

Religious tattoos at one Christian university

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More than one quarter of Americans now have tattoos. The proportion is even higher among younger adults. Tattoos express affiliation and identity. For some, tattoos also express religiosity. Very little research exists on religious tattoos. The purpose of this study is to profile religious tattoos among students at one Christian university in the southwestern United States. We analysed 752 photos of tattoos on campus. One in five photos depicted an overt religious image or text. Men were more likely than women to have a religious tattoo. In addition, the size, placement, and direction of religious tattoos differed by gender. Men's religious tattoos were larger in size and in more prominent places on their bodies. Women's religious tattoos were smaller and in more easily concealed locations. We conclude with a discussion of the practical and theoretical implications of our findings.

INTRODUCTION

It has become cliché, nearly 20 years into a new millennium, to note the expanding presence of tattoos in the United States. One hardly finds music videos or sports telecasts absent visible and elaborate tattoos on the participants. Tattoos have become vogue. As of 2015, 29% American adults had at least one tattoo up from 14% in 2008; and the proportion of tattooed individuals in the United States is now nearly equal for men and women (Harris Poll 2016). The trend of body ink shows no signs of slowing. To the contrary, young Americans are flocking to tattoo parlours. Nearly half of Millennials (47%) have a tattoo (Harris Poll 2016).

Sanders (1989) anticipated this movement by noting the affiliative effect of wearing a tattoo. Subsequent ethnographic observation and analysis of tattoo subcultures discuss examples, stories, and group dynamics that reduce the stigma of body modification and move the practice towards mainstream prevalence (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Kosut 2000).

Armstrong (1991) was among the first to recognise that

career women were acquiring tattoos, though most were 'veiled' by clothing. Ethnographic reports further refine the manner and meaning of tattoos among women (Mifflin 2013; Yuen-Thompson 2015).

Empirical studies indicate significant de-stigmatisation of tattoos. While religiousness correlates with reduced underage drinking, drug use, and promiscuity (Adamczyk 2012), it now seems to have no association with an interest in or procurement of tattoos (Koch et al. 2004). Specifically, the association between norm-breaking deviance and body art requires a greater number of tattoos or the entrée of the acquirer into the milieu of intimate (genital/nipple) piercings (Koch et al. 2010). Moreover, survey respondents increasingly report acquiring tattoos while on a quest for uniqueness and emotional autonomy (Armstrong et al. 2009; Tiggemann and Golder 2006; Wohlrab, Stahl, and Kappeler 2007). Spirituality is part of that quest for some tattooed individuals. In 2015, 19% of tattooed adults in the U.S. reported that having a tattoo made them feel more spiritual (Harris Poll 2016). The popularity of tattoos is rising, even within religiously conservative groups. More than a decade ago, religious studies scholar Marie Griffith (2004, 243) observed: 'Tattoos, once reviled by mainstream Anglo-Americans as seedy, low-class, and even satanic, now enjoy a refurbished reputation and are all the rage among growing segments of evangelical youth culture.' Professional organisations with names like the Christian Tattoo Association and the Alliance of Christian Tattooers now advocate faith through body ink.

Despite the normative entrée of tattoo acquisition into U.S. culture, there is a dearth of research on the extent to which body art expresses one's religiousness or faith. We are aware of only four published studies focusing specifically on religious tattoos (Jensen, Flory, and Miller 2000; Kluger 2012; Koch and Roberts 2012; Maloney and Koch 2020). None of these studies includes any visual images of the religious tattoos themselves. This inattention to religious tattoos is surprising given the enlarging literature on the meaning

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of body art and connections among sense of self, identity, and tattoo acquisition (Lane 2014). After all, sense of self, identity, and meaning are central to religious expression.

Late adolescence and early adulthood are a stage of development where one's religiousness becomes more self-actualised (Dillon and Wink 2007; Fowler 1994). Interest in, and acquisition of, tattoos occur at about the same stage of development, for reasons associated with opportunity – getting a tattoo generally requires reaching age 18 – in addition to cohort effects and peer association (Roberts et al. 2006). Given this convergence of life-stage deliberation and action regarding both religious identity and self-expression using body art, we explore the manifestations of overtly religious tattoos among college students. Since we now know tattoos are not an especially robust indicator of rebellion, we wonder the extent to which their acquisition might rather be an expression of faith.

The purpose of this study is to profile religious tattoos at one Christian university in the southwestern United States. We analysed 752 photos submitted by students for an Introduction to Sociology course assignment in fall 2016 and spring 2017. With these photos, we examined the prevalence of religious tattoos and gender differences in religious tattoo size, location, and content.

A RATIONALE FOR RELIGIOUS TATTOOS

Expressing ones' religiousness, and acquiring a tattoo, may be seen as parallel social-psychological dynamics. Building on the research of Jensen et al. (2000), we conceptualise this in three ways. First, religion and body art are marks of affiliation or 'group identity' (Jensen et al. 2000, 26–27). Second, adorning oneself with religious symbols and acquiring tattoos are strategies for the presentation of self and demonstrating one's identity ('individual expression,' Jensen et al. 2000, 27). Third, religious behaviour and tattoo acquisition/presentation are reminders of identity, transformation, or healing. Jensen et al. (2000) did not distinguish between religious tattoos as presentations of identity and reminders of identity. We believe this is an important distinction, as we argue below. Further extending prior research, our study includes an embedded exploration of how religious tattoos differ by gender.

Affiliation

Visible symbols and markings indicate membership and affiliation. Religious symbols – crosses and other

constitutive designs – are used in jewellery and apparel to signal religious ethnic heritage, affiliation with major religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, etc.) as well as affiliation with religious organisations such as denominations and congregations. Acquiring religious art and maintaining religious traditions – ritual, dance, food and the like – further identifies affiliation and membership throughout families and friendship networks (Christ 2016).

Tattoos likewise connect people to some larger social category or group. Tattoos are historically tribal (Lombroso 1896; Sinclair 1909). Polynesian and North American indigenous tribal societies wore tattoos. Into the twentieth century, body art distinguished sub-cultures including street gangs, bikers, and, members of military Special Forces and other similar groups (Phelan and Hunt 1998; Schonberger 2009). In Latin America, tattoos continue to carry deviant connotations. Tattoos mark gang members, which religious organisations combat by providing tattoo removal for religious converts (Brenneman 2012). A popular Catholic priest in Los Angeles, California, also offers tattoo removal to those wishing to cut ties with the gang attachments of their past (Boyle 2010).

The embrace of tattoos by religious people in the United States is a relatively recent development (Griffith 2004; Winner 1999). It has a much longer history in other parts of the world. For centuries, Egyptian Christians (*Copts*) have set themselves apart from Muslims by getting a small cross tattoo, typically on their right wrist. The Coptic cross tattoo works like an entry badge to get into Christian churches and Christian schools in a country where religious tensions can spur violence. Interreligious rivalries may not drive ingroup/outgroup distinctions in the U.S. as they do in other countries, but religions and religious groups remain a source of belonging for many Americans. We expect religious tattoos to express these affiliations.

Presentation of Self and Identity

Tattoos do more than depict affiliations. Their principal appeal is more personal. Tattoos are an expression of individuality and identity (Kang and Jones 2007). For tattoo enthusiasts, the body is a propriety canvas on which they can record and retell the stories that define them (Velliquitte, Murray, and Evers 2006). Religious faith is part of the life-story for many Americans.

Religions have rites of passage to socialise adherents into a religious identity. In Christianity, the Sacrament of Holy Baptism is the initiation ritual into the

Christian Church. The liturgy concludes with these words or others to similar effect: 'Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever' (Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship 1978, 124). While the ritual may be metaphorical with the sign of the cross inscribed in water or oil, the symbolism for tattooing is pregnant. A cruciform etched into the skin with the permanent ink of a tattoo needle takes this sign of affiliation to a deeper level of personal identity.

Erving Goffman's (1959) classic work on impression management conceptualised the personal link between demonstrating religiousness and displaying a tattoo. Impression management involves presenting oneself in a rehearsed way for specific effect. Clothing, adornments, even pocket trash, send intended messages through the rehearsed – front stage – performances when interacting. Conversely, when the performance is over, individuals drop out of character and become less scripted in manner and behaviour.

Religious behaviour and affect have been similarly conceptualised as 'Extrinsic' and 'Intrinsic.' Extrinsic religiosity essentially involves playing for effect. Attending worship or other religious gatherings is something of a means to an end. This involves, among many other things, networking, being seen by others, creating an impression for some material gain (Allport and Ross 1967). Conversely, intrinsic religiosity involves religious belief and practice that is largely learned and expressed for its own sake (Whitley and Kite 2010).

Body art acquisition, motivation, and display involve similar dynamics. Visible tattoos generate impressions. Colourful displays of visible tattoos may become the lead mechanism by which individuals show others who they are (DeMello 2000; Yuen-Thompson 2015). Tattoos also often are used to convey information about what the wearer would like others to know about them as they move about in public, simply being observed or inviting conversation and questions (Kosut 2000).

Goffman (1967) refined the concept of impression management with a discussion of 'face.' We would contend that a tattoo – especially one that is explicitly religious – exemplifies first what Goffman termed 'line.' That is, 'a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which (one) expresses (his/her) view of the situation and (self) evaluation' (Goffman 1967, 5). A visible tattoo with explicit religious meaning amplifies being 'in line' as an individual and shows 'face.' The tattoo expresses an intentional, and intentionally positive, self-expression – a good showing.

A Reminder of Identity or Transformation

Not all tattoos are for public display however. Research indicates that individuals obtain tattoos to commemorate achievements, remember losses, evoke memories, or inspire perseverance. Tattoo acquisition often signifies a pivot point within individuals' life-stories or identity development (DeMello 2000; Sanders and Vail 2008). Koch and Roberts (2012) and Maloney and Koch (2020) describe parallel socio-emotional dynamics among their respondents who obtained and described tattoos that were explicitly religious.

Obtaining tattoos to reflect memories, transitions, healing and triumph appears more common among women (Sanders 1991; Yuen-Thompson 2015). Similar to breast cancer survivors who obtain a tattoo to celebrate recovery and/or replace a physical loss, women who have survived a suicide attempt sometimes use tattoo acquisition to signify recovery and transform the meaning of emotional losses (Koch, Roberts, Armstrong, and Owen 2015). Tattoos can also signify private struggles or self-reflective motivation to change behaviour (Koch, Armstrong, Roberts, and Owen 2015). For example, a specifically religious tattoo, visible or private, signifies the permanence of faith or practice, may reflect penitence, or, because the process is painful, show an inner strength and deep commitment to what is signified (Koch and Roberts 2012).

The direction that a tattoo faces gives powerful clues about audience and identity. Psychologist Sam Gosling (2008, 16–17) explained that tattoos can be other-directed identity claims (facing out, as most do) or self-directed identity claims. He described the tattoo of a friend named Amanda. It was the outline of her home state tattooed on her inner forearm. To Gosling, it appeared upside down. This is because it was oriented to be seen by Amanda as a reminder of her home state. Gosling advised that paying attention to the location is important for deciphering identity claims: 'Placement determines the psychological function that the clue serves' (p. 17). This is a strategic insight for analysing religious tattoos. A tattoo of a favourite animal or the logo of a favourite sports team likely will face outward as an other-directed identity claim, whereas a tattoo of religious text or a religious image may function as a self-directed identity claim that encourages the tattooed individual to live in accordance with her faith. We suspect that religious tattoos often serve this function of self-directed identity claims.

DATA

We analysed tattoo photos taken at one mid-sized, religious university in the southwest. The university was founded as a Baptist liberal arts college. It grew to be a national university with over 17,000 students. While faculty are required to be Christian or Jewish, no such stipulation is required of students. Nevertheless, university enrolment data for 2017 show that 90% of students are affiliated with a Christian denomination. The university's students are largely though not exclusively evangelical Protestants; Catholics constitute 16% of the student body and 12% come from mainline Protestant backgrounds such as Episcopalian, Methodist, or Presbyterian. Photos used for analysis came from students in an introductory sociology course in fall 2016 and spring 2017. Students participated in a semester-long research project in which they took photos of tattoos on campus and wrote a series of papers that applied sociological concepts of status, group, stratification, and social institutions (Dougherty, Kane, and Wilkinson 2017). We used 752 photos submitted as part of one assignment in which students analysed tattoos by gender. From the photos, we coded religious tattoo (yes or no), size (small = 1 inch by 1 inch or smaller; medium = 3 inches by 3 inches; large = larger than 3 inches or more than one quarter of an arm or leg), location on the body, direction of tattoo (facing owner or facing out), and religious content (image, text, or both image and text).

Our coding of religious tattoos focuses on overt religious symbols or words. Some tattoos could have religious meaning for the owner that is not immediately obvious to viewers. In addition, data collection relied largely on visible tattoos, which owners were willing to have photographed.

FINDINGS

Overall, 58% of the photos were of women and 42% were of men. Tattoos with overt religious content appeared in 145 photos (19% of the total sample). Since coding tattoos as religious or not involved a subjective evaluation, we had two researchers (one of the authors and a graduate research assistant) code the photos separately. There was 95% agreement in the two sets of coding. We also computed Cohen's Kappa statistic to gauge inter-coder reliability. The Kappa value was 0.84, which indicates strong agreement (McHugh 2012).

More men in our photos had religious tattoos than women. Twenty-three percent of men had a religious tattoo in contrast to 17% of women. The size and

location of religious tattoos also differed by gender. Religious tattoos of women were small (69%), even smaller than non-religious tattoos (50% of non-religious tattoos were small). The wrist (23%), foot (18%), and back (18%) were the most frequent locations of religious tattoos for women. Figure 1 displays a typical size and placement of religious tattoos for women in our photos.¹ Contrary to prior research (Atkinson 2003), none of the women in our photos had tattoos on the lower back. Ample photos showed women's tattoos in other concealed places (e.g. back, torso, and stomach), but lower back tattoos were noticeably absent. The sexualised connotation of 'tramp stamp' tattoos may lead religious women to avoid body art on this location of their bodies.

Religious tattoos for men were more likely to be large (61%, as compared to 44% of non-religious tattoos that were large). Upper arm (26%), forearm (21%), and back (19%) were the most prevalent locations on the body for men's religious tattoos. Figure 2 displays a typical size and placement of religious tattoos for men in our photos.

We coded tattoo content into three categories: image, text, or both image and text. The content of religious tattoos did not significantly differ by gender. By far most common was the use of religious imagery without any text. Half (51%) of the religious tattoos in our photos were images. As seen already in Figures 1 and 2, a cross was the most common religious image in our photos. Out of 145 photos of religious tattoos, 88 (61%) contained an image of the cross. These images ranged from simple, one colour, line drawings to elaborate, multi-coloured, three-dimensional depictions. Figure 3 shows a religious image characteristic of Catholicism. It is the Virgin Mary on a man's forearm. Tattoos of the Virgin Mary were not plentiful in our sample, but they



FIGURE 1. Small cross tattoo on wrist of female college student.



FIGURE 2. Large cross and scripture tattoo on the arm of male college student.



FIGURE 3. Virgin Mary tattoo on the forearm of male college student.

were present. Hence, Figure 3 hints at variation in religious affiliations and beliefs within this Christian university.

More than one quarter (28%) of religious tattoos in our sample were exclusively text. They included Bible references (Exodus 3, II Corinthians 5:7, etc.), religious phrases ('walk by faith'), and even complete Bible verses. Figure 4 displays half of Psalm 46:5 on a woman's upper back. We counted 14 different books of the Bible referenced in the photos. A slight majority were New Testament references. The Old Testament book of Psalms was most popular however. Six photos showed a reference or passage from a biblical Psalm. Interestingly, the verse seen most often was Proverbs



FIGURE 4. Bible verse tattoo on the back of female college student.

31:25. Four women had tattoos referencing or stating this verse, which comes from a section in Proverbs describing 'a wife of noble character.' One woman had the entire verse tattooed in a cursive script over her right shoulder blade. Her tattoo, from the New Living Translation of the Bible, read:

*"She is clothed with strength
and dignity and laughs without
fear of the future."
Proverbs 31:25*

Another woman had the same text without the scripture reference tattooed on the side of her torso. Several men also had full Bible verses tattooed on their back, upper arm, or forearm. No more than two men had the same Bible verse or reference in our photos. None had Proverbs 31:25.

Religious images and text comprised 21% of religious tattoos. A cross and a Bible reference (or verse) were a routine pairing, as shown above in Figure 2. Flowers or hearts also accompanied Bible references in some tattoos, mainly for women. Photos reveal impressive artistry surrounding Bible verses. Figure 5 is an example. The text of Psalm 91:11 about angels 'guarding you in all your ways' appears on a man's right bicep. The imagery framing the verse and covering the man's outer arm and shoulder represents an angel wing. Another recurring example of religious images with text were commemorative. Several men had large crosses on their back or arm with the words 'In Loving Memory ...' and a name.

One of the most interesting discoveries in our analysis was the directional orientation of religious tattoos. Religious tattoos were more likely than non-religious tattoos to face the owner. One quarter (26%) of religious tattoos faced inward as compared to 18% of



FIGURE 5. Angel wing and Bible verse tattoo on the arm of male college student.

non-religious tattoos.² The Bible verse on the man's bicep in Figure 5 illustrates this point. The position of the arm against his side makes the verse not readily readable to others. It is a message for him. Tattooed wrists and forearms similarly were oriented towards the owner. Figure 6 shows a tattoo on a woman's wrist that says 'i am His' with a heart symbol. The capital H in 'His' signifies that this is a statement of belonging to God, rather than a message referring to a past or present boyfriend. The inward-facing



FIGURE 6. Inward-facing religious tattoo on female college student.

direction of religious tattoos is important, but we must reiterate that most tattoos in our photos (81%), religious and non-religious, face outward. There was no major difference between men and women in the direction of their tattoos.

CONCLUSION

The rise of religious tattoos and professional associations that promote this type of body art represents a stark break with the past. Religious tattoos are a fascinating, but understudied, social phenomena. Analysing 752 photos of tattoos at one Christian university, our study is the first to document the size, placement, and content of religious tattoos. In the closing paragraphs, we discuss the implications of our findings and pose questions for future research.

The foremost conclusion emerging from this study is to affirm the religious/spiritual significance of tattoos for many people. Like Coptic youth in Egypt who get a tattoo to signify belonging to a community of believers, the religious tattoos in our sample connect students to Christianity. Crosses and Bible verses are prevalent. For most tattooed students in our sample, their tattoos, including religious tattoos, are oriented outward towards others. They are public proclamations of affiliation and/or identity. Yet, tattoos blur the boundary between public and private. Religious tattoos do more than proclaim an accepted identity, they may serve a motivational purpose to live in accordance with one's religious convictions. Religious tattoos facing the owner serve as an indelible reminder of religious identity.

Religious tattoos are gendered. The likelihood, size, and placement of religious tattoos differ by gender. In our photos, men were more likely than women to have a religious tattoo. Furthermore, these tattoos have more prominent placement on men's bodies. They are large and in visible locations. For women, religious tattoos are smaller in size and appear in locations that are easily concealed. This may indicate that tattoos, even religious tattoos, carry a stigma for women that they do not for men. The content of religious tattoos also reflects gender. Women tattoo their bodies with Bible verses and scripture references addressed to women. Men may do the same, but the biblical references tattooed on men in our photos are more varied. Tattoos can function for women as an expression of liberation or conformity to traditional notions of gender (Kang and Jones 2007). Religious tattoos may tend towards the latter.

While this is the first study of its kind, our data and findings have limitations. The photos of tattoos that we analyse are a non-random sample from one religious university. We have no way of knowing if these findings apply to all students at the university or to students at other universities. Data on religious tattoos from a national probability sample would advance research on this topic considerably. Likewise, photos of visible or accessible tattoos miss meaningful images and text that individuals place on more intimate parts of their bodies. Are religious tattoos more or less likely to be located in intimate areas of the body? This would be a fascinating study, but it may be difficult to get approved by a university's Institutional Review Board. Finally, using photos taken by others as our source of data prevents us from examining meaning or motivation. It is probable that we dramatically undercount religious tattoos. Tattoos may have religious or spiritual connotations to the owner that are not recognisable to others. A number of tattooed words in Greek and Hebrew, classified as non-religious in our coding, highlight the need for more attention to a tattoo's intended meaning.

The present study barely scratches the surface on subdermal religiosity. Questions for future research include: Do religious tattoos vary by religious tradition? The embrace of religious tattoos among young evangelicals is well documented (Griffith 2004; Jensen et al. 2000; Winner 1999), but religious groups such as the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church have a rich iconography that might inspire tattoos. Beyond affiliation, are persons with religious tattoo more or less devout in their beliefs and religious/spiritual behaviour than persons without such body art? Does having a religious tattoo result in less regret than having a non-religious tattoo? In the coming years, we look forward to answering these and other questions about religiosity and tattoos. We invite others to join us. Studying religious tattoos provides a valuable lens into the place and expression of religion in contemporary social life.

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NOTES

- [1] Photos shown in Figures 1–6 were acquired at the same university in fall 2018. Since the original photos came from a course assignment not intended for research, we did not obtain signed consent to use these photos for publication. Retroactively, we received IRB approval to analyse the photos. To illustrate themes emerging from our content analysis, we invited students with religious tattoos to sign an informed consent form and pose for a photograph. The new photos are used only for illustration purposes. They were not treated as data in this study.
- [2] We calculated a Chi-square statistic to assess if tattoo direction significantly differed for religious tattoos versus non-religious tattoos. The difference was statistically significant (Chi-square = 4.90, df = 1, p = .03). We report the results of the Chi-square test with caution, since an assumption of this statistical test is that data come from a probability sample which is not true of our photos.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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