



**Devrim Mavi, Pernilla Ouis, Anne Sofie Roald, Per Wirtén**  
**They removed the veil**

It started as an act of radicalism. Anne Sofie Roald and Pernilla Ouis adopted the headscarf back in the 1980s at the same time as political Islam began to grow. Now they are part of a global trend towards secularisation in which more and more women are shedding their headscarves and veils.



The headscarf or veil is a highly controversial religious symbol. In the late 1990s, when serious debate about the headscarf was just beginning in Sweden, converts Anna Sofie Roald and Pernilla Ouis stepped forward to explain and defend it in the Swedish media. As Muslim women and articulate academics, they became the face of Islam in the Swedish public eye. But the headscarf also brought them an overwhelming sense of representing all Muslims, and of being constantly stared at.

After more than twenty years, they have taken off their headscarves, their reasons being both personal and political. The headscarves no longer stand for the radicalism that the men of the Islamic movements claim. It was hard, too, to defend an item of clothing that was a barrier between outside and inside. The headscarf did not offer liberation. Their sense of being liberated came from their professional roles as academics and from feminist ideology.

**Arena:** What made you initially decide to adopt the headscarf?

**Pernilla Ouis:** I'm white and I don't have a Muslim name, but I wanted to be visible as a Muslim. I was young, 21 or 22, and the headscarf was radical, a break with social norms. It was an act of identity and solidarity. The headscarf was, after all, a form of nun's habit, a desexualization, symbolizing humility and piety. Some of the rhetoric was to do with personal appearance being unimportant, a sort of feminist stance. But ultimately, there's no denying it was because I had a Muslim husband, and he wanted me to wear a headscarf.

Wearing the headscarf was incredibly hard work to begin with. More than anything, I thought it made me look bloody awful. That was the worst thing, apart from being stigmatised. It makes you look naked and exposed.

**Anne Sofie Roald:** If I'd had to answer this question six years ago, my answer would have been totally different from the one I'm giving now, because we are constantly reconstructing our perceptions. If people ask me today, I say: well

yes, it was because I was pressurized into wearing the headscarf. I became a Muslim in 1982 and the pressure came not just from *one* man, but from a number of men around me. When I became a Muslim, I had no idea you were supposed to wear the headscarf. I've always been a seeker in life, and I'm a Muslim even without a headscarf. When I came into contact with Muslims, they said women had to wear the headscarf, but nobody did that in Norway then. Some Pakistani and Moroccan women went round with simple cotton scarves tossed casually over their hair. But the Muslim group had greater expectations of me as a convert, and I was one of the first in Norway to wear the headscarf.

**Arena:** Are greater demands made on female converts than on other Muslims?

**ASR:** Definitely. We were paraded in the media and sent onto the barricades. Muslims have low self-esteem in relation to the West, but then we emerged from the ranks of the Nordic people and said "we're Muslims". A female convert will tend to be married to a man who is a first generation immigrant. There's a lot of external pressure. It's a cultural attitude that follows a hierarchical gender model. It has a lot to do with persuasion. We wanted to be good Muslims but we didn't know how. So who taught us? Our husbands, of course.

**PO:** Yes, men who were politically active. We converted in the 1980s, and those were political times. Islamism had gone from strength to strength, and many Islamists moved to Sweden because they couldn't work openly for that form of Islam in their home countries. We thought they came representing the truth, but they were part of a political movement in their home countries and, in fact, globally.

**Arena:** You feel you were exploited, in other words?

**PO:** No, I think we attracted a lot of attention and made a sort of "Islam career" out of it. The attention was a boost to our self-esteem, too.

**Arena:** What was it like going out in a headscarf for the first time? How did those around you react?

**PO:** When I converted, I told my husband I would never wear the headscarf. Yet I soon found myself in the bathroom, practising with a towel wrapped round my head. At first I would look people in the face to see what their reaction was, how they looked at me, but I gradually learned never to look at people. A friend asked, "How can you bear going around like that? Everybody looks at you." Having people's gaze focused on me like that has certainly been hard. I still lower my eyes.

**ASR:** I started with light cotton scarves. I feel I was pressurized. Not to become part of Islam. But about the way I looked. In the end you get used to it and don't notice people looking at you.

**Arena:** What did your families say?

**PO:** They found it difficult, and I can understand that. My sister became a Muslim before I did. So I'd experienced what it was like, being the close relation of a convert. There was something hurtful about the way Islam became more important to her than I was. A lot of converts change their names, and that can upset their parents. One of my relations said, "We've been seeing you

since you were little, and now you won't show yourself to your old uncle." The headscarf is also a signal to men: "You're actually attracted to me". There's a distasteful sort of view of men behind the headscarf.

**ASR:** The problem with the headscarf is that you turn yourself into an outsider. The day you put on the headscarf, you show that you don't want anything to do with "them". You feel different and distance yourself from the rest of the world. I isolated myself. I only socialised with people I knew, and thought they were the only ones who could understand me — nobody else.

**Arena:** Does a headscarf-wearing woman find herself excluded from society?

**ASR:** In Swedish society it is a genuine problem for women who wear headscarves to find jobs. But it's important to stress that the discrimination not only comes from Swedish society. To be honest, the main problem is that this group isolates itself. This has to do with their perception of being a minority — a minority in global terms, based on the idea of Muslims as an oppressed group, even though there are thousands of millions of them. In Sweden, there's a strong sense of minority thinking among Muslims. I'm currently reading Doris Lessing's *Martha Quest* books. The third book is about her encounter with Communism. She gets divorced and joins a group of Communists. It's like reading about what happened to me with Islam. You're in a minority, and you isolate yourself.

**Arena:** You said that when you adopted the headscarf, your identity became somehow associated with shame: you felt almost ashamed when you wore it. But people can also express their identity in clothes that give them a sense of superiority and pride. Did you experience anything like that?

**PO:** I eventually came to feel a sort of pride. The sense of inferiority and of being on the defensive transformed itself into opposition. A sort of radicalism. You find strength within your own group, and we reinforced our own truth. As long as I was within the Muslim group, the headscarf was entirely logical. It was God's word. I don't know if I felt any shame, but I did feel stupid. And that was hard to take. I did well at school, I was intelligent and interested in politics and then suddenly I was "stupid" in other people's eyes for having voluntarily put myself in an inferior position to a man who had persuaded me to wear the headscarf. But as converts, we had to follow the rules: *plus royaliste que le roi*. We had to be better than all the rest.

**ASR:** For me there was somehow a permanent sense of shame, but I boosted my own confidence by thinking in terms of our being a minority. I was part of a "we", and all the rest were going to Hell. I do still wear a headscarf when I visit the Muslim world. In Jordan it has a practical function. If I go without a headscarf, I'm often treated badly. I don't think that's a good thing, but I'm pragmatic. I don't get shown respect for wearing the headscarf, but at least I get a reasonable reception. It is also to do with the circles I move in when I'm in Jordan. I meet "ordinary people", and since I'm researching Islamism I also meet Islamists.

**Arena:** You are both academics and have worn the headscarf. How does the image of academia as a symbol of education and enlightenment fit with the image of the headscarf as a symbol of non-enlightenment?

**PO:** For me, the two contrasting worlds were no longer compatible. I felt like an impostor, whichever world I was in. I couldn't teach in gender studies that

gender is socially constructed and then go home to where gender roles were God-given. That created a conflict for me because I do genuinely believe gender is a social construction.

**ASR:** It's all about the way things have developed. In the 1980s, Islam was fairly coherent and closely held together. Then all of a sudden a lot of different groups emerged, and that started a process of relativization; people started to see that one faith could be as good as any other.

**Arena:** The idea of true Islam foundered?

**ASR:** yes, and after 9/11 there was an explosion of splinter groups and factions. Before 9/11, more and more women started wearing the headscarf, and more became Islamists. Now it's just the opposite. More and more are taking off their headscarves, and there's more and more relativization of faiths. People can see that things aren't as simple as if you have a single faith. Now it's much harder to maintain the idea of the one true faith.

**Arena:** You say the events are developing in the same direction as you are and women are taking off their headscarves. But what we see in the media belies that. We can see what's happening in Gaza. The veils are still there.

**ASR:** When we speak in terms of global conflicts, we refer to a phenomenon known as "Cultural defence". Islam has been used as a driving force against the West. It has put a brake on the secularisation process because it doesn't want to become like the West. When I say more and more women are discarding their headscarves, I mean that this is the case in Sweden and Norway. But I think it will happen in other places too. Islamization is a reaction to processes of modernization and secularization. In my view, there is a change on the way.

**PO:** Starting to wear the headscarf or veil is a counter-reaction to the de-Islamization that has been going on for quite some time. Now we are getting the reaction to the wave of Islamization, and that includes the removal of headscarves. Take Iran for example, they were first with the development of Islamization as a counter-reaction. I think something will happen there. Admittedly the ayatollahs are a strong force politically, but if you look at the ordinary people, a great many of them want to discard their veils. The veil no longer represents the will of the people.

**Arena:** What do you think of the French ban on headscarves in schools?

**PO:** I'm against it, because it's making Muslims mobilize over an essentially unimportant issue. That's my main criticism of the headscarf ban. It's just adding fuel to the fire of the fundamentalists' arguments that the West is against them.

**ASR:** And the repercussions will be harder on those living outside France. It will become an important issue for women living in other countries. You can draw the line at the face veil or at headscarves and veils for children. I was at a conference in Yemen where a lot of the women had face veils, and I had some intense debates with them. I can be sitting talking to someone without having the least idea what they are thinking if I can't see their face.

**Arena:** It's easy to be against the face veil; most people would be. But what do we do about it? Ban it in schools?

**ASR:** The veil should be removed when you're in the classroom. Out in the community it's a different matter, though the face veil can cause problems there too. But in the school environment there have to be rules. Banning the face veil isn't anything to do with religious freedom; it's a matter of practical problems.

**PO:** It's a point of order: no one should wear face veils at all. Multiculturalism can't be an undifferentiated mass of principles; each part has to be negotiated on its own merits. There is a general perception that women's head coverings are part of multicultural society. But face veils are hugely controversial, and it's just not acceptable for someone to go around wearing the equivalent of a bank-robber's balaclava.

**Arena:** Can the headscarf *per se* be said to oppress women?

**ASR:** If both men and women had to cover their heads, women's headscarves would not be such an issue. In Judaism, men and women both cover their heads, so the question is not so charged. The problem with the veil or headscarf is that the edict only applies to women.

**PO:** In Islamic Hadith literature, which tells us what the Prophet said and did, there are strong indications that the Prophet wore a veil covering both the head and the face. If the instructions for men's clothing were equally rigid, they would have to cover their hair, too.

**Arena:** Is the headscarf tantamount to oppression?

**ASR:** Yes, because it's men who have defined it. It's purely a matter of who defines what is religious. An awful lot of women wear the headscarf because they think it's God's will, and so it may be, but it's also man's will. That's where the oppression lies. And like Pernilla says, you can go to Islamic literature and discover that men covered their heads and bodies, too.

**PO:** When I wore the headscarf, I found the feminist viewpoint useful. I didn't have to get dolled up, make myself attractive to men. It's a sort of uniform showing I'm not sexually interested, a way of signalling that I'm not available.

The headscarf wasn't all that practical. The worst thing was that it made your head so hot, plus we used safety pins to keep it in place under our chins, because it was important to keep it in place. I lived in a detached house, and every time I wanted to go out into the garden I was supposed to wear it, but it was such a bother to put on and take off so in the end I didn't go out at all. In that way the headscarf became a barrier between inside and outside.

**Arena:** If a woman wants to wear the headscarf, do we then have to defend her right to get a job, to move about freely in society, in spite of the fact that the headscarf is tantamount to oppression?

**ASR:** A headscarf isn't necessarily oppressive in a specific setting; many women wear them of their own free will. But it can be hard to know what free will is. In the minority situation, the headscarf has become a symbolic issue, not only in society at large but also within the group, which can put a lot of pressure on a lot of women. But in our democratic society, a woman who wants to wear a headscarf should have the same rights as everyone else.

**PO:** The headscarf can also be an opportunity for liberation. In the headscarf you have something culturally accepted; you're respected for wearing it. Women often adopt it so they can have that freedom, be active and out of the home since a woman with a headscarf or veil is viewed as morally inviolable. She should on principle be able to dress as she wants.

**Arena:** But philosophically we are on rather shaky ground if something that basically amounts to oppression can still be liberating in specific cases.

**PO:** Actually, we could say the same thing about my protests when my 14-year-old daughter dresses in skimpy outfits. Older men might look at her in a way I find distasteful. There are a lot of things about the female body that need to be discussed more openly. We find it much easier to see these things when they are part of "the other". When western women went to the Orient they found it exciting but were appalled by the veils. Meanwhile, they went about in corsets and didn't see that as oppression of women. Western women have cosmetic surgery, silicone breast and lip implants. Those are the things that I react to.

**Arena:** Is there room for feminism in Islam?

**ASR:** There's a great deal of feminism in Islam. There are a lot of Muslim feminists who subscribe to the secular, western brand of feminism yet still see themselves as Muslims. And then there's also a strong Islamic feminism; Pernilla and I were very involved with that. We looked into things, read texts and analyzed how certain verses should be understood. It's all based on reinterpretations of the Koran and the Hadiths. There is a form of feminism there.

**PO:** It's the art of the possible. How far can you go in interpretations that support women's liberation? We wrote and debated and made the case for Islam standing for equality, but I got to a point where I couldn't force it any further, and yet still remain faithful to the basic tenets of Islam.

**ASR:** The same could be said of Christianity. I'm more pragmatic these days. I pick the aspects of Islam that suit me. And it's important for Muslim feminists to have that option, just as it is for, say, Christian ones. A lot of people who want to believe in God find comfort in that.

**PO:** The problem with Islam and feminism is that there is no sexual liberation: women have no rights to their own sexuality. Strict sexual morality takes precedence over everything in Islam. If an Islamic feminist could ignore sexual morality, then I'd accept that there could be religious feminism. But as things stand, I tend towards secular feminism.

**ASR:** That can change. When we talk about Muslims we think in religious terms regardless of whether a person is secular or not, which we don't do so casually with Christians.

**Arena:** But there is sexual morality in Christianity, too.

**PO:** There's sexual morality in all religions, but the Swedish Church interprets that pretty much as it chooses: there are women priests and openly gay clergy. In Islam, women's liberation and free sexuality stand for decadence. In that respect, Muslims feel superior to the West.

Women have historically been quite free in the Muslim world, but the oppression of women started again with political Islam. My theory is that attitudes were more open and sexuality freer where homosexuality was concerned. We can read that in some of the old writings, and in literature with homoerotic poems for example. But the Muslim world encountered a Christian world with puritanically controlled sexuality and that became the model for rational human behaviour, and then that model became generally accepted.

**Arena:** What made you decide to take off your headscarves?

**PO:** What came first? My altered view of religion, or my divorce? One explanation is that the pressure from my husband had gone. Another interpretation is that I got divorced because I started thinking along different lines. And after the divorce I found myself in new social settings; people outside the Muslim community became important to me.

I was "the one with the headscarf", but I felt it was a false description of who I was. My religiousness had changed, and the headscarf was a symbol of something I could no longer defend. I started wondering why I should have to pay such a high price. Everyone thought I was stupid, thought I had problems with the West. I became so one-dimensional; in every context I was just a Muslim. You could see it as a defeat and say we should have carried on fighting and insisting there was much more to us than that. And we did fight with our headscarves on — we became researchers.

**ASR:** Yes, we did fight. My job, my research, is tremendously important to me. I spoke to many different audiences about my research into converts, feminism, and Islamism. Even so, the first question they asked was always: why do you wear a headscarf? They saw me as a Muslim above all. I asked myself whether I was a Muslim above all, or a researcher, and decided the research was much more important to me. That was why I took off my headscarf. I wanted to decide for myself when I was going to talk about my beliefs.

**Arena:** Do you still consider yourselves Muslims?

**PO:** It's nobody's business what I do and don't believe since we live in a secular society. But if anyone wanted to put a label on me, my preference would be Muslim. I feel emotional ties with Islam.

**ASR:** I am a religious person and believe there are dimensions other than earthly life. That's important to me. So why shouldn't I be a Muslim?

**Arena:** Are there political aspects to your conclusion that the headscarf had become a political symbol for a particular, orthodox variety of Islam?

**ASR:** 9/11 was one important factor. It made me start asking questions about interpretations of Islam. What happened was done in the name of Islam, and we were expected to explain that. I couldn't defend the fact that it had been done in the name of God or Islam. Those behind the attacks said they found support for their actions in the Koran — and it is indeed possible to find there. But you can also go to the Koran and find arguments for peace and understanding. It's the same with the Bible.

**PO:** I felt a kind of dishonesty in defending and explaining something, yet knowing all the time that the Islamists argued for something I couldn't support.

I had an idealized image of Islam. But Islam also has a darker side to which I cannot subscribe.

**Arena:** How did people react to your decision?

**PO:** A lot of them wanted us to come back. But I'd escaped from their way of thinking long before that. The veil was the last step. I'm sorry the Muslims are so disappointed in us. I do feel nostalgic for the time I wore the headscarf. Everything was in a way much simpler then.

**ASR:** If a person escapes she becomes a kind of traitor. Looking at it in terms of sect behaviour, it's always "us" and "them". Islam isn't a sect, but their view of themselves as a minority still has an element of that about it.

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