

BOOK REVIEWS

Modest Fashion: Styling Bodies, Mediating Faith, edited by Reina Lewis. I.B. Tauris, 256pp. Hb. £56, ISBN-13: ISBN: 9781780763828; Pb. £15.99, ISBN-13: 9781780763835.

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A Neo-Orientalist streak often continues to underwrite Euro-American mainstream discourses on religious dress by unequivocally equating it with a refusal of modernity. *Modest Fashion: Styling Bodies, Mediating Faith*, however, examines the issue through the lens of the new hybrid styles of dress that have emerged at the very intersection of religion, modernity and fashion. Recognizing that the concept of modesty possesses multiple and shifting meanings, the book argues that religiously-informed modesty and fashion are not mutually exclusive. As such, the book is to be situated within the broader intellectual framework of post-secularism in which, for example, scholars such as Asad have emphasized the interdependence of the religious and the secular, and Habermas the minoritarian aspect of secularism, globally speaking. This being said, one of the strengths of Reina Lewis' newest edited work is that the authors, hailing from a range of disciplines in which visibility and material culture have become more salient, are engaged with observed and observable phenomena, namely alternative religiously-informed fashionscapes and the internet-driven businesses that have often facilitated them.

This emphasis on everyday practices underscores the re-alignment of fashion and religion, thus providing a novel way of taking seriously both religion and its increasing visibility. Dress, whether examined from the perspective of fashion studies, visual anthropology or material culture, offers

a particularly rich site of analysis in which questions of economics, taste, culture, gender, class and race intersect. Too great an emphasis has generally been and is still placed on Muslim female veiling practices, because of their centrality in colonial discourses and contemporary debates relating to Western national identities. Similarly, more scholarship has emerged on Islamic fashion than on Christian and Jewish religiously-informed female dress. *Modest Fashion* is innovative in that, highlighting a shared similar concept of modesty, it examines the practices and marketing of covering found in all three Abrahamic faiths, tracing both interfaith online encounters and the role of gender in the creation of these new sartorial expressions and interpretations of faith.

The book's structure is threefold. The first and largest part focuses on both online and offline retailing and the convergence of these various niche markets, whereby women of one faith may acquire the accoutrements of another. Moors examines the transnationalization of Islamic fashion, operated through not only online retailers but also the many fashion-savvy blogs and YouTube videos from the perspective of the now global Islamic culture industry. Lewis herself maps the overwhelmingly female world of modest dress as a mode of female religious agency, in which women engage in religious interpretation, whose diversity confirms the role of digital religion in the fragmentation, deterritorialization and hybridization of discourses and identities. Tarlo traces Muslim-Jewish encounters, focusing on the online conversations about or with Muslims found on Orthodox Jewish women's websites, while Goldman Carrel studies Hasidic fashion and fashion retail in a part of Brooklyn, concluding that its European, Old World, and royal aesthetic, serve—in their opposition to American mainstream fashion and society—to produce and preserve a distinctly Jewish identity.

Modesty is a notion that transcends religion and religious communities, elucidating why the second part of the book treats 'modesty without religion'. Miller's essay on denim blue jeans addresses the ambiguity of the term. Qualifying blue jeans as post-semiotic in their global ordinariness, he argues that it is precisely this lack as signifier and thus inconspicuousness that explains why denim is taboo in certain Orthodox Jewish circles, in order to adduce that modesty sometimes implies seeking distinctiveness rather than invisibility. Cameron examines the range of reasons other than faith (weight, age, pregnancy, comfort, etc.) that prompt women to dress modestly, through non-participant observation on web fora. If she finds that secular and religious women agree in their critique of the objectification of women, the author concludes that the discourses surrounding the

issue of modesty differ, highlighting in particular the discomfort of secular women over the association of modesty with religion. Wilson picks up on this notion in her chapter, exploring the reasons why religious modest dress is disliked in secular societies. While the points she lists are indeed correct, her central premise, that secular norms, practices and ideologies necessarily confer more individual agency than religious ones, can be and has been easily problematized.

The third and last section addresses the relationship between modest dress and the media. Hoggard examines why religious modest dress is never featured in the style pages of the mainstream press. More importantly, she articulates the complex, because contradictory, societal attitudes to sartorial modesty, through the analysis of media reactions to celebrity dressing, from praise of the Duchess of Cambridge's modest style-sense to deprecation of gourmet icon Nigella Lawson's now (in)famous donning of a burqini.

Modest Fashion emerged out of a large research project on modest dressing headed by Professor Lewis. Two industry panel-discussions that took place under the aegis of the project are reproduced in edited form and constitute the final chapter. Their inclusion further underscores the book's emphasis on tangible and living phenomena, and the wider aim of employing academic analysis to shed light on and make sense of current trends and tendencies evident in popular culture. The book is useful in its contemporaneity and scope. Its focus on information and communication technologies adds to the growing study of digital religion, as it equally points to the need to continue developing theoretical tools and models for this field.

References

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