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Fashion and Modesty

What is fashion? It is a popular style or trend, usually pertaining to clothing. It could refer to what people wear on a regular basis or what models like Kate Moss and Adriana Lima are sporting on the runway. Fashion exists in each and every person's daily lives. Whenever someone puts together an outfit and goes out to the store, a party, or the mall, they are telling anyone who can see them something about themselves. How one dresses in Islam is important for this very reason, and it is why female modesty in fashion is important to many Muslim women. However, some may argue that the two cannot coexist in harmony, that one cannot be modest and fashionable at the same time. Women's fashion and modesty have been shown to be compatible with one another, though, and are therefore not mutually exclusive, as indicated by fashion that abides by the guidelines of modesty in accordance with the three major monotheistic religions: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.

Everybody has a different definition of modesty. The dictionary defines modesty as: "behavior, manner, or appearance intended to avoid impropriety or indecency" ("modesty," n.d.). Impropriety and indecency can be interpreted differently. Plenty of those who have something to say on modesty only came to those conclusions because it is what their religion says. Not many would say that the 3 major monotheistic religions had nothing to do with setting guidelines for womenswear. Ultimately, by comparing street and high fashion with Jewish, Muslim, and

Christian female clothing principles, one would notice that it is possible to look both humble and stylish.

The first of the monotheistic religions to be analyzed for excerpts on modesty is Judaism. Judaism was built on what Jews believe to be the words of God, all written down in the Torah; the Torah can also be referred to as Tanakh or Hebrew Bible. This religious book contains guidelines pertaining to an Orthodox Jewish woman's dress that prove to be very specific; it also talks about *tz'ni'ut*, which means modesty (Touger, 2003). First and foremost, women are prohibited to dress like men, which is why it is uncommon to see a Jewish woman in pants. This is called *kli gever* and is similar to *Beged isha*, the prohibition of a man to dress like a woman (Orthodox Jews, 2012). Women are also commanded to cover their elbows, knees, and collarbones. Although they are not specifically instructed to avoid tight clothing, the more pious women tend to stay on the safe side and wear baggy clothing (Orthodox Jews, 2012). A rule that does not apply to all female Jews deals with hair. Married Jewish women must cover their heads, whereas an unmarried woman's hair is free to have the wind blow through it until wedlock (Bronner, 1993). Due to a lack of many restrictions, some verses are open to interpretation. Some rabbis have banned 'loud' colors, meaning neon and bright colors, as they attract attention. One rabbi in particular, Sefer HaChinuch (1988), spoke not about modesty, but the clothing fabric that is allowed in Judaism. In "The Book of Mitzvah Education," he stated that it is forbidden for men or women to mix the fibers of wool and linen. According to Rabbi Sefer (1988), it "destroys the spiritual fabric of the universe":

Each and every thing on earth, except for man, has its own spiritual force that influences it.

When some of these earthly items are mixed together, they cause their spiritual

counterparts to become entangled. Once entangled, they cannot perform their tasks as originally designed, thusly destroying the spiritual fabric of the universe. (#62, para.4)

Due to the amount of depth the Rabbis go into when it comes to clothing, it can be deduced that the way one presents him- or herself is crucial. Their dress commandments are explained down to the very fabric. All in all, these women are encouraged to dress in a way that does not attract negative or too much attention; they are not to dress badly or overly extravagant.

Many high-fashion designers have designed clothes to be presented on runways that follow these laws. They are not necessarily targeted towards Jewish women; however, they are wearable. Vivienne Westwood's Gold Label autumn/winter 2010-2011 collection is almost entirely occupied by long, loose clothing and not a pair of pants in sight (Vogue, 2010). She called it "Towel Culture" (para 4), as the loose drapes and dresses on the model resembled layered towels. Each dress covered the arms and hit the knee, which is the minimal amount of leg skin that a Jewish woman must cover. Marc Jacobs also took a page from the common Jewish woman's handbook. His 2014 Fall collection is entirely made up of loose, long-sleeved shirts, and skirts that at least reach the knee. The colors were subdued hues, which would be appropriate for the average Jewish woman in order to not attract attention to herself. Vogue called it "...a color palette of bone and ivory and beige and nude, a scheme of whispering neutrals that indicated a cleansing-like reset on everything" (Vogue UK, 2014). Concerning the more casual side of the collection, blogger Armine K.(2014) of style magazine *Fashionisers* comments, "The high side slits of the dresses the models wore brought kind of boldness to the Marc Jacobs fall/winter 2014-2015 collection, which was immediately broken by modesty thanks to the skinny pants worn underneath" (para 2). Although

some dresses do have side slits, most do cover the knees, and the pants are quite loose. Gianfranco Ferré's 2014 spring collection debuted in this year's Milan Fashion Week, and it also proved to be wearable (Phelps, 2013). Models were adorned in long, knee-length, neutral, and nude colors. Although the colors were bland, Ferré chose fabrics, such as silk and satin, that would make the dresses appear far more stunning than they would have, had he used material that did not glisten (Phelps, 2013). With the perfect mixture of bland and radiant, this line coincided with the Judaic ruling against being overdressed or underdressed.

As for street fashion, maxi dresses fit the criteria perfectly and have been in style for years; they do not seem to be going anywhere. Also, the world's biggest fashion magazine, *Vogue*, called long, loose dresses the next big thing in Spring 2015 (Bickham, 2014). Also by *Vogue* was an article entitled "20 Inspiring Street Style Looks from Seoul Fashion Week" (Finch, 2014). Multiple women can be seen in very modest streetwear. One, for example, was wearing a knee-length, gray, flower-printed skirt. She paired it with a loose gray t-shirt and black leather jacket. All parts on a woman to be covered according to Jewish law were covered in this look (Finch, 2014). Another photo featured a young lady in an ankle-length black skirt, burgundy sweater, and wooly scarf draped across her chest (Finch, 2014). As with the aforementioned individual, this woman's outfit follows the commandments of the Torah. *Street peeper* (a website that features photos of the most chic street fashion across the globe) posts dozens of modest outfits. One includes a woman in a Harley Davidson Alaska T-Shirt, high-waisted skirt that reaches her knees, and black boots (Phil, 2013). Not a single aspect of these outfits clash with Jewish dress code and are featured on renowned fashion magazines and websites, thereby showing how it is possible for a Jewish woman to be modish yet adhere to the rules of her faith.

Due to the large number of Christians occupying the world, it would make sense for clothing to be targeted towards them - the majority. Christianity is the biggest religion in the United States (Adherents, 1999). Over 75 percent of United States citizens recognize themselves as Christians; 50 percent identify as Protestant, 23 percent identify as Catholic, and 2 percent identify as Mormon (Adherents, 1999). This is a small percentage of the bigger picture. 32% of the entire world's population identify as Christian; approximately 2.2 billion people (Adherents, 1999).

Furthermore, at least 2.2 billion people have laid eyes on the famous portraits of the Virgin Mary (the approximate number of Christians today). She is the model woman for all Christians both male and female -- the ultimate example of purity as stated by Monsignor Charles M. Mangan (Mangan, 2007) in a Catholic.org article titled "The Outstanding Purity of Our Blessed Mother":

The Ever-Virgin Mary was and remains pure in charity, chastity and love of truth and orthodoxy of faith. And that purity is divine because it is inspired by God, imitates His purity and leads to Him. Each of us benefits from the purity of Mary. Regardless of how difficult it is to be pure in charity, chastity and right belief, it is possible. By abandoning ourselves to God as She did, we open ourselves to fresh opportunities of achieving purity.
(para 6,7)

With this quote, one may infer that all Christians should aim to imitate Mary, and all women should try to follow her dress code. In most pictures, she is seen in two layers: a dress and a robe. On top of that she keeps a long fabric draped on her head. Although she is the face of female purity, the texts found in the New Testament (the Bible) do not stress guidelines of dressing that point in her direction as an example. In fact, out of the three main monotheistic religions, the Bible

appears to have the least amount of text pertaining to what modesty really is and how women should dress in order to look like a woman of God based on personal research.

The most direct verses in the Bible applicable to a woman's dress are 1 Peter 3:3-8:

“Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear— but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit.”

...and 1 Timothy 2:9-10: "Likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works.”

As with most Bible verses, these ones are not meant to be taken literally. The text is not telling women to never braid their hair or own jewels. In the scripture, the issue being condemned by Paul in the letter to Timothy is overindulgence. A woman is not to pay too much attention to her outward appearance rather than her spiritual being. For example, she would not be punished for wearing a gold necklace. However, wearing 5 necklaces, a pearl choker, diamond encrusted bangles, and rings on every finger would not be appropriate to brunch in the eyes of a Christian. All in all, similar to Jewish women, a Christian woman is not to be overdressed or underdressed. High fashion and street fashion that oblige to Christian ruling are exact to that of Judaistic ruling. Because Bible verses on modesty are quite broad, yet are similar to that of the First Testament, the previous examples fit quite well if not better since Christians seem to be more lenient when it comes to modest clothing.

The only other verse found does not have to do with modesty; however, it concerns the way a woman may dress: “A woman shall not wear a man's garment, nor shall a man put on a

woman's cloak, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God”
(Deuteronomy 22:5).

A law similar to this exists in Judaism as well as Islam, the final major monotheistic religion.

When one thinks about a Muslim woman’s dress, the first thing that usually comes to mind is the head covering, or hijab. However, it is more than that. In an article on QuranandHadith.com (n.d.) titled “HIJAB,” the author outlines the basic requirements on female dress, the first being the parts of the body that must be covered: that being the head, neck, and body, save hands and face (para 6). Allah (SWT) tells women to "draw their head-coverings over their chests" (24:30-31). Allah (SWT) also says in Sura Al-Ahzab: "O’ Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their veils over their bodies. That is most convenient that they should be recognised and not be annoyed" (33:59).

The second ruling concerns the looseness of the fabrics. A woman’s exact body shape or figure is not to be seen by the opposite sex. It was narrated that Abu Hurairah (RA) stated that the Prophet (PBUH) said:

There are two types of the people of Hell whom I have not seen,,and women who are clothed yet naked; with their heads like the humps of camels leaning to one side. They will not enter Paradise nor smell (Jannah’s) fragrance, and its fragrance may be detected from such and such distance (Muslim, 2012, para 2128).

This hadith goes back to the first ruling as well, and has to do with both the length and tightness of the garments. A woman can be wearing a dress, but only covering the space between her breasts and thighs. Similarly, she can be wearing a bodycon gown; it may cover her, but it hugs the life out of her body and shows every curve.

The third ruling is on the opaqueness of the fabrics. They are not to be see through, as that ruins the entire point of covering one's body in the first place. According to verified hadith, Qabati fabrics were brought to the Prophet (PBUH). Qabati are thin, sheer, Egyptian cloth. The Prophet (PBUH) gave Dihyah bin Khalifah Al-Kalbi some of it and said: "Cut it into two and make a Qamis with one, and give the other to your wife to cover herself with it." When the Prophet (PBUH) looked away he added, "Tell your wife to put a cloth under it, so that it cannot be seen through" (Dawud, n.d., no.4116). This legitimate hadith teaches one that a woman of Islam is not to wear thin fabric, and if she chooses to she must wear opaque cloth beneath it for her clothing to be considered pure in that aspect.

From context, one may presume that a woman should avoid drawing too much attention to herself. Allah (SWT) proclaims: "... and that they should not strike their feet so as to draw attention to their hidden zeenah (ornaments)" (24:31-32). Consequently, it can be inferred that women are not to draw attention through their clothing. An example of this would be wearing neon colors that can be seen in the dark or excessive jewelry and accessories.

The last restriction applies to both sexes and exists in both Christianity and Judaism. It is the ruling on dressing identically to the opposite sex. In terms of this ruling on its own, this does not mean women cannot wear pants or lady suits, because in modern culture those have become gender neutral. It was narrated that Abu Hurairah (RA) said: Rasool-Allah (PBUH) cursed men who wear women's clothes and women who wear men's clothes (Dawud, n.d. no.4098).

Surprisingly, high fashion exists in the Muslim world. In fact, 2014 saw the first ever Islamic Fashion Week (USA Islamic Fashion Week, 2014). Renowned fashion designer Waad Ali noticed the surge of halal fashion, and now flaunts her designs on the runway and even sells her

jilbabs and abayas for \$500 a piece (Economist, 2014, para 6). Egypt even prints a high fashion magazine appropriately given the name “Hijab Fashion” which gives lavish abayas and other modest clothing a time in the limelight (Economist, 2014, para 3).

Islamically modest mainstream clothing have also been put on the market. Lines such as Inayah, Artizara, Shukr, and Emaan have given Muslim girls an outlet to be fashionable, modern, and creative, yet adhere to their religion’s requirements. They provide the loose maxi dresses that Vogue claimed to be the biggest thing in Spring 2015 (Vogue 2014), maxi skirts, flower prints, and pleated skirts. All of these styles can also be seen in mainstream street fashion racks including Forever 21, JCPenney, Macy’s, Wet Seal, and Windsor. Just add a headscarf, and they are good to go.

Fashion changes every so often, and it looks like the modest trend is here to stay. Modest garments that fit all religious requirements have made their mark in the high fashion worlds of Eliee Saab, Marc Jacobs, and even Vivienne Westwood. However, it does not end on the runway. Long, lavish, and loose clothes have made a splash in daily wear; consequently, modesty and fashion can live in harmony.