Culture



Actress Meryl Streep attends the world premiere of ‘The Devil Wears Prada 2’ in New York. (RNS/Getty Images/Angela Weiss)

by The Conversation

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At the world premiere of "The Devil Wears Prada 2," Meryl Streep leaned into her character's devilish persona. She wore the character's signature sunglasses along with long black gloves and a flowing red leather cape from Givenchy's Winter 2026 collection.

Streep's outfit, though, is a small moment in a much larger story – one in which Christianity and fashion have been intertwined for centuries, sometimes as adversaries, sometimes as collaborators.

While neither of the "Devil Wears Prada" movies revolve around Christianity, the invocation of the devil taps into an older moral rhetoric. For centuries, fashion was cast as the troublesome, if not villainous, enemy of a pure and spiritual Christianity – a symbol of putting material desires before holy ones. For example, 18th-century cleric and founder of Methodism John Wesley urged his followers to show their faith by dressing "neatly" and "plainly."

Yet Christian imagery has come to shape the industry in profound ways.

Christian imagery of angels and Eve

In the mid-20th century, Christianity occupied a supporting role in the fashion industry. Articles on how Christianity addresses contemporary problems by Catholic Bishop Fulton Sheen and Columbia University Chaplain James A. Pike appeared in Vogue alongside ads for makeup and fashion photo shoots.

Christian imagery also appeared in fashion advertisements featuring "Sunday best" clothing and Easter dresses. Ads showed angels gifting consumers "heavenly" products that promised beauty and ease.

The devil only occasionally played a part in ads for fashion products, such as perfumes, makeup and handkerchiefs. These advertisements depicted the devil as a snake or alluded to him and his role in the Book of Genesis. The biblical passage recounts how the serpent, typically interpreted as the devil in Christian theology, tempted Eve to sin by eating the forbidden fruit. Eve then offers the fruit to Adam, and, having both sinned, they realize their nakedness, are ashamed and make clothing.

Fashion advertisements, ranging from Revlon in the 1940s to Hanes in the 1960s, celebrated Eve's rebellious action. Revlon "double" dared women to try their "Fatal Apple" makeup so they could look like Eve, while Hanes stated, "Poor Girl! She never knew the temptation of seamless stockings by Hanes," next to an illustration of Eve holding an apple by a serpent.

Ads played with the idea of fashion as a temptation in which female consumers should indulge. Female consumers were urged to "Be Eve" and give into the desire to purchase products.

The devil was eclipsed as ads featured garden settings and products that promised "the look of Eve." Eve symbolized beauty and promised consumers the same results through their purchasing power.

A 1967 ad for the "Eve Petticoat" issued an invitation: "Come, pretty girl. Be Eve, if you wish." In that same decade, Catalina's "part of the art of Eve" campaign for their swimwear showed what this meant. Each ad featured a woman in a provocative pose wearing a Catalina bathing suit in a garden setting. By highlighting Eve's rebellion alongside her beauty, ads framed her as a fashion heroine.

An evolving fashion landscape

While Christianity appeared in industry advertisements, it also slowly began to take a more prominent role in fashion garments, as designers became more bold. Christianity inspired the design of many garments, and later, Christian figures began to appear on designer garments.

In the 1960s, American designer Geoffrey Beene, known for his minimalist design aesthetic, drew inspiration from the cassocks worn by Catholic priests. So, too, did Spanish designer Cristóbal Balenciaga. In 1967, his black evening gown with cape radiated simplicity in form and draping even as it also referenced the attire of Catholic priests.

While Beene and Balenciaga received praise for their restraint and elegance, the lesser-known London-born designer Walter Holmes created controversy with his "mini-medievals" in 1968. Modeled after a monk's robe and a nun's habit, Holmes combined Christian inspiration with the miniskirt trend, which some people found

fun, while others labeled it offensive.

Italian fashion designer Stefano Pilati's 2010 line for Yves Saint Laurent played on the attire of Catholic nuns. More recently, in spring 2020, French designer Virginie Viard's designs for Chanel referenced nuns and Catholic school girl uniforms.

Dolce & Gabbana 'Tailored Mosaic' show. (The Conversation/YouTube)

'Spiritual marketplace'

In the 1990s, the Virgin Mary and saints began to appear on garments. Prior to this, designers often avoided using religious figures; they preferred more abstract interpretations; it also helped prevent any controversy that might emerge from depicting sacred figures.

Designer Gianni Versace challenged this tacit rule in his Fall/Winter 1991 collection. It included biker jackets adorned with bejeweled crosses and, in the finale, a halter top that featured the Virgin Mary made out of a mosaic of jewels. The garment was also the centerpiece of ads for the collection and showcased the fashion potential of Christian figures.

Versace's Marian halter reflected the larger shift away from institutional religion toward individual spirituality. Christian symbols were lifted from church contexts and recirculated through popular culture, including fashion, in new ways. Versace's rock star rendering of the Virgin Mary offered people a new way of seeing her – one open to interpretation outside of doctrine. Like Versace, they could claim her and reimagine her on their own terms.

Sociologist Wade Clark Roof described the religious landscape as a "spiritual marketplace." People relied less on religious authorities and more on the meaning they could create from "available images, symbols, moral codes, and doctrines."

Religious ideas and products circulated through music and movies, crystal shops and sports stadiums, Christian bookstores and designer collections. Within this spiritual bazaar, fashion became a place where people could reimagine Christian symbols, figures and history in new ways.

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Modern-day trends

In the years since, Christianity has become a regular feature in fashion collections. Dolce & Gabbana's 1998 "Stromboli" collection revolved around a Marian procession, and dresses, tunics and blouses featuring Marian imagery.

The design duo have returned to Christian imagery several times. Their 2013 "Tailored Mosaic" line, inspired by the golden mosaics in the Cathedral of Monreale in Sicily, featured garments adorned with angels, saints and Mary, as well as biblical figures. One critic called the mix of garments the designers' "most heavenly offerings to date." More recently, in 2025, the vestments of Catholic priests inspired Dolce & Gabbana's menswear collection.

It is now almost commonplace for fashion lines to reference or include Christian symbols, themes and figures. At New York Fashion Week in 2026, YesuGod, "a luxury Christian fashion house," showcased its designs – garments adorned with the words "anno domini" and others with "the Lord is Coming."

The devil makes only an occasional appearance on the runway and red carpet. Christian figures who embody ideals of goodness and holiness – the saints, Mary and even Jesus – are the ones who rule the runway.

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