

Article

Invisible Dress: Weaving a Theology of Fashion

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Abstract: This article establishes the framework for a (Christian) theology of fashion, the development of which comes under a research project set up between Luxembourg (Luxembourg School of Religion & Society) and Paris (Collège des Bernardins). The text is structured around three areas: the first reveals how theology can accommodate in its field of thought both the idea of dress (also viewed in terms of its materiality) and the way in which modern society experiments with it: fashion. For as much as theological discourse, particularly Christian, might have shown itself to be critical regarding modern day fashion, it has nevertheless failed to come up with any real theological reflection on the subject. The second area aims to explore responsible ethics for fashion. Often moralising, the attitude of Christian theology needs to give way to an ethical and—vitaly—ecological analysis of the effects of fashion in today’s world. Clothing might still cover people’s bodies, but the issue is not restricted to an individual moral point of view, and extends to the social rules of an ethic that is also one of environmental responsibility. Finally, the totally new perspective that I adopt for outlining these areas requires the aesthetics of dress and fashion to be addressed from a theological point of view. For all its rich history, theological aesthetics has hardly ever concerned itself with developing an aesthetic discourse for dress and fashion, other than for liturgical and religious attire. Once these three new research perspectives have been discussed, I want to outline another field of study, in itself extremely fertile: a treasure trove of metaphors and analogies that would be very useful in theological thinking, adding to its inventory terms originating in the uncovering and stripping away of old ways of thinking that no longer convey in contemporary language the mystery that it is meant to clothe.

Keywords: fashion; dress; aesthetics; philosophy of fashion; Christian theology; religions

1. Theology and Fashion

This article offers some conditions or landmarks¹ for a theology of dress and fashion, articulating the dialogue between the field of dress and fashion and religious sciences and Christian theology². In this perspective, the present text engages some theological and methodological perspectives to develop research by elaborating a Christian theological understanding of fashion and dress. Fashion is understood in the paper as the modern system of wearing clothes in a capitalistic society (Simmel 2012), even though fashion studies demonstrate how complex the universe of dress and fashion is (Kawamura 2005, 2011; Lehnert 2013; Miller-Spillman et al. 2012; Levy and Quemin 2011).

Fashion scholarship has approached the subject of dress via, for example, history, anthropology and sociology, while the religious sciences, and theology in particular, have treated this important area

¹ The word exploration here reminds an important theological and seminal work of the Marie-Dominique Chenu’s *Jalons pour une théologie du laïc* (Chenu 1953). As a matter of fact, Chenu himself used sometimes the word « Jalons» (landmark) in order to elaborate his theological thoughts.

² The two-year research seminar entitled “Revêtir l’invisible: la religion habillée” has as its objective an analysis of the link between fashion and religious thinking and the identification of a relationship—if one exists—between fashion and religion.

of contemporary culture more by the way of examining Islam and dress (Bucar 2017). Few systematic theologians have seemed to go further in a theoretical or speculative theology of dress and fashion (Covolo 2013a)³. For example, no Scholastic or Thomistic theologians have taken into consideration the importance of dress and fashion, even if one of the most important categories of the Saint Thomas Aquinas's systematic theology is the "habitus", the habit of virtue. This exists in historical theology of dress (Haulotte 1966) as well as a history of Catholic fashion identity (Dwyer-McNulty 2014), with a renewed discussion of dress in Christian Scriptures (Winner 2015). However, in the last century, the majority of systematic theologians have not taken into consideration the place of dress in theology, in spite of the absolute importance of the metaphor of dress in the Christian Revelation. Some of the most important philosophers of 20th century have considered the question of fashion, putting it in a wider range of theoretical issues, while the systematic theologians seem not to have tried to comprehend the importance of dress, and also of fashion, in their theological writings.

The previous centuries have treated the matter only to address certain periods of history, involving a moral discourse against fashion. The interest of elaborating a reflexive or even speculative theology on dress and fashion is central to the present text. Yet, it is not possible to go further in a speculative theology without considering the historical evolution of dress and fashion.

Dress and fashion cannot fail to be of interest to theology and cannot remain on the side-lines of reflexive religious thinking (Ferry 2010). Theology, defined as words about God, or faith seeking understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*), is concerned with articulating thoughts about God, the created order, and God's relationship with the whole of the created order, from the standpoint of faith. Fashion is part of the created order, as clothes are made by human beings, and worn by them, and so theology should also have something to say about fashion and dress. Nothing can be considered to be outside of being understood and studied in the light of faith. It therefore goes without saying that theology, meaning faith that seeks to understand itself and the given reality according to the categories inherent within faith itself, is not beyond a religious analysis of either dress or the modern contemporary gaze, which falls under the world of fashion. On the other hand, although faith, and theology in particular, have hijacked the understanding of dress throughout centuries, they have not dwelled long on the modern way in which it presents itself: fashion, which has abundantly demonstrated that it was directly inspired by what religion and religions have dreamed up by the way of clothing (Bolton et al. 2018). It is important to note here that some understandings link the birth of fashion to modernity (Wilson 2013; Fiorani 2010) in terms of the economic history of society (Kopp 1986; Huck 2010).

Systematic theological studies on fashion are lacking, the exception being some articles on the fringes of a theologian's personal reflections (Moser 2011; Dooyeweerd 1984). And yet theology has addressed the issue of dress throughout centuries, if only because it also raised moral issues for Christians. One of the first people to have shown an interest in dress was Tertullian (died circa 220 AD), who left behind a certain number of treatises on Christian ethics, one in particular about the adornment of women. The same applies to the thinking already seen in the letter to Diognetus⁴, even older than his other writings, where it is stated that a Christian does not need to dress differently from

³ Based on an analysis of Herman Dooyeweerd, Covolo's conclusion is quite representative of the approach presented here: "Dooyeweerd's multi-perspectival view of fashion invites Christians to participate in the rich discourse fashion has taken in our post-Mad Men world. His desire to study the complexity and problematic nature of fashion as part of an irreducible conversation resonates with the dialectic's current location. Given the state of the current discussion, Christians must follow Dooyeweerd's impulse to reject one-dimensional critiques, be they positive appraisals of fashion as a purely benign/attractive/useful act of cultural creativity, or dismissive of fashion as merely trivial/deceptive/exploitative compromise. An updated constructive and robust Christian engagement with fashion resists the temptation to view fashion through one or two conceptual grids, foregoing the facile pleasure of quick, moralistic assessment. What's more, it offers those clothed in Christ the opportunity to replace a tired, threadbare approach with one that weaves a deeply Christian view of the complexity of God's world into a burgeoning discussion." (Chenu 1953, p. 6)

⁴ "And they show forth the character of their own citizenship in a marvellous and admittedly paradoxical way by following local customs in what they wear and what they eat and in the rest of their lives.", Epistles to Diognetus (Ehrman 2003, pp. 139–40).

non-Christians. He seems to have believed that dress does not need to become an ostentatious marker of identity. Right from the start, these two references indicate that dress is at once important because it works in the service of a certain morality, but not so important that Christians would need to dress differently from others. Ever since, theology has repeatedly had something to say about the dress habits of Christians (Noce 2002; Neri 2004).⁵

The Scriptures certainly do not fail to mention the importance of dress. They even see as fundamental, in the sense that it plays a key role at certain important points in the biblical narrative, according to which, dress, or the lack of it, was linked to Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:3). The issue of such an enigmatic link between the discovery of nudity and the narration of Adam and Eve's Sin, between the Naked and the Veiled, between that which seems manifest and that which remains of the order of the invisible, has been raised by some authors (Agamben 2009; Peterson 1934). The text has been interpreted in both Jewish and Christian hermeneutic history (Rubin and Kosman 1987; Ricks 2000). However mythological, this passage introduces a theoretical dimension (Guindon 1994; Guindon et al. 2009), according to François Jullien⁶. Far from being insignificant, the origin of dress is an issue involving a sequence of thoughts that will lead to a deeper exploration of the connection between the anthropology of dress and the theological origin of clothing as second skin. The Scriptures do not give just the starting point with the Genesis' origin of Adam's clothing, but, as has been shown in other studies (e.g., Haulotte 1966), the Bible represents clothing as one of the most powerful metaphors. The last paragraph of the Christian Bible, the Apocalypse (22:14), reminds us of the garment of the Paradise, while in the Gospels, the seamless tunic of Christ is referred to (John 19:23).

I would suggest that the Nude/visible and the Veiled/invisible is not the core of the theological issue regarding Christian revelation and dress. Speculative theology must consider dress and fashion as an opportunity for examining the visible image of the Invisible God (Colossian 1:15).

2. Between Label and Morality

If the first landmark, or dimension, of the possibility of a speculative theology of fashion was the emergence of the theological question of the visibility of dress and fashion, the second landmark is the religious and moral identity of wearing clothes.

There is a sensitive area of dress and gender that also merits to be studied (Barnes and Eicher 1992). Dress and fashion are now taking over entire essential sectors of societies, not just in the West, but in other developing areas of the world, too. Moreover, evolutionist theory based on orientalist approach (Reinach 2006) might raise the issue of knowing whether fashion, especially as it has evolved in Western Europe and North America, might not actually be the export product of a culture, along with all its symbolism. Some evolutionist-centered theories affirm that fashion—meaning the evolution of dress and its permanent change—is a by-product of Western economy and society (Eicher and Roach-Higgins 1992). At any rate, to us, seeing that a number of contemporaries are involved in this area of activity means that all strata of contemporary societies are affected, either consciously or, more often, unconsciously. This means that is impossible to think of contemporary society in general as being beyond the influence of trends or, more specifically, beyond fashion trends, which are in some ways the key to it. Sociology of trends is not a recent area of study, so it is scarcely possible to exclude the social dimension that it explores in any line of thinking about fashion (Erner 2009).

⁵ I limit here the reflection to the Christian theology, without forgetting that dress is not absent from the thinking of the other two monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam. In the future, it will be interesting to widen the research to a theological comparison of the different theologies of dress and understanding of modern fashion.

⁶ "Le constat en lui-même est simple: tout désigne la création du Nu, en art, comme un phénomène qui a si bien collé à la culture européenne que nous n'en sommes jamais sortis. Tant il relie l'Occident d'un bord à l'autre, d'une époque à l'autre et même d'un art à l'autre, de la sculpture à la peinture et jusqu'à la photographie; et a ainsi servi continûment de base dans la formation des Beaux-Arts. L'Église a pu rhabiller le sexe, mais elle a gardé le Nu" (Jullien 2005, p. 8).

From this perspective, the sociology of trends exposes a vitality and influence. And fashion, in this view, is an absolutely central marker of modernity. Various studies also show that “fashion” comes into being at the same time, although I can cite fashions that are particular to all of the eras through which the world has passed. Representatives from the field of the sociology and semiotics like Georg Simmel (Simmel 2012) and Roland Barthes (Barthes 2015) have addressed this characteristic of fashion.

A very crucial issue for contemporary Christian ethics would thus be the relation between fashion and social impacts in terms of individual identity, social economy and environment effects. It would be an omission not to highlight the important status of this sector, a driving force behind Western economies. France and Italy, for example, have made the luxury fashion market a major area of industrial and financial production (Pippo and Delfino 2017). Luxury companies have some of the best stock market ratings, a clear sign of the huge influence that fashion and luxury have on societies around the world (Sbai 2018). Ever more closely linked to the issue of fashion production, the ethical issue cannot be side-lined by a research project that intends to bring to the table a range of concepts involving theology, religious sciences and all aspects of fashion most closely related to matters of religion. The question has been asked as to why luxury would not be seen as arising from religious discourse, especially Catholicism, where the Council of Trent has been compelled to issue a ruling on the excessively showy appearance of liturgical vestments and church décor (Morand 2012).

Why has the Catholic Church almost never addressed these questions, other than by viewing them as legitimate when applying them to itself? For example, as part of a long solid tradition reaching as far as scholastic teaching (Saint Thomas Aquinas devotes an article of the *Summa*⁷ to this question), the Council of Trent proclaims the solemn nature of ecclesiastical visibility—fineries, ornaments and priestly and liturgical vestments, for example—for the purposes of spreading the evangelical word (Pauline 2002). That said, an ethic of sobriety was very much in evidence throughout 16th and 17th centuries (Charpentier Ljungqvist 2012; Barbazza 1988). Thomas Aquinas was not the only Christian theologian to reflect on modesty when it came to dress: Tertullian and Cyprian amongst others did so before him, and moralists, later, such as La Bruyère (Esposito 2004) followed him in the 17th century. In more recent times, such reflection was indirect only, moralizing on the fashion sector as in the case of the Italian magazine *Famiglia cristiana*, which devoted a column to the criticism of fashion right up to the 1960s (Cullen 2013). The habit does not make the monk, declared the Decretals of Gregory IX (III, 31, 13), but yes, the rule is still all about the relationship between dress and identity, religious included. A religious habit is not essential to a monk, provided that he professes a rule, and of course the habit in turn shows that he conforms to that rule. The relationship between dress-related identity and religious identity is therefore ambivalent, as is the habit, for that matter, in its way of appropriating a social identity.

The habit is in some way suspended between an ethic, or more precisely a morality, and a religious identity constituted by a “label”, with the meaning given to it by consumer society (Hethorn and Ulasewicz 2015), and for women especially (Dion and Julien 2010). However, the second landmark in the way of elaborating the intellectual conditions for a speculative theology of fashion is the investigation of the moral discourse of the Christian teachings—official or not—on the practices of fashion and dress. Christian ethics should elaborate a discourse on the clothing industry and the system of fashion at a time when both are criticized for exploiting and polluting the planet. Sustainable fashion is a real challenge for contemporary and Christian ethics. No Christian theology can feel unbound by social commitment and the obligation to be respectful of human labor and the earth’s resources.

3. The Theological Aesthetics of Fashion

The two previous sections have highlighted two conditions of thinking around the subject of dress, fashion and religion, helped by the research of these topics in the field of humanities, but also in

⁷ Saint THOMAS D’AQUINUS, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, 169, aa. 1–2.

the light of a speculative theology. The third landmark, or intellectual condition, of thinking about fashion in terms of systematic theology would be about fashion itself. Theology can reflect on dress and fashion as phenomena related to the concepts of image and icon, words dear to Christians and deeply rooted in the mystery of the Incarnation. Theology might question whether not just dress alone, before it even became fashion, but also, and above all, fashion itself, might not be a process of humanisation similar to that described by Christian theology through the Incarnation: God assuming human characteristics. This entails a philosophy and a theology based on visibility and vision, not as conduits of a reality, but as another object not visible in pure form. Dress is different from all other art objects in that it can lead to a degree of contemplation, as it automatically refers us to something else. If it is compared to other consumer products that might not be elevated to the level of a work of art, say, haute cuisine, for example, its longevity gives it a more marked presence.

There is also the relationship between God and beauty. I consider here the possibility for the systematic or reflexive theology to understand the human realities of dress and fashion in a perspective of comprehension of beauty. This is because the status of art and its true nature are increasingly important in our contemporary world, challenging the fundamental choices of philosophy and aesthetics. Fashion itself is also weighing in on this huge debate, now an essential aspect of Western culture (Lehmann 2000). Fashion could be thus an object of theological reflection in itself and in the light of a theological aesthetics. In order to elaborate this thought, an intellectual understanding of fashion as a secular religion of the beauty in the public space, it seems to me interesting to have two different inspiring theological thinkers.

First, the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (d. 1988) was one of the leading lights of theological aesthetics, addressing theological aesthetics from the 19th century and going on to construct a theological cathedral with aesthetics as one of its foundation stones (Balthasar 2001; Sequeri 2016). At the same time, Balthasar's theology could offer a theological method of how to proceed in this investigation, more in terms of suggestions and inspirations than some real elements of interpretation of fashion as quasi-secular religiosity. There is indeed an aesthetics of fashion, in as much as this field of knowledge espouses the right to think of it not just as art, but also as the vehicle of an aesthetic experience (Matteucci and Stefano 2016).

Would a theological view of fashion be entitled to see itself within the bounds of theological aesthetics? If theological aesthetics is an attempt to understand beauty within a framework that refers to the Christian Revelation, for example, fashion might in turn fall into this perspective, because—as stated at the outset—according to Christian tradition itself, nothing escapes religious interpretation. But if theological aesthetics is, rather, an opportunity to perpetuate the whole Christian Mystery by putting it within the category of beauty, fashion, and all art forms, are only an indirect component of this thinking.

Second, examining the theology of the secular world and the theology of festivals and play. The *Secular City* by Harvey Cox (Cox [1965] 1990) and his *The Feast of Fool* (Cox 1969), and the considerations of Jürgen Moltmann on both hope (Moltmann 1966) and the theology of freedom (Moltmann 1971) are certainly of interest to anyone wishing to see the world of fashion as a way of escaping but also perhaps conceiving of freedom at the same time. Understanding a secular reality in terms of religiosity, there needs to be a reflexive theology regarding secular phenomena. Cox's theology, considered as one of the initiators of the theology of secularity, offers the basis of a religious interpretation of a secularized society. His reflections stand as inspiring elements for a systematic theology of fashion as an implicit eternal beauty in a changing world.⁸ Cox's theology has showed how secular phenomena can be understood in terms of a new religiosity. He developed an interpretation of the market as a new kind of religion (Cox 2016). Because also fashion is a part of global markets, and

⁸ In a different register, Walter Benjamin gives a theological interpretation of the eternity of dress (Vinken 1997).

because it is a secular reality, Cox's categories permit us to elaborate a speculative theological discourse on fashion as a changing secular experience.

Protestant systematic theology seems to offer more elements than Roman Catholic theology to this specific field. Moltmann, a German Protestant theologian, has dealt with secularity accompanied by a strong theological conviction on the power of hope. Moltmann's works are useful for the next steps of an extensive speculative theology: the place of grace and freedom in everyday life. By experiencing freedom in a contemporary society, people have the opportunity to rely on the graciousness of God, considering grace in two possible interpretations: as grace of God and as freedom from the weight of life's worries. Fashion offers a condition of an experience of individual freedom of choice of wearing different clothes, with the power to present oneself as a willingly capacity.

Fashion actually lends itself to being seen as a spiritual religious system to some degree, with its own codes, muses, taboos and categorical imperatives (Piot-Tricoire 2014). Theology would therefore have everything to gain by reflecting on such an important part of modern society, if it wants to engage in a successful contemporary reinterpretation of a quasi-secular religiosity of a particular beauty that is the wearing of clothes and contemplating them in the public space. Cox, Moltmann and Balthasar, among some others of course, lead the implementation of the theological understanding of dress and fashion as a quasi-secular religiosity, and a way to touch the crucial issue of aesthetics.

4. Conclusion: Undressing Adorned Theologies

These three landmarks are an introduction to a theology of dress and fashion, as they address three fundamental aspects of epistemology: vision, will and taste. To sum up, the relation between theology and dress or fashion leads us to consider theologically the main issue of vision behind dress (and fashion). Speculative theology approaches this relation by developing a reflection on the visible image and Invisibility by the vision of fashion. This issue opens the ethical question how to manage this experience of vision behind dress—that we have called Invisible dress—in respect to environments (individual, social and natural). Christian theology has to take a position with critical reflection. Finally, these two dimensions let us introduce the third dimension of the aesthetics of fashion: how theology understands dress and fashion as a provocation to re-think Christianity as an aesthetic and theological texture. A theoretical theology of fashion cannot ignore these three conditions as a way to elaborate an extensive discourse.

Though these issues deserve to be expanded upon in their own right, it is pertinent to refer to a final example from the exchange and confrontation within the symbolic code of dress and fashion. It is surely of the order of metaphor, but still loses none of its impact. Reinforced by a rich textile imagery, and an entire symbolism ranging from the art required to make it into the variety of products created in our contemporary world for rapid consumption—*fast fashion*—to masterpieces of high culture, dress offers theologians the option of undressing a theology that is no longer "in fashion", overtaken as it is by a new language. If, in its current formulation, the expression might seem risqué for a doctrine that has been centuries in the making, all we need to do is to re-locate it to the dialectic of the evolution of dress and it might offer some kind of a message. Not that "fashion", if we mean by this trends following one after the other, has to become the rule for theological formulations, but we need to be aware that all formulations are in some way the product of a language that can only reflect how fashion moves in waves. One final thought: the symbolism of dress, and how it is made, is entirely capable of providing material for creating endless enlightening metaphors because they are rooted in an experience that is alive today: dressing ourselves. The more theology of dress and fashion will be developed, the more theology itself can be free to be rewrite in alternative terms, especially those of dress, which are based on the Scriptures and in the Christian Tradition.

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