Part 6   Knowledge and Education

Spirituality and Fashion: Is this merely a creative meeting of minds?

By Dr Doirean Wilson, Middlesex University Business School London

Introduction

The impact of globalisation is not only evident in the variety of ethnic groups now depicted across all four corners of the world, but among many communities that are now less homogenous than they used to be. This phenomenon presents to us a visual and cultural kaleidoscope of different dress-codes worn with pride not only to give insight to the wearer's cultural backgrounds, but to their faith and spiritual beliefs.

Such dress-codes are evident for all to see as demonstrated across many streets in places such as New York, Paris and London. Hindu women can be seen adorned in intricate colourful saris, Sikh men wearing turbans that hide their long tresses, Ghanaians of the Asante tribe don garments made from the Kente cloth, and Muslim women wear the Hijab headdress that reflect their Islamic spirituality and faith beliefs.

The renowned designer Miuccia Prada (cited in Eagan, 2014) recognised that "what you wear is how you present yourself to the world, especially today", in changing societies that now yields several generations of those whose parents migrated to hosts countries with spiritual beliefs that often differed to their own.

Although the traditional faith and spiritual beliefs of many immigrants remain the same, globalisation, multiculturalism and the subsequent mixing of generations is beginning to leave an indelible mark on today's religious dress-wear that now tends to have a more modern appearance.

This viewpoint is depicted in the image below that show three young female Christian clerics of difference, posing in religious garments tailored to present a more modern and less traditional style of dress, which perhaps gives insight to a more modern way of spiritual thinking.

Designers in the fashion world are beginning to incorporate different cultural religious themes in their creations seen worn by models strutting elegantly across many fashion catwalks as showcased around the world.

Model wearing modern themed outfit Source: https://pixabay.com/en/saree-fashion-silk-dress-woman-362756/

These cultural occurrences, raises several thought provoking questions such as, is this association between spirituality and fashion merely a creative meeting of the minds? Or, does this unison provide an opportunity to promote insight to differing spiritual beliefs to an audience on a global scale that would otherwise be disinterested or perhaps less receptive?

This essay attempts to answer these questions by exploring the relationship between spirituality and fashion and the ensuing implications that this might have in today's culturally diverse society.

Fashion as a means of communication

"Clothes mean nothing until someone lives in them" is a quote attributed to the American Designer Marc Jacobs and one reiterated in Sciolino's book titled `The Only Street in Paris: Life on the Rue Des Martyrs`. Such a quote could be interpreted as suggesting that clothes alone provides little understanding until donned by the wearer who gives it life.

This life housed in the wearer's garment of choice, is what provides insight to their very being in all its manifestations: their identity whether cultural, physical or of spirit and one as they know it to be. It is this identity which I refer to here as one being "in truth" although its alternative is an identify fashioned to hide the very truth they do not want others to see.

Nonetheless, the self in truth can be communicated through the fabric that cloaks the frame of those of similarity and of others of difference. The same identity that the wearer hopes others can believe, make sense of and respect instead of for example, fearing or criticizing, which is frequently the case when considering recent world events.

As reported by Oliver Pritchard in a recent Mirror newspaper article published on the 22nd July 2016, Muslim British teacher Nurul Islam who arrived at his local pub to meet colleagues, was told that he had to remove his top, which displayed his surname (Islam), as it was upsetting other customers who were reminded of the recent terror attacks that took place in Nice, France on Bastille day that resulted in the loss of 84 lives.

However, in many instances this ideology (respect for self in truth communicated via cultural dress), arguably, can only come to fruition with the onset of change particularly that relating to those governed of less open or receptive mindsets. This notion seems to resonate with International American singing sensation Lady Gaga who makes use of her flamboyant choice of dress as a quest to communicate her intention to "change the world, one sequin at a time" (independent.co.uk, 2010).

As Arntzen (2015), recognised, there is more to fashion beyond that seen by the naked eye. After-all, "fashion was not simply something vain and shallow. It was a method by which to study society, a tool one could use to understand people as well as a visual form of communication" that should not be taken for granted.

The role of fashion in a global age

As recognised from the wealth of research evidence available and from earlier discussions in this essay, "fashion is a global business" (Hines & Bruce, 2007). Perhaps this comes as no surprise to those with insight to the industry or for that matter, the well-travelled.

Fashion is perceived by many as an "exciting, dynamic and creative business" (ibid) linked to not only self-expression but to our very identity (Hines & Bruce, 2007), whether of simile or of difference. With this in mind, it is justifiable to conclude that fashion plays a significant role in today's global age particularly as it "reflects and pushes cultural and social boundaries" (ibid), which exists among different types of people.

Nonetheless, the role of fashion can be described as one that aims to "create uniformity amongst equals whilst at the same time differentiating status and background, signposting preferences and commitments" (Priest,2005) that often includes those of a cultural or spiritual nature or in many instances, both.

A growth in spirituality

Spirituality is not only a growing world trend, but as La Cour, Ausker & Hvidt (2012), recognised, this concept is a "growing research theme, especially in relation to health issues" of both body, mind and soul.

Nonetheless, spirituality as a concept is not always one born of religion. Instead the `writing on the wall` suggests that spirituality "is becoming differentiated from religion as an individual expression that speaks to the greatest of human capacities" (Pargament, 1999). Furthermore, what also seems to be evident is that "the basic concepts of the spiritual mind-set-acceptance, understanding, consciousness, and peace-are embedded in the majority of world religions" (Marquees, 2008). This argues the significance of the topic in the culturally global world that we now live and work in, not in isolation, but with others.

The spiritual self, cloaked in the relics of fashion

Koprinarov (2014) raises an interesting yet valid point by stating that "the human body is one of the main resources of religions as they (the self) practice embodiment of their spiritual aspirations". This notion is made evident when observing those of spiritual belief in the flesh praying or meditating. It is also displayed in the cultural dresscodes that adorn the human physical form displayed for all to see.

"The focus of the analysis is one of the manifestations of these religious bodily signs, especially in Islamic cultures" (ibid), namely, "the control of the body through clothing"

(Koprinaroc, 2014). The Islamic dresscode is regarded as a display "of religious obligation, commitment to the religious community, gender status expression, sexual protection, and personal choice" (ibid). The latter is what affords Muslim women the freedom to choose whether they wear for example, the hijab religious headscarf that communicates their commitment to their faith and in turn their spiritual beliefs.

How Muslim women dress has attracted much debate and controversy in recent years "in both the Islamic world and Europe, that is now under high alert due to the ongoing threat of terrorism resulting in hysteria in extreme, and growing suspicion of those dressed in full Islamic dress-codes. Women don the hijab "and cover their bodies, with the exception of the face, hands, and feet" (Galadari, 2012). Cultural compliancy has led some Muslim women to "cover their faces behind a veil and wear a cloak ('abaya) covering their bodies (ibid). This has created some unease among the less culturally Educated members of the wider community, which has resulted in the introduction of "several secular laws…in parts of Europe to make it illegal to wear the veil in public for security reasons" (Galadari, 2012).

What seems apparent however, is that as Galadari (2012) argues, "the presence of the Islamic dresscode in the European public domain produces a collision of two different versions of body privatization, of two different positions towards the fashion and of two different concepts of the open society" Consequently this clothing debate is not one that relates solely to clothing "though originating from it" (ibid).

Furthermore, "while politicians hold on to a singly negative view of face-veils, trends in the fashion industry show that the boundaries between religion, fashion, and everyday social life are far more flexible than the political gaze is able to capture" (Moors, 2007).

Discussion and conclusion

The insights gained from exploring the relationship between spirituality and fashion identified from a range of different works, has helped to provide answers to the two questions posed in this essay. For example, La Cour, Ausker & Hvidt (2012), recognised that spirituality is a "growing research theme, especially in relation to health issues" This suggests not only is there much interest in this concept, but as Coyle (2002) identified "key aspects of spirituality such as transcendence, meaning and

purpose, connectedness, hope, and faith", is utilised "to produce health benefits in terms of prevention, recovery from illness, or" (Coyle, 2002) for that matter "coping with illness (ibid).

Another health related aspect of spirituality is the critical role that it can play in dealing with what Keks & D'Souza (2003) describes as "devastating loss". They also said "religion and spirituality may replace some of the loss, and may also play a key role in psychotherapeutic support and recovery" but recognise that "religion can also be a source of pain, guilt and exclusion, and religious themes may also play a negative role in psychopathology", which perhaps just as controversially, is akin to issues regarding the mind-set of spirituality.

What is evident from these discussions, is that "recognition of the spiritual dimension as a vital component of human wellness has led to an increased interest in spirituality education", (Hawks, Thalman & Richins, (1995).

Pargament (1999) on the other hand, regards spirituality "as an individual expression that speaks to the greatest of human capacities", all of which indicates that spirituality is an inspiration with meaning that reaches far beyond the surface of the human flesh to the depth of the soul.

When reviewing fashion, Hine & Bruce (2007), made evident their belief that fashion is linked to self-expression, which resonates with Pargament (1999) view. Arguably this is a plausible assumption if we are to consider the creative freedom that fashion affords us to express self, others, our beliefs and how we see the world. Another of Hine & Bruce (2007) viewpoints regarding fashion, is that it has much to do with personal identity which "reflects and pushes cultural and social boundaries". This can create tensions or hostilities if for example, the fashion of choice is in direct conflict with another or where it reflects a contradictory, salacious, disrespectful belief. A paradigm shift in this thinking from another perspective, means fashion can encourage understanding, empathy, harmony, commitment and comradeship.

With this thought in mind, Arntzen (2015), would be right in stating that "fashion was not simply something vain and shallow". Furthermore, it "was a method by which to study society" (ibid), and in turn is "a tool one could use to understand people as well as a visual form of communication" (Arntzen, 2015), which can and is often used to,

as Priest, (2005) put it, "create a uniformity amongst equals whilst at the same time differentiating status and background, signposting preferences and commitments".

These commonalities between spirituality and fashion such as both being a means of communication, human expression and inspiration, which can manifest physically for all to see, makes evident that these two concepts are indeed closely associated.

It is also worth giving some consideration to the obvious profitability of the relationship between spirituality and fashion that has and continues to yield financial benefits, raised controversy, and boosted the reputation and not least the coiffeurs of many in the fashion world.

One such organisation is Moontide, which is a New Zealand swimwear manufacturing company that manufactured women's swimsuits that were made from material that bore the "material patterned with the interlocking curvilinear koru designs" (Shand, 2002). Tony Hart who is the organisation's Managing Director, in addition to "the firm's designers developed this swimwear line with a Maori entrepreneur. Buddy Mikaere, a kaumatua (elder) in the local community, negotiated the use of the koru motif". However, there were two concerns that "governed the design's element's use: Commercial viability and cultural respect" (ibid).

Nonetheless, "in recognition of this dual aim, part of the royalty from sales goes to the Pirirakau hapu (sub-tribe) of the Ngati Ranginui people" (Shand, 2002). At the time when this swimwear line had its debut "Sydney Fashion Week in 1998, it garnered considerable press interest for its apparently ethical handling of indigenous interests" (ibid).

Arguably, it is only right that these ethical interests are considered particularly because of their spiritual connections like those akin to the Maori tribes. Each of these (Maori) tribes are "led by a chiefly ruler with an ancestral lineage, believed to extend back to the gods" (Gream, 1999). These tribes survived quite successfully prior to western intervention. The beliefs of these tribes "were animist in nature, relying on a rich array if mythology and legend to account for creation and all that came afterwards" (Gream, 1999).

These and other associated assertions, demonstrate that spirituality and fashion go beyond just a creative meeting of minds. Furthermore, the opportunity they afford to

express, enables those individuals or collectives who are determined to showcase their spiritual and fashion beliefs, to provide insight to their differing or similar standpoints on a global scale. This scenario is likely to have an impact on others in a variety of different ways for the positive or in many instances, otherwise.

Finally, Dumeljic (2014) paper titled `Moody Closet` made reference to the famed New York fashion photographer Bill Cunningham who allegedly once said, "fashion is the armour to survive the reality of everyday life". It would seem that this quote is one that is not exclusive to fashion alone, as it quite aptly applies to spirituality that is now ever-present in the creations of many designs seen paraded on catwalks across the world rendering both concepts worthy to be respected.

References

Arntzen, M. G. (2015). *Dress Code: The Naked Truth About Fashion*. Reaktion Books.

Barney Henderson & Rozina Sabur 18 July 2016 "Nice terrorist attack on Bastille Day: everything we know so far on Monday" The Telegraph telegraph.co.uk

Coyle, J. (2002). Spirituality and health: towards a framework for exploring the relationship between spirituality and health. *Journal of advanced nursing*, *37*(6), 589-597.

Cunningham, B cited in DePauw, K. M., Jenkins, J. D., & Krass, M. (2015). *The House of Worth: Fashion Sketches, 1916-1918*. Courier Dover Publications.

Dumeljic, B. (2014). Moody Closet. repository.tudelft.nl

Galadari, A. (2012). Behind the Veil: Inner Meanings of Women's Islamic Dress Code. *The Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences*, *6*(11), 115-125.

Gream, M. (1999). Art, Belief and Experience in the Maori of New Zealand.

Hawks, S. R., Hull, M. L., Thalman, R. L., & Richins, P. M. (1995). Review of spiritual health: definition, role, and intervention strategies in health promotion. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, *9*(5), 371-378.

Hines, T., & Bruce, M. (2007). *Fashion marketing*. Routledge.

Keks, N., & D'Souza, R. (2003). Spirituality and psychosis. *Australasian Psychiatry*, *11*(2), 170-171.

Koprinarov, L. (2014). The religious body and the islamic dress code. *RAPHIR. Revista de Antropología y Filosofía de la Religión*, (2), 41-49.

La Cour, P., Ausker, N. H., & Hvidt, N. C. (2012). Six understandings of the word 'spirituality'in a secular country. *Archive for the Psychology of Religion*, *34*(1), 63-81.

Marques, J. (2008). Spirituality at work: internal growth with potential external challenges. *The Journal for Quality and Participation*, *31*(3), 24.

Meakin, N (2015) Britain's Female Priests Want to Dress for Themselves and the Lord` http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/british-female-priest-fashion-940

Moors, A. (2007). Burka in Parliament and on the Catwalk. *ISIM Review*, *19*(5).

Pargament, K. I. (1999). The psychology of religion and spirituality? Yes and no. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, *9*(1), 3-16.

Prada,M., cited in Eagan, G. (2014). *Wear No Evil: How to Change the World with Your Wardrobe*. Running Press.

Priest, A. (2005). Uniformity and differentiation in fashion. *International Journal of Clothing Science and Technology*, *17*(3/4), 253-263.

Sciolino, E. (2015). *The Only Street in Paris: Life on the Rue Des Martyrs*. WW Norton & Company.

Shand, P. (2002). Scenes from the colonial catwalk: cultural appropriation, intellectual property rights, and fashion. *Cultural Analysis*, *3*, 47-88.