

Book Review: Modest Fashion: Styling Bodies, Mediating Faith

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*In **Modest Fashion**, scholars and journalists discuss the emergence of a niche market for modest fashion among and between Jewish, Christian and Muslim faith groups as well as secular dressers. Crossing creeds and cultures, analysing commentary alongside commerce, the book aims to explore the personal and the political as well as religious, aesthetic and economic implications of contemporary dress practices and the debates that surround them. Reviewed by **Tina Basi**.*



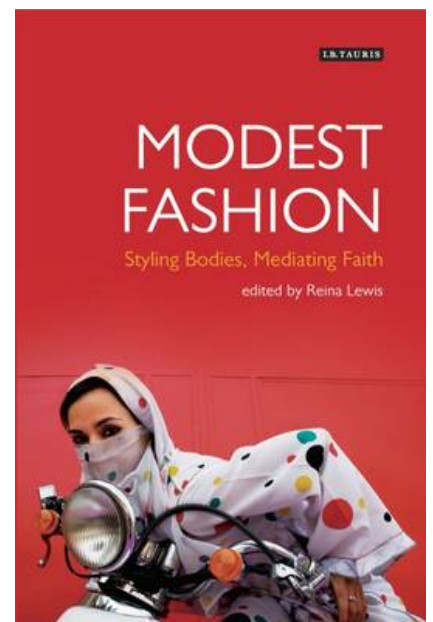
Modest Fashion: Styling Bodies, Mediating Faith. Reina Lewis (ed.). I.B. Tauris. May 2013.

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Hardly a day goes by without a news story appearing in which the modesty of women is discussed. Miley Cyrus's MTV VMAs appearance, the Slane girl, Steubenville, Kate Middleton, Madonna, to name but a few. 'Too slutty,' 'too conservative,' 'too old,' 'too young,' 'what was she thinking?' 'mutton dressed as lamb,' can often be found in the captions.

The policing and regulating of women's bodies through modest dressing and the counter move of autonomy and rebellion expressed through fashion and trends is not a new story. It has been over twenty years since Judith Butler wrote in *Gender Trouble* that, "identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results," enhancing our understanding of sartorial choice as sartorial strategy.

Modest Fashion: Styling Bodies, Mediating Faith, a collection of contributions on new configurations of 'modest fashion', is edited by [Reina Lewis](#), who has previously authored [Gendering Orientalism](#) and [Rethinking Orientalism](#). Unlike other contributions to the discussion of gender, identity, and sartorial strategies (see Carla Freeman's [High Tech and High Heels in the Global Economy](#); Irene Guenther's [Nazi Chic?](#); and Emma Tarlo's [Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India](#)), this collection sidesteps discussions of the performative aspects of clothing choices and the way in which they function to construct identity and cultural meaning. Rather, the book explores the intersection of faith, fashion, and ICTs, particularly through the use of social media and online shopping.



Lewis sets up the collection by writing that modest fashion is a young woman's game, but rather than youthful rebellion or experimentation, 'modest dressers' tend to be regarded as, "representatives of essentialized, unchanging collective religious identities rather than as individuated youthful style seekers" (p.3). The key questions posed by the book ask, does modest fashion, "help to keep people in the faith... or does it dangerously dilute religious identifications?" (p.12). Through a detailed discussion of Internet retail, blogs, and forums, the book unpicks the way in which women experience and engage with fashion and faith.

The chapter by Annelies Moors, "'Discover the Beauty of Modesty': Islamic Fashion Online", is an especially enjoyable read that describes the use of social media and discussion forums. The personal accounts and narratives of women's experiences shopping and the points where authors noted the localising of web stores and the Islamic clothing guidelines will be of interest to many researchers working on identity and technologies.

The chapter by Lewis, “Development of Women as Religious Interpreters and Intermediaries”, is perhaps the strongest in the collection, unsurprisingly as much of the research behind the book comes from Lewis’s [AHRC/ESRC-funded research project](#) on modest fashion at the London College of Fashion. Lewis accepts that the Internet is not neutral and not experienced by everyone in the same way, but argues that the deterritorialised and dematerialised nature of online sales and related communication is essential to the emergence of niche markets. Her chapter also better defines ‘modest fashion’ as, simultaneously, a taste-making mechanism, ideological category, and marketing device. She goes on to say that through the relentless spread of social media and the blogosphere commercial websites are “expanding their role in commentary as well as sales” (p.44).



A sign requesting modest dress in Zefat, Hazafon, Israel. Credit: [tracealex](#) CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Some readers may feel frustrated with the book at times. I often found myself searching for deeper insights and analysis in to the motives or objectives as to why these women were choosing to dress modestly. The book often felt like a description rather than an analysis of the emerging niche markets and commentary. Clothing and fashion is experienced and whilst discussion is of course relevant and can influence choice, the motives behind the ‘ideological category’ of modest fashion were left unexplored.

Linda Woodhead perhaps gets closest to this in the introduction, where she acknowledges that fashion is significant to the discussion of religion precisely because it is a sphere where, “women can act autonomously and creatively, outside of male control and as leaders in their own right,” (xviii). Lewis herself does offer a brief nod to this unexplored area (unexplored in this collection at least) when she writes that in Mahmood’s study of Islamic revivalist women in Cairo in the 70s:

“women may dress modestly for all sorts of reasons (making a political statement, avoiding unwelcome male attention, accommodating community norms, gaining social mobility or status)” (p. 43-44).

My own sense was that avoiding unwelcome male attention, spatial mobility and social mobility played a large part in choosing modest fashion, but this collection does not engage with such a discussion. At heart, the book is about consumerism and consumption and less about production or construction of identity. With the exception of Elizabeth Wilson’s chapter on religious beliefs, the book does not explore the cultural baggage and the assumed responsibility for women as ‘cultural carriers’ (see Yuval-Davis’s chapter “Identity, Politics, and Women’s Ethnicity,” in *Identity, Politics, and Women*) – much of which is mediated through clothing.

Though Lewis writes that “women’s online discourse about modesty contributes a distinctively gendered strand to the emergence online of new forms of religious discourse often regarded as a male sphere of activity” (p.48) and that “women style mediators and entrepreneurs are themselves constructing innovative forms of religious discourse online, creating cross-faith interactions that span commerce and conversation,” (p.49), the other chapters in the book do not explore this observation. The book’s strength lies in the discussion of fashion and ICTs as a way in to the mainstream discussions of religion and autonomy.

Other chapters in the book include debating modesty on the Internet (Tarlo), consumer experience (Goldman Carrell), and notions of modesty (Miller). Miller posits quite a delightful theory in suggesting that wearing denim jeans represents its own particular morality, albeit unintentional and unconscious. “It seems that it is the orthodox religions that are trying to cultivate what we could term immodest claims to being conspicuous and morally superior...who repudiate a form of clothing precisely because it has been more effective...in becoming the material culture of modesty and self-effacement” (p.135). He leaves the reader with the wonderful image that we might all consider telling our children, ‘when you grow up I want you to be ordinary, I want you to wear jeans’.

Tina Basi is a Sociologist working as LSE’s Knowledge Exchange Manager. She spent the time between receiving her PhD and her return to academia as a corporate ethnographer working mostly for Intel Corporation and also working on smaller ethnographic research projects for the Department of Health, Ministry of Justice, and Westminster Council. Her return to academic life coincided with the ‘impact agenda’ and Tina oversees the School’s allocation of the Higher Education Innovation Fund and works across the submissions for REF 2014 Impact Case Studies. Her doctoral research has been published by Routledge, titled *Women, Identity, and India’s Call Centre Industry*. [Read more reviews by Tina](#).

