

## Blessed Be The Season

by Silvia Bombardini



*Monkwear – Kozaburo, fall 2021*

An image circulates online for some indeterminable time in this interminable year – it shows an American priest in his white and gold cassock, disposable gloves, face shield and mask, squirting a neon green holy water gun into the open car’s window of a believer stopping by for a drive-through blessing. It circulates because it’s funny, or maybe grotesque: in a few short months, the communal rites that the world’s faiths have respected and treasured for thousands of years, if not abandoned have been summarily replaced. Gone are the days of the church’s gravitas, the worshipper’s awe, the reverend’s aplomb. Prayers take place in parking lots, or else online – those same religious institutions formerly so resistant to technological innovation, have had to come to terms with broadcasting sermons. But most of all, what congregations have had to forgo when the houses of worship closed their doors, is what we all are have missed the most in this age of everlasting lockdowns, social distancing and quarantines: the physical closeness of a likeminded community.

And yet for all that was lost, something was gained. Virtual sermons proved popular with younger audiences, and the internet extended beyond the neighbourhood, beyond the city and even internationally, the reach of those clergymen and women willing to give it a go. Images of priests with water guns, as memes of resilience and ingenuity in the face of adversity, may even have endeared the church to those who had previously found its sobriety off-putting. In fact, in a world that has become more and more secular in recent decades, new studies show that the covid-19 pandemic, perhaps counterintuitively, has strengthened religious beliefs, at least in the United States. In isolation, with more time on our hands and a lot more to process, collectively we have turned to spirituality – or at least to its symbolism – for comfort if not for answers. And where better than in our clothes could this newfound, comfortable spirituality find expression?

A New York Times article from September 2020, too soon in retrospect, hails Jerry Lorenzo's "fluid casual" collection as the uniform for a post-coronavirus world. Now, Lorenzo designs for the luxury streetwear label Fear of God. Think also of Church's, True Religion, Faith Connexion: fashion brands have made it a habit to borrow the glossary of religious doctrines. Reading about Victoria Secret's lingerie 'angels' on the pages of fashion magazines often referred to as 'bibles' of style, one might think there's nothing more to it than an appropriation of terminology, in spite of any meaning these words might hold elsewhere – it would hardly be the fashion industry's first offense of a similar nature. Yet religion and fashion have more in common and are more entangled than it first appears, and language is but one clue to the middle ground between their fields. Let us step back from the pandemic for a moment if we can, and consider this complex web of affinities.

A comprehensive overview of their relationship, or at least of the relationship between fashion and the Catholic Church in particular, was the 2018 *Heavenly Bodies* exhibition at the Met's Costume Institute, charting the role of dress in Catholicism and vice versa. A record-breaking 1.65 million visitors were drawn to the show by the prospect of a chance to look closely at some of fashion's greatest masterpieces inspired by Catholic iconography, from designers the likes of Alexander McQueen, Thom Browne and Gianni Versace. But the true stars of the show were arguably the papal robes from the Sistine Chapel sacristy, that never before had been seen outside the Vatican. Awe-inspiring would be an understatement. As *Heavenly Bodies* became the most successful exhibition in the history of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, it proved that museums could come close to reproduce for the wider public the believer's experience of going to church. And of course, when all museums closed during lockdown, this was just one more reason to miss them.

Another angle on the relationship between fashion and faith is given by keeping up with Kanye West's career. The rapper-cum-designer, who named two of his children Saint and Psalm, with albums such as

*Yeezus* and sneakers such as *Yeezy*, has done more than possibly anyone else to promote the idea that faith can be cool in the twenty-first century. In 2019, West started the Sunday Service choir, who released in the same year their debut studio album, *Jesus is Born*. When the first pictures of the choir were shared, in which all members wear similar dusty red outfits – not unlike those worn in the 70s and 80s by the Rajneeshes – the internet briefly wondered whether West was planning to start a cult. Of course, as much as for the priests, bishops and deacons of the Catholic Church, strict dress rules are an essential feature of most fringe religious movements. Matching outfits in spiritual cults are usually intended to discourage or erase individual vanity in favour of a more enlightened group consciousness. They're also the most straightforward way to broadcast unorthodox beliefs in a public setting: to separate the cult's followers from others around them, and demonstrate at once their likeness among themselves. Last year, West's Sunday Service choir made headlines when they were filmed walking on water – though with social distancing – and in December they released a new EP sung entirely in Latin, in the style of Gregorian chants.

Here's something else: as a non-believer, I can comfortably say that I've been to church for fashion shows more than for any other reason. Churches of all kinds make for particularly good venues to showcase a new collection – or they did, when fashion shows were still happening in real life. The aisle serves as a ready-made catwalk, the stained-glass windows as perfect backdrops. Interestingly, it's rarely questioned whether or not it's appropriate to hire a place of worship for this purpose: a cynic may say that the way that these events benefit both sides might have something to do with it. A fashion collection gets good backdrops for its press photos, and soaks up some of the gravitas of the location where it is shown, whilst a church gets publicity and some extra cash – it's a win-win situation. On the contrary, controversies are fast to arise, and rightly so, when a designer is seen to take without giving back, and all the more so when what they're taking from is a religion that's not their own. For one example among many, take Gucci's fall 2018 'Indy Full Turban', worn at the show by non-Sikh models and priced at a hefty £790 before it was taken down at the request of the Sikh community. It should be noted here that not even *Heavenly Bodies*, for all its virtues, escaped all criticism – from inspiration to appropriation, it's a slippery slope. Yet there is a difference between appropriation and appreciation: an homage is welcome when it's done tastefully – especially when it is done in partnership with the Vatican itself.

It also should be noted that this is not always a one-way issue. Religious institutions can occasionally take from fashion without giving back. In 2016, for instance, Gucci asked funeral shops in Hong Kong to stop selling paper version of their products to be burnt as offerings for the dead during the Qingming Festival, as it's traditional to do in Buddhism and Chinese folk religion. Another possible controversy occurs when faith leaders are seen to indulge in expensive fashions while supposedly teaching the virtue of humility. With 242k followers, the Instagram account @preachersnsneakers is dedicated to reveal the

price tags of some chosen items, sneakers in particular, that famous pastors wear on stage – or wore, when pastors were still giving speeches on stages. A pair of \$604 Yeezy or \$1090 Balenciaga Triple S are not nearly as endearing when worn by a priest as it is PPE and a water gun. A book on the subject, titled *PreachersNSneakers: Authenticity in an Age of For-Profit Faith and (Wannabe) Celebrities* is due to come out in April.

But to get back to the question of a post-coronavirus uniform – aside from grammar and grandeur, group mentality and a spatial predilection for altars and stages, it has recently become clear that fashion and religion have at least one more thing in common: a counterintuitively optimistic trajectory in response to the 2020-2021 pandemic. Just as faith strengthens when we would expect it to falter, so those same fashion labels that only a few years ago were conjuring up apocalyptic scenarios, are now championing positive thinking. Fashion, not unlike religion, is often accused of escapism: but in these times when more than ever a desire to escape the world and its problems could be forgiven, an undercurrent of hopefulness is instead defining the season. Not necessarily in terms of sales, yet, but with regards to the themes that brands are exploring, the references and narratives in their most recent work. And indeed, quite a few have turned directly to spirituality – or at least to its symbolism, its looks – to convey this blessed new mood. Though now and again fashion has turned to faith for inspiration, as we’ve seen, to turn to it now, in the context of everything that happened and the religious revival that’s taking place, takes on a whole new meaning.



Vetements, fall 2021 – via [vogue.com](https://www.vogue.com)

Take Vetements' fall 2021 collection. A 165 looks' dantesque saga unambiguously narrated by the shifting backgrounds to their lookbook's photos. First there's an hellscape of burning clouds, then a biblical deluge, and finally white and blue sunrays take us to the skies. Priestly black robes and crucifix necklaces are present, but most telling is a tailored jacket cut in the back to expose what looks like a prosthetic attachment for clipped angel's wings. Rick Owens, perhaps unsurprisingly, takes the spiritual theme into a more esoteric direction. Underneath oversize monastic hoods, his fall 2021 menswear collection layers snug white underwear sewn up in the shape of a pentagram at the front. That might sound sinister, yet Owens, who's sometimes referred to in the press as fashion's 'dark priest', told Vogue that this season's offering is all about the light that balances out the darkness – the hope that “springs eternal”. In-between the maxi hoods and the occult briefs, a strong selection of unusually wearable options – including a collaboration with Converse – is apparently intended to suggest tolerance, possibly by opening up the brand's uncompromising aesthetic to a wider population. Inclusivity, in lieu of fashion's notorious elitism, seems to be the vow many brands are taking in 2021. As the industry sets out on a slow path of recovery from the effects of lockdowns on its turnover, this seems wise not only morally, but from an economic perspective too.

It is, in a sense, what the world's religions are also doing, with younger audiences and virtual sermons. Fashion week too has migrated online to comply with covid-19 restrictions, with various degrees of success. Perhaps the best, and certainly the most ambitious digital alternative to the fashion show this season, was Balenciaga's fall 2021 videogame. Titled *Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow* and structured across five levels, the player's adventure could also be described as a spiritual journey of sorts, culminating with a guided meditation exercise. Parallels between Balenciaga's afterworld – that leads us to the top of a crumbling cliff, overlooking the sunset – and spiritual imagery of the afterlife are easily drawn. Young, emerging designers with less generous budgets are also partaking into the theme. Boramy Viguier, who for the past few seasons has been making a name for himself in Paris thanks to the mystical motifs in his work, couldn't be more on trend. For fall 2021, the brand presented a fashion film called *Resurrection*, set in a monastery and featuring knights, priests, and tarot readers – with as hopeful an ending as the title suggests. Meanwhile in Tokyo, Kozaburo Akasaka dubs his new collection *Monkwear*. It was inspired by Kūkai, the Japanese monk who in the Heian period founded the Shingon school of Buddhism, and beautifully shot on Mount Kōya, where legend has it that Kūkai himself never died, and continues to meditate to this day.

All of this reminds me of a scene in the second season of *Fleabag*, Phoebe Waller-Bridge's critically acclaimed comedy show, expressing a sentiment that I suspect some of us may share before the end of the year. In this scene Andrew Scott, playing a priest, is showing to the show's main character some

purple robes he purchased in Italy, that he's particularly proud of. "You can only get proper plum in Italy" he says. Then pauses and adds: "sometimes I worry I'm only in it for the outfits".