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Modest Fashion: Styling Bodies, Mediating Faith

Reina Lewis, editor. London, IB Tauris 232pp Paperback Hardcover (£15.99). ISBN 9780415669962

Reviewed by Katherine Bullock¹

Finally it seems the academic study of *hijab* has come of age. The authors in this collection neither treat *hijab* as an object of curiosity or derision, nor wonder at Muslim women's "false consciousness," rather to treat this 'piece of cloth' and the dress code that comes with it, as a 'normal' object of academic enquiry. One of the ways this is achieved is by expanding the investigation beyond Muslim women, to include Jewish and Christian dress, as well as secular women who dress in similar ways albeit for different reasons. And so the title captures this broad focus, using the term 'modest' dress, rather than a narrower focus on *hijab*. As I have noted elsewhere, while some Jewish and Christian women also dress modestly for religious reasons, discursive politics label only Muslim women's *hijab* as oppressive. It is refreshing to read academic studies that treat *hijab* with the same respect they treat the Jewish or Christian women's dress code. This is not to say that the edited collection of academic papers necessarily endorses modest dress; it is not a religious book advocating for this way of dress. Just to say that the authors, who include a journalist and a panel discussion with bloggers, designers and entrepreneurs, are able to study in a sociological way the different meanings behind religious dress while maintaining respect for those they study. Even Elizabeth Wilson's chapter, "Can We Discuss This?" which finds secular women's recourse to modest dress depressing ("the human body, clothed or unclothed, is a cause for celebration (171)") and asks secular feminists to "fight their corner (171)" is able to summarise in a respectful way the rationale behind modest dress in order to argue against that rationale.

A second way this is achieved is by linking the study of modest dress with the concept of 'fashion.' For many women who dress modestly, this is not particularly special, as they live on a daily basis the travails of seeking nice, fashionable clothing that is long or loose enough to be purchased. But as Lewis ('Introduction') and others, like arts journalist Liz Hoggard, note ("Modesty Regulators: Punishing and Rewarding Women's appearances in Mainstream Media,") mainstream industry does not treat modest dress as 'fashion.' As so it has been that some Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women entrepreneurs have opened stores, and designed and sold their own clothes, finding that many women want to dress modestly, but also be stylish and fashionable when they do so. Thus to investigate more closely the link between fashion and modest dress, while the mainstream may not recognise the link, is precisely one of the ways that the book provides such a refreshing investigation of modest dress. Because it is through the mainstream fashion lens that we get the obfuscations of 'oppressed' or 'false consciousness.'

Lewis argues that the internet has allowed such a niche market to blossom (p.2). And many online stores have found their products appeal to women outside their own faith, so that there is a building recognition of commonalities and bonds of empathy across faiths, as recognising each other for their modest dress. The advent of blogs and interactive websites have allowed women to speak their minds about modest dress, what it is or is not, what it means to

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them and their lives. So Lewis suggests that “online modesty discourse can indeed be regarded as a new form of religious discourse in which women are achieving recognition as religious interpreters and intermediaries (7).” Highlighting women’s *agency* assumed in such a suggestion is a third way that the book offers refreshing perspectives on modest dress.

The book contains nine chapters, separated into three parts, and an introductory chapter by editor Reina Lewis. Part One covers “Faith-based Fashion and the Commercially Fluid Boundaries of Confession,” with four chapters: ‘Discover the Beauty of Modesty’: Islamic Fashion Online,” by Annelies Moors, an examination of Islamic webstores, blogs and youtube videos about modest dress; “Fashion Forward and Faith-tastic! Taste Making as Virtual Virtue: Online Modest Fashion and the Development of Women as Religious Interpreters and Intermediaries,” by Reina Lewis; “Meeting through Modesty: Jewish-Muslim Encounters on the Internet,” by Emma Tarlo; and “Hasidic Women’s Fashion Aesthetic and Practice: The Long and Short of Tzniuth,” by Barbara Goldman Carrel. Part Two, “Modesty without Religion? Secularity, Shopping and Social Status through Appearance,” includes three chapters: “Denim – The Modesty of Clothing and the Immodesty of Religion,” by Daniel Miller; “Modest Motivations: Religious and Secular Contestation in the Fashion Field,” by Jane Cameron; and “Can We Discuss This?,” by Elizabeth Wilson. Part Three, “Manufacturing and Mediating Modesty: The Industry and the Press” consists of two chapters: “Modesty Regulators: Punishing and Rewarding Women’s Appearances in Mainstream Media,” by Liz Hoggard; and “Insider Voices, Changing Practices: Press and Industry Professionals Speak,” edited and contributed to by Reina Lewis.

Written in an accessible style, the book will be ideal for undergraduates, as well as graduates and scholars, indeed anyone seeking better to understand the phenomenon of modest dress, in all its manifestations and permutations in the contemporary era. As a friend who sells Muslim women’s clothing at a flea market said excitedly when she saw the book, “I could read this.”