
Pro Rege

Volume 50 | Number 3

Article 6

March 2022

Fashion Theology (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Bailey, Justin (2022) "Fashion Theology (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 50:
No. 3, 33 - 34.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol50/iss3/6

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BOOK REVIEWS

Fashion Theology. Robert Covolo. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2020. 216pp. ISBN-10: 1481312731 and ISBN-13: 978-1481312738. Reviewed by Justin Bailey, Associate Professor of Theology, Dordt University.

Although I am a professor of theology, every so often I teach a course on Aesthetics. I imagine potential students wondering what a theologian might have to say on the subject. Theology, after all, suggests austerity, precision, and profundity, especially at a Reformed university. Aesthetics, by contrast, seems interested in surfaces, appearances, and the look and feel of things. Can a theologian offer much more than censure?

A similar dynamic may be in play for those who pick up Robert Covolo's *Fashion Theology*. Covolo, a cultural theologian with a doctorate from the Free University in Amsterdam, begins his book by acknowledging that fashion theology sounds oxymoronic. As he writes, "Fashion traffics in the new; theology traffics in the eternal. Fashion is concerned with beautifying the body; theology is concerned with beautifying the soul. Fashion evinces the frivolous; theology evokes the serious. Fashion invites arrogance; theology calls for humility. Fashion prances in with her seasonal transgressions; theology carries herself with moral solemnity" (1). And yet, as Covolo's volume goes on to show, there is a larger, more interesting story to tell.

The book's main argument visits five "sites where fashion and theology meet" (2). These are tradition, reform, public discourse, art, and everyday drama. In the first chapter, which surveys early Christian attitudes towards dress, we find a predictable concern for virtue and vice, anxiety about artifice, and a denunciation of decadence. But Covolo also highlights nuance in the tradition; rather than theologians simply rejecting fashion, we see a pattern of thoughtful engagement.

In chapter two, Covolo recruits three "unlikely allies" for fashion theology from Reformed theology: John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper, and Karl Barth. In Calvin's case, the dour picture of him turns out to be a caricature: Geneva's "sumptuary legislation"

(which regulated dress) was characteristic of the period. What is more striking is the Reformer's social concern: simplicity in dress relativized social rank, preventing the rich from covering themselves "in the blood of the poor" (26). This social dimension also concerned Kuyper, who lauded the multiformity that traditional dress displayed against the dreaded "curse of uniformity." Kuyper also had a prescient sense that fashion would become a secularizing force, itself situated by other forces. Karl Barth took up this theme as well, keenly sensitive to the ways that fashion could become hijacked by autonomous, "lordless powers." Fashion became for these thinkers a "realm where discipleship is forged (Calvin), faith advanced (Kuyper), and dark forces resisted" (44).

Chapter three, the most technical in the book, considers the relationship of fashion and theology to the public square. Here Covolo responds to two common understandings of public discourse: an intellectualist approach that seeks to strip the public square of non-rational elements ("top-down"), and an erotic approach that seeks to fashion the public square according to erotic desire ("bottom-up"). In the first case, faith is displaced by shared reason; in the second place by shared desire. But both approaches are reductive: they obscure the complex interaction of faith, reason, imagination, and identity within a secular society. The author's Kuyperian instincts shine through, as he advocates for a public square that is "properly public (open to all) and secular (free from the dominance of any given comprehensive perspective), ...a differentiated, pluralistic discussion that includes a variety of perspectives (religious or a-religious)" (60).

Chapter four explores fashion theology as art. After surveying classical and contemporary accounts of art, and where fashion fits into those accounts, Covolo turns his attention to a comparison

of theological imaginations. The Catholic imagination mines the classical tradition; it seeks transcendent beauty, the universal and eternal, which shines *through* radiant clothing. By contrast, the Reformed imagination is more grounded, interested in meaning-making and the mundane, in fashion as social action. Following Calvin Seerveld, Covolo suggests that the Reformed tradition may be better equipped to appreciate, not just the aesthetics of modernism in general, but fashion in particular.

In chapter five we get Covolo's most constructive contribution to his subject, an account of fashion theology as lived theology. Taking our ordinary, everyday fashion choices as his focus, the author lets us look through three lenses. Playing with fashion's fascination with the new, he explores our experience as creatures who live in time. Next, he turns his attention to the narrative shape of human life, how dress manifests identities "embedded in the stories that compose" our lives (103). Finally, Covolo highlights the performative aspect of fashion, our desire not just to see, but to be seen. This chapter concludes with reflections on what it might mean for Christians to "put on Christ" and "perform Christ" in their everyday dress.

I found this book to be erudite and elegant. Covolo has written a book about fashion that theologians can make sense of, while also writing a book of theology that fashionistas could read. This may be the reason why Covolo does not give us significant biblical exegesis. The sort of work that he is doing is descriptive (telling us what the tradition has taught) before it is normative. In some sense, this is also apol-

ogetic theology, clearing space, winning the right to be heard. Nevertheless, I would have benefited from a chapter that dealt specifically with Scriptural accounts of clothing, laying a foundation beneath the voices of tradition. I also found myself wondering what might be gained from dialogue with non-European theological traditions, many of which have nuanced traditions of practice and reflection, if not developed theories. But perhaps this would have produced a different sort of book.

In any case, I found the volume to be warmly Reformed, in content as well as tone. It manifests admirable editorial restraint, pushing many technical discussions to the endnotes, which take up nearly half as many pages as the main text. This careful discipline only occasionally gives way to devotional flourish, and it is fitting to finish with one of these moments: "When dealing with identity markers in Galatians 3:28, Paul challenges readers to look past race, class, and gender—all of which were identified by first-century dress. These early Christians found a deeper source fueling their identity: their identity with Christ... Life—with all its hopes and fears, sufferings and victories—is superimposed on the narrative of Christ's own life. Paul calls this activity of superimposition 'putting on Christ.' Having 'put on Christ,' one's story becomes freighted with the arc of cosmic history" (107).

Putting on Christ does not erase our cultural stories, but it does situate them, filling them with a deeper meaning, and a deep hope. Each day as we put on our everyday dress, we are reminded that we will one day be more fully clothed (2 Cor. 5:4).