

Theology Talks Fashion: A Conversation with Alberto Fabio Ambrosio

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The combination of religion and fashion might sound striking to the ear, however, fashion drew inspiration from religious vestments, iconography, and symbols since its early days. On numerous occasions, designers also used fashion to criticize religious laws, institutions and figures. On the other hand, only in the very recent years have we witnessed religion's growing interest in fashion.

Alberto Fabio Ambrosio is a professor of theology and history of religions at the Luxembourg School of Religion & Society, directing a research project on the interactions between fashion and religion on the one hand, and between clothing and religious identities on the other. As a priest in the Dominican order, he is one of the very few ecclesiastical figures addressing the relation between fashion and religion within an academic context. His bibliography on the topic includes multiple books and articles. *Dio Tre Volte Sarto* (God Three Times a Tailor)¹ published in Italian in 2020 has been translated to French and Turkish and will be translated to Arabic and English. *Moda e Religioni* (Fashion and Religions)² published in Italian in 2022 will be translated into English. His articles include "Come vestono gli uomini di Dio, tra mistica islamica e cristiana" (How men of God Dress, between Islamic and Christian Mysticism)³ published in 2018, "Un islam à la mode? Mystique, politique, esthétique" (A Fashionable Islam? Mystical, Political, Aesthetic)⁴ published in 2020 and "Moda e Spirito. Il Vangelo delle vanità" (Fashion and Spirit. The Gospel of Vanities) currently under publication for Flash Art/ Milan.

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1. Alberto Fabio Ambrosio, *Dio tre volte sarto. Moda, chiesa e teologia* (Milano: Mimesis, 2020).
2. Alberto Fabio Ambrosio, *Moda e religioni. Vestire il sacro, sacralizzare il look* (Milano: Mondadori Bruno, 2022).
3. See Alberto Fabio Ambrosio, "Come vestono gli uomini di Dio, tra mistica islamica e cristiana," in *Tra le spade e le alcove. Tradizioni e letterature a confronto: dalla origini a Sa'di e Petrarca*, a cura di Carlo Saccone e Nahid Norozi. Collana Di Studi Indo-Mediterranei Series. (Independently published, 2019) https://www.academia.edu/43158807/Come_vestono_gli_uomini_di_Dio_tra_mistica_islamica_e_cristiana, 39–47.
4. Alberto Fabio Ambrosio, "Un islam à la mode ? Mystique, politique, esthétique," *Nouvelle revue théologique* 142, 1 (2020): 81–102. <https://doi.org/10.3917/nrt.421.0081>.

His article “Invisible Dress: Weaving a Theology of Fashion”⁵ published in 2019 touches on the absence of a theology of fashion. According to Ambrosio, theology is “concerned with articulating thoughts about God, the created order, and God’s relationship with the whole created order from a standpoint of faith”. He adds that theology tackled dress throughout history as a part of the created order, while neglecting the modern manifestation of dress which is fashion. Ambrosio however does not think the naked versus the veiled body should be the major focus of Christian theology, rather dress and fashion should be considered metaphorically as tangible evidence of the existing but invisible God. In more concrete terms, he invites Christian theology and ethics to address fashion’s complex dimensions. He is an advocate of theology addressing the aesthetics of fashion, considering whether fashion is a natural process of humanization just like incarnation through which God assigned human characteristics. This idea is further developed in *Moda e Religioni*.

The feedback Ambrosio received on his fashion related publications, especially from fellow theologians, was positive although some were surprised due to the novelty of the topic and the discipline in general, which Ambrosio is founding. Fellow theologians were generally supportive, in fact Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi wrote the preface of *Dio Tre Volte Sarto*. The positive reactions at this specific time are not coincidental according to Ambrosio, because the recent dilemmas in Europe around banning the veil and other religious symbols, and the idea of modest fashion invoked placing religion and fashion within the same setting. “This is the moment of fashion and religion” exclaims Ambrosio. “Twenty years ago, it would have been very exotic, but not now it is not so since Europe and western countries faced the question of modest fashion, like the veil for instance. Modest fashion as a market in western countries provoked reflection on the topic”.

On whether the Vatican authorities are now more accepting of fashion due to the latter’s increasing power, Ambrosio explains that the subject is complex and multi-faceted. His research findings show Catholic voices, including priests, preaching against fashion in its beginnings during the sixteenth century. However, these views did not represent the Vatican, rather the prevalent thought and culture of the era. Other moralists, unrelated to the church, also criticized fashion in the sixteenth century. Furthermore, the Vatican authorities never released any official statement attacking fashion, according to Ambrosio, on the contrary Pope Pius XII stated in 1957 that the Catholic Church is not against fashion. This statement might seem contradictory to *L’Osservatore Romano’s* (the daily newspaper of Vatican City State) declaration in 2008 accusing journalism of trivializing Pope Benedict XVI by listing his fashion branded belongings. Ambrosio clarifies that the Vatican’s response, although not an official statement by the pope, was meant to defend the pope’s image from accusations of mundanity and expensive material acquisitions and was not a response against fashion as such. The *Osservatore Romano* refuted accusations of the pope being materialistic while like any other priest, he took vows of modesty and poverty. A similar story covered by the media was about the Italian Bishop Domenico Mogavero’s wearing vestments designed by Giorgio Armani in 2011.

“If you want my opinion as a priest, I see the possibility to at least explore the idea of redesigning some ecclesiastical vestments because we need this” answered Ambrosio. “But all these reflections lead us to the question of what fashion is; the idea of fashion is quite fluid because we also have ecclesiastical fashion that could be perceived as mundane by some. Fashion is to a great extent an industrial system nowadays and the Church would be against it in terms of its consumerist aspect, but fashion is also a system inside the Church”.

On the relation between ecclesiastical vestments as a marker of religion and identity, Ambrosio answered from a personal experience as he often does not wear ecclesiastical dress, although he does not mind wearing his religious habit during prayers. In *Moda e Religioni* he explained that dress is not just a material object but also “a performative action [creating] the inner identity”. A clergy’s religious habit becomes not only a uniform but a manner of behavior, and the more it is worn the more it influences the creation of a certain identity. The crucial question for him is how to manage the inner habits (identity) without the outer habits (dress). While Ambrosio understands the motivation of some consecrated people (monks, nuns, sisters and brothers) wearing the traditional habit- hoping to remind people of

5. Alberto Fabio Ambrosio, “Invisible Dress: Weaving a Theology of Fashion,” *Religions* 10, 7 (2019): 419.

God's presence in the public spaces— although their orders do not oblige them to wear it (the practices are very different from liberal to conservative), he has a different opinion.

“When you wear a religious habit as a reminder for society in the public space, you also declare what you think about society which is a sort of moral judgement. This approach holds two assumptions: that the wearer is different from others and is reminding them of something, and that the habit wearer does not want to be part of that society as it is”.

Ambrosio referred to Diognetus' Letter from the second century showing Christians dressing similarly to other communities, in addition to official discourse of the church in its first centuries directed towards priests. This discourse asked priests not to wear different clothes from lay people, but this discourse changed later. These cases, according to Ambrosio, show that “fashion and the Church have not always been as we imagine them today, even for religious vestments”. Ambrosio personally buys clothes created by certain fashion brands because this is what is offered in the market, but like other clergy would not wear high fashion because luxury is prohibited for consecrated people because high fashion is considered counter sobriety. At the same time, he does not encourage wearing fashion sold for low prices while exploiting people and polluting the environment.

Ambrosio's publications encourage theology and religion to address contemporary issues related to fashion like sustainability, environmental footprint and workers' rights. Ambrosio thinks Christian authorities in general are excellent platforms for raising awareness about these issues to people who might not be exposed to them in other contexts. Although this is not yet the case, Ambrosio adds that Judaism, Christianity and Islam as institutions are beginning to be more sensible to these topics. While fashion was not shy to shed light on downsides of the religious institution for years, now religion and theology are also reflecting on the upsides as well as the downsides of the fashion industry and system.

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