

Sacred Clothing: An Inside-Outside Perspective

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LAST SUMMER I WAS ASKED TO RESPOND to a paper on the LDS garment, given by Colleen McDannell at the Salt Lake City Sunstone Symposium. Her paper, to appear as a chapter in her forthcoming book examining the relationships between people's beliefs and the objects they use, she titles "Garments: An Outside View," since she is not of the LDS faith and culture. Considering her research and perceptions caused me to face a difficult set of values in my own life and to do some reassessing of how I regard sacred symbols in my own life. I could call what I write here, "An Inside View," but that might not be entirely accurate. Let me be quite personal and open in explaining why.

I do not wear the LDS garment and haven't for some twenty years, though I was married in the Salt Lake Temple and at one time attended the temple occasionally in Logan. My parents were also married in the Salt Lake Temple, though I never remember their having worn garments when I was growing up. Their only other visit to a temple was at my marriage, when they were given permission to witness our wedding ceremony. My husband wears his garments and sometimes attends the temple. Two of our three children are married and consecrated their marriages in the temple. I did not attend those marriages; I stayed outside the Logan Temple and cried. I have told my tender daughter I would do anything for her, but I've choked on the words, realizing I could not do what she and I so much wanted.

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So, while I am of the faith, some would say I am marginal in it, having failed to claim my full spiritual inheritance. I do have my own set of garment stories and lore, though. My favorite is of a maverick aunt who was careful and observant about wearing the garment at all times. But she also had her vanities and a certain spunk and imagination. When she bought a party dress with a black lace bodice, she decided it would be inappropriate and maybe even wrong to have her sacred garment show through the lace. Her solution was to dye the top of her one-piece garment black.

Then there was my grandfather and his mercantile store in Emery County, Utah—a general store in a tiny town called Ferron. Times were hard and payments were seldom on time. He said he liked dealing least of all with those in the town who had “pie-marks in their underwear.” They were the last to pay up.

There’s also the story of a young woman in Cache Valley who firmly subscribed to the Mormon folk belief that the garment should never be completely removed. So convinced was she that while she was in labor, she argued with her obstetrician over whether her garments could be taken off while she gave birth to her baby. He was adamant that they should come off; she was equally determined that they stay on. As the coming child increased in urgency, they finally reached a compromise. She would keep one leg of her garments on. A nonmember friend to whom I told this story marvelled, “I can’t understand how she got pregnant in the first place.”

Some of us who don’t wear garments have, nevertheless, a high reverence for them. One such friend writes that her only direct contact with garments is when she washes them for her daughters and their husbands when they are home visiting. She has qualms, she says, about throwing their garments in the wash. She wonders if there might not be “special care instructions” to keep the holy underwear untainted. “It doesn’t seem kosher,” she says, “to put these sacred garments with secular undies.” Knowing the protection stories, she wonders sometimes if the obverse could be true. Could a sullied garment transmit sin? Taking it to the metaphorical, if synthetic fibers become grey when washed with other things, could holy underwear take on shades of spiritual dinginess? Does a fall from spotless white constitute a loss of protective power?

Another favorite, possibly apocryphal, story—one that I use in my classes on argumentative writing when we’re talking about “plain-folks” propaganda—is one told about former Utah governor Simon Bamberger. As I heard it (and I can’t remember where), when Bamberger was campaigning in 1916, he was keenly aware of his Jewishness in a Mormon electorate. A shrewd politician, he made sure that when he

gave whistlestop speeches in the Mormon hinterland, he had a string—easily mistaken for the old style garment string—hanging out of his shirt front. As he toyed with it while speaking, Mormon listeners had the comfortable feeling that he was one of them.

As it turned out, Bamberger was one of the most popular governors the state has ever known, and, as a matter of fact, his Jewishness has significance to my consideration here because what I will say about LDS garments and their levels of meaning for me centers around Judaism. Why? Because it is through my exposure to Judaism that I've come to a deeper understanding of my own positions, beliefs, and actions in the Church. I owe much to Steve and Ona Siporin who have taught me the meaning of *communitas* and have shown me ways to be intelligently and thoughtfully observant, making me receptive to symbol and sanctification in ways new to me. They have brought me to a receptive naiveté regarding my own faith. Steve's classes in Jewish folklore and religion have been pivotal for me. Even more important, however, are the new insights into ceremonies and symbols in Mormonism the Siporins have given our family by including us in certain sacred ceremonies and celebrations.

Anthropologist Victor Turner, in his introduction to Barbara Myerhoff's *Number Our Days* (1976, xiii) suggests that anthropologists are thrice born—first in natal birth into a particular culture, second as they work and come to understand an exotic culture, and third, when they come back to their native culture and discover that the familiar is exoticized because they are seeing it with new eyes. For me the second birth happened as I gained some understanding of a religion (Judaism) that for me was exotic and new.

Preparing this essay has forced me to look closer at my own curious spiritual position—to ask myself why I've chosen to return to liminal membership when I had once been an initiate. Why did I stop wearing the garment? I did so at a time when I considered my faith to be strong and intact, and I have never since imagined myself as a lapsed Mormon. The time spent pondering this essay hasn't been the only time I've tried to answer that question for myself, but it has been a time of deeper probing—of a self-examination that would not have been possible before I met and admired the Siporins, devout and faithful in the context of their Jewish faith.

One answer to my question—but not the most important for me—is that I was not prepared for, or comfortable with, material objects as religious symbols. I grew up, as have most Utah Church members, attending services that seemed stripped of ritual or symbol. Paul and Margaret Toscano call this the “symbol-poor” aspect of our worship services, as contrasted with the temple's “symbol-rich” emphasis (1990,

284). I remember my chagrin as a teenager when in planning a young women's party, I brought candles for the table. "In our Church we don't use candles in the church house," I was told. I also knew we didn't wear crosses around our necks, that our leaders didn't wear collars or robes, habits or vestments. We didn't adorn ourselves with such wearable, observable symbols. There is a workaday quality to our belief that partakes of modernity's loss of capacity to feel symbols. Mircea Eliade, in his classic study *The Sacred and the Profane* contrasts religious man—"homo religiosus"—with rational man (1959, 15). He finds in our modern mode a world view that fails to give credence to a world charged with symbols and compares it to a less sophisticated world in which not only time and place are sacralized and valorized, but objects too are sanctified. On one level Mormons live in a desacralized world. In some ways we could be thought to have excessive reverence for the rational and a dismissiveness for things beyond reason. Every miracle, so the teaching goes, can eventually be explained in terms of natural law. When the veil is lifted there will be no mystery.

I think many readers of Michael Quinn's *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (1987) had a profound distaste for the book partly because they felt uncomfortable with his claims that Joseph Smith's world view accepted that some material objects possessed magic power—seer-stones, daggers, divining rods, magic parchments, hankies, capes and certain amulets and talismans. We would rather view the Prophet as a rational man, granting him the miraculous revelatory visions, of course, but rejecting thoughts of his having embraced a world view foreign to our own which to us lacks genuineness and depth and which we might even consider spurious and unenlightened. We view ourselves as liberated from mystery and myth and reject what historian Morris Berman calls "misguided world views we have happily outgrown" (in Quinn 1987, xi). We are not conditioned in our daily attitudes to acknowledge that objects are capable of being transfigured. Things, we think, ought to signify no more than what is visible. With this as my background, however mistaken it might have been, how could I step suddenly from a view divested of sanctification of the material world to a world in which symbol reigned? How could I put on sacred garb when all I had known prior to the temple experience had been my own wrongful disdain for clothing as symbol? In my unwillingness to acknowledge that every human experience is capable of being lived on a different plane, it logically followed that the garment could signify no more than is visible. It could be no more than an item of underclothing, uncomfortable not only in its spiritual fit but in its physical feel as well.

Again, it is through an analogue in Judaism that I now find a willingness to concede the potential sacredness of a piece of cloth—to a realization that a physical object can effectively concretize belief. Consider Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's paper, "The Cut That Binds: The Western Ashkenazic Torah Binder as Nexus between Circumcision and Torah." The Torah, she writes, "is like a human, . . . The scroll is dressed in its finery, and when it is beyond repair, it is buried in a cemetery. Like a queen, the scroll wears a regal mantle. . . . All must stand in the presence of the scroll. Should the scroll be dropped, the community must fast. The 'naked scroll' is not to be touched with the bare hands. The scroll must always be covered except when it is being read" (1982, 136).

Among some western Ashkenazic Jews, the binder was the cloth on which the child was presented at circumcision. The cloth was then embroidered and given to the child as a sacred object, and thereby the link between the child and the Torah became concretized. This binding cloth used during circumcision symbolically bound the child into the covenant and later became an actual physical binder to the Torah. The cloth was thus both a physical and symbolic binder to the covenant in much the same way that the garment serves a dual purpose—it symbolically binds our bodies while ideally binding mind and spirit to temple covenants. Gimblett concludes: "Ritual acts and utterances may be experienced as ephemeral, even though their effects endure. Ritual objects, in contrast, provide a sustained physical presence, a constant tangible reminder of the rituals of which they have formed a part. They serve not only as a reminder, but also as a stimulus, focus, affirmation, guide, and resource for ritual activity. They are activated by ritual acts and utterances, at the same time they possess a power of their own" (1982, 146).

We activate the symbolism of the garment by renewal—by ritual acts and covenants we perform and make within the temple. Here then is a partial answer to my question, but only a partial answer: I felt discomfort with symbol—symbols I am now beginning to embrace as I see them used in a religion in which discussion of them is not taboo and in which they are more openly acknowledged as avenues to higher spirituality. But I perceive separation as another, deeper reason that I need to explore and come to grips with.

Anthropologist Mark P. Leone has identified one of the functions of the garment as that of separator—of a way by which Mormons resolve the charge to be in the world but not of it (1978, 13). I had sensed the way the garment symbolized separation—not only from the world, but from less devout and observant members and from the uninitiated. In nonverbal ways my garments seemed to separate me

from my parents who had put the garment by. Though worn as an undergarment, it does mark an outward separation. Let me illustrate.

The first illustration is silly and something I hate to confess. In the past year I have helped to teach the Gospel Doctrine class in our ward. As I've been getting ready and deciding what to wear, I've half-consciously been aware that certain blouses, though not sheer, would clearly reveal that I'm not wearing garments. I don't necessarily decide against such blouses, but I realize that when I turn my back to write on the board, certain class members will be quite aware of the absence of a clothing item that might lend me credibility. It's back to Simon Bamberger and the garment string again. So not only am I a woman, an academic, and not conventionally active in the Church, but I wear no garments. In my ward those four descriptions constitute four near-heresies when it comes to Gospel Doctrine teachers. My lessons therefore are not above suspicion.

I feel sad and estranged, but I am the stranger. As members of the Church, even though we have made the ritual passage, we can later return to liminality by taking off our spiritual separator. But with Jewish circumcision that cannot be so easily done. *Europa, Europa*, a new film based on a memoir by Salomon Perel, a German Jew, illustrates that clothing and even the body itself can be made into physical separators. In the film, Solly, on the eve of his bar mitzvah, must flee his bath, naked and in terror, when Nazi soldiers enter his home. He secures a Nazi uniform to clothe himself and returns to find his sister raped and murdered upon the very table where his circumcision had taken place thirteen years before. That Nazi uniform became his armor and protection, ironically concealing what is his unambiguous and irreversible sign of identity as a Jew. While the Nazi uniform is his means for deception, his circumcision "keeps him honest," as we say. He can't risk being "caught with his pants down," for though he is young and virile, allowing himself to be seduced would mean certain death. In a scene I am unable to visualize and am not sure I want to see, according to a review, he "attempts in the privacy of a bathroom stall to erase the last vestige of his Jewishness. Working painfully with bits of thread, he tries to extend the flesh of his penis into something resembling a foreskin." His Nazi uniform lends physical protection; his circumcised penis lends moral protection, literally preventing him from succumbing to temptation (Rafferty 1991, 81-83).

There are many garment protection stories in the lore of Mormonism. One finds its analogue in a Jewish folktale. The Mormon version tells of a young Mormon missionary in France. He has become separated from his companion and has wandered into one of Paris' infamous red light districts. He is propositioned by a woman of the streets,

goes with her to her room, and begins to disrobe. She is amazed (even amused) by his curious garment. He, in turn, allows it to remind him of his covenants, and he is then prompted to ask the golden questions, "What do you know about Mormonism," and "Do you want to know more?" The harlot listens and is converted; they turn from sin, he completes his mission honorably, and returns to marry her (in the temple, no doubt).

The Jewish story is alike in almost every particular. What we need to know first, though, is a little terminology. The Jewish prayer shawl, the *tallith*, has no holy meaning on its own; it exists only to hold the holy fringes (the *tzitzit*). Similarly, the body of the garment has no holy investiture, existing solely to provide a place for the sacred markings. With this knowledge we can better understand the story, which begins with the commandment in the Book of Numbers: "That shall be your tassel: look at it and recall all the commandments of the Lord and observe them. . . . Thus you shall be reminded to observe all My commandments and be holy to your God" (Numbers 15:39-41, as quoted in Milgrom 1981, 1). A certain student, so the story goes, was particularly careful and observant regarding the commandment of the *tzitzit*. The man hears about a fabulously wealthy Roman prostitute. He goes to her and finds her seated naked on her golden bed. At that point the four fringes at each corner of the tallith gather themselves and appear to him as four witnesses (one version has it that they even strike him across the face). He falls to the earth, fully ashamed. The prostitute is nonplused and says, "I shall not let you be until you tell me what blemish or defect you have seen on my body." He swears that she has no blemish but that the *tzitzit* caused him to fear for his soul (1981, 5). Furthermore, the woman divides up all her possessions, giving them equally to the King, the Pope, and to the school. Then she comes before the Rabbi and asks that he immerse her and make a Jewess of her, since she wants to accept the faith of Israel. Upon hearing the details of the story, the Rabbi not only baptizes the woman into the faith, but adjures her to marry the student who had been saved from temptation by the wearing of the *tzitzit*. The student takes her as wife, and disciples of sages were her children. In both stories a man is not only saved from transgression by something he wears that is invested with holy power, but a sinner is also converted through interest in that holy garment.

A young, newly married couple of my acquaintance candidly told me that they were sorely tempted while they were courting. As a returned missionary, he wore the garment; she did not, and he found her body more sexually vulnerable than his. They decided, therefore, to give her an "invisible garment" so that her body would be no longer

more vulnerable than his. This helped, they are convinced, to keep them morally clean.

Jewish scholar of liturgy Jacob Milgrom, in his essay "The Tassel and the Tallith" (1981), further looks at the prayer shawl as an equalizer of men, and I use the word "men" advisedly and appropriately here. The wearing of the tallith, Milgrom points out, is not the prerogative solely of those men at the top of a hierarchy; it is worn by all faithful men. The LDS garment is even more democratic; all—men and women alike—may wear it. Garments do not constitute a spiritual identification in terms of rank. Milgrom calls the tallith "the epitome of democratic thrust within Judaism, which equalizes not by leveling but by elevating." In it all Israel is "enjoined to be a nation of priests" (1981, 9). Those of us in the Church, both women and men, share a common priestly heritage in the wearing of the garment. Worn next to the skin, it does not dramatically set us apart as an outer vestment might, except perhaps in the locker room. Followers of many other religions may wear clothing that visibly sets them apart, which to the religious mind is often desirable. It is important, in fact, to separate the sacred from the profane. Both the garment and the tallith are mainly observable only to the wearer, and they both set apart the wearer primarily in inner ways. They separate the wearer not only from the outside world, but from the spiritually marginal and the less devout in the faith as well. In addition, they both separate the wearer from past lives, and they both represent and define boundaries. With the tzitzit and with the garment's markings the purpose is, as the commandment says, to look . . . to recall . . . to observe the commandments. In both cases a material item of clothing is intended to lead to loftier ethical behavior; in both cases something is worn as a spiritual mnemonic to look, to remember, to observe, and thereby to become holy.

Clothing often serves as a rite of passage. Recently I encountered one such rite that I had not originally interpreted as such. In *The Horse of Pride*, Pierre Jakez Helias recounts the trouser ceremony in his own Breton village as a boy's rite of passage. The little boy, formerly dressed as a girl, passes ceremonially into the world of men with the donning of his first pair of trousers. The whole town marks the change with celebrations and special foods (1975, 50-51).

When people marry in the temple, they also experience a rite of passage marked in part by the putting on of the garment. I watched my own daughter wrestle with this step into another world—the putting away of sleeveless summer frocks and pretty undies. Sometimes the wearing of this unfamiliar garment next to her skin might have seemed not only a blessing but a privation. Those who wore hair shirts

next to their skin to prove themselves might not have seemed so remote to her. Ruth Whitman, in her poem, "Cutting the Jewish Bride's Hair," notes the trauma of passage: "This little amputation/will shift the balance of the universe" (1990, 112).

The garment also separates wearers from those of us who may be classed as at the fringe (that expression, "at the fringe," is upended when considered in the light of the prayer shawl's fringe, which is of the essence). To me, wearing the garment seemed to separate me from my family, my roots, my people, my own identity. I believe that a deep spiritual impetus and faith prompted me to make my decision and prevents me now from wearing the garment and entering the temple. I believe in the power and symbolism of the garment. I do not at this time consider myself worthy to wear it. If and when I decide to put the garment back on, I will not take that act lightly. It will have utter significance. I've thought sometimes that perhaps I should just "do it" with less commitment, less honesty. I think of the opening of Judith Guest's book *Ordinary People*. The young narrator, recovering from a suicide attempt, is trying to find normalcy—a way to move through the days. "Get the motions right; the motives will follow" (1976, 5). But something in me will not allow myself that mechanical way. I cannot go back to the temple without full commitment, and full commitment, as I've said, separates me. I've long responded to Francis Thomson's poem, "The Hound of Heaven," in which Christ, the hound of Heaven, pursues the recalcitrant one—the one who ever flees what is good: "I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; / I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways / of my own mind; and in the mist of tears / I hid from Him, . . . / For, though I knew His love Who followed, / Yet was I sore adread / Lest, having Him, I must have naught beside" (1940, 510).

And what of the inconsistencies of my position? Doesn't my refusal separate me as well from my own husband—separate in profounder ways than I imagine a separation from my parents and my roots? Doesn't it separate me from my children?

And why do I permit myself to partake of the sacrament, that renewal of vows to Christ, when I won't permit myself renewal of temple vows? Is the holy sacrament of less importance than temple ordinances?

I come back, in conclusion, to Judaism to find a tentative answer as well as a promise. Anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff, in the final study of her life just prior to her death from cancer, returns to Judaism, to an ultraorthodox community in Los Angeles. In the course of this final video study, she visits a Baal Teshuvah couple—those who have returned to the faith after having been secular—whose study has

bookcases on two walls, one filled with books of profoundly questioning minds—Dostoevsky, Lessing, Schopenhauer, Marx, Spinoza. She looks then at the bookcase of Jewish laws—a library for the believing mind. She asks the young woman who has returned to orthodoxy, “How can you reconcile these two sides of your belief?” Then Barbara answers her own question by recalling a saying: “When the heart is truly open, there is room for yes and no.”

While Myerhoff earnestly studies a community of Jewish orthodoxy, her own students, out of love and respect for their teacher, chronicle on film her methods and her last days. They film the increasingly frail Barbara as she observes a wedding and as she consents to accept from devout believers their own religio-magic attempt to save her. She goes through a ceremonial ritual renaming, hoping to trick death by changing her name. Not only does she change her name, she changes her view of magic—for her no longer metaphor. She comes to find in that seemingly rigid, restrictive culture what we all search for—community and spirituality—or as Dostoevsky said, “bread and miracles.” She came to that old orthodox culture with certain antipathies—a dislike for the patriarchal society, the place of women, the narrow laws. She came to that culture, “able to see through the membrane, but unable to walk through it.” There gradually comes—and you can see it in her face in the film—a move toward true belief. She comes to love the restrictions, when before she had been profoundly rebellious and questioning. She sees the restrictions become freedoms because they are chosen. They are not restrictions imposed by God or man but are internal. With the time she didn’t have, she turned to a deeply believing people; she entered their envelope of belief and accepted the saving rituals that they as a community offered her. “I can’t think of any other people to whom I could have turned,” she said. “They gave me what was mine without my knowing it.”

I still harbor the hope that I too will someday reclaim what is mine.

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