



## BETWEEN THE PONYTAIL AND THE BURKA By Hajja Rabea Redpath

January 11<sup>th</sup> 2014  
Cape Town

*A'udhu billahi mina sahaytan ar-Rajeem, bismillahi arRahman ar-Raheem.  
La hawla wa la quwwata illa billahi al-Aliyyi al-'Atheem.  
Allahumma salli 'ala sayyidina Muhamadin 'abdika wa rasulika an-Nabi al-Ummi  
wa 'ala aalihi wa sahabihi wa sallam.*

As-Salamu 'alaykum everybody, and welcome.

The purpose of this talk is to look at the needs and requirements of the modern-day Muslim young woman, and how we can help her. It is clear that we are in a rapidly changing age and there is a need to readdress and confront what the young woman needs in this new age we live in.

I have divided my talk into two halves. The first half is to identify and touch on just a few of the many issues that affect the modern Muslim woman, particularly looking at some of the more obscure issues. The second half concerns how we can help her, as well as setting out the context for the Lady Aisha College.

I shall begin by attempting to interpret the title of this talk: 'Between the Ponytail and the Burka'. I think we can acknowledge that we are living in a very male-dominated society. I mean not only in the Muslim world, but in society at large. This may not be apparent since we see women in every realm of life nowadays, but the point is: at what cost to the woman? And indeed, at what cost to the Muslim woman in particular?

Shaykh 'Abdalqadir recently said: "The only space that women are allowed in the social or political arena in this society is disguised as a man." This is not obvious, and it is not so much in their appearance but that they have to leave their femininity behind them; they have to push aside the nature of the feminine psyche. The way the male thinks is different to that of the female. Here I quote: "He thinks in structures, he builds up pictures of things by making them into rigid forms, methodologies and categories."

At this point I must mention that there are, of course, no absolutes. Not all men think entirely in this way and, similarly, throughout this talk I make statements which must not be taken as absolutes but rather reflect a general patterning. So again: "He thinks in structures, he builds up pictures of things by making them into rigid forms, methodologies and categories." This is not the way a woman naturally thinks, but it is a mask she has to adopt if she is to be recognised and accepted in any major role in this society. This is not necessarily easy to recognise since most of us have been educated in a mainstream, western system of

education which in itself is male-oriented – many of us have been trained to think in a ‘male’ way. This is the one extreme.

The other extreme is that we have the woman in the burka, who appears neither to be seen nor heard. As we know, this only confirms the western view that Muslim women are oppressed. The fact is however, that these two aspects are two sides of the same coin: in both cases, the unique voice and contribution that woman can make as ‘woman’ in society is silently prohibited. However, this certainly has not always been the case in the Muslim world, and we have not the time here to cite the many, many stories and examples. But let us take one: we know Sayyidatuna ‘Aisha, radiyallahu ‘anha, and we know of her strength of character and the influence and power she had. Indeed, right until the time of the end the Khalifate in the early twentieth century there are countless stories of women who held influence yet retained a fundamentally feminine character of being.

I shall quote one particular story, which I love, which comes from the time of Sayyiduna ‘Umar al-Khattab, radiyallahu ‘anhu, when he was the Khalif. At that time, the Muslims were far wealthier than in the time of the Rasul, sallallahu ‘alayhi wa sallam. Sayyiduna Umar was commenting on this to a large group of people when he said: “Do not make the dower of women more than forty *awqiya*,” which is a measurement of silver. “If it is more, I will put the extra into the Treasury.” A tall woman with a broad nose stood up. “It is not like that!” she said. “Why?” he asked. “Because Allah says: *‘And if you have given her a large amount do not take any of it’* (Surat an-Nisa, 20).” Sayyiduna ‘Umar said, “The woman is right. ‘Umar is wrong.” This is extraordinary, because we all know that Sayyiduna ‘Umar was ferocious. He was absolutely terrifying. Yet this woman could stand up, say what she said and it was accepted. I do not know where we see this today.

Now we will move on to another matter. I do not think it is particularly related to Cape Town or South Africa at large, but nevertheless I want to mention it because it made such a strong impression on me. When I became Muslim forty four years ago, I became Muslim at the hand of a Moroccan shaykh who was a great ‘alim, but above all he was an illuminated man. And all the women around him were illuminated women. They were people of *love*. This love permeated everything they did, and it was this love that awoke something in me, and it awoke in my heart the desire to take on Islam – a longing and a yearning for knowledge and understanding. Now, when I returned to London and settled there, I began visiting different Muslim communities and I began to see, much to my puzzlement and dismay, that a great proportion of the youth of these communities were not well. In fact, they were unhappy and confused. As I began to look at this I saw a pattern emerge. The young Muslims were being educated either in mainstream schools or in madrassas, but the result was the same. The point is that their parents, though very good Muslims, were fearful for the Islam of their children and so tried to make up for the lack of Islam in the schools and society by trying to mould their children into their concept of ‘the good Muslim’.

This concept came with a lot of admonishment and a great deal of anxiety. Bear in mind that children and indeed all of us learn from absorption and transmission far more than words alone. As the Rasul, sallallah ‘alayhi wa sallam, said: “You become the company you keep.” Our inner reality is made up of how we live our existential life. We cannot separate the two. Yet these young Muslims were absorbing two images: society, with its strong pull, and then the Islam of their parents – yet the Islam they were receiving from their parents came with admonishment and anxiety. When I visited the Madrassa, they were being taught Qur’an and fiqh – and all we know that is correct – but I was left wondering: where was the joy? Where was the love?! Somehow the children were not ‘seen’, and their existential dilemma was not seen. I also saw that the result of this was that at puberty they would either rebel or they would remain the ‘good’ Muslim, but somehow you could feel their parents sitting on their shoulders. They also lacked life-force, they lacked joy and spontaneity and, in the worst-case scenarios, they had broken psyches. It has been said, I quote: ‘Subhanallah! You can make tawbah for broken rules, but you cannot make tawbah for broken psyches.’ So I remember thinking: where is the Deen – that life-transaction which is full of love? Where is

the illuminated transmission of love I had tasted in Morocco where my heart expanded and light entered?

Another aspect I noticed within these communities was that they all stayed and were deeply entrenched in their own cultural heritage. They would not move out of their own bubble of cultural identity. Often they were a little hostile to each other. Also they would sometimes confuse their cultural heritage with Islam. The truth of the matter is that I myself, in my early years as a Muslim, rejected my own culture. I rejected everything I came from: everything that I had grown up with, everything I had known – the good along with the bad – I had rejected as ‘unislamic’. As time went on however, a vacuum entered my heart and I began to feel a little empty. Of course I was wrong about rejecting *everything*. We know that in the time of the Rasul, sallallahu ‘alayhi wa sallam, and the first four Khalifs, that as they conquered different countries and entered different lands, they accepted the good customs of those places and rejected the bad. This is the science of ‘Urf. There is ‘Urf sahih, which are the customs that were approved of and were in harmony with the Shari‘ah and therefore accepted. Then there is ‘Urf fasid, which are the customs that were in conflict with the Shari‘ah and therefore disapproved of and rejected.

One of the very early examples of this is in the time of the Rasul, sallallahu ‘alayhi wa sallam. It was the ‘Eid, and a group of Africans who had recently entered Islam started celebrating and banging on their leather drums and dancing with spears. Sayyiduna ‘Umar leapt up to stop them but the Rasul, sallallahu ‘alayhi wa sallam, pulled him aside and intervened, saying, “Leave them. They are sons of Arfeeda (meaning Ethiopia). Leave them, they are not of us.” This is the occasion where he lifted Sayyidatuna ‘Aisha on his shoulders to watch them. This science of ‘Urf has been studied by the great scholars for centuries. I shall just read two examples of what some of the men of fiqh have said regarding it. A 13<sup>th</sup> century Maliki jurist said: “Persons handing down legal judgments, while adhering blindly to the text in the books without regard for the cultural realities of their people are in gross error.” A 14<sup>th</sup> century Maliki faqih from Granada cautioned that, “juristic incompetence would inspire no difficulty upon a people harsher than to require them to repudiate their local customs.”

I have talked about this at such length because it pertains to our situation here in Cape Town, which is a very interesting one. As you know, we are Muslims from diverse cultural backgrounds and the encouraging and wonderful thing is that the youth are beginning to merge together. This may mean they will form and forge their own particular culture, taking, we hope, the best from each and absorbing and thus fashioning an integrated cultural identity that is both comfortable with itself and can function well in the world without in any way going beyond the hudud of Islam. But in order for this to happen, our youth need guidance. They need open-hearted and open-minded guidance.

This is where I come to the second part of my talk. Now, bearing in mind all that I have said, what I am going to talk about is what, after examination, we think the young people and especially the modern young Muslim woman entering this world today needs, and what is required of her. The first and most obvious requirement is that we want these women to stay strong and grounded in the Deen. But it must come from themselves. As I mentioned, children learn by absorbing from their parents, but when they mature into young women what one wants is to wake up their sense of enquiry, of search: What is Islam? What is existence about? What is the meaning of life? What is it that my parents have been doing all my life? If this sense of enquiry and search is awakened in them, it will bring reflection, and then their understanding and their living of Islam will come from a totally different place. It will come from understanding and love.

As I say, our job is to awaken that. Indeed, it is to awaken, because we know that Allah ta‘ala gathered all the selves together at the beginning of time and said: “*Alastu bi-Rabbikum?* – Am I not your Lord?” (Surat al-A‘raf 172) And all the selves from the beginning of time replied: “Yes.” So that confirmation is in everybody’s being, that answer is in everyone’s cells – but in many it is dormant. What we want is to help awaken it. If this

happens, our youth will have a vital and spontaneous Islam that is full of love without imposing and imprinting our own selves on them. Thus the youth will come with a different colouring of Islam. Every place has its own colouring, and the youth in this age has its own colouring and we have to allow that.

This leads me to the second matter, which is the rediscovery of the *fitri* being. What do we mean by that? In the Qur'an, Allah ta'ala says: "So set your face firmly to the Deen as a pure natural believer – Allah's natural pattern on which He has made mankind." (Surat ar-Rum 30). Here it is clear: the Deen of Islam is the life-transaction natural to humankind. The classic definition of 'fitra' is the natural primal condition of man in harmony with nature. One may also say that fitra is the capacity to live in harmony in the time and the place Allah ta'ala has placed one. This means to be in touch with your true nature, with your own authenticity. What I want to look at today – putting aside for the moment that in the end men and women are the same in that we are born to worship and this is our natural *fitri* being, this is what we are here for – and also putting aside what, I hope, we are all wanting, which is *Wilayat*, which in itself means than man and woman rise above manhood and womanhood; for the moment I want to look at the intrinsic, innermost essence of woman, her basic characteristics which are different from man.

Let us first of all look at the hadith we all know well: Abu Hurayrah said that the Prophet, sallallahu 'alayhi wa sallam, said: "Treat women well. Women are created from the bent rib of Adam. If you try to straighten it, you will break it. So treat her well." This hadith used to make me feel rather appalled. I would think that perhaps this meant that women are in some way crooked and bad, awful, and so on. But if one reflects, what is a bent rib? What is the curvature of the rib? The curvature of the rib is what protects the heart, the lungs, the main arteries and the veins – the very essence of life. And if it were straight perform this function. You could say this is the essence of what woman is. She is a nourisher and a protector. However, if we try to make the woman into the man, she cannot fulfil this attribute.

I will now read out from the book 'The New Wagnerian' in which Shaykh 'Abdalqadir says: "The challenge is not to turn the woman into a man and invite her to become political, but to have the courage to confront what women see in life and men are blind to. This is the issue. It involves both a sense of compassion and also a sense of reality. Man's will to power is fuelled by both inspiration and fantasy. Without permitting the woman's will to power fuelled by realism and compassion, man will destroy himself."

Connected with this point is that the nature of woman is continually in flux. We menstruate, we give birth, our bodies are continuously changing. This is connected with our inner being. Our body and our inner being are not separate. We are cyclic, we are in flux, we are in movement. Furthermore, these qualities are connected to an intrinsic, innate wisdom, an instinctive wisdom. So often we find this instinct injured by spirit-crushing forces. So often you find the woman trying to push her life down into a nice tidy little package. But this woman who tries to make her deeper feelings invisible is only deadening herself, and her light will slowly go out.

Let me quote again from Shaykh Abdalqadir, who talks very beautifully about this matter. He speaks about "the moving consciousness of woman." He says: "She would dwell in growth of her feeling life. This is the non-projective being present in her seeing, touching and hearing centres. Not nerve feelings, but the deep seeing, touching and hearing whose expression is aesthetic, is beauty, both inwardly and outwardly, and compassion. This is the power, light and force of women, without which man cannot reach his higher aspiration. It is that which is short-circuited in the bourgeois family so that all that is left is the woman with nerve-based feelings. The reality of the woman touching the petal of the flower, in seeing the light in the water, in the hearing the song of the bird, is itself transcendent luminous being, and without it man cannot understand life. He will invent the atom bomb and not have any qualms. He will drop it, and no man will say a word. But if he were with that woman, she would say, 'If you make this bomb, what will happen to the child in my womb?' So often nowadays that

compassionate exchange cannot take place because she has locked the door, busy crying, and he is saying ‘What is the matter?’”

The true feeling-life which the Shaykh talks about, comes from a burst of the heart. It comes from the woman when she forgets her ‘self’ and goes out to the other. When she reaches out to touch the flower she is in fact reaching into her inner being. When she makes recall to these life energies of loving and feeling, the woman stops trying to think her way through life, stops trying to mentally work life out. As I have mentioned to many of you so often before, I am so grateful to my father because when I was very young, he used to take me for walks in the country, and at a certain point he would make me stop walking and tell me to be very still. Then he would say, “Now, look and listen. Just look and listen.” This was the beginning of my capacity for reflection, of reaching into my inner being.

Now we will move on to the third aspect of what we want for the young women. This is a rudimentary understanding of the self, of the *nafs*, and how it works. I don’t mean on an academic level like knowing about the stages of the *nafs*: *al-nafs al-ammarah*, *al-lawwamah*, *al-mutmainnah*, and so on, what I mean is a recognition, an understanding of what is going on in her own being without guilt and without judgement. We know that within all human beings there is all that is good and angelic and also all that is bad and terrible. Every single human has this range. We can tend to see ourselves as ‘mountain-form’ – like the mountains, fixed and solid: ‘I am bad’, ‘I am good’ or ‘I am clever’, ‘I am stupid’ – but none of these ways of seeing ourselves is entirely true. For instance, since we have come into this room, how many contradictory thoughts have we had? How many different emotions have we all had? What is solid? What is real? Which one of them is real? So the self is more ‘cloud-form’ than mountain-form. If you look at the cloud in the wind, it moves, it changes form, it merges with other clouds, it separates and finally the sun appears.

Once you understand the self as fluid and ever-changing, you begin to get a sense than you can master yourself. Indeed, the Shaykh once said: “You can make ‘you’ obey you.” It is not the Christian approach of repression or that the ugly things of the self are going to somehow disappear, no. But you can master them. They are not in mastery of you. The best thing for the mastery of the self is dhikrullah. But also a great aid in understanding the complexities of the self - the tricks it gets up to and its consequences - is in fact, a fresh, intelligent study of women as they appear in the great European literature. This is one of the studies that will take place at the College.

Fourth on our list of what we want for our young women, is for them to discover their unique potential, their own capacities and their own individual gifts. Shaykh ‘Abdalqadir once said that, “The affair is realising the summit of what we are capable of. We must complete our destiny.” We know that Allah ta’ala has placed many different gifts in all of us, and invariably there is something in our pre-programmed destiny that is asking to be fulfilled – a kind of calling, if you like. Allah ta’ala says: “Those who spend their wealth in the Way of Allah [...] will have their reward with their Lord.” This does not only mean wealth in the sense of money, it also means to give out from the gifts you have been given. It is imperative for the young people to discover their own potential. There are many who already know what their calling is, but there are many who do not. Even those who do know, they often do not know how to begin or are fearful of failure and of making mistakes. Mistakes are in fact wonderful, because they provide opportunity for growth and learning.

Again, we need to encourage the young women in this and make them see that if you think you can do something you *can* do it, and if you think you cannot, then most likely you will not be able to. We want to help them overcome their perceived limitations and to realise how anything with trust and work is possible. *Anything* is possible. Allah is Vast. Allah is al-Wasi’, al-Lateef, al-Kareem. Everything is possible. Once, when I was about thirteen years old, I had a dream of an angel. I was in a big courtyard with colonnades around it, and with a passage under the colonnades. I was on one side and the angel was opposite me, beautiful and shining. Then, suddenly, he was next to me. I said, “That’s impossible! How did you get

here? I didn't see you walk across here." He said, "No, I did not. I walked around the edges. You just did not see me." He added, "You must remember, nothing is impossible. You just have to work for it."

We wish to help these young women find their potential. If a woman discovers her potential and puts it into practice she has far more chances of being content. If she is content she is far more likely to have a happy marriage, and she will not be clinging to and expecting fulfilment from her husband. This is imperative. Instead, along with her own pursuits, she will be walking beside her husband supporting him and encouraging him to go out to do his work *fisabilillah*. By that I do not simply mean acquiring provision, because provision – *rizq* – is from Allah *ta'ala*, but going out calling people to the Deen and suchlike. The Rasul, *sallallahu 'alayhi wa sallam*, said in his last *khutba*: "Treat women well, for they are your partners and committed helpers. So treat them well." I always felt these words: 'partners' and 'committed helpers' imply this collaboration, this cooperation between the husband and wife, that you are essentially a team working *fisabilillah*. This is really the heart of what marriage should be.

We come to the last aspect, briefly, which is that education for the young woman must be such that she is not fearful of, or in awe of, any strata of society. It is that she can move with confidence both within her own community and also in the outer society. In order for this to happen, she must have a deep understanding of the predominant western culture: to understand it and know what it is about. A helpful way to achieve this is the fresh and intelligent study of certain formative aspects of European history.

Imbued within all we have mentioned is the essential matter of *adab* – courtesy – and love. A great wali of Allah once said to me: "There must be *adab*. There must be *adab* to Allah, to creation and to one's self." He said, "You must have it with each other. If you do not have it with each other, you have no *'ibada*. Your *'ibada* falls off you. And love." He also said, "Everything comes from love. Everything happens from love. The children grow through love and the plants grow through love. All opening happens through love. And everything that comes from love is easy. You must love each other, and treat each other as *walis* of Allah, as *awliya*." This we pray and hope for the young women and we pray and hope that we may be examples for them in all of this.

To conclude I would like to say that I have lived here for nine years since coming from Scotland, and in those years I have travelled frequently in Muslim countries, and to me there is nowhere better than Cape Town to be Muslim, and there is nowhere better for this project of The Lady Aisha College. There are many factors: as we have mentioned there is the wonderful natural cultural diversity of the Muslims here, and the warmth that I have encountered amongst the Muslims here, their openness and their generosity, is quite overwhelming. There is obviously the natural beauty of the place, and being surrounded and protected by the *karamats* of the *awliya* makes it is a truly blessed place to be. I feel deeply grateful to be here, and indeed deeply grateful to be amongst you all and honoured to be amongst you all.

Thank you.