

The College Student's Religious Tattoo: Reverence, Remembrance, Respect

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Tattoos

- Baby Boomers – 13%
- Gen-X – 36%
- Millennials – Slightly < 50%

- Spirituality vs. Religiosity?
- Congregational vs. Private Religion?

- (Public?) Religious tattoos: Our respondents
 - 85 essayists; 11 interviewees
- Respondent pool:
 - Aged 18-24; 55/96 Female; 58/96 Anglo

Background on Tattoos

Behavioral correlates

- 4+ for “Deviance.”
- Tattoos and Religion = null

Ideology & Identity

- Need for Uniqueness
- Well-being and Healing

Meaning

- Stories and Emotion
- Gender and Power

Data

The survey data came in response to the following prompt:

- To be answered only if at least one of your tattoos depicts what you consider to be a religious symbol...please tell us the story of your religious tattoo(s). Include, but do not feel limited in your discussion to issues such as: what does the tattoo depict? Draw or describe it in detail if you'd like. What led you to consider getting this symbol tattooed on your body? Where is it located? What does the symbol mean to you? How has having this tattoo changed your life or your faith? What else would you like us to know about your religious tattoo(s)?
- The interviews: 30-90 minutes in length. One-on-one. Stories.

Reverence – religious tattoos that respondents stated they got because of their own religious beliefs and because of the importance of those beliefs. Subdivided into two categories: those tattoos meaningful to both the respondent AND a member of the respondent’s culture and those tattoos meaningful only to the respondent.

These tended to be visibly placed

- *Identity Formation and Group Affiliation Advertisement:* Most obviously religious, observer from same culture would clearly identify as religious, focused on personal beliefs and connection with supernatural, tend to be found on parts of the body likely to be seen by non-intimates (arms, stomach, legs)
 - “A cross with a crown of thorns and INRI so others can see I’m a Christian.”
 - “My favorite psalm with my family name underneath.”
- *Personal Meaning:* Not obviously religious or faith-based to anyone but respondent, found either on intimate or non-intimate areas of the body.
 - “These three dots represent the Trinity, but it’s not obvious. I know it, though.”
 - “The second tattoo is the word ‘emuna’ which is on the inside of my lower lip. It is the pronunciation for the hebrew [sic] word (which would be symbols) for faith. It reminds me to always have faith and use my words respectfully and not to harm anyone.”

Remembrance – religious tattoos that the respondents stated that they got primarily to remind themselves of something: either of a loved one with a shared faith or of their own religious faith.

Tended to express inward emotions.

- *Of Loved One With Shared Faith*

“My grandma played a huge role in my life and she always said the rosary and encouraged me to. She passed and I got the rosary to remind me of her and to be strong in my faith.”

- *Of Own Religious Faith, Without Loved One*

It “says never alone with a dove because God’s always with me and the dove is a religious symbol.”

Respect – religious tattoo that the respondents stated that they got out of admiration for a religious belief or culture not shared by the respondent. Interestingly, some respondents identified tattoos that would not be considered religious in that other culture as religious for the respondent. For example, the Mayan calendar is not an overt religious symbol, but the respondent identified it as such.

These tended to be deeply spiritual and aesthetic.

- *Of Another Religion/Culture*: symbol from a religion or culture not shared or believed in by respondent, but identified as religious by that respondent
“It’s a pictograph of the Mayan calendar. I think it looks really detailed and decorative.”
- *Of Loved One Without Shared Faith*: Respondent felt religious symbol was so indicative of loved one that s/he tattooed it without ascribing religious meaning to the symbol him- or herself; usually found on intimate area of body.
“I’m not Christian myself, but my cousin who died had a tattoo of Philippians 4:13, so I put the words ‘I can do’ on my hip to remind myself of him. It’s a religious text, but it’s more about him and to be persistent.”

The Take-Away

- Tattoos express personal beliefs, manage identity, and signify group affiliation.
- Religious tattoos link motivation and meaning.
- Religious tattoos express:
 - permanence of beliefs
 - enduring emotions
 - relationships with Deity and loved ones.

We expect to see more religious tattoos as the prevalence of body modification increases.