

The Rise and Rise of Modest Fashion

One of my daily routines, which used to be common to many a suburbanite, is picking up a hard copy of the newspaper delivered to my door and to give it a quick scan before setting off to work. My newspaper is reputable enough, but it usually takes me only about ten minutes to see if there is anything I want to come back to in the evening.

One day recently, turning the page, I stumbled upon one of those occasional women's fashion features, which usually gets short shrift. What caught my attention though was that all the garments had their models well covered. For decades, it seems fashion designers have been leaving their fabric suppliers nearly bankrupt or have played games with rising and falling hemlines.

Some days later I stumbled across a reference to a [New York Times article](#) on Modest Fashion Weeks. I looked it up and sure enough, such things do exist and what is more, modest fashion is a recognized trend. Writes journalist Yasmin Dewan: "There is no longer any doubt that what used to be called 'modest' dressing – clothes sensitive to religious requirements more than fashion – has become a part of mainstream trend."

What is clear is that the initiative has come largely from Muslim women who have an interest in high fashion. Just the same, it is now broadly catching on since many women realize they want to dress attractively rather than provocatively.

The idea of modesty should hardly be considered the hallmark of a particular religion. For centuries most highly civilized cultures have understood its purpose was one of safeguarding personal dignity. Check out those portraits or statues of prominent women and men of the Republic of Rome, or consider

the traditional attire of Japan, China, India – and Europe until the 19th century. Reading Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, on the other hand, shows that the elite of Tsarist Russia during the Napoleonic Wars were often pushing boundaries.

Modesty, in practical terms, is not always a simple matter of covering up. It has more to do with what kind of impression one wants to make. Exposing a certain amount of skin at the beach or a sports event is not likely to be provocative. Whereas some forms of dressing, though not skimpy, may very well be.

Why is it that attitudes, after the *laissez faire* ones of the sixties and onward, now may be changing? Is it an offshoot of the #Me Too movement? Is it the increasing acknowledgement of the harmful effects of pornography or the sexual revolution overall? Whatever the trigger, some of us are welcoming the change.

For myself, as a chaplain at both a girls school and a boys school, it is not just the common sense of the average male or female who feels uncomfortable about others' overexposure; it is the same concern many parents have regarding their teen age children and what will happen at parties and proms, and in their future relationships. It is the desire to see young people develop into men and women who will have a sense of their own worth and the worth of others.

There is a brief scene in the film *Apollo 13* where astronaut Jim Lovell is at home with the family when his adolescent daughter emerges from her room, off to a party wearing a mini-skirt. In less time than it takes for a Saturn V to lift off Dad has her back in her room for a fashion rethink. That is a dad who knows and who cares.

The matter of the neglect of modesty was dealt with more than a couple of decades ago by writer Wendy Shalit in a book titled *Return to Modesty*. Shalit's reflections were based on

her less than happy experiences at a prestigious American college, where at social occasions young men and women were often behaving very badly. Her book, which sold in large numbers, was, of course, considered controversial and objected to by many. Others saw the sense of what she was saying. Modesty matters. And yes, it is not just a women's thing. Men need to be modest too.

I hope the new trend continues to take a hold, as we need to restore respect for the body and people's intimacy, and to encourage true beauty. This is something parents need to consider: how to communicate a healthy understanding of the body to one's children, and encourage the virtues of modesty and chastity from an early age. I encourage those who have good ideas on that to pass them on to others.

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