

## 8 Modesty, Bashfulness and Reticence

**Summary** 8.1 The Modest Gaze. – 8.2 Gaze, Seduction and Adultery. – 8.3 A Feminine Virtue? – 8.4 The Nobility of Modesty. – 8.5 A Common Virtue.

The quality of modesty, in Arabic *ḥayā* حياء or *istiḥyā* استحياء, is considered an essential attribute of those who follow Islam, although today its meaning is for the most part confined to women and the decency of women's clothing (and in this latter sense, it is of no small commercial importance to contemporary marketing initiatives that go under the banner of 'modest fashion').

However, unlike most European uses of the word 'modesty', *ḥayā* is less a matter of dissimulation or the concealment of merits as the opposite of vanity and presumption, nor does it link to moderation and measure, which are the etymological prerequisites of 'modesty', deriving from the Latin *modestus*, from *modus*. Instead, it expresses, first and foremost, the discomfort, shyness, embarrassment, awkwardness even, that arise in the face of reprehensible conduct, one's own or that of others, including but not limited to contexts of social interaction or particularly those with gender aspects. The great dictionaries of classical Arabic, such as *The Language of the Arabs* by Ibn Manẓūr or Ibn Fāris' *Analogical Templates of Language*,<sup>1</sup> assimilate *ḥayā* to the broad area of decency or decorum, and also of 'return' or 'repentance' (*tawba*), that is stepping back from error and offence; and make it the opposite of the no less generic shamelessness. Modesty of Islam is then, in short, a wide-ranging modesty, a respect for oneself and others that it would be wrong to reduce to circumstantial behaviour or mere outward appearance.

Against the impoverishment that has depreciated the coin of Islamic modesty in our contemporary times, we should therefore set its semantic range, and then perhaps submit its contents to a possible intercultural consensus.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibn Manẓūr 2010, Ibn Fāris 1399/1979, both root ḥ-y-y. Cf also Lane 1968, same root.

### 8.1 The Modest Gaze

It is true that the Qur'ān, in the sura *al-Nūr* 'The Light', prescribes a discreet and sober appearance to women believers of all ages; and so, in general, it associates the Muslim woman with a certain physical concealment. Elderly women "will not sin if they lay aside their [outer] garments, without showing their adornment, but to refrain from so doing is better for them" (Qur'ān XXIV,60), and as for young women, the same sura contains the passage from which the use of the veil (*khimār* خمار) derives:

And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their private parts, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to cover their bosoms [*juyūb* جيوب] with their veils [*khumur*, pl. of *khimār*]. (XXIV,31)

According to these verses, the honourable behaviour of the Muslim woman rests in the way in which she presents herself to, or rather removes herself from, the possibly prying eyes of the beholder. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the correct feminine attitude also depends, in the first instance even, on the control of her own visual faculty: "Tell the believing women to lower their gaze". That is to say, the good Muslim woman, before safeguarding herself from the gaze of others, must be careful to focus her own gaze only on what it is permissible to see, or, as Qur'ānic commentators of every age and school have stated, only on those parts of the body of others that legal convention has declared permissible. What is at issue, then, is the definition in Islamic Law of the 'zone of propriety', or 'zone of modesty' (in Arabic '*awra* غورة'), both for reasons of public decency and because its display invalidates prayer.

Glosses on the scope of this 'zone of modesty' are to be found in nearly all the Qur'ānic commentators on the above verse from the sura 'The Light'. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, for example, divides '*awra*' into four kinds: that of men towards other men, which goes from just below the navel to just above the knee; that of women towards other women, largely the same as the former; that of women towards men, which makes a distinction between a woman not known or not related to the man, only whose face and arms to the elbow may be seen by him, and the wife or slave where only the genitals are taboo; and finally that of men towards women, where much the same applies. The author then raises numerous exceptions related to medical issues, circumcision, childbirth, possible evidence of adultery, and so on.<sup>2</sup> Among contemporary writers the views of Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī in his well-known *Al-ḥalāl wa-l-ḥarām fī l-Islām* or 'The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam' run along very similar lines.<sup>3</sup>

The obligation to avert one's gaze from others' zones of modesty, like the obligation to strive for the preservation of one's chastity, also binds men, and on the same terms, as we find, again in the sura 'The Light', in the verse immediately preceding the one on female modesty in fact, in the form of a quite similar divine imperative:

<sup>2</sup> Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, commentary on Qur'ān XIV,30-1.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Qaradāwī 1994, 151-60.

Tell the believing men [*al-mu'minūn*] to lower their gaze and guard their private parts; that is purer for them; surely God is Aware of what they do. (Qur'ān XXIV,30)

## 8.2 Gaze, Seduction and Adultery

The verses just quoted affirm the equality of the genders as far as obligations and prohibitions are concerned; and this is something that contemporary authors are also keen to emphasise: like the Egyptian al-Sha'rāwī in *My Considerations on the Noble Qur'ān*, when he observes that men, in the same way as women, are also obliged to lower their gaze because men, like women, are a potential source of seduction (*fitna* فتننة);<sup>4</sup> or like his compatriot Ṭaṇṭāwī in *The Mediator in explaining the Noble Qur'ān*, perhaps in more nuanced tones.<sup>5</sup>

For men as for women, commentators of every epoch discuss the propriety of the gaze, and also its significance; and in formulating their many interpretations they make eyes breaches or openings for traffic in both directions, which on the one hand must be defended because they are open to being penetrated and invaded, and on the other hand must be controlled because they launch outwards what may inappropriately intrude on others.<sup>6</sup>

A historic example is that offered by the Mu'tazilite theologian al-Zamakhsharī in *The Discoverer of Revealed Truths*, more scrupulous than many in illuminating the form and style of the Holy Book. In commenting on the exhortation to modesty in the sura 'The Light', the author notes that in the sequence proposed by the verse, modesty precedes chastity or sexual abstinence – "to lower their gaze and guard their private parts" – and explains that this is because the gaze is wider, embraces many things, and thus has a broader meaning. Of the female gaze in particular, he writes that it is very hard to fight against, because it seeks turpitude and desires adultery.<sup>7</sup>

Another example is provided by the Andalusian jurist al-Qurṭubī in *The Compendium of the Judgements of the Qur'ān*. This author too observes that the precept on gaze precedes the precept on chastity, noting that this precedence appears twice consecutively, once for men and then again for women (cf. Qur'ān XXIV, 30-1), and argues that in the first case this refers the gaze of men and women together, because all occurrences of the plural masculine in the Book (cf. *al-mu'minūn*) are to be understood in that way. Everyone's eyes, therefore, are "the principal gateway to the heart, the most frequented of the paths of the senses that lead to the heart, a path on which many stumble and fall".<sup>8</sup> On this, al-Qurṭubī recalls a Prophetic saying that makes the human gaze a sexual act perpetrated with sight:

<sup>4</sup> Al-Sha'rāwī 1422/2001, commentary on Qur'ān XXIV,30-1.

<sup>5</sup> Ṭaṇṭāwī 1997-98, commentary on Qur'ān XXIV,30-1.

<sup>6</sup> On 'lowering the eyes' and 'guarding one's modesty' cf. also also Magen (2007), on another interesting scholar, Ibn al-Qaṭṭān al-Fāsī (d. 1231) in his *Aḥkām al-naẓar bi-ḥāssat al-baṣar* 'The Rulings of Looking with the Sense of Sight'.

<sup>7</sup> Al-Zamakhsharī 1385/1966, commentary on Qur'ān XXIV,30-1.

<sup>8</sup> Al-Qurṭubī 1413/1993, commentary on Qur'ān XXIV,30-1.

For human beings God has already written down the adultery [*zinā*] that they will commit, and they will certainly commit it, because the eyes are fornicators and their adultery is the gaze.

But for those who lower their gaze, God has sweetness in store in their heart.<sup>9</sup>

As for the feminine gaze, al-Qurṭubī's teaching holds that it is an arrow of Satan full of poison, and it opens the way to the heart just as blindness opens the way to death. Again on the subject of the concupiscence of women's eyes, the author recalls how the Prophet forbade his wives Umm Salama and al-Maymūna to remain in the presence of a blind man, and when the two women objected that he was blind, Muḥammad retorted: "And are you blind? Do you not see?"<sup>10</sup> Words that call to mind the very similar accounts offered by another Andalusian author, also from Cordoba, 'Abd al-Malik Ibn Ḥabīb (d. 238/852), in one of the rare texts devoted to the female side of Muslim married life, *Adab al-nisā'* or 'The Ethics of women':

The Prophet said that desire is divided into ten parts, nine parts for women and one part for men. The Companion 'Amr Ibn al-'Āṣ added that the desire of women far surpasses that of men, as much as an axe stroke surpasses a needle prick; but God Most High, glory be to Him, has veiled them with modesty.<sup>11</sup>

### 8.3 A Feminine Virtue?

We have mentioned that the verses on a demure gaze and chastity in the sura 'The Light' (Qur'ān XXV, 30-1) have been cited, from ancient times down to our own day, as underpinning the Islamic precept of modesty. But the Qur'ān offers other passages on demure behaviour, without, to be sure, adopting the imperative mode, and thus without quite the weight of a divine command. In the sura 'The Stories', for example, there is a passage on the life of Moses, where we find a term akin to *ḥayā'*, that is *istiḥyā'*, which has a similar meaning. Having escaped from the machinations of his idolatrous people and reached the well at Midian, Moses saw that there were a large number of people there drawing water for their flocks, and with them two women standing apart, waiting for the others to leave. Moses helped them and the pair thanked him and went, but then one of them returned (cf. *Exodus* 2,16-20):

Then there came to him one of the two women, walking bashfully. She said: – Verily, my father calls you that he may reward you for having watered our flocks for us. So, when he came to him and narrated the story, he said [...]. (Qur'ān XXVIII,25)

When glossing that woman's modesty or bashfulness (*istiḥyā'*), the commentators go into considerable speculative detail. Al-Ṭabarī, in his *Compendious*

<sup>9</sup> Al-Qurṭubī 1413/1993, commentary on Qur'ān XXIV,30-1.

<sup>10</sup> This is a much-repeated story, recorded in various versions in the main works of the Prophetic Tradition. Al-Qurṭubī 1413/1993, commentary on Qur'ān XXIV,30-1.

<sup>11</sup> Ibn Ḥabīb 1412/1992, 183.

*Discourse*, says that the woman walked about shielding her face with her robe, and that she spoke to Moses from behind the cloth because she was neither bold nor indiscreet.<sup>12</sup> Al-Zamakhsharī, in *The Discoverer of Revealed Truths*, adds that at a certain point while the young woman was conducting Moses to her father's house, a gust of wind lifted her clothing exposing her body, and that Moses then suggested that she walk behind him.<sup>13</sup> Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, in *The Keys to the Unknown*, raises the stakes, from concealment to standing apart, and suggests that the woman used to walk keeping her distance from men.<sup>14</sup> Whatever one may think of these proposals, it is clear that the exegetes are generally content to adopt an exterior reading of modesty, as a dissimulation, as it were, of femininity. And this need not surprise us: the Qur'ān speaks of the quality in question precisely when dealing with a young woman, which shows that in the Prophet's time modesty was felt to be primarily a feminine quality; and this would leave its mark on later thought.

Not that the Qur'ān neglects male modesty. It is mentioned not only in the sura 'The Light', when it deals with the gaze of men in general, but also in the sura *al-Aḥzāb* 'The Combined Forces', when speaking of the Prophet Muḥammad:

You who believe, [...] if you are invited, enter, and, when your meal is ended, then disperse. Linger not for conversation. That would cause annoyance to the Prophet, and he would be embarrassed [*yastahī*] before you; but God is not embarrassed before the truth. (Qur'ān XXXIII,53)

And it is worth noting that when the commentators illustrate the Prophet's modesty or bashfulness by appealing to the Tradition, they liken it, so as to emphasise it better, to that of a girl; and in so doing they curiously make a feminine trait a source of admiration if it appears in a man. Some of them state, for example, that the Prophet was demurer (*ashadd ḥayā'*) than a virgin behind her curtain, and that when he saw something that embarrassed him, the Companions could tell as much from his face.<sup>15</sup>

The traditionist Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī in his *Kitāb al-zuhd* or 'The Book of Renunciation' adds a remarkable story: "The Messenger of God said: - Truly am more bashful before my dead than before the living, for the dead are able to see all that I do".<sup>16</sup> Once again here it is hard to confine 'modesty' or *ḥayā'* to an exterior dimension; it is more a question of a sense of shame for everything that diverges from probity, in action and in intention. A similar breadth of content can be found, for example, in another passage taken from *The Book of Renunciation* by Abū Dāwūd, where the Companion 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib Ibn al-Hārith, when questioned about the state of destitution into which he had allowed his two sons to fall, replied that he was ashamed before God to rely on others than God himself for their subsistence.<sup>17</sup>

Attributions of modesty to males literally abound in the Tradition literature. Such as modesty in dress - a quality Moses possessed, according to another saying of the Prophet:

<sup>12</sup> Al-Ṭabarī 1412/1992, commentary on Qur'ān XXVIII,25.

<sup>13</sup> Al-Zamakhsharī 1385/1966, commentary on Qur'ān XXVIII,25.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, commentary on Qur'ān XXVIII,25.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-adab*, no. 5664.

<sup>16</sup> Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī 1414/1993, 340.

<sup>17</sup> Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī 1414/1993, 339.

Moses was a modest and reserved man, and coy enough not to leave an inch of skin uncovered.

Some of the Jews spoke ill of him: – All this secrecy must surely hide a skin defect, or leprosy, or a hernia, or some injury. But God wanted to clear him of these insinuations.

One day when he was alone, Moses threw his clothes over his mare, washed himself, and when he had finished, he came back to dress himself but the mare had run off with his clothes.

Moses took his staff and ran after the mare, shouting: – Mare! my clothes! my clothes! – until he came upon a group of Jews who saw him naked, and he was the most beautiful thing God had created.<sup>18</sup>

Another of the Prophet's sayings, this time on Adam's bashfulness before God:

Your forefather Adam was of great stature, like a tall palm tree, sixty cubits high; he had much hair, and he hid that which is not lawful to show [*ʿawra*]. He disobeyed God, became aware of his nakedness, and ran away fearfully through the Garden [...]. God called after him: – Do you flee from me, Adam? – No, my Lord – he replied – but I am ashamed before You for what I have done.<sup>19</sup>

Also according to the Tradition, modesty or demureness was a notable trait of the third 'rightly guided' Caliph, 'Uthmān Ibn 'Affān (d. 35/655), a man so reserved that even the angels were modest before him,<sup>20</sup> and also of the fourth Caliph, 'Alī, who was not ashamed to be sweet and submissive with his wife Fāṭima.<sup>21</sup> An exceptional example of how modesty can transcend the genres of the human species is one which brings the divinity into the equation, His way of being and doing being often put before the believer as an unattainable model of creaturely virtues:

The Messenger of God saw a man washing himself in front of everyone. He went up into the pulpit, praised God and glorified Him, and then said: – The Most High and Exalted God is Judicious, and Modest, and Reserved [*ḥalīm ḥayyī* حَلِيمٌ حَيٌّ, *sittīr* سَتِيرٌ], He loves modesty and reticence: therefore, when one of you washes, let him too be reserved.<sup>22</sup>

The recourse to God, and the impulse to imitate Him also *mutatis mutandis* in modesty, demonstrates once again that, in Islamic perception, the whole question of morality goes beyond the example of the Prophet and draws directly on the divine figure Himself.

<sup>18</sup> Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb aḥādīth al-anbiyā'*, *bāb ḥadīth al-Khiṭr ma'a Mūsā*, no. 3175; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, *musnad al-'ashara al-mubashsharīn bi-l-janna*, no. 10451.

<sup>19</sup> In, for example, Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1416/1996, 69-70.

<sup>20</sup> Al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmi'*, *kitāb al-da'wāt*, *abwāb al-manāqib*, no. 3752; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, *faḍā'il al-ṣaḥāba*, no. 364.

<sup>21</sup> Ibn Ḥabīb 1412/1992, 161-2.

<sup>22</sup> Al-Nasā'ī 1420/1999, 54-5.

### 8.4 The Nobility of Modesty

Among the numerous works of Ibn Abī l-Dunyā, his *Makārim al-akhlāq* or ‘The Book of Noble Character’, is perhaps the most famous, and it contains an important section on modesty.<sup>23</sup>

In the many stories given us by the author, modesty appears as an imprecisely circumstantiated quality and one certainly not confined to physical aspects or to the female universe, although the treatise opens with words that do in fact belong to a woman, the wife of the Prophet ‘Ā’isha bint Abī Bakr (d. 58/678): “Modesty is the chief of good qualities”.<sup>24</sup> A little further on in the work we find a saying of Muḥammad, also insisting on the primacy of modesty: “Among what people have learnt from the first prophecy is this: provided it does not bring you shame, do as you wish”.<sup>25</sup> And including modesty in the earliest divine revelation (*al-nubuwwa al-ūlā* النبوة الأولى) – i.e. the primal religion, that of Adam or Abraham – is little short of making it a natural inclination to faith and goodness: “Modesty”, the Prophet said on another occasion, “is the whole of good”.<sup>26</sup>

On modesty as a straightforward equivalent of good, we have a dialogue between the Companion ‘Imrān Ibn Ḥuṣayn and the younger Ibn Ziyād (d. c. 78/697):

‘Imrān Ibn Ḥuṣayn said: – According to the Messenger of God modesty is the whole of good. Ibn Ziyād retorted: – But we read in books that modesty also brings weakness.

The other was furious: – I tell you what the Messenger of God said and you contradict me by speaking of books!<sup>27</sup>

A good example offered by Ibn Abī l-Dunyā on the scope of modesty, both outward and inward, is the following recommendation of the Prophet to his Companions:

Be modest towards God out of the modesty that is due to Him. Protect the head and what it includes, and the belly and what it contains, and be mindful of death and decay. Let those who hope for life in the hereafter abandon the fripperies of this world. Only those who do this can be modest towards God out of the modesty that is due to him.<sup>28</sup>

Several of the stories collected by Ibn Abī l-Dunyā in *The Book of Noble Character* comment on the Qur’ānic passage in the sura ‘The Combined Forces’ – “Linger not for conversation. That would cause annoyance to the Prophet” (Qur’ān XXXIII,53) – where Muḥammad’s reticence with intrusive

<sup>23</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1409/1989, 62-95.

<sup>24</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1409/1989, 62.

<sup>25</sup> In Arabic: [...] *idhā lam tastahī fa-ṣna’ mā shi’ta*; Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1409/1989, 73. Cf. al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, kitāb al-adab, bāb al-ḥayā’*, no. 5682.

<sup>26</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1409/1989, 75. On modesty as an instinct, it is interesting what Ibn Manẓūr (2010) has to say, glossing the root ḥ-y-y: “The Companions of Muḥammad, hearing from him that *ḥayā’* is a branch of faith, asked him how it was possible that modesty, a natural impulse, was part of faith, an acquisition”.

<sup>27</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1409/1989, 77.

<sup>28</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1409/1989, 79-81.



guests is made apparent (and contrasted with God's), modesty here being confined to the verbal sphere. For example: "The Messenger of God has said that modesty and reticence are two aspects of faith, while scurrility and gossip are two aspects of hypocrisy".<sup>29</sup> Or, again on the Prophet's verbal reserve: "The Messenger of God never said to anyone's face what he disliked about them".<sup>30</sup>

A final example of modesty as verbal reserve, and at the same time as a generic abstention from coarse and intemperate speech, is Muḥammad's exhortation to one of his Companions: "God loves the reticent who are full of modesty and the continent who hold back, while He hates the brazen and licentious, and also those who ask and are importunate".<sup>31</sup>

### 8.5 A Common Virtue

Let us sum up on the quality known as *ḥayā'* or *istiḥyā'*: it is undoubtedly referable to women, but not exclusively, given that it can be shared by men, and indeed is appreciated in them. It is a blend of positive attitudes and habits, conforming to or overlapping with a correct orientation of faith; it is shielding oneself from the eyes of others to preserve one's integrity, but before that it is not allowing one's own eyes to rest on others in such a way as to trespass on their personal boundaries; it is modesty in speech: it means keeping silent so as not to offend the sensitivities of others by saying hurtful things to their faces, and also keeping silent out of reserve, protecting one's moral integrity by avoiding profanity and coarseness.

Remarkably, this Islamic idea of modesty or bashfulness, which includes both modesty *of* the gaze and *from* the gaze, and also verbal modesty, is to be found in a rare example of a Christian moral treatise in Arabic, the *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq* or 'The Refinement of Characters' by the Syriac philosopher and theologian Yaḥyā Ibn 'Adī (d. 363/974) – a short text long believed to be the work of a Muslim on account of its lacking specifically Christian references.<sup>32</sup>

In *The Refinement of Characters*, we are told that modesty belongs to the family of composure (*waqār* وقار) and "means lowering one's gaze and speaking little out of embarrassment in the company of someone. And this is praiseworthy behaviour as long as it does not come from ineptitude or incapacity".<sup>33</sup> Despite differences of religious inspiration and methodological assumptions, Yaḥyā Ibn 'Adī's work continually echoes commonplaces on modesty in Islamic literature; as, for instance, where he states that its absence "burns away the veil of decency",<sup>34</sup> and indicates a lack of caution or discretion, as well as covetousness, thirst for possession and greed.<sup>35</sup> No doubt this coincidence of ideas is due in part to the intellectual environment that constituted the backdrop to the work of this Christian author – an open and an ultra-cosmopolitan Baghdad. It serves, nonetheless, to underline the common ground shared by the different cultural traditions.

<sup>29</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1409/1989, 65-6.

<sup>30</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1409/1989, 72-3.

<sup>31</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1409/1989, 76-7.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Ibn 'Adī 1994. Italian translation Ibn 'Adī 2019.

<sup>33</sup> Ibn 'Adī 1994, nos. 254-5.

<sup>34</sup> Ibn 'Adī 1994, no. 352; cf. also nos. 108, 187 and 377.

<sup>35</sup> Ibn 'Adī 1994, nos. 61-8.