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# Understanding the Sacred Undergarments: An Outsider's Perspective

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# Psi Sigma Siren

The Journal of the UNLV Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta: Spring 2015

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## *Understanding the Sacred Undergarments: An Outsider's Perspective - Shannon Nutt*

In the United States, clothing is seen as the expression of the person who is wearing it, and people have almost unlimited options for what to put on their body. Compared to early-twentieth-century standards, American culture now seems to allow most adults to dress much more provocatively because of the idea of individual freedom. One group that is openly fighting against the lack of standardized dress is the Latter-day Saints (the Mormon Church). Among the standards that the LDS Church has set for its members is that they are mandated to wear sacred undergarments. These clothing standards are set up to ensure that Mormons remain sexually chaste, both men and women, until they are married and sealed in the temple. These clothing standards are intended to remove any form of sexuality to the bedroom and limit it to private interactions between a husband and a wife. However, while clothing standards are established for both men and women, it is clear that the standards are stricter for women. These standards are harsher for women because the focus is on women's bodies. Women control the sexual standards for both men and women of the church, so women's bodies need to be covered up in order to protect the LDS society.

### **History**

There has been a fluctuation between the standards of the LDS Church and the mainstream American standards of clothing. The LDS Church had the same moral dress code as the society around them during its founding in the Victorian Age of the mid-1800s.<sup>1</sup> Today, however, the Mormon dress code is far stricter than society's rules. While some other conservative religions and their followers may agree with the moral dress code that the LDS Church has implemented, they have not adopted the same regulations regarding undergarments that Mormons must observe. The LDS Church creates dress standards for both sexes. The standards that are set up for the men in the religion follow the fashion standards of society. The

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<sup>1</sup> Linda B. Arthur, *Religion, Dress and the Body*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 73.



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standards for women, however, are far more restrictive in order to cover their undergarments and parts of their body.<sup>2</sup>

Mormons believe that the justifications for specific undergarments have been around since the existence of humankind. According to the LDS Church, true Christianity was lost until the angel Maroni visited Joseph Smith and revealed the location of the golden tablets, which Smith translated into the Book of Mormon. “It should be understood that ‘the things of the Lord’ (2 Ne. 4:16)<sup>3</sup> have included sacred clothing from the very beginning of this world.”<sup>4</sup> The scriptures contain many references to the wearing of special garments by the ancients. Prior to their expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were clad in sacred clothing. We read: ‘Unto Adam also and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them’ (Gen. 3:21).<sup>5</sup> Since the LDS Church can trace the garments in some form back to the Garden of Eden, these garments became a specific aspect of their beliefs and have a special role in keeping the covenant with God: “They received this clothing [undergarments] in a context of instruction on the Atonement sacrifice, repentance, and forgiveness. The temple garment given to Latter-day Saints is provided in a similar context. It is given to remind wearers of the continuing need for repentance, the need to honor binding covenants made in the house of the Lord, and the need to cherish and share virtue in our daily living so that promised blessings may be claimed.”<sup>6</sup>

According to the LDS, the true version of Christianity was lost; thus the undergarments’ usage was also lost. “Christianity, or any belief system, was like a beautiful, powerfully symbolic piece of clothing [undergarments] when it was first established; but after years of rote, ritual, and bureaucracy, it had become so tattered as to be almost useless. At that point, it was time for reformation, for the cloth to be retailored, so that the eternal meaning that it manifested would become apparent (apparel) again.”<sup>7</sup> Mormons believe that this is part of true Christianity returning: they are reinforcing moral standards that please God.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, see the Brigham Young University Dress and Grooming Standards (Honor Code), <https://idcenter.byu.edu/id-card-policies>. Accessed June 4, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Nephi 4:16, “Behold, my soul delighteth in the things of the Lord; and my heart pondereth continually upon the things which I have seen and heard.” *Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, UT: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints).

<sup>4</sup> Richard Lyman Bushman, *Mormonism A Very Short Introduction*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 3:21, “Unto Adam also and to his wife did the LORD God make coats of skins, and clothed them”; Carlos E. Asay, “The Temple Garment: ‘An Outward Expression of an Inward Commitment’”, *Ensign* (August 1997), <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1997/08/the-temple-garment-an-outward-expression-of-an-inward-commitment?lang=eng>.

<sup>6</sup> Asay, “The Temple Garment: ‘An Outward Expression of an Inward Commitment.’”

<sup>7</sup> Gail Turley Houston, “My Belief.” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 38, no. 4 (Winter 2005).



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## Focus on the Female Body

The emphasis on the woman's body seems to be a constant throughout most religions. This focus enforces dressing standards for women's clothing as well as constructs notions about the role that her sexualized body plays in society. When women are chaste and respectable, then the community and society around them are in turn honorable. According to historian Rosemary Avance, "Modesty enacted on feminine bodies takes on various modes of meaning: for the enactors, modesty enforces patriarchic norms by controlling the little power given to females. But modesty is also appropriated by the women for whom it is proscribed as a tool of resisting cultural and patriarchal objectification. So while chaste Mormon bodies are objectified, they are simultaneously resisting objectification through the very act of putting on temple garments and modest attire. That modesty is necessary because the real power of the female is an idea with controversial repercussions."<sup>8</sup> Women have had to "cover up" in order to ward off men's lustful looks; women also have to dress in such a way that would prevent men from acting on their sexual desires. This raises the question: who is in control of men's desires, women's bodies or the men themselves?

The LDS Church takes a stance that women are in fact responsible for men's desires and should dress accordingly: "Elder Petersen... charged: 'What tempts the boys to molest the girls today more than any other one thing... is the mode of dress of our girls,' which included skirts above the knees, tight and revealing tops, and low-cut evening gowns. When 'such sights are placed before their eyes, almost like an invitation, can you blame them any more than you would the girls who tempt them, if they take advantage of those girls?'"<sup>9</sup> Women were blamed for how they were dressed and men who crossed the line into sexual assault were not held responsible. Women are in fact the people responsible for the culture's sexual purity.

The LDS Church and mainstream society both believe that women need to be covered up in order to be honorable. Throughout history a society's honor has been tied to women's bodies and sexuality; one specific example of this in the United States would be before and during the Jim Crow era. White men in the South would state that they were protecting "their" women from the evils of black men (often framed as rapists) when in actuality they were defending their own identity.<sup>10</sup> Although the Church is not saying that men would turn into rapists or that outsiders would rape LDS women if they were dressing differently, it is clear that the emphasis on

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<sup>8</sup> Rosemary Avance, "Worthy 'Gods' and 'Goddesses'." *Journal of Religion and Society* 12 (2010).

<sup>9</sup> Katie Clark Blakesley, "'A Style of Our Own': Modesty and Mormon Women, 1951-2008." *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 25.

<sup>10</sup> David Pilgrim, "The Brute Caricature." Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia. <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/brute/>. Accessed June 4, 2015.



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women's dress in order to control male desire shows similarity between the past of the South and the present in the LDS Church. Women's chastity and bodies must be protected and covered in order to prove the cleanliness of the ideology.

Chastity is linked to female behavior. All Latter-day Saints are expected to be chaste until marriage, however sexual sin is usually seen as women's sin. Avance argues, "Modesty is seen as a natural manifestation of the virtue of chastity as it is a tool for aiding in the control of lustful desires. In this way, immodesty is treated as a sexual, female sin. Modesty, as a treatment of the physical body, polices acceptable sexuality and ensures proper use of the body's divine abilities."<sup>11</sup> Sexual sins are somehow linked to females because women are supposed to be modest and set the boundaries for men, and if they adhered to these rules, then there would be no issue of sexual sin. But if a woman were to dress in a way that the Church deemed inappropriate, their doctrine asserts that men cannot help themselves with temptation. The LDS Church specifically says that all people who partake in sex outside of marriage are in fact the same; the modesty standards and sexual standards usually fall on the females.

## Guarding the Undergarments

Non-LDS members are allowed to know the basic structure and look of the undergarments, however they are not allowed to know about the sacred symbols that are on the garments. The basic structures of the garments are different for men and women, based on the body and clothing needs of the gender: "Male garments resemble an undershirt and boxer-style shorts, while women's garments are less like typical female underwear and instead resemble knee-length, high-waisted bloomers with a cap-sleeved top."<sup>12</sup> While the length of the undergarments for both sexes might be the same, the undergarments for women are more restrictive. Women have to find longer clothes to cover the garments, whereas men's clothing typically already covers undergarments.

The garments signify a rite of passage and show the member's level of commitment to the faith. Multiple religions have rites of passage when members participate in a ceremony in order to join, to move to a higher level of membership, or to become an adult. The Mormon Church holds a ceremony in the temple for members to receive their undergarments for the first time. This usually takes place before a mission for a man (age 19) and either before a woman is about to get married or serve her mission (age 21). After the ceremony for the garments is completed, active members are expected to wear their undergarments at all appropriate times.

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<sup>11</sup> Avance, "Worthy 'Gods' and 'Goddesses'", 6.

<sup>12</sup> Avance, "Worthy 'Gods' and 'Goddesses'", Ibid., 12.



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The garments serve an important theological role for the Saints after they receive them. It is a daily reminder that they are in a special relationship with God and with their Church. Carlos E. Asay, a Mormon Elder (and, it should be noted, a man) wrote:

“I like to think of the garment as the Lord’s way of letting us take part of the temple with us when we leave. It is true that we carry from the Lord’s house inspired teaching and sacred covenants written in our minds and hearts. However, the one tangible remembrance we carry with us back into the world is the garment. And though we cannot always be in the temple, a part of it can always be with us to bless our lives. Don’t forget that the word garment is used symbolically in the scriptures and gives expanded meaning to other words such as white, clean, pure, righteous, modesty, covering, ceremonial, holy, priesthood, beautiful, perfection, salvation, undefiled, worthy, white raiment, shield, protection, spotless, blameless, armor, covenants, promises, blessings, respect, eternal life, and so forth. All of these words occupy special places in the vocabularies of people sincerely essaying to become Saints.”<sup>13</sup>

Garments ensure that Saints are set apart from the rest of the world. In this respect, garments serve to hold members to a higher standard because they are keeping the covenant that God has given them.

## **Modesty Standards**

Women have had an issue with finding clothes that fit into the modesty standards of the Church. This includes everything from everyday clothes to formal clothing, especially for such events like a prom or other formal occasions. Women have taken it upon themselves to make some of their own clothes. However, there is a new movement, which seems to be led by the LDS Church, for department stores to carry more modest clothing. While the fads and trends change from season to season, some mainstream department stores, especially those in areas with significant populations of LDS members, have started to carry more modest clothing to cover this niche in the market. Another place that LDS women can look for clothes to go over their undergarments is the Internet. The Internet has multiple clothing shops that carry modest clothing, specifically geared for the LDS community. This includes clothing for younger children to dress modestly and to train them so they are prepared to wear their undergarments in the future.

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<sup>13</sup> Asay, “The Temple Garment: ‘An Outward Expression of an Inward Commitment.’”



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Clothing standards are not just about undergarments; there are standards that must be followed in all aspects of the LDS community. This point is explicitly clear with the modesty standards that are now in the honor code for attending Brigham Young University and its satellite campuses. The clothing standards seem to be almost identical for both of the sexes. This includes clothing going down to the knees, no tank tops, and no athletic clothing outside of the gym. Men must be well groomed at all times, including short hair cuts, similar to those seen in the armed forces, and no facial hair. For women this means naturally colored hair, only one earring per ear, and a traditionally feminine hairstyle. Women also have to deal with other apparel issues that men do not have to consider: they are not allowed to wear a two-piece swimsuit, go braless, or wear leggings without a shirt or dress covering the leggings.<sup>14</sup>

The clothing standards can be interpreted in a variety of ways based on how the member feels about modesty. Some members choose to only remove their garments when they absolutely have to, like when showering or swimming.<sup>15</sup> Some other members, specifically married members, allow for a little more leeway and remove their undergarments for sexual intercourse. According to professor of religious studies Jill Peterfeso, “Mormon women receive mixed messages: they learn they must modestly conceal their bodies yet must also find salvation through that body; women must protect men from being sexually aroused by their alluring bodies yet must also appreciate the body--complete with its sexuality--as a gift from the Heavenly Father.”<sup>16</sup> The discrepancy in how members wear their undergarments shows the variety of ways in which Saints view their sexual identity. Some members feel more comfortable with sexuality and remove their garments to put on lingerie, while the more extreme couples do not remove the garments during sex at all. It is not surprising however, that there is so much variety on views of sexuality between members because of the views on sexuality within the church.

Sex is an extremely complicated issue within the Church. With the connotations that are placed on sex and sexuality, members of the Church see sex as an unscrupulous entity that

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<sup>14</sup> Brigham Young University Dress and Grooming Standards (Honor Code), <https://idcenter.byu.edu/id-card-policies>. Accessed June 4, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> It is important to know that there is a difference between the mainstream Mormon Church and the fundamentalist groups that associate with the teachings of Joseph Smith. The difference can be seen in the different type of undergarments these sects wear. The fundamentalist sects can be found wearing the original garments of the LDS Church, meaning that they are covered from neck to foot. These undergarments resemble pajamas that are long sleeved and have long pants. The most prevalent image of these undergarments can be seen in the HBO television show “Big Love.” It portrays fundamentalists who keep the polygamous history alive along with the original undergarment standards from the nineteenth century.

<sup>16</sup> Jill Peterfeso, “From Testimony to Seximony, From Script to Scripture.” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 27, no. 2 (2011): 42.



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should not even be thought about until after they are married. Avance argues that “Within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints the rejection of sexualized bodily display has been institutionalized and dogmatized. Modesty practiced in varying degrees in the lives of faithful members, reflects a paradigm in which men and women inhabit distinct spheres of being, and in which the body serves a particular divine purpose unique to the LDS.”<sup>17</sup> People are told that sex is sinful outside of marriage, but once they are married then they are supposed to have a normal sexual appetite and relationship with their spouse. With the mixed messages about sex it is no wonder that there is a variety of feelings on when it is appropriate to wear and remove the undergarments.

## **Undergarments Used as Social Control**

The clothing standards within the LDS Church are not only meant for modesty standards; they are also set up to ensure that the proper gender roles are maintained by men and women. Women’s clothing was especially meant to ensure that women were feminine in their roles in order to “discourage women from following larger American trends away from women’s traditional roles and instead to encourage women to dress a certain way to reflect their feminine, God-given nature.”<sup>18</sup> One way this can be seen is when attending a Sunday morning church service. Women are all in skirts or dresses, there are no pantsuits to be found. Even though women follow the traditional motherly roles, including chasing children, they are expected to do this in clothing that is feminine:

The day-to-day performance of religious identity construction is inscribed on the body of each faithful Latter-day Saint. The body--that carrier of the spirit, that expression of gendered identity--is clothed to reflect the gendered soul. Women especially are subject to this identity-constructing: the ubiquity of authoritative and collective messages in a woman’s quotidian reality praises the virtues of modesty and chastity and upholds motherhood as the ultimate divine calling for all women. The public and private spheres of life are conflated, and the family unit is the foremost expression of the order of Christ’s Church: patriarchal, hierarchical, and divinely ordered.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Avance, “Worthy ‘Gods’ and ‘Goddesses’”, 2.

<sup>18</sup> Blakesley, “‘A Style of Our Own’: Modesty and Mormon Women, 1951-2008,” 28.

<sup>19</sup> Avance, “Worthy ‘Gods’ and ‘Goddesses’”, 16.





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Clothing is not only a tool for modesty; it keeps the traditional gender roles in place. In Mormonism this is important because the gender roles in place on Earth are both divinely ordained and will exist in the afterlife. These clothing standards in the here-and-now ensure that people are practicing for eternity.

While undergarments are worn under clothes and considered to be secret as well as sacred, most members of the LDS Church can tell if other members are wearing their garments. According to Avance, “the outline also serves as a means for social control: other members (within one’s family, perhaps, or at one’s church) can easily determine whether or not one is following this basic sartorial rule, which marks one’s status as a law-abiding member of the group.”<sup>20</sup> If a member is not wearing undergarments, other members can assume things such as that member may no longer have the “temple recommend,” or the permission to enter the temple. While not wearing undergarments at all times, a member can be treated differently in the Mormon community specifically because they are not following the standards set up by the Church.

The Church elders encouraged women to go against social norms when thinking about what to wear, even if it was a little more difficult. With regards to miniskirts, an editorial published in the paper *Church News* in 1967 argued “‘The Mini Skirts’ asked, ‘Isn’t it time for our women to decide to use their own good sense in regard to dress, and refuse to be like sheep following the dictates of fashion designers who like extremes? If our people would think for themselves, rather than herded into styles by New York or Paris, all would be infinitely better off.’”<sup>21</sup> The Church President uses the sheep metaphor to denigrate those who defy church doctrine.

Clothing is an easy way to dictate who is worthy of certain activities. Single members are able to easily see who is an appropriate person to date simply by if they are wearing acceptable clothing. James E. Faust, the former Second Counselor in the First Presidency, wrote, “When strong young priesthood holders see a girl immodestly dressed, most will not want to date her because her standards are not consistent with their eternal perspective. Immodesty in women cheapens their image. It causes embarrassment and loss of respect. It is not likely to win them the hand of a worthy, honorable young man who desires to marry a righteous young woman in the temple.”<sup>22</sup> Men have an easier time of distinguishing who is a worthy person to date by what they wear than women. Even if men are wearing undergarments, men’s fashions within the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Blakesley, “‘A Style of Our Own’: Modesty and Mormon Women, 1951-2008,” 26.

<sup>22</sup> James E. Faust, “Womanhood: The Highest Place of Honor,” (April 2000).

[http://www.lightplanet.com/mormons/conferences/00\\_apr/faust\\_womanhood.htm](http://www.lightplanet.com/mormons/conferences/00_apr/faust_womanhood.htm). Accessed June 4, 2015.



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Church are not all that different from secular society. However, women are dressed far more modestly in the LDS Church than the outside society.

## Conclusions

Undergarments play a variety of roles in Mormons' lives. Undergarments ensure that members are dressing modestly because their outerwear must cover the garments; they ensure that the sexualized body parts are hidden away from public view under multiple layers of clothing; and they ensure that members are constantly aware of the covenant that they have with God because of what is on their body. Garments provide a means of self-policing within the Church. This policing is a means of social control that is handled within the Church's social structures.

Undergarments also ensure that sexuality is kept completely in check. While men's garments follow the typical men's underwear resembling boxer shorts and an undershirt, women's garments take a much more conservative route than typical women's underwear. The garments seem to serve the purpose of desexualizing the body for women. Because women's bodies are buried under layers of clothing and modesty codes prevent the outer layer of clothing from being too tight, the body loses its public signifiers of sexuality. Mormon garments arguably serve a specific purpose of keeping sex and sexuality in the bedroom between spouses.

While multiple religions have modesty codes and standards for dress for the members of the faith, many people are fascinated by the sacred undergarments of the LDS Church. Different faiths tend to wear sacred garments or clothing that is visible to the outside world, whereas the members of the Mormon faith specifically put their sacred clothing close to their body. Maybe this is why there is such an interest in what Mormon undergarments are and the role they play in members' lives. When a Muslim woman wears a *burqa* it is clear that she is abiding by modesty standards set for her by her religion. When a Mormon man or woman wears the undergarments, the untrained eye cannot tell.

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