

## **Introduction**

The tradition of Catholic women covering their heads during Mass comes from a much-debated biblical passage: 1 Corinthians 11:3-6 from Paul. The passage reads,

*But I want you to know that Christ is the head of every man, and a husband is the head of his wife, and God the head of Christ. Any man who prays or prophesies with his head covered brings shame upon his head. But any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled brings shame upon her head, for it is one and the same thing as if she had had her head shaved. For if a woman does not have her head veiled, she may as well have her hair cut off. (1 Corinthians 11: 3-6 NAB).*

While women followed this passage by veiling throughout the early twentieth century, the 1960's brought deeper questions about its implications among the growing feminist movement. During this same decade, the Second Vatican Council ("Vatican II") sought to update Catholic theology in a world with changing cultural and sexual mores. The Second Vatican Council acknowledged the veil as a symbol of man's authority over woman and has declined to require all Catholic women to cover their heads in church.

For half a century, most women continued to leave their heads uncovered in the church until the turn of the millennium, when some women started to revert back to the traditional ideas of Catholicism dating back to before Vatican II-era changes, reinvigorating the Latin Mass and started "re-veiling" their heads in church. The present ethnographic study suggests that some women readopt this tradition of veiling by rejecting the idea that Vatican II mandated that women should or could stop veiling.

## **Literature Review**

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Veiling is a significant cultural practice among many different religious groups around the world, and considerable fieldwork has been conducted related to religious clothing as a representation of cultural identity and religious conviction. Research focuses on veiling practices of Muslim women across the world and a resurgence in veiling among young Muslim women worldwide. There is, however, a lack of literature about young Catholic women covering, specifically veiling, their heads during the Catholic Mass. In this study we explore this little documented but noticeably increasing practice by situating it within literature related to studies of the bodily expression of veiling.

The term *teshuva* (literally “redemption”) refers to a personal and collective renewal movement in which secular Jews embrace Orthodox Jewish practices. Head covering practices have increased among Orthodox women along with the *teshuva* movement, likely because they want to belong to a religious community. Today, brides at Orthodox Jewish weddings wear head coverings, reinforcing the difference between the sexes in a manner similar to the statement of St. Paul mentioned earlier. Most Orthodox Jewish women cover their heads as Jewish standards of modesty, dress, and behavior prohibit *tefah*, or the uncovering of a woman. Weiss views Jewish head covering as an extension of Jewish law that treats women as the property of their husbands. Many oppose this view of both Jewish and Muslim head coverings, seeing these coverings as women defining their own bodies.

Veiling involves many decisions related to what is used to cover the head. Similar to how the resurgence of veiling in Muslim communities has mirrored a rise of clothing companies selling fashionable *hijabs*, *jilbabs*, and *burqa*, companies distributing Catholic veils have proliferated over the past decade. In this sense, the pushback to modern cultural trends, including what some Catholics view as immodest

clothing choices and promiscuity, has itself affected the fashion industry by supporting veiling companies.

The literature therefore situates Catholic “re-veiling” practices among modern trends in Judaism and Islam, given that no current literature exists for Catholic women’s re-veiling practices. To contribute to this field studying the veil as a cultural and religious phenomenon, the authors sought to explore how bodily and religious identity play a role in modern Catholic women’s practices of veiling.

## **Methods**

For this study, the authors interviewed 30 practicing Catholic women who do or who not veil from across the United States in 13 different states. To gain a range of perspectives, the authors interviewed women from 18-57 years old and that work a wide range of professions. Of the women interviewed, two work as owners of large veiling supply companies, and one is a religious woman, a sister from a convent in Indiana. The authors conducted long-form ethnographic interviews with these women, ranging from one to three hours, which were recorded and then transcribed. A sample of the interviews were coded to develop a preliminary codebook, including 44 unique codes falling into four main categories related to religious history, reasons for wearing the veil, effects of veiling, and reactions to veiling.

All interview transcripts were then hand-coded to determine central themes throughout the interviews. After coding the interviews, the authors identified three major themes including (1) religion in crisis, (2) reversion to Catholicism and re-veiling in adolescence, and (3) religion in the Internet age. In order to protect the confidentiality of all interviewees, the names and identifying information were removed. There were

no substantial differences between women of different ages throughout the interviews except for the age at which they started veiling and their experience as veiled women.

***Religion in crisis: Catholic “Zombies” and secular Catholicism***

The women interviewed consistently emphasized that they live in a society where Catholic religion is in crisis, particularly the traditions and the practice of Catholicism. These women note that many Catholics have become increasingly secular, identified as “fallen away.” Secular Catholicism, however, can also refer to Catholics that have grown “lukewarm” in their faith or who view religious services as an obligatory action. Rachel explained how *“We just check the box, go to Mass, forget about confession, forget about whether you are receiving the Eucharist unworthily, etc. I just describe myself as a Catholic zombie.”* The fear is that some Catholics who are “falling away” come from a religiously educated, devout background. These women re-adopting traditional practices are therefore existing in a bifurcated Catholic community, where some Catholic young people are rediscovering traditions like the veil, scapular, and rosary and others are simply resigning themselves from religion altogether.

Most particularly, women reference growing use of birth control, pornography, and the “hook-up culture” and how “sexualized” American culture is. These women note how society is not only marginalizing traditional Catholicism but also feminine womanhood with the rise of feminism that they believe seeks to destabilize a gendered identity of women as nurturers and mothers. Emily identified the veil, *“as a sign of respect for your femininity and glorifying your femininity and realizing that being feminine is not a bad thing because I think in the world it says that ‘you need to be strong. Feminine emotions, feminine things are not good, femininity is like this thing that marginalizes women.’”* These women closely associate femininity with modesty

and womanly identity. These women therefore view themselves in conflict with a society that is increasingly religiously divided and is sexualizing women.

***Reversion to Catholicism and re-veiling: Rigids and Rad Trads***

One prominent theme discovered in the research was that many of the women interviewed mention a “reversion” experience right after a nonreligious or secular episode in their lives when they started to take their faith seriously. When these women return to the faith, they often incorporate traditional Catholicism into their practices. This reversion experience typically happens during adolescence when women first encounter the division between Catholics that “fall away” and Catholics that choose to identify with Catholicism. This choice comes when women are exposed to sexually liberating behaviour and morals, when they adopt or reject this culture as their own.

Many women focus on the “smells and bells” of traditional Catholic Mass. Young women born after veiling practices had already vanished are re-adopting a new practice rather than an older one. When questioned why they believed that traditional Catholicism was making a resurgence, many discussed the notion of anomie or being unanchored, grasping for tradition. Emma stated, *“I think more people have been called to veiling because it draws people out of that trance of the world or lack of truth and mediocrity that what we’re so used to encountering every day, it’s so appealing because you’re like ‘that’s so radical, so solid, so forward, and so physical.’”*

This tradition often manifest as the Traditional Latin Mass (TLM) that some women attend. Many of those interviewed identify a radical faction who will never attend the Novus Ordo Mass, identified as “rigids” or “rad trads,” shorthand for radical traditionalists. Mary explained, *“the traditionalists, what the Pope has called the Rigids are these people that think that by going to the Novus Ordo Mass, it’s offensive to*

*God.*” “Rad Trad” and “Rigids” are part of what has come to be referred to as the Reverence Revolution, which refers to how Millennials are returning to more reverent practices of Mass, closely associated with traditional Catholicism.

### ***Religion in an Internet age***

One stimulant for growing traditionalism is the Internet and how it connects Catholic women with traditional leanings or upbringings across the country. Most women discovered veiling or validated their desire to pursue veiling based on information from websites, traditional Catholic blogs, and social media sites, including Facebook. The internet provides spaces for women to discuss traditional Catholicism and veiling with women who may not live close together geographically. Catherine attributed the rise of traditional Catholicism in the United States to increasing use of the internet. She says, *“If the Internet did not exist, then I think a lot of things would have been lost forever because you have these little pockets of tradition that have sort of survived, but the Internet has allowed them to really connect and to flourish.”*

The Internet is allowing women to recall older traditions, especially during the time of COVID-19 when many women discuss attending the live-streamed Latin Mass virtually for the very first time. Orders, such as the Priestly Fraternity of Saint Peter (FSSP Masses), have been livestreaming their Masses, making it more accessible for traditional-curious Catholics to experience this TLM Mass from a distance. Similarly, Facebook groups such as Catholic Women’s Veiling Devotion and blogs like Fishwaters.com offer shared spaces for women to discuss veiling practices and why and how to adopt the traditional practices. While Catholic women do not speak with religious authority on these pages, they offer guidance, feedback, and emotional support

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for women who may experience pushback. Women are utilizing the Internet to create a virtual religious community for women across the country curious about veiling.

### **Discussion**

This study of veiling revealed that women veil for several different reasons, often a combination of multiple themes with varying significance of each reason. Many women interviewed acknowledge that their motivation for veiling often coincides with the motives that draw them to traditional Catholicism. Ellen explained this idea, *“I think if you ask 15 different women why they wear the veil, I think that you would get 15 different answers because it is such a deeply personal thing, and some of those things would be because of reverence, because of modesty, because God said to, because it is traditional.”* One of the most prevalent reasons that women veil and are attracted to traditional Catholicism is that they are experiencing ambivalence towards current trends in the world, seeking out a beauty and truth that they feel is lost.

For these women, this traditionalism serves as a religious scaffolding in the form of colored veils reflecting changing liturgical seasons that give life an order, purpose, and placement in time. For these women, traditional Catholicism returns to manifesting spiritual, intangible things in physical objects, grounding an invisible faith in physical ritual – the antithesis of anomie. These women relate the increase in wearing the veil with growing physical manifestations of traditional values and faith. The veil signifies something greater than a medium of religious expression. The veil, as one woman explains, is “a flag of sorts that shows how women handle their faith.” The veil is therefore a physical expression of their traditional Catholic identity.

### **Concluding remarks**

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From this study, the authors determined that the majority of women veiling fall into two age groups, from the ages of 20-30 or over 60, although the majority of women adopting the practice are among the younger generation. These two age groups have an inverted adolescent experience. Those about the age of 60 remember pre-Vatican traditions and experienced Vatican II liturgical changes during their adolescence. The 20-30-year-olds grew up with religious scandal and an increasingly secular church and during their college career, are choosing to revert back to the traditions. Although traditional Latin Masses exist across the country, we were also able to identify that traditional Catholic strains are mostly coming from the East and the Midwest.

We began these interviews in February 2020 and continued to conduct interviews through the end of May 2020, charting changes in daily Mass, prayer, and veiling routines for these women throughout the COVID-19 crisis. COVID-19 has made some women stronger in their faith through online experiences, but for others, who are drawn to traditional Catholicism because it involves the sacredness of space and sacramentals, they have struggled with their faith without the physical objects, spaces, and people that create that sense of transcendence and otherworldliness. We determined that their experience depended not on the strength of their faith but rather on their profession, their access to the Internet, and their living situation during the crisis.

This study therefore contributes to anthropological research related to women in religion, traditional Orthodox Christianity, and religion in times of crisis, offering an interesting perspective about how traditional Catholics, women in particular, respond to a global crisis that affects access to religious resources, including Mass. This study opens doors for future publications related to the traditional Catholic women community, religious Internet forms, and Christian faith experienced in times of crisis.