes without saying that it probably would be rather impractical to put it on while entering, both because a lot of things happen simultaneously at this point, such as making the sign of



the cross and greeting someone at the same time, and because the headscarf often does not sit very tightly, and is not well suited for walking.

Some rather dress after having found a place to sit, and this seat is a second threshold. Being seated, some women greet other women warmly, and sometimes talk a little, and it seems that many say their introductory prayers while standing. At this point, a headscarf can be picked out of a purse, and after having dressed, one seems better prepared to take part in the liturgy together with the rest of the congregation. The headscarf serves to underline a change of mind and body, and directs attention towards the public celebration at the altar. From now on, one can join the singing and the praying. On the other hand, some seem equally well prepared without veiling.

Still, with respect to the headscarf, the most important threshold is the sanctuary, which is approached at the time of receiving the Eucharistic gifts. Although women should not enter the sanctuary (cf. Jarjour 2018:156f), the scarf resembles the liturgical sandals that all male deacons and priests are supposed to put on when passing the border from nave to sanctuary. The sandals signify a physical response before the sacred; and the headscarf could be interpreted in a similar light.

As noted above, some women had headscarves on already, but some, especially the younger generation, dressed up while proceeding to the distributing priest and deacon, up to the second before receiving. In one instance, we observed a woman throwing a jacket around her head just before receiving communion. On the way forward, another smartly dressed young woman whispered to her female friend, “am I supposed to wear one of those?” Women who had forgotten to bring a headscarf were given a scarf from a friend who had just received communion, and in this way women helped each other out. Many took it off as soon as they had left the priest, some on their way out. Indeed, there were many different practices of dressing and undressing the headscarf, but the one instance during which it was essential to wear the headscarf was while receiving communion.

On an analytical level, these different thresholds signal different ‘situated bodily practices’, in which the headscarf can be everything from a pursuit of profound piety to a superficial sign. The connection to piety and personal belief was clearly articulated by two young women in an interview. To wear a scarf throughout the liturgy, one of them argued, was the special reserve of “very old women who were incredibly believing and who had brought their faith with them from the village”. She now wore the scarf of her mother, also depicted as “very, very believing”, and had in fact received it after having started to go to church of her own accord, and no longer simply because her parents forced her. The headscarf marked the transition, and she was now the new carrier of the tradition of her fore-mothers. In the same conversation, the other woman explained how she sometimes was putting on what she called the “prayer shawl” at the time of private prayer at home, especially in times of “desperate needs”. Again, the scarf signalled prayer and something profoundly personal.

Here, one is reminded of studies following Saba Mahmood, which discuss the Muslim veil not simply as an “expression” of piety, but as cultivating it, i.e., as a way to create a religious self (Mahmood 2012, xv; cf. Minganti 2007:236; Bradley 1995; Bridgwood 1995). A decisive difference between many Muslim wearers and the women in this study is of course the fact that the latter do not wear a headscarf in public, but only in the semi-public space of the liturgy. Here, the scarf rather seemed to designate a private, pious use, helping its users to enter a mystical dimension, rather than living this faith in public. And yet, the quest for devotion seems shared, and there are also Muslims who only veil in the mosque, as part of an attempt to guard the “sacredness of the prayer” (Almila 138-139). In this respect, it would be possible to distinguish between modest and pious dress, the former related to covering the body, and the latter to devotion. Modest dress signals a decent and demure person,

while pious dress points to religious seriousness (Bucar 2017:2f, cf. Ron 2018:177f). Although they can be one and the same, they need not be. To dress modestly and piously can be different ways of creating a religious self, as well as of expressing it, and the motives behind them will not be uniquely religious, but also depend on, for example, gender, ethnicity, age, class, generation, and aesthetic preferences (Crăciun 2017:8f; Tarlo & Moors 2013; Bridgwood 1995).

A further related topic, which plays a role for both Muslims and Orthodox Christians, is ritual purity (Butcher 2019:28; Larin 2008:275–276, 290–291; cf. Almila 2019:137–140). The whitish colours of many scarves can be interpreted in light of purity ideals. Such ideals surfaced in interviews, although not directly related to the headscarves, as when a priest explained the reason for women not being allowed to enter the sanctuary during her monthly period. Another person discussed why lipstick should not be used in church, and argued that the primary reason was not the risk of smearing the priest's hand at communion, but rather that the cosmetic contains pig fat, and any products from animals should be kept apart from the sanctuary.

Again, a gendered discourse has been approached. And yet it should be remembered that among male priests different head-gears are also common, for example the cap resembling a 'kippah' that priests wear during public prayer (the so called 'fruit'; Syr. *phiro*). In fact, a priest remembered that during his youth in Tur Abdin, elderly men used to put on a small hat at the time of prayer, although it was a fashion that was disappearing. Another specific instance is the feast of Epiphany (Syr. *denho*), which celebrates the baptism of Christ, and during which a "sponsor for Jesus" is elected. As witnessed, the sponsor is covered in white from head to toe, including a white cloak or a transparent veil covering most of the face. He is dressed, a priest said, "like a girl" getting married. Although this example also points to a male privilege, the dress is gender-bending, and generates the counter-question of whether the female headscarf can also be compared to priestly dress. The question is intimately linked to the enhanced status of the female choir (Jarjour 2018; Kellogg 2013), which sometimes sings invisibly from a gallery at the back of the church, but also next to the male deacons facing the altar. In the latter case, their large coloured robes give the impression of clerical dress, and the headscarf, which either can be part of the robe, as a cloak, or be carried in addition, contributes to the overall expression of a group of people who are ritually singled out from the rest, with a distinctive function. Interestingly enough, two of the choirs that we observed even carried something resembling stoles, the ribbons that signify ordination. In this setting, the usage seems to reflect a push for more authority and responsibility, and the scarf can even be seen as a tool for empowerment and a possible challenge to established social hierarchies.

These examples point to ways in which the liturgical wearing of the headscarf can be linked to a cultivation of piety, belief, purity, and even authority, but not necessarily so. The different thresholds in the liturgy rather indicate different usages, from the profound to the superficial. The ritual separation of the sexes might allow a safe space of prayer for women, but at the same time prevent them from drawing close to the altar. However, the fact that only women dress for the occasion, i.e. for receiving communion, gives them a liturgical tool for ritual transformation that men do not have.

4. Not dress

As already mentioned, one woman compared not wearing the headscarf to being undressed, or naked. In a final step, therefore, the people who go against the grain and do not wear a headscarf will be considered. If dress was the 'act of covering', the act of not covering is now under scrutiny, because to *not* dress in the expected way may be judged as, and may actually be, an action in and of itself. In



this regard, we should also ask: are there any consequences of not following what seems to be the norm?

Despite the high percentage of scarf-wearers, up to 90 percent among regular female worshippers, the picture is not unanimous. The mention of thresholds in the preceding section points to the fact that some women, especially those who arrive late or are not in the elderly group, only wear a scarf while receiving communion. Here, we do not have comparative material that allows us to see whether this is a growing tendency, underlined by generational change, or not, but it is likely. In one interview, a woman explicitly claimed that “few women younger than 50 wear a headscarf”, a statement which is not reflected in our material, but perhaps in other congregations. What we have occasionally seen, however, are other ritual events in the church, like baptisms and weddings, in which few had put on a headscarf. One example was a combined celebration of Lucia and Christmas, which was arranged by a youth group. The priest participated as a guest, sitting in the front row on the women’s side, and the rest of the people, all women without scarves, were in all likelihood sitting with their families, including small children, out of which a few wore a Santa dress, with the woollen cap. Only a little later two elderly ladies wearing headscarves arrived. This was definitely another kind of ritual for the people participating, but the same family pattern seems to govern baptisms and weddings, other rituals with younger people at the centre. Even in a special Sunday liturgy with a procession outdoors, we noticed not only that the gender separation in the church room was dissolved outside, but also that several women had unveiled.

In addition, there were a couple of high-profile women in these congregations who did not wear a headscarf during the liturgy. One of them was in fact the wife of a prolific person. According to her husband, this is because she comes from an urban milieu and one of the Catholic churches with a Syriac heritage, so she is simply not used to it, and shows no sign of feeling pressured. Another example is a woman who told us she had consciously chosen not to wear a headscarf despite being a relative of a priest, despite the pressure she had faced from the outside; according to her, some said she was “shaming” her next of kin. She grounded her decision in “gender discrimination”, criticising the way in which women were made responsible for the “sinful thoughts” of men. Even if these women are in the minority, they are important examples of moving boundaries that do not take existing norms as self-evident.

Analytically, these last examples point to different levels of pressure. On specific occasions there seems to be no requirement for women to dress in a headscarf at church, at least not for the younger generation. But at other times, it was expected, and feelings of “guilt” could arise, one woman said, if she did not put it on. In an interview, a woman said that a priest could “deny” a bare-headed woman communion, but the only time she had experienced it was in Turkey. Sometimes, though, we heard that elderly women could tell women to put on a headscarf, and a priest also told us that, much against his will, a few women came early in order to guard the door, and prevent any other woman from entering without a scarf. He also guessed that perhaps half of the priests in his church would consider headscarves as important during the liturgy, thereby estimating that a substantial portion of the priests, like himself, would disagree. In our material, we could sometimes see how parents, primarily mothers, were anxious to dress their daughters at the time of communion. In a few other instances, we watched role-playing with the scarf, either a grown-up dressing up a small girl, or children playing with one another. In one instance, a young boy showed his even younger sister how to put it on. Not all girls wore a headscarf; however, the older they became, the more pressing the need seemed to be.

Although left unspoken, there seems to be what Goffman calls “a moral demand on others” to dress with a headscarf (Bucar 2017:15). Following the notions of modest and pious dress, discussed in the preceding section, not wearing a headscarf may signal a non-decent and shameless person, or someone who is not seriously religious. At the same time, the demand is not always valid, and not for everyone, such as small girls or ‘outsiders’. In addition, there seems to be a difference of opinion, and room to move, at least for some, to make an individual choice. Despite such a partial acceptance of diversity, it is equally clear that it sometimes takes a conscious choice *not* to wear the headscarf, and so challenge social hierarchies (cf. Barnard 1996). Such a choice might counter-intuitively be compared to the ‘new veiling’ in other Christian and Muslim contexts (Riccardi-Schwartz 2021; Franks 2001), because in both places one has to defend a position, which is visible through headwear or lack thereof. On the one hand, the wearing of the headscarf does not seem to be a big deal for many, but on the other, there are examples of pressure. Despite moving boundaries, the price can be high for an individual who goes against the flow.

Concluding Discussion

In this article, we have traced a specific ‘situated bodily practice’, namely the ‘act of covering’ the head with a scarf during the liturgy, in a church belonging to a community that has migrated from the Middle East to Sweden. This ‘veiled tradition’ has been interpreted here as a ‘ritual of migration’ that can cast light on the complexities of re-producing specific customs in a new setting, and so function as a ‘cultural prism’ (Pedersen & Rytter 2018). The broader aim has been to nuance the strong symbolic value given to the veil in political discourse in the West. Scholars have long tried to resist this oversimplification with the notion of a ‘new veiling’ among Muslim women (MacLeod 1991); however, this model does not fully explain what we have observed, and our study is therefore a contribution to a growing field of studies about the veil – and migration.

The ‘sacred’ space that we have observed is certainly a hybrid space, a space between the private and the public, but within which both can play a role. It is a religious space to be sure, with its specific traditions and authorities, but not exclusively so, since the same space is also a functional, cultural, and societal space; a space for both individuals and families, with their different ethnic, religious and other identifications.

Primarily we have discussed four different usages of headscarves and explored possible ideals related to them. As ordinary dress that in theory should cover the hair, but seldom did, the headscarf was related to ideals of female modesty, or at least decency. Here, we argued that the headscarf rather was a ‘sign’ of female and ethnic identity, than an ‘anti-sign’, covering “the actual sign: the female body” (van Wichelen 2012:207). As festal dress, the headscarf resembled an accessory, indicating ideals of beauty and fashion, which sometimes could stand in clear contrast to more modest ideals, but not necessarily so, since modesty also can be part of an aesthetic ideal. As liturgical dress, we noticed how the headscarf both can be used as a token of piety and even spiritual authority, but also as a superficial sign. Among the people not dressing in a headscarf, some resisted it as gender discrimination, and some refrained since they were not used to it. All in all, these usages reflect different moral, aesthetic, religious, and other ideals, even though they are taking place in the same ‘sacred’ space. In this regard, one might say that the ‘new veiling’ seems to be a combination of all of these ideals, namely to be modest and pious in a fashionable and self-determined manner (cf. Bucar 2017:2–3), while we have observed how they are played out next to one another, and sometimes also in direct contrast to one another.



In addition to these partly differing ideals, what can explain the divergence of these usages? Here, we need to delve into the ‘micro-politics’ of the practice (cf. Pedersen & Rytter 2018). First of all, it seems the ‘tradition’ of the headscarf does not have a single owner, but that there are several opinions and different means of transmitting the practice. The practice is veiled *as* tradition. One could distinguish between individual habit, social custom, and authorized tradition in order to stress that different people can do the same thing, but with different awareness and determination (Otto & Pedersen 2005). For something that an individual routinely does to develop into a custom, a process of “institutionalization” has to take place, namely a shared recognition of the habit, and for a custom to become a tradition, a further process of “legitimation” is needed (Otto & Pedersen 2005:26–29). In our material, the headscarf could certainly be interpreted as a social custom, but less strongly as a legitimated tradition. At least, we could not detect any formal attempts at teaching the practice.

Secondly, there are different social boundaries that also need attention in order to understand the ‘micro-politics’ of the headscarf, and the question of who is in charge. Even if the overarching social boundary is religious, there are also other social boundaries at play in our material, most importantly ethnicity, gender, and age. A practice, such as the wearing of the headscarf, can certainly uphold and reproduce patriarchal power, but also test existing social hierarchies, and we would argue that we have seen both; i.e. also how the ‘act of covering’ can be an act in which the subordination of women is challenged. In this regard, the strong agency of women must be mentioned, both women who advocate the practice and women who resist it, but not least of all women who wear the scarf in their own ways. They make use of the many different opportunities in handling the headscarf, and thus it is not only a migration ritual which shapes identity and belonging, but also *becoming* in the new environment.

What is, then, the future of the headscarves in this setting? One thing seems for certain, namely that a shift is taking place. As soon as the older generation passes away, the headscarf as an ordinary dress will most likely be lost. So, the question remains whether there will also be a ‘new veiling’, as in Islamic and a few Christian settings, or something else, like a renewed ‘ritual veiling’, which stresses piety and authority over modesty? One could imagine both these scenarios. More likely, we pose, is something resembling the slow disappearance of the veil in other Christian settings, so that the long tradition of headscarves in the Syriac Orthodox tradition will also come to its end “in undramatic silence” (cf Sjöberg 2014:118).

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council (Dnr. 2018/246).

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