

Wearable worship

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [April 15, 2015](#) issue



Azra Akšamija's [Flocking Mosque](#), 2008, which "creates a prayer space in the form of a rug made of little textile pieces, which can be used as slippers and hanf pillows, facilitating Islamic ritual prayer."

Years ago I was part of a new church that was meeting on Sunday evenings in the basement of a language school. The minister, Liz Myer Boulton, would show up in the late afternoon with what she called "church-in-a-box." Out of the big plastic bin that she carried around in the trunk of her car would come an altar cloth, candles, a Bible, a cross, and a cup and plate for communion. In half an hour or so, the basement would be transformed into sacred space, ready to welcome a congregation. With her box, Liz traveled light, ready to move as the spirit moved. Liz and her box could make a church almost anywhere.

Sarajevo-born artist Azra Akšamija has explored the notion of portable worship by creating "wearable mosques." Her Nomadic Mosque is a woman's suit of clothes that can be opened and unpacked to provide the wearer with a head covering, a prayer rug, and a compass to find the direction of Mecca. The wearer of Nomadic Mosque can pause anywhere to pray. Akšamija's work makes a place in the secular spaces of the world for Muslim prayer and shows a religious tradition moving through time and space, transforming the world around it and being transformed as well.

In her discussions of her wearable mosques, Akšamija often refers to the *hadith*, in which the Prophet Muhammad speaks of how the whole world is a mosque, made so by prayer and not by architecture. Her multipurpose suit of clothes is also a

reminder that a mosque is a world—a place not only for prayer, but also for learning, resting, discussing, and gathering with a community. Akšamija's wearable mosque makes Muslim devotion and Muslim life visible in a society where Islam is often misunderstood and threatened. Another of her wearable mosques, Survival Mosque, comes equipped with an American flag for the wearer to display, along with earplugs to block out the sounds of shouted insults and a cleaning solution in case someone spits on the wearer as she prays.

I learned about Azra Akšamija's work from Jo Murphy, a student who was inspired to explore forms of portable, wearable worship within her own Unitarian-Universalist tradition. For her M.Div. thesis, she created three pieces: a preaching dress covered in flowers called *Petals Shook*; a dress made of mesh and barbed wire called *Standing Enmeshed*; and a hoop skirt strung with tea lights, *The Skirt That Lit Spiral*.

The preaching dress reveals and makes beautiful the vulnerability of the preacher. When the preacher shakes, the flower petals on the dress make a sound like leaves rustling and petals fall from the dress's pockets and onto the floor. The dress made of mesh and barbed wire is the one piece in Jo's collection that is too dangerous to be wearable. But when displayed on a sculpted form, it communicates strength and steadiness in the midst of pain—"a strong figure," as Jo puts it, that stands "waiting to minister." The skirt covered in tea lights recalls the lit chalice that's central to Unitarian-Universalist worship. Jo intends it to be worn by someone who's in need of support from the community. She imagines some of the people present lighting candles, bringing illumination and hope to one among them who cannot, in that moment, find the light of hope on her own.

These works of wearable worship are also works of critique that point to what's missing, to what's made invisible by our own fears and our society's fears. In Akšamija's work, it's the graceful gestures of Muslim prayer and devotion; in Jo Murphy's work, it's the life of the body and the vulnerability and pain that human beings carry everywhere, even into sacred spaces and the work of ministry. Both artists make these hidden dimensions of our shared human life visible, beautiful, and shareable.

Both also demand a response: someone to help the wearer of Nomadic Mosque release the prayer rug folded into her clothes; someone to acknowledge the trembling of the preacher; someone to light the candles on the dress. Azra Akšamija has said that she intended her Nomadic Mosque to foster communication in two

directions—between the worshiper and God, and between the worshiper and anyone who stops to question, admire, or respond to the appearance of Muslim devotion in an unexpected place. Jo Murphy's work also invites our participation, for each piece tells a story that extends beyond the boundaries of the wearer's life to make a space for others' stories.

These works have the potential to transform our understanding of sacred space. These artists depict sacred space not as something set apart but as a place of intersection where the mosque and the world, the church and the body meet. They remind us that our religious traditions and practices are portable, even wearable, and that when we find ways to carry them in our journeys through the world, we learn over and over again that, as the Prophet taught, all the world is a mosque, a place where we might encounter God.