

On Account of the Angels: Why I Cover My Head

By Elisabet

At first reading of this verse I thought, “Good grief, that, at least, can’t have anything to do with women today.” I was a new convert to Christianity and making a valiant effort to read the Bible “as if it were true.” St. Paul was hard to swallow, and so were angels—along with fairies and trolls! My grudging acceptance of Christianity was based on honest doubt rather than conviction. No one had proved to me that it was true, but neither could I prove it false. On that flimsy hope I chose to make what Kierkegaard called “a leap of faith over the abyss of the absurd.” It was a desperate act. I was at the end of my rope, at a loss to explain the painful contradiction between my good intentions and the reality of my life. I was no longer able to pretend success as a wife, mother of four, or writer (even though my book had been sold on first submission to a leading publisher). In truth I didn’t even know who I was, although I loudly proclaimed my manifesto as atheist, humanist, and feminist, with strong opinions on most issues. I had spent most of my young life trying to define myself by “proving” I could do anything a man could do, only better. (What man could bear children!) But inside was a black hole and I was about to fall in. Somehow I “happened” across a Bible and read that God (whoever He or It was) created “man in our image, male and female created He them.” I read of Moses encountering a burning bush which was not consumed—and a God who identified Himself as I AM. That caught my attention. If there was a great I AM from whom all small “I ams” received their identity, there was hope of discovering myself and what it meant to be a woman. One night, under a canopy of stars in the desert, I cried out: “God, if you are there, I want to find You!” But my mind refused to accept the Bible stories of sacrificial lambs and Christ crucified and resurrected. Descartes said, “I think, therefore I am,” and I agreed. My ability to reason was my life! With a heavy heart I gave up on the “mindless” Christian solution. But when all seemed lost, a quiet little thought lodged in my head: “If it were true—would you accept it? And can you prove that it is not?” The question would not let go. In fear and trembling I chose to “sacrifice” my reason, accept the incomprehensible in hopes it would prove true, and live the rest of my life as if it were. It felt as if I were dying, but I saw no other way.

The proof of the pudding, of course, was in the eating. The truth of the Bible could only be tested through obedience. I determined to do whatever “leapt at me” in the daily reading of Scripture. I disagreed with St. Paul’s view of women, but he did say, “there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). Clearly we were equal in salvation and worthiness—then why different rules? Were they only cultural, not applicable to us today? Then one day I prayed, “God, You made me a woman; I want to live the fullness of womanhood as you meant it—spiritually, emotionally, every way, even if it means doing as St. Paul says!”

Soon after that, during morning prayer, I Corinthians 11:10 leapt at me. It seemed silly, but I got up from my knees, found a kerchief to put over my head, and went on with prayers. Somehow it felt right. One day I wore the scarf in my Southern Baptist church. There were glances, but no comments. Gradually it became more of a habit, both during prayers at home and in church. As the only woman with a head-covering, I felt conspicuous at times, but could not bring myself to take it off. I decided I would rather err on the side of obedience than against it. And there were the angels to consider. By now I believed in them, but why they should care about my head was still a mystery.

After I had been a Christian for thirteen years, a desire for the sacraments drew me to the Episcopal Church. It was 1979, and three-fourths of the women in the congregation wore head-coverings. I

rejoiced. During the Eucharist the priest, standing before the altar, chanted: “Therefore, with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify Thy glorious Name, evermore praising Thee, and saying, “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of hosts: heaven and earth are full of Thy glory...” The glory hit me: We were worshipping God in the company of a heavenly host! Was St. Paul alluding to that?

When I learned of the Jesus Prayer and adopted a rule of prayer, it seemed appropriate to wear something on my head at all times. I sewed matching dresses and scarves which my friends accepted as my “style”—artistic and a bit eccentric. That was fine with me (and I hoped, with the angels!) I was saddened when other women in our parish stopped wearing a head-covering. They thought it unnecessary and outdated, and some saw it as a sign of inferiority. Women and men were equal, and—according to current unisex fashions in clothing, life and hairstyles—practically alike and interchangeable. For nearly two thousand years Christian women had covered their heads in church, and usually elsewhere—but now we were “liberated” from that.

In 1995 I was chrismated Orthodox and was surprised to find myself again the only woman wearing a head-covering in my parish. An Orthodox sister told me, with a nod to my scarf, “We don’t have to wear that anymore.” I smiled and said, “I know, but I want to.” St. Paul had said “ought,” not “must.” It was my voluntary obedience, even if I didn’t understand the “why’s.” By now I had no intention of giving up the benefits. I felt blessed and protected, feminine, and, paradoxically, confident and free—in the presence of guardian and ministering angels.

In Orthodox worship the angels were even more in evidence. The Divine Liturgy is full of references to the various ranks of angels, emphasizing our participation with them in the joyous worship of the Holy Trinity. St. John Chrysostom (d. A.D. 407), in a sermon at the Feast of the Ascension, spoke both of angels and the veiling of women: “The angels are present here...Open the eyes of faith and look upon this sight. For if the very air is filled with angels, how much more so the Church! ...Hear the Apostle teaching this, when he bids the women to cover their heads with a veil because of the presence of the angels.” Origen, another early Church Father, said, “There are angels in the midst of our assembly...we have here a twofold Church, one of men, the other of angels...And since there are angels present...women, when they pray, are ordered to have a covering upon their heads because of those angels. They assist the saints and rejoice in the Church.” Instructions for catechumens in The Apostolic Tradition, probably written in the second century by St. Hippolytus of Rome, include this: “Moreover, let all the women have their heads veiled with a scarf...” And St. Cyril of Alexandria, commenting on I Corinthians, wrote: “The angels find it extremely hard to bear if this law [that women cover their heads] is disregarded.”

The Church taught that it mattered to the angels whether women cover their heads. But why? Was the covering “a sign of submission to her husband,” as some commentaries say, or “a cultural statement of inferiority,” as one woman told me in explaining why she would not wear a veil? A friend and former dean of a Lutheran seminary in Norway, Håkon Haus, pointed to another possible reason. He looked up I Corinthians 11:10 in Greek: “Therefore the woman shall have exousia [right, power, authority] on her head for the sake of the angels.” The word *exousia*, said Håkon, also occurs in John 1:12: “As many as received Him, to them He gave exousia to become children of God, to those who believe in His name.” I felt a light go on. Was St. Paul saying that the head-covering was an outward sign of my “authority, right, power” as a female child of God, recognized by the angels? It rang excitingly true! God asks voluntary

submission and obedience of His children. I chose to wear the sign of my feminine—as distinguished from masculine—authority. But why should the angels care?

In her book, *The Holy angels*, Mother Alexandra writes: “The Celestial hierarchies are the...spiritual reality of ordered creation, the stable patterns in which disruption is unknown...” Obedience is characteristic of the angelic realm. Dionysius the Areopagite, influential since the fifth century, wrote of nine orders or hierarchies of celestial beings, arranged in three choirs. Seraphim and cherubim are in the first, archangels and angels in the third choir, closest to us. Without obedience there is chaos and disorder. St. John Chrysostom, in a sermon on I Corinthians, speaks of how distinction in male and female dress—and particularly the veiling of women—“ministers effectively to good order among mankind.” Taking off the veil was “no small error,” said St. John; “...it is disobedience.” It “disturbs all things and betrays the gifts of God, and casts to the ground the honor bestowed...For to [the woman] it is the greatest of honor to preserve her own rank.” To some who argued that a woman, by taking off her covering, “mounts up to the glory of man,” Chrysostom answers: “She doth not mount up, but rather falls from her own proper honor...Since not to abide within our own limits and the laws of God, but to go beyond, is not an addition, but a diminution...” Always emphasizing the equality between man and woman, Chrysostom admonishes the man “not to dishonor her who governs next to thyself.” The issue was order, not superiority or inferiority. At Matins for Orthodoxy Sunday, we sing, “Come and let us celebrate a day of joy: Now heaven makes glad! Earth with all the hosts of angels and the companies of mortal men, each in their varied order, keeps the feast.”

The answer to my prayer nearly thirty years ago, that I might know what it means to be a woman, and to live it as God wills for me, is becoming clearer in obedience—often in little things, like putting on a scarf. The mystery of womanhood is still incomprehensible, but now I think, so it must be. I don’t have to understand fully what it means to be a woman in order to know that I am a woman and to live it. God knows the meaning and I trust Him. I don’t have to fight for my place or my right; it is given me in the glorious ranks of angels and mortals.

Fr. Basil Rhodes wrote in his Master of Divinity thesis in 1977 on The veiling of women in I Cor. 11, “Man is the head of the woman, according to Genesis and to St. Paul who compares the relationship of man and woman with that of the Son to the Father: ‘And the head of Christ is God’ (I Cor. 2:3). It would be a grave error to say that Christ is inferior to His Father. The veiling of the woman, for St. Paul, is an outward sign of the acceptance of God’s order, and His divine purpose in creation. The veil is the woman’s ‘yes’ to God, a physical, visual ‘Amen’.” St. John Chrysostom thought that Paul, in admonishing women to wear a covering “because of the angels,” meant it “not at the time of prayer only, but also continually, she ought to be covered.” Fr. Rhodes agrees: “The veil can be the constant symbol of the true woman of God...a way of life...a testimony of faith and of the salvation of God, not only before men, but angels as well.” Timothy McFadden, who is working on his doctoral thesis at Oxford on the subject of “man/woman—God/Christgod,” writes: “Members of the Godhead—and His image—are not interchangeable. As God Father and Son are equal and One in nature, so also they are unique and not interchangeable. Similarly, though equal in nature, man is not woman, woman is not man. They are distinguishable.”

In my pre-Christian days, when I sought to understand myself in light of the doctrines of feminism, I believed that men and women shared male and female characteristics, which made us pretty much interchangeable. (And if we were interchangeable, we didn’t really need each other except to conceive babies!) Today some say we have both a masculine and a feminine self that must be lived out. But how

do women live out their “masculine self,” and men their “feminine self”? That presents an identity problem (another modern notion) for both men and women (not to mention adolescent boys and girls!). No doubt it also adds to the chaos and gender confusion of our times. I no longer believe we are a mixture of masculine and feminine characteristics and selves. As God in Trinity is One in essence and three Persons in function, so man and woman, created in God’s image, share a human nature, yet are distinct personal selves with different functions. As Christians we both have *exousia*—power, right, and authority—as children of God, but woman’s authority is distinctly feminine, as man’s is distinctly masculine. Hers does not contradict or usurp his, but complements it. And as the Trinity would not be complete with one of the Three missing, so man and woman are both essential to each other and to the whole. Being in the holy order of God’s creation as lived in Orthodoxy calms the troubled waters of my soul. I don’t understand the mystery of Trinity—nor the mystery of man and woman—but I know I am woman, and I both want and love to live it. St. Paul wrote, “woman is the glory of man” (I Cor. 11:7), a hard verse to take for some of us. McFadden suggests that “all women may somehow participate in the glory of the Theotokos.”

Woman’s unique and God-given capacity to give birth made the Incarnation possible. The woman Theotokos is indeed the glory of all mankind, “our solitary boast,” as one writer called her. Eve, our first mother, contributed to the fall of man by choosing to disobey. Mary, the mother of our Lord—and of the Church which is His Body—made our salvation possible by obeying God’s will. If she whom we hymn as “more honorable than the cherubim and more glorious beyond compare than the seraphim” is always seen in icons wearing her head-covering, it certainly cannot be a sign of “inferiority to men”! McFadden calls the veil a “badge of authority” between equals, perceived by the angels who maintain order among themselves. Why head-coverings matter to the angels may be unclear, but that they matter seems evident. Fr. Rhodes says, “The angels watch what we do and rejoice when we obey.” A scarf may be a small matter, but obedience often hinges on small things, small choices. My scarf is seen by men, but to me it signifies obedience to God, a way of living my womanhood. It is my feminine “I am” reflected outwardly. In putting on my head-covering I mean to say to God, “Behold your handmaiden, be it unto me according to Your word—Your will, not mine.” For twelve years I have worn a scarf at all times. I now perceive that it has been—and continues to be—essential for the pilgrim journey and salvation of my soul. The bottom line for me—and a growing number of my sisters—remains obedience. And with it comes a sense of being in our rightful place in God’s ordered universe, rejoicing with the angels. Now I gratefully say, “I am!” in the presence of the great I AM—at prayer and in church, surrounded by the angelic host, worshipping our Lord and King. To God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be the glory, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen!