

SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION STREAM PLENARY

THURSDAY 15 APRIL 2021, 16:00 - 17:00

THE LANGUAGE OF MODEST EMBODIMENT: GLOBAL VARIATIONS IN CONCEPTS OF RELIGION AND CULTURE

Reina Lewis (London College of Fashion) and Kristin Aune (Coventry University)

Reina Lewis and Kristin Aune investigate the incursion of religiously related fashion into spaces often understood in “western” contexts as implicitly secular: the public art museum and the workplace.

As consulting curator on the exhibition *Contemporary Muslims Fashions*, Reina provides behind the scene data on the development, staging, and reception of the exhibition from its opening in San Francisco and its tour to Frankfurt and now New York. She reflects on why having diverse Muslim religious dress cultures displayed in an American public arts context matters and to whom it matters. Participation from diverse local Muslim organisations and communities impacted museum departments as professionals grappled with the contested nature of the exhibition content, messaging, and viewership. Reaching “diverse” new audiences is a priority for Euro-American cultural institutions, with each tour location throwing up different flash points and contestations over authority and interpretation: religious and secular, political and spiritual, financial and aesthetic.

If the museum exhibition aimed to keep religious definitions of fashion open, our AHRC research project on UK women and modest workwear demonstrates a different dynamic: the tensions in defining modest dress as mostly a religious requirement/practice versus a cultural norm/practice. As Kristin shows, this contrast and different usage of language about dress and religion emerged in the two case studies of our research. In the UK, modest dress practices may be coded as religious to gain protection under UK/EU equality law, whereas women working for UK and global firms visit Saudi Arabia, may find similar workwear requirements being defined by Saudis as “cultural not religious” in the context of state-mandated dress for women and men. In both cases, regardless of women’s own religious and secular beliefs and practices, organisational codes of modest dress and behaviour may be impacted and regulated equally by managers and colleagues, user groups and visitors, and socio-cultural contexts and norms.

Professor Reina Lewis

Professor Reina Lewis is the Professor of Cultural Studies at London College of Fashion, joining from her previous post at the University of East London where she was also Professor of Cultural Studies. Trained in Fine Art and Art History at the University of Leeds, Reina took an MA in English: Critical Theory at Sussex University. Her PhD in Humanities at Middlesex University on western women orientalist artists and writers marked a new development in understandings of gender and imperial cultures. Reina’s research remains inter- and multi-disciplinary, whether in cultural history or contemporary studies, and breaks down into two interconnected areas: feminist postcolonial studies (concerned predominantly with changing attitudes to Islam in the west and in the Middle East); and lesbian, gay, and queer studies (concerned mainly with the role of dress in the formulation of sexed and gendered identities). In recent years Reina’s research has focused on modest fashion cross-faith and the intersection of the fashion industry and women’s experiences of secular and religious cultures. Reina has also acted as consultant curator on the exhibition *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* at the San Francisco Fine Arts Museums and is the Series Editor of two books series: *Dress Cultures* (Bloomsbury), with Elizabeth Wilson; and *Cultures in Dialogue* (Giorgias Press), with Teresa Heffernan. She sits on the Editorial/Advisory Boards for several journals, including *Fashion Theory*, *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, *Lambda Nordica*, *Art in Translation*. Reina’s writings and opinion have appeared across the global media, most recently in the *New York Times*, *le Monde*, *BBC World*, *BBC Radio*, *CBC radio*, *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *Marie-Claire* magazine, *Elle Brazil*, *Businessoffashion.com*, *Fortune.com*, and *Huffington Post*.

Professor Kristin Aune

Professor Kristin Aune is a professor at the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations at Coventry University. Kristin has previously taught on sociology and youth work and theology programmes at the University of Westminster, Ridley Hall Cambridge and the University of Derby. At Derby she became Reader in Sociology and Director of the Centre for

Society, Religion and Belief. She has been a visiting fellow at Grinnell College, Iowa, and Uppsala University. She leads the Centre's Faith and Peaceful Relations research group.

Kristin has undertaken pioneering work on gender, religion and feminism. Her book on single women's marginalisation in the church led to a PhD on gender in evangelical Christianity, the findings of which were widely published. Fascinated by how women's changing lives are affecting their faith commitments, she co-edited *Women and Religion in the West: Challenging Secularization*, which traces the disaffiliation of women from religious institutions, exploring differences between Christianity, Islam and alternative spirituality.

Kristin was also part of The Evaluation of the Church Urban Fund's Together Network project. This project evaluated the work of the Together Network, a network of joint ventures between Church Urban fund and Church of England dioceses to help churches respond to the challenge of poverty. From 2016-18 she co-directed the project Chaplains on Campus, exploring university chaplaincy in UK universities. She is also Principal Investigator on the project 'Tackling religion-based hate crime on the multi-faith campus' (funder: Office for Students, 2018-2020) and Co-Investigator on a study of religious student societies (led by the think tank Theos).