

**Why Do Clergy and Sometimes Women Cover Their Heads in Church?**

A little more research would help us find sources in the Jewish Scriptures, which we Christians generally refer to as the Old Testament, telling us precisely when and how Jewish people began to cover their heads in sacred assemblies.

We know very well from Moses' encounter with God in the desert when he was drawn to see more closely the phenomenon of the burning bush that was not being consumed, that the voice of God spoke to Moses and told him to take his shoes off; for he was standing on holy ground. It is for this same reason, out of awe and reverence for God, that Jewish people cover their heads when they pray. Jewish men wear "prayer shawls" to pray, while women generally covered their heads for several other reasons. Remember when Ben-Hur covers his head and prays before the chariot race?

In the Middle East cultures, it became their experience that a woman's hair was felt by both men and women to be one of her most important feminine attributes. Women might be jealous of another's hair for its quality and beauty. Men in that culture, but we could probably say in any culture, are drawn by the beauty of a woman's hair. For this reason, a woman who loves her husband would be motivated to cover her hair so that no one but her husband might enjoy seeing her uncovered. Husbands would see their wives' hair as something intimate and belonging to their exclusive relationship of intimacy with their wives, and for this reason would want them to cover their heads in public.

Muslim culture did not invent the covering of hair by women, but simply regulated it in a more detailed way and with perhaps stiffer sanctions for those who fail to comply. It was the influence of western culture, particularly through the years around and after the two world wars of the previous century that caused some Middle East societies to relax some of their practices, including that of hair covering. This is why those who still practice the covering of hair by women consider western society as depraved; that is, having no sense of reverence for women or corresponding sense of shame in the absence of proper respect for others or for the human body. Let us not boast too quickly of being such a sophisticated society but remember how many youth, both girls and boys, suffer over appearance.

Catholic societies were part of this view of life, and women did cover their hair for centuries. As society relaxed its respectful practices, Catholic women gradually began to wear veils, shawls, or hats that covered their hair less and revealed it more. Eventually, as a result of the updating process started by Vatican Council II, many national churches dropped the requirement altogether or simply allowed women to stop covering their hair. There are still countries where women, or at least older women, never stopped the practice. Women could and some still do cover their hair when they go to church both out of reverence for God and out of modesty, to conceal this feminine attribute from the eyes of others, both men who could be drawn to it and women who could be jealous of it.

As for clergy, the miter worn by bishops is a descendant of the miter worn by Jewish priests in the Temple. The skullcaps worn by bishops underneath the miter is purple for bishops, red for cardinals, and white for the pope. Priests wore a black one, especially where it was cold in church. For bishops, the Liturgy spells out when they wear it and take it off, maintaining the practice. Most priests stopped wearing it. It too originated with our Jewish "elder brothers" who continue the practice to this day. For some Jews who practice their religious traditions more fervently, men wear them all the time.

For Catholic Christians, the practice of covering one's head in Church or during prayer is not considered an essential practice for our faith; so that there really isn't much taught or declared by the Church about it. This is one of those practices that is more cultural than religious, and our Church and tradition generally try to respect local customs, providing their practice in no way threatens our faith.