

ARTICLE

Do Liturgical Vestments Have Gender?

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(Received 18 June 2019; revised 18 May 2020; accepted 23 May 2020; first published online 07 August 2020)

Abstract

This article questions whether traditional Christian liturgical vesture has any intrinsic gendered identity. Vestments are worn by the clergy of various denominations, including in traditions where women are ordained into all orders. For some early female clergy, there was a discomfort about wearing garments traditionally associated solely with male figures, and even today certain vestment manufacturers distinguish between the type of products available for female clergy and for male clergy, or target select gendered clientele. This brief cross-disciplinary examination, of some scriptural, historic and socio-cultural understandings of vesture, concludes that, despite some seeming modern misconceptions to the contrary, vestments are inherently non-gendered, and that they appear predominantly to have been regarded as such at various stages of history. This is consistent with the liturgical understanding that vesture is not meant to be a statement of personal identity, but a symbol of ritual function and office within the gathered assembly.

Keywords: art, clergy, gender, liturgical garments, vesture

In an article, written in the 1990s, Carol Noren detailed the challenges faced by a particular group of female preaching students in choosing what to wear in the pulpit and sanctuary.² In essence, their dilemma seemed to stem from a concern that, if dressed in a feminine or personalized way, they would be dismissed as ‘mere women’, but dressing in either traditional liturgical attire, or in ‘sensible’ clothing, made them feel as if they were somehow subsuming their feminine identity to implicitly support a masculinist or patriarchal agenda. In effect, their message was that traditional church vesture or attire was somehow implicitly masculine or patriarchal in its communication.

It is interesting that these women felt this way. Modern liturgical scholarship generally agrees that the role of vestments is to be a sign and symbol of office

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²C. Noren, ‘Theology, Vestments, and Women’s Nonverbal Communication’, *Homiletic* 15.1 (Summer 1990), pp. 5–8.

and function, rather than any commentary or signifier regarding the personality or personhood of the wearer.³ They are essentially timeless and eschatological garments: expressing something of the historic journey of the Church, and lifting the worshipper out of the mundane through visual representation of the beauty and grace of the eternal kingdom.⁴ As such, there can, and should be, no implicit gender or personality communicated via vesture, but merely an indication of the person's specific role as part of the action of the broader worshipping assembly. Theologically-liturgically, the answer seems straightforward: ecclesial vestments are neither male, female, nor other: they are functional: having no personal identity, but serve a three-fold ritual purpose: (1) to indicate the gathered assembly's transition out of the commonplace into the realm of the divine; (2) to communicate clerical or lay function (that is: distinguishing the principal celebrant from the server, cantor, or deacon); and (3) occasionally also to distinguish a particular office (for example, denoting a celebrant exercising *episcopate* as opposed to another member of the *presbyterium*), within the context of a specific liturgical celebration or ecclesial event.⁵

In the light of this liturgical argument, Noren's article indicates there may be an inherent cognitive dissonance between theological-liturgical understandings of ecclesial vesture and sociological-historical interpretations of the same. It is therefore important to examine the possibility that somehow traditional liturgical vesture implicitly, or even subliminally, speaks of a patriarchal, masculine identity within the understanding of non-liturgists within the *ecclesia*. Such an assumption raises a number of questions, including whether vestments do have gender, and whether – in an era in which the presence of women in all forms of ministry is a more prevalent reality than it was in the 1990s in many denominations – there is still an implicit gendered statement articulated in the adoption of traditional liturgical habit? In taking upon themselves a preaching gown, alb, surplice, stole, or chasuble, are women in ministry subliminally (or even intentionally) cross-dressing, in order to be more readily accepted by an institution still caught up in a patriarchal mindset?

A secondary question must also be addressed: What are the trends within historic socio-cultural associations regarding vesture? Does the historic record suggest anything regarding the identity of vestments within sociological understanding, particularly regarding associations with male or female identity?

In order to begin examining such questions, two differing perspectives will here be briefly reviewed: (1) the historic gender identity of the traditional garments of the Christian tradition, and the development of any understandings of gender relating to vesture; and (2) modern, twenty-first century perceptions regarding liturgical garments.

There are some important recent discussions of the distinctive symbolism and use of Eastern and Orthodox vesture, including indications that the historic development of liturgical attire in the Eastern Rite involves a more complex narrative

³G. Cope, 'Vestments', in J.G. Davis (ed.), *A New Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (London: SCM Press, 1986), pp. 521-40 (537). P. Malloy, *Celebrating the Eucharist: A Practical Ceremonial Guide for Clergy and Other Liturgical Ministers* (New York: Church Publishing, 2007), pp. 52-53.

⁴D. Brown, *God and Mystery in Words: Experience through Metaphor and Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 243.

⁵R. Hovda, 'The Vesting of Liturgical Ministers', *Worship* 54.2 (March 1980), pp. 98-117 (105-106).

than the standard understanding of the West.⁶ Acknowledging the complexity of this wider debate, this paper will concentrate solely on vesture of the Western liturgical tradition.

The Historic Gender Identity of Christian Liturgical Garments

Scriptural Associations

Medieval liturgical scholars, basing their understandings of vesture upon the writings of Gregory the Great, Isidore of Seville, and even Bede, argued that liturgical vestments were directly descended from the garments of the Aaronic priesthood, described in detail in Exodus 28.⁷ While this understanding has been resoundingly disproved within the academy, socio-cultural assumptions may still assume a historic link.

For example, Frank Senn recently saw the need to briefly examine these Aaronic garments in terms of masculinity, divine representation and sexuality in liturgical contexts, suggesting that the design of these garments indicates a concern that the genitals of the high priest might be accidentally placed on display, a concern either demonstrating recognition of the higher ranking gender-status of the Divine as alpha-male, or as a means of ensuring that no suggestion of sexualized defilement of the Divine is made.⁸ Here is a definite suggestion that gendering, and possibly sexuality, is at play within the symbolism of sacred attire, at least in Exodus, in a manner which can only be read as a negative influence. That Senn felt any necessity to mention this scriptural passage, given that he then moves on to address the true origins of vesture, suggests that either he identified a specific local resonance relating to cultural traditions regarding gender and modesty within his intended audience, or that he was aware of an ongoing common misconception regarding the relationship of Exodus 28 to liturgical attire in the Christian tradition.

In response to the possibility of an ongoing common misconception, it must therefore be noted that, although the liturgical attire spoken of in Exodus 28 is certainly implicitly masculine, this is essentially due to a cultural context in which only males (and only certain, select males) were involved in liturgical leadership. Any implicit gendering of vesture in this context is thus the result of a specific cultural-contextual gendering of sacred ministry, and does not necessarily extrapolate into contexts in which the understanding of sacred ministry has significantly changed, particularly since it is agreed that there is no link between the liturgical attire of the Aaronic priesthood and the development of liturgical attire within the Christian tradition.

The Medieval assumption that the Aaronic priestly garments had any historic influence upon Christian vesture was examined and dismissed in the late nineteenth

⁶For studies of Orthodox liturgical attire, see especially K.M. West, *The Garments of Salvation: Orthodox Christian Liturgical Vesture* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2013).

⁷M.C. Miller, *Clothing the Clergy: Virtue and Power in Medieval Europe c.800–1200* (London: Cornell University Press, 2014), pp. 53–58.

⁸The revealing of the genitals of the High Priest is understood to be a revealing of the genitals of the one who stands in place of the Divine, therefore the revealing of the Divine's genitals. F.C. Senn, *Embodied Liturgy, Lessons in Christian Ritual* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), p. 82.

century by various scholars, who each assert conclusively that the vesture of the Church derives not from Judaic traditions, but from Greco-Roman court attire.⁹ Thus, the Exodus texts, while potentially tacitly influencing Judeo-Christian understandings of sacred attire, do not have any direct impact upon the modern understanding of vesture within the Christian tradition. Any scriptural reference relevant to Christian liturgical attire must therefore be sought in other texts: most particularly in those of the early Christian communities.

Before looking at New Testament texts, it must first be noted that, throughout the period in which the canon of Christian Scripture was composed, there was little formalized liturgy, no instituted clergy, nor specific liturgical attire distinct from everyday clothing. Indeed, as Andrew McGowan affirms, what we would recognize as special liturgical dress was not developed until after the first three centuries of Christian practice.¹⁰ Alongside this, we have a distinct difference between the early Christian movement (the emerging church up to, and including, the fourth century: which McGowan examines), and what we might identify as a developing intentional pattern of liturgical traditions (not quite uniformity) within geographically separate church movements, which continued to evolve and emerge until as late as the sixth century.¹¹ Therefore, any references to garments in Scripture are not necessarily intended as liturgical instructions. They do, however, exist as part of the historic Christian record, both as indicators of symbolic associations with garments, and as an influence upon later interpretations of special Christian attire.

St Paul, in a number of the epistles, speaks of garments in symbolic terms: most famously the armour motif of Eph. 6.11-17, as well as speaking of being clothed with Christ (Rom. 13.14), or being clothed with various virtues (Col. 3.12-14). Some of these images were worked later into vesting prayers, thus becoming historical influences upon cultural understandings of the symbolism of liturgical attire.¹² While the martial imagery of Ephesians 6 might be said to lend a slight masculine or patriarchal association to traditional concepts of the symbolism of vestments, this is counterbalanced by the virtue associations of Colossians 3 (which can be said to be virtues potentially associated with all genders), and more importantly Paul's insistence that, to be clothed in Christ (Rom. 13) also means setting aside personal distinctiveness or division, including those of race, gender, class, or sexuality (Gal. 3.28). If vestments are, in part, the clothes which the *ecclesia* uses to indicate entering into the actions and world of the corporate body of Christ (which is one common understanding of the purpose and communication of vesture), then St Paul's understandings about being clothed in Christ, and the corporate body of Christ as a unifier of persons previously distinctive or separated (Gal. 3.26-29) are very important to our liturgical-theological understanding of vesture and its role in setting aside personal identity, distinction, gender, race or sexuality.

⁹P. Johnstone, *High Fashion in the Church: The Place of Church Vestments in the History of Art, from the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century* (Leeds: Maney Publishing, 2002), p. 5. See also H. Norris, *Church Vestments: Their Origin and Development* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1949), pp. 8-9, and G. Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1952), pp. 398-410.

¹⁰A.B. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Press, 2016), pp. 40-41, 62.

¹¹Miller, *Clothing the Clergy*, p. 19.

¹²For an analysis of the symbolism in Medieval vesting prayers, see Miller, *Clothing the Clergy*, pp. 77-87.

The images of the redeemed, clothed in white garments in Revelation (Rev. 6.9-11; 7.9-14), and potentially the Parable of the Wedding Banquet (Mt. 22.1-14), must both be allowed to suggest the possibility that in early Christian communities, the appropriate attire for heavenly worship (and thus also potentially for earthly liturgies, being the eschatological anticipatory visions that they were) was seen to be a white robe. Ecclesiastes associates white garments with celebration and triumph (Eccles. 9.8), Zech. 3.3-5 implies that such garments are the symbolic garment of the chosen people of God, a symbol of purity – both understandings which fit neatly with both St Paul’s understanding of the process of being clothed in Christ, and with John the Divine’s visions of the redeemed. It is certainly an interpretation of the liturgical symbolism of the alb commonly used in many Christian communities today. Likewise, scholarship surrounding early baptismal rites suggests that the baptized members of the earliest Christian communities may well have changed into white robes during their baptism, a liturgical action which resonates with the various scriptural imagery regarding white garments.¹³ Notably, in the context of early Christian baptism, while men, children and women were probably baptized in separate groups, maintaining due modesty, all would have received the same rite; therefore, if clothing in a white garment was part of the baptismal rite, it was a liturgically used garment associated with both genders.¹⁴

Alongside these texts, one other scriptural biblical reference to attire in early Christian worship speaks of the Pauline expectation that women will cover their heads during worship (1 Cor. 11.4-16). The text is a rare scriptural example wherein gender and attire in worship are connected, and one which suggests that females were not only potentially involved in liturgical roles within the Corinthian *ecclesia*, but also that expectations for liturgical involvement of all Christian members included suitable attire. Notably, the text speaks of appropriately attired women not only liturgically involved as members of the gathered assembly, but also of women prophesying and praying alongside male congregants (1 Cor. 11.4-5). The only requirement here established for attire for liturgical involvement and leadership (for both genders) is that which is socio-culturally deemed modest, or appropriate. Here we see a particular modesty culture at work, and perhaps a greater implication that dressing for worship is about wearing respectable clothing, appropriate for public interaction. This may be a simple answer to the dilemma of Noren’s students about dressing themselves in a modest or professional manner: the early Christian expectation was not necessarily that liturgical leaders should suppress their gender identity, but that both males and females operating liturgically were expected to attire themselves in modest, professional and culturally appropriate ways.

¹³R. Giles, *Creating Uncommon Worship: Transforming the Liturgy of the Eucharist* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2004), p. 73. Schnackenburg argues against the interpretation of the wedding garment in Mt. 22.11 as a baptismal robe: see R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew* (trans. R. Barr; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 25. See also McGowan’s examination of the role of white robes in early baptismal rites (*Ancient Christian Worship*, pp. 172-74). P. Dearmer (*The Ornaments of the Ministers* [London: A.R. Mowbray & Co, 1920], pp. 11-14) also examines the historic association between Christian worship and white garments.

¹⁴McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship*, pp. 152-53.

This brief survey of scriptural passages relating to liturgical attire indicates that, while there are texts which imply connections between gender and suitable liturgical attire, the concern is directed towards established modesty-cultures. Significantly, the few references to attire in worship settings within the scriptural canon suggest that dressing appropriately was expected of all the baptized, both male and female. It could even potentially be argued that 1 Cor. 11.4-6 indicates the presence of (suitably attired) women in acknowledged roles of liturgical involvement (or leadership) within the Corinthian *ecclesia*, thus suggesting that neither liturgical leadership nor liturgical attire were solely masculine in the developing early Christian movement.

The Classical Origins of Traditional Christian Vestments

Much has been written over the last century regarding the origin and development of the traditional vestments of the Western traditions.¹⁵

It is generally agreed that the common origin for the shape and pattern of Western Christian liturgical vesture can be identified as the court attire of the late Greco-Roman Classical world. In essence, in the early church of the first four centuries, which was still an illegal underground movement, those engaged in acts of worship and those engaged in liturgical leadership simply wore suitable public attire, as they would likewise have worn in the market place or their place of business.¹⁶ Such a choice of attire would have ensured that they were not visibly recognized as members of an illegal organization. Granted, the attire worn at worship by early Christians was probably ‘Sunday best’, but – as McGowan reminds us – there would have been little distinction between those holding office and general congregants, other than perhaps more sober garb for clerics and monastics.¹⁷

The common public attire of the Greco-Roman world for both males and females included the wearing of a tunic as the base layer – usually a white or cream colour, and commonly made of linen or wool.¹⁸ Over this many wore a *paenula* for warmth (an outer robe, similar to a poncho, common to males and females, and the larger relative of the *casula* which led to the liturgical chasuble), or perhaps instead a *pallium* to identify a role of authority or precedence (such as a teacher).¹⁹ It is likely, therefore, that the early Christian communities were often gatherings of generally white-robed males and females, with perhaps some members’ roles or status

¹⁵Norris (*Church Vestments*, pp. 8-9) provides an excellent brief summary of the traditional understanding of the historic development of Christian liturgical attire. A more expansive analysis of the historic development of vesture is found in West’s work on Orthodox vesture, including a brief examination of Mesopotamian and Egyptian garments influencing the development of Classical Greco-Roman attire (West, *The Garments of Salvation*, pp. 41-59).

¹⁶E.A. Roulin, *Vestments and Vesture: A Manual of Liturgical Art* (trans. J. McCann; Westminster: Newman Press, 1950), pp. 4-5. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship*, p. 62.

¹⁷McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship*, p. 62. See also Dearmer, *The Ornaments of the Ministers*, pp. 10-11.

¹⁸C. Pocknee, *Liturgical Vesture: Its Origins and Development* (Westminster: Mowbray Press, 1961) p. 13.

¹⁹Norris (*Church Vestments*, pp. 21-37) discusses the role of the *pallium* as a Classical symbol of a teacher or prophet, and its development into the garment specific of episcopal authority.

identified through their outer attire.²⁰ If this is so, it can be argued that the liturgical attire of the earliest Christian assemblies was worn by men and women, lay and ordained. The liturgical attire of the early Christian communities was therefore effectively not only non-gendered, but potentially egalitarian.

Within the persecuted early Church there appears to have been no formalized system of clericalized ministers, but rather a system of charismatic leaders (preachers, evangelists and healers).²¹ Other than formal attire for worship and possibly the seasonal or specific use of baptismal robes, there would therefore have been very little need for any codified sacred vesture, for not only would it be dangerous to publicly identify visually as a member of the assembly, it would also have been unnecessary to identify who was exercising leadership within small, gathered assemblies at worship. As potentially implied in 1 Cor. 11.4-5, the gender of this charismatic leadership may have been mixed – indeed recent scholarship has included examinations of the role(s) of women in the early Church – but this seemingly had no impact upon any ritualized clothing (or, at least as far as records will allow us to know).²²

A brief comment needs to be made at this point regarding the trend towards non-vested liturgical leadership which has developed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, especially within many reformed or Pentecostal church traditions. While the use of ‘street attire’, business suits or smart casual clothing by liturgical leaders may, at first, seem consistent with the practice of the early Church – in that it appears as if the ministers are attiring themselves in the same ‘street attire’ as their fellow worshippers – this is not always the actuality. In many worship services where the minister wears suit and tie they are frequently the only person doing so (and, thus, the business suit becomes a pseudo-vestment, symbolic of the role of leader of the assembly). Likewise, although the choice of which ‘street attire’ to wear as a liturgical leader is intended to be an expression of solidarity with the assembly, or a rejection of the notion of sacral status, the danger is that subtle political or fashion statements are inherently (perhaps unconsciously) at play in the choice of casual liturgical clothing. Designer label clothing, jeans cut according to styles associated with a particular social sub-group (hipster, ghetto or classic middle-class straight-leg Levis), tight-fitting T-shirts on gym-toned bodies, or the use of a sports jacket: these fashion choices immediately communicate certain assumptions or aspirations regarding the type(s) of people intended to be gathered as the worshipping assembly.²³ Such garments therefore do not necessarily allow for inclusive, transcendent or transformative worship.

As part of the process of Christianity becoming officially sanctioned in the fourth century under Constantine, it is believed that bishops may have been recognized as having the status of magistrates or senators’ officers, possibly even able to hear legal

²⁰Senn, *Embodied Liturgy*, p. 84, Johnstone, *High Fashion in the Church*, p. 7, Dearmer, *The Ornaments of the Ministers*, pp. 11-14. See also McGowan’s examination of the role of white robes in early baptismal rites in *Ancient Christian Worship*, pp. 172-74.

²¹Senn, *Embodied Liturgy*, p. 83. McGowan (*Ancient Christian Worship*, pp. 40-41) also suggests that early Christian leadership was also potentially fluid, based upon location and hospitality roles as much as charismatic leadership or civil authority.

²²McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship*, pp. 41, 149-50, 160.

²³Brown, *God and Mystery in Words*, p. 244.

complaints and make judgements (presumably for the discipline of members of their own communities).²⁴ With this came the conferral of a symbol of office: the *sudarium* (sometimes assumed to be the origin of either the maniple or the stole), and thus an association between imperial court attire, with its layers of rank and status, and an imperialized religious institution with ranked clerical status was established.²⁵ This initiates the development of specific liturgical attire as a progression from formal, public attire worn by all, to an eventual separation out of liturgical and ecclesial rank and function, symbolized by specific insignia.

As with much of Church history, as secular culture developed and shifted, the Church's developments trended towards a retention of tradition, so that the retention of classical court attire by the clergy, even after it was abandoned by the culture around, eventually resulted in a unique ecclesial expression in which garments once associated with court attire and ranks and worn by many in worship became uniquely ecclesial and specifically clerical in their symbolism and resonance.

The development of Christian attire out of Greco-Roman imperial court attire is important for our question about the gendering of vesture. As Pocknee, and more recently Hovda, have both noted, the basic elements of classical imperial attire were unisex (or non-gendered): both males and females wore, in various situations, the white tunic, the dalmatic and the *paenula* (or the smaller *casula*, or the more voluminous *byrrus*/mantle), as illustrated in the famous mosaics of San Vitale, Ravenna, where Justinian and Theodora are shown in almost identical attire (white *tunica linea*, possibly with a gold-trimmed dalmatic, and covered by embroidered *byrrus*).²⁶ Theodora and Justinian's court garments – similar in line and cut regardless of their gender – in shape and design also mirror the attire worn by the cleric Bishop Maximian in the same mosaics (who stands alongside in alb, cream dalmatic with purple *clavi*, and brown *paenula/casula*). It is notable that the only significant difference between the attire of the three is Maximian's *pallium* and tonsure (although it may be that, by this point, the *paenula/casula* was also beginning to symbolize a clerical status). Likewise, as Pocknee notes, in a depiction of St Gregory with his parents it is particularly notable that the only distinction in attire between the three figures is the *pallium* on the papal shoulders.²⁷ All else about their (male and female) Classical attire is uniform. Both of these images illustrate the unisex nature of Classical court attire (and therefore of Christian vesture's progenitors) while also indicating the close association between secular court attire and early Christian liturgical attire within the period leading up to the sixth century.

If the prototype origins of Christian vesture were unisex, this presents no theoretic obstacles for women wearing traditional Christian liturgical garb.²⁸ Indeed, if, as Hovda suggests, good liturgy is about lifting us out of the injustice and mess of the mundane, by bringing celebratory excess and a sense of historic continuity, then the use of garments which are time-honoured, beautiful, 'otherworldly' and unisex would seem most appropriate for female ministers, claiming their equal place in

²⁴Dearmer, *The Ornaments of the Ministers*, p. 53.

²⁵Hovda, 'The Vesting of Liturgical Ministers', pp. 111-12.

²⁶Pocknee, *Liturgical Vesture*, p. 14, and Plate I.

²⁷Pocknee, *Liturgical Vesture*, p. 14, and Plate II.

²⁸Hovda, 'The Vesting of Liturgical Ministers', p. 110.

expressing the *presbyterium* of the assembled people of God alongside similarly attired males, visually symbolizing a situation of lived gender-justice, in a world still replete with much gendered division.²⁹

Such a unisex, historic origin for traditional Christian attire should allow any minister, regardless of gender, to let liturgical vesture be a means of enabling an assembly to look beyond the minister's person-hood, into their role as an incarnation of the whole assembly's celebration.³⁰ All liturgical vestments (including those of lay assistants) should serve primarily as communicators of specific function within the whole action of the gathered assembly. They do not exist to speak of the personhood, identity, or personal taste of the individual wearing them.³¹ Since gender is not a part of the liturgical function of a minister, but is a part of their personhood, liturgical attire can be seen to provide a symbolic consistency – regardless of the gender of the human person wearing these garments/costumes/symbols of office, they continue to articulate function and role. Garments which are not about identity, but about function, intrinsically have no gender in themselves, and if based upon unisex prototypes cannot be said to have an invested or implicit gender within their symbolism.

Historically, as long as it is accepted that Christian vesture originates out of Classical attire, then traditional liturgical attire can be understood to be non-gendered in its form. This, however, may not necessarily have been always quite true of its inherited sociological associations. In the next two sections of this article, a variety of historic and cultural references and interpretations of Christian liturgical garments will be examined in relation to their potential commentary on the gendered identity of the garments.

The Medieval Period: Clerical Attire, Sociological Understandings and Gender

Within the early Medieval period (pre-1100 CE) we see suggestions that there was still fluidity in the gender identity of liturgical attire. While clergy were almost universally male (excepting female religious, and perhaps in the Byzantine rite of the eighth to twelfth centuries, where there appears to have been an allowance for the existence of deaconesses),³² there exist occasional references to traditional clerical ceremonial attire being associated with female figures, in ways which imply that the garments themselves were not symbolically understood to be gender exclusive.

Jane Tibbets Schulenberg, in examining the role of women in the production of ecclesiastical textiles, suggests that their involvement in not only producing, but also commissioning such textiles somewhat destabilizes any inherent masculinist associations these liturgical garments might have had as a result of a male-only clerical world.³³ She also references a number of instances where female figures wore, or

²⁹Hovda, 'The Vesting of Liturgical Ministers', p. 105.

³⁰Hovda, 'The Vesting of Liturgical Ministers', pp. 101, 115–16.

³¹Hovda, 'The Vesting of Liturgical Ministers', pp. 106–107. See also K. Rumens, 'Sumptuous Harmonies: A Glimpse of Vestments', *The Way* 39.3 (July 1999), pp. 266–67.

³²P. Zagano, 'Women in the Diaconate', *Worship* 88.1 (January 2014), pp. 73–77. See also P. Zagano, 'Phyllis Zagano on the Case for Catholic Women Deacons', <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/422/article/catholic-women-deacons> (accessed 25 March 2019).

³³J. Tibbets Schulenberg, 'Holy Women and the Needle Arts', in K.A. Smith and S. Wells (eds.), *Negotiating Community and Difference in Medieval Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 83–110.

were depicted as wearing, garments which would normally be the 'sole preserve' of (by this period) universally male clergy.

Most notable among these instances is the alb of St Edith of Wilton (c. 963–986 CE): a liturgical garment embroidered by Edith, depicting herself taking part in a biblical scene (as Mary the penitent at the feet of Jesus, surrounded by the apostles).³⁴ While this imaging of self as a witness to sacred events is not unique,³⁵ the depiction of self as a participant in a biblical event is unusual: here a female artisan transgresses various boundaries of the ecclesiastical institution, a space in which boundaries were traditionally drawn by male figures. Contemporary records also indicate that this alb was seemingly made for Edith's own use while attending liturgies in one of the convents of which she was patron, not as a garment for use by any male clergy within the liturgy: a clear indication that the alb, at least, was not exclusively a male, or clerical garment within her understanding.³⁶ Here we have an unusual record of a Medieval laywoman wearing liturgical attire at liturgical events.³⁷

Edith is not alone in this era: the poet Sedulius Scotus, in praising the textile prowess of Queen Ermangard (d. 851), blesses her with the wish that she may 'glitter in an eternal stole, and bear the unfading trophy to heaven': a definite reference to a liturgical garment, given that he is commemorating Ermangard's gifting of particular liturgical textiles dedicated to St Peter.³⁸ It could be suggested that this 'eternal stole' is merely a female outer wrap or shawl, in the same way that the term 'stole' is still used in fashion today; however, the literary purpose of the works as a record of an important bequest of vesture is significant. The poet would be likely to avoid a term which had a liturgical meaning if the garment in question was not intended to be seen as commensurate with that which had been gifted to be worn by clergy in the sanctuary. It is also important to note that while, as a poetic reference, this is not a historic record of an instance in which a female was actively attired in ecclesial vesture, the image is clearly not seen to be undermined by any implicit gendering attached to the concept of a stole. Scotus clearly understands nothing inappropriate about vesting a royal patroness with a symbol of clerical, ordained identity.

Tibbets Schulenberg notes similar references to female figures being robed in heaven with garments which mirror certain vestments (most particularly copes) – again a suggestion that vesture may not have been seen to be the sole preserve of male persons within an early Medieval understanding, but rather perhaps serving to express a spiritual identity as opposed to a secular one.³⁹ These images may also

³⁴Tibbets Schulenberg, 'Holy Women and the Needle Arts', pp. 94, 102–103.

³⁵For example, the depiction of King Edgar as donor presenting the charter to Christ on the frontispiece of the New Minster Reformation Charter (MS Cotton Vespasian A. viii, fol 2v); see Plate 1 in L. Roach, *Æthelred the Unready* (London: Yale University Press, 2016), facing p. 174.

³⁶Tibbets Schulenberg, 'Holy Women and the Needle Arts', p. 104.

³⁷It is acknowledged that, given the existence of female religious throughout the Medieval period, there were a variety of liturgical settings in which it would be commonplace for female figures to be liturgically attired. The particularly notable aspect of this historic record is, in part, Edith's lay status. While it could be argued that female religious were possibly perceived as genderless within medieval cultural understanding, a royal laywoman most certainly was not.

³⁸Tibbets Schulenberg, 'Holy Women and the Needle Arts', p. 91.

³⁹Tibbets Schulenberg, 'Holy Women and the Needle Arts', p. 102.

draw from the common understanding that the worship of the church was an anticipation of the worship of heaven: the garments of the Medieval sanctuary, therefore, provided artists and poets with models of the garments of those in heaven (regardless of gender).

The symbolism inherent in the practice of people of status (including women) gifting or bequeathing items of their own clothing or possessions for the creation of vesture or ecclesiastical fittings is also important to consider.⁴⁰ Such acts of patronage, in which even female garments or adornments were turned into an ecclesial garment or ornament suggests that there was not necessarily any inherent gendered-ness attached to items of clothing related to sacred use.⁴¹ Instead, perhaps, we see in these examples an indication that, at least in the early Medieval period, vestments more commonly expressed a spiritual identity or state of being, rather than being imbued with any gendered identity. Such an understanding seems to shift in the later Medieval period, with the development of a more rigorous encoding of attire, consistent with the development of courtly ritual and stratified society.

Andrew G. Miller's recent article, examining the power politics and symbolism inherent in actions of violence directed towards clerical garments in twelfth-century Anglo-Norman England, suggests that, certainly by this period, clerical vesture, and indeed even monastic habit, had become an important social signifier: of power, authority and also masculinity.⁴² He draws parallels between the attire of the knightly class and the traditional robes and tonsure of the clerics, indicating that situations in which these garments were forcibly and intentionally torn, damaged, removed and even reshaped, were usually intentional expressions of disempowerment, humiliation and emasculation.⁴³ Such a clear non-verbal piece of communication operated predominantly as a result of the carefully coded nature of all attire within the Medieval world, in which status, role and social function were carefully expressed through garments. Miller argues, convincingly, that – certainly by the twelfth century (and possibly considerably earlier than this) – clerical garments had become inherently gendered, operating as masculine in nature when expressing social or spiritual power or authority. Indeed, he cites Pauline Stafford's argument that Anglo-Norman clerics tended to criticize courtly attire as effeminate, compared to the 'masculine' attire of the monastic 'soldiers of Christ'.⁴⁴

Miller's article offers a useful indicator of the significant shift in sociological understanding of the symbolism of clerical attire through the course of the Medieval period. While, in an ecclesial setting, the liturgical and clerical garments spoke of tradition and apostolic succession, within the wider sociological structure, clerical garments had effectively also become symbols of position, power and authority, and therefore (within a Medieval worldview) masculinized.

⁴⁰E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580* (London: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 33, 551–53.

⁴¹Tibbets Schulenberg, 'Holy Women and the Needle Arts', p. 99.

⁴²A.G. Miller, 'To "Frock" a Cleric: The Gendered Implications of Mutilating Ecclesiastical Vestments in Medieval England', *Gender and History* 24.2 (August 2012), pp. 271–91 (271–72, 275).

⁴³Miller, 'To "Frock" a Cleric', pp. 279, 283–84.

⁴⁴Miller, 'To "Frock" a Cleric', p. 274.

Gender and Depictions of Vesture in Art and Design

Looking briefly at artistic representations of vestments in a variety of historic periods, including in twenty-first century fashion, indicates that – while, in the course of Western history there may have been a developing understanding of clerical vesture as masculinist symbols of power – clerical and sacred garments have always had multivalent, multi-gendered meanings. Traditional clerical vesture has been used repeatedly to identify spiritual or particularly holy figures in art, including for both gender-neutral angels and female saintly figures, as well as male saints and clerics. This indicates that the garments themselves were not necessarily universally perceived as holding a masculine association, but served more resonantly as ecclesial or spiritual symbols.

The musical angels in the upper register of the fifteenth century Van Eyck altarpiece in St Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent, are each vested in amices, albs, tunics and copes, with particular attention paid to the details of their gilded and jewelled morses.⁴⁵ These gilt morses and copes mirror the patterns and designs of the papal saints attending the vision of the *Agnus Dei* in the central panel of the lower register. Thus, they are clearly meant to be read as ecclesial vesture. Interestingly, while angels are often depicted in a gender-neutral manner, or as male figures, many of the musical angels in the Van Eyck altarpiece could be read as female figures: particularly those alongside the figure of St Cecilia.

Images of angels robed in various liturgical garb are common. In the Merode Altarpiece by Robert Campin (1427 CE), depicting the Annunciation, the Archangel is vested in apparelled amice, apparelled alb, and a jewelled stole, tied as a deacon's stole.⁴⁶ The detail of the stole tied in the manner worn by a deacon is also present in an earlier version of the same scene by Campin in the collection of the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, and suggests an interesting possible connection between the role of deacon as one taking the Gospel out to the world beyond the worshipping community and the role of angels as messengers. In contrast, the angels hovering behind the figure of the resurrected Christ in Bartolomé Bermejo's 'Christ Leading the Patriarchs into Paradise' (c. 1480 CE) are robed as priests: with amices, albs and crossed stoles (crossed across the breast in traditional *presbyteral* fashion), one also wearing a red mantle.⁴⁷ In the Met Museum's anonymous sixteenth-century miniature altarpiece, depicting 'The Virgin of the Rosary and the Fifteen Mysteries', not only is the archangel of the Annunciation robed in white alb and gold dalmatic/tunicle, but the figure of Simeon, in the Presentation scene, wears alb, gold dalmatic, jewelled mitre, and white

⁴⁵An image is available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/19/science/ghent-altarpiece-restoration.html> (accessed 18 June 2019). See also L. Monnas, 'Silk Textiles in the Paintings of Jan van Eyck', in S. Foster, S. Jones and D. Cool (eds.), *Investigating Jan van Eyck* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishing, 2000), pp. 147–62.

⁴⁶An image is available at <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/470304> (accessed 18 June 2019).

⁴⁷M. McDonagh, 'Bartolomé Bermejo Review: Rare Sighting of a Master of the Spanish Renaissance', *Evening Standard*, 12 June 2019, <https://www.standard.co.uk/go/london/arts/bartolome-bermejo-exhibition-review-national-gallery-a4164266.html>. See image 4/6 (accessed 18 June 2019).

fanon/*rationale*, the two figures almost mirroring each other across the top register of the altarpiece.⁴⁸ Again, it is important in examining these depictions of mysterious ‘otherworldly’ figures to acknowledge that angels can often be said to be gender-ambiguous. Likewise, the cultural conception of Medieval worship as a symbolic representation of the beauty and glory of the heavenly kingdom, in which the earthly sanctuary is a glimpse into the realm of the divine, may be an important influence upon depictions of the attire of heavenly beings. Depictions of angels in liturgical vesture may be the result of an eschatological, anticipatory understanding of the function of the liturgy.

The artistic inheritance of this fifteenth-century tradition of depicting angels (of indeterminate gender) in sacred vesture can be clearly seen in Cowper’s image of St Agnes in prison (1905 CE).⁴⁹ Here, with his image of an angel robed in red garment and white crossed stole, we are left in no doubt as to the angel’s gender for it is known that the sitter for the figure was the actress Gertrude Kidd.⁵⁰ There is likewise a distinct femininity in the angel in Spencer Stanhope’s ‘Why seek Ye the Living among the Dead?’ (1875 CE), who is robed in alb and dalmatic; and in the star-angel in the Burne-Jones/Morris and Co ‘Adoration of the Magi’ tapestry (c. 1900 CE), robed in appressed alb, stole, cope, jewelled morse, with flowers in her tightly curled hair.⁵¹ Clearly, for late Victorian gothic-revivalist artists there was no discomfort in the idea of female forms wearing clerical vesture.

Affirming this nineteenth-century perspective, an 1860s altar frontal, designed by William Burges for St Michael & All Angels Brighton, depicts angels of both genders wearing albs, copes and dalmatics.⁵² The angels in the festal altar frontal at St George’s Chapel, Windsor Castle (designed by J.L. Pearson in 1889 CE) wear albs and appressed amices.⁵³ Those in the nineteenth-century ‘Annunciation to the Shepherds’ window at Church of St Catherine, Arthog (by the firm of Heaton, Butler and Bayne) are both in albs, one with a crossed stole, and possibly a cope.⁵⁴ The angels in the upper register of the ‘Adoration of the Magi’ window at St Oswald’s Malpas, Wales (possibly by James Ballantyne & Sons, dating to c. 1928 CE) are vested in albs and stoles, two also wearing dalmatics.⁵⁵ Angels are often assumed to be androgynous, therefore such images cannot necessarily be said to depict female figures in vesture, but neither can they be read as an implicit support of a masculine association for vestments. If nothing else, they continue the

⁴⁸C. Jacobi and L. Ward (eds.), *Love and Desire: Pre-Raphaelite Masterpieces from the Tate* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, NGA Publishing, 2018), p. 172.

⁴⁹Jacobi and Ward, *Love and Desire*, p. 132.

⁵⁰Jacobi and Ward, *Love and Desire*, p. 133.

⁵¹Jacobi and Ward, *Love and Desire*, pp. 124–25, 204–205.

⁵²M. Schoeser, *English Church Embroidery 1833–1953: The Watts Book of Embroidery* (London: Jenner City Print, 1998), p. 136.

⁵³Schoeser, *English Church Embroidery*, p. 109.

⁵⁴M. Crampin, ‘Two Windows in Arthog’, *Stained Glass in Wales* weblog, 9 April 2019, <https://stainedglasswales.wordpress.com/2019/04/09/two-windows-at-arthog/> (accessed 3 June 2019).

⁵⁵M. Crampin, ‘Stained Glass Museum Study weekend 2017’, *Stained Glass in Wales* weblog, 28 April 2017, <https://stainedglasswales.wordpress.com/2017/04/28/stained-glass-museum-study-weekend/> (accessed 3 June 2019).

understanding that the vesture of the sanctuary is an eschatological glimpse of the heavenly realm.

Some other female figures depicted vested create more clarity about the perceived non-gendered nature of vestments. The stunning image of the Virgin Mary, with lilies springing up around her feet, and crowned with a halo of stars, standing among the saints depicted on an altar frontal made for St Peter's Hascombe (c. 1880s CE), clearly shows Mary vested in white alb and a cope embroidered with fleurs-de-lis.⁵⁶ There is no suggestion, here, that it is somehow inappropriate for this female figure to be vested: she is in a position of prominence within the scene, standing alongside the other, similarly robed (male) patron saints. Another extraordinary piece of embroidery depicting a vested female is an Arts and Crafts style altar frontal worked by Ann McBeth, recorded in Mary Schoeser's examination of English ecclesiastical embroidery. Here a female is depicted, robed in cassock, rochet, stole, cope, mitre and episcopal gloves, bearing a crozier.⁵⁷ Schoeser suggests the figure might represent the Church (under the guise of 'Holy Mother Church'); alternatively she may be intended to represent St Hilda of Whitby (occasionally depicted with a mitre or crozier, as an abbess of a dual monastic establishment). Either way, again, there appears to be no implication that full episcopal vesture is somehow inappropriate for a female figure.

More recent examinations of vesture and gender identity have included the spectacular exhibition at the Met Museum of Art, New York, in 2018, in which links between the art and textile collections of the Roman Catholic Church and inspiration for high fashion designs were explored.⁵⁸ As part of this exhibition, the opening gala was attended by a wide range of celebrities, many of whom wore couture responding to the traditional palettes and patterns of clerical attire (as well as dressing in representations of saintly figures like the Virgin Mary).⁵⁹ Both the exhibition and the gala evening explored and emphasized the gender-fluidity of traditional ecclesiastical shapes and styles, with fashion houses using designs inspired by (amongst other things) clerical cassocks and episcopal vesture to create women's evening outfits,⁶⁰ showcased alongside a rare exhibition of vesture and other items from the Vatican Collection.⁶¹ While not the core purpose of the curators, this exhibition nonetheless emphasized an implicit understanding that traditional ecclesial vesture, at least in its design palates and patterns, might not necessarily need to be seen as the sole preserve of males, even within a Roman Catholic context.

⁵⁶Schoeser, *English Church Embroidery*, pp. 73–74.

⁵⁷Schoeser, *English Church Embroidery*, p. 41.

⁵⁸A. Bolton (ed.), *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, Yale University Press, 2018). See especially the introduction by Bolton, p. 95. Also of note in this text is the article by B. Drake Boehm, 'Habit Forming: Costume in Medieval Monastic Community' in Bolton (ed.), *Heavenly Bodies*, pp. 218–19.

⁵⁹L. Borrelli-Persson, 'Met Gala 2018 Theme: Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination', *Vogue*, 4 May 2018, <https://www.vogue.com/article/met-gala-2018-theme-heavenly-bodies-fashion-and-the-catholic-imagination> (accessed 18 June 2019).

⁶⁰For example, the Dolce & Gabbana 2016–17 Evening Ensemble based upon cope and mitre: Bolton, *Heavenly Bodies*, pp. 154–55. Couture and designs displayed came from various fashion houses and designers, including Chanel, Dolce & Gabbana, Schiaparelli, Fontana, The House of Lanvin, Yves Saint Laurent, and John Galliano for Dior. Bolton, *Heavenly Bodies*, pp. 108–215.

⁶¹Bolton, *Heavenly Bodies*, pp. 25–87.

Clearly within the world of art and fashion there is no sense that liturgical and clerical vesture is the sole domain of the masculine: indeed, it could be argued that this short sample of artistic representations of vesture implies a historic-cultural understanding in which vesture is not even the sole domain of the clergy/ordained. Does this, however, translate into the modern understanding of vestments worn liturgically?

Modern Perceptions: Gendered and Non-Gendered Readings of Liturgical Garments

The experiential worldview of Noren's preaching students was based in an era in which ordained women's ministry was, in many parts of the world, still a new or contested possibility within mainstream denominations. This meant that, although the traditional liturgical garments worn by those in the sanctuary may have originated as non-gendered garments, over a period of centuries of predominantly male-only clerical roles, cognitively, for Noren's students, they had become visually associated predominantly with a patriarchal, masculinist world and culture.

Noren's students, in expressing discomfort in the idea of donning traditional liturgical attire identified their issue to be about the obscuring of their identity, in a way which also obscured or denied their gender: since 'special garb for those leading worship, and especially for celebrating the eucharist, was clothing for men'.⁶²

Although these garments were not necessarily originally male garments, had they become so, through long-established patterns of use?

Certainly, in Noren's experience, this was the case, for although the traditional garments had somewhat feminine lines with 'long flowing dress and more ornamental detail', they were still seen to be too masculinized or male-dominant by some women clergy who set about designing their own refashioning of the traditional vestments, with new symbols, or more 'feminine' lines.⁶³ The Reverend Katherine Rumens speaks of a similar journey, in which, when she was among the first women priests ordained in the Church of England, ordination stoles with new symbolism were specially designed for these new women clergy.⁶⁴ Both these sets of women's voices articulate a certain discomfort with garments seen to have some implicit masculine identity, and a desire to refashion the garments to reduce this association. Ironically, such 'personalization' of vestments, whether to make them more feminine (Noren), or to make a stronger statement of a shared, ordained identity (Rumens), undermines the fundamental point of vesture: that such garments are not about emphasizing personal identity, but rather the opposite; they function primarily as a symbol of office which seeks to clothe, or cover, the individual such that it is their function within the gathered assembly, not their personality or identity, which is expressed.⁶⁵

⁶²Noren, 'Theology, Vestments, and Women's Nonverbal Communication', p. 5.

⁶³Noren, 'Theology, Vestments, and Women's Nonverbal Communication', pp. 6–7.

⁶⁴Rumens, 'Sumptuous Harmonies', p. 263.

⁶⁵Giles, *Creating Uncommon Worship*, p. 78. Hovda, 'The Vesting of Liturgical Ministers', pp. 106 and 112.

It could be argued that this gendered discomfort with traditional liturgical vesture was only an initial problem: a period of reframing understanding as ministry went from being a male-only province, to one in which a multitude of gender identities can be (and are) expressed.⁶⁶ Yet Sarah Coakley, in her exploration of the nuptial symbolism of the gendered/erotic dynamism of the priest at altar in interaction with the Divine, suggests that the use of traditional vesture is still regarded as ‘dressing up’ in a gender-transgressive manner (she speaks of ‘a woman dressing up as a man dressing up as a woman’, in speaking of female priests operating liturgically in a traditional manner).⁶⁷

Coakley’s description of vesture as effectively a form of ecclesially sanctioned cross-dressing seems inconsistent with her identification of a gender-fluid pattern for priests as intermediaries in the traditional nuptial-erotic interpretation of the eucharistic action (in which the priest is functionally and symbolically, at one moment feminine/receptor/human, and then the next masculine/agent/divine).⁶⁸ Nonetheless, her image of men dressing up as women expresses a common twentieth and twenty-first century misconception of liturgical attire, with its long, non-bifurcated shape, particularly in a societal setting wherein trousers (and shorts) are seen as masculine attire, and any alternative to this is somehow feminine. The common terminology of clerics as being ‘frocked’, ‘unfrocked’ or ‘defrocked’ does not help this misconception.

While there are many female deacons, priests, bishops and other ministers who wear traditional liturgical attire (variant according to their particular denominational traditions), seemingly without any sense of degendering themselves, it is interesting that there are presently a number of online ecclesiastical outfitters who advertise or sell clerical vesture in gendered categories.⁶⁹ Granted, there is a necessary difference in the tailoring of an alb, cassock, preaching gown or clerical shirt for females as opposed to those for males. Most gendered divisions within clerical outfitters represent such a practical reality. However, one online company not only categorizes their available cope designs according to gender, but also their chasuble selections differ greatly between what is available for men and what is available for women.⁷⁰ This distinction does not appear to be about cut or size but more about

⁶⁶The Anglican Diocese of Brisbane journeyed with one of their priests in transitioning from a male to a female identity in 2017–18, demonstrating that the narrative of clerical gendered-ness must be acknowledged to be a little broader than the traditional assumption of male/female binary. J. Baird, ‘Meet Australia’s First Transgender Priest’, *ABC NEWS*, 23 February 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-02-23/australias-first-transgender-priest/9477100> (accessed 25 March 2019).

⁶⁷S. Coakley, ‘The Woman at the Altar: Cosmological Disturbance or Gender Subversion?’ *Anglican Theological Review* 86.1 (Winter 2004), pp. 75–93 (91).

⁶⁸Coakley, ‘The Woman at the Altar’, p. 88.

⁶⁹Notably C M Almy, www.almy.com; Hayes & Finch, <http://www.hfltd.com/category/ladies-vestments/>; and Mercy Robes <https://www.mercyrobes.com/shop/category/ladies-clergy-collection/> (accessed 25 March 2019).

⁷⁰<http://www.hfltd.com/category/copos/> and <http://www.hfltd.com/category/chasubles/> (accessed 25 March 2019).

design, suggesting that, within this company at least, there are certain vestment designs which are perceived to have gendered qualities to them.⁷¹

Similarly, the existence of companies designing vestments exclusively for female clerical use indicates that there is an implicit ‘masculine’ quality believed to exist within traditional ecclesial vesture designs, which is best counteracted by producing something ‘feminine’, ‘personal’ or ‘different’ for female clerics.⁷² It is interesting that, in neither the academic world, nor in the legal profession, has any need to similarly adapt or personalize robes according to gender been identified. Makers of academic robes and juridical attire do not advertise garments specific to gender, even though tailoring may occasionally need to differ according to the build or gender of the wearer. Academic gowns and hoods, and legal robes and wigs serve much the same purpose as clerical vesture: they are not statements about personality or gender, but signify office, rank and function within the institutional organizations to which they belong. Interestingly, academia and the judiciary system are also hierarchical vocations historically known to have been male-dominated, or even patriarchal, and just as prone to the cult of personality as the church. It is therefore notable that there has been no perceived need among female judges, lawyers and professors to personalize or ‘feminize’ the robes of office in their institutions, in ways comparable to present patterns within the world of ecclesiastical vesture. Perhaps, if nothing else, the development of personalization in ecclesiastical patterns indicates a lack of understanding of the ritual purpose of vestments as expressions of function, not of personhood, if not also suggesting a growing individuality cult within the modern church. The personalization of vestments, therefore, effectively potentially undermines their very purpose.

If vestments, like academic and judicial attire, are not meant to be personality statements, why would vestment makers feel the need to ‘feminize’ certain vestment designs, or to imply that certain vestment designs are suitable only for male or for female clergy? Given that there are many parishes in which both male and female clergy wear the same suite of parish vestments when presiding,⁷³ seemingly with no cosmological disturbance, it cannot be argued that there are differences in traditional design between what is suitable for male or female clergy to wear, provided the designs of the vesture seek to articulate spiritual or theological concepts, not

⁷¹While my female colleagues advise that some chasuble designs may be inappropriate for a female to wear, lest they draw unwanted visual attention to the wrong part of the chest, this does not appear to be the consideration at work in this instance. Chasubles with modern or centralized images are available in both gender categories, while it is many of the more traditional designs of chasuble and cope which are not available as ‘ladies vestments’.

⁷²For example, the women’s vestment company WomenSpirit, ‘a twenty-five year old company that was first to the marketplace with robes and clerical clothing tailored to fit the spirit and bodies of women’. Since March 2019, when this article was first researched, the company has diversified, now also producing male clerical attire and vestments, under the brand labels Abiding Spirit and Spiritus. The diversified company has rebranded as Sacred Stitches, with WomenSpirit retained as a brand division within the larger entity. <https://sacredstitches.com/about-sacred-stitches/> (accessed 14 May 2020).

⁷³Norwich Cathedral UK, Christ Church South Yarra, Australia, St George’s Cathedral, Perth Australia, or St Mark’s Philadelphia USA, are all examples of parishes with senior female clergy on staff who regularly preside at the Eucharist in the same parish vestments as those worn by male clergy.

personalized slogans.⁷⁴ Perhaps the existence of specialized ‘women’s’ stoles, chasubles, copes or dalmatics indicates a remaining misunderstanding that certain vestments are implicitly ‘male’ in their cut, pattern, design or association.⁷⁵ This may, in part, stem from a socio-cultural lack of knowledge of the liturgical-theological identification of vesture as expressing ritual function as opposed to personal identity.

Conclusion

In this short survey of both the nature and depiction of Western clerical vestments throughout the last two millennia, it has been demonstrated that, in both historic foundations and in artistic and social symbolism, vestments have been understood to be non-gendered. Despite this, there appears to be within the modern mindset some assumption that traditional clerical vesture has a lingering masculinized association. Such an assumption may be the result of the long history of exclusion of females from ordained clerical ministry within the Western tradition, coupled with the retention of such exclusion within some denominations (or certain political subgroups thereof), most of which utilize traditional ecclesial vesture. What can be stated, fairly clearly from this brief survey is that there appears to be no sound reason why clerical vesture should be regarded as having any particular gender associations. Rather, the unisex, and impersonal nature of these garments, which primarily exist (1) to express a temporary transition out of the common world into the realm of the divine, (2) to highlight the functions and offices of clerics and other liturgical assistants as agents within the actions of the whole assembly, and (3) to set aside the personhood of the same, should be an encouragement to those who may still feel some gender disparity at work within the clerical world. Clerical vestments are gender-inclusive garments, expressive of the inclusive and all-embracing identity of the corporate body of Christ (Gal. 3.26-29). It is imagined, by this author at least, that the unisex, impersonal nature of traditional clerical vesture and garments may therefore be an important consideration for transgender clergy – a matter of research beyond the confines of this paper.

⁷⁴Thomas Merton argues strongly against personalization or the influence of popular trends in liturgical design. T. Merton, ‘Absurdity in Sacred Decoration’, *Worship* 34.5 (1960), pp. 248–55. See also G. Kitto Lewis, ‘Sacred Arts Study: Thomas Merton’s Guides for Art and Worship’, <http://merton.org/ITMS/Annual/4/Lewis155-171.pdf> (accessed 25 March 2019).

⁷⁵It is here suggested that the length and width of chasuble, cope or dalmatic, which may well influence whether some women are able to wear a church’s particular vestments, is arguably not a gendered issue. This difficulty pertains to the height of the cleric regardless of gender. It is just as likely that amply-cut chasubles will be problematic for slightly built male clergy as for female clergy, and likewise that a fiddle-back chasuble, or vestment with centralized ornamentation, will often hang badly on a full-figured cleric regardless of their gender.