
The logo features the letters 'AAR' in a large, bold, serif font. A thick, black, curved line arches underneath the letters. To the right of 'AAR', the words 'BOOK REVIEW' are written in a smaller, all-caps, serif font.

Pious Fashion: How Muslim Women Dress. By Elizabeth Bucar. Harvard University Press, 2017. 248 pages. \$29.95 (hardcover), \$16.17 (e-book).

In *Pious Fashion*, simplicity is a virtue.

That is, this study of three Muslim-majority, non-Arab countries is simple in its depiction of the author's humorous and personal examination—some could say rethinking—of her own biases about the impact of religious authority and social conformity on Muslim women who strive to embody their morals and aesthetic values in their choice of dress. I very much appreciate the vulnerability she exudes in her storytelling and the lengths she travels to depict her experiences as somewhat of an insider—who was nevertheless surprised by her discomfort with the physical greetings of unrelated males while in Iran and wearing “proper hijab according to the sharia,” or her sense of being unprotected when she traveled in Turkey without covering her hair—and also as a non-Muslim outsider who was discovering her writing voice (vii).

I imagine that Bucar teaches her liberal arts students at Northeastern University as she writes: ethically inviting personal anecdotes as she shares her own, challenging patriarchy in the written text of the moment and the context being lived, and problematizing the complexities of culture, embodied reality, and the commodification of female bodies. Moreover, Bucar's use of ethnography in three distinct locations belies monolithic assumptions that rules for Muslim dress around the globe are universally regulated, that the result is *the* symbol for authentic Islam, and that the messages Muslim clothing convey about male privilege, female agency, and social control cannot also enhance the public image of the faith. In this regard, *Pious Fashion* serves as a more complete sequel to her earlier work on religious dress, *The Islamic Veil: A Beginner's Guide* (Oneworld Publications), and an interesting counterpoint to a Pew Research Center study of the nuances of understandings about Muslim dress and modesty, both published in 2013.

Pious Fashion opens with a short preface and introduction that recount the journey of a researcher committed to a level of detail that transforms her

Journal of the American Academy of Religion, XX 2018, Vol. XX, No. XX, pp. 1–4

© The Author(s) 2018. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of the American Academy of Religion. All rights reserved. For permissions, please e-mail: journals.permissions@oup.com.

observations into “guided tours.” From the ways in which location can dictate the form of head-covering and the shape of a Muslim woman’s head to the reality that colors and textures routinely convey individual tastes, Bucar uses her daily encounters as a multi-tasking tool to explore her guiding question—“What to wear?”—and to render key concepts accessible to undergraduates and adult readers of any age regardless of familiarity with Islam or Muslim women. The author’s training as a religious ethicist is especially useful for this project. Her contrast of modesty, the pious, and piety and their links to fashion for Muslim women, for example, seem to anticipate distinctions of morality with which her students might wrestle. Such considerations also establish a firm foundation for a key argument of *Pious Fashion*: “there is no non-cultural way to perform modesty” (20). Noteworthy too is the intersectional approach to meaning making via agency and clothing. While Bucar’s practice of linking individual actions to particular social contexts is not unusual, the contribution she makes here is to reinterpret agency as “creative conformity,” or a “tactical engagement within a structural context” where “choices are limited by factors, pressures, and expectations outside [a Muslim woman’s] control” (18).

Bucar’s explanations for avoiding the phrases “gendered Muslim clothing” and the more expansive “Muslim clothing” serve as further evidence of her comfort with questioning aloud and with her readers as she strives to “unsettle assumptions.” The rationale for the book’s title was particularly instructive: “‘Pious fashion’ is also meant to be slightly provocative. These two terms do not sit easily together; fashion is often thought of as a way to express materialistic desires, whereas piety is the mechanism through which unruly desires are suppressed. . . . These terms do not conflict but rather inform each other when used together to help us understand the complexities of Muslim women’s actual sartorial practices” (4). The introduction to *Pious Fashion* also explains the utility of three countries situated outside of the Arab world as apt settings for a comparative research project. With Iran, Indonesia, and Turkey—which are also among the settings of her earlier work, *The Islamic Veil*—Bucar turns the spotlight on regions with their own histories of using official dress codes to regulate women’s public attire even as she confronts Western notions of the supremacy of Arab-speaking regions for the world’s Muslims. These relatively young nation-states—having acquired the designation within the last century—“underscore the global diversity” and local specificity of pious fashion and the extent to which “stylistic choices [of what to wear] provide a way for women to contribute to local debates about gender norms in Muslim politics” (6). Ultimately, the inclusion of Indonesia, the country with the highest population of adherents of Islam around the globe, decenters Arabs as the determiners of all things Muslim.

To unfold the four succeeding chapters, Bucar introduces her readers to women who “are real people trying to express their religious beliefs and look good at the same time” (197). Accompanying stories of resistance, regulation, and the judgments they impose on one another are strikingly colorful photos taken by photographers with ties to each region and from fashion blogs also critiqued by

the author. These visual snapshots serve as informative texts on their own and as further evidence of the creative and varied approaches Muslim women take with their choice of dress. While they serve as a visual authority of Iranian women's public decisions, these photographs often challenge or reinforce five authorities that "shape and regulate pious fashion" in these regions: religious experts, morality police, visual propaganda, fashion designers, and fashion blogs (54).

Tehran, the author's only research site that regulates by law what women wear, serves as the setting of chapter 1. In it, readers encounter one of the localized styles of pious fashion called *chador*: the full body, typically black traditional covering, banned in 1938, but most associated with Iran since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Whether tracing the state's coercive measures to restrict public covering under Reza Shah Pahlavi or the implementation of compulsive hijab (and the current dress code) mandated by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Bucar weaves together strategies women in Iran use to negotiate in the public sphere the diversity of legal opinions about what "good" hijab is and their allegiance to the Islamic regime or a current alternative. She makes clear early on that the type of "public" a woman traverses as well as her economic status has sweeping influence, from determining the public protests in which she engages, her identity, or whether a woman is declared mentally ill or the possessor of a deviant lifestyle.

Indonesia and Turkey receive similar treatment. With the former, Bucar traces the rise of Sukarno, leader of the successful resistance against the Dutch and Indonesia's first president in 1945, and his successor, General Suharto, who held the presidency from 1967 to 1998. She documents Indonesia's early history, where bare shoulders and uncovered hair were part of the Javanese aesthetic of beauty until Indonesia's response to its colonial history and post-independence transitions began to link social control of women to cultural adherence to Islam. Bucar's focus on Suharto's thirty-one-year reign associates his determination to separate religion from politics to increased popularity of pious fashion in the form of the *jilbab*, represented by a headscarf and modest outfit that replaced bare heads, wrapped sarong-style skirts, and blouses. Of particular note is her attention to the racist appropriation by Dutch colonial women of Javanese women's dress (*kain kebaya*), though this is too brief. Finally, her analysis in this chapter of the "potentially dangerous" side of pious fashion regarding contamination of a woman's inner and outer beauty could have evolved into a separate chapter.

The history of pious fashion in Turkey represents something of a merger of the strict regulation in Iran and the freedom afforded women in Indonesia, in that Turkish women have experienced both extremes even when not in their favor. The secularity with which Mustafa Kemal Atatürk began his presidency after WWI unleashed a cultural divide that continues to split the culture into pro-hijab and anti-hijab camps. Here, *tesettur* denotes pious fashion and is characterized by high necklines, low hemlines, and complete coverage of the hair, with styles of outfits often tied to the age of the wearer. Bucar captures the economic and spiritual challenges of maintaining a wardrobe that can be both aesthetically

pleasing to the wearer and a socially acceptable presentation of the values of her society.

By devoting her concluding chapter to global fashion trends and various forms of media, particularly fashion magazines, Bucar creates a virtual fashion runway for readers. Here's a work that manages to give a shout out to Beyonce without decentering its primary subjects: Muslim women. Bucar especially situates *Pious Fashion* as a social analysis that intentionally evaluates fashion failures without attaching judgments of piety. Throughout this informative addition to literature about Muslim women, the author reminds her readers that hijab—as worn on the head or other parts of a woman's body or called by another name—is open to limitless interpretations and is bound by meanings that are socially constructed and sufficiently fluid for further evolution.

doi: 10.1093/jaarel/lfy017

Debra Majeed
Beloit College