

## Bespoke Words

### The Bible, Fashion, and the Mechanism(s) of Things

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This paper hopes to weave conversations from various threads in an examination of biblical passages on-and-about clothing and fashion (and the array of scholarly and interpretive communities arising from them). Biblical passages about clothing regulations, body ornament and body display are significant to many confessional readers and to many feminist and queer biblical scholars and manifest in pious, but also sharply economic and material, ways. As I read biblical text and survey some of its interpretation, I will argue that, like the clothing that we wear, the Bible is an active Thing, creating, through an assemblage of materials, concepts, and affects, social order and Subjectivity. The essay that follows will juxtapose a series of “garments” of argument. An outfit is composed of several separate but complimentary pieces, assembled together to create a meaningful, aesthetic, final whole; as follows, we shall see the final outfit of this argument emerge from disparate pieces that “mean” via assemblage.

### Boxers and Socks

With the burgeoning of scholarship on the Bible and “affect,” it’s getting that one hesitates to use the word. First, it’s fairly certain that, in biblical studies, “Affect Theory” will be methodologized, read about more than read, and over-applied. Second, and more substantively, is the risk of being positioned among work equating “affect” with “emotion.”

Affect, as I’m using it, began in the social sciences tracking responses and reactions that are automatic, pre-cognitive but persisted, in a second incarnation, in work engaging or emerging from Giles Deleuze or feminist/queer critics such as Eve Sedgwick (On a quick-and-ready review of Affect, see Koosed and Moore 2014; Kotrosits 2016; Koosed and Black 2019; Schaeffer 2019). Attending to affect is attending to how Things affect us, the automatic, involuntary, pre/pan-cognitive ways we regard or respond and how those responses are a form, themselves, of meaning. Affect is a corrective to centuries of philosophical inquiry that has stressed intent and logic, the primary mediators of agency and sentience. Affect is automatic. Affect, as I use it, is “meaning” or cognition without (or prior to) awareness (Massumi 2009). Affect is pan-human. Images, texts, music, architecture, film, animals, materials, environments, systems, theories, technologies, and beyond all have affect. So, affect, as I’m using it, not only includes, but is focused on “in-betweenness” or “becomingness.” Affect is the connection – between human and non-human animals and plants, between systems and individuals, between Beings and Things. In short: Things affect us. Indeed, merging affect and Non-Human studies (Animal studies, assemblage theories, new media, new materialism, systems theory, speculative realism, neo-vitalism and object-oriented ontology to name a few) quickens an array of complex questions about agency.

Few Things in the world touch or affect us more frequently or more intimately than clothing (Seigworth 2016). We dress to inspire (or inhibit) affect when we dress in ways to conceal aspects of our body that we deem publicly shameful, to perpetuate modesty. Clothing is public intimacy. Clothing both expresses and shapes a sense of the Self. Clothing is fundamentally affectual.

## Shirt & Trousers

The Bible speaks to clothing, making it, for many, not just an affectual or political act, but specifically also one of religious devotion. In general, one might divide biblical language on clothing into three categories: liturgical purpose; articulation of social rank (and metaphorically a symbol of distress or salvation); and concern for “modest” clothing.

Liturgically, for example, Priests wear clothing to indicate their holiness and dedication to God (including headgear and underwear. Ex. 28:1-5; 29:5-6; 31:10; 39:1; Lev. 8:7-9; Num. 20:26; Ezk. 44). Priests and (male) laity wear fringes to recall their Jewish identity (Num. 15:38; Dt. 22:12; Zech. 8:23—a practice continued in the second Temple era: Mt. 9:20; Lk. 8:44). Biblical law contains a prohibition against mixing fabrics, very likely a contemporary pagan practice (Lev. 19:19; Dt. 22:11). The cleanliness of liturgical garments is stressed (not a trivial matter in an age of animal sacrifice). Though a distinct element of modern Jewish practice, male head covering is not really present in biblical text. The current liturgical use of Yarmulke or Kippot is medieval. Women veil in the Hebrew Bible, but not liturgically (e.g. Tamar in Genesis 38). Indeed, the only Hebrew Bible veiling for religious cause is Moses who veiled his face after its resulting alteration from a spectacular encounter with God (Ex. 34:35). Ruth 3:15 (see also Is. 3:22; 25:7; 28:20) indicates women could and did veil for social reasons. Transvestitism (for either sex, liturgical or otherwise) is forbidden (Dt. 22:5).

Perhaps, in part, because clothing conceals bodies, but reveals identity. Clothing reveals an individual’s status and, as such, is also a metaphor for joy, grief, corruption or salvation (Gen. 37:3; 41:42; 1 Sam. 24:4-5; 2 Sam. 13:18; Ps. 45:13-14; Is. 3:22; Ezk. 27:24; Dan. 5:7, 29, 25; Est. 6:8; 8:15; Ecc. 9:8; Job 22:6; Mk. 12:38; Lk 15:22; 16:19; Acts 12:21). Clothing also demonstrates grief (Gen. 44:13; Lev. 10:6; 2 Sam. 3:31; Is. 2:2-4; Ezra 9:3). Grand clothing, particularly spotless white clothing, is a symbol for luxury and wealth, but also of salvation. Jeremiah enacts a symbolic prophecy by wearing, burying then exhuming the same linen undergarment (Jer. 13:1-11). Zechariah has a vision of the high priest clothed in filthy before God’s Accuser, Satan (Zech. 3).

Certainly, a central theme surrounding clothing in Hebrew Bible is the issue of modesty. Nakedness is regarded as shameful in Genesis (Gen. 3:7, 21, perhaps also, in the New Testament, the reason Peter dresses when he sees Jesus, Jn. 21:7), and a euphuism for sexual congress is to “uncover the nakedness” (Lev. 18), yet concern over immodest clothing in Hebrew Bible is concerned primarily with concealment of *male* genitalia (eg Gen. 9:20-27; Ex. 28 or 2 Sam. 6:20).

Fine clothes in the New Testament can be a sign of God's favor but are more often about haughtiness or exploitative wealth (Mt. 6:28; Lk. 16:19; Acts 12:21; Jas. 2:3; 1 Pt. 5:5). Missionaries are forbidden to carry two cloaks, and disciples are urged to "consider the lilies" and not worry about clothes (Mt. 10:10; Mk. 6:9 and Mt. 6:25-34; Lk. 12:22-32). Cloaks are to be surrendered in lawsuits, much like Hebrew law forbade keeping an overcoat as loan collateral (Mt. 5:40; Ex. 22:26). Clothing is never considered negatively, per se; Paul the apostle is a fabric worker, as are early converts (Acts 18:3; Dorcus Acts 9; Lydia in Acts 16). The forgiveness of sins is likened to clothing being "washed" pure in "the blood of the lamb" (2 Chron. 6:41; Job 29:14; Ps. 149:4; 132:16-18; Is. 50:9; 51:8; 52:1; 61:10; 66:10; Ezk. 16:10; Neh. 9:21; Zech. 3:4; Col 3:12, 26; Eph. 4:22-24; Rev. 3:5, 18; 4:4; 7:9; 19:18).

Within the New Testament there is a new disinterest in (disregard for?) fine clothing which is nearly always coupled with an interest in preservation of "modesty." There is no specific liturgical garb commanded for followers of Jesus, apart from head covering for women in 1 Cor. 7 (which is connected with issues of gender submission generically). Also, alongside a broad shift in attention to modesty and gendered hierarchy over liturgy is a shift in attention to women's dress. The two most notorious passages on clothing and modesty—1 Tim. 2:9-10 and 1 Pet. 3:3—enjoin women to modest dress specifically against *excessive, secondary adornment* (as per Rev. 19:18, a motif not inconsistent with Hebrew Bible: Ps. 31:30; 2 Kings 9:30; Prov. 5 and 7).

Most contemporary Christian groups recognize the New Testament is interested in "modest clothing," but interpret "modest" as clothing that inhibits (generally male) sexual desire. This is only a partial understanding of biblical modesty. Indeed, read closely quelling or checking sexual desire does not appear to be the primary focus of New Testament imperatives for modesty at all. Biblical injunctions toward modesty are instead found in contexts concerned with gender submission and with socio-economic status; arguably, biblical "modesty" is to restrain from dressing in ways that garner inappropriate notice or that seem un-submissive. Such includes dressing for sexual display, but, perhaps much more, dressing ostentatiously or in ways that demonstrate wealth and status.

## Shoes

The extent to which "biblical modesty" in dress is an attempt to separate adornment and display of wealth is the degree to which it is, like fashion itself, also economic and social. Alongside the food production and media industries, the clothing industry has undergone remarkable and dramatic change in the past 50 years. Fashion is intentionally ephemeral, of course, but the changes in industry are not merely changes in taste. As Elizabeth Cline discusses, the rise of low-cost, mass clothiers has altered both industry and patterns of consumption (2012; see also Cline 2019); at present, manufacturers dictate public tastes and access in unprecedented ways.

In the nineteenth century, clothing was expensive. Durably made, garments were intended to last despite heavy wear. Only the wealthy owned several unique outfits. By the twentieth century, modern manufacturing changed this. In the 1950s the average American family spent ten percent of its annual income on clothing (Cline 2012, 22) and the average

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person owned several dozen items. By our current standards of consumption, the average US consumer owns some 300 items of clothing and purchases over 100 items per year, though clothing is more cheaply made and significantly less durable. Notably, though consuming more and more items, we are paying less and less (per increase in median income rate). As Cline observes, “According to annual statistics compiled by the US Bureau of Economic Analysis, individual spending on clothing is now just less than \$1000 a year. Families spend about \$1,700 a year” (2012, 22). Our volume of consumption has increased, but spending has dropped just as precipitously.

Clothes are now made much more cheaply and rapidly. The bulk of the difference is the global effects on labor costs (Cline 2012, 42-43). Overwhelmingly, the cost of a garment is labor and mechanization matched with low-wage international production have reduced that capital investment in manufacturing; low-cost clothing has become an expectation, but it is an expectation enabled by exploitative employment practices (piecework, sweatshop work conditions, etc.) and disastrous environmental and secondary costs. Cheap fashion is, in many ways, as nefarious as factory farming and industrial monoculture agriculture.

Fashion, as a burgeoning industry, has also recently become both a social and scholarly interest. Clothing is both individual and collective, public and private. Somewhat counter-intuitively, fashion and clothing are not just about the garments we put on, but on a more fundamental level, they are about the bodies we dress and the systems (economic and political) that surround us. Fashion, as an act (or an art) is non-verbal communication (Damhorst, Miller, and Michelman 2000). This is particularly true for clothing as religious symbol and as means of religious expression. (Damhorst, Miller, and Michelman 2000 have an entire section on religion Foster 1997, 4). Yet, like many strategies of Subjectivity, fashion does all this interanimated by-and-with other social systems.

Fashion is both signifier and signified. Clothing and fashion are, I would argue, not merely a burgeoning manufacturing industry, but also are Deleuzian machines, produced by an industry and regulated by social order, that in turn produce or manufacture Identity; what we put on when we dress is a complex system of meaning-making symbols. When we dress, we participate in that system manipulating it, and manipulated by it, and this participation has real social, political, economic and environmental effect and consequence. Fashion, at least in the United States, frequently weaves the threads of Religion and Capitalism into the fabric of Subjectivity.

## **Jacket**

For example: Christian thought until the medieval era argued “to dress in excessive luxury was considered sinful, and to be dressed soberly was to be ‘impeccably’ dressed which comes from the Latin for ‘without sin’” (David 2016, 16). Fashion, however, “encouraged lustful behavior and was associated with pride and vanity, as well as the sensuous, earthly pleasures of the flesh. Such thinking is much more reflective of biblical text. Garments that distorted body shapes came in for torrents of vitriolic rhetoric . . . In Christian eyes, humans should accept their God-given bodies” (David 2016, 16). The industrial revolution, sparked Enlightenment, Colonial and later Victorian interest in the care of the body, hygiene, and in

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self-decoration, shifting attention back to bodies and the things “hidden” by clothes (which, in the Victorian era, certainly, themselves, demonstrated much about public and economic status). Clothing was covered in complex layers of embodiment (David 2016, 16).

As cheap fashion has industrialized, so have the ways religious sensibility interacts with it. Contemporary protestant Christianity, for example has sparked a burgeoning sub-industry in Christian and Bible-themed clothing, particularly casual-wear decorated with Bible or Christian-themed messages or imagery. According to an oft cited statistic, in 2009 the sub- industry of Christian-themed casual and athletic clothing accounted for \$4.6 billion in sales (note, for example and review, Nussbaum 1996), a number made more startling when one realizes the US t-shirt market as a whole was around \$11 billion. As an industry, the explosive growth is most frequently ascribed to entrepreneur and believer Michael Edwards who in 1990 started in his apartment silk-screening shirts with Bible verses and, by 1995, was co-founder of Exodus Productions with \$1.2 million annual sales (Dressler 1995; Nussbaum 1996). Within five more years, the industry had the attention of not only apparel insiders but the business community as a whole. (Jonsson 2016).

Evangelical Christians often rhetorically position themselves outside traditional fashion markets (indeed, as outsiders to many traditional markets such as music, entertainments, and film) and often avow “secular” or “worldly” products, fashions and goods are antithetical to their values (and that secular marketing ignores them). Yet the Christian apparel industry is not just performing resistance to signals of wealth or cultural awareness (or “Fashion”), it is, at times, using these systems to articulate counter identity, using models from popular “secular” culture to articulate a counterculture and mark oneself as Outsider (e.g. the “God’s Gym” design logo for casual wear). Whatever the spiritual motives, the practice is fiscally quite lucrative. Christians looking to make a public witness of their alienation from popular culture do so via consumption and purchase of pop reframed pop culture items and spend significantly in the process. They use fashion as a mechanism for deviation from – and protest of – popular culture and the fashion industry itself.

## Tie

Religion (from *Religare*, “to tie, bind; to knit”) is an organized communal way to react to what humans regard as awe-inspiring or “sacred,” according to standard definitions a la Dirckheim, Geertz, or Eliade; it is, however, also a way of mediating and regulating affect. Religion is also a system producing and ordering Things in the world around us. Religion shapes, and is shaped by, material culture and technology.

So also Bibles. In an essay, perhaps written tongue in cheek but anticipating many of the current questions behind speculative realism and Object-oriented ontologies, Hugh Pyper (1998) mused about the Bible as a selfish gene or meme. (specifically in the sense of Richard Dawkins, but perhaps more broadly). After considering the history of Bible preservation and transmission and surveying the burgeoning rate of bible publication (a trend marked even more by Timothy Beale 2012), Pyper draws from Richard Dawkins’s assertion that “an organism is a gene’s way of making other genes.” Pyper asks: What if Judeo-Christianity is a Bible’s way of making more Bibles? (1998).

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Questions such as these resonate with the current “turn” to the non-human, which Richard Grusin defines as “the human . . . characterized precisely by their indistinction from the nonhuman” (2015, ix). Such a shift includes Latour’s Actor-Network theory, Affect Theory, Deleuzian “assemblage” readings, artificial intelligence and technology/networks, new materialism (feminist, Marxist, or otherwise), systems theory and speculative realism.

Gilbert Simondon has written forcefully on the latter, specifically the congruence of human evolution and technology (2016). Humans do not biologically evolve to respond to environmental shifts or changes (or, evolve much more slowly. Note the development of this idea for popular readers by Harari 2015, 2017. See also Hayles 1999). Rather than natural selection producing the human equivalent of an elongate beak, as in Darwin’s famous finches, we develop new tools. Systems and structures and technologies—languages, religion(s), economies, political theory—are arguably also complex tools for our adaptation and growth. Witness, for just one example, our global alteration of social norms, patterns, behaviors and technology use in the wake of the unique COVID-19 coronavirus. It’s (very real) biological threat was met much more (certainly much more rapidly) by changes in social order, structure and tool use than by genetic selection. Via similar responses, over time, humans have created the material world as it currently is; we have fashioned it as bio-appendages to human evolution. To be human is to be cyborg (as per Clark 2003). These tools and systems integrate into our lives and enhance our physiology, reaching critical junctures where we both cannot live without them and cannot fully control them. They become affective and autonomous. Simondon (2016) argues the evolution of the human is the co-evolution of the tool, but it is also via adaptation of social behavior and all that goes with that—including systems and structures such as economics, politics, kinship, consumption and religion, with all their various sub-systems, “machinery” and “tools.”

## Glasses

Consider again, then, the field of Fashion. This essay has noted how clothing is integral to human society and organization, pivotal to many human activities in religion (a cultural act that many would argue is uniquely human), and, in doing so, is also in our present age highly industrialized, economic. Clothing has wrapped itself around almost all our major social systems. Were clothing a domestic, invasive or native biological organism, plant or animal, even viral, we would have absolutely no hesitation observing how wonderfully successful it was in its growth and expansion (genetically), and we would immediately credit this success to its ability to live symbiotically with humans and co-evolve (guided or influenced, perhaps, by human systemic intervention). Were my English-tailored suit my Irish setter, we would see all that it represents—where it “evolved from,” how it functions, what cultural and social mores it reflects or reinforces—in very different ways. We would see, at once, the false binary of being a Thing either (solely) acted upon or one possessing (at least genetic) autonomy, and with that glimpse, we would see the complexity of the agency of Things, the limits of the categories of “animate” and “inanimate.”

My point (in this essay, at least) is less to assert an autonomy of Things or Thing-ness (though that’s a fine line of thought), but more about the autonomy and animating agency

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(consciousness?) of *Systems*—in this case human participation with matter to form networks of meaning *as constituent parts of* technologies of survival and adaptation and to note the complicated ways that systems (capitalism, fashion, religion) interanimate and, like systems such as evolution, geological change, celestial mechanics, take on a form of sentience. If nothing further, our definitions of sentience, structure, agency and autonomy are in need of clarity, and arguments for human uniqueness or privilege need review. What if clothing, or at least fashion, *does* make the man?

So, again, to Bibles. Deleuze and Guattari famously argue for the book as machine, a device for making meaning created by an author, left for readers, an assemblage that incorporates all the author's desires and intent (both known and subconscious), the context of its own narrative, and the circumstance of the reader.

As an assemblage, a book has only itself, in connection with other assemblages and in relation to other bodies without organs. We will never ask what a book means, as a signified or signifier; we will not look for anything to understand in it . . . A book exists only through the outside and on the outside. A book is a machine." (1987, 2)

Books—Bibles—are machines, made of multiple parts (contexts, language, history, reader) for creation of other meanings, other machines. They are affective systems, not, in the end, unlike the clothing we might wear as/while/if we read them.

The Bible, and fashion, are similar meaning machines. Like clothing, like Fashion, the Bible is (after Deleuze and Massumi) a machine producing more machines, and biblical criticism, like communities of religious devotion which also read Bibles (perhaps, even, as a sort of subset of the same) is an industry of consumption and display not unlike fashion; in a strange fusion of materiality and agency, Bible and biblical interpretation shroud our body in affective tapestries, weaving themes of concealment and display, stitching and altering the material and social worlds we inhabit.

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