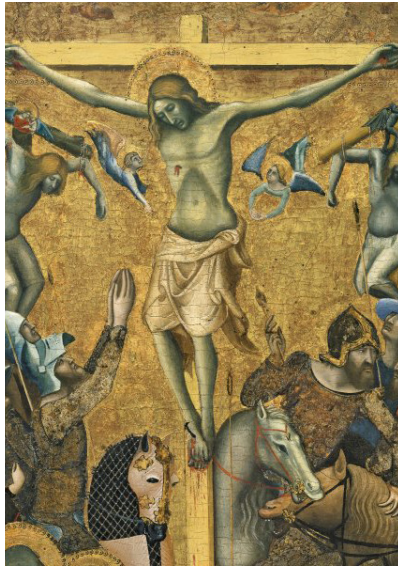


Does Fashion Keep The Faith?

The reappearance of the Christian cross in fashion



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Abstract

This paper examines and discusses the Christian cross, as a new feature in the fashion industry. The history of the cross, its representation and symbolism from the past to its popular appearance in the present, sets the framework for analysing its adaptation from a conservative and religious symbol to a fashion and social media accessory. The theme of religion, individualism, social groupings and the 'you are what you wear' theory, is examined through literature research and in interviews.

Preface

Christianity has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. From my childhood, my mother and I would say a prayer before going to bed. We would make the sign of the cross, touching our foreheads, chest and then our shoulders as a gesture of faith. On Good Fridays, we had the cross painted with ash on our foreheads by a pastor. In The Bahamas, where I lived for five years, I attended catholic summer school and had my first holy communion. (Figure 1) My mother, a Roman Catholic, always wore a golden cross around her neck and we would occasionally say the rosary, made of colourful pearls with a cross attached. However, the older I got and the more nomadic our lives became, the more I lost my personal touch with religion. But because of the prominence of the cross in my early life, as a symbol to be respected, I continued to observe its presence in the different countries that I have lived in. In Switzerland, where I live now, I watch the type of people who wear a cross and see its prominent appearance in social media. New fashion trends make the question of religious and cultural appropriation a controversial topic for debate. The revival of the cross as a new accessory might be as much a fashion question as it is a religious and sociological one.



Figure 1
"My First Holy Communion"

1. Introduction and Research Question

There are different ways to see the cross: From “...depicting a suffering, crucified Christ, to the highly abstract symbols of two simple crossed lines, any of which may be worked into fashion and jewellery.” (Hume, 2013, p. 32) The subject of this essay is the cross and its reappearance in modern fashion. I will examine its history and symbolism, its perception by different institutions and people and its usage by fashion-brands and designers.

Research Question: The Cross in Fashion - Does Fashion keep the faith? When did the Cross start being used in fashion? What drives today's Fashion consumers to wear and use these symbols? Is it superficial ignorance or is it the longing for religiousness?

In this paper, I will firstly give a brief introduction to the Catholic cross with its religious symbolism. Secondly, I am going to show how the Cross has appeared in music, pop-culture and, generally, in the fashion world. Throughout this essay, the religious symbolism is closely linked to today's adoption and adaptation of the cross in fashion and the question of whether religious provocation or spiritual connection stands at the centre of this trend. Fashion and anthropology theories of Daniel Miller and Roland Barthes, will serve as a supporting tool and provide a framework to best describe and understand this global phenomenon. Investigating the most prominent factors, particularly the cross' appearance in pop-culture, high fashion and the influence of social media will be the main focus of my research. This will be complemented by two quantitative expert interviews, in order to explain the background of the place of the cross in today's society, fashion and cultural environments.

2. The History of The Cross

The Christian cross is the primary symbol of Christianity. Considered nowadays as the image of the cross-beams of the crucifixion of Christ, its symbolism is older, and probably began with the use of the sign of the cross. (Figure 2) Before the time of Christ, the cross was a symbol of shame, ignorance and dishonour. A cross was branded upon the forehead of criminals as a sign of disgrace before the whole world. The cross was an instrument of execution, a symbol of shame, torture and death. It was the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great (280-337 AD) who introduced the first cross by combining the two Greek letters X and P to form the monogram of Christ. Only as of the 4th century, the cross became the main Christian emblem and symbol. It was at this time that its cult began. During the 4th and 5th centuries, the symbol began to be used to adorn religious buildings. From the 6th century onwards, the Cross was regularly associated with the representation of Christ. “With the Crucifixion, the cross became the symbol of honour, the standard of Christian faith, the symbol of salvation. Like governments which fly their flag over public buildings, ships and ports, so does the church now crown the steeples, the altars and the tombs of its followers with the emblem of the cross. Privately, Catholic people grace their cars and homes with this sacred symbol.” (Rustia, LeoDante *The Truth About The Cross*)

The Bible (Peter 2:24) explains that Christ was nailed to the cross, so that humanity could be saved: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.” Christ carried the burden of humanity’s sins and through his cuts and bruises people were healed. In Matthew 16:24, Jesus says to his disciples: “If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me.” And in Luke 14:27, he goes on: “Those who do not carry their own cross and come after me cannot be my disciples.” In this sense, to carry one’s cross is necessary to be a true disciple of Christ, a true follower or a true Christian. Does all this mean to carry a literal cross or just wear it in a symbolic way to demonstrate that the wearer follows God, whatever sacrifice it may imply? With endless interpretations and usages of the cross in pop culture and fashion, the question can be asked whether there remains a deeper, religious meaning or whether it is just a fashion fluke?

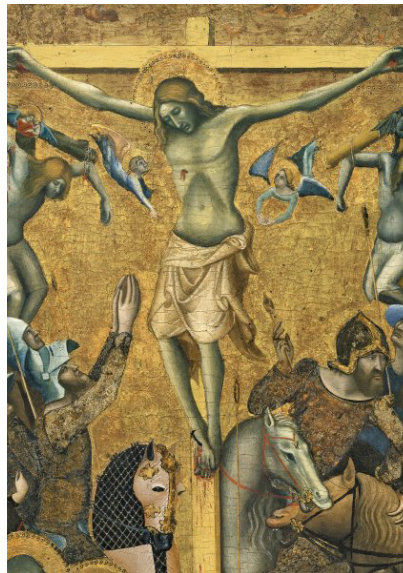


Figure 2
“The Crucifixion with the Virgin, Saint John and Angels”

3. Theory

3.1 Roland Barthes

Roland Barthes (1915 – 1980), one of the leading thinkers of semiotics, stated in his book, *The Study of Signs*, that a garment, a dish of cooked food, a gesture, a film, a piece of music, are all ‘signs’ that tell us something about the owner, user or wearer. In his book *Mythologies* he writes: “the garments we wear, everything, in everyday life, is dependent on the representation...and makes us have relations between man and the world.” (Barthes, 1972, p. 139) A sign which has been established by social convention, over a long period of time, requires an understanding of a culture to appreciate its meaning. “So, on the one hand clothing was subject to an entirely conventional code, but on the other to change clothes was to change both one’s being and one’s social class, since they were part and parcel of the same thing.” (Barthes, 2004, p. 60) In essence, everyone is

continually and instinctively interpreting the meaning of signs around them. A 'sign' refers to something which conveys meaning: a written or spoken word, a symbol or a myth "...for any material can arbitrarily be endowed with meaning." (Barthes, 1972, p. 108) A sign itself has no meaning. Meanings come from a process of putting things into a context and interpreting them therein. All signs have a literal meaning, which is called their denotation. But, depending on the context, many signs also suggest other layers of meaning, which is called their connotation. According to Barthes, signs had both a signifier, being the physical form of the sign as we perceive it through our senses and the signified or meaning that is interpreted. Signs rarely work alone. They are most often combined with other signs to form a code. A 'code' is a group of signs that we recognize as going naturally together to signify meaning. "Clothing was perceived as a kind of language, as a kind of grammar: the clothes code." (Barthes, 2004, p. 90) The meaning we gain from codes is culturally determined which means that our culture 'taught' us that particular way to interpret the meaning.

In Barthes' view, the religious cross is a symbolic sign that carries both a subjective and conventional association: Both personal religious beliefs and the message of the church. But he states that the symbol of the cross has a greater significance than the message of Christ. "What the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself." (Barthes, 1972, p. 16)

3.2 Daniel Miller

In chapter one, "Why clothing is not Superficial" of his book *Stuff* (2010), Daniel Miller presents us with an academic starting point and basis for this paper. He looks at clothing from a semiotic perspective, which is the study of symbol-making and reducing objects to images.

The Christian cross, one of the most well-known symbols in the world and often seen as an expression of one's innermost beliefs, does not always reflect one's cultural views or spiritual understanding: "There is simply no reason on earth why another population should see things in the same way. No reason at all why they should consider our real being to be deep inside and falsity on the outside." (Miller, 2010, p. 17) In other words, the re-emergence of the Christian cross as a fashion accessory or statement, may well be seen as a current fashion craze to some and, therefore, somehow shallow or more frivolous than an external expression of an inner rebirth of religious feelings. On the contrary, in other cultures, fashion and clothing style are seen as an expression of one's individualism and deep religious beliefs. It is often a symbol liberation from tyranny or slavery. And, for yet others, it is an expression of a poor man's hope for a better place in the afterlife: "Because no one is judging what they have done, nor what they happen to look like originally. We are judging them by their labour, not their birth." (Miller, 2010, p. 21) For Miller, the French Revolution has helped to abolish set dress codes and allowed for a more authentic expression of our inner selves through what we wear: "...the concept of 'the person, the sense of the self, the experience of being an individual, are radically different at different times and in different places, partly in relation to differences in clothing.'" (Miller, 2010, p. 40) But although this freedom may have released the people from fixed patterns, it may have created another set of problems: "The situation is full of ironic contradictions: freedoms that create anxiety, empowerment that feels oppressive, individualism that leads to conformity." (Miller, 2010, p. 38) What Miller says is clearly reflected in the emotional mechanics

of today's fashion trends and social media. Miller highlights that, ironically, individual taste and the lack of social norms or criticism has led to constant anxiety concerning the question of 'what to wear' and 'what not to wear'. In this paper, Miller's observations of clothing tradition and styles will help me to explore the phenomena of the re-emergence of the Christian cross in fashion and in social media.

4. The Cross in Today's Fashion

4.1 Pop-Culture

The cross has frequently been recycled as a fashion accessory. It became a staple of rock glam and punk looks of the '80s. (Figure 3) Punk rock (or "punk") as a rock music genre developed a lifestyle and socio-political statement. Punks were consciously working class, shabby, vulgar, dirty in clothing and language. Punks expressed their rebellion by provocation, characterized by distinctive styles of clothing and adornment. This ranged from deliberately offensive T-shirts, leather jackets, studded or spiked bands and jewellery, as well as wearing the Christian cross. Later, the Goth, a post-punk subculture, picked up on this and further spread the non-spiritual, non-religious use of the cross. (Figure 4)

The evolution of the iconic cross to mainstream pop-culture has taken much of the mystery out of it. By its use as a dangling pair of earrings or a piercing through a tongue, pop culture has demystified or humanized the cross and changed its uses. When Madonna burst into the music scene in the 1980's, she skilfully made use of these developments: "Artists like Madonna have used religious symbols in both their concerts and as part of their on-stage outfits, arguably to create controversy." (Surace, 2015) She was able to commercialize these

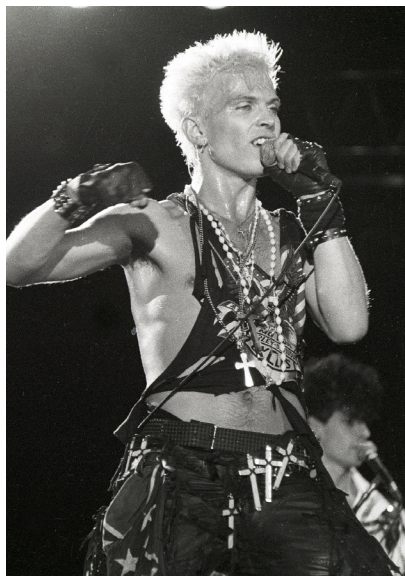


Figure 3
"Musician Billy Idol's Punk Style"



Figure 4
"Goth Style with the Crucifix"

subcultures and introduce them into mainstream music and pop culture. Madonna's 1984 *Like a Virgin* and her *Like a Prayer* (1989) music video used Catholic imagery, religious symbolism and sexual provocation to create one of the biggest controversies in show-biz history. "It was the visual and lyrical content that set a successful pattern Madonna has followed through her career." (DeMarco, 2013) Madonna used this as a marketing strategy for her music as well as a way to constantly reinvent herself. She created an image of herself in the industry by explicitly using the Christian cross and combining it with her unconventional ideas. (Figure 5) "Madonna had also adopted the crucifix and rosary as accessories in her regular wardrobe." (Bruculieri, 2017) Her *Like A Prayer* video features burning crosses as she wears a low-cut top with a cross on her chest. In *Like A Virgin*, Madonna wears a rosary with other beaded necklaces dancing sexually in a white wedding dress. (Figure 6) These provocations certainly created a lot of attention for her and her music: "Unfortunately, symbols, like the cross, pay the price of adopting the more universal meanings, in this case two parallel lines that form a fashionable shape, if they wish to remain a part of popular culture." (Demakos, 2014)



Figure 5
"Madonna's Style with Rosaries and Crosses"



Figure 6
"Madonna's *Like A Virgin* Outfit"

4.2 High Fashion

Today, the cross is often visible outside of the Church, taken out of its religious context and used in fashion. For many people, fashion has become a type of religion as: "...advertising agencies have spotted a new way of marketing their products: sell them as if they can fill the void in a faithless world; make brands their icons, inviting the faithful to devote themselves to the new religion by buying...", brands are labelled as the new religion and "...shopping is not a substitute for spirituality; shopping is itself a spiritual act." (Corner, 2002) Consumer goods are worshiped instead of deities. "The implicit message is that the half-needed things are themselves the religious symbols that will give meaning to life." (Corner, 2002) The objects become religious-like-symbols because we give them disproportionate value. 'Selling spirituality' is a theory that involves the marketing of condensed forms of religion, as "symbols are often taken out of the context of their religious meaning and sold as a part of fashion trends." (Masood, 2014) By provoking the public with religious symbols in fashion, designers conscientiously try to bring attention to their brand.

This year's Met Gala, an annual fundraising gala for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute, was held in New York City with the theme 'Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination.' The event addressed the influence of religious and liturgical clothing in fashion. Sewn into the title was an inbuilt provocation of the issue. Celebrities such as Rihanna, Kim Kardashian, Jennifer Lopez and many more attended the gala, showing a variety of different takes on the theme. The photos show that at least two used the cross as a main symbol on their dresses and one wore a sexified version of the Pope's formal robe, which also included the papal tiara. (Figure 7, 8, 9) The Pope is viewed as "God's representative on earth, dressed in splendid robes and jewels, wearing a type of crown as a symbol of his power, articulating his equal status with royalty".



Figure 7
"Rihanna at Met Gala 2018"



Figure 8
"Kim Kardashian at Met Gala 2018"



Figure 9
"Jennifer Lopez at Met Gala 2018"

(Hume, 2013, p. 18) Today, royalty is no longer confined to Kings and Queens. Celebrities are very much considered 'social royalty' and avidly copied. It is no surprise that Rihanna would wear an imitation of the Popes royal garments. To make oneself stand out is the ultimate goal no matter what the taboo. The tight body outfits, revealing plenty of skin and then to include the cross or other Catholic paraphernalia, equates with disrespect and irreverence, which is precisely the type of daring or glitz required to get the attention that celebrities and designers crave for. "Dress is a communicator of many things (identity, beliefs, the social and political order, individuality, group allegiance) as well as a fashion statement." (Hume, 2013, p. 2)

Interestingly enough, the theme was labelled as the Met's 'most controversial yet', that is, by positioning these fashion garments alongside sacred artefacts. The Heavenly Bodies exhibition has, however, received the official stamp of approval from the Vatican. "In fact, along with over 150 designer pieces, the Costume Institute's next big exhibit will also include 50 garments and accessories loaned from the Vatican." (Fisher, 2018) Backlash, disrespect and controversy was the reaction after the event. High-end labels like Dolce & Gabbana and Versace participated by designing special outfits for the gala. Dolce & Gabbana's Fashion Show in 2013 used mosaics of Sicily's Cathedral of Monreale, printed on dresses and presented by models covered in jewels and golden embroideries, mimicking religious Baroque aesthetic. (Figure 10 & 11) In an interview with The New York Times, Andrew Bolton, head curator of the event, gave a new twist to interpretation of Christian imagery saying that the exhibit focused "...on a shared hypothesis about what we call the Catholic imagination and the way it has engaged artists and designers and shaped their approach to creativity, as opposed to any kind of theology or sociology." (Fisher, 2018) No doubt, inspiration for design is drawn from any source and, in this case, for fashion design "...the church's rich history of symbolism and aesthetic excellence makes it a prime source." (Wbauck, 2013) Designers need publicity. To grab the consumer's attention is everything. Dominating the spotlight by religious and cultural appropriation or misappropriation is an ideal blueprint.



Figure 10
"Dolce & Gabbana 2013 Fashion Show"



Figure 11
"Dolce & Gabbana 2013 Fashion Show"

Often, non-Christians wear the cross and “... do so without ill-intent adopting the symbols into their style for aesthetic or even sentimental reasons.” (Wbauck, 2013) The cross’s symbolism can be taken religiously “If I wear this I am representing the sacrifice Jesus made” (Demakos, 2014) or just simply as a well-balanced geometrical design on a piece of clothing.

4.3 Social Media

The showing of skin on social media is a phenomenon that is much more often seen than it is seriously discussed. It seems to have been accepted without reflection, slowly allowed to develop into a trend that the eye becomes immune to.

Exposing one’s body and digitally displaying it online is attracting more attention. The equation is easy: The more you show, the more attention you will receive and possibly more likes, shares and comments you will get. By doing visual research on Instagram, I found photos of many celebrities and jewellery designers wearing the cross in different ways. The cross on social media has become less about religion and more about the image that the users want to portray to the public. “There is no way of knowing simply from observing appearance if that person is motivated to dress that way for religious reasons” (Lewis, 2013, p. 141) The mechanism is simple: Clothing brands can promote their brand and clothes by giving celebrities their products to post and mention on their account. The followers of the celebrities see the photo with the product and set off a chain-reaction of ‘likes, shares and comments’. These social media platforms allow the content to be shared and liked by people all over the world, able to connect using the form #hashtag to create “...micro-communities of like-minded friends and strangers who share a particular aesthetic affinity or niche sensibility.” (Dhillon, 2015) On social media, the distinction between lifestyle and marketing is blurred. A more personal way to connect with the consumers is created and the promotion strategy has a wider and broader audience. It is a fast and easy way to inform the audience about the brand and its identity. The cross lends itself extremely well, as it is immediately recognized and the message is clear. “With visual storytelling, fashion brands and retailers are now using Instagram as their primary tool to reveal brand personality. One look at a brand’s Instagram page should easily provide consumers a glimpse into the brand’s culture, lifestyle and products.” (Alter, 2016) Social media raises a lot of controversy, one of which is self-presentation on social platforms. “Much of that content is photographs, links, and textual information that social media users post to present an online self as such, self-presentation is centrally involved in impression management and the projection of an online identity.” (Herring, 2015, p. 1) This ties in neatly with Miller’s statement about the presentation of one’s inner self, seen here in a western exemplification. Many girls’ social profiles present them in a seductive manner and suggestive dress, like showing cleavage. (Figure 12) “Promoting one’s body in a sexual manner is a growing trend on social media.” (Herring, 2015, p. 5)

The following three brands make good use of this by marketing their Cross jewellery using half-naked women or lingerie: Vanessa Mooney (2009) with 199,000 Instagram followers, Luvaj (2005) with 140,000 followers and Verge Girl (2007) with 346,000 followers. These brands mainly use social media for publicity and to reach their target audience. “Recently, crucifixes have become popular tropes among Instagram-popular

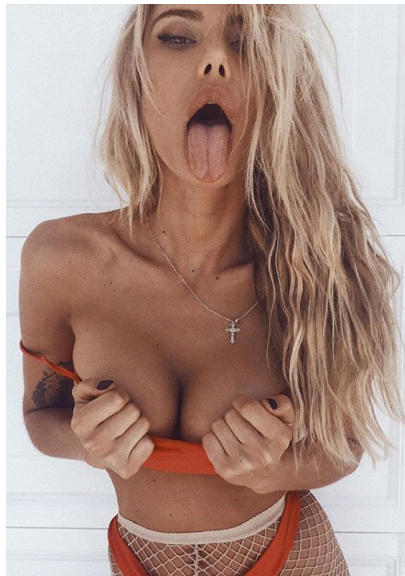


Figure 12
"Sahara Ray on Instagram"



Figure 13
"Verge Girl Accessories"

brands like Vanessa Mooney for fashion's sake." (Coscarelli, 2018) Interestingly enough, how the crosses are actually displayed, seem to have a great influence on the brand's following and popularity. This means that the more controversially the cross is displayed, the more publicity the brand will get. For instance, nudity is a sure method to gain likes and followers. (Figure 13) Models and social-media influencers can help brands create an identity and micro-community within Instagram. "In 2018, there are far fewer people wearing the cross as a subversive act, and many more wearing it as a purely aesthetic one." (Coscarelli, 2018) Abuse or not, it is clear that the cross gets attention when worn by a half-naked girl on her chest. (Figure 14 & 15) It could be seen as 'sexualised religion', but does commerce and profit matter? Whatever the case may be, Lewis states that at least,



Figure 14
"Vanessa Mooney Instagram"

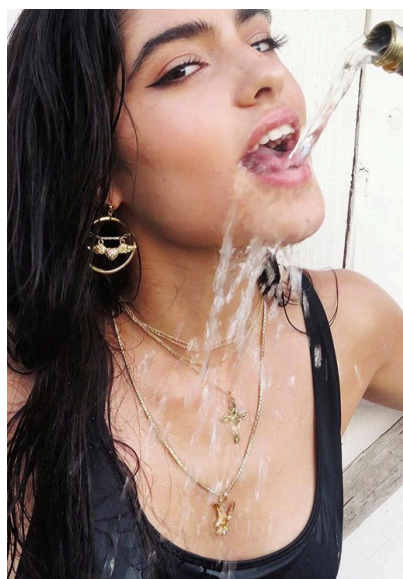


Figure 15
"Vanessa Mooney Instagram"

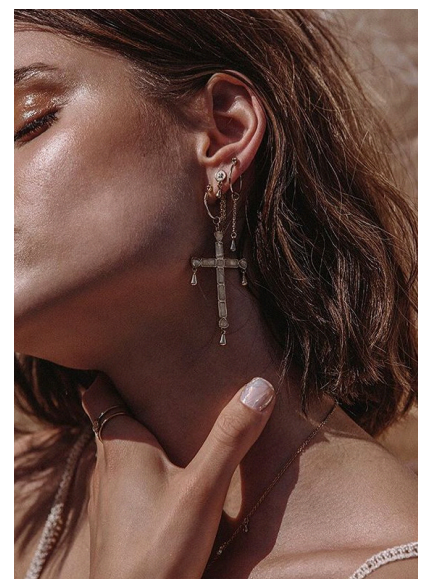


Figure 16
"Luvaj Instagram"

the cross is in the public eye and provokes dialogue. (Figure 16) If it is marketed as a trendy accessory even by non-Christians then that is the right direction to go: “The Christian community should be quick to acknowledge work done on the foundation of a Christian worldview, especially when done by a non-Christian.” (Lewis, 2013, p. 149)

5. Qualitative Research Through Interviews

Through two expert interviews, I wanted to get more in-depth background information for my research. The first interview, conducted with a graduate student of religious studies, has a more scientific connotation and the second one, conducted with a permanent wearer of the cross, is more practical with a personal, spiritual touch.

5.1 Juyani Gomez

In Juyani's opinion, there are several reasons why the Cross has turned up in fashion. “One reason may be to provoke. Specially in secular societies, religion is quite personal, private and should not be seen on the outside.”

“In this context, wearing a cross on your shirt is a provocation. Another reason could be the cultural identity of the designer - a connection to the church and Christianity.” She says that in Europe, the Cross will have a weaker or stronger symbolic meaning depending on where one is. “For instance, in Italy, the cross is not anything extraordinary, one would see it everywhere. It really depends on the context and for which context a designer is designing the clothes.” This, in itself, gives us a fundamental statement: The way in which people read a symbol, in this case, a religious one, depends on the context. How and where it is presented and the personal connection people have to it. Another argument is that the Cross might be a reinforcing statement of western culture, “Because of the increase in immigration and the growth in the Muslim population, people feel like they need to connect back to their roots and religion.” According to Juyani, what is very unique for Catholics is the crucifix. This special cross is the most well-known symbol because of the rituals in Catholicism. “If you go to a Catholic Mass you would see the priests entering with the cross, the cross at the altar and, generally, in all the paintings in a church.” In Catholic rituals, there are a lot of objects and symbols and the cross is often involved in these rituals. This is why iconography is important in the Catholic church. Wearing the Cross outside the church could be more of a fashion statement than a spiritual calling: “I may not be Christian but I'm wearing a cross.”

When nudity is involved with the cross, it is definitely seen as a provocation. The Church is very rigid about sexuality. People see crosses in terms of respect and in a more conservative way. “The cross could remind you of acting differently, because of its sacred and respect-demanding symbolism.” Provocative conduct of fashion brands will attract attention from non-religious and religious people. It is a marketing strategy. “Negative attention, is still attention”. Negative attention and provocation often leads to controversy. “The fact that you can provoke with religious symbols will not go away anytime soon.” From Juyani's perspective the church

is slowly getting used to seeing the cross outside of the context. The reaction would have been different 40 years ago. With the current Pope, the church has become quite open to these developments and you even see the Pope posting “selfies” on social media.

5.2 Christoph Ibrahim

The main point that Chris, my interview partner, makes is that his religious background comes directly from his ethnicity. In the Coptic culture, faith is everywhere and deeply rooted in the use of the language. To wear one of the many symbols of his community (i.e. the Coptic cross) is in itself, an affirmation of belonging. “It is important that it is the Coptic cross and not any other cross. It shows that I belong to the Coptic community. It’s about belonging.” To express this more permanently, most Coptic children get the cross tattooed on their arm at a very young age. Since Copts have always been a minority, they are intensely proud of their roots and heritage. For Chris, the religious significance of wearing a Cross is his liberal interpretation of religion and faith. This helps him to find answers to difficult questions in life. “Faith has also helped me time and again in my life, because it is a wonderful support on which one can rely.” The Cross is definitely not a fashion statement, but a part of his personal identity. (Figure 17 & 18)



Figure 17
“Christoph’s Coptic Tattoo”



Figure 18
“Christoph’s Coptic Necklaces”

6. Conclusion

The world around us, our social environment and everything that happens in it, influences our self-perception and the way we dress and present ourselves. The fact that the cross has reappeared in fashion and in public is no exception. For various reasons, religious accessories always have a special attractiveness for the buyer. But for me, it remains unclear why they are really worn. For some people it is a clear religious message, while for others it is simply a fashion statement. Just follow the trend. Whether you want to provoke, demonstrate openness or express a religious meaning, it seems important to me to know, understand and respect the underlying, respective cultural and religious background. For believers in every religion, symbols, images and accessories offer the possibility to identify with their faith - especially on a visual level. This supports and promotes cultural and religious pride. For others, these symbols are just costume jewellery and decoration. And for some, wearing these symbols may actually be a rebellious protest against the established institutions and systems. Culture and religion play an important role in today's western society, which is characterised, above all, by individualism and diversity. Culture and religion protect individuality through rituals and symbols. But self-expression, manifested through the wearing of religious symbols, can also lead to great provocation and tension. Nevertheless, I think that no one should be restricted and limited in his style. The controversy should not be avoided. It is just very important to know for yourself what the respective symbolism means for other people. In my view, the fashion industry has a great opportunity to help with this and, intentionally or not, bring back some spirituality to all of us.

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