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Islamophobia and Americans' Problems with Face Masks

by Liz Bucar
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We could better embrace COVID masks if we took the time to understand people's motivations who cover their faces for religious reasons



Despite evidence that wearing a face mask prevents others and ourselves from contracting COVID-19, many Americans are reluctant to wear one. Experts have posited that anti-masking stems from confusion caused by muddled early public health messaging about their efficacy, denial about the danger of the novel coronavirus, and as a way to assert control during uncertain times. But as someone who has studied negative stereotypes about Muslim women's clothing for 15 years, the reasons I've heard not to wear a mask—it curtails freedom, it shows weakness, it is un-American—are all too familiar. These are the same

judgements levied against Muslim women's head and face coverings, and this similarity is no coincidence. Because the dominant framing of face coverings is that they are foreign, a sign of submission, and an assault to American values, our country is now unable to cover when it is literally an issue of life and death. Islamophobia has long been a danger to Muslim Americans' health, but COVID-19 has made it clear that misperceptions about Muslim practices affect the health of non-Muslims as well.

Since the CDC began recommending the use of face masks, many of the daily reports of non-compliance have shown the connection between the logic of America exceptionalism and refusing to wear a face mask. Take Jennifer Kaye's takeout tirade in North Carolina in July. She refused to wear a mask and was caught on video yelling, "We don't cover our faces in America. They don't control us. We're Americans." Kaye might have had in mind the surgical masks commonly worn in Asia during flu season. Or she might have been thinking about the niqab, a form of face veiling practiced by some Muslim women where the nose and mouth are covered. In either case, Kaye was clear that if we cover our faces, we become the other she so vehemently disparages.



A woman in a niqab

Some mask deniers are explicit with their Islamophobia, using the visual similarity of the niqab and face masks as a reason not to wear the latter. A post to Facebook on July 10 listed confirmed cases of COVID-19 in countries with large Muslim populations alongside a photo of women in niqabs. "Worn face coverings their entire life… and still reported to have COVID-19," the post reads. "Think America Think!" In many of the countries listed (like Turkey and India) few Muslim women wear niqabs and, of course, no men do. Besides, a niqab is not designed to prevent viral transmission. It is not airtight, and Mosques now ask women to wear a mask underneath a niqab. But the association of the post is clear: face masks remind us of Muslim face veils.

I routinely see the negative stereotypes of niqabs applied to COVID masks, including the perception that they are a sign of submission to men. A recent study of 2,459 people living in the U.S. found that men are less likely to wear a face mask than women because they believe it is "a sign of weakness" and "not cool." Just last month Robert O'Neill, the former Navy SEAL who has been credited with shooting Osama bin Laden, tweeted "I'm not a pussy" alongside a photo of him smiling unmasked on a full commercial flight. Yet another sign that toxic masculinity kills.

To be sure, mask refusers are more likely to be politically conservative. And yet even among my circle of liberal friends I have noticed a reluctancy to cover when we are together. Running errands, we all mask up. But when socializing, some discard their masks. Too many of us have internalized the belief that face covering is anti-social and something "we" don't do. Even worst, the difference in our practices of covering in public versus among groups of friends implies we think the risk of contracting COVID-19 is only from strangers, which reinforces the idea that there is an "us" and some dangerous "other."

As someone who writes and teaches about the ethics of clothing, I believe the current public health emergency contains an important learning opportunity. We could more fully understand and embrace COVID masks if we took the time to understand the motivations of people who cover their faces for religious reasons.

For example, Muslim women wear a niqab as a sartorial nod to a vision of the common good. Of course the visions of the common good implied by a niqab and a COVID mask are different. A niqab communicates one's belief in the importance of sexual modesty and gender segregation. A COVID mask communicates the importance of preventing viral transmission through personal responsibility during

a pandemic. In both cases, the way people cover (or don't) helps express what the community believes a good society entails.

COVID masks are a reminder that we are living through strange and difficult times. When everyone wears them they remind us that we are in this together. A COVID mask is a symbol of our shared human experience and one benefit of mask wearing might be a sense of belonging.

Another lesson for wearing COVID masks we can glean from religious covering is that our sartorial choices can morally change us. Muslim women who wear a niqab commonly do so to cultivate a particular virtue—often modesty—and thus to become a certain sort of person. From this perspective, a person's thoughts and values change because of their clothing choices. Covering one's face (or head, or shoulders) out of modesty becomes a daily habit, and this habit can make one into a more modest person who may start to see dressing immodesty as unnatural or wrong.



The question then becomes: how will COVID masks change us? The answer depends on our intentions. If we wear our COVID mask to protect others, it becomes a gesture of care and we will be inclined to use it even in front of friends. It also means that wearing face masks over time will encourage us to cultivate the virtues of compassion and kindness. On the other hand, if we wear masks out of fear and self-preservation, and only when we are required to by others, the practice will make us more anxious, afraid, and angry. The meaning we assign to our masks matters. It will determine who we become.

The perspective of the COVID mask as a source of care for others is the one I am trying to instill in my 12-year old daughter. We wear masks even when others do not, I tell her, not because we are cautious or fearful, and not just to follow the rules. We wear our masks to make visible that our community's health is important to us. What I know from studying the role of clothing and the cultivation of character is that by wearing a mask in this way, she will also become a more caring person.

Anna Piela, a scholar of religion who studies the niqab, shared in a recent article that some of the women she has interviewed think COVID masks are "making public life in the niqab much more pleasant." I hope that is true, but lasting change won't occur without a more sustained effort to combat gendered Islamophobia. We have seen in France, for instance, communities can simultaneously ban niqabs and require COVID masks.

If religious coverings can help us better understand the ethical implications of our COVID masks, the opposite might be true as well. As we become more familiar with covering our faces it may help debunk the myths that facial coverings are a security threat, and instead help us see how items like a niqab are about communicating social values and cultivating personal character. And that could make being Muslim much safer.

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