

introduction: the mirror moment

Perhaps you have had one of these mornings, when you find yourself standing in front of your mirror, drowning in a pile of tangled clothes. Every item of clothing you have put on makes you feel bad about yourself and your entire existence. As you toss the clothes to the ground you begin to panic, wondering if you are ever going to find something to wear and if you are ever going to get to work on time. As the shirts, skirts, pants, and jackets accumulate, you fear that you will be swallowed up by them and all the negative feelings they have created. At a moment such as this, what stings more than any disapproving word from a parent, teacher, or friend is seeing in the mirror the disappointed eyes of your worst critic—you! The power of dress is astonishing. The day before, you might have felt great about your life and future; now, as you gaze at your reflection, all your hopes and dreams have vanished.

If this is or ever has been your story, you are, like me, one of the lucky ones. Amid the inequities of the global landscape, I am profoundly privileged to own a bounty of clothes from which to “choose,” made from a variety of fabrics that keep me warm in the icy winters and cool in the hot summers. But acknowledging this only makes me feel worse about myself, by compelling me to reflect on

my vague awareness of the social inequities in the clothing industry. I teach at a liberal arts college, and in my line of work thinking is never bad, yet the questions triggered by my standing in front of the mirror overwhelm me. Along with questioning why I feel social pressure to wear this or that dress, I wonder how my dress was produced, at what cost, and to whom. In this mirror moment, I begin to wonder about the young bodies that were worn out in making my clothes—bodies that can never wear such clothing because of its high cost. Juggling all these thoughts and feelings in my head, I am completely undone by seven o'clock in the morning.

Exposing my feelings and private struggles with dress makes me cringe in embarrassment. I am well aware

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that I risk appearing to be vain and superficial or, even worse, being seen as a privileged person who does not want to feel guilty. Being vain seems to be tolerable—practically a virtue—in our day and age, if the end result is looking good and hence feeling better. On the other hand,

being guilt-ridden is often understood as a curse in that it holds one back from accomplishing all the things they need and want to do. Whatever the case, in the midst of my vanity and guilt, I have come to realize from sharing these mirror moments that I am not alone. In one of my favorite courses to teach, called Religion and the Body, we discuss how our daily rituals—such as eating, exercising, and dressing—have religious significance. The students

practically end up instructing the class themselves because they have so many experiences with these practices, all of which are connected to being vulnerable. Hearing my students' testimonies, I am convinced that everyday happenings related to what we wear and why we wear it offer insights into the complex journey of being a creature in the world with God and others.

From a Christian perspective, our ordinary daily routines reveal and call into question fundamental convictions about what it means to be vulnerable, to be free, and to be obligated to others. Referring again to “the mirror moment,” muddling through that pile of clothes might be considered one version of what Christians call the fall, original sin, or the brokenness that complicates human existence. If Christians believe we are born into patterns of daily living that restrict our freedom and the freedom of others—patterns that, if unchecked, could lead to emotional and physical pain and suffering—then reflecting on mirror moments is neither superficial nor self-indulgent. Rather, it is potentially transformative, moving us toward life-giving relations with God and others.

Clothing as Spiritual

In my Religion and the Body course, when we begin the unit on dress, students are all too happy to share their experiences of attending parochial schools and being forced into conformance with particular dress codes. Female students describe how they would defy the school rules by rolling up their skirts, and male students lament their feelings of powerlessness against the anonymity they experienced when wearing their uniforms. These examples often generate a lively debate about the differences

between attending private and public schools, focusing on which type of institution grants students more freedom to be themselves. Amazingly, students who have not yet spoken a word in class are unable to stop sharing and reflecting on their experiences. While some who attended public schools guess that they would have resented the lack of freedom to dress the way they chose, others who attended private schools are nostalgic for dress codes and

miss their uniforms. Students who liked uniforms believe that the freedom from daily decisions about what they should wear and why they should wear it allowed them to be more themselves in school. It becomes clear that students crave freedom, creativity, safety, peace, and beauty in their dress, and depending on the individuals and their circum-

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stances, some practices are more life-giving than others. Unbeknownst to themselves, through their storytelling, these students are working toward their own spirituality of dress. Most impressively, in the course of lively and honest conversation, they begin the process of what I like to call "getting naked," that is, telling one's stories and being vulnerable with others.

What my students prove during class discussion, time and time again, is that in many ways, the spiritual import of dress is already part of our everyday life. We just don't articulate it as such, for any number of reasons, including

a lack of time or interest. Without a verbal narration, our clothes tell our stories. When a loved one dies, we treasure articles of the person's clothing; we hold shirts close to remember the loved one's perfume and wear his or her jackets to feel the person with us. These pieces of our loved one's stories are as valuable to us as any relic of a saint. The way we dress also has spiritual import because it stands as our testimony to the world, witnessing to who we are and what our values reflect. As we do in prayer and in celebration of the sacraments, when we dress, we express our hope for life-giving relationships, love, peace, and acceptance.

Playing the Devil's Advocate

Some may want to question the feasibility of a spirituality of dress, skeptical of whether clothing and religion really relate. While some instances of dress clearly connect with religious issues, others are less obvious. Muslim women who veil, Roman Catholic nuns who wear habits, and Mormons who wear undergarments are all engaged in religiously charged dress practices that are clearly worthy of analysis. In the following pages, I am asking readers to consider these issues and more. Specifically, I am concerned with how—beyond reading the symbolic meaning of a single article of clothing, such as a clerical collar or a cross on a necklace—it is important to reflect on how our rituals and processes of dress tell our stories and reveal our anxieties about being a creature in relation to God and others.

Even if we agree that the topic of what we wear and why we wear it is interesting, and even if we can find examples and stories about dress as spiritual, the question

still arises as to whether this topic is terribly profound. Aren't war and poverty more important issues for Christians to deal with than fashion and popular culture? The fashion industry, while creative, lucrative, and exciting, is still an industry—a term that itself cultivates suspicion and contempt. This is not to say that any and all industries are evil, just that they are driven by profit—an end goal that does not always foster life-giving relations. It seems strange to talk about God and grace in the shadow of celebrity, where we hear constant chatter about this or that latest fashion, this or that latest diet fad, and this or that failed relationship or scandal. How can spirituality unfold in such a hollow, despair-filled world? What I attempt to demonstrate in this book is that in the midst of this ambivalence over the fashion industry, Christians are called to embrace our clothing practices as spiritual. It is precisely here on the ground or in front of the mirror where meaningful work about Christian interpretations of the human person begins.

An even more daunting obstacle to admitting the relevance of dress to philosophical and theological inquiry is what some call “the body problem”—the assumption that anything related to our physical natures and daily routines is less important than our rational endeavors. The body problem is rooted in the age-old denial of the significance of flesh and feeling and their interconnection with thought processes. From Plato to Paul, from Augustine to Aquinas, and onward to the contemporary period, with Rousseau and other Enlightenment thinkers, there has been a consistent devaluing of the body, which has filtered down to teachers and scholars. That devaluing leads to a dismissive attitude about the importance of thinking philosophically about the body. Due to lingering dualistic trends in

culture and religion, mind is often privileged over matter, reason over emotion, and the soul over the body. What is often meant by the “body,” according to such a dualistic perspective, is the flesh that holds one back in life. This view has understood women’s bodies as distractions to men and historically has seen brown and black bodies as inhuman, allowing them to be commodified and sold throughout modern times. Devaluing the body and disregarding issues related to embodiment foster a social context that understands the body as a problem, an entity that needs to be controlled and scaled. This mentality seeps into all aspects of our embodied being, and at times we feel ashamed of our shopping, eating, sexual desires, and even our dress practices. When the issue is framed in this light, it probably is not surprising at all that a bodily practice like adorning ourselves would be understood as not intellectual enough to discuss at length.

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Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, however, feminists and other liberation theorists worked diligently to prioritize thinking about the body in critical terms. They began to conceptualize the body as a powerful vehicle of communication and embodied activities as places where social power is negotiated. They began to articulate how dualistic mentalities, which subjugate the body to the mind and some bodies to other bodies, result in exploitative and oppressive social structures—including ones that subjugate women to men, blacks to whites, and animals to humans. In light of these theoretical

developments, we are obliged to ask whether in fact the body is a problem. If what we mean by “problem” is something to be avoided, overcome, discarded, or even normalized, then I do not think the body is a problem. However, if we embrace the sense of the body as a social and historical text that requires sustained attention and reflection so that individuals and groups can build life-giving relationships with God and others, then, yes, certainly the body and all processes associated with it represent theological and philosophical problems worthy of engagement.

The body problem does not end there. Now, more than ever—with the proliferation of electronic communication technology, including the Internet, social media, and texting—new challenges arise in understanding the meanings and values associated with the body and embodied experience. Some have argued that virtual life and gaming have led to a disembodied reality in which our bodies seem insignificant and even disappear. Obviously, our bodies don’t really vanish. We still have to take breaks from e-mailing and texting to eat and sleep, among other embodied activities. Nevertheless, it is fascinating to think about how we can hide our bodies behind avatars and mute our true feelings with carefully scripted e-mails and texts. In his book *Hiding*, Mark C. Taylor theorizes two somewhat opposing effects related to the phenomenon of the disappearing body: “For some people, the growing detachment from the body holds the promise of realizing the ancient dream of immortality; for others, the apparent loss of the body and eclipse of materiality are further symptoms of alienation.”¹ In an effort to bring back their bodies into existence and rewrite their stories, many people, according to Taylor, are turning to body art: “Tattooing represents the effort to mark the body at the very moment it is

disappearing.”² Attentiveness to such embodied rituals and the stories they tell is an important component of developing a spirituality of dress. With each shirt, surgery, diet, piercing, and tattoo or even decision to go naked, we reveal our stories. We communicate values, ethics, and identity, along with hopes, dreams, and anxieties—all dimensions of existence that are most worthy of study and discussion.

One final red flag I want to acknowledge when analyzing the philosophical and religious meaning behind our clothing comes from an almost contradictory position: that only the elite have time to think about these body issues. Interestingly, when juxtaposed with one another, these challenges seem to contradict one another. The first argues that a spirituality of clothing is not academic enough, while the second claims that only academics have time for such queries. It is not that the body is elite, but rather that the study of it and its related social practices is an activity available only to privileged individuals. That is an important issue indeed, since if and when we do have one of these mirror moments, few of us have the luxury of time to seriously consider and reflect on what is happening, never mind ask the big questions about freedom. We are so pressured to make breakfast for our children, check our e-mail, pay overdue bills, and get to work on time that the big questions fade, and we become lulled into thinking that what we wear and why we wear it is no more than a result of our personal tastes and economic resources. Yet this book rests on the premise that while our style and finances certainly influence our clothing, when we actually do slow down and reflect on what we wear and why we wear it, we may be surprised by the answers. How we adorn ourselves reveals our feelings and attitudes, particularly our anxieties, about our relationships

with ourselves, others, God, and all the messy borders in between. While many of us don't have time to explore our mirror moments, the effort might improve our quality of life if we made time for it.

What's in a Name?

I use three terms—*clothing*, *dress*, and *adornment*—interchangeably throughout this book, since they all refer in one way or another to the act of putting on or taking off garments and other body modifications as a way to perform one's identity. The term *clothing* appears frequently in the Bible and along with the term *dress* is the most succinct way of describing what many of us do daily—put on clothes and accessories in order to participate in the social world. Beyond biblical references, the Christian imagination is full of allusions to clothing. Many Christians are familiar with stories about John the Baptist's camel hair clothing and Francis of Assisi's burlap robe. Closer to home, many female students, particularly the ones raised as Catholics, are all too ready to discuss their First Communions, specifically how they felt about wearing a white dress and veil at the tender age of seven. In each of these contexts, clothing symbolizes a different aspect of the Christian story. John's clothing communicates his prophetic qualities, while Francis's robe symbolizes the Franciscan commitment to poverty and a life of self-denial. My students' Communion dresses express a sense of purity and newness.

Another way to describe how clothing tells a story is to use the language of adornment. The connotation of the term *adornment* pushes the discussion to include the varied body modification regimens we use as part of our

dress on a daily basis. These include but are not limited to the articles of clothing we put on and how we arrange them, hair care and style, cosmetics, accessories, dieting, weight training, plastic surgery, hygiene products, perfumes, dental care, nail and skin care, jewelry, piercing, tattooing, and circumcision. The borders between our bodies and our dress are becoming increasingly murky, especially with the rise of tattooing and piercing in global capitalist cultures, to the extent that some theorists have referred to this enmeshment between body and dress as movement toward cyborg being.

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Advances in communication technology further what is meant by clothing. Mobile phones, BlackBerry devices, iPods, and Bluetooth devices are all part of one's dress or adornment. We decorate our bodies in ways our grandparents and parents might never have imagined. Some "bedazzle" their phones with crystals and other accessories. Our clothing is made to suit our technology. For example, now there are shirts and sleeves available to accommodate one's iPad and smartphone.

In his famous text, *The Psychology of Clothes*, J. C. Flugel claims that when we adorn or decorate ourselves, we signal who we are and what our values are, communicating publicly our most personal stories and our deepest anxieties, making dress an "extension of our bodily self."³ At the same time, when we tell someone we like his or her outfit, we are usually commenting on the person's whole

look, extending to how that look performs the person's identity—the way tattoos complement clothing, the way hair complements makeup. Whether we are preschoolers playing in our mothers' closets, tweens celebrating Halloween, or adults getting ready for work, we all in a way are playing dress-up. We consciously and unconsciously employ our clothing, dress, and adornment practices to reveal our identities and stories to the world.

Whatever term makes us comfortable—clothing, dress, or adornment—it is arguable that clothing does not end with what we put on, shape, or mold; it also includes what we take off or leave bare. In effect, when we get naked, we are adorning ourselves. This is an important idea to think about at the very least, because it calls into question whether there is any natural or normal mode of dress. We like to think of being naked as simply being without clothes. Sometimes we think of nakedness as symbolic of innocence, a blank script even. This leads to conflating naked with natural. There is a common sense logic to this: we are born naked, so nakedness seems natural. What if, however, we are tattooed, pierced, or circumcised—are we still naked or natural? Is a shaved naked body natural? How has the proliferation of plastic surgery changed the face of what is natural and what it means to be naked? When the missionaries encountered the indigenous peoples, did they think the natives were natural in their nakedness?

Following the lead of so much of the feminist theory that has shaped and continues to influence our understanding of identity, in this book I argue that bodies are always mediating meaning, in that we are never naked if what we mean by naked is “without meaning.” Even

through the barest of images, our bodies perform who we are to the world, and that meaning is negotiated between subject and other. By extension, all aspects of our identity, including our gender, race, class, and ethnicity, are wittingly or unwittingly performed. Every outfit we wear carries meaning and reflects our story, even when our dress is that of nakedness. Perhaps nakedness is a type of clothing and form of dress—it is a performance, a story, a communiqué. This notion of nakedness as an adornment practice is especially important in this book, since I begin to imagine the incarnation as a kenotic event and model for all, a moment in which God gets naked in solidarity with human beings. Through the incarnation, God dresses in vulnerability. This reading has the potential to change how Christians think and feel about their finitude, creating the possibility for transforming vulnerability from being a bad word into a good one—namely, an invitation to develop more genuine relationships of interdependence within their lives.

When we imagine a spirituality of dress, then, our thoughts travel at least three trajectories. The first is understanding that what we wear, why we wear it, and all the anxieties around those processes have meaning in culture. The second involves questioning the value of the patterns of dress we are enmeshed in, assessing which are life-giving and which lead to brokenness. And a third trajectory reenvisions the incarnation as a form of dress that has the potential to norm all others for believers. This last claim is not intended to be exclusionary to non-Christians. It rather represents one key for thinking about vulnerability as a sacred sign of God's hospitality for and solidarity with creatures.

Overview of the Book

I have divided this book into three chapters, which loosely follow those three trajectories. Chapter 1 focuses on the anxiety related to our adornment practices. Humans are faced with a paradox of having been created in the image of God and being finite, having glorious promise and being constrained by their mortality. The stress of living this paradox can be a good thing, particularly when we draw

..... on the resulting anxiety to stretch ourselves emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Reflecting on the creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2, I elaborate on how each of us in our everyday practice of dress has the option of transforming stress about human existence into a catalyst for creating life-giving relationships with

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God and others. Then, referring to Genesis 3 and the fall of Adam and Eve, I focus on the downside of our anxiety. I illustrate how vulnerability and mortality are dimensions of human existence that have become distorted into something negative and perverse—shameful signs of our powerlessness. When vulnerability is perceived this way, we dress to shield ourselves from the emotional, psychological, and spiritual stress caused by our own or another's negative judgments about our human frailties.

When directing our anxiety into something positive, we would like to think we have unencumbered freedom and choice about what to wear and why we wear it. We will

see, however, that freedom is curtailed by external stressors, including the fashion industry, global consumerist culture, and even our families. I argue that for the good effects of our anxiety to take hold, we need to be cognizant of the impact of these stressors on our freedom. Also, I claim that for a spirituality of dress to emerge, we must reenvision freedom in light of our vulnerabilities. When we embrace our limits, even through something as ordinary and mundane as our dress, a more life-giving sense of freedom emerges, one in which we are thoughtful about and responsible for our interconnections with others locally and globally.

In chapter 2, I focus more specifically on how failure to engage with issues related to our dress opens up ourselves and others to brokenness. Focusing on popular ideas about dress as a way to achieve happiness, I prompt readers to question the messages we hand down to our loved ones. By passing on hand-me-downs, such as, “If you look good, you feel good,” or the commonsense notion that retail therapy and dressing up are cathartic, I argue that we actively participate in the brokenness of the world. We pass on sin, not necessarily through our dress, but rather through our lack of attention to or, perhaps worse, our blindness to the negative implications of these hand-me-downs. Christian discipleship depends on struggling against these patterns of blindness, or what an important Roman Catholic theologian named Bernard Lonergan called *scotomas*, in an effort to recover from the decline associated with our anxiety about mortality.⁴

Next, shifting from the personal to the political, I ask what, if anything, is sinful about our contemporary practices of adornment in a global world. Taking on the issue of where our clothes come from, I analyze how sin and

grace manifest uniquely in everyone's adornment autobiography. As in the previous section, I invite readers to reflect on their own dress experience—this time with an eye toward global justice. The results of this self-story time will vary. For example, tracing one's clothing to a company that employs child labor stimulates a profoundly different reaction than tracing one's dress to a company in which the workers make a living wage. Telling one's own story related to what one wears and why one wears it is an important step toward embracing vulnerability locally and globally.

In the third chapter, I rethink trajectories in scripture and tradition that foster engagement with serious questions about our how our daily regimens of dress influence Christian discipleship. In particular, I explore moments in our dress that call us to be hospitable to and in solidarity with others in need. Scriptural passages on exodus and exile, biblical and popular narratives about Jesus' parents (Mary and Joseph), and snapshots of Jesus' other-oriented activity in the Gospels all reveal a sense that human beings are not just born vulnerable but called to embrace their neediness as a way to create community. Most intensely, however, I highlight Christian claims about the incarnation as a form of dress. For believers, when God becomes human in the person of Jesus Christ, he exposes himself, gets naked, and takes on human vulnerability. In the last pages of the book, I hope to convince readers that Christians are called to bear witness to the incarnation by being thoughtful about and committed to the importance of vulnerability in their adornment practices. I hope to demonstrate that “getting naked” with Jesus, or embracing our vulnerability, is our only hope at creating life-giving relationships with God and others in

the global world. Stephanie Paulsell's work *Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice* comes to mind here, as she asserts that being human in a way that engenders life-giving relationships in local and global contexts depends on embracing our "sacred vulnerability," our limits, all the while being oriented toward God.⁵

Moving from theory to practice, I then ask how Christians might embrace vulnerability concretely in their everyday lives, to the point of making vulnerability fashionable. People need to buy into the importance of embracing their sacred vulnerability in order to transform the sinful patterns of consumption, debt, and exploitation that characterize our current adornment practices worldwide. Some individuals and groups are already doing this. One example is TOMS Shoes. For each pair of shoes it sells, TOMS donates a pair of shoes to a needy child. And SweatFree Communities is an organization that supports workers in sweatshops worldwide in an effort to transform the global economy and enact just practices. Making vulnerability fashionable opens us up to these possibilities and more.