Introduction

*Fashion History Is Religious History*

In November 1988, Anna Wintour, newly minted editor of American *Vogue*, shocked the fashion world with her debut cover.¹ It featured Israeli model Michaela Bercu in a casual pose with her hair down, her eyes almost closed, and her midriff showing. She wore jeans and a black Christian Lacroix jacket adorned with a large bejeweled cross. The cover differed markedly from the norm of close-up, formal portraits featuring perfectly coiffed and made-up models. Wintour’s cover, in contrast, displayed an unfamiliar casualness for the magazine with Bercu’s relaxed pose, unstyled hair, and fifty-dollar acid-washed jeans. Bercu also, according to Anna Wintour, sported a few post-vacation pounds. The jeans, in fact, became part of the shoot because the matching Lacroix skirt did not fit. Further, the dominance of the cross symbol on this seemingly secular fashion magazine (and an Israeli model) shocked some and prompted them to wonder if it “was a religious statement.”²

While Wintour denied any such intention, she would not be able to deny that *Vogue* and the fashion industry more broadly do make religious statements. In the years since that inaugural cover, such statements have become commonplace on the fashion runway, from Gianni Versace’s designs featuring the Virgin Mary in the 1990s to Dolce & Gabbana’s collection inspired by the Cathedral of Monreale in the 2010s. Even more notable, Jesus, part of the Christian godhead, appeared on numerous items in Karla Špetić’s Fall 2013 “Faith” collection. These garments and frequent headlines proclaiming the controversies surrounding fashion’s use of religious symbols and figures in designer clothing shape the central question of this book: How did God get on a dress? Or, put another way, how did Christianity and Christian symbols become such a prominent part of the fashion industry?
Designer Data for Religious History

Answering the question of how elements of the Christian imaginary began appearing on designer clothing necessitates foregrounding history, specifically fashion history. My focus is on fashion since World War II, as this global event simultaneously disrupted the international fashion industry and introduced significant changes in the American religious landscape. However, since examinations of the relationship between religion and fashion do not appear in any significant way in either religious or fashion histories of the period, I had to turn to other historical sources. Fashion magazines, which function simultaneously as a gateway to and gatekeeper of fashion, provided a way to discover
this discourse—what religion looked like and meant in fashion over this time period, albeit from a particular lens. *Vogue* (US), supplemented by *Harper’s Bazaar*, became primary sources for constructing the broad contours of this history. In these pages, long before bejeweled crosses adorned the cover of *Vogue*, I found the writings of Catholic Bishop Fulton Sheen, advertising images of angels and churches, and haute couture inspired by monks’ cowls. These numerous instances of religiously oriented articles, images, symbols, and apparel suggested an alternative source and perspective on religious history.

I have focused on *Vogue* because, of the many fashion magazines available, it leads the way in terms of status and circulation. Established in 1892 as a New York society weekly, it became a national women’s magazine when purchased by publishing executive Condé Montrose Nast in 1909. Nast had worked at *Collier’s* and increased its annual advertising revenues from approximately $5,000 to more than $1 million dollars in ten years through his innovations, including the use of color, two-page spreads, and special issues. He brought this expertise to *Vogue* and sought to make it “the technical adviser—the consulting specialist—to the woman of fashion in the matter of her clothes and of her personal adornment.” He raised the price of each issue and charged more for advertising, as the magazine reported on and sought a high-society clientele. Nast’s counterintuitive marketing strategy worked, as the circulation of *Vogue* went from fourteen thousand in 1909, when bought by Nast, to more than 1.2 million in 2014. Today the average reader is a thirty-eight-year-old woman with a median household income of $60,536, and a full- or part-time job (almost a quarter of which are in management). The magazine now has editions in more than fifteen countries.

*Vogue* showcases the aspirational—the clothing and lives desired by many but worn and achieved by few. It presents a high-class, predominantly white and whitewashed world, beyond the reach of most readers. Yet, by inspiring and teaching these mostly female readers about a host of topics, the magazine promises the potential and proximity of this beautiful life. Issues, averaging 350 pages, overflow with advertisements and feature articles to help guide and orient the reader. Regular features include the latest fashion collections and trends, advice on health and beauty, as well as information on those making a name for themselves in the fashion industry. These articles encompass both the international
and American fashion scene, providing an American take on a global phenomenon. Alongside these fashion-oriented articles are regular stories on political trends, women’s issues (sexuality, marriage, careers), and cultural events (art exhibits, photographers, popular literature).9

More than fashion, *Vogue* sells a vision of the good life, a vision dominated by the world of high culture and haute couture. It focuses on idealized representations of and rhetoric about this idyllic realm. This makes sense, as fashion magazines hope to sell advertising space and the centrality of fashion to people’s lives. Fashion magazines are, as Leslie W. Rabine notes, “well known as instruments for consumer capitalism,” but as she and other scholars remind us, “fashion eludes a purely economic explanation.”10 While the glossy pages filled with images, articles, and advertisements hope to sell products by presenting a beautiful world in which people go to art exhibits, travel internationally, and wear designer clothes, they also encourage readers to cultivate particular attitudes and practices. Nast and his magazines, argues his biographer Caroline Sebohm, “showed Americans how to appreciate modern art, music, photography, and illustration, and in making an intellectual standard of art acceptable to society, he elevated American taste.”11 *Vogue* and other fashion magazines set the standard for taste and class. They contain a wealth of information about prescribed ideals and practices that can illuminate broader trends in American culture.

In terms of fashion, *Vogue*’s focus on the aspirational provides the researcher with a historical guide to popular trends, lauded designers, and valued topics in different time periods. As a prescriptive source, fashion magazines teach the reader “how to look,” or, to use the words of scholar David Morgan, a “way of seeing.”12 They train readers how to see and practice fashion, what to wear, how to wear it, where to buy it. Assuming a kind of “trickle-down” approach, fashion magazines rest on the idea that the fashion ideals and products set forth and associated with the upper class will eventually be imitated by the middle and lower classes.13 As such, using fashion magazines as primary source material informs scholars about what designs, values, and ideals the modern fashion industry hopes will find their way into potential consumers’ wardrobes and lives.

Yet fashion magazines do more than prescribe fashion tips and etiquette rules. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, they also teach readers
how to look at religion. They remind us that “in principle, anything, from language to the body, from book to computer, from sculpture to icon can become a religious medium.”14 When I first sat down with a hefty volume of Vogue, I wasn’t sure what I would find, but as I flipped through countless pages, I saw the concept of religion defined in terms of Christianity and mediated in multiple forms—textual, visual, and material. Words, such as “heavenly,” “divine,” “prophetic,” and “miracle,” denoted Christianity, as did symbols, including angels, crosses, and Eve’s apple. These words and symbols appeared in advertising copy and illustrations alongside feature articles and photographs on religious topics. Settings ranging from churches to mosaics, clothing designs that resembled nuns’ habits, and models with their hands clasped in prayer all evoked the Christian imaginary. From these sources, I was able to sketch the broad contours of how fashion utilized Christianity; however, they also identified central moments, trends, or designs that demanded further examination and more sources.

Thus, in addition to fashion magazines, I examined historical newspapers. Fashion columns and features provided important details about trends, designers, garments, and their reception. Newspapers also enhanced my understanding of fashion’s impact on and interpretation within American culture. Further, as Christian designs and symbols became a more frequent part of high fashion apparel, I went beyond fashion magazines and researched designers inspired by and incorporating elements of Christianity. Biographies of designers, books featuring photographs of designers’ collections, along with digital archives of these collections and videos of runway shows all became valuable resources for examining how Christianity came to constitute such a regular part of the high fashion industry. Through these additional sources, I was able to flesh out the contours of the Christianity and fashion relationship drawn from Vogue and construct a narrative that traces how God got on a dress—how conceptualizations of Christianity shifted from the textual and visual discourse surrounding fashion (articles and advertisements) to its increasing materialization in fashion (jewelry and apparel).

This book, then, is not a traditional or standard religious history. It does not privilege religious sources, recount religious debates, or foreground religious subcultures. Nor is it an ethnographic account of the religious garb people wear or what people do with religiously inspired
fashions. Rather, it focuses on how the fashion industry has constructed a vibrant textual, visual, and material discourse on Christianity—through articles, advertisements, accessories, and apparel—that exists alongside and intersects with those discourses that scholars have traditionally deemed religious. Examining fashion’s construction of this Christian discourse illustrates how the industry does more than depict angels or nuns’ habits; rather, it illuminates how fashion generates a specific vision of the Christian tradition.15

I use the term “fashionable religion” to capture this generative vision and perspective. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “fashionable” as “good-looking, stylish,” which reflects its common usage today. But “fashionable” also means “capable of being shaped or moulded.” This word, then, highlights how the fashion industry “shapes and molds” the concept of Christianity in particular ways to produce a vision of religion that it deems “stylish” and “of good appearance.”16 The fashion industry then normalizes this religious perspective and reproduces it in various ways.

Further, even though Christian ideas and images dominate the pages of Vogue and the symbols that find their way into the accessories and onto the apparel of the fashion industry, I use the broader concept of “religion,” rather than the more specific “Christianity” to capture this generative process. This choice emphasizes the ways in which the fashion industry actively shapes and constructs popular conceptualizations of religion and the religious, while my examination focuses on one particular tradition. Studying fashion does not simply provide a window into Christianity; rather, it represents an important and powerful way for scholars to examine how religions are constituted and evolve.17 Thus, I hope others will be prompted to analyze diverse fashion mediations of “religion,” even as this book focuses on how the fashion industry draws upon, reshapes, and embellishes Christianity.

Specifically, I argue that in the latter half of the twentieth century the modern fashion industry constructed an aestheticized vision of Christianity deemed fashionable. By “reprocessing” elements of Christianity—decontextualizing them from their theological and institutional contexts and recontextualizing them within the sartorial realm18—the fashion industry accustomed people to seeing it in bits and pieces. This aestheticized perspective modeled how to approach the Christian tradition
and its heritage in ways that emphasized the seeking individual over the religious institution, the sensual reaction over contextual knowledge, and the local experience over global systems. This, in turn, helped to construct a fashionable religion that envisioned Christianity as a diffuse and benevolent supernatural force that inspired beautiful artistic wonders and bestowed enchanted gifts that offered moments of awe that could transform people’s lives. It blended historical Christian elements with modern liberal Protestant values and Catholic iconography in ways that offered the possibility of being religious while avoiding the unfashionable stigma of being a religious conservative or “primitive.” As such, it provided progressive Catholics, liberal Protestants, and spiritual seekers—groups separated by a “blurry” if not porous dividing line—an alternative and stylish way of being religious.

An Altered Approach to Religion and Fashion

In foregrounding how elements of Christianity became part of couture designs and the fashionable religion produced by the fashion industry, I confronted longstanding patterns in scholarly and popular conceptualizations of the relationship between religion and fashion. In many ways, the seeds of scholarship and popular thinking about fashion were sown in the Garden of Eden. Church “fathers” and Christian theologians have labeled the events of Genesis 3 as the “fall of man.” Not only does this passage record the “original sin,” but it also makes a statement about fashion. It introduces clothing as one of the results of sinful behavior. Eve’s eating of the fruit and her sharing it with Adam produced knowledge of their nakedness. “Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves” (NRSV Genesis 3:7). The image of Adam and Eve adorned with fig leaves has become iconic, while dominant interpretations of this passage imply that in a perfect and pre-fallen world, clothing was unnecessary.

Over time two seemingly antagonistic discourses, religion (dominated by Western Christianity) and fashion, would grow from these biblically rooted seeds. Framed as binary opposites, religion represents that which is spiritual, serious, and substantive, while fashion is material, silly, and superficial. Religion focuses on the interior, while fashion
adorns the exterior. Religion focuses on the divine, while fashion centers the self. Men lead religions, while women consume fashions. Religion is sacred; fashion is profane.

Historical sources demonstrate the pervasiveness of this framework in Christianity. For example, in the thirteenth century, to deter the sins of vanity and pride the Dominican and Augustinian religious orders forbade their members from wearing coral, amber, and crystal paternosters (a string of beads used for prayers).22 Apparently, though, not all agreed with or abided by these restrictions, which necessitated admonitions against such practices. “By the end of the 15th century a reforming preacher in France was even giving sermons where paternosters were cited along with worldly wealth and mistresses as things to be renounced by the pious.”23 Within Protestantism in the eighteenth century, John Wesley, in Advice to the People Called Methodists, with Regard to Dress, urged his followers to adopt neat and plain dress, by which he meant cheap and grave (as opposed to airy), and to not wear gold, pearls, or precious stones. By doing so, he hoped to distinguish “good” Christians from the “singularities” of Quaker dress and the indulgences of “the world.”24 Similarly, Martha Finch’s investigation of the “Old Clothes Controversy” that plagued one sixteenth-century Separatist congregation shows how fashion symbolized the sin of pride for some church members. Finch explains that for congregant George Johnson “his sister-in-law’s pride was so offensive because it was so publicly and extravagantly displayed upon her body, in velvet, lace, whalebone, and gold.”25 These sources show how Christian leaders emphasized the antagonism between the spiritual and the sartorial, a trend that continues in some religious circles today.

The modern fashion industry often reinforces this interpretation. Upholding art for art’s sake and its freedom from conventional authorities, including religion and religious institutions, the fashion system frames itself as secular, progressive, and avant-garde. Wintour’s Vogue cover featuring a cross-embellished jacket, then, appears as surprising and cutting-edge, and perhaps controversial, but garners little more thought. Given the dominance of this binary thinking and rhetoric, inclusions of religion appear occasional and exceptional, rather than as part of a larger historical trajectory.
This dominant, antagonistic framework helps to explain why textbooks in both fashion studies and religious studies neglect one another. Religion remains absent from standard texts, such as *Fashion Today*, *A History of Costume in the West*, and *20th-Century Dress in the United States*. According to the indices, *Reforming Women’s Fashion, 1850–1920* mentions Christianity on one page, while the index to *Survey of Historic Costume* refers readers to religious dress—Egyptian, Greek, and Roman. These narratives suggest that the sacred realm rarely impinges upon fashion and that religion, once upon a time, shaped the attire of more “primitive” people, but no longer.

Similarly, fashion, costume, and dress occupy little more than a footnote in textbooks of American religious history, implicitly reinforcing the sacred/profane dichotomy. Book-length studies and articles on religious dress helpfully highlight the history and significance of clothing in religious life, often utilizing a Durkheimian approach that emphasizes the distinction and hostility between the “sacred” and “profane” realms. For example, Linda B. Arthur’s edited volume *Religion, Dress and the Body* examines the distinctive forms of dress donned by religious subcultures, including Amish and Mormons, Hasidic Jews, and Catholic nuns. In doing so, it employs Durkheim’s ideas as Arthur explains: “The binary opposition of the sacred and the profane are intentionally used to separate these religious groups from the larger culture.”

Subsequent historical and ethnographic studies focused on religion and fashion have challenged the dominant Durkheimian dichotomy. Jenna Weissman Joselit’s *A Perfect Fit* focuses on how the relationship between clothing and character shaped collective identity in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Joselit’s cultural history emphasizes the connections between religion and fashion. Similarly, in her article “The Robes of Womanhood” Pamela Klassen shows how nineteenth-century African American Methodist women used forms of fashionable dress to claim religious leadership and challenge white male privilege. Recent ethnographic studies, such as Emma Tarlo’s *Visibly Muslim* and Elizabeth Bucar’s *Pious Fashion*, highlight Muslim women’s spiritual and sartorial agency, as well as the
creation of Islamic fashion. Bucar’s fieldwork in Tehran, Yogyakarta, and Istanbul highlights the diverse and evolving aesthetics of Islamic fashion(s), while Tarlo focuses on the Islamic fashion scene in Britain and the complexities involved in “looking Muslim.” These studies helpfully problematize Durkheim and highlight the interplay between religious identity, dress, and fashion. In doing so, they demonstrate, as Colleen McDannell argues, “the scrambling of the sacred and the profane” that has occurred throughout the history of American Christianity, and religion more broadly.

Yet, the current scholarly lens only focuses on how religious individuals and groups use dress and fashion. It has not expanded to provide a model for or explanation of the data I found in fashion magazines, fashion columns, or designers’ collections. It does not account for numerous references to Christian symbols and elements that appeared over time and across various dimensions of the fashion industry with little comment or controversy. As a result, I kept asking and assembling a way to answer: What does American Christianity look like if we shift our attention to fashion sources?

These fashion sources provide an alternative perspective on American Christianity. In a 1964 article for Harper’s Bazaar, socialite and fashion icon Gloria Guinness wrote an article entitled “Eve and the First Dress.” She proclaimed in this slightly humorous piece that “It is Eve who started it all.” According to Guinness, a bored, intelligent, and imaginative Eve sought something more, something new. “Without thinking, but trying to do so, Eve picked a large beautiful leaf, and concentrating on thinking began to pass the leaf over her face and hair, and then lower and lower along her body, until suddenly, the hand stopped. And Eve knew. And from that moment on the textile industry has ruled the world.”

In this twist on the “fall of man,” Guinness highlights the significance of clothing, the intellect of women, and the power of fashion. Rather than lament Eve’s sin, Guinness’s article celebrates Eve’s imagination and creativity. This fashionable retelling of the biblical account provides one example of how Christianity is woven into the fabric of the modern fashion industry. It exemplifies how Christianity is a part of, not apart from, fashion.

By conceptualizing Christianity as a part of fashion, I incorporated the “scrambling” of sacred and profane utilized by other scholars, but,
at the same time, altered its focus from “religious” to “nonreligious” sources and from demand to supply. Put another way, this book focuses on fashion’s circulation of and communication about religion, rather than that of religious practitioners and practices. This shift in perspective foregrounds how religious ideas, symbols, and gestures appeared in and moved through the fashion industry. By attending to the ways that the fashion industry infused its products with dimensions of Christianity, we can see how fashion, along with other forms of popular culture, constitutes a form of religious communication. Thus, fashionable religion not only reflects existing elements of American Christianity, but it also constructs new and altered “expressive forms, discourses, moods, and modes of debate.” It shapes how we look at, see, and experience the Christian tradition.

Conceptualizing fashion as a form of communication builds on a dominant scholarly trajectory in fashion studies. This trajectory highlights not only the relationship between wearer and worn but also the ways clothing provides insights into broader culture. For example, Malcolm Barnard explains, “clothing as fashion, as communication, are cultural phenomena in that culture may itself be understood as a signifying system, as the ways in which a society’s experiences, values and beliefs are communicated through practices, artefacts, and institutions.” Similarly, Fred Davis argues that fashion symbolically conveys “images, thoughts, sentiments, and sensibilities.” Numerous studies of religion and dress rely on this perspective to understand religious practitioners; however, it has not been applied more generally to the fashion industry and the ways it creates and circulates Christian ideas, symbols, gestures, and more. This book analyzes this discursive realm.

Further, in framing fashion as communication I do not restrict my analysis to the written word. Colleen McDannell, in addition to her “scrambling” of Durkheim’s categories, highlights the importance of examining the material dimensions of religious life. She explains, “People learn the discourses and habits of their religious community through the material dimensions of Christianity.” McDannell and other scholars since have persuasively shown that “meaning production is not disembodied and abstract, but deeply sensorial and material.” Thus, throughout this book, I attend to illustrations and photographs as well as words and captions. Symbols and gestures, as well as props and...
backdrops, matter. Clothing designs and embellished garments matter. David Morgan argues, “pictures [and objects] are not merely illustrations of nonvisual events” but rather a “powerful way in which” things, including religion, “happen.” Studying these sources, then, provides us with a way to understand how religion “happens” visually and materially. Fashion illustrations, designer garments, and advertising images featuring religious elements cultivate a particular way of seeing Christianity, which, in turn, communicates fashionable religion.

A Haute Couture Vision of American Christianity

Examining this fashionable religion deepens our understanding of American Christianity in the latter half of the twentieth century. At mid-century, the idea of Christianity, its meaning, shape, and manifestations, was changing, and these changes laid the foundation for the religious shifts that would dominate subsequent decades. Robert Ellwood emphasizes that popular religion at this time focused on addressing individuals’ “yearnings” and helping them achieve personal power and happiness. Similarly, Wade Clark Roof states that “a new cultural context for religion was emerging, one in which faith was increasingly psychologized and viewed as a matter of one’s own choice and in keeping with one’s own experience.” He explains how this “expansive self” necessitates “an unending search for moments of transcendence.” In this cultural milieu, people become “spiritual omnivores” hungry for new and ever more meaningful experiences.

Robert Wuthnow’s findings reinforce this understanding, but he uses a different metaphor. He argues that religious life in the United States was shifting from “dwelling” to “seeking.” The once dominant mode and mood of Christianity, focused on the church, the home, and the nation, was changing to one of religious seeking, characterized by individual exploration and negotiation of “new spiritual vistas” that offered “sacred moments,” rather than sustained faith.

This changing religious landscape helped shape the fabric of fashionable religion even as the structures and norms of the fashion industry embellished and tailored it in particular ways. The fashion industry trained people to see Christianity in terms of extractable visual elements that could be interpreted and experienced individually in nonreligious
contexts. Roof’s description of the emerging spiritual marketplace of the time helps make sense of this interpretation. “Casting religion in subjective terms meshes well with a highly individualistic, inward-looking culture, and particularly its emphasis upon spiritual openness and expansion. Symbols are selectively retrieved and interpreted or re-interpreted, in the creation of alternative universes of meaning.” Roof further explains that this communication is predominantly visual as religious symbols are “lifted out of one cultural setting, and ‘re-embedded’ into another.” Fashionable religion communicated, assumed, and utilized many of the symbols of Christianity in ways that simultaneously reinforced, expanded, and altered existing religious trends.

Within this changing religious context, the Christianity evoked and produced by the fashion industry not only wove together these threads of individualism, sacred seeking, and visual culture but also incorporated the ethos of liberal Protestantism with elements of the Catholic “sacramental imagination.” Tracy Fessenden persuasively demonstrates how in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a “Protestantized conception of religion control[led] the meanings of both the religious and the secular.” She urges scholars to consider “the consolidation of a Protestant ideology that has grown more entrenched and controlling even as its manifestations have often become less visibly religious.” Similarly, N. J. Demerath argues that even as mainline, liberal Protestant denominations declined in the twentieth century, their values—individualism, freedom, pluralism, tolerance, democracy, and intellectual inquiry—“triumphed” in American culture. These liberal Protestant values are integrated into the fabric of fashionable religion.

At the same time, though, heavily influenced by the fashion industry’s roots in a Western Europe steeped in Catholic history, this fashionable religion also embraced elements of Catholicism. Cities such as Paris, Milan, and Rome shaped the lives of many esteemed fashion designers. Further, their rich visual and material Catholic heritage epitomized notions of “taste” and “high culture,” while also fostering a sense of sacramentality. This sensibility emphasized God’s presence and grace in the world; it highlighted how divine potential infused the mundane and material realms of life. Numerous Protestant converts to Catholicism described how “the beauty,” “the sensuality,” and “the grandeur” of Catholicism provided an “antidote” to liberal Protestant rationality.
In addition, from 1945 through the early 1960s, Catholicism became a more prominent and respected part of the American religious landscape. Historian Sally Dwyer-McNulty demonstrates that Catholics occupied a “visual high point” at this time and explains that “Catholic clothing became a fixture in the American imagination.” Catholicism’s aesthetic heritage, its more affirmative position on the material world, and its increasing visual presence in the mid-twentieth century not only influenced the fabric of fashionable religion but also provided it with a culturally familiar repository of symbols to retrieve and refashion.

By fusing the values and ethos of liberal Protestantism with the aesthetics and visual iconography of Catholicism, fashionable religion became a stylish participant in the emerging spiritual marketplace. Through supplying a familiar yet altered set of religious ideas, symbols, and artifacts, fashionable religion shaped the conversation about Christianity, and religion more broadly, in the latter half of the twentieth century. Religion, Kelly Besecke argues, is about not only social institutions or individualized beliefs but also “societal conversation about transcendent meanings.” She explains: “By recognizing communication about transcendent meanings as a primary dimension of religion, we can begin to comprehend the ‘religion’ that takes place in otherwise ‘secular’ settings such as bookstores, lecture halls, movie theaters, and cafes.” As part of the conversation, fashionable religion simultaneously reinforced and shaped existing religious trends in ways that upheld Christian assumptions and dominance even as Christianity’s meanings grew more diffuse and mainline Protestant institutions declined. As the American spiritual marketplace expanded, fashionable religion modeled tasteful ways of thinking about and adapting to the changing religious landscape. Simultaneously, the textual and visual contributions of fashionable religion provided those interested fashion followers with ways to customize and tailor their religious experiences through cultivating their appreciation of religious art or purchasing a particular product. It also offered those in marginalized religious traditions a model of what “good” and “tasteful” religion should look like if they wanted to “fit in” to the dominant religious scene.

This fashion-oriented approach to American religious history since 1945 builds on and adds to current studies of post–World War II religion.
By focusing on fashion sources, which privilege visual and material forms of religion, we can see how, as Wade Clark Roof writes, “since midcentury especially, the images and symbols of religion have undergone a quiet transformation.” Scholars and others often comment on this transformation and decontextualization of religious symbols, especially when bejeweled crosses appear on the cover of *Vogue*. Such uses are often understood as part of the diminishing role of religious institutions and the rise of spirituality—where people seek “authentic inner life and personhood,” rather than “group identity and social location.” These insightful studies utilize sources such as survey data, religious literature, personal interviews, and field observation to demonstrate this profound shift in the religious landscape. From these studies and others, we know the political, legal, and religious contours of this topographical change. They do not, however, map how God got on a dress. Put another way, they do not foreground how the circulation, meaning, and mediation of Christianity changed through the linguistic, visual, and material apparatus of the modern fashion industry. The rise of seeker spirituality revolved around increasing religious diversity, experimentation with alternative belief systems, and the creation of hybrid religious identities. However, it also occurred through and included a strong visual and material dimension not examined in the existing literature. Chronicling this neglected dimension better positions scholars to understand the current religious landscape and the multiple resources from which people are constructing hybrid religious worlds.

The fashionable religion promoted by the fashion industry is perhaps best described as idealized. Like the fashions that permeate the pages of magazines or walk the runway show, this fashionable religion celebrates beauty and wonder, innovation and enchantment. It would be tempting to dismiss the beautiful Christianity presented by fashion as nothing more than rhetorical flourishes and symbolic accessories designed to increase publicity and sales. Others might want to dismiss it as a superficial or trivial spirituality. The story of fashionable religion is not, after all, one steeped in the religious institutions (churches, synagogues, mosques), religious people (ministers, missionaries, mystics), and religious values (sacrifice, justice, depth) that scholars of religion expect and typically value. Yet, examining American Christianity through the
lens of the modern high fashion industry helps scholars gain a more complicated understanding of the numerous religious transformations that have occurred since 1945.

Reading *Religion in Vogue*

The overall organization of this book is broadly, but not strictly, historical. Each chapter focuses on a different form of religious mediation in fashion—articles, advertisements, jewelry, and designs—that emerged as prominent in a particular time period. This structure highlights how fashion’s incorporation of Christianity occurred and evolved over time. While the various forms highlighted in each chapter do not disappear after the time period under study, other forms emerged that expanded the ways fashion shaped and mediated Christianity. Examining this historical process reveals how fashionable religion became more materialized over time, as this evolution eventually included not only texts and images but also cross jewelry and then clothing inspired by religious dress and later garments embellished with religious figures. This increasing materialization personalized fashionable religion, as people could purchase what they liked and wear it on their bodies.

The first two chapters focus on the same time period but examine different sources to establish the historical and dominant ways fashion envisioned Christianity from 1945 through the 1960s. Chapter 1, “Designing New Ways of Seeing Christianity,” analyzes the most explicit and common ways of seeing the Christian tradition constructed through fashion magazine articles. These texts provide an important entry point for thinking about the relationship between Christianity and fashion, and they help outline the fashionable religion promoted. Religion-oriented articles did not stop in the 1970s, as fashion magazines addressed the Religious Right and abortion rights, as well as the rise of New Age spiritualities in the 1980s; however, their frequency did decline over time. During this same time, advertisements, the focus of chapter 2, “Making Over Christianity,” appeared alongside articles on religious topics. While more implicit, advertising utilized religious language, symbols, and gestures that reinforced a vision of Christianity, and a conception of religion, as supernatural yet sophisticated, beautiful yet attainable and practical. Such ads and visual cues continued beyond the
1960s, but in the late 1960s other religious mediations in fashion appeared on the scene. The addition of new mediations, though, did not mean the disappearance of these older forms (articles and advertisements referencing Christianity continued) but rather demonstrated the increasing breadth of fashionable religion.

The remaining three chapters attend to these increasingly material religious mediations and advance the book's chronology. Chapter 3, “Accessorizing the Cross,” traces the rise of cross jewelry as a fashion trend that occurred with little controversy through its more controversial reappearance in the 1980s. Examining the early emergence of this trend also highlights a central shift in how fashion mediated Christianity. Prior to this, fashion’s incorporation of Christianity focused on the textual and visual and constituted part of the discourse surrounding fashion. With the popularity of cross jewelry, fashion’s mediation of Christianity became more embedded in the material forms of fashion. Fashionable religion was transformed from something you could see—a church, an image in a magazine, a short story—to something you could wear in a stylish and sophisticated way. Chapter 4, “Innovating Religious Dress,” addresses fashion’s next popular religious mediation—fashion designs (forms and shapes) inspired by religious dress. This chapter focuses on when, how, and why fashion designers found inspiration in Catholicism. Beginning in the late 1960s and emerging periodically thereafter, the garb of monks, nuns, and priests inspired fashion designers, which reinforced a way of seeing Christianity based on decontextualized religious symbols and garments. Attending to this history highlights how fashion constructed visual and material ways of seeing Christianity that focused on the supernatural and experiential. Through the late 1980s, religious mediations in fashion designs referenced Christian symbols, such as the cross, or forms, such as nuns’ habits. However, they shied away from pictorial representations of Christian figures, such as Jesus, Mary, and the saints. This changed in the 1990s when high fashion designs began to incorporate such representations. Chapter 5, “Fashioning Holy Figures,” chronicles this trend toward increasingly figural representation and its predominant focus on the Virgin Mary. Examining these garments, as well as the controversy surrounding them, further demonstrates fashionable religion’s emphasis on visual and material forms. Tracing this evolution of the relationship between religion and fashion
highlights how fashion has shaped ways of seeing Christianity in the United States.62

The conclusion, “Putting God on a Dress,” chronicles the emergence of the Christian God and Savior, Jesus, as the focus of fashion collections in the twenty-first century and examines the implications of this inclusion for fashionable religion and the wider religious landscape. We can better understand the individualistic and unaffiliated trends in contemporary US religious life by analyzing the varied and profound ways the modern fashion industry has shaped conceptions of Christianity and religion. Fashion designer Coco Chanel famously said, “I don’t do fashion. I am fashion.”63 In a similar way, then, this book demonstrates that fashion does more than use Christianity; it also helps create it.