

## **Jewish wigs and Islamic sportswear: Negotiating regulations of religion and fashion**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the dynamics of freedom and conformity in religious dress prescriptions and fashion, arguing that although fashion is popularly perceived as liberating and religion as constraining when it comes to dress, in reality both demand conformity to normative expectations while allowing some freedom of interpretation. The article goes on to trace the emergence of new forms of fashionable religious dress such as the human-hair wigs worn by some orthodox Jewish women and the new forms of Islamic sportswear adopted by some Muslim women. It shows how these fashions have emerged through the efforts of religiously observant women to subscribe simultaneously to the expectations of fashion and religious prescription, which are seen to operate in a relationship of creative friction. In doing so, they invent new ways of dressing that push the boundaries of religious and fashion norms even as they seek to conform to them.

### **Keywords**

Jewish wigs

Islamic sportswear

fashion

religion

burqini

sheitel

This article explores the dynamics of the relationship between religious clothing regulation and fashion by tracking the evolution of new sartorial inventions that have emerged through religious women's dual concerns with fashion and faith. It proposes that although religious regulations relating to dress play an obvious role in limiting sartorial possibilities, they also provide a stimulus for creative responses that result in stylistic innovation. Viewed in this light, new forms of fashionable religious dress should be seen not so much as attempts to dilute or circumvent religious prescriptions and regulations, but rather as aspiring to obey the rules of fashion and the rules of religion simultaneously. This process is demonstrated through tracing the emergence and popularity of various forms of fashionable religious apparel among strictly observant Jewish Orthodox and Muslim women – two groups which seek to maintain higher levels of body- and hair-covering than is normally possible through following mainstream secular fashions. Through tracing the current trend for fashionable human-hair *sheitels* (wigs) amongst married Jewish Orthodox women and the emergence of new forms of Islamic sportswear, such as the 'sports hijab' and the 'burqini' worn by some Muslim women, it is possible to see how the regulatory mechanisms of religion and fashion operate in a relationship of creative friction.

### **Freedom and constraint in fashion and religion**

At first sight the idea of religious fashion seems an oxymoron. Religion is associated with rules, restrictions, limitations, interiority; fashion with experimentation, exteriority and embrace of rapid change. If the former conjures up images of tradition and social conformity, the latter evokes ideas of freedom and claims to offer opportunities for individual self-expression. But is this really so? Philosophers of fashion, from George Simmel writing back in the 1900s to Gary Watt writing today, remind us that fashion is as much about conformity as it is about individualism (Simmel 1904; Watt 2013). When colours are forecast months in advance, materials selected and styles mapped out by season on a global scale, how much freedom does that leave the individual selecting his or her clothes? Or to put it another way, if half of the world's population is at any given time wearing denim jeans, as some anthropologists have suggested (Miller and Woodward 2010), then what does that tell us about the dynamics of freedom and conformity concerning the clothing choices we make? The catwalk does of course offer opportunities for experimentation, but the unwearability of most of what is represented there is a reminder that the catwalk is a boundary marker separating the rituals of high fashion from the performance of everyday fashion realities.

Fashion, then, operates through a curious form of social consensus which delimits what we are prepared to accept at any given time. We take in its ever-changing rules and codes without necessarily realizing we are doing so. Even those who take pride in resisting fashion are inevitably informed by it (Simmel 1904; Woodward 2007). Societal norms, as the sociologist Erving Goffman pointed out, are 'entrenched nowhere but cast their shadows on encounters everywhere' (Goffman 1963). The rules of fashion are no exception. Despite the lavish amount of media space dedicated to fashion reporting, blogging, tweeting, advertising, policing and advising, fashion codes often remain semi-obscure. Even fashion reporting is highly coded. One French fashion reporter told me that she keeps a long list of words for praising and criticizing new outfits to ensure that she does not repeat the same phrase too often. Her list suggests not only the repetitiveness of fashions but also of the language used to describe their originality.

There is clearly a contradiction, or at least a striking contrast, between the language of individualism and creativity used to describe and market fashion and the conformism that seems inherent to it. As Simmel pointed out, the very idea of fashion hinges on the dynamics of sameness and difference (Simmel 1904), for unless others are prepared to follow a fashion idea it remains merely an aspirational proposition – in fashion terms, a flop. From this perspective the history of fashion design is more about the persuasive power of fashion propositions and the economic and media forces that help to make them convincing than about the artistic genius of individual designers. All of this seems obvious – and perhaps that is the point – it is almost too obvious to be noticed, leaving us free to exaggerate the innovative nature of fashion and to accept its mythological claims to originality. Fashion is, after all, more seductive if we imbibe its mythologies.

Of religion, it is possible to say the opposite. It is often assumed to be a more conservative force than it is in practice. People who are not religiously inclined tend to

exaggerate the conformism of members of observant faith communities, whether Jewish, Muslim or Christian. By extension, religiously inflected dress is perceived largely in terms of restriction, obedience, making and maintaining boundaries, repressing individualism, obeying patriarchal norms and following the rules (Arthur 1999). To outsiders these rules seem the very antithesis of the apparent freedoms that fashion seems to offer. They tend to be perceived as dictates which force people to dress and behave in particular ways. How often do we read in the media of Muslim women forced to wear a headscarf and (although less frequently) of Orthodox Jews forced to follow the clothing restrictions of their faith? Yet when one goes back to the theological texts from which these rules are presumed to stem, one finds that religious clothing prescriptions are often highly ambiguous and open to interpretation – hence the wide variety of different ways that Muslim or Jewish women and men actually dress and the different degrees to which their identity, faith, regional, national, personal and political preferences are visible from their appearance (Tarlo and Moors 2007 and 2013; Tarlo 2010; Silverman 2013; Lewis 2013). Historic and ethnographic research shows how religious clothing prescriptions and prohibitions are often hotly contested by insiders, including religious experts who hold different theological positions as well as religious followers. What we find are multiple interpretations concerning what is or is not acceptable, desirable or permissible, allowing for a gamut of responses and differing levels of expression of individualism and conformity.

It is important to question both the popular association of fashion with individuality and freedom of expression and the equally widespread association of religion with restriction on expression (Moors and Tarlo 2013). As an alternative it might be suggested that whilst ideas of conformity and freedom are central both in fashion and religion, their proportional and ideological weight varies. The mythology of fashion places high value on originality and freedom of expression, while fashion practices themselves often rely heavily on social conformity. The mythology of religion places high value on social conformity and obedience, and yet religious practitioners often find ways of making the rules more palatable by interpreting them in innovative ways, which include creative engagement with the expressive aspects of fashion. Just as some people follow fashion so ‘blindly’ (I use the term advisedly) that they are perceived as ‘fashion victims’, so others follow religious prescriptions so strictly that they are perceived as ‘ultra-Orthodox’ or ‘extremist’ – labels which are always ascribed by others rather than self-chosen. Even so, the labels are of course revealing for the emphasis they place on normativity. They suggest that there are *appropriate levels* of engagement whether we are talking about fashion or religion, and that if people stray beyond these levels, it is somehow abnormal, pathological even. It is only through recognizing that ideas of freedom and conformity are insistent constructs, both in fashion and religion, that we can begin to comprehend the dynamics at the heart of the many religious fashions popular today.

### ***Sheitel* fashions**

In recent decades the choices of *sheitel* (wig) on offer for Orthodox Jewish married women have proliferated, as has the practice of hair-covering itself. Today, wig shops and hair salons catering to Jewish women in London, New York and Tel Aviv display a wide variety of fashionable and glamorous human-hair wigs. Some also offer a wide range of unconventional hair pieces, including the ‘i-band’ (a realistic fringe of hair for concealing

the hairline); the ‘cap-wig’ (a hairpiece attached to a baseball cap); the clip-on bunch; and even the ‘u-wig’, which has a u-shaped opening allowing the wearer to show her own parting and effectively disguise the fact that she is wearing a wig at all. Such wigs can be found in specialist shops and online stores which cater specifically to those Jewish women (some modern Orthodox, some from more traditional Haredi sects) who consider hair-covering upon marriage a religious requirement, an act of modesty and a *mitzvah* (commandment from God) but who wish, nonetheless, to look fashionable and stylish. Such wigs rarely cost less than \$1,000 and many are two or three times that amount, with the top range of custom-made human-hair wigs retailing at around \$6,000 a piece. In addition, wigs are sent back and forth to the *sheitel macher* (wig stylist) for a variety of procedures from washing, conditioning, drying, dyeing, highlighting, low-lighting, thinning, volumizing, lengthening, styling and repairing. Fashionable human-hair wigs (as opposed to cheaper off-the-shelf synthetic wigs) are an ongoing work-in-progress, requiring considerable investments of time, money and aesthetic attention. Most Orthodox Jewish women keep their own hair under their wigs although there are a few strict Haredi sects, such as the Hungarian Satmar, that practise head-shaving. This means that many women find themselves having to maintain at least three sets of hair at once (their natural hair which still needs cutting, washing, styling and colouring if desired; the *sheitel* on their heads; and the one they have left at the *sheitel macher*’s for refurbishing). In addition, many women keep a ‘Sabbath wig’ for special occasions.

Some of the expensive upmarket human-hair *sheitels* available in Israel and the United States come complete with labels which certify their kosher status. Far from being a throwback to some ancient Jewish tradition, these so-called kosher wigs are a relatively new invention that came into being just one decade ago. But what exactly is a kosher wig? And what might it tell us about the complex relationship between fashion, religion and the law?

To trace the arrival of the kosher wig on the market, we need to backtrack to 2004 and the events which became known in Orthodox Jewish circles as Sheitelgate. This was the time when bonfires of human-hair wigs were ignited in Orthodox pockets of Brooklyn, Jerusalem and London’s Stamford Hill in response to a ruling made by a 94-year-old Lithuanian Israeli rabbi and much respected authority of Jewish Law, Rabbi Elyashiv. Elyashiv claimed that it was not permissible for Jewish women to wear *sheitels* that contained Indian hair and that all wigs containing Indian hair should be destroyed. The fear was that such hair had the forbidden status of a sacrificial offering to an idol, since much of it was obtained from Hindu temples in South India where pilgrims undergo ritual shaving, known as tonsure, in fulfilment of vows they have made to their deities (Fleming and Reed 2011; Tarlo in press).

The status of this Indian hair had for some years been a cause of anxiety in Haredi rabbinical circles. Its prohibition in 2004 came after a delegation of rabbis was sent from London to the Indian temple of Tirumala in Andhra Pradesh to investigate Hindu tonsuring practices.

There is no space here for discussion of the contradictory theological opinions of rabbis, Brahmans, Hindu barbers and pilgrims concerning the status of Indian hair and the meaning of tonsure – issues which have been analysed from a religious studies perspective

by Fleming and Reed (2011) and which I discuss elsewhere based on my own ethnographic observations in South Indian temples (Tarlo in press). What I focus on here is not so much the facts and details of the legislation as the emotional and material responses to it in Jewish communities.

In the short term the ruling about Indian hair was quite literally incendiary. A large proportion of the human-hair *sheitels* worn by Jewish women contained Indian hair at the time and its prohibition was a major blow both for wig traders and wig wearers. Discussing the issue a decade later, many women still recall the shock of hearing the ruling and remember beginning to doubt the status of the wigs they themselves were wearing. ‘People were hysterical,’ a London-based *sheitel* stylist recalls. ‘They panicked! They were told they couldn’t even have the wigs in the house.’ (Rifka, 24 March 2015 interview.) ‘It was a terrible time,’ a New York *sheitel*-maker recalls, remembering how her phone never stopped ringing (Claire, 15 April 2015, interview).. She was besieged by women seeking advice. Nobody wanted to throw out wigs that had cost thousands of dollars but neither did they dare to carry on wearing them. ‘It was a disaster,’ the owner of a major New York wig company told me, recalling how his entire stock of wigs as well as all the hair stocks in his factory were rendered useless in an instant (Baruch Klein 16 April 2015, interview).

Such was the rush on scarves and snoods as head-coverings that in London some women apparently resorted to wearing swimming caps in the absence of suitable modest alternatives. The panic and soul-searching was well documented in the play, *Cling To Me Like Ivy* (2010), written and directed by Samantha Ellis, a London playwright who was working in a bookshop in the Orthodox Jewish hub of Temple Fortune in North London at the time of the crisis. Jewish scholar David Landes contextualizes women’s visceral reactions when he points out that idol worship is ‘the nightmarish other of Judaism: dangerous, licentious and horrifying’ and that the thought of intimate physical contact with anything associated with it was not only sinful but utterly repellent (Landes 2010). One response to this ruling was a further tightening of the rules by some Haredi rabbis. Rabbi Dunner, who had led the delegation to Tirumala in India, saw the controversy as a clear message from God that Haredi women should renounce wearing human-hair wigs altogether.

While Jewish legal experts (or Posik) were exploring the possible need for yet more restrictions about head-covering, others, including wig sellers, entrepreneurs and many *sheitel* wearers were more interested in turning their attention to finding new ways of satisfying both fashion requirements and the latest religious legal restrictions. This meant getting rid of existing stocks of wigs made from Indian hair and looking for new sources of hair. Most *sheitel* companies began advertising wigs made from European hair; some, like the US-based Savvy Sheitels, inserted messages on their websites to announce their avoidance of Indian hair. But European hair was, and still remains, the most expensive hair on the market owing to the fact that it is in short supply and difficult to obtain. Most human hair used in wigs comes from countries where the female population is sufficiently poor to find selling hair a worthwhile or necessary activity or where Hindu or Buddhist beliefs encourage the practice of tonsure (Tarlo in press). For the *sheitel* trade to flourish without supplies of Indian hair it needed to find cheap equivalents, and for this it turned principally to China where some *sheitel* companies had already established wig factories.

Soon China was supplying not just cheap labour but also cheap supplies of hair which it collected mainly from rural areas. Thicker and straighter than Indian hair, it was considered less compatible with European hair types but could nevertheless be bleached, dyed and styled to suit European requirements. Meanwhile to quell anxieties about the legitimacy of their *sheitels*, some companies began to allow Kashrat authorities to inspect their factories. Israeli rabbis usually concerned with issuing kosher certification principally for foodstuffs now developed a lucrative sideline in checking the kosher status of hair.

Kosher Sheitels (recently renamed Fridman Hair) is a Chinese company that emerged in the aftermath of Sheitelgate. It was established by Jewish Ukrainian entrepreneur Ran Fridman who was already living in China running a travel-advice service for Jewish entrepreneurs at the time the wig crisis broke. Soon he found himself approached by a New York businesswoman who ran a *sheitel* company and was hoping to shift production to China. After assisting her in this process, Ran decided to go into *sheitel* production himself, in partnership with a Chinese wig factory owner in Qindoa. Ran uses his extensive networks in Ukraine to obtain supplies of European hair and regularly travels to Myanmar (Burma) for cheaper supplies of Asian hair. His factory is regularly visited by a rabbi who comes from Israel to issue kosher certification. This adds considerably to the price, Ran informed me when I met him in Shenzhen in 2014, since the rabbis have to be paid to travel and inspect the hair. Ran saw this as just another kind of business. If clients wanted that sort of reassurance, he was willing to supply it. However, he was less willing to tell the rabbis exactly where he obtained his hair supplies, not because he feared the hair might be non-kosher but because he worried that rabbis might be tempted to set up in competition with him (Ran Fridman, 28 July 2014, interview).

So the kosher wig is a luxury human-hair wig with kosher certification that came into being in response to the banning of Indian hair as idolatrous in 2004. Now that the Indian hair controversy is fading into history, the desire for kosher certification is diminishing and it is likely that the business of issuing kosher certificates for *sheitels* is in decline. That some of the hair from Myanmar and Indonesia hails from Buddhist and Hindu temples is not widely known and is therefore irrelevant, for as Gary Watt points out, the law is more concerned with external proofs than inner truths (Watt 2013). The kosher wig provides an excellent example of the dialogic tension that exists between legal and fashion requirements but also of the creative force generated through this tension. What I want to go on to suggest is that it is this dialogic tension that provides a key to understanding the history of *sheitel*-wearing for Jewish women.

Let me highlight a few key moments in the history of the *sheitel* to support this claim, drawing initially on Leila Leah Bronner's excellent historical analysis (Bronner 1993). Take for example the moment when wigs first became a popular form of head-covering for Jewish married women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Until this time Jewish women fulfilled the requirement to cover their heads by wearing headscarves. What attracted them to wearing wigs was that wigs were at the height of French fashion at the time. Far from accepting this as suitable, most rabbinical authorities opposed it, either on the grounds that it was an example of inappropriate emulation of the 'ways of nations', or that wigs could evoke the same feelings of arousal in men as women's actual hair. The fact that women retained their wigs in the face of rabbinical opposition is a sign of the

powerful pull of fashion as well as women's capacity to negotiate the law. Their refusal to abandon their wigs resulted in the practice of wig-wearing eventually becoming institutionalized and mostly accepted in Ashkenazi Jewish circles.

The laws of fashion, however, remind us that when something is in fashion its destiny is to fall out of fashion, so the *sheitel*, first adopted as a daring new form of head-covering, eventually became classified as old-fashioned. By the time that Jews were migrating from Europe to the United States in large numbers at the beginning of the twentieth century, abandoning the *sheitel* was seen as an act of liberation and a gesture of modernization and assimilation, with some women literally casting their wigs into the ocean at the sight of the Statue of Liberty as they approached New York. The wig became associated with the old ways of Eastern Europe, retained on the heads of a few old ladies who had grown into their *sheitels* to such an extent that they would feel naked without them. Growing hair, getting it styled and wearing fashionable hats was part of the process of becoming an American woman and was embraced with enthusiasm (Schreier 1995: 49–90). And so the once-fashionable *sheitel* became a symbol of traditionalism and resistance to change.

Fast-forward a few decades to the 1960s and we find wigs reappearing on Orthodox Jewish heads in America. It is no coincidence that this was also a time when there was a mainstream revival of wigs in the fashion industry following the recent Japanese invention of synthetic hair fibres such as kanekalon, which made wigs cheaply available to women of all classes. A central figure in promoting the revival of the *sheitel* in Orthodox Jewish circles was the Lubavitch Rebbe, Rabbi Schneerson (Slonim 2006). On the one hand he insisted that covering the head was not a matter of preference for married women but a Halakhic (legal) requirement and that it was important for the moral good of the family and society. But he considered headscarves and hats inadequate for the job, partly because they made Jewish women too conspicuous but also because they often left some hair showing and could too easily be taken off. He maintained that the wig was superior because it covered all of a woman's hair and because women would not be tempted to whip it off in public since their own hair would be unsightly underneath. Yet the rebbe seemed to recognize that preaching Jewish law would not be enough to convince women to return to wigs, so he also employed aesthetic and psychological arguments, pointing out that wigs enabled women to blend in with the people around them and that they could be even more beautiful than a woman's own hair. Far from encouraging the purchase of cheap synthetic wigs, he encouraged new brides to buy the most beautiful wigs they could find, stressing that they needed to invest in at least two *sheitels* so that one could be worn whilst the other was being washed. Recognizing the expense of high-quality human-hair wigs, he even offered interest-free loans for wig purchases (Slonim 2006). In other words, he simultaneously mobilized the power of Jewish law, identity politics, fashion, beauty and commerce.

To summarize, the history of the Jewish *sheitel* is a history in which the demands of fashion and religious law operate in a relationship of creative friction with periodic moments of reconciliation. Today, as in the past, different rabbinical authorities occasionally issue statements criticizing the realistic look of human-hair wigs or

complaining that they are too alluring and should not exceed a certain length. While some women agree and abstain from wearing fashionable human-hair wigs, many respond by finding more and more subtle ways of simultaneously obeying the laws of religion and the laws of fashion. In an astute analysis of the situation, Orthodox Jewish writer Ariella Brown points out that if the stiff, old-fashioned *sheitel* of first-generation migrants to America acted as a potential barrier to assimilation, today's *sheitel* with its long and lustrous silky hair available in every possible shade, has become an important means of assimilation – covering Jewish women's natural hair (a potential source of difference and for some, anxiety) with hair that better meets the American standard of beauty (Brown 2004). It is the *sheitel*'s capacity to offer an improvement on a woman's own hair that enhances its appeal to many Orthodox women. Affirming this, one renowned New York wig-maker whose wigs sell for \$6,000 dollars a piece suggested: 'If the rabbis issued a decree asking women to remove their wigs, 90% of them would refuse to do it and they'd find some religious arguments to support their case' (Ralf, 17 April, 2015, interview).

This is not to argue that all Orthodox Jewish women opt for the most fashionable wigs they can find. Some, particularly if living within tightly-knit Haredi sects, are more conservative in their choices. Some paint the partings of their wigs black to make the wigginess apparent; some think only synthetic hair appropriate; some consider that the wig is only modest if worn in conjunction with a hat; while others consider all wigs unsuitable because they are hair. Such women consider headscarves and snoods more pious and appropriate. In other words, through their choice of headwear Orthodox Jewish women place themselves within subtly coded internal hierarchies and geographies of fashion and piety (Carrel 1999; Schreiber 2006). But for many young women, especially those whose mothers were less Orthodox, *kisui rosh* (the law of covering the hair) is lived as a difficult challenge – a *mitzvah* (commandment) that brings blessings through testing their faith and commitment. Many claim that of all the *mitvahs* they follow, it is the most difficult one (Schreiber 2006). For many such women the fashionable human-hair *sheitel* plays an important role in assisting their transition into covering and enabling them to persist with the practice even if they do find it difficult. In the *sheitel* salons I have visited in London and New York much effort is invested in trying to achieve a natural look – from blending hair shades, to dyeing false roots, to revealing one's own parting, inserting baby hairs, adding a few strands of one's own hair to the wig and so forth. And if the wig still looks 'too wiggy', this often leads to yet more alterations and cost (Tarlo in press).

Yet what *sheitel* trends show is not women's resistance to religious regulation but their creative engagement with it, as my final examples show. Natania is a young beautician of Indian origin who comes from a Sephardic background. Sephardic communities trace their descent from Jews from the Iberian Peninsula, the Ottoman Empire, Asia and North Africa. Such communities do not have any tradition of wearing wigs and some Sephardic rabbis have actively ruled against *sheitels* (Schreiber 2006:23). However Natania's husband is from a *sheitel*-wearing Ashkenazi family which has European roots, tracing descent from Jews of the Roman Empire. On marriage she decided to adapt to the traditions of her female in-laws by adopting a *sheitel* even if the custom felt somewhat alien to her and, like many women, she found wig-wearing uncomfortable and itchy. Her frustrations with the *sheitels* available on the market led her to learn the craft of

wig-making by following YouTube demonstrations and unpicking and hand-knotting wigs. Today at the beauty salon where she works in North London, she offers bespoke wig-styling, -refurbishment and -making and is planning to set up a rental service for wigs for special occasions. When I first visited her salon she was busy adding hair extensions to the wig of a young Orthodox woman who felt her shoulder-length *sheitel* was too traditional and frumpish. Natania purchases hair from a UK-based Ukrainian hair dealer who claims that the hair is European hair, although Natania fears some of it may be Chinese. Aware of the ruling about the idolatrous status of Indian hair, she scrupulously avoids buying hair that is classified as Indian even though she likes Indian hair texture and is herself Indian. She has however found an ingenious if somewhat arduous way of satisfying her personal desire for an Indian-hair wig. She is currently growing her own hair sufficiently long for her to be able to cut it off and use it for making her own *sheitel*. Natania is aware of the textual sources and rabbinical views that state that a married woman's hair is sexually charged when still attached to her head but loses this potency once its connection to the head is severed. According to this logic which is questioned by some rabbis, the use a woman's own hair in a *sheitel* is legitimate and does not break any Jewish religious law (Natania, March 12-25 2015, interviews).

My final example concerns Esther (not her real name), a young woman who works in another Jewish wig salon in North London. Esther had an unsuccessful marriage and found herself divorced in her early twenties. On divorcing she worried that her wig was sending the message that she was married and therefore putting off potential suitors and damaging her chances of remarrying. When she consulted her local rabbi he told her that she must not stop covering her hair since this would mean taking a backward step, whereas a person should always struggle towards higher levels of religious observance. So Esther found her own solution and discussed it with her rabbi. She proposed to wear a 'u-wig', which is designed in such a way that the woman's own parting remains visible and some strands of hair from her hairline can be brushed back over the wig, creating a natural look. When I asked her if the rabbi disapproved she said: 'I told him that unless I could wear a u-wig I would stop wearing wigs altogether, so he agreed!' (Esther, personal communication). Today, Esther has the appearance of a fashionable young unmarried woman with long hair. Most of this hair is wig hair but this is entirely disguised by being intermingled with her own hair. That some of her hair is visible is justified with reference to an old rabbinical ruling that states that it is permissible for a woman to show a *tefach* (hand's breadth of hair) (Schreiber 2006: 13). Some married women interpret this ruling as an opportunity to allow some of their own hair to stick out at the front and back of their wigs. Another young woman I met in London not only has 'u'-shaped fronts but also holes cut into the back of her *sheitels* to enable her own hair to hang freely under the wig, thereby adding comfort and volume. The effect is that of a voluminous head of wild lustrous hair that is more suggestive of nonconformity than of tradition. Through this style she expresses her ambivalence towards the rules and expectations of hair-covering. As a feminist she considers the obligation to cover patriarchal. She also distances herself from the argument that *sheitels* are about modesty, pointing out that many of the wigs worn by Jewish women are conspicuous and alluring. What she does embrace, however, is the role of the *sheitel* as a sign of commitment to Jewish identity and faith. By finding an

individualistic and messy way of customizing the *sheitel*, she makes it conform to her personal aesthetic and ideological requirements (Ayala Prager, 4 June 2015, interview).

What such examples show is the seriousness with which women take the expectations of religion and fashion and the ingenuity with which they find ways of negotiating yet conforming to the regulatory mechanisms of both. In the examples discussed in the second half of this article we see the powerful role of design in enabling the management of the combined demands of fashion and faith.

### **Fashions in Islamic sportswear**

Islamic sportswear is a relatively new invention, consisting of various forms of sportswear designed to cover the head and body. They include the so-called ‘sports hijab’ and ‘burqini’, a swimming costume which covers the body, legs and arms and is similar to swimwear targeted at Orthodox Jewish consumers and others concerned with modesty. The evolution of these garments shows the role of design in mediating the interface between different sets of regulatory mechanisms and norms which are often perceived to be incompatible. These include Islamic ideas of modesty concerning what parts of the head and body should be covered (ideas that have become increasingly normative with the growth and spread of particular forms of Islamic revivalism) and secular norms concerning appropriate levels of bodily exposure for sports activities. These norms are often formalized and codified into regulations concerning what can and cannot be worn in such contexts as school sports lessons, public swimming pools, sports clubs and competitions but have also become accepted in other public places where people engage in sports such as the beach.

Norms concerning what should or should not be covered are of course historically produced and are often associated with ideas of decency and cleanliness (Mingati 2013). Spin back to 1902 and we find the Amateur Swimming Association in Britain setting regulations for men and women for swimwear. Costumes for both sexes covered the body and could not be more than three inches above the knee; female competitors were also required to wear long coats or gowns to the poolside (Williams 2012). In the Stockholm Olympics of 1912 there was discussion of whether female competitors should wear modesty aprons, skirts or pantaloons. As for the bikini, invented in 1946, the bodily exposure it enabled was considered so explosive that it is said to have got its name from the South Pacific island, Bikini Atoll, where atomic-bomb testing was taking place that summer. In Paris it was modelled by a nude dancer from the Casino de France since mainstream models apparently did not consider it respectable enough to wear. In Italy the bikini was initially banned. Ironically, today it is in Italy and France that wearing the burqa is banned in public places. Concerns about women wearing ‘too little’ or ‘too much’ may shift, but these are two sides of the same coin and attest to the high levels of conformity concerning acceptable norms of bodily covering and exposure expected in these countries both in the past and present.

If secular ideas about suitable levels of bodily exposure have undergone considerable change over the last century, so too have Islamic norms concerning what constitutes modest dress. For example, in Turkey and Iran, there were movements to ban

the veil in the early-twentieth-century in the name of modernization and progress. Many women abandoned their head- and full-body coverings at the time, sometimes under coercive conditions. Later in the century covering was actively encouraged as part of Islamic revival movements leading, in the Iranian case, to the legal imposition of head- and body-covering following the Islamic Revolution of 1979. In the Turkish case, there was a development of a substantial Islamic fashion industry which challenged secular norms (Navaro-Yashin 2002; Sandikci and Ger 2007; Lewis 2015). In many Muslim minority countries, it is common to find that second- and third-generation women from migrant backgrounds cover considerably more than their mothers ever did. Like the Orthodox Jewish girls who have chosen to embrace wigs, many Muslim women have self-consciously decided to adopt hijab (headscarves) and other forms of covering which they see increasingly as an important part of their identity and which many consider an Islamic necessity (Tarlo 2010; Tarlo and Moors 2013; Lewis 2015).

To summarize with a broad brush, the twentieth century has seen a progressive move towards increased levels of bodily exposure which are associated with modernity (Scott 2007). Such exposure is linked in secular fashion discourses to ideas of freedom, female emancipation and unrestricted movement and has found expression in sport in the peeling away of layers of clothing and a reduction in the size of garments. During the same period, increasing numbers of young, religiously oriented women, including many of those living in so-called western countries, have been adding rather than subtracting layers of clothing – sometimes partly in defence against the prevailing trend of uncovering. All of this leaves plenty of room for awkward juxtapositions, misunderstandings, mutual discomfort and disbelief concerning the extreme ends of the spectrum of norms concerning bodily covering and exposure (Figure 1).



Figure 1: © Malcolm Evans, 2011.

The question of whose norms are strangest is raised in Malcolm Evans's cartoon as a neutral one, but of course in secular countries where bodily exposure is associated with freedom, it is the burqa, not the bikini, that raises the most eyebrows. Even some feminists who were once critical of the brevity of certain fashions for the sexualization of women's bodies that they implied, are now more prone to defend the virtues of bodily exposure when confronted with the presence of new forms of Islamic fashion in the swimming pool or in the street (Scott 2007: 151–74). A consequence is that those who do choose to cover on the beach or in the swimming pool are the ones who are made to feel out of place

(Mingati 2013), and may even be forbidden to participate in sports or walk in the street in their chosen form of covering.

It is precisely in this context of hostility to covering that we can trace the emergence of the ‘sports hijab’ which, contrary to what might be assumed, was designed not by a Muslim but by a secular non-religious Dutch designer named Cindy van den Bremen. To summarize what I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Tarlo 2010), van den Bremen was studying in the Netherlands for an MA in design in the 1990s when she became aware of a controversy raging in Dutch schools concerning Muslim girls who wanted to wear the hijab for sports. In some schools the use of the headscarf was forbidden on the grounds that it posed a safety threat and girls were being told to wear swimming caps or polo necks in the gym as alternatives.

Irritated by what she saw as the intolerance and prejudice of the Dutch authorities, van den Bremen set about trying to design a form of headwear that would cover the head and neck, that was safe for sports, and that could be both practical and stylish – blending with the logic and aesthetics of existing sportswear. Appropriate design could, she felt, not only make the garment more comfortable and practical but also tackle prejudice by dispelling its apparent strangeness. ‘I wanted to rid the hijab of its traditional associations,’ she told me when we met in 2005 (Cindy van den Bremen, 18 April, 2005, interview).

To conform to the aesthetic and practical requirements of sportswear, she researched materials in terms of their practicality (stretchiness, breathability and so forth) and their ethos and image. At the same time, she consulted with young Muslim women in the Netherlands concerning both their aesthetic preferences and religious requirements. She got women to try out different models and adjusted her designs accordingly, replacing zips with Velcro fastenings for comfort. She also obtained approval from an imam who was satisfied that her designs fulfilled Islamic criteria of modesty. Finally she launched her company called Capsters, offering four different sporty head-coverings named after different activities: tennis, skate, outdoor and aerobics. They were made from plain stretchy fabrics suitable for sport and were different from headscarves since they did not require pins or ties and conformed to a sporty image and style. She has since expanded her range to include ‘runner’, ‘swim’ and ‘team’ hijabs suitable for school wear.

Though inspired by the dilemmas and frustrations faced by Muslim women, the designs were marketed under the non-religious trade name ‘Capster’, suggesting they could be worn by anyone and were not exclusively Muslim. Through her designs and responses to them, van den Bremen maintains an active dialogue with women around the world who contact her by e-mail (usually assuming that she is Muslim) and recount how her designs have enabled them to feel comfortable running marathons, playing tennis, kick-boxing, jogging and so forth, whether in South Africa, America, Britain, the Middle East or Europe.

Such designs should be seen as more than merely a creative response to restrictive institutional rules and norms concerning sportswear; they have also played a pioneering role in challenging the norms. After the Iranian women’s football team was

prevented by FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) from participating in qualifying matches for the 2012 Olympics on the grounds that their headscarves posed a safety risk, Cindy van den Bremen was invited to work with FIFA in trying to get the 4-year-old ban lifted. The Capster – or sports hijab – was used as material evidence that safe forms of head-covering could be made. FIFA went on to lift the ban just before the Olympics (too late for the participation of the Iranian team) and an official FIFA-approved football hijab is now marketed on the Capster website.

Unlike the sports hijab, the burqini was designed by a Muslim woman specifically for Muslim women, although interestingly some of the people who wear it are from other religious and non-religious backgrounds. Its designer, Aheda Zanetti, is an Australian from Lebanon who wished to be able to participate in a full range of sports without compromising the levels of modesty she considered Islamically required. She had noticed that many Muslim women in Australia were simply avoiding certain sports like swimming because they did not want to have to expose their bodies (a plight shared also by many Orthodox Jewish women and women from Asian backgrounds where people are accustomed to higher levels of covering). Like Cindy van den Bremen, she was concerned to build Muslim women's confidence and encourage wider participation in sports – in this case by producing comfortable, attractive, practical, covered swimwear using appropriate lightweight, flexible, UV-protected, chlorine-resistant fabrics. This was at a time when Muslim women were facing increasing hostility for the visible difference they displayed in their clothes – a difference all too often interpreted as a sign of backwardness, lack of integration, foreignness and extremism (Mingati 2013).

By playfully naming her intervention a 'burqini', Zanetti was mediating the perceived opposition between the bikini and burqa and producing some sort of material reconciliation between the two – a two-piece covered garment which suggested that freedom of movement and covering were not incompatible. This theme was later taken up by a British Islamic swimwear manufacturer who in 2007 developed the label Modestly Active. However this is not to suggest that levels of covering offered by the burqini and its derivatives have gained widespread acceptance. When the British celebrity chef Nigella Lawson was photographed wearing a Modestly Active burqini on Bondi beach in Australia a few years back, she found herself mercilessly ridiculed in the British press. But the very fact that an iconic celebrity like Nigella Lawson even contemplated wearing such a garment could be interpreted as a sign that swimwear norms of undress are currently becoming destabilized. That the Miss World Competition in 2015, for the first time in its 63-year history, did not include a swimwear round might be taken to support this claim that social expectations regarding bodily exposure are currently being challenged. While burqinis sometimes meet with hostility and suspicion in public swimming pools in Europe (Mingati 2013), there is at the same time increasing recognition that the brevity of much swimwear can be oppressive in terms of the levels of body management it requires, whether in relation to sun creams or control of unwanted hair or unwanted public exposure and scrutiny.

What both the sports hijab and the burqini do is expand the range of sartorial possibilities open to those women who wish to cover by recognizing and catering to their

bodily norms and privacy requirements. A large part of their success lies in judicious design which aligns these products with contemporary sportswear fashions while maintaining distinctive levels of covering. In doing so they also blur the distinctions between secular and religious dress codes, challenging the norms of both.

Since its invention in 2003, the burqini has attracted massive public attention and new companies have grown up marketing equivalents in Turkey, the Netherlands, the United States, Britain and Dubai. The garment has even made it into the flagship store of the iconic British retail chain, Marks and Spencer in London. Meanwhile in Orthodox Jewish circles we find equivalent companies such as Aqua Modesta, Sea Secret and Hydro Chic offering modest alternatives for Jewish women. We also find increasing dialogue online between Muslim and Jewish women concerning what constitutes fashionable modest dress and where and how to obtain it (Lewis 2013; Tarlo 2013). None of these developments have quelled the long-cherished and simplistic assumption, expressed particularly vehemently by secularists and feminists in France, that bodily exposure represents freedom whilst covering represents oppression. Such stereotypes received their latest incarnation in April 2016 when France's Minister for Women's Rights accused Marks and Spencer of being 'irresponsible' for selling burqinis, arguing that such clothes represent 'the imprisonment of women's bodies' (Chassany 2016).

### **Concluding thoughts**

The popular associations of religious dress with conformity and of fashion with innovation have proved an obstacle to understanding the dynamics of religious fashion, which plays on the elements of freedom and conformity found both in fashion and religious practice. Much religious fashion is about finding ways of fitting in both with religious norms and expectations and with mainstream fashion norms. In doing so, new sartorial propositions emerge which often have the capacity to extend the range of what is acceptable to religion and to fashion. In making fashions that cater to religious demands, designers, entrepreneurs and wearers of religious fashion simultaneously make religion more fashionable and boost its appeal to new generations of young women who find spiritual and material benefits in combining their dual concerns with fashion and faith.

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