To Serve the Present Age

An examination of the theological alternative to veiling. *Michael P Wilson*

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1 Introduction

Issues of modesty emerge regularly in any society as it sways to and fro between periods of liberalism and conservatism. In Britain, long periods of general conservatism have been broken over the centuries by short outbursts of liberalism. Thus the Restoration period, the Regency period and the Edwardian period are conventionally regarded as periods of liberality. By and large, the period from the early 1960s to the present day is regarded as one of steady erosion of conservative standards in favour of social and moral liberalism. For example, the extent to which male and female bodily exposure and the portrayal of sexual behaviour is tolerated today on stage, on film, in the media and in public places was unthinkable in the 1950s. Whilst some protest, consensus deems this trend to be in general for the common good. In the meantime, the cultural and religious diversity of the United Kingdom has steadily increased, and in particular, the Muslim community has grown in numbers and self-confidence, and has become far more articulate in its critique of Western culture. In parallel with this trend towards liberalism and diversity has been a drift towards fundamentalism in religion and politics. This has not been as marked in Western Europe as it has been in the United States, in the Muslim world, and in the USSR. This paper is peripherally about the collision of conservative fundamentalism and liberalism. In particular, it is about issues of female modesty that are exposed by that collision.

Mary Daly seems to believe that fundamentalism is by its very nature bad for women.[1] This is unlikely to be true, even though the examples Daly cites are horrific and widespread. It is more likely that fundamentalism, in common with any simplistic, formulaic way of thinking, tends to detract from sound judgment. It can, and on occasion does, facilitate an unreflective exercise of power that is both seductive and evil. When men (and less frequently women) who are drawn to such

power achieve positions of authority, bad things happen, for women especially. For as John Berger says, men tend to deal in power and women in powerlessness. Hence the discussion in what follows of sin and the suspension of right-judgment.

Is it appropriate for a male to be composing this piece? It is. The first line of Daly's Statement from the Biophilic Brotherhood, addressed *by* men *to* women declares, 'We understand deeply that until all women are free, no man can be free.'[2]
This would seem to be a limited version of the paradoxical truth that although in a finite world one person's freedom is necessarily bought at the price of another's limitation, it is also the case that no-one is free until all are free.

Recent tragic, violent events have caused the states of Western Europe, and the United Kingdom in particular, to look closely at issues which in all probability they would not otherwise have visited. The place of Muslim culture within wider society has become a subject for uncomfortable debate. To what extent, society wishes to know, is it reasonable to insist on common standards of public and private behaviour for all? How far does the individual's right to religious and cultural freedom run? One seemingly small issue in this debate is that of veiling. When shops put up notices insisting that motorcyclists remove their helmets before entering in order that staff may be reassured and that security cameras may obtain pictures for later identification[3] few object. When shopping centres ban youths wearing hoods that obscure them from security cameras, society's response is ambivalent. When schools insist that they must be able to see the faces of all their female students on pain of exclusion, anguished public debate ensues. Current British legislation insists that all women must be photographed for passport purposes showing their entire face, and must be prepared to show that photograph to customs and immigration officials. Is this a common-sense security measure, or a violation of sexual modesty and of basic human rights?

It is a crass simplicity that descends into falsehood to speak of the Muslim community in Britain as if it were a homogeneous phenomenon with a single voice. It patently is not. Nevertheless, there is a persistent and articulate strain within the Muslim community which claims that the issue of veiling is not merely about the right of women to dress according to culture and custom when going about their rightful

business in wider society. Modesty, in this view, is a bastion of social moral integrity on a far wider scale. Modesty, and in particular, veiling, is necessary firstly to keep women safe – meaning physically and morally secure. Secondly it is necessary to keep men morally safe. Thirdly, it is necessary to secure a far more broad-based moral healthiness in society. The proof offered as demonstration that veiling and modesty is necessary is firstly the moral discipline of Muslim society, and secondly the appalling decadence of the wider, Western, secular society in which it is embedded. In Western society, it is said, women walk abroad virtually naked[4] and flagrantly expose themselves at sporting events, and men are inflamed with lust. Rape and unwanted pregnancies abound, marriage is either ignored completely or is regarded as a merely temporary legal arrangement. Children are brought up in a chaotic environment without secure frameworks of relationships, moral standards and authority. The whole of society is hopelessly distracted into a frenzy of self-seeking that is at root lust-driven, and ultimately disastrous. In Muslim society, on the other hand, rape is virtually unknown, and women walk abroad in safety and freedom, and children are reared in an environment of security, trust and moral clarity. Muslims feel threatened by amoral Western culture, and are justified in defending their right to maintain a practice that is unquestionably right, good, and enshrined in the sacred texts of their religion.

This highly contentious Muslim critique of Western society is deeply conservative, authoritarian, and driven by a distinctive fundamentalist reading of the Quran and associated religious texts. Liberal self-defence in the face of conservative fundamentalism is always problematical. All the authority, confidence, moral and theological justification appears to lie in the fundamentalist camp. A liberal defence may be lured into countering fundamentalism with an authoritarianism of its own. The decision of the British government towards the end of the last century to counter terrorism in Northern Ireland with internment without trial was typical of this error. At the time it appeared to many to be the strong option. With hindsight, it descended to fighting terrorism with terrorism, dogmatic authority with dogmatic authority.

Liberalism might better seek to show that what appears to be an open-and-shut case for conservativism is not as open-and-shut as might at first appear, and that there is evidence in favour of an alternative view. In the case in question , one might seek to

show firstly that veiling does not contribute unambiguously to a moral society in which women are safe, and that there is a radically alternative path to moral society and public safety for women.

The argument presented here is of the second form, namely, that there is a radically alternative path to creating a place of public safety for women. Veiling, and especially that form of veiling that is the wearing of the burkah or similar totally body-obscuring garb represents one extreme of the modesty and clothing spectrum. The other is total nakedness. Ruth Barcan's work suggests that it is possible for women to create space in which they can socialise with men and women with a unique sense of identity, safety, freedom and social intimacy. The argument here is: if Barcan's result is true, then the claim that veiling is necessary for the safety and freedom of women is false, and veiling is reduced to nothing more than a life-style choice. Further, it is suggested that if Barcan's result is true, then the balance of Christian criticism would suggest that veiling is a poor life-style choice. For veiling, virtually by definition, is a form of deliberate alienation of one human from another. It is, therefore, a deliberate denial of the possibility of intimacy. As such, veiling appears as a denial of the opportunity to love openly and freely, and a deliberate thwarting of the dynamic of the Holy Spirit of God.

2 Alienation

It is claimed here that alienation is a denial of the dynamic of the Holy Spirit, and that veiling is a specific, physical manifestation of deliberate alienation. Alienation in all its manifestations is recognised as one of the most deep-rooted ailments of Western society. For example, Brian Thorne (2003) writes,

> 'For many of us the desire for intimacy rules our lives while our actual experience of relationships often brings about a profound fear of the very thing that we most desire.'

In consequence,

> 'not only individuals but whole communities founder on the rock of alienation which can so easily turn to despair and destructiveness.'[5]

Advocates of the culture of veiling would agree that it is precisely this desire for intimacy (inappropriately understood and sought) that is both ruling and destroying our lives. It would argue that the cure of the disease is to make intimacy (and physical intimacy in particular) impossible except in extremely well regulated, legitimatised situations. Brian Thorne might well reply that it is precisely that authoritarian logic and the associated denial of freedom that contributes to the despair and destructiveness that the culture of veiling so deplores in Western society.

So pervasive does Thorne believe alienation to be that it is helpful to consider it in relation to the theological concept of original sin. It might be the case, for instance, that the fact that so many people feel driven to veiling is, in fact, a response to the all-pervading presence of original sin (an argument which would find favour with conservative Christians and Muslims alike.) It is argued here that this is indeed the case. Alistair McFadyen's remarks are helpful here. The essential characteristics of original sin, he supposes, are that it is contingent (unnecessary), radical (radically damaging), communicable (infectious) and universal.[6]

Alienation is contingent in a theological sense. New Testament faith insists that our alienation from ourselves and others – our failure to hold ourselves and others in high and appropriate esteem and in appropriate intimacy – is unnecessary and could (and should) be otherwise. It is all part of our estrangement from God. The cure for it lies in our embracing the salvation that is in Christ. There is empirical evidence for the contingency of alienation. Thorne's army of fellow-therapists affirm that it is unnecessary and could be otherwise.

Alienation is radical. That alienation strikes deeply damaging blows at the roots of our lives individually and collectively is precisely Thorne's primary point. The evidence for it is the testimony brought by clients to his consulting room. It is also the never-ending violence reported on news channels.

Alienation is universal in a theological sense. Within the Christian inheritance, the Methodist tradition has insisted the most strongly that all need to be saved, and that all

can be saved. That all humankind needs to be reconciled to God is a theological conviction. That they need to be reconciled to each other is an empirical observation upon the state of the world.

McFadyen chooses to consider the pathologies of Holocaust and Child Abuse in order to explore the radical and communicable natures of original sin in empirical terms. One of his most significant results is that once we are caught up in the web of holocaust or child abuse, our normal faculties of right judgment become modified. In order to explore this, McFadyen cites the feminist Mary Daly as he proposes an appropriate vocabulary of sin as 'hiding', 'refusing,' abdicating,' 'participating,', 'acquiescing,' and 'consenting.' 'Sloth' is the controlling characteristic of sin and is described as 'self-loss.'[7] Sin defined as 'that which constricts and distorts from the possibilities of life in its proper and full abundance.'[8] McFadyen believes that holocaust and child abuse are made possible by a hideously seductive mechanism of acquiescing and consenting on the part of victim, perpetrator and society that is achieved through the subtle distorting of our right-judgment. It is, he believes, through just this radical distortion of collective right-judgment that original sin is rendered communicable. It follows that the more widely the practice is enacted throughout the abusing community, the more entrenched as pseudo-right-judgment it will become.

According to McFadyen, one of the most disturbing features of holocaust and child abuse is that not only do they provide instances of appalling atrocity, but they also invade the mundane in insidious and disturbing ways. The same might be said of issues of modesty. Like holocaust and child abuse, practical examples of abuse through imposed modesty range from the seemingly mundane and trivial (yet none the less life-colouring) to the horrific. Liberal children and parents bicker guiltily and manipulatively over what might be appropriate garb for parties and later, as adults, those same children work with therapists to restore their true sense of their body. Elsewhere, women are criminalised for wearing the wrong kind of socks in public[9], and publicly beaten and killed for their failure to veil appropriately.[10] McFadyen believes that in holocaust and child abuse victim, perpetrator and collaborator all find themselves sucked into the same dynamic in which their sense of justice is fatally distorted. The same is arguably true in instances of alleged immodesty. Only in a

society where right-judgment regarding justice is suspended could the wearing of the wrong kind of socks below a burkah be regarded as sufficient grounds for imprisonment. Daly, for example, is appalled at how women who are themselves victims of fundamentalist oppression seek refuge through collaborating in the very system that oppresses them.[11] In McFadyen's terminology, these women have been infected by a vicious contageous disease. McFadyen warns that if it is true that there is a fatal distortion in extreme cases, then it is probable that there is an equal (though far less obvious) distortion of justice in such seemingly trivial cases such as the outraged young party-goer. If this is the case, then the degree of pain, distress and diminishing of life reported to therapists such as Brian Thorne becomes more explicable. We conclude that alienation in the form of imposed modesty (ie. veiling) looks very like a category of original sin.

3 Body Theology & Testimony

Theological appraisals of the significance of the human body remained virtually unchanged for the first two millennia of the Christian era. Body Theology would seem to be an invention of the late 20th century. It arose as a theological response to three new major areas of secular social discourse: feminism, homosexuality and AIDS. One might possibly point to Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949) as the start of the movement that led to its emergence. It was de Beauvoir, deeply influenced by Sartre who first identified woman as 'Other,' [12] a theme that has pervaded feminist discourse (and European feminist discourse in particular) ever since. Alienation has been part of the vocabulary of Body Theology from the start.

Arleen Dallery identifies three major themes in feminist writing: (i) a celebration of women as sexual subjects as opposed to objects of male desire, (ii) the otherness of woman's body and (iii) the revelation of suppressed female identities.[13] The themes of celebration of lustfulness, suppression and otherness also find expression in lesbian/gay discourse. Homosexuals, like feminists, understand well what it is to have identity denied, and to have society seeking with some violence to replace one's self-knowledge with an alien understanding of its own making. They know well the sense of otherness, estrangement and alienation from mainstream discourse. From the start,

feminists and gays spoke from their positions of perceived oppression and exclusion, and in their struggle for self-expression they achieved a clarity of perception that illumines what is loosely described as 'body theology.' As Martin Smith explains with regard to the homosexual community,

> 'The experience of being different, and of having to conceal that difference from almost everyone on pain of intolerable sanctions, has tended to make gay and lesbian people especially sensitive to the mystery of identity, the inevitability of masks, the oppressive nature of conventions and stereotypes.'[14]

After feminism and homosexuality, the third new area of theological discourse central to the development of body theology is AIDS, which moves to centre stage a theme that also runs throughout feminist and lesbian/gay theological discourse, namely, sin. As James Nelson observes, the challenge of AIDS brings us face to face with some of the most deep-seated fears and prejudices in Western culture, death and sex.[15] It is, as yet, a condition that at best can barely be contained and for which avoidance is the only 'cure.' It destroys both body and mind. It threatens homosexual and heterosexual alike. Transmitted through sexual intercourse and the exchange of body fluids, it is virtually the embodiment of the Augustinian formulation of the doctrine of original sin.

James Nelson's hugely influential *Body Theology* appeared in 1992, offering a shrewd account of what, as a genre, body theology might be. He offers this definition: 'It [body theology] is nothing more, nothing less than our attempts to reflect on body experiences as revelatory of God.'[16] Rather old-fashionedly, he begins with a theological paradigm. His choice is highly significant.

> 'The Wesleyan heritage argues that there are four interweaving sources of revelation and truth for the Christian: scripture, tradition, reason and experience. [...] If we take that "quadrilateral," or fourfold, formula seriously (which even a non-Methodist is entitled to do), we are reminded that reason and experience are vitally important as well as scripture and tradition.'[17]

Nelson draws attention to the significance of the fact that there lies within the Christian tradition a major, long-established tradition (viz. Wesleyanism) that has always taken experience to be a central element of Christian revelation. Thus there is a legitimate voice that claims that the Christian has a duty to listen without prejudice

simply to what, for example, lesbian/gays and women are *saying* about their experience of what it is to be lesbian/gay or a woman. And having listened, the Christian duty is then to weigh and consider, with a view to stretching the tradition's understanding of itself in order to understand what it is now hearing as 'revelatory of God.'

How to weigh and consider? Nelson offers a second paradigm:

> 'I believe that the standard is love, multidimensional in its reality, with *epithymia* (sexual desire), *eros* (hunger for fulfillment), *philia* (friendship), and *agape* (self-giving) its necessary aspects. No one of those dimensions can be slighted.'[18]

Of the paradigm of love, Nelson says 'Of particular importance in our time is the reclaiming of the much-neglected, much-feared *erotic* dimension of love.'[19] Indeed, he is uncompromising in his evaluation of the erotic in human living.

> 'We need to recapture a vision of the divine eros as intrinsic to God's energy, God's own passion for connection, and hence also our own yearning for life-giving communion and our hunger for relationships of justice which make such fulfillment *(sic)* possible. [....] The erotic dynamic is still the sacred basis of our ability to participate in mutually empowering relationship – and to know and love God and ourselves.'[20]

There is expressed here a theme that Nelson shares with Daly, namely the sheer, exuberant, lustful yearning to be free to be exactly what you believe yourself to be. Nelson links to a further element of his Wesleyanism, namely the harnessing of the Holy Spirit as God's 'sacred energy.' Charles Wesley's hymn expresses it thus: 'Spirit of holiness/ Let all thy saints adore/ Thy sacred energy, and bless/ Thy heart-renewing power. Not angel tongues can tell/Thy love's ecstatic height....'[21]

Nelson's prolegomena is essential because it picks up the essential plea, 'But just listen to what it is like to be us!' Receptiveness to the urgent possibility of new grounds for Christ-like compassion is part of Wesleyanism's gift to the wider church and the world. Maybe it is of some significance that the very last surviving letter of John Wesley is a note to William Wilberforce urging him to persevere for the

emancipation of yet another alienated, theologically disenfranchised group – the African slaves of Britain and North America.[22]

Nelson, then, proposes that theology should be done by paying reasoned and loving attention to people's passionate accounts of their own experiences. In particular, he urges that full weight be given to their experience of the workings of all four of the dimensions of love in their lives, not least that of sheer lust for living.

4 Bodies ARE bodies.

Nelson leads us to another important phenomenon of late-20th century discourse about the self – namely that it is precisely discourse. Charles Taylor (1989) in his *Sources of the Self*[23] (1989) traces the historical path to modern self-understanding. He describes the contemporary human predicament as 'the way we are set in nature and among others, as a locus of moral sources.'[24] We are not just one thing. We are necessarily multi-facetted, and we live our lives by moving between the various components of what we are. We do this by means of discourse. Christian theology, Taylor believes, can no longer provide us with a meta-narrative by which we bind the other accounts into a coherent whole. Christianity is but one narrative among the many, and it is not even coherent and unfractured within itself. Nelson, on the other hand, seems to suggest that a significant element within the Christian theological tradition is the attempt to embrace *all* the discourses people use about themselves, and *all* the realities represented by those discourses, and hold them in a meta-narrative of love. Surprisingly, this is not necessarily to set Nelson against Taylor. The sheer destructive power of post-modern fragmentation alarms Taylor deeply. He sees Neitzsche as the true prophet of our age, but it gives him no pleasure. He characterises the destructiveness of differing cultures and discourses seeking to enforce their hyper-goods as 'mutilation[25].' He looks for an escape route from the destruction, but he does not find it. Rather, he hopes in Judeo-Christian theism.

He says,

> 'It is a hope that I see implicit in Judeo-Christian theism (however terrible the record of its adherents in history) and in its central promise of a divine affirmation of the human, more total than humans can ever attain unaided.'[26]

Nelson's body theology seeks to find at least part of that 'divine affirmation of the human' in the very fact of our bodiliness and its capacity to be revelatory of God.

It might be thought that bodiliness by its very nature offers the hope of an uncontested narrative. If it does, then work needs to be done to clarify what sort of bodiliness is intended. Isherwood asks a question that would have been laughable until the late 20th century. How many bodies do women have?[27] Mary Douglas supposes that we have two, one physical and one social. Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock (Isherwood reports) 'prefer to think of three,' namely 'the individual, which is the lived experience of the body as self; the social, which is a representational use of the body as a symbol of nature; and the political, which involves the regulation and control of the body.'[28] Whereas Douglas seems to posit one relatively concrete and objectively stable body (the physical) and one fluid body (the social), Scheper-Hughes and Lock retreat further into the language of discourse. The 'physical' body withdraws into 'the lived experience of the body as self,' which in turn is open to infinite adjustments and interpretations, a far cry from the objective reality of Douglas' 'physical body.' The second and third bodies are purely social and political constructs.

To these bodies, Isherwood wishes to add a fourth, 'the divine body.'[29] She does not intend any metaphysical reality in the classical sense, but rather 'the transgressive signifier of radical equality.' This body, 'not chained by [the world's] narrow [patriarchal] definitions and hierarchical power systems' is 'the grounded, acting, stubborn objection to life as it is.'[30] She understands this body as occupying its own space, on its own terms. Much of the oppression she perceives suffered by women is because they have no space to command, and, it would seem, no alternative place to retreat to. Mary Daly, in her *Quintessence*[31] and its Utopian society that is composed exclusively of women, offers a fictional - but deeply seriously intended - attempt to solve this problem in crudely physical terms. She imagines a society of women from which men are completely banished, and where reproduction is by parthenogenesis. Only in such an environment, she claims, can women be truly free.

Isherwood believes that the type of political analysis offered by Foucault and his disciples has revealed that the struggle for space is far more hard than was envisaged

in the early Feminist discourses rooted in Liberation Theology and the categories of 'oppressor' and 'oppressed,' - an analysis to which Daly clung to the end. (Daly regarded the second-wave feminist embrace of post-modernism, and Foucault in particular, as a total disaster. She saw it as women deliberately opening the door to re-invasion by men and their patriarchal methodologies.[32]) Isherwood's 'divine body' occupies a space in which a new radical equality can be articulated and lived out. Here, she claims, women may 'engage in an obstinate way with the patriarchal world and declare another set of values.'[33] If language of transcendence is to used, then it is to be employed not as language about transcending finitude, but of transcending the boundaries of conventional [patriarchal and oppressive] social and political discourse. 'There is,' she says, 'a sense in which we may assert that the grounded reality of our lives also gives us a transcendent quality, it is the radical nature of our incarnation that moves us into that place that may be called transcendent. [...] The divine body is a symbol of co-creation and co-redemption, it is through us, with us, in us by the power of our divine humanity that we change the world.'[34] Here, then, is a most illuminating paradox that Nelson would recognise and applaud: transcending reconciliation for women and men may lie in the proper honouring of 'grounded reality,' that is, sheer physical bodiliness.

Isherwood's paradox seeks to turn a most peculiar phenomenon common to almost all feminist theology to spectacular advantage. For all the recent insistence in feminist writing that bodiliness is about sociology, politics and therefore discourse, the fact remains that bodiliness is about sexuality and the inescapable physicality of sexuality. Women 'are' their bodies, as Moltmann-Wendel says[35]. To deny bodiliness is to deny woman-ness. Equally, to deny bodiliness is to deny man-ness.

The modern identity of self and body is not unique to feminism, or to women. James Nelson declares 'We do not just *have* bodies, we *are* bodies'[36] and Rowan Williams ponders the dangerous consequences of supposing that 'my body isn't me.'[37] Nevertheless, feminist theology as a whole has made far more of the fact that we are our bodies than have most.

In the ordinary business of living, it takes considerable mental effort to deny the physical commonality of bodiliness. Indeed, the effort is so great that it is in itself

grounds for supposing the exercise futile. One can concede cheerily to the likes of Thomas Nagal[38] that a God's-Eye view does not exist, and that the world of entities held in common that science objectively surveys is a world inhabited by precisely no-one. One can agree with the early Wittgenstein when he declares bluntly in the *Tractatus* 'I am my world,'[39] yet the fundamental conviction that we occupy common space is so fundamental to all human intercourse that it is difficult to see how it could ever be abandoned. It is in part this uncomfortable difficulty that drives Mary Daly to her utopian vision: one cannot negotiate or philosophise away the commonality of our physicality. Either we share it, agree to divide it, or fight over it.

5 Modesty and veiling

One common charge from Western liberals in the face of Muslim veiling is that the veil (whether it be merely a headscarf or an all-over covering like the burkah) is an unacceptable sign of the subjection of women to the rule of men. Sherif Abdel Azim counters that though this is not true of Muslim veil-wearing, it *is* true of Christian veil-wearing. A straight-forward reading of St Paul, he claims, would suggest that Christian head covering for women is indeed a sign of male domination. St Paul, it would seem, argues that men should not wear veils because they are in the image of God, but women should because they are in the image of man. Indeed, woman was created for the sake of man[40]. Azim follows this with citations from Tertullion's *On the Veiling of Virgins*[41].

Tertullian writes his 2nd century Christian diatribe out of the emerging tradition of Graeco/Christian aestheticism known broadly as Virginity Cult. According to this, every evidence of sensuality is regarded as repugnant, sinful and capable of turning the soul away from God and holiness. However, Tertullian was taught his solution, namely veiling, not by Christian theology or Greek philosophy, but by the example of the pre-Muslim Arab tribes who to his knowledge practised veiling. He explicitly charges Christian women to be more modest than their Arab (pre-Muslim) neighbours.

Tertullian's frankness regarding the Arab women is a timely example of what McFadyen calls 'post-it theology.'[42] Far too often we claim theological authority for a

favourable secular prejudice by the simple expedient of sticking a theological label on it while in itself it is of no theological consequence at all.

By contrast, Azim quotes the Quran,

> 'O Prophet, tell your wives and daughters and the believing women that they should cast their outer garments over their bodies (when abroad) so that they should be known and not molested,' [43]

Azim concludes that in Islam, 'Modesty is prescribed to protect women from molestation or simply, modesty is protection. Thus, the only purpose of the veil in Islam is protection.'[44]

Azim's case based on St Paul and Tertullian is broadly correct in that there is indeed a virulently subjectionist strand within the Christian tradition that survives to this day, and which finds its justification in passages such as I Cor 11. (Tertullian is long forgotten.) Equally forgotten, or wilfully ignored, is that Paul is not writing about veiling in general at all, but is only concerned in this passage with how a *married* woman should present herself when prophesying before the congregation. As Hooker points out, in St Paul's eyes, she should cover her hair in order to make it clear that she is speaking with the authority of God, rather than the authority of her husband.[45] Hooker also observes that St Paul's is a post-it argument. 'Though based on theological premises,' she says, it is not really theological at all, but a practical expedient in the light of the cultural mores of his day. The same is equally true of those who hold subjectionist positions in the 21st century. What is interesting, common to both the Christian and the Muslim tradition, and by no means self-evident, is the proposition that protection, veiling, modesty and the moral welfare of the wider community necessarily go hand in hand. Here, we explore testimony regarding nakedness in order to examine that claim.

6 Ruth Barcan and nakedness

By far the most complete modern discussion of nakedness is Ruth Barcan's. Her *Nudity – A Cultural Anatomy*[46] appeared in 2004 as the first major book about

nakedness since Magnus Clarke's *Nudism in Australia*[47] some twenty years earlier. Barcan's book is a study of the social meaning of nakedness. Her primary task is to identify values and meanings underlying cultural attitudes to nakedness and to place those values in a wider cultural understanding. For the present argument, however, the results of Barcan's field work which she presents in her article '*The Moral Bath of Bodily Unconsciousness: Female Nudism, Bodily Exposure and the Gaze'* (2001) are even more important. If Hooker is correct, St Paul in I Cor 11 is preoccupied with bodily exposure and gaze. So too is Tertullian. So too is Azim. So too are modern subjectionist Christians. And so too is just about everyone else. The issues are: what is going on when women present their bodies in the public sphere, especially in the company of men; can they in any way control what is going on; and what theological evaluation can we make of what is going on?

Barcan's book is defined by her declaration, 'The naked body is a site of *ambivalence.'* [48] She finds ambivalences in the distinctions between nakedness and nudity, in our delight in nakedness yet our deploring of it, in the simplicity of 'no clothes' yet the almost impenetrable mystery of the meanings of nakedness, and in the sexuality and yet the asexuality of nakedness. She analyses the ability of 'naked' to take meanings as diverse as 'pathetic,' 'pure,' 'wicked,' and 'honest.' Nakedness, she claims, is lack of clothing, and yet nakedness *is* clothing, and can never be anything else. Nakedness is a symbol of power, yet of vulnerability; a symbol of plenitude yet of total lack; of sinfulness and yet of innocence and purity.

Barcan is heavily influenced by two books (and, indirectly, by a third.) The first is Mario Perniola's (1989) essay, "*Between Clothing and Nudity.*"'[49] The second book is John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972). The third is Kenneth Clark's *The Nude, A Study of Ideal Art* (1956).

7 Berger

Berger's thesis is that there is a simple distinction to be made between a mainstream European nude portrait and an image of a naked person. He says, 'To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not be recognised for

oneself. Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display.'[50] A nude, therefore, is a *construction*, fashioned primarily by the (male) artist, but also by the (male) viewer, and by the sitter (female.) Berger's theory is that, historically, in European society a woman is always the person she is constructed to be in the gaze of a male-dominated society. Therefore a woman learns, from very early on, to be pre-occupied with two elements of her life: who she is as she *surveys the world*, and who she is as the world *surveys her*. Nowhere is this displayed more blatantly than in the painting of nudes. It is the artist who largely contrives this where paintings are concerned. In normal life, women contrive it for themselves – they become their own artist. 'To be naked,' says Berger, 'is to be without disguise.'[51] On the other hand, to be nude, is 'to have the surface of one's own skin, the hairs of one's own body, turned into a disguise which, in that situation, can never be discarded.'[52] According to Berger, whether with clothes or without, women of Western Society *always* present themselves as nudes, in the sense that they are always conscious that the task imposed upon them by society is to present themselves as an object designed with the male gaze in mind.

There is appeal to a very peculiar (if not pernicious) ontology here. According to Berger's account, 'Nudity is a form of dress,'[53] and the nude is condemned to never being naked. To be nude is to be constructed, by yourself or by others. To be naked 'is to be oneself.'[54] A women, Berger claims, can only be naked 'to herself.' A woman is therefore two parallel existences, a nude to the world and a naked person to herself. She has no mechanism for presenting anything of what she is in her naked self to the world, because the moment she presents an element of herself to the world, she is nudified.

Is this ontology possible? It is clear that her nude presentation is real, for it exists in the realm of shared humanity, and common experience and discourse. It is not at all clear that her naked self has any intelligible sense of reality attached to it. It is no more than Descartes' mysterious 'I,' a ghost known only to itself. Fergus Kerr in his *Theology after Wittgenstein* effectively demolishes the Cartesian ghost. His immensely important point is that when people say 'You do not know the real me,' they are mistaken. People do indeed know the real 'me,' for it is the very person they deal with every day. What people do *not* know is the constructed, contorted image of 'me' that people torture themselves with because they have persuaded themselves that

the person they see in their introspection is the true self to which they alone have privileged access. However, like an image in a fairground distorting mirror, it merely bears some relation to the truth, and is a poor guide to the truth. Berger's description of what it is to be a woman is a modern reconstruction of the Cartesian myth.

Berger says nothing of the male nude. He is interested in why things are as they are in Western paintings. He concludes that, '*Men act* and *women appear*.'[55] Images of men, he claims, show them acting out what they believe themselves truly to be, in marked contrast to the images of women, which show them as men wish them to be. He believes the same is true in life. Men are free to act out who they believe themselves to be. They are naked before the world. Men's nakedness is their power, and men deal in power. Women's hidden-ness is their powerlessness, and women, he says, deal in powerlessness. These results are highly congenial to anyone who wishes to veil women.

8 Christian theology and banality

Berger speaks of the banality of that social nakedness which is a preliminary to heterosexual lovemaking. Berger believes that there is something essential about this banality, a conclusion which Christian theology should find disturbing.

> 'At the moment of nakedness first perceived, an element of banality enters: an element that exists only because we need it. Up to that instant the other was more or less mysterious. ... Our relief is the relief of finding an unquestionable reality to whose direct demands our earlier highly complex awareness must now yield.'[56]

In this encounter, according to Berger, the man is who he is in his nakedness. The woman, on the other hand, is not at all who she is, for she can only be that to herself. Rather, she is yet another objectification, another nude, albeit a profoundly unsatisfactory, crude and banal one. Even in this most intimate of encounters, Berger's woman may not be who she is.

Berger says, ‘We need the banality which we find in the first instant of disclosure because it grounds us in reality.’[57] So it is the reality of our bodiliness, that is, of our materiality, that is banal. Sexual encounters aside, Berger believes that our bodies are made acceptable by the alienating aesthetic sophistication of dress (which is a form of veiling) on the one hand, and the nudity of high art on the other. If this be true, then veiling becomes not only desirable, but virtually inevitable. But is it true that our bodies are, in themselves, banal?

Christianity holds that when God created the heavens and the earth, God endowed the divine creation with finite intelligibility[58] and value[59] commensurate with divine intelligibility and value. The Catholic tradition understands that we must discern the rationality of the things of God in the things of creation through our own rational, faithful enquiry. The Protestant tradition asserts that due to the ravages of sin we are incapable of correctly reading the ways of God from the works of creation. Accordingly, we must read them through the eyes of faith and revelation. Both traditions take it as given that, regardless of whether or how we are able to discern it, the reality that is the world as it presents itself to us is shot through with divine meaning. Our bodies are part of that world. Under such an understanding, it is impossible to dismiss the human body as ‘banal.’

It must be conceded, however, that it is possible to incorporate Berger’s view into a Christian theology of sorts. An extreme Augustinian understanding of original sin under-girded by a dualism that claims an absolute distinction between ‘the body’ and ‘the spirit’ can relegate the fundamental goodness of creation declared in Genesis to a pre-lapsian remark, rendered void in the first place by the sin of Adam and subsequently lost to humankind. Such theology (which is equally possible in traditions other than Christianity), rooted in a philosophical dualism that is generally regarded today as simply a mistake, leads to precisely the kind of oppression that this paper deplores.

9 Perniola

For her second major source, Barcan selects Mario Perniola’s essay *Between Clothing and Nudity*. In his erotic of dressing, Perniola suggests that encounter with reality is

generated both by stripping clothing away to display the glorious reality of nudity and by taking the empty shell of reality which is the naked body and so clothing it that the truth about it is revealed.

Barcan is particularly interested in Perniola's understanding of the Hebrew and Greek sources of the Western Christian tradition. Hebrew thinking, he claims, is always in terms of clothes, that is, of the hiddenness of true glory, which is epitomised in the hiddenness of the glory of God. Greek thought, on the other hand, is expressed in terms of nakedness. He says of the Greeks,

> 'nudity assumed a paradigmatic significance [such that..] its glorious celebration [became...] an end to be most energetically pursued.'[60]

He regards neither conception of the human figure to be essentially erotic. His interest is that Christianity found itself moving ceaselessly from one to the other, from clothedness to nakedness and back, and *that,* Perniola says, is highly erotic. Here, then, is a possible source of the eroticism that Nelson seeks to rediscover in Christian body theology. According to Perniola, Western eroticism is hard-wired into the Christian response to our being clothed, naked people. Here too, Barcan thinks she has found the cause of Western nakedness being, as she puts it, 'ambiguous and multivalent both as metaphor and physical state.'[61] Never mind that Perniola is at best half right on both counts.

Peter Brown showed long ago[62] that nudity and prudery exist side by side in our the Graeco/Roman inheritance. Michael Satlow meticulously exposes the complexities of the Jewish heritage[63]. A glimpse may be gained from St John's post-resurrection fishing story[64]. The disciples had fished all night, naked in the boat, as was commonplace. When Peter recognised Jesus on the shore, he put on his cloak, and leapt into the water to go to greet Jesus when common sense might suggest it better not to dress until ashore. It was acceptable to be naked with your friends, but it was presumptuous (an offence against modesty) to be genitally naked in the presence of God. Despite Perniola's sloppiness, the result Barcan needs may be allowed to stand: Western ambiguity regarding nakedness has its roots in Christianity's Judaic and Greek sources.

The theology of veiling exploits all that is negative about our experience of the body in our inheritance. In her *'The Moral Bath of Bodily Unconsciousness': female nudism, bodily exposure and the gaze,*[65] Barcan explores what it might be that women find positive about the body in social nakedness. Her enquiry has its roots in testimony. Her exhaustive interviews reveal that these women testify to a freedom and security in their naked socialising that not only gives them pleasure at the time, but that also enhances the major part of their lives in clothed society. Barcan's question is not 'Can this be right?' Testimony insists that it is indeed right. Barcan's question is, 'How can this be understood?'

She quotes the hugely influential Luce Irigaray to the effect that for women to be women, clothing is essential: Irigaray says,

> 'Woman must be nude because she is not situated, does not situate herself in her place. .... She cannot make use of the envelope that she is, and must create artificial ones.'[66]

Irigaray[67] regards a person (a woman especially) as a series of concentric envelopes or shells. Life is portrayed as a kind of mask-ball. When we encounter a masked person (or indeed, a merely clothed one) we cannot but act out before them the role conjured for us by their mask. The personality behind the mask is of little account. We all, of necessity wear masks, and by the wearing of them we act out many roles within the one space-time framework that we share with everyone else and all their masks. This is, in effect, the argument adopted by Kenneth Clark[68] in his *The Nude: a Study of Ideal Art* (1956). It isn't (in his account) that the naked woman (ie the real woman) isn't there. It is just that she is of no interest or significance whatsoever. In order to engage with the world, she has to be rendered nude (or, alternatively, clothed or masked in some other way.) Irigaray's post-modern development of this is that we quite simply *are* masks (much as others might say that the world simply *is* discourse.) To suppose that there is a woman behind the mask capable of existing in the world without a mask is a delusion because, in her words, 'she *cannot* make use of the envelope that she is, and *must* create artificial ones.'[69] Each mask (or envelope) defines its own space. There is no 'real self' behind the envelope and no real space for

that real self to occupy. Therefore we do not choose to wear an envelope – life is the very business of being enveloped.

Barcan has collected an impressive number of testimonies of women who socialise naked in mixed company. If Irigaray is correct, women who purport to experience freedom on a naturist beach by deliberately throwing away their 'envelope' are deluded. Their testimony must be untrue. This cannot be freedom. It must be abject surrender. Of necessity, these naked women discard the envelope of their choosing only to have another forced upon them by the objectifying and imprisoning gaze. Against Irigaray, Nelson's appeal to the central importance of testimony is crucial. What these women say of their experience is not to be discarded on the grounds of theoretical inconvenience.

Barcan finds herself obliged to propose that Irigaray is mistaken. Her interviews force her to the view that when these women declare that they feel more free to be themselves, and experience the exact opposite of insecurity in their naked socialising, they must be correct. That established theory has no way of accounting for it is another matter. Barcan concludes that when women choose to socialise naked, they are opting to be without any of their envelopes and yet, at the same time, they are adjusting the moral gaze that is directed towards them. Irigaray suggests that women control the moral gaze by controlling their choice of envelope. Barcan says it can be done by the radical expedient of not having an envelope at all. It follows that when men and women socialise naked together they do so in a space that is quite unlike any other.

Barcan writes,

> 'I am convinced, both from my own experience and from my interviews, that a different kind of space is opened up at such sites, a space involving quite distinctive intercorporeal relations, which help to produce new body images. I think nudists are right when they say that nudism involves a new way of seeing – almost, in a way, a kind of not-seeing.'[70]

These women, Barcan thinks, discover that to some extent at least, in naked socialising the objectifying male gaze does not exist. And to the extent that it does exist, they have a control over it that they do not normally have.

This is an extremely important and surprising result. Barcan further concludes, cautiously, on the basis of testimony, that the space that women create for themselves socialising naked may in some sense carry over into their non-naked socialising. She suggests that the sense of who they are in themselves that they learn when naked can affect the space that they generate when clothed, and that the effect is liberating. She writes,

> '...bodily practices, especially collective, repeated, and ideologically supported bodily practices, can help change body images – sometimes, as in the case of nudists, edging them away a little from constraint and towards something that feels – however provisionally – a little more like freedom.'[71]

Fourth century Christians found the nakedness of the baptismal rite sacramentally liberating. It spoke of moving from a life of bondage to freedom; from death to life; from sin to purity and from unacceptability to acceptability. These are the fundamental themes of the casting off of original sin and finding salvation in Christ. The testimonies of Barcan's interviewees, and her analysis of their significance, are remarkably similar. Like the baptismal candidates of the fourth century, these women find in their nakedness an expression of the freedom, security and acceptability needed to be who they truly are that (to some extent at least) helps them overcome the alienation that besets Western society. In that they find that the benefits of their naked socialising carry over into their clothed lives, there is something recognisably sacramental about their experience. Indeed, the near-ecstatic language in which Barcan records women describing their first encounter with naked socialising suggests that in this initiation something profoundly unhealthy did indeed 'die' within them in order that a new life of freedom might be lived.

10 Conclusion

The ideologically supported bodily practices of veiling proposed by Tertullian, some interpreters of the Quran, Berger and even Irigaray do, indeed, form body image. The

image so formed serves to diminish, imprison and (at the extreme) endanger women. Christianity cannot applaud unnecessary diminishing, imprisoning and harming. These are the mechanisms of alienation. Alienation looks very like original sin.

Some women find in naked socialising an alternative bodily practice that enhances, sets free, and in no way endangers. Their testimonies express this freedom as a freedom from alienation and fear, and a discovery of a new intimacy with those with whom they wish to share their lives. The discovery of freedom, security and intimacy are things Christianity cannot but applaud.

It follows that the argument that veiling and alleged modesty of dress is necessary for the protection of women in particular, and for the moral good of society in general, cannot be true. Rather, the radical alternative of naked socialising would seem, from a Christian point of view, to have rather more in its favour.

[1] Daly, 80
[2] Daly, 68
[3] For example, Tesco filling stations have such notices on their kiosk entrances
[4] 'Community and political leaders are distancing themselves from senior Muslim cleric Sheikh Taj el-Din Al Hilaly's comparison of women who do not cover their bodies to raw meat. Sheikh Al Hilaly is reported as saying that women who do not wear the hijab, or headdress, are like uncovered meat. The sheik reportedly made the comments in a speech in Sydney last month.' http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200610/s1774182.htm dated 26 Oct 2006 and accessed 23 July 2007
[5] Thorne 2003, 7
[6] McFadyen, 16
[7] McFadyen, 151, citing Daly in her *Beyond God the Father*
[8] McFadyen, 162. McFadyen is drawing on Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father* (1993)
[9] Esler, 2003
[10] Daly 1998, 79
[11] Daly 1998, 193
[12] Tong, 201/2
[13] Jagger, 58
[14] Hefling, 72
[15] Nelson, 25
[16] Nelson, 50
[17] Nelson, 20
[18] Nelson, 22
[19] Nelson, 23
[20] Nelson, 23
[21] Hymns and Psalms 4
[22] the Letters of John Wesley, Vol VIII p264
[23] Taylor
[24] Taylor 513
[25] The stark bodiliness of the metaphor is perhaps in itself instructive of his thinking
[26] Taylor, 521
[27] Isherwood, 22
[28] Isherwood, 22
[29] Isherwood, 22
[30] Isherwood, 23
[31] Daly
[32] Daly, 135f
[33] Isherwood, 32
[34] Isherwood, 33
[35] Moltmann-Wendel (1995), title of book
[36] Nelson, 43
[37] Williams, 64
[38] Nagal, *The View from Nowhere*
[39] Wittgenstein 1961, *Tractatus* 5.63
[40] The bible. I Cor 11: 3 - 10
[41] Azim Part 15
[42] McFadyen, 11
[43] Quran 33:59
[44] Azim Part 15
[45] Hooker, 416
[46] Barcan 2004a
[47] Clarke 1982
[48] Barcan 2004a, 3
[49] Barcan 2004a, 7
[50] Berger, 54
[51] Berger, 54
[52] Berger, 54

[53] Berger, 54
[54] Berger, 54
[55] Berger, 47
[56] Berger, 58f
[57] Berger, 59
[58] The Bible, Rom 1:19&20
[59] The Biblem Gen 1: 31
[60] Perniola, 238
[61] Barcan, 7
[62] Brown 1988
[63] Satlow 1997
[64] St John 21: 1 - 8
[65] Barcan 2001
[66] Berger 2001, 312 quoting Irigaray 1993, 11
[67] Berger 2001, 312
[68] Clark 1956 , *The Nude: a Study of Ideal Art*
[69] Berger 2001, 312 quoting Irigaray 1993, 11
[70] Berger 2001, 314
[71] Berger 2001, 315

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