

Facing the Veil in Education: Todd and the “Veiling” Question

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It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.

—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Le Petit Prince*

Following several incidents concerning the wearing of Muslim dress,¹ and based on two examples in educational settings, Sharon Todd raises the question: “To what extent...do we need to see the face in order to acknowledge the other’s presence in a communicative encounter?”

Emmanuel Levinas’s concept of “the face” provides Todd the basis for a discussion on communicative encounters in education. A dangerous move in this context, for has not Levinas written:

“Before the face of the other,” I have said. Can one, properly speaking, use the preposition *before*...here? Have we not, in speaking thus, confused the meaning of the face with the plastic forms of representation that already mask it, whereas the face, in its formal nakedness, or stripped of forms, expresses mortality and signifies a commandment?²

So when one expresses concern about seeing, or not seeing, the face of the student or the teacher, when one demands “that the face — not just the eyes — be visible so that one can better ‘read’ it and thereby form ‘proper’ communicative relations,” what is one referring to in the context of Levinas? When reading Levinas, Biblical connotations to “the face” must be kept in mind, as well as references to Franz Rosenzweig’s writings.³ Very familiar with Rosenzweig’s work,⁴ Levinas wrote a “Foreword” for Stéphane Mosès’s *System and Revelation*, in which Mosès discusses Rosenzweig’s use of “the human face” as “the way the transcendence of the other is revealed to me,” harking back to “the face of God” and “Truth.”⁵ Seán Hand recalls that, in *Totality and Infinity* already, “[t]he term ‘face’...denotes the way in which the presentation of the other to me exceeds all idea of the other in me,”⁶ and Michael Smith writes: “The face of the other is the locus of transcendence in that it calls into question the *I* in its existence as a being for itself.”⁷

It is this last meaning I underscore as being most relevant to Todd’s “‘veiling’ question.” One of Levinas’s declared “fundamental themes,” developed in *Totality and Infinity*, is precisely this interpersonal, nonsymmetrical “intersubjective relation.” Levinas considers it as “essential”⁸ and insists: “I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it.”⁹ This call to responsibility through the encounter with the Other would be “the release of this ontological contraction said by the verb *être*, the *dés-intér-essement* opening the order of the human, the grace, and the sacrifice.”¹⁰ Levinas developed this notion of *dés-intér-essement*, then presented his concept of *il y a* as a trace of the “necessary,” “the very test of dis-inter-estedness.”¹¹ To emerge from the *il y a*, the individual must depose the “sovereignty” of his or her *I*. The individual’s choice to acknowledge the Other as other, “beyond the control of vision,” is an ethical decision, and it is this

acknowledgment which Levinas calls justice. This is also where Levinas sees — were one to forget the uniqueness and primacy of the other — the possible risk of “transforming the sublime and difficult work of justice into a purely political calculation.”¹² And has not “political calculation” precisely taken hold of the “veiling question”?

In a second movement, to discuss identity linked to the “‘veiling’ question,” Todd turns to Luce Irigaray’s themes of light and vision. Indeed, Muslim young women who have expressed their own positions concerning the veil in all its variations affirm that it has much to do with their own identities. One might ask in what way is this so? Using Irigaray’s work, Todd discusses these women as “relegated to darkness,” “invisible,” “behind the screen of representation.” She argues that the feminine, basically defined through the masculine gaze, is “rendered invisible yet is created as the necessary support of patriarchy itself.” Is not the veil perceived by some as “a method of control, a method to remove freedom and liberty from Muslim women...as part and parcel to a system of forcing them into a subservient, hidden role, a role as second class citizens to Muslim males who have no such restrictions”?¹³ Todd points out that, according to Irigaray, behind this creation, this projected identity on “the screen of representation,”¹⁴ there remains a woman who has not yet been “captured through the mastery of [male] vision.” Throughout this discussion, it may seem that the “veil,” whatever shape and form, has been imposed on Muslim women. However, many Muslim women have spoken with a different voice, and insist “that [they are] under no pressure at home to wear the veil.”¹⁵ The international network Assembly for the Protection of Hijab (or Pro-Hijab) — formed in response to headscarf bans in France and parts of Germany — aims at reversing bans already established, and prevent more “abuses of democracy.” It hopes to counter the “negative stereotypical image of the *hijab* which lies at the root of this discrimination” and offer Muslim women a platform from which they can speak out. These new generations of women who wear the veil as part of their identity, as women deeply attached to their religious traditions, also acknowledge that, even when adopted willingly, veiling is not devoid of risk as it may impair women’s ability for self-awareness, masking any need for introspection as much as it hides them from the view of others. The veil may become a refuge behind which they remain unseen, unheard.

What is at stake here, in the virulent controversies raging in Europe and Canada, is the matter of rights, human rights, and civil rights, for women, and for men. “We must therefore reconsider the civil identity of each sex,” Irigaray writes, “and rethink possible myths and religions in a way that respects the difference between the sexes.”¹⁶ She insists that “these rights must be redefined and rewritten for our Western cultures not only out of a concern for individual and collective justice, but to give ourselves a means of communicating amongst ourselves and between cultures regardless of religious choices.”¹⁷ She also recognizes that “[c]hanging these habits is a long process, because it means changing the cultural climate, stereotypes and customs.”¹⁸

So I cannot concur with Todd when she writes, “the Muslim practice of veiling the face is really neither here nor there in Levinas’s scheme of things.” In fact, I think that her choice of both Levinas and Irigaray to discuss the “veiling question” is rather judicious, and I would go even farther than her conclusion that “Levinas’s work opens up...the question of how my approach to the other can remain open to otherness beyond the control of vision.” Precisely because reading Levinas and Irigaray helps us focus on what really matters — deeper than surface perceptions, deeper than the eye can see — that is, on our individual responsibility regarding the “‘veiling’ question” and on our quest for a more just and equitable education, an education based on the respect of the Other in her or his identity, where violence, including academic and political violence, would have no place.

1. Todd refers to four types of Muslim woman dress: *hijab*, *burqa*, *niqab*, and *jilbab*. Over one hundred terms are identified by the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, many of which are used for “veiling.” See for example: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5414098.stm>.

2. Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 33.

3. Especially in Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara E. Galli (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005).

4. For example, Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: Athlone, 1993), xii–xiii, 49–66.

5. Stéphane Mosès, *System and Revelation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, trans. Catherine Tihanyi (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 284–86.

6. Seán Hand, *The Levinas Reader* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1989), 5.

7. Pierre Hayat, “Preface: Philosophy Between Totality and Transcendence,” in *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), xiv. Also Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1993), 20; and Max Picard’s works and Levinas’s “Max Picard and the Face,” *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), 94–98.

8. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 79.

9. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 98. In the original French text, the quote reads, “*dût-il m’en coûter la vie*” (“should it cost me my own life”) (Paris: Fayard, 1982), 105.

10. Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre nous* (Paris: Grasset, 1991), 238.

11. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 52.

12. Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 170.

13. Warner Todd Huston, “Is Muslim Veil Issue Western Intolerance?” *RenewAmerica.com*, October 26, 2006, <http://www5.renewamerica.com/columns/huston/061026>.

14. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 9.

15. “Veil issue ‘a Matter for Muslims,’” *BBC News*, October 6, 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/5412742.stm.

16. Luce Irigaray, *Thinking the Difference*, trans. Karin Montin (New York: Routledge, 1994), xviii.

17. Irigaray, *Thinking the Difference*, xvii.

18. *Ibid.*, xvi.