

## Threads of incarnation

By [Lauren F. Winner](#)

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I loved writing [Wearing God](#) in part because it allowed me to rove around archives (I use the term here broadly, to denote a far-reaching Christian repository—not, in other words, to denote libraries' manuscript collections) from more or less every century of the Christian past. The biblical images for God that most (American?) churches today largely ignore were decidedly *not* ignored in earlier eras. I'd love to imagine that I'm doing something startlingly original in this book, but in fact, I'm mostly doing retrieval.

For example: the book plays with the idea of—as the title suggests—wearing God, wearing Jesus; putting Jesus on. This is, of course, biblical language (Romans 13:14; Galatians 3:27), and it is theologically suggestive: it wants to take seriously the physicality or materiality of the relationship between the baptized person and Jesus in a way that many of us—especially, I think, many of us Protestants—have a hard time doing. The language of clothing, of wearing and being worn, threads throughout Christian theological reflection.

It's especially important for early Syriac writers, who were interested in how clothing could help say something about incarnation and redemption. St. Ephrem (who plays with figurative language, and epithets, for the divine more revealingly than just about anyone) put it this way: "All these changes did the Merciful One effect: Stripping of His glory and putting on a body; For He had devised a way to re clothe Adam, In that glory which Adam had stripped off." Or here is Ephrem again, spelling out God's wearing us and our wearing God: "Our body became your garment; your spirit became our robe." Maybe the catechism of Theodore of Mopsuestia makes the theological work of the figure clearest: "For our salvation, He put on a man and dwelt in him." So pondering these sartorial images is a deeply traditional exercise.

The Syriac clothing imagery is best treated by Sebastian Brock, and it was a pleasure to have an excuse to sit with his probing of sartorial metaphor. Indeed, each chapter of *Wearing God* allowed me to return to some wonderful studies of pre-

modern Christianity, like Susan Ashbrook Harvey's *Scenting Salvation*, an exploration of olfaction in the early church. And although Caroline Walker Bynum has said that she didn't write *Jesus as Mother* in order to "update and feminize liturgical language," it has been well mined by pastors, worship leaders, and theologians who are delighted to learn that biblical maternal imagery is not peripheral, and attention to it not a 20th- and early 21st-century indulgence.

Some of the richest stores of figurative language of God come, of course, from the mystics. (I am half-inclined to say "those people we call mystics," because I am more and more persuaded that the term obfuscates at least as much as it illumines.) Jan Ruusbroec rivals Ephrem in his creativity and his insistence on stretching language to see how it can be made to speak about (or, better, near) the divine: God as fire, God as abyss, God as a glutton. One of the generative tensions in the church's store of mystical reflection is that the "mystical" tradition also forcefully articulates apophaticism. It is the "mystics," along with the philosophers (an aside: why, I wonder, am I easy with the category *philosopher*, but not *mystic*?) who remind us that to try to speak of God at all is a fool's errand.

Ruusbroec himself calls for erasure. "In the possessing of God with love, a person is rid of images from within," he writes, "for God is a spirit that no one can really render in images." When you are truly possessed by God, you "will tumble into the naked imagelessness that God is." (But even that chastening apophaticism is figurative speech—Ruusbroec's *naked* returns us to the sartorial.) Perhaps it shouldn't be a surprise that the multiplication of tropes for God comes from the same place as the warning not to speak about God at all; both the warning and the insistent multiplication understand that there is no way to get it right, no way to make such speech comprehensible.

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