This study pioneers the intersection of theology and the emerging discipline of fashion theory. Rejecting accounts that characterize the two disciplines as estranged, the study argues theology and fashion theory have reason to consider the other of consequence. This thesis is carried out in three movements. First, by way of assessing the emerging field of fashion theory (Chapter 1). Next, by reexamining and reframing theology’s historic relationship to discussions on dress and fashion (Chapters 2 & 3). Finally, by providing three examples of constructive engagement between the two disciplines (Chapters 4, 5 & 6).

The first chapter takes up the central issue fashion theory seeks to address: What kind of thing is fashion? Where does it come from? By what logic does it operate? Having offered a provisional definition of fashion built on two of its salient features—fashion’s relationship to change and fashion’s relationship to Western modernity—the chapter proceeds to unpack the reigning “multiple perspectives” approach driving the field. In doing so, the discussion sketches five key intersections fashion theory shares with Christian theology: art, economics, communication, the body, and identity. Given the considerable intellectual real estate the two disciplines mutually inhabit, the chapter concludes by asking if theology’s absence from the discussion is because theologians have neglected the subject.

To answer this question, the second and third chapters retrace theology’s historic relationship to (fashionable) dress as demonstrated in some of the most important thinkers in the Christian tradition. The first of these retrieval chapters (Chapter 2) takes up the Catholic tradition, a tradition which forged its understandings on dress well before the onset of (modern) fashion. In following the trajectory from Tertullian’s antagonism toward the fledgling fashions of the Roman
Empire, to Augustine’s conflicted concessions regarding the inescapable role of the City of Man in the City of God, to Aquinas’s Aristotelian inspired synthesis, the chapter reveals an increasingly nuanced understanding of the way God takes interest in broader culture. Even so, (as Catholic theologian Erik Peterson’s attempt to reclaim a theology of dress exemplifies) the tradition’s implicit hierarchies, problematic views of nature/grace, ecclesiocentric factions, and fixation on virtue, leave her inadequately equipped to answer fashion’s democratizing impulse, this-world focus, poetics of daily life, and increasingly ubiquitous presence.

The Reformed tradition’s approach to fashion is taken up in the next chapter (Chapter 3). The Reformation brought with it not only a new approach to (visual) culture, but also a new approach to fashionable dress. Among sixteenth century Protestant groups offering proposals for reforming fashion, John Calvin’s call for social responsibility and a simplicity of dress across class offered an alternative to Martin Luther’s tacit endorsement of fashion’s hierarchies and Menno Simons’ separatist anti-fashion rigorism. This same impulse to rethink fashion is further explored in Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper’s attempt to forge a distinctly (Dutch) Reformed fashion, and Swiss theologian Karl Barth’s desire to identify fashion’s creaturely status. Having surveyed these respective approaches, one recognizes that behind John Calvin’s cross-pressured approach to sumptuary legislation, Abraham Kuyper’s concern over the relationship of French fashion to secularization, and Karl Barth’s depiction of modern fashion as in league with “lordless powers,” resides a desire to move beyond the language of personal virtue/vice to address fashion as a social and political force. What’s more, in so doing, these Reformed theologians not only expanded God’s investment in everyday life, but actually pre-figure contemporary discussions in fashion theory.
Having addressed fashion theory (Chapter 1), theology’s historic relationship to pre-fashion dress (Chapter 2), and having evinced that “theological heavyweights” in the Reformed tradition took fashion quite serious within their respective dispensations in fashion history (Chapter 3), the discussion turns to the third movement of the dissertation: modeling a contemporary Reformed engagement with fashion theory. This is carried out in three constructive chapters that offer a Reformed account of the political, aesthetic and poetic intersections between theology and fashion theory.

The first of these constructive chapters (Chapter 4) surveys three different understandings of the relationship between faith, fashion and the public sphere: Habermas’s criteria of a “reasonable” public sphere free from fashion and faith; Lipovetsky’s fashioned erotics “opening” the public sphere at the expense of faith; and Charles Taylor’s reframing of faith in the secular spaces of fashion and the public sphere. By way of providing a contemporary Reformed approach to the triad, the chapter revisits Abraham Kuyper’s vision of a fashionable, faith-filled pluralistic public sphere. Here it is argued that Kuyper’s initial vision, amended in light of Charles Taylor’s concepts of “the space of fashion” and “social imaginaries,” suggests that, although not without tension, (Reformed) Christians have reason to continue to be invested as Christians in both the space of fashion and the public sphere.

This is followed by the fifth chapter, wherein the theological implications of on-going debates of whether art is fashion are explored. Rejecting both polarizing and merging accounts of art and fashion, the chapter reexamines two critical tributaries feeding the discussion: philosophical and theological aesthetics. Just as the founders of the former found their bias against fashion challenged by new approaches in philosophical aesthetics, so too classical theological aesthetics’ aversion to fashion is reconsidered in light of more recent movements in the field. By
way of detailing one such key trajectory, and in an effort to offer a Reformed theological aesthetic that provides a more robust account of fashion’s aesthetics, the study turns to the Neo-Calvinist theological aesthetics tradition. By way of retracing the tradition’s attempt to makes sense of art in the modern period the discussion demonstrates various onramps and dead ends for a theological engagement with fashion’s aesthetics. The chapter concludes by demonstrating how Neo-Calvinist philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff’s recent *Art Rethought* offers unprecedented gains for a theological account of the art of fashion.

The final chapter of the study (Chapter 6) provides a theological appraisal of the dramatic power of fashion to shape not only the world of high fashion, but also everyday life. To achieve this, the study sets its focus on three critical features of (everyday) fashion that undergird its dramaturgical quality: fashion’s imaginative construals of time, narration, and performance. The first of these, fashion’s relationship to temporality, highlights the critical role of “the new” and “the now” for modernity. The second of these facets reminds us that fashion is inexplicably bound up in the grouping of our lives into meaningful (embodied) wholes. The third facet probes the role of everyday dress in life’s on-going performances. Having identified and distilled these critical poetic elements informing the drama of everyday fashion, the chapter advances a (Reformed) theological account of these three strands. Taking them in turn, the study shows how Augustine’s aporias of time in *Confessions* 11 offer a theological rejoinder to fashion’s temporality; Reformed philosopher Paul Ricoeur lends insight into the relationship between fashion’s narrative force and narrative theology; and recent Reformed dramaturgical theology illuminates fashion’s performances as compatible with Calvin’s divine theater.

The study concludes by acknowledging much more work remains in the critical intersections between the two disciplines.