Introduction

Faith/Fashion/Forward—“Dress” and the Sacred

Frederick S. Roden

University of Connecticut, Stamford, CT, USA

In a fifteenth-century work of English Christian mysticism, the *Showings of Divine Love*, Julian of Norwich writes that God “is our clothing which for love enwraps us, holds us, and all encloses us because of His tender love, so that He may never leave us” (15). This metaphor of the Divine as clothing seems somewhat counterintuitive, given most traditions’ focus on the immaterial spiritual essence juxtaposed to the physical form. We might see the trope as thoroughly incarnational: God took embodiment through the human Mary, so every mortal shares in this experience. Yet the notion of God as clothing is relational, insofar as Julian’s theology is amatory. Christ’s sacrifice is a literal labor of love, a birthing of the Divine Being’s care for Creation. It is also material. Julian lived at an historical moment when the cultural production of busy market towns, the international trade of ports, and the nascent bourgeois economies of “fabric-ation” had hit the runway. Clothing mattered in her culture, to demonstrate rank and express human modesty after the fall from grace that happened in Eden. The design, manufacturing, wear, and gaze meant more to her premodern, largely unlettered, society. Comparable to the sacrifice of the Mass performed and seen, sovereignty and sanctity were conveyed by vestments, both clerical and lay. The revolutionary notion found in Julian’s statement is the transcendence between worlds. Heaven and earth may meet in soul and body. But the sanctification of all created thing (one of Julian’s favorite expressions) occurs through this metaphor of fashion. We are fashioned, yet not subject to “fashion.” For all time, this metaphor of clothing by God serves as a relational gesture of love exceeding all hierarchies known in the world, rejecting the privilege associated with any rank, human or non-human. Julian’s statement and her systematic theology posit the holy work of making goods to be worn and the performance of the self through them. Most significantly, she proclaims the sanctity of the human relational interaction. God is present in every human act of wrapping, holding, and enclosing.

I begin this introduction with a Christian example for several reasons. This special issue was inspired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2018 exhibition, *Heavenly Bodies*, on Catholicism and fashion. It has been our goal to look beyond those two fault lines: both in the margins of the Christian traditions as well as through the lenses of other world religions. In the essays contained here, we see broad observations and subtle nuances within that Catholicism (and related faiths); we also find how others (reflecting, rejecting, or thoroughly independently) express the relationship between fashion, faith, and identity. More significantly, however, as in Julian's quotation above, we see a deep challenge to the trivialization of that which is worn, what is made. The performance of the self and indeed material culture, "all created thing," are neither secondary nor pejoratively aesthetic to the depth of essential truth or meaning. As the Western literature of the late nineteenth century shows (in the Aesthetic Movement and Decadence), the relationship between sacred and profane is not dichotomous, any more than appearances are always surface rather than substance. Scholars of religion are keenly aware of this reality, given the importance of rite and ritual. But when we move out into the secular world, or spaces where private religious identities are publicized, how do we label these supposed opposites? When a spiritual leader dons designer goods, is s/he polluted, crassly "accessorizing," or simply negotiating the same divide each person must traverse within material culture? None of us can be Francis of Assisi—the silk merchant's son, stripping naked in public of his frivolous wares, doing the work of renunciation. Even habits (good or bad) must be fashioned. Instead, we see in the essays contained here the thoughtful and deliberate engagement between collective and individual religious identity and other categories of being and belonging.

Julie Glodt's article on medieval priestly vestments opens our investigation into these issues. The performative act of clothing the priest served as separation between clergy and laity. Of course, each culture and faith has its own public displays of such rites and rituals, often to declare the movement across that liminal space from the one to the other. Glodt argues that "clothing's meaning shifted from segregation (between laymen and priests) to assimilation (of the priest to Christ) in the late Middle Ages." Akin to Julian's embodied esotericism, the *imitatio Christi* enacts this notion of clothing as a second skin. If clothes made the first man, here Glodt suggests that they also make the new man, both Christ the new Adam and the priest as vicar of Christ. Here and in Diana Pereira's study on the practice of clothing the sculptures of saints, "fashion" bridges between the human and nonhuman. In Catholic devotion, there is interplay between God, the saints, these sculptures/"dolls," and real people. The statues have wills of their own, but like humans require the modesty of

clothing. Historically, gender difference often empowered women in this way. Rather than due to an eye for fashion, women's sex brought them into positions of honor with respect to clothing the venerated object. A male priest should not be dressing the Virgin Mary. Even in relation to the doll motif, these statues have been treated as living bodies to be touched, bejeweled, and clothed with offerings honoring their donors. Glodt and Pereira bring this sharper lens to these two aspects of premodern and Early Modern Christianity. Through Glodt, we see the evolution of clerical authority insofar as clothing virtually divinized the man who would be priest. In contrast, Pereira's work demonstrates not only the lay ownership of the vernacular experience of piety but how material objects of creation take on a life of their own in the imagination of the devout collective.

Staying with this Christian theme, later essays demonstrate different kinds of negotiations. Vincent Lankewish writes on two 1960s films about nuns and their roles as models for young modish women. His essay points not only to the changing times of the Second Vatican Council and the emergent feminist movement, but also to a regular theme in this issue concerning concealment versus exposure. The historical moment is key, given postwar imperatives for women's pursuit of beauty and consumerist consumption. But in the films, the truer truths pursued in faith privilege inner devotion over outer style. This negotiation with tradition is found across religion and popular culture within the changing roles of women, wherein their lives, desires, and indeed activism are made known. The stripping of the altars here—a kind of Reformation itself—put practicality in conflict with standards of beauty. Greater freedom and equality might require sacrifice of the beautiful. These issues were critical in the nineteenth century to which I refer above. The “useful” and the “beautiful” are often competitive, and complementarity or combination the best to be hoped for. Likewise, elitism and material privilege may yield to depths previously unknown. Consider Oscar Wilde's 1897 prison letter *De Profundis*, in which suffering rather than pleasure is the ultimate art. Humility becomes a mode of self-realization. His 1891 essay “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” rejected these concepts, lacking the lived experience. Similarly, at the end of his Decadent search, Joris-Karl Huysmans's protagonist Des Esseintes (in the 1884 novel *A Rebours*) eventually turns to mysticism after trying out everything else. It is worth noting that the era of the 1960s—its pragmatism and later radicalism negotiating with consumerism—nurtured both the cult of the saints, such as fascination with Lourdes and other sites of Marian apparitions, as well as guides for pursuing the spiritual life. Consider the popularity of Catholic convert Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk who pioneered East-West interfaith communications about contemplation and meditation, focusing on Buddhism.

These nineteenth-century legacies and cross-cultural phenomena are reflected in Kyunghee Pyun's article on East Asian Christian school uniforms, which she compares to monastic habits. Pyun points out stasis and stability in the arena of "fashion" (as collective identity) in relation to profound cultural change. Unlike the evolution of Christian school uniforms elsewhere, Pyun points to the legacy of colonialism, the work of Catholic and Protestant missionaries, that has fixed particular types in certain kinds of (post)colonial schools in Asia. The humility and modesty associated with Western Christian religious orders coexist with a particular nationalism. Even where 1990s updates (to 1870s models) slightly dislodged the entrenchment of traditional school uniforms, the values associated with statehood and religiosity have been maintained despite some casual loosening. In contrast, we see in Elizabeth Bucar's analysis of Shepard Fairey's image for feminist protest politics post-Trump an uneasy coexistence between outsider religion and national identity. In the infamous representation, a Muslim woman covers her head with a modesty garment (*hijab*) that is the American flag. This artwork was created by a non-Muslim man, based on a photograph by a male Muslim-American. The Muslim woman in the photo shoot does not ordinarily cover her head. Contrary to the blending and perhaps positive appropriation found in Pyun's concern, Bucar objects to any exploitation that blurs the diversity of experience, stating that "Muslim women don't need saving."

It is this topic of mixing and agency that proves most provocative in two essays included in this issue. Museum curator Warren Klein writes on Jewish circumcision gowns, beginning with a nineteenth-century example. Since there is no religious precedent scripting the wardrobe for this male rite, Klein points to the aspects of acculturation, assimilation, and relation to the host culture for these "internal others" in western Christianity. Klein posits that the dresses were likely made from patterns used for baptismal/christening gowns. In a seemingly seamless way, like the work of Reform Judaism in the nineteenth century, Jews developed strategies for remaining fully Jewish while adapting customs and traditions of the lands where they were fully or partially emancipated as full citizens. This positive experience of hybridity that maintained the integrity of the faith and the persons who professed it may be contrasted with Rina Arya's pointed critique of the cultural appropriation of Hindu symbolism by Western fashion designers in recent decades. The usage here differs from the camp deployment of Christian religious symbols, where the shared understanding of image or representation can gauge the degree of reverence or irreverence. While Arya focuses on Hindu calendar art and the appeal of Hindu symbols, she delves into the 1990s New Age boom of "Indo-chic" and "Asian chic" among yoga clothing. In the decade of checking the "spiritual but not

religious” box, many Westerners have, however reductively, substituted these random fragments to serve as “spirituality” among the “nonreligious.” Another example is the presence of “Zen” stores in affluent American malls and shopping areas, given the striking contrast between consumerist objectification and a philosophy that clearly resists it. Arya details the negative response from Hindus to the misuse and misrepresentation of Hindu images on western merchandise. She asserts that in the realm of fashion, there is also the question of modesty, wherein the symbol becomes sexualized. Here ways of looking, not just seeing, are important. The problem is not just the use of the image or even how or where one wears it, but the way one looks at it: the appropriateness of the appropriating gaze.

This issue also contains an essay reviewing recent publications that concern Islam or Judaism and fashion. Here we have the clear “others” to the Christian West, increasingly internal and/or deeply acculturated, wherein history and contemporary thought still inflect and reflect a tradition. In Muslim Studies, we find Western critics depicting the global and local practices particularly with respect to women and personal agency, how Muslim identity stands in relation to other categories of target markets (“Brand Islam” versus the LGBTQ “Pink Pound,” for example), and the notion that digital media is giving voice and visibility to the performance of the pious/modest/Muslim and “fashioned”/fashionable self. In contrast, Jewish Studies has already established a secular critique from within that examines the dual identity of Jewishness and belonging—that may or may not have a specifically religious, versus cultural, identification. I suggest that the emergence of new ways of being Muslim and a strategy of struggle for belonging are “fashioning” identity as well as cultural studies.

There will always be those for whom “fashion” connotes the trivial and time-sensitive—made in the moment rather than the timeless classicism of essential, immaterial religious values. But as we see in the recent popularization of “mindfulness” as a product for sale, the aesthetic appeal of living deeply and sensuously in the moment of experience (hearkening back to Victorian Walter Pater) is the stuff of religion; or at least that of faith.

Work Cited

Julian of Norwich, *Showings: Long Text with a Commentary*, transl. John-Julian Swanson. *Love's Trinity: A Companion to Julian of Norwich with a Commentary by Frederick S. Roden*. Collegeville (MN): Liturgical Press, 2009.