

Cultures of Invisibility: The Semiotics of the Veil in Early Christianity

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The paper aims at seizing the main features of the early Christian conception of the female body, of its visibility and invisibility. It therefore proposes a semiotic analysis of *De virginibus velandis*, “on the veiling of virgins”, a moral treatise written by Tertullian, probably between 213 and 225, and addressed to the strict Christian sect of Carthage known as “Tertullianists”. The paper claims that as in this text, so also in the moral discourse of contemporary religious fundamentalisms, the veil is not simply a symbol but a meta-semiotic device of invisibility, whose intrinsic “betweenness” brings about a series of semi-symbolic oppositions that together shape and maintain the identity of a religious community by inscribing its limits on the surface of the female body.

Introduction: cultures of invisibility

The present paper is meant to represent a step ahead in the development of a long and complex research project tentatively named “cultures of invisibility”. One of the main hypotheses underlying it is that so far, visual studies – from aesthetics to art history, from visual anthropology to iconology, from phenomenology to the philosophy of images – have been characterised by a general bias: since the background from which these disciplines stem – a complex blending of different cultures, in which the Greek-Latin and the Christian inputs prevail – emphasises the role of visual representations, they have unconsciously supported the idea that the best way to know the visual culture of a society is to observe, describe, analyze, and interpret its visual artifacts, the way in which it gives iconic presence to what is absent. On the contrary, the research project called “cultures of invisibility” claims that visual cultures can and must be studied also from the point of view of what they hide, conceal, and choose not to represent, so giving an iconic absence to what is present.

The veil as meta-semiotic mechanism

In the last years, the abovementioned research project has focused mainly on the veil, understood not only as a garment but also as a complex semiotic category, whose analysis can reveal many interesting features about the way in which dif-

ferent visual cultures conceive the idea and the practice of invisibility.¹ This choice has also been determined by the fact that a particular semiotic device in this category, the veil as an item of the dressing code of Islamic women, has been recently chosen by contemporary mediatic discourse as the symbol, or even as the embodiment, of a supposed “conflict of civilisations”, dividing Christianity and Islam, but also a lay and a religious imagination of the social order. Nevertheless, the way in which the issue of the Islamic veil has been approached by non-Islamic media commentators has been often tainted with the same bias described above: visibility and representation have been commonly judged *a priori* as ethically superior to invisibility and lack of representation; the veil has therefore become a symbol of backwardness, opposed to a non-Islamic idea of social progress.

One of the main purposes of the “cultures of invisibility” project is to develop a phenomenological, semiotic, and anthropological understanding of the veil, so as to demonstrate that most of the dramatic oppositions of values evoked by contemporary media around the Islamic veil reveal not only a stereotypical conception of Islamic visual culture, but also, what is worse, a deep ignorance of the historical roots of both Greek-Latin and Christian visual culture. Even a cursory exploration of the history of the ancient Mediterranean cultures, indeed from Jewish to Roman visual culture, passing through Greek visual culture, shows that they all consider the veil as a central semiotic device, used in order to articulate a complex pattern of visibility and invisibility around the presence of the body in the visual structure of a society.²

A semiotic investigation of the history of the veil in Mediterranean visual cultures will show that the Islamic veil is only one of the many manifestations of a broader semiotic category, analyzing which will cast a new, less ideological and more anthropological light on the usage of the veil in the female dressing codes of contemporary Islam. Moreover, such an investigation will probably reveal that the ban, or at least the marginalization, of invisibility in most European and North-American visual cultures is a relatively recent phenomenon, whose development is underlain by a very complex cultural dynamics; at the same time, it will also show that the concept of invisibility, and the consequent adoption of the veil as a semiotic device, was on the contrary fundamental both in Christian and in Greek-Latin visual cultures, the same visual cultures often invoked as a pedigree by those who dramatise the contemporary “conflict of civilisation”.³

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1. See for example Robert Murphey, “Social Distance and the Veil”, Ursula Sharma, “Women and their Affines: the Veil as a Symbol of Separation”, and Massimo Leone “Remarks for a Semiotics of the Veil”.
 2. See Molly Myerowitz Levine, “The Gendered Grammar of Ancient Mediterranean Hair”.
 3. The bibliography on the veil in ancient civilisations is extensive. On the culture of ancient Greece, see Page Du Bois, *Sowing the Body: Psychoanalysis and Ancient Representations of Women*; Richard Onians, *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time and Fate* (421); Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux, *Du masque au visage*; Nanette Salomon, “Making a World of Difference”; Elaine Fantham, *Women in the*

Research on the cultural history of the veil is increasingly revealing that, beyond all the differences in shape, size, material, and relation to the body characterizing the various objects that can be ascribed to the broader semiotic category of the veil, its phenomenological essence probably lies exactly in its “betweenness”, in the fact of being between something and something else: between the naked surface of the body and an external gaze, as is the case in many cultures of invisibility, but also between an internal gaze and the external world, as is the case in some other cultures of invisibility.⁴ Moreover, as research is pointing out with increasing evidence, the semiotic essence of the category of the veil, that is, the way in which artifacts belonging to this category produce meaning, also depends on its “betweenness”, on the fact of generating, by its mere presence, a difference, or a set of differences, between something and something else. The veil would therefore be, and should therefore be understood as, not simply a symbol – as media that are not conversant with semiotics simplistically claim – but as a meta-semiotic device, as a generator of what semioticians call semi-symbolic systems (see Leone, *Il semi-simbolico*).

From the semiotic point of view, the difference between these two approaches is huge. Indeed, those who interpret the veil as a symbolic device usually merely associate its presence with a fixed meaning: for most media commentators, for example, such interpretation amounts to an equation between being veiled and being a fundamentalist Muslim woman. On the contrary, semi-symbolic systems are characteristically conceived as instituted by semiosis between a pair of contrasting expressive elements and a pair of contrasting semantic values (see Omar Calabrese, *Lezioni di semi-simbolico*). For example, it is known that many cultures, including the Italian one, express a value of affirmation through nodding – that is, a vertical movement of one’s head – and a value of denial through shaking one’s head horizontally; however, it is also known that other

Classical World: Image and Text; Linda Jones Roccas, *Ancient Greek Costume: An Annotated Bibliography*; Liza Cleland, Glenys Davies and Lloyd Llwelllyn-Jones, *Greek and Roman Dress from A to Z*; and especially the work of Douglas Cairns (“Veiling, Aidós, and a Red-Figure Amphora by Phintias”, “Anger and the Veil in Ancient Greek Culture” and “The Meaning of the Veil in Ancient Greek Culture”) as well as Lloyd Llwelllyn-Jones (*Women’s Dress in the Ancient Greek World, Aphrodite’s Tortoise: The Veiled Woman in Ancient Greece*) and Lloyd Llwelllyn-Jones and Mary Harlow, *The Clothed Body in the Ancient World*; on the culture of ancient Rome, see Massimo Leone “Cultures of Invisibility: The Semiotics of the Veil in Ancient Rome” and its bibliography, as well as Judith Sebesta, “Women’s Costume and Feminine Civic Morality in Augustan Rome”, Laetitia La Follette, “The Costume of the Roman Bride”, and Judith Sebesta and Larissa Bonfante, *The World of Roman Costume*; on early Christianity, see Mary Rose D’Angelo, “Veils, Virgins, and the Tongues of Men and Angels: Women’s Heads in Early Christianity”.

4. See Leone, “Cultures of Invisibility: The Semiotics of the Veil in Ancient Rome”: “Cultures of Invisibility: The Semiotics of the Veil in Ancient Judaism”, “Remarks for a Semiotics of the Veil” and “Pudibondi e spudorati: Riflessioni semiotiche sul linguaggio del corpo (s)vestito”.

cultures, for example the Bulgarian one, express the same value of affirmation through a horizontal movement of one's head, and a value of denial through an opposite movement of nodding.

In reflecting on exactly such cultural differences Roman Jakobson (in his paper "Motor Signs for 'Yes' and 'No'") was one of the first scholars to formulate the idea that gestures for affirmation and denial are a typical example of semi-symbolic systems, where what matters is not the association between a single movement and its value, but between a pair of contrasting movements and a pair of contrasting values. Consequently, it is not relevant whether one says "yes" by nodding or by shaking one's head; what matters is that, if in a given culture a vertical movement is adopted to express denial, the opposite movement must be adopted to express affirmation, and vice versa.

Understanding the veil as a meta-semiotic generator of semi-symbolic systems, as a category whose semiotic essence lies in its "betweenness", means moving a step forward in the comprehension of why the presence or the absence of the veil can mean even opposite sets of values in different socio-cultural contexts; why, for example, the presence of the veil on the heads of Iranian women during the 1979 revolution mostly signified their adhesion to Islam as a liberating force opposing the oppression of the royal establishment, while the same veil on the heads of Iranian women nowadays frequently signifies their submission to Islam as a religious rhetoric supporting an oppressive theocratic establishment.⁵ Mediativ discourse, often tainted with Orientalism, frequently ascribes such contradictions to a supposed innate and dazzling ambiguity of the Islamic world. Yet, a cultural history of the veil shows that other visual cultures of invisibility too have adopted this semiotic device as a generator of semi-symbolic articulations.

The semiotics of the early Christian veil

The second part of the present paper will offer some preliminary insights about the presence of such semiotic dynamics in the culture of invisibility of early Christianity. Understanding the semiotic role of the veil in the first centuries of Christian history is a complex matter, requiring the interpretation of a multitude of verbal and or visual sources, coming from different cultural areas and adopting different verbal languages or visual codes. Furthermore, even a cursory look at this abundant material shows that the early Christian semiotics of the veil cannot be fully comprehended without reference, once again, to the concept of "living in between": the cultural proximity, and therefore also the cultural need for differentiation, between early Christian communities and Jewish communities on the one hand, and between early Christian communities and "pagan" communities on the other. The semi-symbolic systems generated by the veil in the Christianity of the first centuries are often extraordinarily multi-layered works of semiotic *bricolage* exactly insofar as they stem from such a complex dialectics be-

5. See Michael Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* and Susan Tiefenbrun, "The Semiotics of Women's Human Rights in Iran".

tween the language of the new Christian “sect” and a multifarious background of several religious traditions.

Among the several verbal and visual texts that can be analyzed as a source of evidence concerning the culture of invisibility in early Christianity, three in particular seem to bear a fundamental witness about this topic: first of all, a passage (1 Cor 2-16) from a letter written in Greek by the Christian “apostle” Paul⁶ between 53 and 57, and addressed to the Christian community of Corinth, Greece, which Paul himself had founded some years before. Second, *De virginibus velandis*, “on the veiling of virgins”, a moral treatise written, probably between 213 and 225, by Tertullian,⁷ one of the most influential authors of the first centuries of Christianity, and addressed to the strict Christian sect of Carthage⁸ known as “Tertullianists”, founded and led by Tertullian himself. Third, *De habitu virginum*, “on the behavior of virgins”, a moral treatise probably written around 249 by Cyprian, another influential author of early Christianity, and addressed to the Christian community of Carthage, which had elected Cyprian⁹ as bishop around 248. An extensive amount of philological and theological scholarship has been produced about these three texts, and in particular about the first one, considered by many as the most problematic passage of the entire corpus of Paul’s writings.¹⁰ Indeed, although all three texts have the primary goal of suggesting the dress code, and in particular the use of the veil, which women in the Christian communities of Corinth and Carthage should adopt, the arguments that these texts deploy in order to support their indications are such that they can be interpreted as precious sources of information concerning the status of women in the Christian communities of the first centuries, in comparison with their status in the societies where these communities would grow, for example the pre-existing Jewish and “pagan” communities.

The semiotic point of view, with its characteristic synchronic perspective on cultural phenomena, can cast new light on these texts, which should interest semioticians not only for the sake of historical knowledge, but also for the many interesting insights that the analysis of these texts can give us about contemporary phenomena. Indeed, the three authors, Paul, Tertullian, and Cyprian, despite the many differences between them, seem to share the same worry: trying to preserve the identity of the Christian communities from the risk of “contamination” through contiguity with “alien” cultural and religious contexts.

From the abstract point of view of Lotman’s semiotics,¹¹ then, this situation of “living in between” two or more different cultures, formulating semiotic codes that shape and keep one’s religious identity despite this “betweenness”, is not

6. Born in Tarsus (no scholarly consensus on date), dies in Rome between 64 and 67.

7. Carthage, c. 160-c. 225.

8. Current Tunisia.

9. Carthage, died in 258.

10. See Giancarlo Biguzzi, *Velo e silenzio: Paolo e la donna in 1 Cor 11, 2-16 e 14, 33b-36*.

11. See Jurij Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*.

very dissimilar from the semiosphere of those contemporary Islamic communities that, especially in Europe – where they are a religious minority – try to do the same in relation to a context perceived as a threat to their identity. Now as then, in Turkish communities in Germany as well as in Tertullianist communities in Carthage, the veil is adopted as a meta-semiotic device that, by projecting a pattern of visibility and invisibility on the bodies of women, implicitly projects a pattern of identities differentiating between in and out, us and them, *halal* and *haram*.

Within the limits of the present paper, only some preliminary insights will be proposed about the second of these texts, Tertullian's *De virginibus velandis*, which is probably also the richest one in "semiotic" considerations.¹² When Tertullian wrote this treatise, Carthage women above the age of puberty (defined as being twelve years old) had to wear a head-covering in the street, unless they were prostitutes. In church, married women always covered their heads and girl-children did not, but the position of unmarried women was less clear. Tertullian suggests that unmarried women other than children should be veiled in church, just as adult women were. There were some arguments against this, so Tertullian discusses the whole issue of whether women should cover their heads in church, making various points.

The first problem Tertullian faces is that the stricter usage of the veil he wishes to introduce in the Christian community of Carthage is difficult to justify: the Scriptures do not contain any reference to it, and the custom of Carthage is actually opposed to it, since unmarried women usually stayed in church with their head unveiled. Tertullian therefore proposes an argument that is surprisingly similar to those adopted by contemporary fundamentalists: first, it is not important if what he suggests is not in accordance with custom, since "our Lord Christ has surnamed Himself Truth, not Custom";¹³ second, it is not important if the Scriptures do not mention this usage of the veil, since they are just the first step of an ongoing revelation that continues through the inspiration of religious leaders like Tertullian: "for what kind of (supposition) is it, that, while the devil is always operating and adding daily to the ingenuities of iniquity, the work of God should either have ceased, or else have desisted from advancing?"¹⁴ It is evident that this logic allows Tertullian to justify any normative order whatsoever through the claim that it derives from the inspiration of divine grace.

12. The Latin edition of Bulhart (*Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 76 (1957): 79-103) and the English translation of Thelwall (*The Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, 18 (1870): 154-180) have been used for the preparation of the present paper. On Tertullian's text, cf. D'Angelo, Alexandre Faivre ("Dieu a-t-il créé la femme voilée?"), Geoffrey Dunn ("Rhetoric and Tertullian's *De Virginibus Velandis*"), and Carly Daniel-Hughes ("Wear the Armour of your Shame!": Debating Veiling and the Salvation of the Flesh in Tertullian of Carthage").

13. "*Sed dominus noster Christus veritatem se, non consuetudinem cognominavit*" (I, ii).

14. "*Quale est enim, ut diabolo semper operante et adiciente cotidie ad iniquitatis ingenia opus dei aut cessaverit aut proficere destiterit?*" (I, vi).

However, Tertullian's argument is subtler than that: in the second chapter of *De virginibus velandis*, he opposes the custom of Carthage, which he disapproves of, to the custom of other Christian churches of the East, where all women, according to Tertullian, were obliged to cover their heads.¹⁵ At that time, indeed, the question of how best to conceal the body of Christian women must have been a common issue in all of Christianity, as is shown by a passage from the *Traditio apostolica*, a text written in Greek by Hippolytus,¹⁶ bishop of Rome, around the same years when Tertullian wrote his treatise:

The faithful will greet each other (*aspazesthai*), men with men and women with women; men though must not greet women. Finally, all women must cover their head with a wide veil (*pallion*) and not only with a foulard (*eidós*), which is not suitable to cover (*kalymma*) (40).

Tertullian's problem is therefore reformulated as follows: if customs in Christianity differ, how is it possible to recognise the true one? For he discards *a priori* the idea that different customs might be kept in different areas of Christianity. In this anti-relativistic attitude too one can recognise another typical stand of contemporary fundamentalism, consisting in denying any blending between religious tradition and local cultures. In order to find out what the true custom is, Tertullian develops a further argument, consisting in a sort of syntax of gazes and desires. If virgin women remain unveiled in church, then their virginity will be known not only to God, but also to other men in the same church. But, Tertullian writes:

Such eyes will wish that a virgin be seen as has the virgin who shall wish to be seen. The same kinds of eyes reciprocally crave after each other. Seeing and being seen belong to the self-same lust.¹⁷

In order to block such dynamics, where men want to see women, and women want to be seen by men, the veil must stay between the body of women and the gaze of men, it must conceal the virgins' bodies from men and reveal them only to God. The semi-symbolic system brought about by Tertullian's veil could be summarised through the following scheme:

E	Presence of the veil	Absence of the veil
C1	Virginity is known only to God	Virginity is known to all men in the church
C2	Virgins are not desired by men	Virgins are desired by men

If the usage of the veil is not extended to all women, this according to Tertullian brings about an opposition between "virgins of men" and "virgins of God": the

15. See Roland de Vaux, "Sur le voile des femmes dans l'Orient ancien".

16. Rome, c. 170 – Sardinia, c. 236.

17. "Tales enim oculi volent virginem visam, quales habet virgo, quae videri volet; invicem se eadem oculorum genera desiderant; eiusdem libidinis est videri et videre" (II, v).

first, who “go about with front quite bare, excited to a rash audacity”,¹⁸ are even scandalised by the fact that some virgins want to keep their veil in church. But against these “marketable girls”, who expose their virginity in church, Tertullian affirms that, for the virgins of God, having their head exposed in public is tantamount to being raped, according to a further semi-symbolic system, which can be summarised as follows:

E1	Presence of the veil	Absence of the veil
E2	Physical Virginity	Absence of Physical Virginity
C1	Spiritual virginity dedicated to God	Virgins are desired by men

Here is one of the strongest arguments proposed by Tertullian: the veil is nothing but a sign of the hymen, that bodily veil which stands between the female body and the desire of men, so that obliging a virgin to remove that sign is equivalent to obliging her to lose her physical virginity. One could say that for Tertullian the veil is a public sign of virginity exactly as the hymen is a private sign of it.

Yet, the main obstacle to Tertullian’s argument is that the only passage of the New Testament explicitly dealing with the veiling of women, 1 Cor 2-16, refers only to women (“*mulieres*”) and never to virgins (“*virgines*”). Therefore Tertullian embarks on a long and complicated semantic analysis, whose style reminds one of that of some contemporary fundamentalist exegeses: he tries to demonstrate that the word “women” actually encompasses both the meanings of married and unmarried women, so that when Paul suggested to the Corinthian women to cover their heads in church, he actually meant both married and virgin women. This semantic *tour de force* is accompanied by some further arguments, which are interesting to contemporary semiotics especially insofar as they reveal more features of the early Christian culture of invisibility. For example, Tertullian proposes a parallelism between female hair and the veil: exactly as it is shameful for a woman to cut her hair, whether she is a married woman or a virgin, so it is shameful for a woman to remove her veil, whether she is a married or an unmarried woman (VII, i). On the contrary, Tertullian praises the custom of some Carthage virgins of massing together their hair upon the crown, so that “it wholly covers the very citadel of the head with an encirclement of hair”.¹⁹ The military metaphor suggests that both the female hair, especially if massed together, and the veil function as a fence protecting the head from alien attacks. The parallelism between hair and the veil is then extended to men too: as it is shameful for a man to grow his hair long, so it is shameful for him to cover his head with a veil. The following schema summarises the new semi-symbolic system elaborated by this passage of *De virginibus velandis*:

18. “*Ambiunt virgines hominum adversus virgines dei, nuda plane fronte temerarie <in> audaciam excitatae*” (III, iii).

19. “*Si autem et naturae praeiudicium adicit apostolus, quod honor sit mulieris redundantia capillorum, quia coma pro operimento est, utique hoc maxime virgini insigne est, quarum et ornatus ipse proprie sic est, ut concumulata in verticem ipsam capitis arcem ambitu crinium contegat*” (VII, ix).

E1	Presence of the veil MEN	Absence of the veil WOMEN
C1 Normality	Short hair Absence of veil	Long hair Presence of veil
C1 Abnormality	Long hair Presence of veil	Short hair Absence of veil

This pattern of normality and abnormality is quite different from that characterising other cultures of invisibility, for example some trends in the visual cultures of ancient Judaism or ancient Rome, according to which men should keep their heads veiled in some circumstances, for instance during most sacrifices.²⁰

Then Tertullian refers to a common tradition of early Christianity, briefly referred to also by Paul in his letter (1 Cor 11, 10), according to which the first fallen angels had abandoned God because of their lust for women (VII, ii). Tertullian invokes this tradition in order to demonstrate that, if Paul imposed the veil on married women in order for them not to represent a temptation for the angels of God, *a fortiori* unmarried women must veil their heads, since they would attract the angels' lust even more. Such an argument is interesting not only because it shows that for Tertullian as well as for many early Christian writers angels were definitely male, and not only because it bears witness to the early Christian belief that angels would mingle with humans during Christian assemblies, but also and above all because it hints at the fact that, in the eyes of Tertullian and his contemporaries, but maybe also in those of many current religious fundamentalisms, the veil should not so much protect the female body from male desire, as defend male desire from the female body. It was in order to preserve the angelical nature of men in church, and their proximity to God, that the veil was imposed as a semiotic device ensuring the invisibility of women. Similarly, some years before, an influential early Christian philosopher, Clement of Alexandria,²¹ had written in the *Paedagogus*, one of the first moral treatises of early Christianity:

But I do not wish chaste women to afford cause for such praises to those who, by praises, hunt after grounds of censure; and not only because it is prohibited to expose the ankle, but because it has also been enjoined that the head should be veiled and the face covered; for it is a wicked thing for beauty to be a snare to men. Nor is it seemly for a woman to wish to make herself conspicuous, by using a purple veil.²²

Another interesting characteristic of Tertullian's argumentation on the veiling of virgins lies in his urge to create and preserve a state of complete moral homo-

20. Cf. Leone, "Semiotics of the Veil in Ancient Rome", "Semiotics of the Veil in Ancient Judaism".

21. Maybe Athens, c. 150-maybe Antioch, between 211 and 216.

22. Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, II, x, 114, 3-4 (Sources Chrétiennes 108, 214-216); English translation by Philip Schaff (The Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Fathers down to A.D. 325, vol. 2, 1867).

geneity between the internal space of the church, where virgins were surrounded by Christian “brothers”, and the external space of the street, where virgins were surrounded by both Christian “brothers” and non-Christian men. Indeed, Christian virgins in Carthage and elsewhere would adopt the veil as observant Islamic women currently adopt it, as a semiotic device creating a threshold between the private sphere and the public sphere. However, whilst for most Christians in Carthage the church was mostly a private space, where virgins could keep the same dress code they would adopt at home, for Tertullian the church was mostly a public space, where virgins should keep the same dress code they would adopt in the street. Tertullian’s moral attitude resembles that of current fundamentalists also from this point of view, since it does not admit that different spheres of social life, taking place in different types of space, can be guided by different moral codes, since “identity of nature abroad as at home, identity of custom in the presence of men as of the Lord, consists in identity of liberty”.²³ As a consequence, if on the one hand the veil institutes a “betweenness” protecting the virgin female body from the desire of men and vice versa, it also eliminates the “betweenness” of the church as a space of transition and mediation between the private and the public sphere.

As regards the semiotic system underlying this space of transition, Tertullian, as most fundamentalists, does not wish to enrich it or to replace it with a new one, but rather to curtail it until it is eliminated, and the space of transition with it. In Carthage, women could signify and communicate their virginity to other Christian men by removing the veil from their heads in church. As every semiotic system, though, this one too could be used in order to lie: Tertullian is afraid that, if virginity is signified through the veil, girls who have lost their virginity might lie about their virginal state exactly by veiling their heads in church. However, it is quite evident that Tertullian’s primary worry is not to preserve the Christian virgins’ sincerity, but to expel from the space of the church every hint of sexuality, for to his mind, the ultimate semiotic purpose of the veil is to conceal femininity itself:

For who will have the audacity to intrude with his eyes upon a shrouded face? a face without feeling? a face, so to say, morose? Any evil cogitation whatsoever will be broken by the very severity. She who conceals her *virginity*, by that fact denies even her *womanhood*.²⁴

Femininity must be hidden, concealed, denied, so that the veil is transformed into a semiotic device meant to eliminate the difference between genders and, with it, the very possibility of desire. The patriarchal logic underlying this urge is evident when Tertullian specifies for the sake of whom women should suppress their femininity:

23. “*Eadem natura foris quae et intus, eadem institutio apud homines et apud dominum eadem libertate constat*” (XIII, ii).

24. “*Quis enim audebit oculis suis premere faciem clausam, faciem non sentientem, faciem, ut dixerim, tristem? Quicumque malus cogitatus ipsa severitate frangetur. Iam se etiam mulierem negat, quae virginem celat*” (XV, 4).

Veil your head: if a mother, for your sons' sakes; if a sister, for your brethren's sakes; if a daughter for your fathers' sakes. All ages are periled in your person.²⁵

Again, Tertullian resorts to a series of military metaphors in order to emphasise the defensive nature of the veil: the veil is a panoply, the veil is a stockade, the veil is a rampart, which must neither allow the virgin's eyes egress nor those of other people ingress.

But Tertullian does not limit himself to prescribing the veil to all Christian virgins; not differently from some current Islamic moralists, he also dwells on a detailed description of how the veil should be worn:

For some, with their turbans and woolen bands, do not *veil* their head, but bind it up; protected, indeed, in front, but, where the head properly lies, bare. Others are to a certain extent covered over the region of the brain with linen coifs of small dimensions.²⁶

On the contrary, Tertullian draws a precise map of visibility and invisibility over the female head, and tries to exactly determine which part of it should be kept invisible:

Its limits and boundaries reach as far as the place where the robe begins. The region of the veil is co-extensive with the space covered by the hair when unbound; in order that the necks too may be encircled. For it is *they* which must be subjected, for the sake of which power ought to be had on the head: the veil is their yoke.²⁷

Tertullian even invokes as a model for Christian virgins the women of Arabia, who cover not only their heads but also their faces, keeping only one eye bare, and proposes a public punishment for those women who, while reciting in church the Christian prayer of *Pater Noster*, "with the utmost readiness place a fringe, or a tuft, or any thread whatever, on the crown of their heads, and suppose themselves to be covered?"²⁸ These women are like ostriches, says Tertullian, who believe they are invisible when they stick their head in the ground.

25. "Oro te, sive mater sive soror sive filia virgo, secundum annorum nomina dixerim, vela caput, si mater, propter filios, si soror, propter fratres, si filia, propter patres: omnes in te aetates periclitantur" (XVI, iv).

26. "Mitris enim et lanis quaedam non velant caput, sed conligant, a fronte quidem protectae, qua proprie autem caput est, renudae; aliae modice linteolis [...] operiuntur" (XVII, ii).

27. "[...] limites et fines eius eo usque porriguntur; unde incipit vestis; quantum resoluti crines occupare possunt, tanta est velaminis regio, ut cervices quoque ambientur; ipsae enim sunt, quas subiectas esse oportet, propter quas potestas supra caput haberi debet; velamen iugum illarum est" (XVII, iii).

28. "Quantam autem castigationem merebuntur etiam illae, quae inter psalmos vel in quacumque dei mentione relectae perseverant meritoque etiam in oratione ipsa facillime fimbriam aut villum aut quodlibet filum cerebro superponunt et tectas se opinantur! Tanti caput suum me[n]tiuntur" (XVII, vii).

Conclusion

Reading Tertullian's *De virginibus velandis* with a semiotic sensibility reveals how this text, as well as other moral treatises of the first centuries of Christianity, consisted in an attempt at shaping the identity of the new Christian communities by regimenting the invisibility of the female body, considered as a source of men's desire and sexuality. Adopting the veil as a meta-semiotic device, able to introduce a whole series of new semi-symbolic systems in the semiosphere of Carthage Christians, Tertullian meant to differentiate his community from that of heretic Christians, whose moral standards were intolerably loose to him, but also from Jews and pagans, who had different ways to organise the same pattern. Further investigation is needed in order to seize the main semiotic structure of the cultural invisibility of early Christianity, but even a cursory analysis of Tertullian's work "on the veiling of virgins" indicate a whole series of similarities between the moral discourse of early Christianity and that of contemporary fundamentalisms. In both enunciations, indeed, the female body is not considered per se, but transformed into a semiotic surface where the veil or other meta-semiotic devices proclaim the identity of a religious community and its symbolic frontiers.

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