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Herman Dooyeweerd: Christian Philosopher of Fashion



by Robert S. Covolo

“Fashion’ is a very interesting example of social imitation. Its proper nature asserts itself quite obviously in the horizontal inter-individual societal relations.”

Herman Dooyeweerd
New Critique of Theoretical Thought

AMC’s award-winning television series *Mad Men* is all about fashion. From the exaggerated hourglass shapes and boxed blouses that came to be known as the New Look, to the thin ties and grey suits that became standard issue for each man, the fashion in *Mad Men* awakens our collective mem-

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ory by situating in visual culture the arrival of now antiquated artifacts as they once appeared in their original habitat. As some critics have noted, the recreation of the styles of dress, interiors, and accompanying social performances evokes a nostalgic yet painful memory of a by-gone era that foreshadowed our own. From Betty’s full skirts, donned from a relaxed suburban-housewife wardrobe, to Joan’s stylishly seductive, Christian Dior-inspired hourglass silhouettes, the relatively predictable fashion in *Mad Men* stands in stark relief to our unstable mixing and matching, used to construct the ever-proliferating and ambiguous social performances that mark late modernity. *Mad Men* offers viewers a reminder of our transition from a relatively fixed society to the increasing plurality and tribalization initiated by the fragmentation of the cultural revolution of the ‘60s; its fusion of fashion and advertising teases out fashion’s eventual dominance in a culture of conspicuous consumption, giving us a peek at the fledgling stages of what we would come to know as the invasive power of market forces. The numerous tasks that fashion assumes in *Mad Men*—spanning a culture’s collective memory, indexing identities, offering social performances, establishing social stability, and driving market forces—is why fashion is critical for the show. For *Mad Men* is not just about mid-century fashion but is, rather, a contemporary look back into mid-century fashion with the awareness of the multiple discourses fashion would evoke in late modernity.

As such, *Mad Men* offers an important clue for

any relevant Christian engagement with fashion. Rather than looking at fashion through reductive lenses, such as modesty or vanity, Christians must listen seriously to the multiple discourses that fashion has taken in our post-*Mad Men* culture. Then, by reviewing the promise of Christian philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd's reflections on fashion, Christians can respond well to those discourses.

Fashion's Multiple Discourses

Recently, Routledge introduced a 1,500 page reference work simply titled *Fashion*.¹ This tome testifies to the importance of fashion as a burgeoning arena of theoretical discourse. What do those who theorize about fashion discuss? Here are a few of the subjects captivating this burgeoning discourse.

Fashion and Art: Clearly fashion design employs the kind of aesthetic judgments native to the arts. But is fashion art? If fashion is art, in what sense? If not, why not? Even if fashion must settle for the downgraded distinction of a "decorative art" or "applied art," what are we to make of the increasingly prominent role that fashion is playing in museums? For example, what are we to make of the record crowds that stormed the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2011 to see the fashion of the late Alexander McQueen?

Fashion and Hermeneutics: How do "fashion statements" work? Although we are undoubtedly communicating in our choice of clothing, *how* does our attire communicate and to whom? Do our choices of clothing merely voice our individual tastes, or is our dress part of a larger discussion about social performance? If the context in which one wears a garment is just as important as the garment itself, and if these contexts are mutually constructed events, in what sense are we responsible for such "statements"?

Fashion and Politics: Does fashion operate in society in a way akin to social media—creating new public spaces of mutual display, free from authoritarian control? In other words, is there a connection between the crackdowns on protestors in Iran and the fashion police that patrol the streets of Tehran? If this connection is true, *how* does fashion redistribute social power? To what degree is fashion concomitant with liberal democracies? While we might not want to go as far as Princeton fashion theorist

Gilles Lipovetsky in arguing that democracy is the *lingua franca* of fashion,² clearly individual liberties regarding political and sartorial choice have some purchase on each other.

Fashion and Class: Is fashion the source of class warfare, or does it alleviate divisions? Is it true, as some have argued, that fashion is one of the most important ways that the leisure class distinguishes itself from lower classes? Is fashion at its essence conspicuous consumption? Similarly, does fashion lure us into an endless game of keeping up with the Joneses—a vicious treadmill designed to separate who is "in" and who are "out" (Thank you, Heidi Klum)? Or, to the contrary, has the rise of fashion broken down the distinction between the masses and aristocracy, crown and commoner? Do knock-offs offer a salve to otherwise painful class differences?

Fashion and Subculture: What is the relationship between fashion and subcultures? How have Punks and Goths, as well as Amish and Mennonites, used the rejection of the typical interplay of clothing to distance, challenge, and (in the case of the Punks and Goths) transgress dominant culture? Should the church display its difference through clothing? What does she gain and/or lose through such displays?

We could go on, but these subjects suffice to alert us to the fact that the contemporary discussions about fashion have become a thick knot comprised of a number of threads—from aesthetics, hermeneutics, and public space, to individual choice, the market, and subcultures. As fashion theorist Malcolm Barnard summarizes, "There is no one set of ideas or no single conceptual framework with which fashion might be defined, analyzed and critically explained."³

Given this development, how should Christians proceed? This is where the philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd gains traction. Long before the contemporary, multi-threaded discussion on fashion emerged, Christian philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd was eschewing the tendency to reduce the complexity of the world. What's more, Dooyeweerd displays this impulse when reflecting on fashion. In doing so, Dooyeweerd distinguished himself not only as one of the most original philosophers of the 20th century but arguably as the first Christian philosopher of fashion.

Dooyeweerd, Modal Diversity, and Cultural Development

Few thinkers in history have attempted to reframe the Western philosophical tradition with such boldness as Dutch Neo-Calvinist juridical scholar and philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd. For Dooyeweerd, there is no existence apart from creation in relationship to God (“pancreation”). Aside from God, everything that exists (including fashion) does so by virtue of its status *as* created reality. As such, everything that exists does so *within*

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the temporal order of creation. This temporal order not only is experienced as duration (“subject-side of time”) but is part of the ordering framework, or order of succession, that governs reality (“law-side of time”). The coherence of creation cannot be found by reducing some aspect of its existence to other aspects of its existence but by a careful examination of each thing’s creatureliness—its individuality structure as gift (“irreducibility”).⁴ With these two principles in hand—pancreation and irreducibility—Dooyeweerd attempted to work out a theory that could account for the various (“radical”) types of things (“existents”) in the world, among which he discusses fashion. To appreciate Dooyeweerd’s view of fashion requires a basic knowledge of two important Dooyeweerdian concepts: modal diversity and cultural development.

One of Dooyeweerd’s most creative and productive insights is his theory of modal diversity: the theory that certain irreducible dimensions mark created reality. In his *New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, Dooyeweerd lists fifteen of these dimen-

sions, or “modal aspects,” of reality: numerical, spatial, kinematic, physical, biotic, psychic, logical, historical, lingual, social, economic, aesthetic, juridical, moral or ethical, and confessional or pistic. Everything that exists within the created order functions in all these aspects. Even though these aspects are mutually irreducible, they exhibit an “order of succession” that entails a cumulative and increasingly complex order. While these modal aspects do not exist apart from individual (typical) phenomena, they are not to be confused with the existents. When two of these aspects exist within one of the functions of a concrete existent (“an analogical moment”), they are described as either *retroicipations*—the expression of a particular aspect within an earlier one—or *anticipations*—the expression of a particular aspect with a later one. Although much more could be said regarding the functioning of the modal spheres, these two expressions already suggest the capacious, multidimensional approach to reality Dooyeweerd desires to employ.

But a few qualifications must be made before we move into Dooyeweerd’s view of fashion. First, it should be noted that modal aspects are not sufficient to account for the existence of concrete, *individual* things, events, and social relationships. For individual things exhibit modal aspects within a structure of individuation. For example, when my wife wears her Alexander McQueen Skull scarf, the scarf shares a unique set of individuated modal relationships: the scarf demonstrates a juridical aspect, in that it is possessed by my wife, and a numerical aspect, in that it is countable, etc. But its individual structure makes it distinctly *this* owned, numerically qualified object.

Within each concrete structure of individuality, two of the modal functions have unique significance in making it what it is: the “leading” function (sometimes called “qualifying” function) and the “founding” (also called “foundational”) function. Succinctly put, the leading function of a thing directs an existent towards its destination, and a founding function provides important support for this movement. The term “structural principle” served Dooyeweerd as shorthand for an existent, in virtue of its various modal functions, characterized by its qualifying and founding functions.

Additionally, before we exegete Dooyeweerd's philosophy of fashion, a word should be said about his view of cultural development. Dooyeweerd spoke of an "opening process," by which the various modal aspects open up in the temporal process of history. Time and agency, alone, open up the total structure of modal aspects. This opening process involves a cross-pollination of the aspects as they open up the potentialities of creation. Cultural production should always be seen in light of mankind's situatedness in the historical aspect of history's temporal process. Particularly important in the opening process is Dooyeweerd's claim that social relationships move from a "closed" and "primitive" to an "opened" and "differentiated" condition. More specifically, groups move from rigid walls of small tribes and populaces to complex societies that manifest a variety of social functions, such as family, economy, polity, etc. This process of social transformation involves integration across primitive social arrangements as well as differentiation and individualization—the flourishing of the individuality of persons, social structures, peoples, and nations.⁵ In short, there has been progress in the opening process, to the degree that historical developments foster the norms of integration, differentiation, and individualization.⁶ With this final piece in place, we are in a position to examine Dooyeweerd's philosophy of fashion.

Dooyeweerd on Fashion

Dooyeweerd takes up the subject of fashion in book three of *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*.⁷ He begins by agreeing (with Karl Marx, Thorstein Veblen, and others) that fashion was originally used by higher classes to distinguish themselves from lower classes. However, for Dooyeweerd, fashion's current role in social imitation is defined within the context of the unfolding process—from "vertical" isolated societies to the "horizontal" expansion of "inter-individual" societal relations.⁸ Acting as a practice that integrates individual and social identity, fashion serves as a catalyst for inter-individual behavior across the various social contexts found in complex societies. Dooyeweerd highlights the idea that although there are leading influencers in fashion, fashion itself is not merely the unhindered outcome of these influences but must work within

any given artifact's historical development—the individuality structures of societal relations (social contexts) in which dress is worn. In other words, "there is a fashion in sporting clothes, in evening dress, in traveling clothes, lounge-suits and street-dress, etc."⁹ Eschewing national and ethnic identity, fashion contains within its principle a cosmopolitan and international character. Therefore for Dooyeweerd, fascism and National Socialism are a reversal of fashion's opening process. They manifest a desire to restrict inter-individual relations of social discourse within national barriers, thereby artificially restricting economically, scientifically, and aesthetically qualified social relations.

Dooyeweerd does not deny the capricious element within fashion, but he challenges the idea that fashion is merely the outcome of the whim of individual designers or *ipso facto* the caprice of class pride or vanity. After all, Dooyeweerd reminds us that the logic of modern fashion, its globalizing and cosmopolitan social movement, is at work "in every sphere." Dooyeweerd further implies that the vast varieties of choices within fashion are concomitant features, critical for avoiding the individual's absorption within its trans-national nature; the ethnic or national identity lost in fashion's trans-national movement is, therefore, not absorbed into "mass-man." Dooyeweerd ends this discussion by noting that fashion is particularly indebted to the nature of inter-individual economic relations and international trade.

What are we to make of Dooyeweerd's thoughts on fashion? How do they relate to the burgeoning discussion currently taking place? In this regard, two very promising elements emerge from his approach. First, Dooyeweerd should be commended for his recognition that fashion is not the result of powerful "individuals" but, instead, involves "leading circles" acting in response to a variety of influences, such as social taste and efficiency.¹⁰ This is a welcomed respite from the long-held characterization of the masses as sheep that follow a handful of powerful designers. Nevertheless, Dooyeweerd could be updated here since, from the mid-19th century onward, fashion has increasingly been polycentric and pluralistic in its sources. In fact, today it is almost pointless to look to Paris or Milan to discover the new fashions; there are now numer-

ous sources and manifestations of fashion and style, from pop music and youth culture to street wear. One might also add that fashion originates from a diverse range of groups, sources, and designers for particular market groups, unique niches, and sub-cultures.¹¹ This update notwithstanding, Dooyeweerd should be commended for his insight that fashion's production involves a number of players, constrained by a variety of cross-pressures.

The most promising element in Dooyeweerd's view of fashion is his multi-perspectival view of fashion. In other words, fashion maintains an irreducibly multi-threaded structure. This conclusion, as we have already stated, is inherent in Dooyeweerd's modal theory. In line with Dooyeweerd's thinking, leading fashion theorist Elizabeth Wilson has noted, "dress in general seems then to fulfill a number of social, aesthetic, and psychological functions; indeed it knits them together, and can express them all simultaneously."¹² In this statement, Wilson (and Bernard, who was previously quoted) convey a Dooyeweerdian impulse about the way reality comes to us as irreducibly multifaceted. Dooyeweerd, however, goes beyond Wilson, analyzing *how* pieces of reality such as fashion can be multi-perspectival and enabling an analysis of the way these various modes of fashion interact in unique combinations.

What does Dooyeweerd say regarding fashion's function? Dooyeweerd states that fashion's *found-ing function* is historical—the historical opening processes that have unfolded cultural potentialities. He also identifies its *leading function* as social—aimed towards the intercourse in inter-individual relations with human society. In other words, fashion's *qualifying and leading function* involves the way individuals relate to social settings and is concomitant with history's opening processes, particularly as they have reframed society from feudalism to its current modern shape. This explanation squares well with two of the most important assumptions in fashion theory: first, the consensus that fashion is inextricably a modern phenomenon that has paralleled the reframing of social order in the West; second, the idea that although there is an irreducibly social aspect to fashion, a merely sociological reading of fashion is inadequate. Regarding this second point, Dooyeweerd is particularly clear:

an existent's leading function does not define it but frames how it interacts with *all* of the various spheres, including various *retroicipations* and *anticipations*. In other words, Dooyeweerd sees fashion's inter-individual relationship to human society as creating the possibility of unique interlacements with its various lingual, economic, aesthetic, and psychic modal functions. Therefore, Dooyeweerd would want to pay attention to the capacious full-orbed manifestations of fashion in its various interlacements. In other words, fashion is a subject worthy of examination as it functions within its unique historical, lingual, aesthetic, economic, and psychic modal aspects.

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.

Conclusion

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.

Endnotes

1. Malcolm Barnard, *Fashion* (London: Routledge, 2011).
2. Giles Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion*, trans. Catherine Porter (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).
3. Malcolm Barnard, *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, ed. Malcolm Barnard (New York: Routledge, 2007), 7.
4. For a summary of how the two principles of pancreation and irreducibility guide a Dooyeweerdian approach see Roy Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality* (Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 241-242.
5. Chaplin, anticipating the criticism that a merely social view ignores a comprehensive view of cultural development, notes that Dooyeweerd uses the term "social structure" or "social relationship" in a comprehensive manner to include such developments as those in the economy, technology, ideas, etc. See Jonathan Chaplin, *Herman Dooyeweerd: Christian Philosopher of State and Civil Society* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 81.
6. Dooyeweerd rightfully should be critiqued here for

seeing primitive societies as too one-sidedly negative. There were a large variety of primitive societies which did not entirely subordinate the individual to an inclusive total community.

7. Herman Dooyeweerd, *New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, vol. 3, (Ontario, Canada: Paideia Press, 1984), 588-693.
8. Here Dooyeweerd follows Georg Simmel, "Fashion is the imitation of a given example and satisfies the demand for social adaption [...] fashion represents nothing more than one of the many forms of life by the aid of which we seek to combine in uniform spheres of activity the tendency towards social equalization with the desire for individual differentiation and change." See Georg Simmel, "Fashion" in *The Rise of Fashion: A Reader*, edited by Daniel Leonhard Purdy (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 291.
9. Dooyeweerd speaks of the restriction of fashion within athletic dress as an example of *enkapsis*. See Herman Dooyeweerd, *New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, vol. 3 (Ontario, Canada: Paideia Press, 1984), 661.
10. This is far preferable to Karl Barth's view of fashion being the dictates of "Kings residing in Paris." Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics Volume IV, Part 4 Lecture Fragments* (Grand Rapids: MI, Eerdmans, 1981), 229.
11. See Peter Braham, "Fashion: Unpacking A Cultural Production" in *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, ed. Malcolm Barnard (New York: Routledge, 2007), 359. Also see Lucy Collins, "On The Street" in *Comment Magazine*, accessed online May 13, 2011 at <http://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/2780>.
12. Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion in Modernity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 3.