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Religion, Tattoos, and Religious Tattoos: The Body as Sacred Subculture

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ABSTRACT

Tattoos have evolved into a widely popular form of self-expression in the United States, especially for younger generations. Religious texts and images become increasingly common tattoos that now decorate the body. Surprisingly, previous research on tattoos is largely silent about religion. Given changing perceptions in the United States on tattoos, we ask: do religious people today have tattoos? And, how religious are people with religious tattoos? With a nod to Durkheim, tattoos may be conceptualized as *profane* and *sacred*, with religious tattoos functioning as sacralized markers of religious subcultural identity. We analyze tattoos and religion with nationally representative data from the 2021 Baylor Religion Survey. Religious affiliation is largely unrelated to tattoo acquisition or tattoo type, but religious commitment is related to both acquisition and type of tattoo. Highly committed religious people are unlikely to have a tattoo. If they do, it is likely a religious tattoo.

1 | Introduction

Religion and the body are inseparable. From faithful adherents in postures of prayer or on a pilgrimage, to the adornment of a cross, crescent, or Star of David worn as jewelry, religion is embodied. Perhaps the most sacred moment in Christian worship is the literal or figurative ingestion of Christ's body in the sacrament of Holy Communion. Remarkably, social science research on religion often ignores the human body (Bartkowski 2005). The study of body art is a prime example. Despite the growing prevalence of piercings and tattoos, research on religion and body art is scarce, limited in scope, and shows surprisingly vague results (Koch et al. 2004; Rivardo and Keelan 2010).

Tattoos are increasingly mainstream, and empirical research indicates acquisition is quickly becoming strategy for presentation of self, claiming collective and individual identity, fulfilling a need for uniqueness, and lately displaying religiousness (Armstrong et al. 2009; Dougherty and Koch 2019; Koch and Dougherty 2023a, 2023b; Tiggemann and Golder 2006). New polling data show 32% of US adults have a tattoo, but the prevalence of tattoos varies dramatically by age group (Schaeffer and Dinesh 2023). For US adults under age 30, 41% now have at least one tattoo. Prevalence peaks among those 30–49 (46%), dropping to 25% for those 50–64, and again by half (13%) for those 65+. Other recognizable correlates of tattoos are gender (women), race (Black and Latino/a), education (less than college), income (lower income), religion (unaffiliated). This is especially noteworthy among those who self-identify as LGBTQIA+ with 51% having at least one tattoo. Among LGBTQIA+ women, 68% have tattoos, over half of whom have more than one (Schaeffer and Dinesh 2023). This suggests an appropriation of one's body to embrace, display, or celebrate who one is and/or stands with, despite stigma or potential risk.

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Even so, these changes are situated in a history of tattoos associated with deviant subgroups such as criminals, prisoners, and biker gangs (Atkinson 2003; Kang and Jones 2007). Returning soldiers and sailors—while not "deviant" in the same sense—often came back with tattoos signifying subcultural identity and solidarity through combat experiences well beyond the mainstream. As noted above, tattoos signify seemingly similar sentiments among sexual minorities. Blurring the Durkheimian distinction between profane and sacred, we suggest that religious tattoos are displays of faith, commitment, and adherence.

A small but growing corpus of research over the past two decades suggests the emergence of religious tattoos may signify that the relationship between tattoos and religion in the United States may be changing. Pop culture provides abundant examples. Singer Justin Bieber has Jesus' face on his left calf, a cross on his chest, and numerous other Christian symbols and texts tattooed on his body. Actress Angelina Jolie has a Buddhist prayer tattooed on her back. Jensen et al. (2000) were among the first to note this trend, specifically among GenX Evangelical youth. Koch and Roberts (2012) and Maloney and Koch (2020) reported the way religious tattoos told stories of remembrance, reverence, and renewal. Dougherty and Koch (2019) presented striking images of religious tattoos signifying both introspective hope and outward expressions of faith. Morello Sj et al. (2021) brought an international context to the appropriation of body art for strengthening faith and ratifying practice, using the theoretical approach of "lived religion" to explain tattoos as a religious practice in the West (Morello 2024). Thus, we wonder: Do religious people today have tattoos at a higher rate than nonreligious people? And, how religious are people with religious tattoos?

To date, there has been no comprehensive national study on tattoos, religion, and particularly religious tattoos. This study is an attempt to do so. Using data from the 2021 Baylor Religion Survey, we analyze the influence of religious tradition and religious commitment on tattoo acquisition and tattoo type. Our findings provide a nationally representative snapshot of those with no tattoos, nonreligious (profane) tattoos, and religious/spiritual (sacred) tattoos in the United States.

2 | Tattoos as Profane

Durkheim famously defined religion as: "A unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things" (Durkheim 1915, 47). Sacred things inspire reverence, respect, fear, and their meaning is nearly universally understood by those subject to the same social facts. The Christian cross exemplifies a sacred symbol that, even among non-Christians, is recognized as such. The Star of David or Red Crescent are similarly sacred. But what about tattoos?

At the most basic level, simply having a religious affiliation seems to deter Americans from getting tattooed, although the findings are mixed. To many religious people, tattoos remain unattractive. A 2023 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 41% of American adults who claimed no religious affiliation have a tattoo, whereas 29% of adults with a religious affiliation are tattooed (Schaeffer and Dinesh 2023). Interviews with a snowball sample of 21 tattooed people in three South American sites yielded similar findings (Morello 2021). Most of the tattooed respondents (57%) were not affiliated with religion; about a quarter were Catholic (23%); only 14% were Evangelical Protestant, and they were most likely to experience tattoo regret.

Sacred texts within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam seem to prohibit tattoos (Scheinfeld 2007). Jewish and Christian scriptures contain the verse: "Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:28, New International Version).[1]

Tattoos are more clearly considered forbidden (*haram*) in Islam. Although Buddhist and Hindu traditions have utilized tattoos for centuries, largely as signs of devotion or visible prayers for protection (Scheinfeld 2007), the largest faith traditions in the United States give warrant to eschew tattoos. This leads to our first hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1. People affiliated with a religious tradition will be less likely than those without a religious affiliation to have a tattoo.

Religiosity is more than claiming an affiliation. People devoted to their faith engage their lives differently than less committed adults. People with high levels of religious commitment view religion as salient to their identity, regularly engage in behaviors such as prayer, reading scripture and attending worship. Thus, we expect religious commitment to limit the attraction of tattoos, as tattoos retain a reputation of risk and deviance. Regular involvement with other religious people further reinforces norms of tradition and moral conformity (Koch et al. 2021). For these reasons, our second hypothesis moves from religious tradition to religious commitment, predicting that people who identify with and devotedly practice their religion will avoid tattoos.

Hypothesis 2. People with high levels of religious commitment will be less likely than those with low levels of religious commitment to have a tattoo.

3 | Tattoos as Sacred: Subcultural Identity and Sacralization

Interestingly, profane things (tattoos?) may transform to the sacred as their meaning becomes embedded into culture or subculture. The social meaning of ordinary bread and wine, basic foodstuffs, is transformed through ritual and belief to represent, and even literally become for some, the body and blood of Christ. Evidenced by their more widespread prevalence among Millennials, religious tattoos have evolved from social anomalies to, in some cases, sacred objects.

Subcultural identity theory helps us conceptualize these initial ideas. Smith (1998) summarized this frame in a discussion of internal solidarity among Evangelicals, much akin to Ammerman's (1987) *Bible Believers*. More recently Cooper (2017) extended this logic into a discussion of a "Post Evangelical Subculture". This body of work essentially argues that collective religious identity stands in opposition to both real and imagined others and against moral indifference to apostasy, drinking, drug use, and promiscuity.

Wellman (1999, 187) applied similar logic to codify opposition to gay ordination:

> … there is a need to create out-groups against which group and religious identity is further solidified. … This construction of enemies, imaginary or real … is integral to group solidarity."

This group cohesion relies on corporeal and incorporeal signals like language, clothing, and body modification to build and strengthen their identities as members of a given group and, importantly, not members of an oppositional group, thus satisfying (in Smith's words) humans' inherent "drive for meaning and belonging" (1998, 90). Evans (2003) concurs, finding that liberal Protestants (in this case, Presbyterians) experience the least decline in states where members "have created a niche where they have [similar] conservative theological beliefs but consider themselves to be theological liberals compared to other members of the public" (p. 467).

Similar applications in terms of identity formation and cohesion are noted with reference to tattoos and deviance (Koch et al. 2010). More directly, Williams and Copes (2005) used subcultural identity to illustrate "Straightedge". This is a (typically) internet subculture of often heavily tattooed punk rock music aficionados, vegetarians and fitness enthusiasts. Their motto is, "I don't drink; I don't smoke; I don't f***".

We bring these insights to bear on an analysis of religious tattoos. In a cultural context where tattoos have gone mainstream, it seems inevitable that some religious people would also appropriate tattoos to express their religion. This practice, in the company of others, generates both internalized subcultural identity and external signs of that identity. Thus, tattoos both reflect chosen membership of that subculture and further (usually permanently) invest that person in that subculture as they and others continue to see the signal on their bodies.

Religious tattoos also seem to align with, or even become, religious practices (Barras and Saris 2021; Morello 2024). College students with religious tattoos claimed a stronger faith, prayed more frequently, and worshipped more often than those with no tattoos or nonreligious tattoos (Koch and Dougherty 2023a). Placing a religious symbol or sacred text in permanent ink on one's body is a willful act of fusion. Tattoos convey a desired (or newly desired) identity that becomes central to self.[2] Although we hypothesize above that religious commitment will deter tattoo acquisition on average, the growing popularity of religious tattoos suggests a countervailing trend at work. For some religious people, we suspect a salient faith gets expressed through body art, thereby, defining a religious subculture. Thus, religious tattoos sacralize the profane. In doing so, religious tattoos function as a boundary marker of a religious subculture willing to challenge conventional religious norms to convey faith through a formerly profane, stigmatized practice. This leads us to our final hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3. Net of religious tradition, high levels of religious commitment will correspond with having a religious tattoo.

4 | Data and Methods

We test our hypotheses with the 2021 Baylor Religion Survey. The Baylor Religion Survey is administered by the Gallup Organization to a national random sample of US adults. From January to March 2021, Gallup sent the survey via mail and internet to 11,000 US households. The survey was available in English and Spanish. A total of 1248 people completed the survey, for a response rate of 11.3%. A survey weight allows us to generalize to the full population of US adults.

A set of questions in the survey pertains to tattoos. One asked: "How many tattoos do you presently have?" Response options were none, 1, 2, 3, 4, or more. For respondents who indicated one or more tattoos, a follow-up question asked: "Do any of your tattoos have religious or spiritual significance to you?" Response options were yes or no. From these two variables, we created two dependent variables. The first is a binary variable distinguishing people with no tattoos from people with one or more tattoos regardless of content. The second dependent variable categorizes people by tattoo type into no tattoos, exclusively nonreligious tattoos, or religious tattoo (one or more).

Our independent variables are religious tradition and religious commitment. Religious tradition is coded in the Baylor Religion Survey from survey questions about religion, denomination, and congregation name (Dougherty et al. 2007). We contrast Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Black Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, other traditions, with respondents who have no religious affiliation. A second independent variable is a three-item religious comment scale similar to what Smith and Snell (2009) used in their study of emerging adult religiosity. The three items are a self-rating of religiosity ("How religious do you consider yourself to be?" from 0 = *not religious* to 3 = *very religious*), frequency of religious service attendance ("How often do you attend religious services at a place of worship?" from 0 = *never* to 7 = *several times a week*), and frequency of personal prayer ("How often outside of religious services do you… pray alone for 5 min or longer at a time?" from 0 = *never* to 5 = *several times a day*). The scale is standardized to account for different ranges of values in the component items. The religious commitment scale has good internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$).

Control variables are gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, age cohort, education, region, and military status. Gender is coded as male, female, and other. Race/ethnicity is coded as white, black, Asian, Hispanic, and other. Sexual orientation is from a survey question that asks: "Which of the following best describes you?" Response options were gay/lesbian, bisexual, straight/heterosexual, and other. From a survey item asking a respondent's age, we categorized people into age cohorts of Gen Z (less than 26 years old), Millennial (25 to 40 years old), Gen X (41 to 56 years old), Baby Boomer (57 to 75 years old), and Silent Generation (more than 75 years old). A survey question asks the highest level of school completed by respondents. Nine response options ranged from "8th grade or less" to "Postgraduate or professional degree, including master's, doctorate, medical, or law degree." We collapsed education into three categories of high school diploma or less, some college, and bachelor's degree or higher. We control for a respondent's region of the country with a set of dummy variables for Northeast, Midwest, South, and West.

To control for political party, we used the survey question: "Do you think of yourself as Republican, Democrat, or Independent?" Respondents chose from seven options ranging from "Strong Republican" to "Strong Democrat" with "Independent" as a middle option. We created three dummy variables: Republican, Independent, and Democrat. Finally, we control for military involvement based on the survey question, "Have you ever served (or are currently serving) in any branch of the US Armed Forces, including the Coast Guard, the National Guard, or a Reserve component?" (coded 1 = yes, 0 = no).

Analysis begins with descriptive statistics for the full sample. Next, we estimate a logistic regression model to predict who is tattooed. The final stage of analysis is a multinomial logistic regression model to analyze the correlates of tattoo type, contrasting people with no tattoos and nonreligious tattoos to those with a religious/spiritual tattoo. All statistical models are weighted.

5 | Results

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics. Thirty percent of American adults in our sample have a tattoo, fitting with the percentages found in other recent national polls (Ipsos 2019; Schaeffer and Dinesh 2023). Approximately 1 in 10 Americans (9.6%) have a tattoo that they identify as religious/spiritual. In terms of religion, 80% of respondents report a religious affiliation. The two largest religious traditions are Evangelical Protestants (28%) and Catholics (23%). Other characteristics of the sample are 52% identify as female, 65% are white (non-Hispanic), and 89% identify as straight or heterosexual. Further attesting to data quality, these demographic variables in the 2021 Baylor Religion Survey match closely the weighted sample of the 2021 General Social Survey, which is 51% female, 65% white (non-Hispanic), and 92% straight or heterosexual.

5.1 | Religion and Tattoos

Table 2 reports results from a logistic regression model predicting who has a tattoo. The logistic regression model tests our first two hypotheses. Religious tradition is not related to having a tattoo. Hypothesis 1 is not supported. Religious commitment is the only religion variable that is significant. As predicted in Hypothesis 2, people with higher levels of religious commitment are less likely to have a tattoo. The odds ratio of 0.70 indicates that every one unit increase in religious commitment is associated with a 30% decrease in the likelihood of having a tattoo.

Among the control variables, we observe other interesting patterns in tattoo acquisition. Americans who identify as female are 2.2 times more likely than males to possess a tattoo. Adults who are gay or lesbian are 3.7 times more likely than heterosexual adults to have a tattoo. Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, and Baby Boomers are all more likely than the Silent Generation (ages 76 and older) to be tattooed. The odds ratios demonstrate a strong age effect on tattooing. Compared to the Silent Generation, the odds of being tattooed are over 20 times higher for Gen Z and Millennials, 17 times higher for Gen X, and over seven times higher for Baby Boomers. Respondents with some college

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics.

Variable	*n*	Mean (SD)	Min	Max
Tattoo	1225	0.300	0	1
Tattoo type				
No tattoo	1225	0.700	0	1
Nonreligious tattoo	1225	0.204	0	1
Religious tattoo	1225	0.096	0	1
Religious tradition				
No affiliation	1226	0.197	0	1
Evangelical Protestant	1226	0.277	0	1
Mainline Protestant	1226	0.120	0	1
Black Protestant	1226	0.085	0	1
Catholic	1226	0.232	0	1
Jewish	1226	0.016	0	1
Other religion	1226	0.073	0	1
Religious commitment	1242	−0.032 (0.854)	−1.212	1.724
Gender				
Male	1239	0.470	0	1
Female	1239	0.521	0	1
Other gender	1239	0.009	0	1
Race/ethnicity				
White	1222	0.648	0	1
Black	1222	0.113	0	1
Hispanic	1222	0.157	0	1
Asian	1222	0.039	0	1
Other/multiracial	1222	0.044	0	1
Sexual orientation				
Straight/heterosexual	1190	0.888	0	1
Gay/lesbian	1190	0.034	0	1
Bisexual	1190	0.053	0	1
Other sexual orientation	1190	0.025	0	1
Age cohort				
Gen Z	1221	0.067	0	1
Millennial	1221	0.302	0	1
Gen X	1221	0.263	0	1
Baby boomer	1221	0.288	0	1
Silent generation	1221	0.080	0	1
Education				
High school or less	1217	0.353	0	1
Some college	1217	0.285	0	1
Bachelor's degree or more	1217	0.363	0	1
Region				
Northeast	1248	0.174	0	1
Midwest	1248	0.211	0	1
South	1248	0.373	0	1
West	1248	0.242	0	1
Military veteran	1237	0.112	0	1

Note: Weighted data.

TABLE 2 | Logistic regression predicting who has a tattoo.

Variable	Coef.	Odds ratio
Religious Tradition(No affiliation)		
Evangelical Protestant	0.095	
Mainline Protestant	0.176	
Black Protestant	−0.319	
Catholic	−0.367	
Jewish	−1.155	
Other religion	0.273	
Religious commitment	−0.352*	0.703
Gender (Male)		
Female	0.802***	2.230
Other gender	0.444	
Race/ethnicity (White)		
Black	0.079	
Hispanic	0.069	
Asian	−0.515	
Other/multiracial	0.071	
Sexual orientation (Heterosexual)		
Gay/lesbian	1.298**	3.661
Bisexual	−0.011	
Other sexual orientation	0.032	
Age cohort (Silent generation)		
Gen Z	3.023***	20.558
Millennial	3.103***	22.259
Gen X	2.834***	17.011
Baby Boomer	2.044***	7.720
Education (High school or less)		
Some college	−0.551*	0.576
Bachelor's degree or higher	−1.188	0.308
Region (Northeast)		
Midwest	0.342	
South	0.233	
West	−0.108	
Military veteran	0.989**	2.690
Constant	−3.561***	

Note: $N = 1002$, weighted data.
*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

are 42% less like to have a tattoo than those with only a high school diploma, and Americans with a college degree are nearly 70% less likely. Our results for gender, sexual orientation, age, and education mirror 2023 Pew data (Schaeffer and Dinesh. 2023). As a complement to the latest polls, we also find that military veterans are 2.7 times more likely than non-veterans to be tattooed. No differences in tattoo acquisition appear by race or region of the country in our data, controlling for other variables.

5.2 | Religious Tattoos

Next, we look at religious tattoos. The 2021 Baylor Religion Survey is the first nationally representative survey to ask about religious tattoos. The findings in Table 3 are from a multinomial logistic regression model, using people with a religious tattoo as the comparison group. Model 1 contrasts having no tattoo to having a religious tattoo. Again, religious tradition is not significant, contrary to Hypothesis 1. Having any type of religious affiliation does not separate people with religious tattoos from those with no tattoo. Gender, sexual orientation, age cohort, and education are significant. Women, gay/lesbian adults, and all generations younger than the Silent Generation are less likely to have no tattoo than a religious tattoo. College graduates are four times more likely than high school graduates to have no tattoo instead of a religious tattoo.[3]

Model 2 contrasts people with nonreligious tattoos to those with a religious tattoo. Most religious traditions are no different from the religious unaffiliated regarding their tattoo type (nonreligious vs. religious). Only Jewish respondents are less likely than adults with no religious affiliation to have a nonreligious tattoo rather than a religious tattoo. Among those with tattoos, higher levels of religious commitment is associated with having a religious tattoo. This offers partial support for Hypothesis 2, and support for Hypothesis 3. The relative risk ratio reveals that a one unit increase in religious commitment corresponds to someone being 47% less likely to have a nonreligious tattoo than a religious tattoo. The relative risk ratio Gender, sexual orientation, and education are not significant. Only age cohorts distinguish people with nonreligious tattoos from those with religious tattoos. Compared to the Silent Generation, every other age cohort is substantially less likely to have a nonreligious tattoo than a religious tattoo. Hence younger generations are not only more often tattooed than the oldest Americans; they are more often tattooed with religion.

6 | Discussion

The purpose of our study was to take an updated look at the relationship between tattoos and religion in the United States. We hypothesized that religious affiliation and religious commitment would deter tattoo acquisition. We were only partially correct. Religious tradition is unrelated to tattoos. Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Black Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and other traditions are no less or more likely to be tattooed than the growing segment of Americans without a religious affiliation.

The type of religion may not deter tattoos, but commitment to a religion still does. People with higher levels of religious commitment tend not to have tattoos. These findings match previous research on tattoos and religion for college students (Koch and Dougherty 2023a). In addition, they match a more general pattern observed among emerging adults by Smith and Snell (2009). That is, religious commitment proves to be more consequential in the lives of Americans than religious tradition. Moreover, among those with tattoos, higher levels of religious commitment *is* associated with having a religious tattoo. In sum, these findings about those with religious tattoos illustrate they represent subcultural identity in two ways. First, those with religious tattoos are distinct from other religious respondents in

TABLE 3 | Multinomial logistic regression predicting tattoo type (religious tattoo as comparison group).

	No tattoo (vs. religious tattoo)		Nonreligious tattoo (vs. religious tattoo)	
Variable	**Coef.**	**RRR**	**Coef.**	**RRR**
Religious tradition(No affiliation)	−0.288			
Evangelical Protestant	−0.959		−0.243	
Mainline Protestant	0.220		1.179	
Black Protestant	0.063		−1.391	
Catholic	−0.479		−0.380	
Jewish	−0.604		−15.270***	0.000
Other religion			−0.400	
Religious commitment	−0.059		−0.634*	0.531
Gender (Male)				
Female	−0.986*	0.373	−0.271	
Other (Please specify)	−1.175		−0.976	
Race/ethnicity (White)				
Black	0.363		0.673	
Hispanic	0.662		1.029	
Asian	−0.238		−1.255	
Other/multiracial	0.256		0.477	
Sexual orientation (Heterosexual)				
Gay/lesbian	−1.352*	0.259	−0.102	
Bisexual	0.154		0.153	
Other sexual orientation	0.904		1.178	
Age cohort (Silent generation)				
Gen Z	−15.241***	0.000	−12.506***	0.000
Millennial	−16.530***	0.000	−14.196***	0.000
Gen X	−15.916***	0.000	13.664***	0.000
Baby Boomer	−14.281***	0.000	−12.476***	0.000
Education (High school or less)				
Some college	0.616		0.082	
Bachelor's degree or higher	1.392**	4.023	0.286	
Region (Northeast)				
Midwest	−0.689		−0.497	
South	−0.570		−0.442	
West	0.052		−0.087	
Military veteran	−0.689		0.385	
Constant				

Note: $N = 1102$, logit coefficients and relative risk ratios, weighted data.
*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

that they have a tattoo. Second, they are distinct from those with tattoos because their tattoos are religious.

This research adds to existing literature on tattoos, religion, and the body in three ways. It is a first-of-its-kind nationally representative study of religion, tattoos, and religious tattoos. This gives broader context and statistical rigor to qualitative studies on the topic as well as statistical support for studies relying on purposive samples. Further, we associate having a religious tattoo with religious belief and practice as well as adding demographic depth to the literature.

Second, our study documents that the acquisition and bodily display of a religious tattoo is a means and manner of religious

practice. The most consistent finding is that younger people are more likely to both (i) have tattoos and (ii) have tattoos that are religious or spiritual. Religious texts and images tattooed on the body are a way to make an otherwise stigmatized practice/image explicitly sacred. This *is* the practice of religion (Barras and Saris 2021; Morello 2024). A religious tattoo escalates the public display of religious belief to a permanent insignia, analogous to the widespread use of religious symbols to display identity through jewelry, clothing, or uniforms (Koch and Dougherty 2023b). That they are also permanent and painful to acquire makes the commitment behind acquisition even more salient.

Our work suggests broader scope to Morello's (2021) deep dive into how religious tattoos appropriate one's body to outwardly signify faith and inwardly solidify faith. Thus, a religious tattoo conveys one's religious identity (Morello 2021; Morello 2024; Morello Sj et al. 2021). Moreover, previous research also illustrates the heightened emotional and reinforcing nature of a "secret" placement of a religious tattoo—generally concealed by clothing. Similarly, a meaningful sign of faith on one's inner forearm, for example, oriented to view essentially only by the wearer, may represent a kind of devotional practice. The tattoo serves as a reminder of their faith, who they are with reference to it, and a touchstone to a better version of themselves (Koch and Dougherty 2023a). Using the framework of sacred objects and subcultural identity, we see that especially younger religious individuals may be appropriating a secular practice to center stage, a deeply felt expression of faith perhaps especially for first timers. In essence, they use skin-deep representation of common sacred objects to make a previously deviant practice more acceptable and even sacramental.

Finally, the matter of subcultural identity may signal a broader look at the possibility religious tattoos can generate a kind of "Moral Community". This borrows logic from an extensive body of literature using conservative Protestant affiliation and commitment as proxies in deterring nonnormative behavior (Adamczyck 2009; Regnerus 2003). Koch and Dougherty (2019) illustratively report an idiosyncratic finding to this effect in a pilot study involving small purposive samples of college students. Respondents with religious tattoos, as compared with those with secular tattoos, reported less binge drinking and marijuana use but, ironically and somewhat puzzling, more premarital sex.

Our findings are limited in that we are not able to report the ratio of religious to nonreligious tattoos, or their relative size and placement on the body. Neither are we able to report the specific content of religious tattoos. Hence, we may miss the distinction of religious tradition on tattooing, such as a fish symbol (*ichthus*) denoting Jesus Christ on the ankle of an Evangelical woman, Madonna on the shoulder of a Catholic man, or the goddess Kali on the forearm of a Hindu woman. Nor are we able to distinguish an obviously religious tattoo—a cross, for example—from a symbol that is spiritually connected to the wearer's history, but not obviously religious.

7 | Conclusion

Tattoos generally emerged to a visible degree among those within the same subculture: military conscripts and veterans, biker gangs, incarcerated and ex-offenders. In the 1970s, Janis Joplin was among the first celebrities to popularize a tattoo—and appropriate her body—in a way that became widely known and revered. Interestingly, she only had a very small heart above her left breast, and a narrow "bracelet" on her wrist. This enhanced her notoriety and brought much wealth and fame to her artist—Lyle Tuttle—as thousands of fans followed suit (Vidan 2015).

Beginning perhaps with the transition from rock to heavy metal music—and its attendant vivid and sometimes violent imagery—musicians added highly visible tattoos to their bodies, presenting themselves and their band in visually compelling ways. Examples include Axl Rose (Guns 'N Roses)[4], Tommy Lee (Motley Crue), and Phil Anselmo (Pantera). Mainstream rock and pop stars followed, such as Lady Gaga, Rhianna, and Bille Eilish. Similarly, the movie industry features famously tattooed stars, such as Scarlett Johansson, Emma Watson, Johnny Depp, and Billy Bob Thornton. Professional boxers, wrestlers, and MMA stars are widely and heavily adorned, as are popular and revered sports stars in the NBA, NFL, MLB, and even men's and women's tennis. Fans of these examples minimally point acquirers toward a vicarious subculture identity made permanent in the flesh, or more broadly toward commitment to their own faith group or ideology.

Organized religion and the religious tattoo are seemingly next in line, particularly for the young. We note a Joplin-esque pioneer: the Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber, "The Tattooed Pastor" (Miller 2021). Pastor Bolz-Weber is seminary trained, ordained in 2008, and was founding pastor of an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) mission congregation in Denver known as the House of Sinners and Saints. Now a prolific writer and sought after speaker, she was called by the denomination in 2021 to serve as the ELCA's first Pastor of Public Witness (Miller 2021). Part of Pastor Bolz-Weber's public witness is prominent tattoos. She wears, in part, "(t)he entire Christian liturgical calendar on her left arm, including scenes from creation to Pentecost, and ink on her right arm of Mary Magdalene, schooling the all-male bewildered disciples about the resurrection" (Chitwood 2013). These images undoubtedly fit Smith's (1998) indicator of a subcultural identity, in that they identify members of that subculture to themselves and others while simultaneously helping them form and reify their identity as a member of that subculture.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "Now you are the Body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Corinthians 12:27, Revised Standard Version). For members of the Body of Christ, this declaration becomes a mandate for ministry: Use your body to walk where Christ would go; reach those whom Christ would touch. When those feet and hands are marked with the signs of faith, the faithful live out the Biblical admonition to "glorify God in your body" (1 Corinthians 6:20, Revised Standard Version). Religious tattoos mark one's own body, showing honor and devotion within the Body.

Endnotes

[1] While seemingly straightforward in a literal sense, Fox (2019, 97–99) proposes that this rather singular scriptural prohibition belies several instances in the Hebrew Bible where "marking" may reference tattooing as acceptable in a broader historical and cultural For reference, see Genesis 4:15, the mark of Cain; Isaiah 44:5, the mark of one devoted to

Yahweh; Isaiah 49:16, Israel engraved on God's hands; Ezekiel 9:4, the mark of the righteous; and Numbers 6:27, writing God's name on the Israelites.

[2] Early Christians, surreptitiously and at no small risk, self-identified with a toe-drawn ichthus in the sand. Koch and Roberts (2012) report a respondent indicating that (they) "got an ichthus on my foot when I lost my virginity as a recommitment to faith."

[3] We tested interaction terms for religious commitment with gender, sexual orientation, age cohort, and education, respectively. We found no evidence of significant interactions.

[4] Axl Rose's prominent right forearm cross, with sketches of his band mates at each of the four endpoints, illustrates our title and content in a nutshell.

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