Clothed in Meaning: The Role of Textile, Fashion and Design in 21st Century Religious Philosophy

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Abstract
In the twenty-first century, textiles and fashion have become a powerful tool for expressing religious identity, moral aesthetics, and embodied theology. On the contrary, far from being marginal to spiritual life, clothing and sacred designs are material symbols that reflect belief system(s), tradition(s) and systems of ethical consciousness. This discussion examines the role of clothing and fabric-based forms of design, which not only serve as cultural symbols but also function as philosophical media in contemporary religious thought. Tapping into multiple religious traditions – Islamic modest fashion, Christian vestments, Hindu ritual wear, and Jewish laws of dress – the study reveals how textiles carry theological meaning, provide sacred cover from sin or exposure to God's presence in everyday life. Through it, modern fashion industries and digital media practices are critiqued alongside the ethical discourse of sustainability as they impact faith-based clothing, with tensions between cultural appropriation (versus authenticity and innovation) in religious design being interrogated. Through an interdisciplinary engagement with material religion, aesthetics, and philosophy, this paper contends that the clothed body doesn't get dressed so much as it gets inscribed – woven into the intricate texture of devotion, discipline, and divine presence.

Keywords: Material Religion, Sacred Design, Modest Fashion, Embodied Theology, Textile Symbolism, Religious Aesthetics, Spiritual Clothing.

Introduction

Textile in modern parlance mostly means a flexible material containing natural or man-made fibers like thread or yarn that has been plaited, netted, woven, knitted, or tufted (Backer, 1997; Apparel Search, n.d.). Textiles in a religious context are not just another material, but objects that carry cultural and spiritual weight; both a visual representation of the divine or as the ritual garment itself. In this context, fashion, typically understood as a system of sartorial change, emerges instead as the template for how to make theological commitments normative and how ritual values work. This kind of phenomenon also happened in fashion. Fashion is not only an external decoration, but in symbols belief, piety (excessively religious), resistance, or transformation. Whether it is the religious garments, accessories, or sacred spaces that need to be created, design that involves the deliberate arrangement of materials to yield objects or experiences is key. Religion often relies upon encoded spiritual geometries, proportions, and moral narratives in its design aesthetics (Meyer, 2009). For this study, I use the term religious philosophy to refer to this reflective inquiry into what it means for a belief or experience to be religious. These dimensions cover metaphysical, ethical, and aesthetic facets of religion, through which questions about the existence of God(s), one's body, and material culture co-emerge or converge.

Religion is an embodied material system of beliefs and practice in which spiritual meanings take the material form, and are inscribed into art, craft, and ritual objects like textile, ceramics, sculpture and visual symbols. It is a lived tradition, a visible tradition, a tradition experienced through creativity, sight and physical contact. It is that which brings those who practice it into immediate contact with the sacred within material forms (Ozidede, 2025, 2024; Ottuh & Onibere, 2024; Roy-Omoni et al., 2024). As religion & belief embodied through cloth

come under scrutiny from increasingly materialist or visual cultural perspectives in the 21st century, this paper uses these intersections as a departure to address how textiles and fashion are not just religious markers, but reflections of contemporary spiritual reflection (Plate, 2014). Across a breadth of cultures and eras, clothing has intentionally established an outsized role in religious expression. Garments create theological, ritual, and ethical connections: they are the saffron robes of Buddhist monks; the tallit (prayer shawl) in Judaism; or even something like a hijab in Islam. They are the mediators between the sacred and the profane, installing territories of purity, masculinity, power, and faith. Clothing is furthermore where doctrine meets embodiment; a locus in which abstract thought translates into materiality and practice (Barber, 1994). In some traditions, cloth is used to decorate holy places, cover sacred objects or figures, and perform liturgies because the fabric, per se, has spiritual power.

In the 21st century, globalization and digital media have enlarged the scope of who sees religious dress. Today, religious practitioners negotiate this multiplicity of identities that compel expression where ancient codes intersect with contemporary aesthetics, political conscience, and environmental ethics. Fashion has therefore become a field in and through which religious philosophy is not simply depicted, but contested, worked over, and re-animated. Religious clothing is a dynamic social construction emerging in response to changing cultural, theological, and technological circumstances (Fuller, 2004). Discussing religious iconography as an ethical interface of the knowledge society, Ottuh, Omosor & Abamwa (2023) stated that art constitutes a fundamental aspect of human existence and has significantly influenced the development of religion by providing a medium for expression, communication, and self-definition. This study investigates the role of textile, fashion, and design as powerful tools in the articulation of 21st century religious philosophy. Instead of relegating clothing to the peripheries of spiritual life, this study situates dress at the very intersection where individuals and communities make belief, claim identity, and engage theology. This conversation also hints at a comment on the changing relationship between the body and sacred through fashion, built upon historical underpinnings, symbolic of dress, identity politics, and ethical issues. To provide a comparative and interdisciplinary view, contemporary embodiments are typically favored over those drawn from dozens of traditions.

Historical Context

Clothing, textiles, and fashion are key elements of religious life, which often functions as extensions of spiritual ideologies and theological aesthetics. Religious garments have been used by communities for centuries to visually advertise holiness, define social roles, and represent cosmological ideas. The sacred cloths, ritual vestments, and religious adornment that people wear express more than personal aesthetics; they also reflect deeply held metaphysical beliefs about what bodies mean or are for, about what it means to be pure or impure (physically or morally), about whether the divine is present in the world and if so where, about what behavior counts as good (Roberto, 2015; Bynum, 1991; Douglas, 2002; Norris, 1950). Indeed, framing the changing face of textile and fashion in religious philosophy should not be seen in isolation without considering these historical precedents.

The idea stretches back to ancient Egypt, and among the Vedic and Judaic traditions, where textiles were believed to be imbued with spiritual agency. Linen was more than a commodity in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt; it was a sanctified material that embodied ritual purity as well as divine order. It was woven linen of fine quality to draw (or contain) the holy (Crăciun, 2017; Guindi, 1999). All of this is specified in detail by the concierge's head copy for the Hebrew Bible, who makes much of holiness in fabric vis-à-vis divine proximity (Exodus 28:2–43; Tarlo, 2010). We can read the significance of woven textiles and threads in the ritualized cosmology that is surrounded by initiation rites in early Vedic India, as symbols of rebirth and harnessing spiritual power (Bullock, 2015). Beyond mere ceremonial regalia, these

were textiles as thresholds between the seen and unseen. The materiality of the cloth, including the fiber type, dye, weave pattern, and even its scent, was considered to impact the efficacy of ritual. The act of sacralizing fabric, as set up by the fact that we view it to be sacred, gave way to what is called a material theology- being that divine presence would now be mediated through touch and sight (Wilson, 1985). It exposed the issues that would spark much debate in later theology concerning the propriety, meaning, and efficacy of liturgical vestments.

Clothing, textiles, and fashion have always played a significant role in religious life, often serving as extensions of spiritual ideologies and theological aesthetics. Across centuries, religious communities have used garments to establish visual codes of sanctity, delineate social roles, and embody cosmological beliefs. The use of sacred cloths, ritual vestments, and religious adornment reflects not only aesthetic preferences but also deep metaphysical convictions about the body, purity, divine presence, and moral comportment (Barthes, 1983; Leder, 1990). Understanding these historical precedents is essential for situating the evolving role of textile and fashion in 21st-century religious philosophy. Religious dress also has served as a means of reinforcing gender roles within religious systems. In religious law and philosophy, dress codes essentially serve as a proxy for policing the presentation of bodies, sexualities, and moral rankings. Thus, for example, Pauline texts in early Christianity rooted veiling in female submission to divine order (1 Corinthians 11:2–16), a view that contributed to the ecclesial dress requirements and monastic rules of costume (Stafford, 2024; Balthasar, 1983).

Over the years in Islamic history, understandings of what it meant to be modest as per the Qur'anic injunctions have largely revolved around prescriptive and specific roles and appearances for males and females, with these understood expressions sometimes being modified according to changing cultural norms through time/space (Jawad, 2010). In religious terms, clothes ceased to be of value as a medium for articulating such dualities as spirit/flesh, order/chaos, and sacred/profane. Women, in particular, were usually made to embody both spiritual threat and social subjugation as it was dictated by the idioms of their time; the act of dressing them helped to turn bodies into what could be even remotely tamed or divine. These past performances carry with them mixed blessings that continue to shape current religious discussions and feminist theological attacks (Crabtree, 2023; Meyer, 2009). To this end, it is necessary to understand these gendered histories surrounding religious fashion in order to disentangle the symbolic and philosophical conflicts around religious design components that is being played out in today's world.

Meanings and Symbolic Representations of Textiles in Religious Traditions

For centuries, textiles have been more than just clothing in religious traditions; they have been received as an iconic manifestation of what is sacred. Each color has its spiritual connotation for different faiths. Within Christianity, white represents purity and resurrection (Plate, 2014), and it is worn during baptisms and Easter celebrations, in contrast to purple which signified penitence related to Lent (Nasr, 1996). In Islam, green is often associated with paradise and the Prophet Muhammad as a symbol of life and godly favor. The Qur'an portrays the faithful in the afterlife wearing a lush green cushions (Al-Insan 76:21; Al-Kahf 18:31), and Hadith reports that the Prophet Muhammad will be arrayed in green on the Day of Judgment (Egypt's Dar al-Ifta, n.d.). Scholarly analysis further confirms green's symbolism of spiritual growth and heavenly reward in early Islamic culture (Hirsch, 2020). Saffron is a pigment used mainly by the sadhus and swamis in Darshan, in which it represents purity, asceticism and the fire of sacrifice in Hinduism (Fletcher & Tham, 2019; Dwivedi, 2018). More than simply aesthetic, these colours function as visual theologies; coded languages by which believers articulate and decipher their spiritual affections. Religious textiles go to great lengths in their design beyond colorfulness; the

patterns and motifs communicate deep narrative or cosmological considerations. Similarly, Islamic textiles may draw on geometric and arabesque patterns that highlight the unity and infinity of God alongside aniconic traditions concerning figural representation (Fletcher, 2013; 2008). On the other hand, Andean Indigenous-Christian syncretic textiles in South America potentially draw from both Christian iconography and pre-Conquest patterns, symbolizing a spirituality of strata that is diverse (Stanfield-Mazzi, 2015). These patterns are not random, but are among the ways that we have intentionally woven every thread of this tapestry of spiritual memory and cultural identity.

With regards to religious textile symbolism, materiality itself is central. Doctrinal or liturgical traditions often dictate the use of silk, wool, linen, or cotton. For example, Orthodox Judaism requires both a tallit ("prayer shawl") made of pure wool or silk for men, and a kapel an outer garment worn over the coat of any material woven with particular ambition to fulfill the Jewish law (Leviticus 19:19) that forbids garments of wool and linen mixed. The monk's robe (kāṣāya) in Buddhism is traditionally made from scraps of cloth and dyed rags, saffron or ochre, with origins dating back to the 5th Century BC in India. Wearing a robe-covered garment (Tibetan Nuns Project, 2022; Encyclopaedia.com) was an ideal method to represent humility and non-attachment, which has become symbolic of the Buddhist monastic tradition alongside being a marker for siler status among themselves (Kim, 2025). This spirituality is not only a conventional choice of material, but they express theological positions on purity, discipline, and proximity to divinity. The colours, patterns, and material choices are a semiotic system of religion, not only worn but also sensed. Indeed, Meyer & Houtman (2012) and Morgan (2010) demonstrate in their investigation of materiality and the body that religious symbols are much more than representations; they are constitutive of belief and identity. Textiles thus serve as mediators of the sacred, strengthen bonds within a community, and influence how the wearer interacts with divinity.

Handmade vs. Mass-Produced: Craftsmanship, Spirituality, and Ethics

The way textile is made, whether by hand or machine, is therefore one of the key factors that contribute to its religious value and sacredness. The religious garb made by hand carries the sense that to physically labor over such an object, each stitch sewn with time and intention, brings the item closer to home and therefore nearer to sacred. In a number of African and Indigenous American traditions, textiles are woven by spiritual artisans who pray or sing while weaving them to imbue the fabric with power (Moore, 1991; Church of England, n.d.). The belief in the residue of spiritual power that emanates from works made in ritual situations correlates to an anthropological theory about the "potency" of objects, suggesting that handmade objects in particular sometimes function as more than merely aesthetic or symbolic objects passing personally along with divine intent.

The problem, however, is that mass-produced religious clothing and articles are generally time-efficient for users and favour accessibility over maintaining a strong tension between the craft and belief. Likewise, manufactured prayer shawls, or factory-sewn vestments, can, for example, be less expensive and identical, but without the subtle regional and denominational specifics that hand weaves can maintain. Scholars such as Bradshaw & Johnson (2012), Fletcher (2013), Ahmad & Berghout (2025), and King (2008) contend that the move from craft to mechanized methods has ethical and philosophical implications, especially in religious settings where the duty of care or intention to specific standards of purity are paramount. Religious textile use is also a site of discussion and activism around labour, environmental sustainability, and economic justice; all being seen as important ethical issues across faith-based textile uses. Some faith-based communities are campaigning for “slow fashion” and fair trade clothes based on moral imperatives in their doctrine of stewardship of the earth and compassion (Hitzhusen & Tucker, 2013; Norris, 1998). This transition both restores appreciation for traditional craft and

also calls upon the faithful to judge their theological commitments on the basis of labor processes, in addition to aesthetic stances.

Fashion and Identity in 21st Century Religious Life

Fashion is, for lack of a better term, the shallow end of personal identity and religious belief in today's globalized visual world. Modest attire (whether in the form of a hijab, yarmulke, turban, or other symbolic vestments) is more than just an expression of belief; it is literally and psychologically part and parcel with being one. It is particularly the case of younger generations who are subject to complex cultural landscapes. For example, in the West, many Muslim women appropriate modesty to cultivate beauty; they reinterpret and remix traditional religious dress requirements with Western fashion trends (Bernier, 2023; Ambrosio, 2014). In this context, modesty does not mean disappearance, but instead it provides a way of threading through religious and secular expectations for minimum visibility and agency. For each of these, the infusing power is similar; a forum for believers working into clothing daily in order to live, walk, and work through belief systems that have been woven within fabric.

For instance, religious symbols and themes have shown up in both high-design collections and lower-tier popular garments. Here we see how both mainstream and alternative fashion spaces are reimagining religious faiths, with examples of designer Dolce & Gabbana's extravagant Marian motifs and faith-based brands like Modli or Verona Collection (Anderson, 2016; Phelps, 2013). Although some of these forays into religious identity raise questions about cultural appropriation (this was the case with the discussion surrounding the 2018 Heavenly Bodies exhibition at the Met) and ethical implications in terms of using culture that is not one's own; although, others allow for religious creative to craft their own stories (Chang, 2019; Dowd, 2018; Farago & Mclaughlin, 2018; Laird, 2018). Increasingly, designers grounded in spiritual traditions are trying to advocate for a fashion philosophy that seeks to honor aesthetics as much as spiritual values, transforming garments into visual theologies by addressing ethical, ecological, and theological concerns simultaneously.

Digital media has also, in a sense, magnified these expressions by making social platforms into dynamic spaces for molding religious fashion narratives. Demonstrating that one can be pious yet stylish, respectively ditching outmoded, monolithic portrayals of religious life by harnessing Instagram and TikTok to show faith-based fashion in the form of Dina Tokio and Simi Polonsky (Barron, 2020; Strauss, 2014). Drawing from the assumptions made about Black Muslims, Orthodox Jewish women, conservative Christians, and other faith communities that engage in identity-based clothing practices, these sites work to fill online spaces with varying representations of sacred dress. If you tend to be disgruntled, remember that social networking increases the accessible religious fashion markets where conversations on authenticity, representation, and spiritual expression may easily transpire; and so, we have a booming digital world in which belief, the self, and dress all mutate fluidly, chaining themselves on pixels and piety.

Ethical and Environmental Considerations in Faith-Inspired Fashion

The protection of our natural environment is a priority shared by many faith traditions that emphasize stewardship, moderation, humility, and care for creation. Islam, for example, enjoins avoidance of waste (Isrāf), a principle guiding ethical resource use (Fahm & Yussuf, 2020). More broadly, religious motives are increasingly recognized as catalysts for sustainable behavior and environmental engagement in modern institutional contexts (Rifat et al., 2020). This spiritual foundation fuels the faith-based fashion movement - where consumers and designers seek materials that reflect reverence, fair labor practices, and ecological care.

Indigenous-Christian brand Bima Wear exemplifies this by weaving Tiwi cultural symbols into sustainable fashion operated by Tiwi women (Many Rivers Company, 2024). Similarly, Sikh environmental activism through EcoSikh links spiritual service to ecological responsibility (Wikipedia Contributors, 2025).

In this regard, eco-conscious design is transformed from mere environmental activism to a theological moral imperative. Religious traditions provide paradigms for refashioning the nexus of labor, land, and time. This means that religious ideals, as can be seen in Pope Francis' encyclical Laudato Si' (Pope Francis, 2015; Trivedi, n.d.), which calls for a new "integral ecology" that links environmental justice to human dignity, had impacts on how Catholic organizations started to think about their fast fashion buys. Using the Qur'anic conception of 'humans as khalifah (stewards) on Earth,' Islamic eco-theology critiques exploitative production systems and endorses circular economies (Obaideen & Alnidawi, 2025; Kitson, et al., 2025). Designers who have bought into these ideas are calling it spiritual activism and turning to biodegradable fabrics, plant-based dyes, and regenerative processes. The garments are first not just a commodity but also a sacred artifact that is responsibly made, ethically sourced, and theologically resonant.

These trends are complementing a renewed interest and investment in original crafting methods linked to old-blood artisan activities. In communities across Africa, South Asia, and amongst Aboriginal Americans, once-discounted religiously rooted practices of textile production are being turned to in order to develop sustainable processes. Most of these involve plant-based fibers, hand weaving, and systems of communal labor that follow the natural pace. The Aso-Oke weaving tradition amongst the Yoruba people, an example used for sacred ceremonies, is ecologically aligned through local materials and non-industrial processes (Ndukwe, 2020). Just as Indian Khadi, endorsed by Gandhi as both spiritual and ecological, lives on as the spirit of ethical expression. Rooted in the sacredness of creation, faith-based fashion these days must embody a new kind of design that supports ecology and culture.

Conclusion

When spiraling through the layers of textile, fashion, and design, it is clear that in the 21st century, attire plays a role not only as an aesthetic expression but also as the medium reflecting spiritual and ethical aspirations. Garments operate as gestural weapons of political reproduction or cultural dissent and cultural memory, embodied and stimulated with sacred symbolism and theological identity. Acknowledging the age of globalization and transition in terms of values and pluralistic expressions, dressing becomes a locus for the interplay between modernity and tradition, where aesthetic labour practices reverence modesty, and embellishment, ornamentation, or craftsmanship convey information on philosophical-religious leanings. Fashion, therefore, is not a superficial artifice of style but a moving stage upon which we act our beliefs, affirm identity, and enter into and participate in our common stories as human beings. Furthermore, the recent sustainability and ethical turn in (fashion and product) design we see in today's world shares a common moral imperative found in traditional religious teachings, which includes care for creation, moderation of consumption, high qualifications, and fair employment conditions. Fashion from faith that is rooted in religious teachings also promotes eco-consciousness and environmental stewardship as well as responsible labor practices (as sacred texts hold that all labour is sacred) and regional craftsmanship, acting as the opposite of the fast fashion empire. Design undoubtedly has demonstrated the integration of theological ethics in fashion practices, which can be interpreted as a growing synergy between spirituality and social responsibility. Bound up in that philosophy is the intertwining of cloth, conscience, and creed at its most elemental, and together they propose that we might think about fashion as a liturgical act

of dressing badly or well, as an embodied theology, with our wardrobe becoming a visible repository of what it is we truly believe.

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