



7. Why Do Clergy Wear Different Clothes For Different Services? (Part 1 - What The Well-Dressed Minister Is Wearing)

The purpose of formal occupational dress is to denote both status and function of the wearer. This is true of restaurant staff, of military personnel, and of the legal profession. It is also the case with the clergy. Further, just as a soldier's battledress usually dates from the last war, and his (or, these days, her) parade uniform from the last but one, or even before, so in the learned professions it can be demonstrated that formal costume is that of a past age, fossilised.

The first essential for an ordained minister in most circumstances is that he or she should be readily identifiable as such. It is a requirement of Canon Law that a person in Holy Orders should dress soberly in clothing distinct from that of a member of the laity. This until relatively recently meant dressing in dark clothing, with stock (the black 'shirt-front' worn by clergymen) and the clerical collar. The collar was originally the white neck-cloth worn by respectable persons, wound tightly round the neck with the two ends folded neatly down at the front. The sub-text of this garment was essentially the same as the Chinese mandarin's long fingernails: 'This person does not do manual work'.

To keep the neck-cloth clean involved heavy laundry bills and with the smoky nineteenth century, it was modified. The folded-down ends were detached and became the 'bands' or white tabs worn by advocates and Methodist and other Free Church ministers when in Court or Church respectively.

The cloth round the neck became a simple strip of linen, fastening at the back. Originally used by Roman Catholic priests, it was adopted first by extreme Anglo-Catholics in a show of solidarity, and later by all English clergy. The height of the collar used to, and perhaps still does, denote the brand of churchmanship of the individual wearing it. Laundry is still expensive, and the clerical collar has now evolved into a small white tab, which can be slotted into the opening of a button-down collar on a black or other 'sober' shirt.

The working dress of the cleric is the cassock. This, in origin, is simply the long dark gown worn by a respectable man in mediaeval or Tudor times. It was not distinctive of clergy only, and was what the wearer would use going about his day-to-day business in a town. One could not wear it when riding a horse, or indeed a bicycle, and so the rules of clerical dress were relaxed to permit the wearing of other clothing, providing it was 'sober' and

distinctive from lay dress. Hence the 'clerical grey' suit, stock or shirt, and collar. Now the collar is beginning to disappear, and some clergy are beginning to wear ordinary collar and tie, and a silver cross in the buttonhole.

The cassock is worn in church as part of 'choir dress', i.e. for services at which the wearer is not participating in an active role at a sacrament. So choir dress is used at Morning and Evening Prayer, and at Funerals. The two former derive from the monastic Offices, and as such are non sacramental; the latter, as evolved at the Reformation, was deliberately distinguished from the 'Popish' Requiem. An ordained minister wears the cassock, surplice, academic hood if worn, and the tippet or black preaching scarf. There was much discussion after the revival of the office of Reader in the Church of England as to what dress would be appropriate for them; eventually it was decided that they should wear choir dress with a distinctive blue scarf.

The surplice is a very full white garment worn over the cassock, reaching to halfway down the lower leg. It originated in Northern Europe as the 'super-pelisse', the garment worn over everything else in a climate where the white alb or liturgical garment would be insufficient.

White, as the symbol of purity and holiness, is what the officiant would wear at mass; the surplice is the only garment so far mentioned which qualifies as a traditional liturgical vestment. For this reason, it was something which the extreme Puritans refused to wear on principle, even to celebrate Communion. This issue caused a great deal of dissension in the Church of England at the time of the Reformation and for a century after.

Archbishop Laud's insistence on the wearing of the surplice, and his strict enforcement of clerical discipline, helped to provoke the English Civil War. Many Free Church ministers wear the 'Geneva gown', similar to that of advocates and teachers, to indicate that they do not regard themselves as members of a separate priestly order.