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Version 1.1, 12 March 2019



LDS Garments and Agency

Podcast with **Nancy Ross** (18 March 2019).

Interviewed by **Kristeen Black**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/lds-garments-and-agency/>

Kristeen Black (KB): *The form of garments has changed over time from wrist-to-ankle, single-piece, long underwear, to versions that included short sleeves and legs, to the two-piece style that are common today. One of the most difficult aspects of studying garments is that talking about them is a transgressive act. Today, join us as we talk about garments. I'm here with Dr [Nancy Ross](#), Assistant Professor at Dixie State University in St George, Utah. Welcome.*

Nancy Ross (NR): Thank you. I'm really glad to be here.

KB: *So, let's talk about garments.*

NR: So I should first probably begin by explaining what garments are. Sometimes they're referred to as "Mormon magic underwear", by popular media. And that's a bit of a tricky thing for Mormons, definitely. That's like super-offensive. But they are religious underwear that committed Mormons wear, night and day, for their whole lives.

KB: *What do you mean by a committed Mormon?*

NR: So Mormon's have So you can go to church on a Sunday if you're a Mormon . . . and they recently shortened it to two hours and . . .

KB: *Because it used to be three!*

NR: Right. The whole Mormon world is celebrating! But in addition to Sunday worship there are also opportunities for further worship or deeper worship, or deeper commitment. And those happen in LDS temples. So when people talk about the Mormon Church, they're typically talking about the Church of

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Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Or I'm going to use the shorthand LDS church. And there are a number of LDS temples throughout the world. They're generally very fancy looking buildings. And only committed Mormons can go inside them. And inside they make kind-of further and deeper commitments to their faith, and to God, through a number of different ceremonies – typically through the initiatory ceremony and the endowment ceremony. And in the initiatory ceremony Mormons receive garments. And that's kind-of the starting point for wearing them for the rest of their lives.

KB: *OK. And at what age do they become committed Mormons, usually?*

NR: So typically Mormons go . . . we talk about it as “going to the temple for the first time”. And that often happens just prior to young adult Mormons going on a Mission, typically maybe aged eighteen or nineteen. Or it happens just prior to marriage.

KB: *OK. For both men and women?*

NR: For both men and women.

KB: *And so not every Mormon would be committed in this sense, is that right?*

NR: Correct. Many adult Mormons are. But not everybody does this in quite the same way. I have some adult Mormon women friends in their late thirties and forties who have chosen never to make this deeper commitment. I think that there are aspects about the commitment that make them feel uncomfortable.

KB: *So talk about that a little bit about why it's such a transgression to talk about garments.*

NR: So everything that is associated with the Temple is Mormons would say it's sacred, not secret. But it's also secret.

KB: *It is also pretty secret! (Laughs)*

NR: And so the idea is that something is so sacred that you aren't supposed to talk about it. And so Mormon Temple ceremonies definitely fall into that category. You are supposed to experience them with your bodies, but you don't necessarily discuss in great detail their meaning. Even in Mormon circles I certainly have never been, or haven't often been, part of discussions with highly committed Mormons about the meaning of temple ceremonies. But it's something you're supposed to do. And then, garments become the kind-of evidence, or the daily reminder, that you have made that deeper

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commitment to the LDS Church.

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KB: *OK. And in your work . . . It's a qualitative study. And it's a questionnaire. And you really. . . . It seemed like you were pushing on the idea of identity.*

NR: Yes. So I've a co-author on this particular study. Her name is Jessica Finnegan. And what happened is that at the time that we decided to do this study Jessica and I were both committed Mormons at that time, but struggling with the practice of wearing garments. We were both involved in Mormon feminist circles – Yes “the thing”! And garments often came up as a topic of discussion.

(5:00) This taboo topic came up as a topic of discussion within Mormon circles which are prone to talking about the things you were not supposed to talk about. And we felt that in order to understand our experiences and our frustrations better that we wanted to study the problem. And so we decided that it would be difficult to interview participants to be interviewed about garments – because that seems very awkward, and kind-of inappropriate, particularly in a Mormon context – but that rather we would set out a survey and that people could participate in the survey anonymously and tell us what their garments meant to them. We collected a lot of demographic data. We asked people about their Mormon belief, if they agreed or disagreed with particular statements. We asked them a lot of questions about garments and how they felt about their bodies: what did it feel like to wear garments? What did their garments mean to them? And how they engaged in a practice of wearing garments. This just wasn't a very open conversation at that time, beyond my Mormon feminist circles. And I just really needed to know. I was really struggling with issues of faith and the practice of wearing garments. And we just needed to understand. . . . I just needed to understand if it was just me.

KB: *OK. So you mentioned in your work this word friction. And it sounds like there was a spiritual friction for you.*

NR: Yes.

KB: *And you also mention it as a difficult experience for many women especially. Talk a little bit about that.*

NR: So in the Sociology of Religion there are a number of frameworks that we often use to describe particular women's' experiences and gender traditional religions. Agency is a very common one, I've used agency. But also embodiment. And embodiment is also something that's discussed quite a lot in scholarship of religion and so forth, these days. And I'm still relatively new to embodiment. Agency is

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something I've used more. But as I understand it, a framework of embodiment – or the theory of embodiment – it's the idea that our bodies can produce religious knowledge, or knowledge about religion and so through the life cycle and our practice of religion.

KB: *Something like a [Geertz](#) type of experience, here?*

NR: A little bit.

KB: *OK.*

NR: And really, also I think that our bodies interact with . . . you know, even going back like [Judith Butler](#)

KB: *Oh, I see.*

NR: You know, our bodies perform religion and our performances aren't necessarily conscious and super-intentional. It's just, like, the stuff of life: what we do unconsciously. And for Mormons who come to our garments, it's just, like, what you do. It's your underwear. It's what you do. You just put them on. And so, over time, this particular practice was difficult. Initially when I first went through the temple and received garments it was prior to my being married. I was twenty-three. I was a grad-student. And I knew that there was a certain weirdness about the practice. But I was framing it in my mind, like, "This is what it means to be an adult in my community." And so, at 23, and being unmarried, I hadn't really felt like a full adult in my community. Does that make sense? And I felt like by going to the temple in preparation for a marriage, by receiving and then wearing garments daily that I was becoming a fully-fledged and recognised adult in my community. Making this deeper commitment, and then by wearing the garment day and night represented that commitment. And I was ok with that. That wasn't something that initially bothered me. There were some initial discomforts. I always felt like my garments were trying to climb out of my neck-hole from my shirts, and I always felt like that. But initially, it was just fine. Like, "This is what it means to be an adult in my community. This is its own coming-of-age sort-of ritual. This is what it is." And I was ok with that for a long time. But then, when I became pregnant with my first child, my body changed shape in very dramatic ways. I am short person and so my body became very round, very quickly. And the garments that I had did not easily accommodate, or created additional discomforts for my body (10:00). And so there are pregnancy and maternity garments. There are nursing garments that are supposed to help facilitate changes in the shape of women's bodies. But many Mormon women acknowledge that

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maternity garments and nursing garments do not do this very well. They are not very accommodating of change in women's bodies. And so I go through this change, I have an emergency caesarean and I'm in the hospital for a while and I'm trying to figure out how to manage the waistband of my garment bottoms with my caesarean scar. And just . . . the stuff of life and the stuff of many women's lifespans. And then, after my first pregnancy through the process of nursing, and then getting pregnant with the second child, and going through more dramatic changes in the body. And then having, at the end of that, two very tiny children and not handling that especially well. And feeling kind-of depressed, but also feeling like I've been through this big thing and my body has changed. And this practice that was once ok and it was fine . . .

KB: *The practice of wearing a garment?*

NR: The practice of wearing garments. It was fine. I understood it in a particular cerebral way, and that largely worked. It was ok. Then it became less ok. It became trickier. I don't know if this falls into the category of too much information . . .

KB: (Laughs).

NR: So you can just let me know. But some Mormons feel like you have to wear the garment underneath your bra. And that can make nursing an infant very difficult. Because if you're trying to get access to your breast to feed your child and you're suddenly having to sort out not one or two layers of clothing . . .

KB: *But several!*

NR: Like a whole raft of layers of clothing! That quickly gets cumbersome. And if you spend your life breastfeeding, which you do if you breastfeed an infant, that's a lot of difficulty. And a lot of, like, wrestling with your clothing. I changed my practice so that I wasn't wearing garments under but that felt a little bit scandalous.

KB: *Still? Yeah.*

NR: To me. And other women would say that that was fine. But that was not necessarily presented to me as being fine. Because I had understood that I had to wear the garment against my skin only. So anyway . . . Lots of information about Nancy's garments! So this practice that was initially fine, understood in a particular context and it made sense to me. It's just that as my body changed and as my

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need to interact with my body changed, particularly through like the practice of nursing and just growing into a very different shape. Suddenly that didn't work well. And suddenly things like waistbands became very uncomfortable and just too much effort. And endless tucking. You know, I was just always trying to like re-tuck in my underwear. And that became very frustrating. And so – sorry this is a long way to say this – that's part of my embodied experience of my garments. Where initially it was ok and I felt like this was in harmony with my religious beliefs. “Yes, it was fine for God to require this of me”, as I believed the time. But then, the garment represents LDS temples and they represent covenants that Mormons make in LDS temples; covenants of commitment to God and church. And so the garments represent . . . they're like an extension of LDS temples, they're an extension of a particular kind of belief in God, and commitment to God. And so, as that symbol became more and more difficult to manage in my life, that's where this – sorry, back to your friction comment – that's where this friction was really coming from. Literally, there was more friction with my body that was still trying to figure out . . . post-pregnancy I was still trying to figure out what this new shape of my stretched-out body was like. And my new kind-of stretched-out and nursing body did not accommodate garments very well, like my pre-pregnancy and nursing body had. And so this daily everyday practice simply became very difficult. At the same time I had committed to wearing these day and night for the rest of my life. And I felt very committed to my religious belief and I didn't feel like I could really do anything. I felt a little bit trapped in this particular practice (15:00). So that's when we start writing papers about Mormon feminism, and we're complaining about our garments, and we thought “Let's study this. Let's figure out if other women are experiencing the things that we are experiencing.” And we figured that a survey is the best way to do this for us so we go through an [IRB](#) process and write this survey. And when we put this survey out on line – we used a [snowball sampling](#) method – which we realise has some problems in terms, if you're trying to create a representative sample. We had determined that this would not be a representative sample, but would give us some data about people's experiences of how they felt. And we actually got more than four-and-a-half thousand responses.

KB: *Which is an amazing number!*

NR: Not a small number. It's more data than you can analyse easily, that's for sure!

KB: *Right.*

NR: And it turned out that a lot of people had very different experiences with their garment. And in a sense, it was comforting to find out there were many women who had had far worse experiences than

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Jessica and I had had! But also, there seemed to be people that had problems and seemed to be people that didn't have problems. And there seemed to be people who were just fine with the practice and it was working for them very well in their lives, where there was no friction with body and belief. And there were other people, like me, who were really struggling. There were other people who had stopped wearing their garments. Garments had become, for one reason or another, such a really big issue. One thing we kind-of saw in the data was that . . . ok so garments largely look like men's underwear. So if you think of men's underwear as like a T-shirt and some boxer shorts, garments are white versions of those with some special, sacred LDS temple markings.

KB: *So they're not the full-body coverage?*

NR: No, they're not the full-body covering. That wouldn't work in my desert location! But then, for women, it's like a cap sleeve shirt with, like, shorts.

KB: *Knee-length shorts?*

NR: Yes, knee-length shorts. And what we found is that for many men . . . their garments look like the kind of underwear that they would wear, even if they weren't Mormons, and hadn't been through the temple.

NR: *Nothing foreign to them.*

NR: Right – the markings and the requirement, but not fundamentally different. But for women, there were very different issues because women's bodies change through your lifespan, in the way that men's bodies do not change. And women's garments don't look like women's underwear. You know if I were to identify like regular standard secular women's underwear as like a camisole and panties, this was a lot more fabric and a lot more covering. Women's garments, until very recently, were edged with very itchy lace all over. That's also very visible, because it creates a very distinct raised line that is visible through outer layers of clothing. And so our data really gets us into what people's garments meant to them, and also: how are garments functioning in Mormon community? What do garments mean? What are people's experiences with their garments? How do their garments make them feel? How do garments impact on sexual relationships and marriage relationships? And we just asked a whole raft of questions. And then we were hugely surprised when people seemed really eager to answer these questions. Because it seemed like this might be too taboo. But when we asked the questions, an overwhelming number of people were willing to answer. And so we were able to get a lot of really

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good data. Which was pretty neat from our research point of view.

KB: *Right. So it kind-of sounds like – and I know that people will be putting these pieces together themselves already – is that in a patriarchal society, designed by men, that really police women's bodies in every way already, it's not a big surprise that they would be designing underwear for them without their bodies – without especially their sexualised bodies – in mind. So is that something that a lot of the response talked about directly? Or is that just kind-of an implied thing, that you can kind-of infer?*

NR: No, a lot of respondents talked about body issues very directly. **(20:00)** And so I would say, first of all, that the data is data-poolooza, and we're still trying to pick out all of the meaningful, or the most meaningful elements of this data! But one thing is clear. Very loosely, about half of women experience their garments as interfering with their sexual relationship with their spouses. About half of women feel as though – it's really divided half and half. Half of the women that we surveyed feel that it does impact their sexual relationships and half feel that it doesn't. And so that's a pretty tidy divide. Many men reported that . . . not that they felt that their own garments were unattractive, necessarily, but they reported that their wives wearing garments put them off sex. They were unattractive. And that created a problem in their intimate relationships. And so that was really interesting, that men weren't really concerned about how they looked in their garments, but they were very concerned about how their wives looked in their garments! We didn't really get women saying that they were concerned about the way that their husband looked in their garments. But we got a lot of women saying that garments impact the relationship they have with their bodies. So, for some of these, that was in terms of feeling sexy and attractive. For some women that was like a literal deadening of the senses. So some women felt that garments deadened their senses and prevented them from being able to feel. Some women felt that the ugliness or unattractiveness they felt from their garments had impacted their life in other ways. Some connected eating disorders with wearing garments.

KB: *Oh?*

NR: And so it's not just about sex and sexiness. It's about women's relationship with their bodies. And garments were definitely impacting women's relationships with their bodies in a variety of ways, where men's bodies didn't seem to be affected in the same ways. That's not to say that men's bodies are not impacted by garments. But largely they seem to be impacted differently. And so it's not just these different mental, emotional, perception issues. Women also have reported . . . hundreds of

women reported medical conditions that were caused or exacerbated by wearing garments. So, the

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making of garments is controlled. I can't just, you know, learn to sew one day and whip myself up garments in a fabric or cut that suits me exactly.

KB: *And you're not supposed to modify them either?*

NR: No. You're not supposed to modify them. You're supposed to wear them as you receive them. And you know, you go to Beehive Clothing and buy them. So there's a particular distributor. You go to a particular place. And there is a little bit of choice in fabric and cut, but not very much. And what women experience, then, is that some women, hundreds of women, experience yeast infections which are triggered by garments; urinary tract infections, which are triggered by garments; problems with managing menstruation. When the latest version, the two-piece version of women's garments were created I think women largely wore sanitary pads and belts. And that is not a thing I remember. I think my mom had one!

KB: (Laughs). *Yeah!*

NR: I think it was in her drawer, or something. But the form of underwear didn't really matter because managing menstruation seemed to be different. It happened differently. But today, you know, it's very common to have sanitary products with “wings”, right? And garments don't accommodate many contemporary menstrual products very well. And so that creates a kind of messiness and a problem, in addition to pregnancy and nursing. So other women reported additional auto-immune disorders or various disorders that were impacted by the wearing of garments. Some women overheated very quickly as a result of wearing garments. Because again this isn't like, “Well you don't wear a camisole if you don't want to wear a camisole.” You have to wear the additional layer on top. And that can lead to other layers. And that can be difficult. I live in a desert. Wearing garments in the desert is very difficult.

KB: *It's uncomfortable. (25:00) So I'm hearing that the friction is happening, then, on another level. We need to kind-of reinforce this idea, maybe remind Listeners that there's this idea of gender being eternal within Mormonism.*

NR: Yes.

KB: *So it's really a physical, embodied religion in that sense. So when you're having this problem with a gendered body wearing religious symbols and both are supposed to be eternal. . . . Am I reading that right? That that's how this spiritual friction comes into play?*

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NR: So the physical issues can become sources of spiritual friction. Because if God, and your promises to God, and your relationship to God are somehow embedded or represented in the garment, then physical friction with the garment, or medical problems, or difficulty with menstruation, or pregnancy, or nursing, or whatever that is, all those problems can then create a feeling of disconnection from God. So if you are beginning to resent the garment and having to wear the garment, having committed to wearing the garment, then what can sneak in there is a feeling like, “I don't like that God has required me to do this. I'm feeling resentful toward God, or my faith, or my church for this to have happened.” And so those symbols, then, are not positive reinforcements of commitment and identity, but rather they can transform into something negative. And there are real disconnects between people who are like, “No. Garments is a beautiful practice. I feel connected to God”, which is what many people said. “I feel reminded of the temple, and the temple is this very special and sacred place. And that's a beautiful thing in my life. And so garments are a beautiful thing in my life. I don't have physical problems wearing them.” There's a real disconnect between Mormons who feel that way about the garment, and then Mormons who are like, “This is a disaster. And it's not only a disaster for me physically, it has really begun to impact my faith.” Because through the difficulty of wearing the garment, it introduced faith difficulty as well. The physical friction becomes the religious or spiritual or faith friction.

KB: *And a cultural friction?*

NR: Yes. Because if you take them off, yes it's your underwear and you want to say, “Well who's looking at underwear?”

KB: (Laughs). *Well . . .*

NR: But in Mormon communities these garment lines are very visible and expected. And it's an easy way to check. Like, if I were to be in a church setting and I would notice that the woman sitting next to me . . . that she didn't have the same garment line as everyone else. I would know that. . . “Was something wrong?” And that maybe she had broken her covenant to continue to wear the garment? Or that she had done something in her life that had led the bishop to tell her that she had to stop wearing garments. Because a garment is a symbol of the “in group” of Mormonism. The inner group of very committed individuals.

KB: *And Mormons use the word “worthiness”. So when you said something was wrong there, maybe that would be what would come to mind: “She's not as worthy”.*

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NR: Right. Mormons meet with their bishop for what we call “temple recommend interviews” to gain access to the temple, which is a special and sacred thing. But they have to be living the tenets of Mormonism in order to be able to do that. And to verify that they are doing that they have to have what we call a temple recommend interview. And one of the questions in the temple recommend interview is about whether or not you are wearing garments night and day as instructed in the temple. And so you can't, then, continue to participate in the inner group of Mormons if you're not wearing your garments. And so garments are connected . . . and there are other things that happen. For example, if you are not wearing your garments you may not be able to go to your child's temple wedding. Or a friend or other family member's temple wedding. And that can create real isolation. To be wearing your garments is to be more included.

KB: *So it's not just a hierarchy in a culture. It's also a hierarchy in the religion itself and it's tied to your salvation.*

NR: Yes. Right. Because temples are spaces that reflect and represent the eternities and, to a certain degree, the afterlife in Mormonism. And wearing garments connects people to that sense of salvation and afterlife (30:00). And so not wearing your garments is, I think, for many Mormons, putting themselves in spiritual jeopardy, as well as a community jeopardy, or potential loss of community status, and so there is so much pressure in Mormon communities for people to wear garments – even though clearly, as our survey shows, there are many Mormons who struggle with this practice.

KB: *Right. So not having that visible line, that visible emblem of belief, carries a lot of baggage with it.*

NR: Yes.

KB: *So in your presentation you talked a little bit about the circular thing of going to the temple, and being tied to family, and the garments, and it was kind-of self-reflective . . . Can you just kind-of mention that again?*

NR: Sure. Which is that Mormons believe that families can be together forever. And it is the temple ceremonies that people go through that bind them - or Mormons use the term sealing: families are sealed together forever. And then garments are a part of that reminding. And part of that ongoing assurance of salvation. And then, to stop wearing that practice is to put that in jeopardy. Was that what you were . . . ?

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KB: *Yeah. That was what I was wondering. What does put in jeopardy . . . ? So it's not just being able to go to the temple that's in jeopardy. It's this unseen layer of . . .*

NR: And so many Mormons feel that maybe if they don't wear their garments or if they stop wearing their garments that they won't be with their family in heaven after they die. And that is a big weight of expectation.

KB: *Yeah.*

NR: Where people clearly expressed a loss of agency. They felt that they then couldn't make a choice to either create an adaptation for themselves that worked – maybe that would be to wear those sometimes, but not at other times – but there was a real resistance to feeling empowered to adapt a practice of garments that would suit their own needs. Rather, that they felt compelled to wear their garments in the way that the community expected them to. And that was necessary for salvation in the Mormon context.

KB: *Right. So the sense of identity. Is that identity within yourself, identity within your community and identity of how you relate to God in the eternity?*

NR: Yes.

KB: *That's pretty huge.*

NR: It's pretty huge. And you have to do it every day. And it's something that connects. But then in many ways that's part of the beauty of garments. That you're connected to salvation through your underwear.

KB: *It's something so everyday.*

NR: So ordinary. And I think that for good reason many Mormons find a lot of beauty in that practice.

KB: *And I think that's what made me think of Geertz. Especially like (audio unclear), unless you been in that, then you don't know what that means. It's not just that you decide to not to wear the camisole top one day. That, literally, taking that off is taking off a lot more than just a piece of material.*

NR: Right. Garments also represent ideas of spiritual or physical protection. So it's the sense that like God is watching over you, and people can interpret that more or less literally. But it's the sense that

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God is with you and God is watching over you that's manifest in the garment. You know, it is both beautiful and troubling. Right? And so people experience this as kind-of beautiful or troubling.

KB: *Religion is kind-of that way.*

NR: Right. Religion is kind-of that way. So it was just a very interesting and complex thing to study, as it turns out that when you imbue religious ideas into people's underwear, that it just gets into the everyday messy stuff of lives.

KB: *A fascinating topic, and I think there's a lot more that you will no doubt come out with as you continue to go through the surveys. We look forward to reading more about this. Do you have anything published right now that is accessible?*

NR: No we don't. We're working on . . . Jessica and I figured that garments is a very sexy topic. And so we're trying to shoot for a higher tier of journal than we would normally go for, in the hopes of capturing somebody's imagination and wanting to know about Mormon magic underwear!

KB: *OK. So nothing yet, but we'll look for that on the horizon. (35:00) And in the meantime, we wish you luck. And thank you for meeting with us today.*

NR: Thank you very much.

ADDITIONAL AUDIO

KB: *So what you said earlier in your presentation that I found really fascinating was this idea that within the doctrine – and I use that word because Mormon's are really tied to the written word, and written instructions – the doctrine around garments is really kind-of vague.*

NR: Yes.

KB: *And it allows for some type of experimentation or personal interpretation and maybe adaptation.*

NR: Yes. So this is the tricky thing, I think there's one of . . . at least for the paper that I gave earlier, one of the bigger findings which is that: yes, there is technically room for adaptation; for you and God to figure out an adaptation that is appropriate and then to adopt that adaptation in good faith. But in

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practice, things are little trickier than that. When we looked at the data, we saw very few people feeling empowered to make adaptations that suited their needs. We saw instead, more people feeling obligated to wear the garment night and day in a more rigid way. And when we asked people for instance - after you maybe go swimming or go to the gym or something, how quickly do you put your garments back on? I'm going to pull out a rough statistic here: seventy percent of people said that they either put them on within 10 minutes of finishing the activity, or within the hour. And there were very few people who waited longer than that. And so there is a sense, and I'm wondering if this shows up in other kinds of conservative cultural issues – where we have an absence of dialogue, and discourse, and discussion, and certainly a lack of open discussion, and some very taboo topics – that the community ends up defaulting to the rules are the most strict interpretation of the rules. And even if there is, yes, technically, flexibility in the instruction, that that flexibility is never – or rarely – referenced in practice. And many people do not feel empowered to adapt in a way that technically the rules allow for. But in real life practice, when people ever talk about this – which is rare – the rules seem much more hard and fast.

KB: *So they err on the side of caution, rather than experiment.*

NR: Right. And that's largely, then, what the community comes to expect. The community expects that people who have been through the temple are wearing the garments. And that kind-of in-group policing, I think, among other things, makes it difficult to find a greater space for experimentation and adaptation. The fact that we don't talk about it makes it very difficult for people to find space for experimentation and adaptation. Because nobody's talking about it. Nobody's frequently saying, "Oh yeah. Well, you need to wear your garments, but if you're having your period and it's really not going well, just don't worry about it." Or, "If you have a yeast infection, give it a break for a few days." People are not having those easy kinds of conversation. I wonder if that's maybe similar to the way in which lots of conservative cultures insist on abstinence but refuse to talk about sex and sexuality.

KB: *Right.*

NR: So we default to a very conservative – you shouldn't be kissing – very strict and conservative rules.

KB: *And other ways that sexuality and the body is policed.*

NR: Right. And that's, I feel, an idea that is really kind-of evolving and developing out of this survey,

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is that an absence of discourse and a very conservative community – especially surrounding something like the body – doesn't create flexibility, it creates rigidity. And that rigidity creates a lot of problems.

KB: *And this is one of these paradoxes that I see with Mormonism, is that they do have this prophetic bent that they can be very experimental, and very willing to adapt in one area. But then they're really rigid, and follow the rules – not just a spirit of the law, but the letter of the law. And it's this paradox of, how do you hold the tension there of that? And it seems like garments is one of those areas that's a very material thing, in every sense of the word, that you can bring up to think about that. Is that . . . ?*

NR: I would absolutely agree with that. And you know, if you're wearing your garments or if you're not wearing your garments those are very measurable things (5:00). And you know, within Mormonism, we often . . . or fringes of Mormonism critique the “check-boxiness” of Mormonism: there's a list of things and you're just going to do them. And it's very clear to say you are wearing them or you are not wearing them. And as Mormons I think we like that. We like the clearness of some rules and expectations. And therefore we default to that very literal interpretation, without there necessarily being a lot of grace for other challenges. It's also true that men make the rules on garments. And I'm not sure that there are a lot of Mormon men – who struggle to say words like sex in public – who are interviewing women about yeast infection!

KB: *Right!* (Laughs).

NR: And the problems they're experiencing during menstruation and pregnancy and nursing. And so it's like, our taboo around other things to do with bodies creates a knock-on effect of issues. We've just got to learn to talk about bodies, and maybe that would resolve some issues here.

KB: *Yes. Maybe that would help. I had one other thought about this idea of women's bodies and men wanting to police them in ways that they don't police their own bodies. So is there something that you found . . . ? I think maybe the word that kind-of comes up that you mentioned before was covenant. And that God is a very rule-making God. But since God is male, and males make the rules, how does this idea of covenant and rules fit together with policing bodies, especially women's bodies?*

NR: So that's tricky. So Mormon men and Mormon women both When we asked people, “What do your garments mean to you?” the most common response was that they represent covenant. And men said that, and women said that.

KB: *And by that you mean promises made between you and God?*

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NR: Yes. Related to keeping commandments, following rules, and commitment to the LDS Church. And so when people were talking about covenants that wasn't necessarily . . . men and women didn't have different responses there. They were like, they were responding: "My garments are evocative of my covenants" or "They are a reminder of my covenant." They were responding in fairly similar ways and largely in ways that they had been taught to respond, and taught, "This is what garments are about. Garments are about covenants." But this extra issue it seems, you know. . . . The issue had been why women's bodies are policed extra, or end up being policed extra? I mean, I think historically, you know, within the rise of the evangelical movement and purity culture of the eighties and nineties, Mormonism latched onto that as well. And – not that I don't think maybe women's bodies weren't policed before then – but then this kind of hyper-focus on women and girls and teenage girls as like the gatekeepers of sexuality, and really the ones to kind-of make or break this particular covenant to be chaste. Abstinence before marriage, and chaste in marriage, becomes then a responsibility of women. And so many of the issues with evangelical purity culture find their way into Mormonism and end up being wrapped up with garments as well.

KB: Yes.

NR: There's a really good book that just came out called [Pure](#), and it has a much longer title.

KB: *Oh right.*

NR: I think by [Linda Kay Klein](#), about the purity movement. And so much of what she said really resonated with mine and other Mormon women's experiences of feeling like our bodies were very heavily policed, and that garments were another way to do that. For women's garments, the lace – men's garments don't have lace on them, and there are some forms of women's garments that no longer have lace but that's a very, very recent change – but it makes the garment extra-visible for women, somehow. So it's easier to notice or not notice. And that's just one more way that women's bodies end up being extra-policed. By this extra bit of fabric, which is probably meant to make them look more feminine but really makes them more visible through multiple layers of clothing. And then everyone is very clear about which women are wearing garments (10:00). Where if a man is wearing a suit and tie, maybe that's a trickier thing to see through all those layers. Yeah.

KB: *Right. Interesting ok. Well thanks for clarifying that. Because it seems to be a thing that Mormonism gets caught up in in ways that other religions don't. I think especially having an embodied male God.*

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NR: Yeah. And I think that there are still elements of that being pressed out.

KB: *Even though they have a heavenly Mother and that's becoming more prominent right now, there's still this sense of this male God figure.*

NR: Oh yeah. I mean I think that there would be some disagreement, among Mormons, as to whether Heavenly Mother was actually God or not God. And what the body of Heavenly Mother was like, or what the role of Heavenly Mother was like. And that's largely . . . She exists in name only. You know. It's largely a mystery.

KB: *So is it another way that Mormon theology is a little bit lacking on, maybe?*

NR: Yes.

KB: *Alright. OK. Thank you. I appreciate your time.*

NR: No, thank you.

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