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'This intriguing collection offers a fresh perspective on modesty and fashion linkage, a topic that has become so important lately. By examining modest dressing across faiths and contexts, and detailing diverse ways religions, markets and the internet interact, shape and are shaped by lived experience, the chapters in this book vividly show why studying fashion and religion matters. The diversity of the book, with contributors from academia, business world and the media, and its focus on the interrelationships among fashion production and consumption practices of Christian, Jewish and Muslim faith groups make it a constant delight to read. Overall, a wonderful discussion of new configurations of "modest fashions" in the contemporary world.'

Özlem Sandıkçı, Bilkent University

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MODEST FASHION

Styling Bodies, Mediating Faith

edited by Reina Lewis

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NOTES

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FOREWORD

Linda Woodhead

It's a sign of how new and original the subject of this book is that it is likely to arouse perplexity as well as interest. Were it about 'veiling' or 'religious symbols' or even 'religious dress', there would be less confusion. There are sociologists, anthropologists, historians and specialists in the study of religion for whom the idea of studying material cultures and even dress cultures is not novel. There are also political scientists and legal specialists for whom the idea of studying controversies around the Muslim hijab or Sikh turban is familiar. What is discombobulating is the combination of religion and fashion. But it is this which constitutes the genius of the book, and the research on which it rests, and which allows it to make such an innovative and important contribution to a number of fields, including the study of religion.

To a much greater extent than studies which concentrate on established locations and more conventional manifestations of religion, this exploration of modest fashion enables us to see how religion has been changing – not declining or dying, but transforming. I have been arguing for decades that we have witnessed a tectonic shift in the religious landscape of the Western world since the 1980s – but we are only just beginning to take seriously this 'de-reformation' of religion. Old forms are shrinking; new forms have arisen to take their place. There are a plethora of new religious actors, drawing on new resources and technologies, joined in new forms of association, and busy modifying and reinterpreting traditional beliefs and practices from many parts of the world.

The fact that fashion is so marginal to historic, authorised and 'orthodox' forms of religion is precisely why it offers such a good sight-line into an area of new religious vitality. We as scholars may not have appreciated that fashion and religion can mix, but the research which this book presents leaves little doubt that fashion choices are central to the religious lives of many people. The findings also reveal a great deal about why this should be;

and the reasons are the same as those which make it hard for conventional approaches to religion to take these manifestations seriously.

A key point is that the fashion world is seen to be dominated by women – not just as producers, but as consumers. Yet ‘real’ religion is normally assumed to be dominated by men – who occupy the power positions of religion both ‘really’ and symbolically. One of the most striking features of the religious shifts of the last few decades is that women have been at the forefront. This is not unprecedented in the sense that women have long outnumbered men in the Christian churches in the West, but what is new is that many now operate outside such organised religion and have been busy creating – or reclaiming – their own forms of religion, both as producers and consumers. When I took part in a study of alternative, ‘holistic’, forms of spirituality in the town of Kendal in Cumbria at the turn of the twenty-first century, we found that 80 per cent of those offering and participating in mind, body and spirit activities were women (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, Sointu and Woodhead 2008). The visibility and significance of second- and third-generation Muslim women in Britain, and more widely in Europe, is also widely recognised. What is less often noticed is that many of the latter are actively engaged in interpreting and re-forming Islam in a way that marks a new departure in the history of Islam (Chapman, Naguib, Woodhead 2011; on women’s new leadership in Islam outside the West, see Bano and Kalmbach 2012). In other words, the fact that women are independent, influential actors in fashion makes it an obvious rather than a surprising place to start looking for interesting religious activity, as this book confirms.

Of course, a major reason for women’s high profile in both fashion and contemporary religion is that these are – or, in the case of religion in the West, have become – areas of low prestige. This is both cause and effect of the way in which these spheres are often trivialised or ignored. However, it also turns them into spheres where women can act autonomously and creatively, outside of male control and as leaders in their own right. By paying attention to the margins rather than the centre, research such as this turns power relations upside down and, by shifting the dominant gaze, allows us to see what otherwise falls below the scholarly horizon.

Another reason why fashion and religious reinvention work together is that they both have to do with ‘everyday’, material, quotidian, matters – and with the body. These are also coded as trivial in our societies, in contrast to ‘real’ religion which has to do with the extraordinary, sublime, transcendental and other-worldly – the high rather than the low, the

spiritual rather than the bodily, the sacred rather the profane or mundane (Woodhead 2010). But the forms of religion which have been growing fastest since the 1970s are precisely those which have been most effective in offering routes to heal, empower and enchant everyday life and heal the body – Charismatic Christianity being the most notable example, but alternative forms of spirituality also illustrating the trend. Yet again, this book shifts our gaze, allowing us to see that things like dress, which are often viewed as most mundane, can equally be viewed as most vital, most basic to human life, relationship, identity and communication – with the sublime being the real luxury.

What this book's interest in fashion also gives access to is the growing importance for contemporary religion of consumer capitalism, the market and the internet. Again, because of a fixation with older forms of organised religion, whose primary relationship was with the state not the economy, scholarship has tended to view such domains as hostile to religion – the materialistic as opposed to the spiritual, the selfish as opposed to the selfless (e.g. Carrette and King 2004). The chapters which follow give the lie to this assumption. It is the market and the internet which have allowed modest fashion to break out of narrow religious community-based circles and go global, crossing the boundaries of a single religious community or tradition, and catering to all who have access to the universal cultures and currencies of shopping, money and internet access. The fact that blogs, websites and chat rooms cater for Muslims, orthodox Jews, varieties of Christians (including the Latter-day Saints), and non-religious women may surprise those schooled in the traditional idea that such groups are sealed off from one another by the walls of organised tradition, but is less surprising to those who realise that religion is now located not only in communities of face-to-face interaction and in centralised and hierarchical forms of religious organisation, but also in cyberspace, in virtual networks of elective connection and in occasional gatherings – ranging from Hajj to Glastonbury Festival to evangelical conventions. These are global not in the sense that they are standardised across time and space ('MacDonaldised'), but because different communities of taste, aspiration, value-commitment and so on can now link to one another across national and traditional religious and ethnic boundaries. It is not a matter of global homogenisation and 'broadcasting', but of new opportunities for de-differentiation and 'narrowcasting'. It is through micro-level convergences and conformities that a process of differentiated religious globalisation is effected. And how better to recognise those with whom we have something in common than by their dress and fashion sense?

There is little doubt then that this book upsets some orthodoxies. I have tried to explain why it upsets an old-fashioned, orthodox view of what religion is, who its main actors are and where it is located. But it also upsets a prevalent secular orthodoxy, widespread in Western societies, which holds that women who dress modestly for religious reasons are passive victims of patriarchal religious traditions and associated forms of male oppression – in contrast to secular modern women who are seen as liberated agents of their own self-determined pathways of fulfilment. As several authors argue, it is this ‘othering’ secular myth which makes the mainstream fashion industry – and the newspapers, magazines and other media which support it – reluctant to give any space to modest fashion. Far from being open, tolerant and liberated, their own prejudices and exclusions are revealed in the process. The chapters which follow remind us how constrained and uniform-like our secular fashion can be, and how narrow-minded our media. The entrepreneurs and consumers who are the subject of this book contend with all this, defying our stereotypes with their distinctive mix of free-spiritedness, piety, creativity and attachment to the ideal of modesty.

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