

Fashionable Religiosity: Consumer Culture, Secularization and Changes in Religious Practice

In this paper, I provide empirical evidence in the form of two new religious phenomena that cannot be explained properly by theories of secularization such as the “subtraction thesis” and the “theory of privatization.” With these two test cases I hope to both discredit theories of secularization and to assert that Lipovetsky’s theory of fashion is a viable alternative theory that can account for the changes in religious practice. The first case is of al-Qaeda. Rather than looking at them as a political terrorist group, I argue that al-Qaeda’s form of Islam is a product of consumer culture and can be seen as an extreme consequence of the erosion of traditional religious authority. This erosion has individualized religious practice and allowed al-Qaeda to be innovative and creative in its approach to Islam. This call to individualization in their eyes justifies their many radically violent and innovative practices. I also investigate the consequences of the commodification of Islam and its practices by looking at the practice of veiling in Indonesia. I explore the diverse social meanings of Indonesian veiling practices and show how wearing the *jilbab* as a fashion statement illustrates how religious women negotiate the complexities of being modern as well as religious. I will argue that women have reappropriated the development of the individualization and democratization of religious authority to bring religion back into the political and public sphere through their personal self-expression. In doing this I would like to show that faith and fashion are not mutually exclusive and that instead they meld to create unique but faithful forms of religiosity.

Subtraction Theory

This theory postulates that the process of decline of religious belief since the end of the 17th century is a trend that is both inevitable and is continuing. Many in educated Western society took it for granted that the end result of modernity “would be the progressive erosion, decline and eventual disappearance of religion (Casanova 1994, 19).” It is a naturalized assertion that true reality is that which is left over when you subtract religion’s distorting ideologies. It comes from the unstated premise in Enlightenment thinking that as humanity becomes more rational it will lose its childish illusions and religion would just fall away. The narrative history is that over time, outside authority will be shed, especially the ultimate authority of God; that old horizons will erode and what emerges is the underlying sense of ourselves as fully autonomous individuals. This rests on the premise that there is an inherent and intractable tension between faith and reason. What was added to this core idea by 19th century sociologists was the idea of the differentiation of religion as an autonomous sphere. It relied on a certain conceptualization of the role of societal modernization in the process of “functional differentiation and emancipation of the secular spheres – primarily the state, the economy and science – from the religious sphere (Casanova 1994, 19).” Modernity led people to the conclusion that the place for religion was instrumental toward other humanistic goals. Another idea of the Enlightenment narrative was that religion would become marginalized so that it would be forced to stay within its own sphere and not encroach onto other secular spheres. Many who still hold on to this second theory of secularization use the overwhelming statistical evidence “of the progressive and apparently still continuing decline in Western Europe (Casanova 1994, 27)” of religious belief and practice. In arguing that secularization is inevitable, theorists who argue for the second theory of secularization ignore trends in the rest of the world and make Western Europe a paradigmatic example of the outcome of when modernity encounters religion.

Privatization Theory

This theory posits that religious practice is changing rather than being lost. Instead it argues that religiosity is being expressed by the movement of religion from the public social imaginary inward toward the private sphere. The main feature of the privatization theory is the turning of the individual's religious expression and search for meaning and strength inward. Religion is now not a quest for identity within a group but instead a search for an authentic inner life and personhood. Individuals are looking within themselves in hopes of finding a God "not bound by older canons of literalism, moralism and patriarchy, in hopes that their own biographies might yield personal insight about the sacred (Roof 1999, 57)." The statistic that Wade Clark Roof argues is most telling of this phenomenon is the 1994 poll that reported that 65% of Americans believed that religion is losing its influence in public life, yet 62%, claimed that the influence of religion was *increasing* in their personal lives (Roof 1999, 7). This, to Roof, signals that privatized religion is beginning to become a permanent feature in American life. This permanence is highlighted by the sheer numbers of people of all walks of life involved: spiritual searching is hardly limited "to a few bold spirits, to either marginalized or privileged classes. Surveys show that large sectors of the American population today are interested in deepening their spirituality (Roof 1999, 9)." Corresponding to Taylor's analysis of secularization, this interest in an inward spirituality to the detriment of public religion is not just tied to a yearning for authenticity but also with the opening of the spiritual marketplace to a plurality of viable sources of meaning.

Loss of Authority and Democratization of Religion

The current retrieval of past practices is not just a return to an imagined past of pre-modern religion. It comes directly from the historical situation of the erosion and decline of social and religious authority within Islam. Erosion of authority is a product of the modern disclosure of the world as fashion and it is a cause of women's reappropriation of veiling. What must be emphasized is that Islam has never had a centralized religious authority or single spokesperson. Power over interpretation of religion has been scattered among a handful of competing clerics and institutions of religious law. Regardless of the fact of decentralization of interpretation, a handful of scholars called *ulema* and schools have had an iron fisted monopoly over religious practice and formal religious education for more than 14 centuries. Reza Aslan has pinpointed three major catalysts to explain the erosion of traditional religious authority away from *ulema*. The first is the globalization of Islam. The deterritorialization and deculturalization of Muslims has meant that they are not tied to any cultural or state community that would link them to a traditional school and has instead put the impetus of constructing their religion themselves. The second catalyst is the influx of Muslims into the West that has exposed Muslims to new ways of living, to a plurality of religious ideas and to the media. All of this new exposure has allowed individuals to choose many unorthodox practices from the spiritual marketplace. The final catalyst in the erosion of authority was access to the internet. It both empowered the individuals to have unmediated access to religious knowledge, but also an equal platform to show off and be an exemplar of any innovative practice they chose to broadcast via a website (Aslan 2006).

This eruption of media available to the average Muslim and cheap modes of communication has meant that the believer can now acquire religious knowledge independently of religious authorities through group and self-education, pamphlets, informal discussion groups or websites (Roy 2004, 162). What has really put a dagger into the heart of institutional authority in Islam has been the ability to share different interpretations of scripture and law

quickly and globally through the internet. In the days before high speed communication, if you wanted interpretation for some practical or religious decision, there was only one resource, usually the local mosque. But now with the advent of the internet, the average Muslim can go to fatwaonline.com and look up their database of innumerable legal opinions on various practical matters at their convenience and from their own home or internet café. There are so many other minor fatwa sites that a person can browse for as many different rulings as they want until they find the ruling with the best fit for what they personally would like to do. This means that the circulation and direction of religious knowledge is no longer vertical and hierarchical, but democratized and horizontal. Interpretation opens up the formerly religiously esoteric and “private spheres of discussion to a public debating space (Roy 2004, 169).” Contestation of interpretation is no longer done within religious institutions or arbitrated by state power, it is happening outside these domains, in the streets. As Olivier Roy puts it, “religious debate everywhere is in everyone’s hands (Roy 2004, 161).”

Fashion as the Disclosure of the Contemporary World

In his book *The Empire of Fashion*, Gilles Lipovetsky defines fashion not only as the clothes people wear but as a disclosure of how people now comport themselves to the contemporary world. Lipovetsky unpacks the idea of fashion as a specific form of social change that is characterized by “fanciful shifts that enable it to affect quite diverse spheres of collective life” (Lipovetsky 1994, 16). When fashion affects many spheres of life in the modern world, it gives an opportunity for people to exhibit themselves to a larger audience. In turn, Lipovetsky argues, human beings are then socialized to observe each other endlessly, appreciate each other’s looks by evaluating cut, colour and pattern in appearance. Lipovetsky argues that fashion’s role in modern society is empowering individuality through the investment in one’s self because of the inherent pleasure in the aesthetic of self observation, of being seen and of exhibiting oneself to the gaze of others (Lipovetsky 1994, 29). In this way, the diffusion of fashion can be seen less as a form of social constraint but instead as an instrument of social representation and affirmation (Lipovetsky 1994, 30). Fashion goes hand in hand with a relative devaluing of the past. This is because it always implies the attribution of prestige and superiority to new models and a downgrading of the old order. What novelty offers, Lipovetsky argues, is the experience of personal liberation as an “experiment to be undertaken, an experience to be lived: a little adventure of the self” (Lipovetsky 1994, 155).

Fashion changes an entire culture’s habits because it seeps into the three major categories of the modern social imaginary: the economic sphere, the public sphere and the political sphere. The old coercive imposition of discipline by the state has been replaced by socialization through choice and image: the idea of social revolution has given way to infatuation with personal meaning. Little is not directly influenced by fashion, the ephemeral governs the world of objects, culture and meaningful discourse, while seduction has profoundly reorganized the everyday environment, news, information and the way we understand politics. As I will argue in my next sections, the fashion process succeeds in annexing even those spheres, such as religion, that are most resistant to its play. We are not living through the end of ideologies; instead we are ushering in the era of ideologies reappropriated as fashion (Lipovetsky 1994, 203).

The way that fashion works is exactly a microcosm of the way worlds are disclosed through reappropriative practices. Fashion has always emphasized that the reserve of different ideas in and outside a culture can be combined to form new ideas. As Charles Taylor explains in his book *A Secular Age*, fashion is one of the “typically modern, ‘horizontal’ forms of social imaginary” (Taylor 2007, 481) that function by mutual display rather than the social driving

force of common action. Instead of coordination, what matters when we act within the sphere of fashion is that others are there “as witness of what we are doing, and thus as co-determiners of the meaning of our action” (Taylor 2007, 481). Fashion attracts the eye to a disclosure both of one’s personality but also the shared background of the viewer and dresser in the way one dresses. For example, hair worn as a side pony tail is the signification of the 80’s. If one were to wear this side pony tail with bellbottoms signifying an intimacy with the 60’s it suggests a new disclosure of the spirit of both decades. Fashion is a communicable language that can only be intelligible because others take it up and it becomes a shared background. The essence of modern fashion is the tension between mimesis and originality of style. If the style is too outrageous or *avant-garde* as on the catwalks of the fashion industry, it becomes too out of touch with current style to be taken up by others and worn. On the other hand, just copying another’s style without adding something of your own, becomes too utilitarian. Without originality, the material becomes a uniform. Uniformity is no longer noticed and observed by the other’s gaze and taken up because, as Heidegger says “it disappears into usefulness” (Heidegger 1971, 44).

Al-Qaeda: Innovative Religiosity Maquerading as Pre-Modern Practice

In mainstream Muslim practice, it is generally agreed among traditional authority that mandatory practice is regulated by the five duties or “pillars” of Islam that are incumbent on every Muslim. The great innovation of al-Qaeda was to raise the idea of violent jihad up to the level of a “pillar of Islam (Aslan 2006).” Al-Qaeda promoted the formerly political idea of violent struggle as a personal religious duty so that it gained the same status as primary practices in Islam as daily prayer and professing belief in God and the Prophet Muhammad. The goal of violent jihad in *political* Islamist movements is to overthrow the current government and replace it with an Islamic theocracy. Once this political goal is attained, either through peaceful, diplomatic means or bloody revolution, jihad is supposed to end. But al-Qaeda represents a complete break with the nationalist movements. This means, I would argue, that al-Qaeda should be analyzed in a different manner. Not only has the theatres of war moved to the periphery of the areas that a normal Islamist movement would fight in, but also the members of al-Qaeda would never call themselves nationalists in any sense. Relations between the militants and their country of origin were weak or non-existent (Roy 2004, 305). For example, the attacks of 9/11 happened an ocean away from truly political targets in the Middle East and were planned in Hamburg, Spain and Kuala Lumpur. Al-Qaeda’s jihad is motivated by an ethical duty for its own religious reasons. To re-paraphrase Oscar Wilde, holy war for al-Qaeda is to be ‘jihad for jihad’s sake.’

One would expect these militants to be strict ascetics who despise the Western world’s opulence and sexuality and come from the Middle East. This type of pious holy warrior corresponds to the characters that usually fight in political Islamist movements. None of the militants in these attacks attended a *madrassa*, a religious school, nor had any other formal religious training, in fact all of them were trained at secular institutions in a technical or scientific discipline (Roy 2004, 302). Other than the leader of the 9/11 attack, Muhammad Atta, none of the other attackers were “averse to consuming alcohol, gambling in Las Vegas or attending a lapdance club in the days before their final flight (Devji 2005, 17).” This pattern repeats itself with the Madrid bombers in 2004 who were described by the BBC as appearing westernized and integrated into the Spanish community “with a liking for football, fashion, drinking and Spanish girlfriends (Devji 2005, 17).” If class were a major factor in the makeup of the militants then Bangladesh, the poorest Muslim country per capita, would provide many of the militants for the jihad. But we have “yet to hear of a single Bangladeshi international terrorist

(Roy 2004, 316).” Al-Qaeda’s jihad is not motivated by oppressive or disturbed conditions in the Muslim world especially in the Middle-East since, as mentioned before, “its fighters often have no experience of such conditions, and in any case tend not to involve themselves in the political struggles of their own countries, choosing instead to battle in more exotic locations like Bosnia (Devji 2005, 4).” Al-Qaeda’s jihad is motivated by an ethical duty for its own religious reasons.

The Subtraction theory of secularization has no explanation for the resurgence of violent, fundamentalist religious movements. This phenomenon cannot be attributed to a “Clash of Civilizations” theory, where the irrational Other is still enamoured with religion, while the rational Western world is slowly shedding the illusion of religion. This is because, empirically, the members of al-Qaeda mostly come from Europe and have received advanced university degrees. The Theory of Privatization is inadequate as well since the heinous acts that al-Qaeda perpetrated in many ways became more than hostile and vengeful acts on the West. They were also “a set of communications (Devji 2005, 14)” that gained meaning within the global public and political sphere as a series of effects. It gave the world a new tool-set of terminology and vocabulary having to do with Islam. This toolset was given to people who had never encountered Islam in any meaningful way other than through the iconic figure of Osama bin Laden and his globalized brand, al-Qaeda. Islam was taken out of the periphery and put in the middle of what people and the media were talking about in the West. In Western Europe other debates were triggered. In 2003, the issue of the veil which had been a non-issue since 1994 was reopened in France (Scott 2007, 29). The veil was a symbol for *many* issues in the Western European public sphere ranging from how Europe has handled integration of the Other (Scott 2007, 139) to the question of women’s participation in Islam (Mahmood 2005, 1). More importantly, it has raised questions of democracy and liberalism’s compatibility with Islam (Aslan 2006, xxviii). These attacks opened up debate in the Islamic world on whether the *ulema*, or the individual holds authority over interpretation. Indeed, the individualized action of al-Qaeda laid bare the truth of the erosion of traditional social authority (Aslan 2006, xvii).

While Evangelical Christianity in the U.S., in embracing fashion, has transformed into a stable, tolerant and deprivatized form of religiosity, I will argue that al-Qaeda still has to undergo this process. I would like to show however that al-Qaeda’s embrace of fashion has been all encompassing. It has eroded traditional authority’s sway on interpretation of scripture which has individualized religious practice and allowed al-Qaeda to be innovative and creative in its approach to Islam. Its innovation has been so creative, that it has become something like the *haute couture* of Islam. Indeed, the practices of al-Qaeda are so ‘*avante-garde*’ – ie. Radical, violent, spectacular and disconnected from real life – that they lose their mimetic quality and their ability to be taken up and practiced by mainstream Muslims. Because of this I want to argue that it has currently taken a very unstable form and will have to change itself into a less violent form of religiosity or risk becoming irrelevant to its very own adherents.

Looking again at the phenomenon of al-Qaeda, we can see that it truly is a product of fashion, completely new in its presentation, obsessed with novelty, spectacle and a narcissistic obsession with its own symbolic, exhibited imagery. There is also an aesthetic bent focused on the spectacle and exhibition of martyrdom that clearly reveals fashion’s influence on al-Qaeda’s religiosity. There are websites where members of al-Qaeda exhibit themselves to each other on sites called “Al-Ansar’s Top 20” from Iraq in which insurgents send in clips of attacks that are then competitively ranked on the model of the top twenty music countdown (Devji 2009, 69). Now these video clips are ranked by their aesthetic merits rather than the number of people

killed. This exhibitionism propagates models ready to use for horizontal mimesis by others who would like to use their own style to show off their innovation in the spectacle of martyrdom.

Just as with fashion, the jihad destroys traditional forms of Islamic authority and recycles their fragments in eclectic, individualized and democratic ways. Especially because of this eclecticism and obsession with aesthetics and spectacle, martyrdom takes on new meaning. As Roy argues, to say that the Qur'an never promoted suicidal jihad as a military campaign or to stress the tolerance of the Ottoman Empire is irrelevant in explaining current events (Roy 2004, 10). This is because unlike both the traditional *ulema* and political Islamists, al-Qaeda does not refer to Islamic texts in any extended or exegetical sense nor do they try to draw their practices from these systematically. The important question is: why was suicide never found in traditional Islam even though Taliban-like fundamentalism regularly occurred in the past? Roy argues that the 'reward in paradise' explanation is not very helpful. The reference to the Assassins legend further proves that suicidal jihad was never part of the mainstream and is instead an eclectic bricolage of principles fashionably taken up because this legend belongs to an early Medieval Ismaili group, on the fringe of heterodoxy. In fact, this type of martyrdom turns out to be a reappropriated marginal practice taken off the shelf of the open spiritual marketplace. Martyrdom is a supreme ethical act because it is complete in itself and does not represent anything beyond itself. Islam in this sense is not a set of ideas so much as a pure set of practices. Devji draws the parallels to *Fear and Trembling* when he argues that "the jihad does for its warrior what Kierkegaard did for Abraham: it makes him into a Protestant, so that the Islam of the suicide bomber is an absolutely personal quality, as distant from the group identity of the traditional cleric as it is from the state ideology of the fundamentalist (Devji 2005, 120)."

The affect of al-Qaeda as a product of fashion is the empowerment of the individual to innovate and interpret their own religiosity. The mixture of fashion with religiosity means that the implementation of binding religious obligations rests on the goodwill of the believer, not on any external cultural pressure or a state's legal system. This inability to coerce people with religious law means that all practices are implicitly based on a voluntary approach. This is not just volunteerism but a call to self creation. Reconstruction of what it means to be a good Muslim now rests on the individual. With fashion, Roy argues, neither family nor community suffices as a transmitter of traditional Islam (Roy 2004, 178). But al-Qaeda embraces this rootlessness because they regard politics as irrelevant because in their view reform of the soul should precede reform of the state. Politics does not help to purify the soul. As Roy argues, for al-Qaeda, the aim of action is salvation and not revolution which means their objective is the individual, not society (Roy 2004, 248).

By centering religious focus on the individual, al-Qaeda responds innovatively to fashion's erosion of cultural and social authority and instrumentalizes this erosion to further their own religious ends. Al-Qaeda is perfectly adapted to a basic dimension of contemporary fashion: that of turning human behaviour into codes and patterns of consumption and communication, delinked from any specific culture. With its aim to explicitly not be linked with inherited cultural habitus or collateral knowledge such as literature, oral traditions and customs means, Roy argues, al-Qaeda's quest for a 'pure' Islam necessitates an impoverishment of its content (Roy 2004, 25). Stripped of cultural moorings, al-Qaeda's Islam has to be thought of as merely a religion whose boundaries must constantly be redrawn and affirmed. It does not help al-Qaeda's overall stability of practice and definition that individualization encourages innovation from different sources. With only the individual to define and interpret the meaning of Islam without cultural anchoring there becomes an obsession with norms. This need for

permanent elaboration of norms governing every field of activity arises from the fact that they are no longer internalized as cultural patterns. These cultural patterns pervade our daily lives and become the medium through which culture is transmitted to us. Although its media savvy keeps al-Qaeda's practices very visible to a large audience so it can be emulated, al-Qaeda's loss of the medium of culture to convey familiarity of practice to their audience so that will get easily taken up renders al-Qaeda very unstable at its core practices. With their rampant eclecticism of sources and loss of communicating through a familiar cultural medium, they lose the background of shared practice needed for innovation to be taken up by a viable community. I am not arguing that al-Qaeda cannot innovate and that religious norms need to be fixed permanently to be taken up, but instead I am arguing that such creativity always takes place in a background of what one is. New religious practice must be made of many of the "accepted presuppositions that cannot be called into question all at once because they must remain in the background to lend intelligibility to... change (Dreyfus 1991, 161)."

With this in mind, we can see why, even with all their fashionable innovation, al-Qaeda's only audience seems to be the completely rootless, violent radical. For al-Qaeda's religiosity to be taken up, it must be expressed in a more familiar background but this, I argue pushes it out of the realm of violence and into the realm of globalized protest. This globalization has come about because they have delinked themselves from a localized culture. The great characteristics of fashion, namely its supreme ability to change identity and its affect of socializing people to be more tolerant and peaceful cannot help but shine through al-Qaeda's extreme take on Islam. The long term features of this type of Islamic religiosity is its fragmentation, democratization and individualism, all of which they share with other global movements. Both Devji and Roy argue that as a global ethical movement, al-Qaeda joins other ethical movements like environmentalism, anti-globalization not to mention those dedicated to animal rights or anti-abortion. The idea of jihad is very unstable because to make jihad and martyrdom effective, al-Qaeda had to turn those practices into individual duty. In order to make jihad an individual duty, they had to democratize Islam so as to take interpretation of Qur'an away from traditional sources of authority and use it themselves. But this democratization could lead those that follow the ideology of al-Qaeda away from jihad and violence because when all individuals have a say over ideology and interpretation, there is *always* the potential to move away from certain principles. Al-Qaeda's addition of a sixth pillar to Islam signal that no core principle is safe from re-interpretation and that of course includes al-Qaeda's principles of violence and martyrdom. Roy argues that there is discussion among many militants that they should revert to *dawah* (which means preaching, that is propaganda and a return to political means) instead of jihad (Roy 2004, 325). What I am arguing is that al-Qaeda's instrumentalization of fashion to democratize religious innovation, seduce new recruits, erode traditional authority and use the media as spectacle will work against their original violent intents. Fashion's ability for people to choose many practices from the spiritual marketplace allowed al-Qaeda to choose from many sources, but once the door of the spiritual marketplace was opened it could not be closed and therefore religious innovation seems inevitable.

Veiling as Fashion in Indonesia

In talking about the practice of veiling as fashion, I will concentrate specifically on Indonesia because it is an Islamic country outside the periphery of Middle Eastern countries and is as well a country that is just beginning to adjust to modernity. Being a non-Middle Eastern country, their heritage is *not* the traditional veil associated with Saudi Arabia. This generation is actually only the second one of Indonesians that has begun wearing head coverings. This is

because during the Soeharto regime, these types of clothes were discouraged for young people. Soeharto, following the lead of Turkey, was attempting to liberalize the Islamic society as well as open up the country “to large inflows of foreign investment and push the development of modern industrial, resource and financial sectors (Fealy 2007, 27). I emphasize the specific context of Indonesia, because only under these conditions could one say that women practice veiling freely; in fact they usually do it against the wishes of their family or modern society (Scott 2007, 31). The population of Indonesia is just coming to terms with mass culture and yet the presence of Islam has not diminished, counter to many secular narratives. Indonesia has instead had an increase in the number of mosques and the size of the congregation of these mosques (Fealy 2008, 15). Women wearing a *chador* (the completely black, conservative coverings taken from Saudi Arabia) in universities were a small but politically radical 3% minority of all women in the late 70s. These women used the veils to show that they did not support the dictatorship of Soeharto. After the end of the dictatorship, those wearing some kind of religious covering on campuses rose to an astonishing 60% (Jones 2007, 221). The movement to veil in Indonesia is no longer a political movement against the Soeharto dictatorship, instead it is a reappropriation of the medieval Islamic practice of transforming oneself into a pious subject through “the Aristotelian model of ethical pedagogy” (Mahmood 2003, 135). It is an embodied critique of the secularization of everyday life that is taking place in Indonesia that treats “Islam as a system of abstract values” (Mahmood 2003, 45)” and prevents people from infusing Islamic principles into the practices of everyday life. The practice of the veil is an integral part of an entire manner of existence through which “one learns to cultivate the virtue of modesty in all aspects of one’s life” (Mahmood 2003, 51) and so encompasses an entire way of being and acting. This way of practicing veiling takes up the Ancient Greek practice that both early Christians and Muslims took up: *habitus*. *Habitus* is concerned with ethical formation and is understood to be an acquired excellence learned through repeated practice. This type of moral cultivation implies a “quality that is acquired through human industry, assiduous practice, and discipline, such that it becomes a permanent feature of a person’s character” (Mahmood 2003, 136).

We have looked at the practice of veiling, but what does veiling as fashion mean? Muslim head coverings are not just the black, Saudi-associated styles with face coverings. There is a diversity of styles that move into the territory of very colourful, “patterned, and often fitted styles less frequently associated with foreign origins, which might involve modest Western style” (Jones 2007, 213). This innovation in Indonesia is a loose but fitted headscarf and body covering called the *jilbab*. The *jilbab* has extended the meaning of pious head covering in Indonesia and is now consistent with the cyclical pattern of fashion in general. There is a growing industry stemming from the commodification of this symbol of piety, with the advent of Islamic fashion catalogues and Islamic fashion shows with new styles of body and head covering (Kilicbay 2002, 500). Many feminist scholars in Indonesia are concerned about the commodification of Islamic dress and worry that the political potential of Islamic visual identities is diluted when such dress becomes trendy and fashionable (Jones 2007, 219). But this seems to rely on the mistaken binary that the practice of veiling is antithetical to fashion and the women who do so are therefore locating themselves in the world of Islam but if they dress fashionably they are instead putting themselves in the ‘Western’ world.

I argue that faith and fashion are not mutually exclusive but can be melded to create a unique but faithful form of religiosity. Women, with their personal self-expression through fashion, bring the individualization and democratization of religious authority back into the

political and public spheres. Moreover, the ability for self creation is skilfully negotiated by women who engage how they dress within the liminality of religious, aesthetic and political pressures. Women in Indonesia who fashionably wear the veil act within the interstices of two critiques. One expressed by conservative traditionalists, that making fashion out of a symbol of modesty weakens its religious impact. Another are the politically minded critical theorists in Indonesia who accuse them of the de-politicizing a charged Islamic symbol. For these critics, the allure of the commodified aspect of fashionable veiling “tempts women to make primarily consumer rather than religious choices, suggesting that the two qualities must be mutually exclusive” (Jones 2007, 222).

What is most interesting is how fashion both empowers people to individualize their practices, but also equips them to skillfully handle the negotiation of the pressure of social and religious conformity and their own self expression. Fashion does this by allowing people to realize that tradition is just another option to choose from in the global spiritual marketplace. This permits individuals to reappropriate traditional practice from the spiritual marketplace and creatively incorporate it into their personal practice. This process combines novel individual practice with ancient communal practice to give traditional practice a personalized “style.”

The interaction of style and religious practice is particularly interesting since the way the veil is worn by a particular Indonesian gives us a strong sense of the way she interprets Islam. The question must be asked, what else is Islamic fashion other than externalization of your interpretation of the Quranic dictate of modesty as a practice for others to recognize in symbolic form? The veil worn as fashion is a way that personal interpretation of Islamic principles is externalized and brought into the public domain for others to see. It is an oversimplification for critics to regard those wearing fashionable veils merely as “starry-eyed slaves to fashion (Jones 2007, 219)”. They ignore how women might borrow from a discourse of consumer choice or from Islam to position themselves as being in control of their choices. Veiled women receive criticism from even those who are in fashion themselves. Sandikci argues that it is assumed that since veiling is a practice that does not belong in a Western space and since fashion historically belongs to the West, the veil cannot be fashion (Sandikci 2005, 78). The fashionable wearing of the veil ruptures this linear and structural reading of the relationship between Western fashion and modernity. It challenges the idea that there is no space for fashion and modernity in Islam. Women who do wear the veil fashionably responded that they felt that their decision was exciting, involved considerable effort as an act of personal transformation and frankly should not be open to others for critique. The practice of veiling was, in their perspective, a result of a prior decision to cultivate a pious lifestyle. This is an arduous and slow process of changing one’s character and does not automatically happen once the veil is dawned. For these women, it was reasonable as Jones argues “to consider the reward and promise of a devout lifestyle as consistent with the thrill of selecting attractive clothing (Jones 2007, 220).” This means for most veiled women, head covering is anything but a traditional practice and the aesthetics of the headscarf is at least as important as its religious and political dimensions.

When questioned on the tensions they face in dressing, many Indonesian women argue that the Qur’an never specifies what a woman should wear. This means it certainly does not specify the black *chador* that Muslim fundamentalists insist should be uniformly worn. In fact, they emphasize that the only requirement seems to be not to expose oneself too much or to draw too much attention to oneself. In this way they flesh out a counter-intuitive argument that the *chador* is not a dress of piety or modesty because in Indonesian society, the *chador* is particularly distinctive and its distinctiveness undermines the purpose of wearing a *chador* for

modesty (Sandikci 2005, 65). It attracts the gaze not because it exudes piety but because of its charged political symbolism within Indonesian society. In the Middle East, the *chador* would be part of the background fabric of society, but in Indonesia, this type of veil represents a very foreign type of ideology. Veiling as fashion has a great impact on Indonesian society, since “photo spreads that placed a woman in [the headscarf] in the same frame as a woman in generic corporate dress suggested that either option was equally fashionable” (Jones 2007, 225). In this way, the woman who veils for fashion runs in conchord with society because Indonesians recognize the beautifully patterned *jilbab* as a product of their very own culture. She is a vital force in society, whereas the *chador* is anachronistic, alien (originating from Saudi Arabia) and fundamentalist.

When wearing the veil in public, regardless of how private the wearer feels the meaning of the veil is, it is still expressing some message in the public sphere. Style is dependent on many factors and when mixed with the already multiple meanings of the veil ingrained on the consciousness of the public, the act of pious fashion cannot help but being a statement on how someone chooses to represent Islam. It begins a dialogue with traditional authority, with designers, with those who do not wear the veil, with those who wear the cosmopolitan but conservative Arabized *chador* and even with others who wear the veil for fashion. The meaning of the veil always overflows its intention. Yet when a woman wears a veil, she has entered the public battle for control of what the practice of veiling means. The meaning of modest dressing becomes open to negotiation because of the crisis of authority in Islam and becomes open for reappropriation within the spiritual market. This new interpretation of modest dress pluralizes aesthetic judgements and taste dispositions and so individual choice, cultural and financial capital have greater significance. Other than the problems of extravagance and wastefulness that is frowned upon in Islamic consumer culture, there is the added edict that Muslims in general have to be well groomed and have a beautiful and pleasant appearance while not encouraging vanity or arrogance. The recent pluralization of meaning behind the veil provides more freedom of interpretation by opening the margins of what is allowed for women to express their own taste and understanding. Yet this greater freedom also creates tension in trying to negotiate the boundaries between concepts of distinctiveness but not wastefulness; between beauty but not ostentation. Sandikci argues that achieving a “beautiful and faithful look requires creative and resourceful negotiation of the subjective meanings, social influences and the fashion dynamics (Sandikci 2005, 66).”

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