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Book Review

Robert Covolo, *Fashion Theology*

Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020, 200 pages,
ISBN: 978-1-4813-1273-8

Robert Covolo's work *Fashion Theology* challenges the reader, and the academic discipline of theology, to "take fashion seriously" (p. 2). In this groundbreaking text, Covolo sets out to define and explore the resonances and tensions between the distinct worlds of theology and fashion – an important task given fashion's status as an evocative medium of expression, dissent, and power in the current political sphere. Despite this flattering portrait, Covolo acknowledges that fashion is known for its fads, but insists that "fashion is part of a much larger cultural phenomenon that boasts its own history" (p. 3). This history, as he goes on to prove, includes a robust theological history. Covolo's study endeavors to demonstrate the *pas de deux* performed by theology and fashion, in the hope of retrieving a better understanding of both.

Covolo is a cultural theologian by trade, and his exploration of fashion and theology is deeply attuned to the Augustinian call to engage faith with culture. Covolo divides his work into five chapters, each attending to a particular facet of "fashion theology". These chapters endeavor to answer a question that weaves the work together: what has been, is, and could be, fashion theology?

Chapter 1, "Fashion Theology as Tradition", explores commentaries on fashion among Patristic and medieval thinkers, to organize historical and theological opinions towards dress. He guides the reader through the development of sartorial signification in the Roman world and employs especially the works of Tertullian and Augustine to gesture towards theological interventions in daily dress (p. 4). This chapter explores, among other things, Tertullian's caution against adornment, Augustine's navigation of fashion in

the cities of God and man, and Aquinas' understanding of fashion and social dress through the lens of virtue ethics. Covolo's reflections illuminate the overlapping functions of dress – to distinguish sex, rank, and other social markers, to communicate and cultivate virtue, to temper oneself towards others, and even to communicate aesthetic beauty, divine or otherwise, to the created world. The author exposes the dynamism of dress while teasing out unique and provocative insights for today, for example, that Augustine serves as the “father of fashion theory” (p. 10). Who knew that the Bishop of Hippo could share resonances with semiologists like Roland Barthes?

Chapter 2, “Fashion Theology as Reform”, focuses on the developments of fashion and theology with specific attention to the Protestant Reformation. In this chapter, Covolo offers an examination of John Calvin, whose writings on fashion stressed the role of dress in enabling opportunities for sin (p. 23) and distraction (p. 26). Calvin's caution towards dress, Covolo surmises, was fueled not only by soteriological concerns, but also by his social landscape, which was rife with unrest (pp. 25–26). Calvin prescribes order and discipline regarding dress to remain focused on the priorities of earthly and heavenly existence. Though Calvin is guarded as far as earthly dress is concerned, he employs striking sartorial language of God, who appears “magnificently” arrayed in the fabric of the world (p. 27). Here, Covolo yet again demonstrates how claims of fashion and theology as enemies are reductive and fail to grasp the full vibrancy of theological, fashion-laden language.

From here, Covolo introduces the work of Dutch Reformed theologian Abraham Kuyper. While Calvin eschewed fancy, Kuyper embraced the “luxuriant dress of the past” (p. 31). He further celebrated sartorial vibrancy as the God-given impulse humans have “to adorn” and “to make ourselves beautiful” (p. 32). He couched this claim in an overarching distrust of French influence, fearing its fashion to be distracting and its society morally vacuous (p. 33). Covolo further teases out theological tensions in Kuyper, specifically his caution towards radical social reconstruction, which “he perceived as a usurping of God's sovereignty in the historical process” (p. 33). Covolo then recounts Karl Barth's evaluation of fashion as “complicit with dark forces” (p. 39) and his warnings that fashion endlessly conscripts masses into capricious rituals, which amplifies the power of the *Zeitgeist* (p. 39) and enables capitalists to run amok (p. 40). Barth feared the reduction of the human person through capitalism and saw fashion as a willing accomplice towards this end. Barth's words generate further discussions of freedom, creative expression, and historical disruption.

Chapter 3, “Fashion Theology as Public Discourse”, attends to the role of fashion and faith in modern public life, specifically in democracies. Fashion uniquely communicates democratic impulses within a society (p. 46). Individual sartorial expression, for example, can elucidate challenges to convention, fluctuating public opinion, and even the role of elite classes in social spaces. Covolo offers three “dispensations” of fashion: first, its proliferation among the aristocracy as a fanciful status marker (p. 50); second, its modern iteration, reflected in the haute couture gown and the mass-produced simulacra (p. 51); and third, its democratized form in the 20th and 21st centuries, reflected in mass marketed, homogenized tastes found in fast-fashion stores lining city streets (p. 51). Covolo grapples here with two interpretations of fashion: fashion as top-down (where the upper classes control the lower classes), or fashion as bottom-up (where the individual subject is revalorized) (p. 53). Neither successfully captures the dynamic role of fashion in religious and public life (p. 54).

The chapter further explores the atheistic tendencies of modernization. Individuals freed from the “burden” of tradition are now individuals burdened anew by the task of self-expression without normative evaluations (p. 59). And Christian fashionistas are caught in the crossfire, “participating in a visual discussion that by its very nature retains a logic that is less hospitable to transcendence” (pp. 63–64). Covolo, through Kuyper, pushes for a more complex understanding of the intermingling of fashion, faith, and public discourse.

Chapter 4, “Fashion Theology as Art”, interrogates the merit of fashion’s claim to be art. Covolo presents philosophical critiques of the aesthetic, including Kant and Hegel, and shares their concern that fashion is too superficial, too consumption-driven, and too earthly to ever inspire the contemplation of art, and thus theology (p. 71). Yet fashion too is capable of aesthetic prowess, which Covolo teases out via Dewey and Benjamin (pp. 72–74). His study necessarily engages with beauty, requiring response from Patristic scholars (pp. 76–77). He further articulates Protestant prescriptions towards the visual arts by addressing the potentially “iconoclastic” impulses of Zwingli, Luther, and Calvin, while also exploring the complex role of art in Neo-Reformed thought (pp. 84–89).

Chapter 5, “Fashion Theology as Everyday Drama”, explores the affective power of fashion to “heighten one’s experience with time, narrative, and performance” (p. 91). Covolo notes how the constantly changing nature of fashion can devolve into chaotic inconsequentiality, without a “larger drama from which to invest [...] meaning” (p. 95). The chapter’s attention to

time (p. 92), personal narrative (p. 99), and narrative arc (p. 102) helps develop a more coherent stage on which fashion, hand-in-hand with theology, can endeavor to put “God’s glory [...] on display” (p. 111). The chapter closes with avenues for Christians to “perform Christ”, employing dress to evoke revelation and response.

Covolo’s study allows for deeper exploration of the mundane sartorial encounters we experience each day. For instance, his foray into the French Revolution reveals the political roots of the black suit (p. 29). Contemporary readers may regard their dress suits as the innocuous standard of formal wear; Covolo reveals that the emergence of the black suit signaled the emergence of bourgeois male suffrage and a subsequent “shift in political life to a new kind of access [...] to shape public opinion in a public square freed from [...] the aristocracy” (p. 29). This is a great example of the strength of Covolo’s writing – he actively engages the reader’s notions towards dress while simultaneously reshaping them.

Covolo’s exploration of seminal Christian texts and thinkers is carefully done, and he adeptly balances the tensions between fashion and theology without reducing either discipline, articulating their resonances while preserving their distinctions. He also takes great care to elaborate on the fashion contexts in which different theologians and church figures were born and were active, showing, for example, how the developments of Italy, Spain, and France in furnishing European fashion in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries prefigured the life of Calvin (p. 23).

There are aspects of the book, however, that leave more to be desired. Though Covolo’s work addresses matters of ethics, the text does not engage fully with the ethical implications of fashion as an industry, such as its prominent role in the Atlantic slave trade or its present threats to garment workers and the natural environment. The book is distinctly Reformed, and while those from all (or no) traditions can learn from this work, this study will likely inspire explorations from a Catholic perspective and from that of Eastern Christianity, with the latter of which may further complicate fashion’s “Western” locus. Since Covolo’s study opens towards a new and emerging realm of study in theology, there are ample opportunities for emerging scholars to build upon this work and plumb the depths of fashion theology.

Fashion Theology is a necessary read for fashion-minded people of faith and academics, and will surely inspire further studies of fashion in academic theology. This work is sure to reinvigorate its readers’ attitudes towards fashion, theology, and the clothes they wear.