



Muslim Dress beyond the Headscarf

Podcast with **Liz Bucar** (1 April 2019).

Interviewed by **Candace Mixon**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/muslim-dress-beyond-the-headscarf/>

Candace Mixon (CB): *Ok, so I'm [Candace Mixon](#) and I'm meeting with Dr [Liz Bucar](#) at the Annual meeting of the [American Academy of Religion](#). And we are in Denver on the floor of the Conference Centre.*

Liz Bucar (LB): Literally!

CM: *We are on the floor. And there's not a lot of space, so we've found a space to carve out for ourselves. So Dr Liz Bucar is an Associate Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Northeastern University. She's a religious ethicist who's studied sexuality, gender and moral transformation within Islamic and Christian traditions and communities. She's the author of three [books](#) including the award winning, [Pious Fashion: How Muslim Women Dress](#). And that's what we're mainly talking about today. So thanks so much, Liz, for meeting up with us.*

LB: Thanks.

CM: *So, to start, can you tell us what pious fashion is? And what brought you to that topic?*

LB: So pious fashion is the word that I use in this book to describe clothing that is both religiously coded as Muslim, so trying to be “upright women” and trying to be “mosque”, in a certain religious way, giving their own interpretation but also intentionally trying to be fashion-forward or with the fashion trends. And it's actually not exactly a topic I had, but it came out of conversations with the women that I'm actually talking to. It literally is subject-driven research: the focus groups I had, the interviews I had with women, that's what they wanted to talk about in terms of mosque clothing. And so instead of calling it mosque clothing, or instead of calling it just . . . it's not just headscarves, it's really a head-to-toe sort-of look, in these three locations.

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CM: *Awesome. So speaking of the three locations you're book relates to examples from Iran, Turkey and Indonesia. So for a lot of people out there that might be sort-of a random combination – ones that don't immediately have commonalities. So I wonder if you could walk us through, first, just the choices for those three particular countries.*

LB: Yes. The case studies came out of my own sort-of experience in these locations. But there's also a conceptual, theoretical reason for it. So, in terms of my personal experience, like you, my initial research in grad school was based in Tehran or in Iran. So my experience. . . . My research wasn't about clothing or material culture in that way. At that time it was part of my experience, if not my research. And I had this moment where I moved directly from Tehran to Istanbul in 2004. And having spent the summer covered, to suddenly uncover on the streets of Istanbul . . . For me, that was the first time I actually cared about clothing, or understood clothing, or was interested in clothing in terms of what it did to someone's character and culture. Because I felt really uncomfortable uncovered. I'm not Muslim, but still, by doing that practice every day I felt . . . and I wasn't covered with the intention of becoming more modest or becoming more Muslim. But still, by doing that every day in Iran, I had shifted what I thought was appropriate behaviour for myself with men I didn't know, behaviour in public, how I should dress. And so that was an interesting moment for me. But I wasn't really interested in the question of fashion until I did other research in Indonesia. And I got there and I was like, "Oh my God! It looks so different here!" And I was like, "Duh!" But when I'm surprised by things I have a moment where I lean in a little bit. So, of course it looks different there. And it didn't read to me as, like, modest in the way that it would in those other locations – particularly in Tehran and Istanbul – because of the local style culture, the local politics, the local history of garb and women's clothing and women's dress. And so those three case studies kind-of come out of my own trajectory, moving through these different spaces, doing other research. But then when I sat down to write the book, I was like, "Oh no, no, I'm going to stick with case studies." Because we spend so much time, particularly in the US, thinking about the Gulf as the origin of all things Islamic, much less clothing, right? And I just wanted to de-centre that. Of course you're going to include Indonesia. That's the most populous nation in the world and it was a great way to have three case studies. They're all Muslim majority – the cities. That was sort-of one baseline for me. And they were all not part of the Gulf, right? So that's how those case studies emerged. And then also showing the enormous diversity through those cases. And I mean, I'm really a comparativist. So the only thing that really cuts through all my work, that is similar, is that I like to have many things on the table at once and find connections and differences. So I felt much more comfortable and could find more things . . . could

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understand things more in depth when I have more case studies. So I understood more what was going on in Tehran when I started thinking about what was happening in Yogya or what was happening in Istanbul (5:00).

CM: *It's interesting, I think we've had similar trajectory. I haven't been to Indonesia but I've certainly spent a lot of time in Turkey and Iran doing my research. And even just going back and forth from those two countries, packing is a nightmare, trying to get all the right clothing that makes sense for travelling in very different places. And I'm sure you've had this experience too, where your students will often come to it with monolithic . . . and so I think something like this really helps them break apart those different cases in how different the fashion and style is in those countries.*

LB: Yes. I mean, I think in some ways. . . . Am I a little bit annoyed that we are still spending so much time in the conversation about women and Islam talking about clothing? Yes! I am also really annoyed about that. This is the second book I've written on this topic and this is not where my research started, right? But it's partly in response to the fact that people still don't understand it. And non-Muslims fetishize it, and over-politicise it, or under-politicise it: they think it means more than it does, or it means less than it does. They just don't understand the context of what is happening. It's either a sign of women's oppression wholesale – they don't understand the choice involved – or it's a sign of a worrisome creep of Islam – “It's coming! And “Oh look! The Hijabis are coming!” So it's partly that we keep talking about it because there's still so much misunderstanding. The other thing, that you just sort-of raised, is – particularly for my students and for a non-Muslim audience, which I'm really interested in, I'm writing primarily for them – it's a good *way in* to thinking about different Muslim communities and Islam that doesn't sort-of start with texts, or political debates. I mean, I get into politics, it comes up. But I also get to start with like religious practice. These women. . . . there's not talk about the Qur'an in this book. That was actually really hard for me. I've written another book and it has that chapter on the sacred texts, right? And I was like “I know that stuff and I have to put that in there.” But I don't put that in there because the women I'm talking to don't start with quoting to me the Qur'an. They jump right in with, like, “OK – this is what it looks like here.” And “Here are the debates that we're having”. And, “This is the problem” or, “This is the pressure we're feeling”; or “Here's how I style my headscarf.” They start right in with the decisions they're making every day. And you realise *that's* where the negotiation of what accounts to being a good Muslim woman is happening. It's not happening over fights in the text. The women I was talking to, they all agreed that – these women who are covered – they think that it is their religious duty, it is a religious duty to cover. That's a given. So then the question is, what does that mean? And that's not a textual debate, really. It's an everyday

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practice debate. So it's a way into the religion that actually, once you move through, "It doesn't mean that; it doesn't mean that. Ok – it's diverse!" You can then open it up and have a fuller conversation. Either in this book having a conversation, or with my students, or in the public scholarship I'm trying to do, I'm about combatting Islamophobia and Anti Muslim racism in ways that are trying to meet my audience at a place that they can enter the conversation with me, I guess.

CM: *Right yes. So you mentioned Islamophobia and we talked about that for a second before this, and I am interested in just having you say a little bit more about perhaps how your work, by diversifying . . . whether the hijab, or impressions of Muslim women and their choices – or not choices – or their culture, etc. . . if you see it rubbing against and resisting Islamophobic tendencies a little bit, or if you've seen any reaction like that related to your work?*

LB: Ok, so as soon as you write anything about Muslim women and the veil, you immediately get hate-mail, right? Especially if you do it to a public audience. So the [LA Times piece](#) I wrote, I got a bunch of Liberal, non-Muslim women telling me I was like doing this terrible disservice to the world of feminism because I was talking about Muslim women's fashion, I guess, just in a charitable way. I was letting the women speak for themselves. And they were expressing agency and choice – I mean within structures of . . . not that it's a completely free choice. No clothing is not happening within a web of . . . You know.

CM: *I have to wear this right now. I have to.*

LB: You look really good. And you have to wear that right now. Because we're at the AAR, right? So there's all kinds of . . .

CM: *Precisely.*

LB: I was told, the first time I went to the AAR by a senior faculty member when I was a grad school, I was given a list of things that are particularly important for women. So: don't wear aggressive shoes. I'm wearing aggressive shoes right now!

CM: *Min are moderately aggressive shoes. Medium aggressive.*

LB: I am wearing aggressive shoes right now. And not to wear distracting lipstick. I was told by a male senior professor to make sure that I had more than one suit when I went on a job, to wear, because women were judged more on their appearance. And on day two, I'd better show up in a

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different looking suit than on day one. (10:00) Another academic was talking about hemlines – so much policing of our clothing in the academy! So, anyway, that’s like another whole issue. But probably what this book is trying to get people to think about, as well, is our own sort-of constraints that we have. This is not just a Muslim problem. There are expectations about what you wear. But back to your questions about Islamophobia: I have found this an interesting way to begin conversations about Islamophobia, and anti-Muslim racism. Because . . . so the [De Young exhibit](#) is a good example, in San Francisco. Because it's so visual and so material. So the De Young Museum is like . . . I'm from Boston, so it's like the MFA of San Francisco. It's the modern art museum. They have a gorgeous exhibit right now which is very informed by scholars. They have a scholar board involved, and also a local community board that popped out. So it's a very different than something like [Heavenly Bodies](#), that Met exhibit, which was not informed that way. So the exhibit at De Young . . . because the clothing there is both stunning and beautiful, but also shows a great diversity, you could have someone who knows nothing about Islam and the Muslim community walk through and come out with a different . . . it sort-of shifts. . . . I think it pushes back against the stereotypes. And I think that's important, because we've had a bunch of surveys lately that have told us that, basically, if you know a Muslim you're less likely to be Islamophobic. And also, the [Pew Forum](#) in 2017 had a survey that came out that said that fifty percent of Americans do not think that Muslims are part of the mainstream, in the US.

CM: *OK*

LB: So that's how Muslims are “othered”.

CM: *Outsiders.*

LB: Always outsiders, right? So you bring someone through this exhibit and you have clothing that is accessible. And you have . . . you know . . . the silly, Christian white lady: “Oh I would wear that! That's not so different!” And then you have . . . pushing back, “Oh it's really not all a biased” and “It's not all black clothing” And “There is a diversity of clothing!” Because, guess what? There's a diversity within the Muslim community. That can be an “Aha!” moment for people. Or “Oh my God! They're not, like, being forced to wear this by the men, or the Ayatollahs and their lies” – the Muslim men are liars – “and the clerics and their lies.” “Look, there are actually women who are designers who are making a business and life out of this!” Or “There are women who are using their clothing for social activism.” So the De Young exhibit has really activist wearers and designers as part of it. So they’re like, “Muslim women don't need to be saved” right? They're able to use the example of clothing like

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showing how they are themselves producers and using it in interesting ways. And then again that mainstream culture thing – it's everywhere, now! And that exhibit – what does it look like? Macey's. And what does it mean that. . .

CM: *And all the top designers are adding full, modest lines.*

LB: Yes.

CM: *That are akin to people that are in the Middle East that are often becoming wealthier, in countries like Qatar and countries UAE, and trying to also push to that. So that's also interesting.*

LB: Yes. So who the designers are responding to is a certain market, right? But the truth is, I'm looking at what you're wearing right now. You're wearing a modest outfit, right. So hemlines have gotten longer and necklines have gotten higher. There is, sort-of, a “mainstream” I'm putting my hand in the air but no-one can see that, right?

CM: *Air-quotes.*

LB: Air-quotes for “mainstream fashion”. Like, these are taste-makers. Muslim women wearers and fashion makers are influencing . . . they're part of mainstream culture. They are producing culture. And so if you think about, you know, Clothesline or H&M lines that people are going in and purchasing – not realising it was originally developed and marketed to Muslim women. But now it's being marketed as globally sensitive, inclusive, like, you know, it could be called hip and sophisticated. It's actually to be thinking about ways in which this clothing – if you're a non-Muslim woman – this clothing actually might appeal to you now as a cool thing, right? As a cosmopolitan thing. So I think that clothing could be this way, again, into If you really pay attention to it instead of just seeing the headscarf, you can just . . . it's great way open up the complexity of these different areas.

CM: *Yes. And then how do you see your work sort-of speaking to I mean, we've talked about dress and contemporary society – and, yes, I totally agree things like hemlines are getting longer, turtle necks are in again, mock necks etc., again, right now – but what about within gender and religion more broadly? So I know your project is comparative within the Muslim world or within Iran, Turkey and Indonesia. But how would you see those discussions fitting in with other discussions of religious clothing, perhaps, not just for mainstream America or something like that. Or would you?*

LB: Sorry, particularly in the US context, or?

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CM: *Yes. Whichever ones seems to appeal to you*

LB: So there's a couple of things that . . . I think you're sort-of asking me to expand my work out into religious Studies more broadly, right? (15:00) So for me, doing this work, because I'm really a religious ethicist, that's the other hat I wear, is in different societies of religious ethicists. Like the Society of Christian Ethics, the Society of Muslim Ethics. Those have been societies that have been really text-driven. So even just thinking about how we study visual culture, and everyday practice, and material culture, and how we theorise that has been sort-of a challenge. And in that work I've really found allies in places like Religious Studies. And that was a lot of exciting stuff. But a lot of stuff was kind-of in the last decade. So none of it was stuff I was reading about, or thinking about, back when I was in grad school. So that's thinking about – particularly if you're someone like me who's interested in everyday practice – and thinking about, how do you *read*, visually, instead of textually? Those have been really exciting conversations to have. And in the US context, actually the new project I'm working on there is a chapter focused on clothing and I brought up the ethics of it. Because we're having this moment, in the US, where religious clothing has got a lot of attention. I mean the Met exhibit, Heavenly Bodies exhibit, which is an exhibit – for those who don't know – of Catholic-inspired couture, basically, also some things from the Vatican – about forty pieces from the Vatican – so it's The exhibit had 1.6 million visitors, and more visitors than any other exhibit ever . . .

CM: *Right. It was huge.*

LB: When I went it was like lines around the block.

CM: *It was physically, like, immersive. I mean it took me hours to get through it, and I went to the cloisters and it was. . . .*

LB: A pilgrimage

CM: *It was a pilgrimage. It really was. You had to go on top of a mountain to get there.*

LB: And the light was low, so you were kind-of confused. And the music is loud. The music is very dramatic. So it's interesting, like, who that drew in. But what's also interesting about that exhibit is – I don't know how you felt about going through it. There wasn't a lot of context. So, although there were beautiful pieces to look at, there wasn't a lot of filling out of history of them, or the symbols that we saw there. So there's a sort-of Met Gala, which is like the gala that opens it up where you have

[Rihanna](#) dressed basically as the pope. And she's like so fabulous and we're all like “Oh, you look so

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fabulous! “But this is a sort-of appreciation for aesthetics but it's not coming with the understanding . .

CM: *Of the religious community . . .*

LB: Yes, or some problematic features of it. So [Robert Orsi wrote](#) some great stuff about this, where it's a very sexy exhibit – lots of low-cut, and really the body is put forward – and it's coming at a time when we're in this crisis, this sex abuse crisis. There's no conversation about that in the exhibit. So again, I think, obviously the board, in considering religious clothing, they were like, “you can get them in the door of the Met to see it”. So again it becomes an opportunity to have more complicated conversations about religion. That’s where I’m thinking about sort-of going.

CM: *Cool. And you mentioned something you're working on. So if you wouldn't mind, maybe we can have a little preview of your interesting . . .*

LB: Little spoiler . . . Yes. I have a book that's under contract again with Harvard University Press which was really wonderful to work with on *Pious Fashion*. And they've really helped me think about pushing or writing for a different kind of audience. And writing in a different voice. So I have a book under contract which is . . . My working title is called, “Stealing your Religion”. And it's a book that comes out of frustration, in my classroom, about stilted conversations about cultural appropriation that Students love that word, and love that phrase – especially in terms of religious racial borrowings, like white people stealing things from black communities, like culture. They were using a word, in addition also, in terms of religious stealing, but not . . . It was just shutting down conversations instead of opening up. So this book is about the sort-of ethical, muddy, ambiguity, good and bad, of these sort-of borrowings of religion particularly by people who themselves are not part of those communities. So we're moving in the US to a situation where the majority of Americans are going to have no religious affiliation, right? We’re going to be “nones” n-o-n right? Not . . .

CM: (Laughs).

LB: And so I thought there was actually something really interesting for me to think about in this. Because I actually am, myself – this is probably too much information – but I am, myself a baptised Catholic. But I have not been practising since I was in the household, like 10. So I'm a non-religious affiliated person who has made a career of studying religious communities. So that's kind-of weird.

CM: *Same, by the way. Almost exactly. (20:00)*

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LB: And it's interesting to think about that and think about the positionality of that, and what the politics of that. And so this is a book that kind-of goes through different things that I have a lot of experience with. So, for example, I take students on a pilgrimage to Spain every year as part of our Study programme. We do the Camino. So I'm taking mostly non-Catholics on a Catholic pilgrimage as part of a course and the majority have this life-changing experience even if they're not religious. OK, so what is that? Like why are they . . . ? What are they trying to get out of an experience . . . as a quote-unquote non-believer, as an outsider? How can they? Why are they searching for? How are they understanding the sort-of spirituality-versus-religion divide that people just assume is a truth? What is that really? So this book is like looking through different case studies. And I'm kind-of . . . I sometimes say I'm doing all the icky things and then thinking about them. So I'm “stealing their religion” and trying to unpack it and problematise what And that audience, that is really a book written for white women. Like, we're hearing about “the problem of white women”, I want to think about especially about Like, if I am a character in that book, I'm sort-of thinking about white women moving through these spaces. And sort-of the ethics of that.

CM: *Yes. I was thinking about, when you mentioned it . . . so obviously that project is pretty contemporary, right?*

LB: Yes.

CM: *As is Pious Fashion. But then I was thinking about, even if I consider examples from that Met exhibit, or just other ones where you see elements of covering such as habits, such as other forms of veils – Mother Mary is presented as wearing a veil. And those aren't problematised as much as this abject reaction that comes, sometimes, with Muslim forms of covering.*

LB: Yeah.

CM: *So it's interesting when you track a historical trajectory of different forms of covering up and then, now that one culture seems to be focussed on as the one that covers up, there's more of an adverse reaction. Or something. At least I think, I don't know.*

LB: So again, part of my annoyance . . . not my annoyance, my resistance of writing this last book was that “Oh my gosh, there's so much scrutiny on Muslim women!” – so much attention in some ways. And this book is part of that conversation. It's like I'm also . . . I'm adding to that problem, right? I'm also scrutinizing and looking at women. I'm hoping that because they are really pushing the research,

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and their voices are really pulled out, you also see how they themselves are involved in like surveilling each other and scrutinising each other. And they're part of that mechanism. But I think in my classroom with my students, they are usually really shocked to find out that the veil is not a big deal in Muslim communities until – like in Egypt – until the British decide it's a big deal.

CM: *Exactly.*

LB: So it's like, “Oh it's just their fault.” Like it's: the British come in and they're like basically “This veil is a problem. It's a sign of Islam, that you're not the same as us. We're going to take it off.” And then Muslims go, “Woah! You want to take it off? We're going to put it back.” So, like, that interaction is usually a wake up moment for my students. Yes, we are in a really kind-of exciting, interesting moment, right, where we have our [first elected representative](#) in the congress in a hijab.

CM: *Yeah.*

LB: But I don't know if you've seen this yet, but this week it just broke that one of the first things the Democrats are doing is changing a hundred-and-eighty-one year old rule, that's on the books, for what you can wear on the house floor. It says you can't wear hats. So in order for her to make sure she feels like she can walk in the first day, they're going change it. So we're in this interesting moment where like: I'm sorry – Muslims are mainstream in America, right? Muslims are part of leadership and activism. And so it's also . . . (interruption waving at a passer-by) we're at this interesting moment where it's really showing us the structural racism and religious discrimination that we still have on the books.

CM: *Yes, there's so many examples, you know you can think about the history of the places that you've studied, of Turkey and Iran, specifically – hats! Oh my gosh! Such a big deal! Putting them on, taking them off, putting on the tie, taking off the tie. So the clothing is where those decisions about modernity and about culture are being negotiated. So it makes complete sense to have book like Pious Fashion, I think, to do some of that work. And I've found it works really well in the classroom. And I'm sure you've found as well that for your students, they're reacting really well to the work, right?*

LB: So yes my favourite thing, here, is that it's working well in the classrooms. It's only been out for a year and I have That is like the greatest compliment that you can pay me. Because I was trying to write in my teacher voice and I was trying to The way I teach is a lot of stories. So I was trying to tell the stories and let the women tell their stories. **(25:00)** And I just think the more story-telling we

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do in general in the classroom, and in our writing, the more we can . . . I just think it's a good way to teach, and shift . . . It's very effective in terms of shifting perspectives. There is just something else that is happening there. Another thing that I think that's happening right now, that's sort-of showing again this like sea-change in the US right now: the [NYPD is being sued](#) by a bunch of different Muslim women for basically having their headscarves ripped off for mug shots. And again there's no reason why hair . . . I mean my hair wasn't this colour a couple of years ago! Hair is not a distinguishing feature of someone. You don't need hair to . . . so the idea . . . And it's like we're just in this really contentious place right now and unfortunately clothing is becoming part of that debate.

CM: *Cool. Well I think this was super-helpful. Hopefully people have gotten a bit about pious fashion and will hopefully check out your book. Any other final thoughts for us?*

LB: No. Thanks for this, it was really fun. Even though we should confess we are, literally, sitting on the floor!

CM: *Yes. We might take a photo just to let everyone know. We'll put it out there. It's very empty. And yes we're going to go back and keep conferencing.*

LB: That's right. In our conference gear . . . conference-wear!

CM: *Yes, in our modest conference gear!*

LB: There's pious fashion everywhere. And what counts as pious fashion here is this!

CM: *Is old suits!*

LB: (Laughs). Sensible shoes and old suits!

CM: (Laughs). *Ok. Thank you so much, Liz.*

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