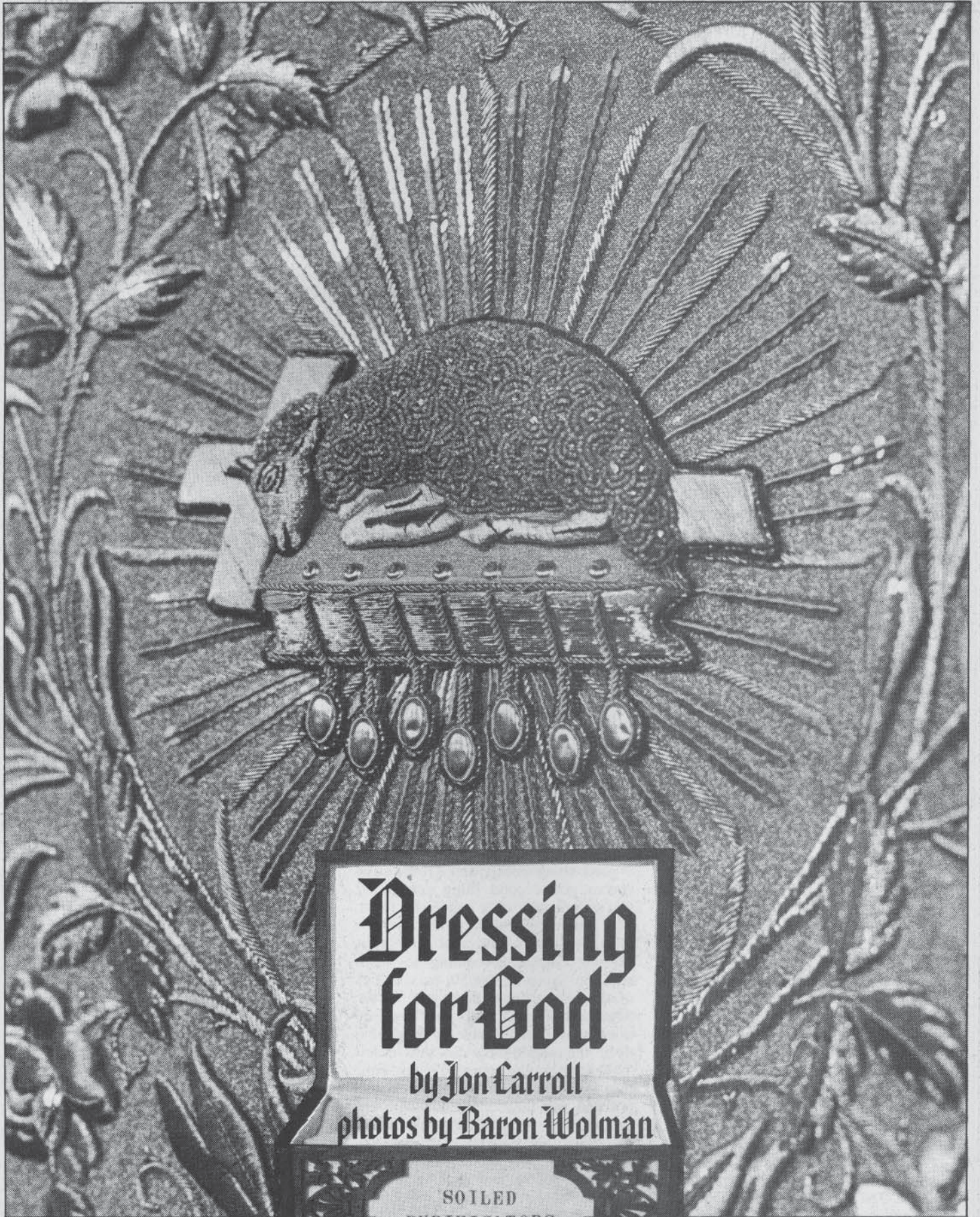


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Dressing for God

by Jon Carroll

photos by Baron Wolman

SOILED
PURIFICATORS

In the Beginning

Here are three theories. All of them may be true; none of them may be true. All of them may be partially true.

FIRST THEORY: When the religion started, it was just a group of people with the power in their eyes and the glory in their souls, walking the streets and talking to the people

peased if He's certain that as many people as possible are worshipping him in the best way they know how. The glory of God must be reflected in the glory of his followers. To that end, believers wear the fanciest raiment they can find in His presence. So He'll know.

THIRD THEORY: You're in the religion game. You know you've got

tage Dictionary alleges, "the art which purports to control or forecast natural events, effects or forces by invoking the supernatural," then organized religion is certainly a branch of magic. God is a supernatural being—in truth, a Holy Ghost. Which means that the clothes worn in His pursuit are magic clothes. Which is why we are gathered here today.



The amis

The alb

The cincture

about this new way of looking at the Lord. They dressed the way everybody else in that time and that place dressed. But power and glory are hard to achieve, and even harder to sustain. Human beings, unable to function on a purely spiritual plane, need physical reassurances. So the leaders who came later attempted to hold on to the power by imitating the clothes of the first missionaries. Maybe the power would rub off. Maybe people would believe that the power rubbed off. At first the clothes seemed old-fashioned, then they seemed archaic, then they seemed timeless. The origin was lost, but the clothes remained, sanctified by their longevity.

SECOND THEORY: God has his eye on you as well as on the sparrow, and He is a jealous Lord. He can be ap-

a good thing going, and God knows you've got a good thing going, but you're not the only game in town. The Pentecostal folks up the street are drawing pretty well, and the latest Miracle Swami is coming to town and you figure to lose 50, maybe 100, of the less staunch to the lure of the Mysterious East. And you begin to think that a little show biz might reduce the backsliding. So you invest in this dynamite purple velvet robe that makes you look about 9½ feet tall and this huge medallion with the symbols of your faith worked into the design. Not that you're materially changing your relationship to your Creator—you're just *looking* a little more holy. So the people will find it easier to believe.

If Magic is, as the American Heri-

In the Middle

In the rear of the great cathedral on the University of San Francisco campus is a light, high-ceilinged room where the vestments are kept. Everything is still there, like a millpond in summer. Voices float upward and are lost. No matter what your rational constructs about the First Mysteries are, there is an uneasy feeling that Someone is eavesdropping.

Father William Wood is over by the high wooden wardrobe under the windows. In his black turtleneck sweater and black slacks, he looks like an unusually scholarly backfield coach. He speaks diffidently, almost apologetically, as though vaguely ashamed that

(in this day and age) someone should be coming around asking about clothes. There is more important work to be done.

By way of introduction Father Wood talks about the hierarchy of vestments. "There are really three sets of vestments—one for subdeacons, one for deacons and one for priests. It used to be that a bishop in the full

had ended. This was just a hood, worn for warmth and protection."

Next comes a white linen full-length robe. "This is the alb. In the 4th Century, it was the standard undergarment worn by all citizens. We still wear it because . . . well, because the church, in this as in other things, is slow to move. Later, it was said to symbolize the gown that Christ wore.

of them, while bishops wore it straight down. But now anyone can wear it either way. We're trying to get away from that kind of action. It seems to place too much emphasis on these things which are symbolic, rather than those things which are sacred. We used to kiss every garment before we put it on, too. It was just symbolic, to remind us. But in the minds of



The stole

The chasuble (rear view)

The chasuble (front view)

liturgy would wear all three, but they're very hot and heavy. But, in essence, the same thing is worn by priests, bishops, cardinals and the Pope. . . . The vestments have been almost the same since 1570, although they were in use far before that. But in 1570, they were made the official clothing of a priest, to be used in all liturgical and sacramental functions."

He takes out a square of white cloth, puts it around his neck and ties the attached straps around his waist. "This is the amice. It was originally a hood—monks still wear it as a hood, in fact. Originally, you understand, none of the vestments had any religious significance. They were just the ordinary street clothes of the Greco-Romans in the 4th Century after Christ, when the persecutions

The alb is always white, symbolizing purity."

Father Wood takes out a white rope with small, macramed tassels. "This is the cincture, and it's worn around the waist. It's thought to symbolize girding your loins for the battle of life. The tassels can be ornamented in any way, but the ornamentation shouldn't be distracting."

Next is a long thin piece of green and gold silk, fringed at both ends. Father Wood puts it around his neck and pulls it through the cincture. "This is the stole. In the Greco-Roman days, it was worn by civic officials as a sign of authority. When it was taken over by the church, it was said to symbolize bearing the yoke of Christ. It used to be that priests wore the stole crossed in front

people who are not educated, people who are superstitious, it was looked on as a magical act."

And that's bad? "Well, there's a problem of having identified the central thing of the Church with pageantry. The pageantry tended to distract from the central Christian message—which is very closely connected with the poor."

Pageantry may be getting killed off, but it's not dead yet. The last vestment is a long, green and gold, silk and velvet tunic. "This is the chasuble. Originally, it was worn as the outer garment by the people in the streets. The ornamentation was added later. It was originally cone-shaped, but lately we've taken to wearing this style, which makes it easier to use. It dates from the 10th Century and it's

called the Roman style, though in fact it originated in Spain."

Does the color have any significance? "Yes indeed. There are five different basic colors for the chasuble, worn according to the seasons of the liturgical year. There's white, which symbolizes joy and purity and is worn for the Virgin's feasts; violet, which denotes calmness and penance, worn during Advent and Lent; green, which you see here, worn during the season of epiphany between Christmas and Lent and symbolizing inner peace; red, the color of the Holy Spirit, symbolizing life and dynamism and worn during the Pentacost; and black, which is used for burial of the dead. Actually, we also have pink vestments, worn only on the third Sunday of Advent and the fourth Sunday of Lent. It indicates that it is a time to pause and rejoice."

Now that he's got it all on, does he feel any different? "Personally, no, I don't feel any different. When I can, I don't wear vestments. They're fine for a cathedral like this, but in a small room someplace . . . you know, these vestments were originally indications of authority. When they were retained as religious, it was to denote the greater authority and power—I hate both those words—of the church. But that authority is often understood as political, and it's not. The priest is the visible representative of the presence of Christ, which is why he was supposed to stand out. But the authority is not political, it's the authority and power of service, not dominion. I like very simple robes, myself."

Redef Shalom Congregation is very different from the Roman Catholic cathedral across the bridge. It's a kind of ranch-style synagogue, all wood and glass and indoor-outdoor carpeting. Parked out front is a red Mustang with a license plate reading: RABBI. The car belongs to Rabbi Dave Davis, who is young and hip and the only rabbi in the area—"the Pope of Marin County," he calls himself occasionally, referring not only to his isolation but to the lack of ecclesiastical structure within Judaism.

In his huge, book-lined office, behind his executive-size desk, Rabbi Davis talks about the clothes he wears on Friday nights. "The origin of the clothes is very interesting. About 100 years ago, the rabbis in this country began taking on the role of the Prot-



Rabbi Davis in regalia



There was no doubt whose car it was

estant minister—visiting the sick, things like that. And they took the robe of the Protestant minister, adapting the customs of the country to Judaism. But a rabbi is basically a layman, a teacher who lately has taken on the duties of the temple ad-

ministrator. So I don't have to wear a robe."

He opens the closet next to him and takes out the black robe. "During the High Holidays, the period that begins with Rosh Hashanah and ends with Yom Kippur, we wear white robes, symbolizing purity and holiness. The rest of the year, we just wear this black robe."

He withdraws a hat from the same closet. "This is called the sarum. I don't have to wear it, either. It's based on a Middle Eastern custom, covering your head as a sign of respect for the place of worship. The Talmud says that the headcovering is a sign of piety, which is principally why the tradition has been continued. But in some Reform temples, the headcovering is no longer worn."

Last out of the closet is a fringed blue and white shawl, wider and less ornate than, but still very similar to, Father Wood's stole. "This is the tallis, and it's the only garment which is directly referred to in the Torah, the book of laws." He goes back to his desk and opens a book. "Here it is. Numbers 15:37-41: 'And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying: Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they make them throughout their generations fringes in the corners of their garments, and that they put with the fringe of each corner a thread of blue. And it shall be unto you for a fringe, that ye may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them.'"

He looks up. "The tallis is really the sign of the Jew, signifying the covenant relationship between the Jew and God. Many men wear them over a business suit. Israeli soldiers wear them when they pray. It's the universal symbol."

We crowd closer to touch the tallis, and someone observes that there are no blue threads on the corner fringes. The rabbi smiles: "Well, technically, this is not Rabbinic garb. It's not a full tallis, technically." He shrugs his shoulders.

So he really doesn't believe that his clothes are very important? "Well, it may help some people who wish the rabbi to be separate, but for me, frankly, it doesn't mean the same thing. I think people should care about each other, not about what I wear. More and more Jews feel this

way, I think. There's nothing mystical about this. Not everyone feels that way, of course. The Hassidic Jews wear the old dress of Eastern Europe because they wish to be separate. They don't wish to identify with the masses. They feel they have to keep their religious identity. Well, we want to keep our religious identity, too, but we don't feel that clothes have anything much to do with that."

So we have two young representatives of two old religions, both rationalists fighting ritual. Is science killing magic? Not at the Hare Krishna temple in San Francisco. There, in the hushed, incense-laden air, what you wear does count.

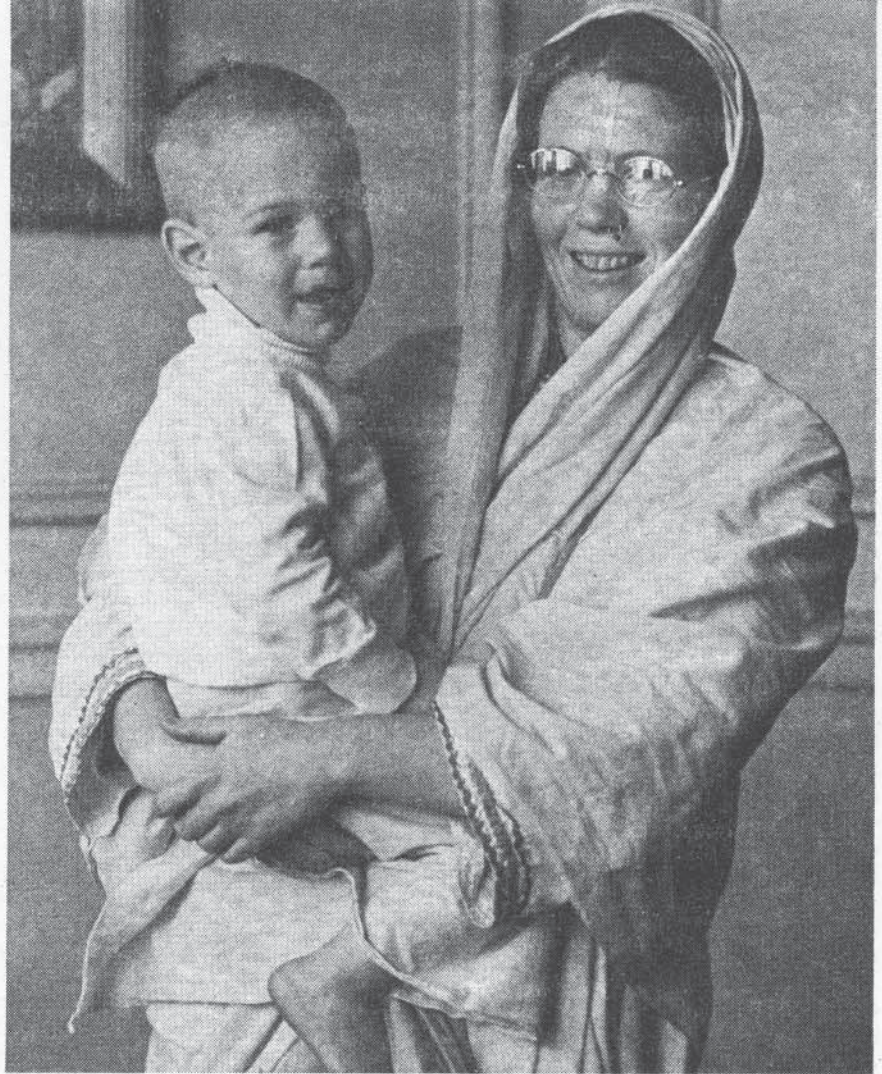
In the large room at the rear of the building, a young man, head shaved except for a topknot, scrubs the floor in utter peace. Other believers wander the halls, chanting to themselves. We are in an anteroom, where books and magazines are on display for sale. The largest of the books is *KRSNA—The Supreme Personality of The Godhead*, featuring a holograph introduction by George Harrison: "All you need is love (Krishna). Hari Bol 31/3/70."

Tulasi Devi, who serves as kind of housemother for the temple, turns over the pages of the book, looking at the pictures. She wears a yellow sari and a small nose ring with a red stone set in it. She gazes down at the illustrations of voluptuous, elaborately arrayed maidens gamboling in a Hindu arcadia. "These are the kinds of clothes they wear on the heavenly planets in the spiritual sky. These are milkmaids, spiritual beings, not material, perfect in every way. But we are living in a material world, and in order to get spiritual, we have to practice austerity and the regulated life."

For instance? "Well, the girls wear saris at all times—yellow if she's married, saffron if she's not married. Traditionally, a woman's own son couldn't even see her at all unclothed. We cover our bodies so that the men will not take their minds off spiritual realization."

And the men? "Well, in the temple room, they wear a dohti, the traditional dress. It's kind of like . . . well, it's kind of like the sari. It's a robe. But I know that up on the farm in West Virginia, the men ran around wearing nothing but loincloths." She smiles slightly.

But if a woman's body will sway



Tulasi Devi and son

a man from the course of spiritual realization, why won't a man's body sway a woman? "Well, all the women are supposed to be married. It doesn't matter much if the men go around dressed or not . . . you know?"

Can the saris and dohtis be any color? "No, they're usually yellow or saffron or rose. The colors of sunshine. Black, brown and gray aren't nice colors. They're too somber looking. And red is bad, because it's the mode of passion. Blue is bad because it's the mode of ignorance."

The dominant theme may be mystical Puritan, but Tulasi Devi does cop to it. There is power in clothing. She believes it. When her three-year-old son comes downstairs later, he's wearing a dohti. It all matters.

In the End

We could have gotten extremely ecumenical about all this, like a Unit-

ed Crusade poster—one white kid, one yellow kid, one brown kid, one black kid. Where, after all, are the Protestants? Where are the Buddhists? The Shintoists? The Satanists? The Taoists? The Zoroastrianists? Where, to be sticky about it, are the atheists? (The atheists, not believing at all, do not of course believe in the power of clothing. That's why they never wear anything that might be interpreted as religious. The great eye in the sky will note their consistency with approval. It likes a man who sticks to his lack of belief.) But the point is made: at some level, at some point, all religions have decided that clothes symbolize something. They can effect transformations, transmit holiness. Some things are more pleasing in the sight of God than others. If you're going to venture into the supernatural, you had best be dressed for the occasion. Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with thy God—and look sharp. ☺