

Modesty (part 1 of 3): An Overview



Modesty and shyness play a special part between the affairs of the Creator and the created. All prophets and Messengers encouraged modesty, as the Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said:

“Indeed from the teachings of the first prophets which has reached you is, ‘If you do not have shyness, then do as you please.’ (Al-Bukhari)

Modesty as a sense of shame or shyness in human beings is a shrinking of the soul from foul conduct, a quality that prevents one from behaving badly towards others or encouraging others to behave badly towards you. Islamic ethics considers modesty as more than just a question of how a person dresses, and more than just modesty in front of people; rather it is reflected in a Muslim’s speech, dress, and conduct: in public in regards to people, and in private in regards to God. Any talk of modesty, therefore, must begin with the heart, not the hemline, as the Prophet of Mercy said, **‘Modesty is part of faith,’**^[1] and that part of faith must lie in the heart.

Take reservation in speech. As with everything in Islam, speech should be moderate. Raising one’s voice in venting anger simply shows one lacks the ability to contain it, and only damage will ensue from it. Uncontrolled anger, for example, can lead one to verbally abuse and physically assault another, both of which take off the veil of bashfulness one is endowed with, exposing the shameful ego within. The Prophet said:

“A strong person is not the person who throws his adversaries to the ground. A strong person is the person who contains himself when he is angry.” (Saheeh al-Bukhari)

A strong person who believes feels shy in front of God and His creation, since God knows and sees everything. He feels shy to disobey his Lord and feels shame if he sins or acts inappropriately, whether in private or public. This type of modesty is acquired and is directly related to one's faith, where one's awareness of God increases one's "shyness" in front of Him.

Islamic morality divides modesty into natural and acquired. Modesty is a quality inherent in girls and boys, a certain type of modesty that is natural in human beings. It manifests itself, for instance, in a natural human urge to cover one's private parts. According to the Quran, when Adam and Eve ate from the fruit of the forbidden tree, they became aware that their private parts were exposed, and they began to cover themselves with the leaves of Paradise, a natural result of their modesty.

Islamic scholars consider modesty to be a quality that distinguishes human beings from animals. Animals follow their instincts without feeling any shame or a sense of right or wrong. Hence, the less modesty a person has, the more he resembles animals. The more modesty a person has, the closer he is to being human. Islam has mandated certain legislations which induce this sense of modesty within humans. These legislations range from seeking permission before entering any room and distancing one from others while relieving oneself, to mandating certain manners of dress for men and women alike. Another way that modesty may be attained is by associating with modest people - people in whose presence a person feels embarrassed to do anything shameful - as the Prophet said:

“I advise you to be shy toward God, the Exalted, in the same way that you are shy toward a pious man from your people.”^[2]

Being shy of a stranger's gaze is one of the driving forces behind modesty in dress. This can be seen in children, who naturally shy away from strangers, sometimes hiding from them in their mother's skirts or behind their father's legs. In Islam, screening most of your body off from the gaze of a stranger, especially of the opposite sex, is actually mandated as a means to avoid falling into conduct that may lead to extra-marital or pre-marital sex. God says,

“Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and be modest. That is purer for them. Lo! God is Aware of what they do. And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their chests, and not to reveal their adornment.” (Quran 24:30)

The verse then mentions the people before whom one is exempted from veiling; the ones who cannot be called ‘strangers’. Also, the command is relaxed as one matures: an aged woman who has no hope of marriage can discard the overcoats that screen what they are wearing underneath.^[3]

As seen from this verse, Islamic ethics view modesty not as a virtue for women only, but for men as well. Thus, men must also dress modestly, being careful to wear loose flowing and opaque clothes through which the area between their waist and knees be totally covered. Tight pants or translucent clothing is prohibited. This modesty is reflected upon Muslim male clothing throughout the world, long shirts reaching below the thighs, and loose flowing trousers.

It may still seem, however, that women bear the main brunt of ‘dressing modestly’. When one reflects, however, about the predator and the prey in illegal relations between the sexes; the prey which is hidden escapes being a victim. Besides, another verse says modesty in dress actually identifies one as being a believing woman,^[4] a ‘target’ which the devout Muslim, or any decent man, would be motivated to protect rather than abuse.

The way to develop modesty is to think about whether he or she would do the sin they are contemplating in front of their parents. A person with a shred of shame in their heart will not commit any lewd act in front of their parents. So what about doing so in front of God? Is not God much worthier that such acts not be done in His sight? Thus, Islam considers that the modesty of a believer in front of God must be greater than in front of people. This is manifest in the saying of the Prophet when a man asked him about remaining naked in the house while alone. The Prophet responded:

“God is more deserving than other people of shyness.” (Abu Dawood)

Early Muslims used to say, “Be shy toward God when you are in private in the same way you are shy in front of people when you are in public.” Another one of their sayings is, “Do not be a devoted slave of God in your public behavior while you are an enemy to Him in your private affairs.”

Modesty can therefore be seen as the means by which morals and ethics in society are maintained and pursued. Shyness from people and society may be a reason to be modest, but this modesty will not remain due to the fact that what is immodest one day in a secular society may be totally acceptable in another. Thus, the key to modesty is knowing that God is aware of what you do and shying away from that which He forbids. God only desires what is best for us. So to seek what is best for us is to submit to what He has in mind for us. The only way to properly know what that is, is to believe in what he sent down to us through His Prophet, Muhammad, and to embrace the religion (Islam) that His Messenger brought us.

Footnotes:

[1] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim.*

[2] Ahmad in his work “*Az-Zuhd*”.

[3] Quran 24:60.

[4] Quran 33:59.

(part 2 of 3): Stories on Modesty I

Muhammad and Modesty before God

The Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said:

“Every religion has its characteristic, and the characteristic of Islam is modesty.” (*al-Muwatta*)

Modesty, in the sense of shyly protecting oneself with propriety from the lustful or envious gaze, means one takes care about how to express oneself in word and deed. One does not want others to look at one strangely or as if one is blameworthy. It encourages one to be proper in behavior and thought with other people, and with one’s relationship with God. The Prophet once said to his companions:

“Be bashful before God according to His right to modesty before Him”.

They said: “O Messenger of God, verily we are shy, praise be to God.”

He said: “That is not it. Modesty before God according to His right to modesty is that you protect your mind in what it learns; your stomach in what it ingests. And remember death and the tribulations attached to it; and whoever wishes for the Hereafter, leaves the adornments of this life.

So whoever does all that is truly bashful before God according to His Right to modesty”.^[1]

Modesty and shame apply to every aspect of one’s life, and awareness of God’s presence helps one to be bashful and seemly in the way we comport ourselves in every activity we are engaged in. It crowns the moral ethics of behavior and practice, for it inspires him to do all that is beautiful and prevents him from doing all that is wicked. It is a shield of chastity for the body and of purity for the soul, as private shame concerning one’s wickedness stems from being aware that God is watching. The Prophet said:

“Modesty is from the faith, and the faith is in Paradise.” (*Ahmed*)

Muhammad and the Wedding Feast

On the occasion of his marriage in Medina with Zaynab, the daughter of Jahsh, the Prophet invited the people to his wedding feast. This was a late morning invitation, and most people simply rose and left after eating, as was the custom. The bridegroom, however, remained sitting and some people, perhaps thinking that this was a signal that they, too, should remain with him, stayed behind after the other guests had left. Out of propriety, the Messenger of God did not like to tell the people to go away, so he got up and left the room with his ward, ibn Abbas.

He went as far as the room of Aisha, another of his wives, before returning back to Zaynab's room, expecting the guests to have taken the hint. However, they were still there, sitting in their places, so he turned away once again and went back to Aisha's room, still accompanied by his ward.

The second time they returned the people had left, so the Messenger of God went in. Ibn Abbas was going to follow him, but Muhammad took the dividing curtain and drew it across the doorway, blocking the egress^[2]

One of the story's lessons is that a person's home is private and one should be shy of abusing an invitation to it. Moreover, because Muhammad was too nice to ask people to leave, his actions provide an example of how to teach a lesson without being offensive. He used a non-verbal means to show the people they should leave and, once his private space was vacated, he used another non-verbal gesture to drive home the fact that the invitation was over.

Moses and Zaphorah

After waiting for a long time in the queue, being only two females among all the males, someone finally helped them, and they were able to take their flock of sheep and goats home. Their father was old, and they had no brother to do their outside chores. Being one of the most onerous of tasks, drawing water from the well in order to water one's livestock was one performed by men; a lucky day for them to come home early with the drove freshly watered. The father was surprised about their early return, and when he inquired into the occurrence, his daughters told him that a man who seemed a traveler had helped them. The father asked one of them to seek the man out and invite him home. Upon returning to the well, the lady approached him shyly. When she was in earshot, she gave him her father's invitation so that he might recompense him for his help. He kept his gaze low to the ground as he replied to her, saying that he had done it for the sake of God alone, and required no compensation. However, realizing that this was God sent help, he accepted the invitation. As she was walking ahead of him, the wind blew her dress, which revealed part of her lower legs, so he asked her to walk

behind him and point out the way he should follow when he reached a fork in the foot path.

Once they arrived at the house, the father presented him with a meal and asked where he was from. The man told him that he was a fugitive from Egypt. The daughter who had brought him home whispered to her father: “O Father, hire him, because the best of the workers is one who is strong and trustworthy.”

He asked her: “How do you know he is strong?”

She said: “He lifted the stone lid of the well that cannot be removed except by many together.”

He asked her: “How do you know that he is trustworthy?”

She said: “He asked me to walk behind him so that he couldn’t see me as I walked, and when I conversed with him, he kept his gaze low with shyness and respect.”

This was Prophet Moses, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, who had run away from Egypt after killing someone by mistake, and the father of the girls was a God fearing man from the tribes of Midian; a man who was sonless, but had had these two daughters.

The verse in the Quran that tells us this story stresses upon the manner of her approaching Moses:

“So one of the two (daughters) came to him walking modestly...” (Quran 28:25)

Both the way Zaphorah approached Moses and his care about not seeing more of her than was needful at the time describe acute senses of propriety. Neither had a chaperone, nor could people see what they did, yet both conducted themselves with the utmost decorum. This was done out of fear of the One who sees everything. The outcome was that when her father proposed to Moses that he marry one of his daughters, Moses considered them a suitable marriage prospect. He and his daughters also saw in him all the virtues a man needs as a mate for a woman to consent to his guidance and nurture through life. Moses accepted, and also ten years hire as a shepherd.

Footnotes:

[1] This paraphrases a prophetic narration found in the collection of *Tirmidhi*

[2] Ibn Abbas reported the story in a Prophetic narration collected by *Al-Bukhari*.

(part 3 of 3): Stories on Modesty II



Muhammad and the Rebuilding of the Kaaba

The modesty of the Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, was the most prominent trait of his personality. Even from an early age, his sense of shame in an open society of the Arabs prior to Islam was remarkable. In one instance, after the treasures had been stolen from inside, the people were rebuilding the the Kaaba with a roof in order to prevent thieves from entering it again. Muhammad, while, still a young man, took part. He went with his uncle, al-Abbas, to carry blocks of stone. His uncle told him to put his sarong [\[1\]](#) around his neck to protect himself from the sharp edges of the heavy rocks.

As he moved to comply with this sensible advice, he was overcome with dizziness, and he collapsed in a dead faint. His eyes gazed fixedly skywards as he lay on his back on the ground, his sarong loosened but still covering his privates. A few moments later, he came round, yelling, “My clothing - my clothing!”

Hastily, he wrapped his sarong securely around himself again. Never again in his life would anyone outside the family ever even catch a glimpse of his loins.

The story above was told by one of the Prophet’s companions, Jabir ibn Abdullah, and shows Mohammad’s strong sense of shame and propriety about his body was ingrained, even before prophethood. He was known to be more modest than a cloistered virgin both before and after receiving revelation from God.

Moses and the Mockers

Another story about Moses, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, demonstrates that he was as equally bashful and shy about his own body as young Muhammad. He never appeared in front of anyone without fully covering himself, which led some of his people (the Children of Israel) to disparage him hurtfully. They said, “He covers his body in this way only because of some defect in his skin, either leprosy or scrotal hernia, or he has some other defect.”

God wished to clear Moses of what they said about him. One day, when Moses had taken off his clothes and put them on a stone while in seclusion, he started taking a bath. When he had finished the bath, he moved towards his clothes in order to take them and put them on again, but the stone took off with his clothes and fled. Despite his nakedness, Moses picked up his stick and ran after the stone saying, “O stone! Give me my clothes!”

But the stone continued to flee until it reached a group of Israelites, where it stopped. That is how they were able to see him naked, finding in his form the best of what God had created.

Thus God cleared him of what they had accused him of. Moses, however, was rather upset. He took his clothes and hastily put them on, and then started hitting the stone with his stick. The Prophet of Islam, the one who narrated the story, swore that the stone still had some traces of the hitting, even today; three, four or five marks. That was what God refers to in His Saying:

“O you who believe! Be not like those who annoyed Moses, but God proved his innocence about that which they alleged. And he was honorable in God’s Sight.” (Quran 33:69)

This story shows how shy Moses was about letting his body be seen in public. In fact, only his anger at being deprived of the barrier between his body and the world led him to allow the whole of his body to be seen, the exposure of which was by God’s Will in order to clear him of the slander applied by his detractors. Of course, he could not hold that exposure against God, so he took it out on the rock – the means by which his exposure was engineered, and hence his innocence was established from what his slanderers alleged.

Muhammad and the Garden Well

What is respectable to view between people of course varies. How much of a woman’s body can be exposed to a husband is different from what she can expose to her brother, which in turn differs from what can be seen by a complete stranger, and vice-versa. This is true concerning what is permissible to see between people of the same sex, too. What a father, brother or son can respectably view of each other is different from what a man outside the family circle is permitted to see, as what a mother, daughter or sister can of each other in contrast to a strange woman.

Once, when the Prophet went into a garden, he asked his companion, Abu Musa al-Asharee, to guard its gate. In the garden was a well, and he sat upon its wall dangling his legs inside it. After a while, Abu Bakr came by, wanting to enter the garden. Abu Musa went to tell the Prophet that his father-in-law wanted to share the garden with him, so the Prophet said, “Tell him the good news that the gardens of Paradise await him, and let him in.”

So Abu Bakr, Aisha's father, went into the garden and sat beside the prophet, whose sarong was pulled up to just above his knees, and dangled his legs in the well with him. A little later, Umar al-Khattab turned up. He wanted to relax in the garden, too. Again Abu Musa sought the Prophet's permission for him, informing him of another of his father-in-law's presence at the gate. He said, "Tell him the good news that the gardens of Paradise await him, and let him in."

Umar, Hafsa's father, took the free place beside the Prophet, and dangled his legs in the water next to him.

Both of these men had had the sensitivity to sit next to the prophet, and thus the prophet was able to preserve propriety without having to pull his lower garment over his knees.

Some time after that, his son-in-law, Uthman al-Affan, whom his daughter Ruqayyah had married, also sought entrance to the garden. When Abu Musa transmitted the Prophet's message by saying, 'The gardens of Paradise await you after some trials,' and let him in, Uthman observed that the only free spaces on the wall were on one of the three walls that the Prophet and his fathers-in-law were not occupying, which meant he might see more of the Prophet's legs than they. As he hesitated, the Prophet pulled his sarong down over his knees, so Uthman took the place opposite him.^[2]

Islam teaches that there are some parts of the body that should not be revealed in public, and the closer these parts are to one's privates, the more they are prohibited to reveal. Although all three men who sat with him had close family ties with him, which is why he let his knees be seen, when the Prophet's thighs were threatened by exposure, he took steps to hide them.

Footnotes:

^[1] A cotton cloth wrapped around the waist, covering lower body to the calves/shins. Worn by men in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand these days, and used by Arab men before (but called izar).

^[2] One lesson interpreted from this story was that it constituted a sign that his fathers-in-law would be buried next him when they died, but his son-in-law would be buried somewhat removed, as indeed actually happened. (*Fath-al-Bari*)