

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

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

Patricia A. Maloney  
Assistant Professor of Sociology  
Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work  
Texas Tech University  
Lubbock, TX 79409

Jerome R. Koch  
Professor of Sociology  
Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work  
Texas Tech University  
Lubbock, TX 79409

Running head: Religious tattoos

Address all correspondence to: Jerome R. Koch  
2500 Broadway Holden Hall 158  
Texas Tech University  
Lubbock, TX 79409  
(806) 834-3920  
[jerome.koch@ttu.edu](mailto:jerome.koch@ttu.edu)

The authors would like to thank the E.A. Franklin Charitable Trust for their generous grant in support of this research.

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

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

Abstract:

Tattoos are now generally socially accepted means of expressing one's thoughts, beliefs, and affiliations. Using two types of data – interviews (N=11) and survey responses to an open-ended prompt (N=85) – this article focuses on the meanings, motivations, and rationales that young college student adults have for their self-identified religious tattoos. We found that their responses generally fell into three categories: respect, reverence, and remembrance. Additionally, we divided the respondents' self-described motivations and descriptions into two subcategories that described the uses those tattoos had for respondents. We discovered that even tattoos that do not appear to be religious to an observer may actually have varying religious meanings and uses for respondents – even for respondents who describe themselves as areligious or atheists. We also find that the more public the body placement, the more likely the respondent wishes to use the tattoo for evangelical and group affiliation purposes.

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

## INTRODUCTION

Rates and numbers of tattoos in America are increasing, particularly in young adults. As of 2015, a little under half of Millennials, the target sample in this paper, note on a national poll that they have at least one tattoo, as compared to 13% of Baby Boomers (Shannon-Missal, 2016). Clearly, tattoos have become a form of self-expression for many in this age group. Since religious exploration is also common in this transition stage to adulthood, it stands to reason that some may be obtaining tattoos that have religious meaning and/or symbolism. Interestingly, this may be bolstered by recent Pew Research Center findings (Alper, 2015) that indicate that, although Millennials are the least formally religious generation (only about a quarter report attending religious services regularly), their numbers on “spirituality” and personal expression of spiritual beliefs either rival or surpass those of other generations. Might tattoos be inked indicators of those beliefs that have taken the place of formal religious adherence?

While religion is common to virtually all cultures, the manner and meaning of religion to its adherents develops in a family and/or tribal context, and ultimately becomes unique to each individual. Moreover, religious identity may change over the life course, becoming more complex and refined in its expression of the self (Fowler 1994, Glover 1996, Becker and Hofmeister 2001). Specifically, the movement into early adulthood represents a pivot point toward religious maturity (Fowler 1994). We recognize the importance of this stage of development, and explore its meaning by examining one way by which some young adults (college students) reveal their religious identity. Specifically, we explore the self-identified motivations and meanings of college students' religious tattoos to explore how those identified meanings (of reverence,

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

remembrance, and respect) motivate these individuals. While more detail on these non-mutually exclusive concepts can be found below, we generally define reverence tattoos as those meaningful to the respondent because of his/her own religious beliefs which can act as a symbol of religious affiliation to others or via personal meaning to the respondent.

We define remembrance tattoos as those meaningful to the respondent because of a loved one with a shared religion or to remind themselves of their religion, but not necessarily to revere a supernatural being/divine force. Finally, we define respect tattoos as those which indicate admiration for a religious belief that the respondent does not actually hold, or for a loved one with a religious belief that the respondent does not share. Body placement also seems to be correlated with motivation, as explored below. While these definitions were inductively developed from our data, Koch and Roberts (2012) also report reverential and memorable meaning ascribed to respondents' religious tattoos.

Reverence and remembrance are supported more generally by an aura of respect that emerges throughout, and even mostly across, otherwise secular cultures. Religious holidays generate exemptions from school and work for bona fide adherents. Religious organizations and institutions are given tax exemptions in exchange for their activities and ideologies that presumably add to the public good. Religious artifacts, jewelry, books, and icons are venerated and sold in the broader marketplace. And, as all of these are objects embedded in symbolic interaction, they can become sacred as individuals make them part of their religious identity.

In that light, we highlight the emergence of the religious tattoo. This research explores the following questions: what are the motivations and manifestations of religious tattoos among survey respondents across several samples of American college

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

students at 12 different institutions of higher education? Are there any patterns in terms of placement, content, or motivations? To what extent, and in what ways, are religious reverence, remembrance, and respect embedded in what has become an increasingly mainstream manner of self-expression and identity management for young American adults – the tattoo?

### **LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORY**

There is a substantial body of research concerning body modification, particularly the relatively recent proliferation of tattoos and piercings. Recent demographics suggest the proliferation of tattoo acquisition is most prominent among Millennials (47% among Millennials), but also broadly apparent among Gen-X (36% among those 30-45). On average, 29% of American adults have at least one tattoo (Shannon-Missal, 2016).

Three bodies of research guide our process and analysis. First, there are prominent articles examining the behavioral correlates to having tattoos and piercings. Second, we explore the link between tattoo acquisition and a sense of identity – particularly the wearer's need for uniqueness. Finally, we embed our analysis of religious tattoos in the more broadly based ethnographic research on the meaning of tattoos amid changing cultural norms.

Most of the research examining the behavioral correlates to having tattoos and piercings suggest that individuals – especially young adults – who expressed interest in, and acquired tattoos and piercings are more likely than others to exhibit other, more edgy behavior. This includes, but is not limited to, underage drinking, illegal drug use, and engaging in atypical and extensive sexual expression (Burger and Finkel 2002; Drews, Allison, and Probst 2000; Greif, Hewitt, and Armstrong 1999). Those assumptions have

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

been called into question by research suggesting that at least a minimal to moderate level of body modification does not correlate significantly with other behavior that might be considered dangerous or deviant (Atkinson 2003; Koch, Roberts, Armstrong, and Owen 2004). A follow-up study attempted to quantify the degree to which escalating levels of body modification began to correlate with binge drinking, sexual permissiveness, illegal drug use, and arrest histories (Koch, Roberts, Armstrong, and Owen 2010). Findings from that study indicate that a rise in drinking, sexual permissiveness, and drug use is significantly apparent among those with four or more tattoos, seven or more piercings, or at least one intimate/genital piercing.

However, recent findings suggest multiple tattoos may also generate salutary emotional benefits or represent recovery from illness (Koch, Roberts, Armstrong, and Owen 2015). This adds to previous findings showing tattoos can have continuing positive effects on trauma victims – specifically from rape - in that the tattoo becomes a reminder of resilience and triumph (Atkinson and Young 2001), a notion popularized in the book and feature film, “The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo.”

Thus, this research adds some depth of reflection on the shallow – and largely passé -- notion that tattoos themselves represent a deviant, or even especially edgy lifestyle. We also open the way for further research on how religion is a pathway further into the mainstream for tattoos.

While there is a paucity of research examining specifically religious tattoos, one study found no significant correlation between having (or not having) a tattoo and higher or lower levels of religiosity (Koch, et al, 2004). Thus, while religiosity has a suppressive effect on deviance (see Adamczyk, 2012, for a helpful literature review on

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

this), no such dynamic seems measurable with regard to tattoos. This leads us to speculate in this article that, rather than religion suppressing tattoo acquisition, tattoo acquisition expresses religion.

This leads us to our second area of inquiry – tattoos, identity, and culture. Research on tattoos, identity, and meaning, seems to reflect the tattoo wearer's need for uniqueness (Tiggemann and Golder 2006, Wohlrab, Stahl, and Keppelar 2007). Ethnographic researchers provide compelling stories describing the process of reflection, acquisition, celebration (or sometimes regret – see below) for how this permanent addition to their identity enhances well-being (Atkinson 2003, DeMello 2000). Kosut (2014) presents evidence that the normalization of tattoo acquisition has led the “artification” of tattoos. More than tacit legitimation, she highlights the emergence of tattoo exhibitions in mainstream museums, and points to the broadening identity of tattoo wearers who embrace their bodies as canvases of contemporary culture and high art.

Finally, we extend the specific insights cited above to more fundamental questions about tattoos and those who wear them. What do tattoos viscerally mean to those who acquire them? To what extent, and in what ways, is body modification much more an expression of identity than an indicative correlate to other behavior? How might these emotional dynamics reflect and/or reproduce a religious identity?

DeMello (2000) was among the first to document how tattoos tell the stories of individuals' lives. These deeply emotional narratives reflect individual experiences, memories, and most profoundly individuals' broader sense of who they are in a cultural history. Sanders and Vail (2008) continue to document and illustrate the deeply personal manner and meaning of tattoo and identity. They also regard the tattoo community at

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

carriers of an artistic genre deeply embedded in particular sub-cultures, but reflecting more broadly individuals' sense of identity within culture. As norms have changed, meanings of tattoos within culture become more broadly understood. Yuen-Thompson (2015) portrays this dynamic vividly in women's' tattoo narratives – stories and meanings that seek and reflect empowerment. And yet, amid mainstreaming of this activity, and the salutary impact on identity and context, tattoo regret emerges as the changing context of individual lives changes the meaning of their tattoo(s). Oddly parallel to Yuen-Thompson's empowerment narratives, tattoo regret seems more prominent among women who seem more prone to stigma over time (Armstrong, Roberts, Koch, Saunders, Owen, and Anderson, 2008; Madfis and Arford, 2013). Lane's (2014) review of tattoo literature adds to the understanding of what remains a matter of contested meaning and mainstream identity.

Our work here adds to what seems a vastly under studied convergence of identity, faith, and art by examining individuals' stories of their religious tattoo(s). We are aware of two published studies in this regard. Koch and Roberts (2012) suggested a Weberian back-story for those who expressed their faith, memorialized a loved one, or eased their angst by obtaining a religious tattoo. Kluger (2012) developed a thought-piece on the topic, focusing largely on motivation and behavior rather than meaning. However, we contend in this research that acquiring a religious tattoo is a profound expression of faith, a quest for religious identity, and a contribution to (literally) a body of religious art.

This research also adds to the emerging work focusing on religious body modification by examining the meanings respondents attach to their interest in, and acquisition of, religious tattoos. Open-ended survey data were gathered from written

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

responses from eighty-five survey respondents from twelve different American colleges and universities. Eleven illustrative interviews were also conducted with students at one of the universities (a large public school), giving us a total of ninety-six respondents.

Short stories, commentary, drawings, and interviews reveal that religious tattoos signify, in our thematic categorization of respondents' words, respect, reverence, and remembrance for both their religious faith and the key agents in their lives (usually parents and grandparents) who have initiated and maintained them in that faith. Thus, these tattoos become reminders of "proper" behavior and even aspirational attitudes and are rarely regretted by the young adults who have them, in contrast with some other, less meaningful and less planned tattoos elsewhere on their bodies.

### **METHODS**

#### ***Data Collection***

There were two sources of data for this research: a) stories and pictures written by respondents in response to an open ended question on the last page of a survey given out in selected classes in twelve American colleges and universities from 2010-3 and b) eleven illustrative interviews with similar age respondents at one of the universities included in the sample. Six of the twelve schools are public state universities; six are private and largely quite selective in admission standards. Three of the six private schools are also explicitly Christian. This identity is at the forefront of each one's constitution, history, identity, expectations of students and staff, and regulation of behavior.

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

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)?

Among the 3610 multiple-university respondents, eighty-five chose to report information and emotion about their religious tattoo(s). These responses ranged from one sentence (e.g., “a cross with angel wings with my family name”) to quite detailed personal histories and intricate drawings of the tattoo(s). Of note, at this point, is the disproportionate degree to which our religious tattoo narratives came from respondents at Christian schools. While we received no narratives from one Christian school and two public schools, there was a roughly 25% greater likelihood that those we received came from Christian school respondents (25/658 Christian = 3.8%; 60/2048 Other = 2.9%). This disproportionality leads us to wonder the extent to which not only individual religiosity may be part of their motivation for acquisition, but also about the possible contextual effects of a religious environment, out of which comes this dramatic – and permanent – expression of faith and allegiance (see below – Conclusion.).

Each respondent was also asked through open-ended questions his/her gender, age, race/ethnicity, and how long s/he had the tattoo. Respondents reported being 18-23 years of age and having had their tattoos from one week to seven years. There were 55 females, 39 males, and two of unidentified gender. In terms of race, 58 were white, 12 were black, seven were Hispanic, six were Asian, and one was mixed-race (black and white). The 12 institutions of higher learning range from large, research-focused public

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

state universities to small liberal arts colleges and were not clustered geographically in any particular region.

The 11 illustrative interviews were conducted in 2014-5 in-person at a large, public four-year university that was one of the original surveyed universities. Students in undergraduate sociology classes were asked to contact one of the authors if they had a tattoo they considered to be religious. No reward was offered for participation and interviews took place in a faculty office. Interviews ranged in length from 30 to 90 minutes and were dyadic, non-repeated, and semi-structured in order to let the respondent describe the history and meaning of the tattoo, as well as any effects it had on the respondent's life. Respondents were 18-24 years of age, seven were male, and five were non-white (three were Asian, one was black, and one was Latinx).

### ***Data Analysis***

Data for this project were analyzed inductively in three waves to allow for the greatest accuracy and validity. In the first step, a textual analysis was conducted of the survey responses utilizing grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Charmaz 2005) that allowed codes to emerge from the students' textual responses and then later interviews in three waves. The first wave was general: identifying and classifying by religious affiliation, race, gender, placement on the body, and type of tattoo. This allowed for the generation of more accurate interview questions for the interview portion of data collection. The transcripts from the interviews were included in with the written student responses for the second and third wave of data collection. The second wave identified type of rationale for tattoo as well as looked at patterns within rationale by race, gender, placement on the body, and religious affiliation. The third wave identified meta-themes

## The College Student’s Religious Tattoo: Respect, Reverence, Remembrance

among tattoo rationales and any patterns by religious affiliation, placement on the body, and demographics like race or gender.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overall, we found three different themes regarding the meanings that respondents reported about their religious tattoos: reverence, remembrance, and respect. These themes are not mutually exclusive – the same respondent could certainly reference both reverence and remembrance, for example – but were distinct enough that they should not be treated as synonymous. The primary means of differentiating between the three are that of motivation and usage, which are discussed in more detail below. Indeed, the permanence of the tattoo heightens the reverence, respect, and remembrance that the respondent wishes to convey to others and to him- or herself. Table 1 clarifies and defines the two sub-codes associated with each of those themes, as well as indicative example quotations from writings and interviews. These categories, while encompassing the majority of the tattoos respondents wrote or spoke about, shouldn’t be considered exhaustive. Some respondents did not give enough information about their tattoos or meanings to adequately determine classification or motivation – for example, a couple of people told us that their tattoo was “a cross. I thought it was a good idea for a first tattoo” or “I thought it looked nice.” In these cases, the primary motivations seems to be more about body modification itself, rather than the meaning of the tattoo. However, by far, the majority of the respondents could be placed in the categories below:

Category	Definition	Example
<b>Reverence</b> – religious tattoos that respondents stated they got because of their own religious beliefs and because of the	<i>Identity Formation and Group Affiliation</i> <i>Advertisement:</i> Most obviously religious, observer from same culture	“A cross with a crown of thorns and INRI so others can see I’m a Christian.” “My favorite psalm with my family name

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

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.	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)	underneath.”
	<i>Personal Meaning:</i> 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.”
<b>Remembrance</b> – 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.	<i>Of Loved One With Shared Faith</i>	“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.”
	<i>Of Own Religious Faith, Without Loved One</i>	It “says never alone with a dove because God’s always with me and the dove is a religious symbol.”
<b>Respect</b> – 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	<i>Of Another Religion/Culture:</i> 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.”
	<i>Of Loved One Without Shared Faith:</i> Respondent felt religious symbol was	“I’m not Christian myself, but my cousin who died had a tattoo of Phillipians

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

<p>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.</p>	<p>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.</p>	<p>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."</p>
---	--	---

### *Reverence*

We operationalized reverence tattoos as those tattoos the respondent stated that they got because of a) their own religious beliefs AND b) because the respondent felt those beliefs were important in causing him- or herself to actively do something in regards to his or her faith. To further specify, we found two major sub-themes within each of those categories of reverence, remembrance, and respect. These sub-themes, although theoretically not mutually exclusive were, surprisingly, *empirically* mutually exclusive. For example, in the reverence category, it is easy to see that, theoretically speaking, identity formation/group affiliation advertisement should correlate quite closely with personal meaning. That is, it's unlikely that a person would form or advertise an identity with something as indelible as a tattoo without that tattoo having personal meaning. Conceptualizing the meaning of religious tattoos in this way resonates with Yuen-Thompson's (2015) concept of gaining sub-cultural capital by seeking solidarity – reverence – with other women who were heavily tattooed. This dynamic also appears much earlier in the literature with respect to the more general impact of tattoo acquisition on identity (Kosut 2000; Sanders and Vail 2008).

However, we also learned that, when respondents were talking about their tattoos, they meaningfully differentiated between these two concepts not only in content and motivation, but also in terms of bodily placement. In terms of content, those tattoos

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

which contained commonly recognized religious symbols or words, like a crown of thorns or Bible verses (the majority of our respondents identified their tattoos as Christian), tended to be used as outward symbols or advertisements of inner reverence.

As one young man noted:

On my inner bicep it is Hebrew that says “crucified with Christ.” I got this so I could use it as a ministry tool. I got it when I dedicated my life to Christ and wanted to share the good news through my tattoos. It has changed my life because I have been able to [bear] my testimony and the Gospel to people through my tattoo. It has opened up conversation to a religious topic with people that usually would not talk about Christian faith.

This respondent overtly states that his tattoo is a ministry tool – the placement on his body in an easily seen area and the use of Hebrew (a language not commonly spoken in America) invites questions about the tattoo and becomes a way to share his religious faith with others. To put it in English would allow people to read the tattoo for themselves and not ask him about it, thus losing him the opportunity to “bear the Gospel.” Many others also combined symbols of their faith with other elements of their identity, like adding surnames under favorite psalms or elements from their ethnic culture like Celtic- or German-style crosses. It is easy to see how such symbols would become symbols of group identity and membership to those observing the tattoo.

Uniformly, those tattoos which the respondent noted as advertisement of identity and of aid in forming their identity would be found on “public” areas of the body: for males, on the chest, arms, and (sometimes) legs. For males, rarely would a reverence tattoo be found on the back because the respondent would be unable to see it or on the lower limbs because higher placement on the body seemed to connote more value for the

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

tattoo for men. For women, reverence tattoo placement differed slightly because the non-intimate areas of the body differed: arms were common but not the chest, and, unlike the males, females were quite likely to have a small tattoo (“a fish so all can see I walk in Christ”) on their foot. This might be due to the fact that women’s shoe styles allow for more visible foot area than men’s shoes. In general, women in our sample seemed to be more likely to report smaller tattoos. While our data is certainly not generalizable to even college students as a whole, we found no particular racial or ethnic pattern among those who had a “reverence” tattoo. It was present in all the racial/ethnic groups in our sample.

In contrast, some respondents reported having tattoos that they themselves considered religious in nature because of the personal meaning attached to the symbols found in the tattoo, but would not be easily “read” as religious by other members of the person’s culture or even the person’s own religious group, either because of body placement or vagueness of the tattoo. That is, if the tattoo had an obviously religious element, it would be placed somewhere on the body that would be unlikely to be seen by a non-intimate (or, in some cases, placed in areas like the inside of the lip or inside the hairline that cannot be seen by anyone). Some noted that they did not wish for the tattoo to influence their future careers, and that “it was never about having something to show off, it was more about showing my dedication to God.” This was also the case for one respondent who told us that she had the word “emuna” tattooed on the inside of her lower lip, which she noted 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.” Interestingly, while both this Christian respondent’s tattoo and the one used as a ministry tool by the Christian gentleman above involved Hebrew, they

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

differed in terms of whether they used the Hebrew alphabet itself or transliterated English, as did other reverence tattoos in these two categories. It is perhaps an outlier finding, but the three tattoos reported by respondents in our sample that used the actual Hebrew script fell into the identity formation/group affiliation category because the respondents noted that they used them as advertisement, or conversation starters. That is, they used other people's curiosity about what foreign word would be so important that the respondent would choose to permanently inscribe it on a body part to start a conversation and evangelize about their religious faith. The two tattoos that transliterated the Hebrew into the English pronunciation were personal meaning ones and found in non-visible areas of the body. It is perhaps the case that words written in the English alphabet, even non-English words, could be seen as more intimate and thus more accessible as indicators of reverence to the respondent than words written in a non-English script. This was true in reverse for those whose native language was not English – the tattoo on the non-visible part of their body that had personal meaning was written in their first language, rather than English. As one Indonesian woman told us, “I decided to get ‘Thou Shall Never Part’ in Indonesian on my left ribs, by my heart.”

Additionally, if the tattoo was in a visible area and was a personal meaning tattoo, it would be deliberately vague. For example, one respondent said that “these three dots represent the Trinity, but it's not obvious. I know it, though.” The three dots were in the style of the “therefore” symbol in mathematics ( $\therefore$ ), so it is unlikely that even a member of the respondent's own Christian sect would automatically assume it was connoting the Christian Holy Trinity. These tattoos were definitively not tools for ministry or evangelism, but rather to remind the respondent of reverence towards his or her deity

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

and/or a particular set of prized behaviors founded in that deity's creed. They were tools of personal correction and meaning, not meant to be shared with the general public, unlike the reverence tattoos used for group identity formation *and* advertisement, which were meant to be seen and talked about to others. Yet, the respondents reported that these two types of reverence tattoos were actually motivated by the same reason: the respondent's own religious beliefs and the importance of those beliefs to the respondent.

Interestingly, the reverence tattoos were the ones that tended to be "themed" to the body part on which they were placed, like the inner lip tattoo discussed above. Another woman noted that her "tattoo says 'walk by faith,' it's located on my foot...I had to realize that all I needed to do was walk by faith." Almost everyone who mentioned having a tattoo on the foot used some version of the phrase "walk with Christ" or "walk in my faith." One person noted that she placed a religious tattoo "in a place where only my future husband would regularly see it" as a challenge to herself to maintain sexual purity and (for him) to accept Christ before accepting her. In contrast, the respect and remembrance tattoos seemed to be on the trunk of the body or areas less difficult to "theme" than hands, mouths, or feet. This is likely because the reverence tattoos usually had some sort of behavioral aspect to them – these tattoos were functioned as means to solidify one's personal identity through action or behavior or to advertise that to others. It would be logical for these tattoos to be present on those areas of the body that more easily connote action (like hands, feet, mouths, etc.). We did find one exception to this body placement rule with a reverence/personal meaning tattoo: one respondent got a cross on his back to "remind me that Jesus is the One and he will always have my back."

### ***Remembrance***

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

The tattoos we classified as remembrance also can be seen as having some theoretical overlap with the reverence tattoos (in that the respondent could wish to remember to revere a deity through the mechanism of the tattoo) but have a different primary motivation: the respondent stated that they got the tattoo primarily to remember either a loved one *or* to remind themselves of their religious faith because of their current presence in a setting that the respondent considered conflictual with that religious faith. This oppositional setting is a key difference from reverence tattoos. To be clear, we are reflecting the respondents' mindset that it is counter-cultural to be Christian in the supposedly worldly and secular setting of higher education. This understanding of another's framework is necessary to understand that they believe that their motivation is counter-cultural, regardless of whether it actually is.

Generally, the respondent considered this oppositional setting to be higher education (which is understandable, given the age and source of our sample), which the respondents usually indicated was a setting rife with anti-religion messages from faculty or behaviors and attitudes from peers that the respondent considered counter to their religion. These are not new concerns or dynamics. Yuen-Thompson (2015) and Hawkes, Senn, and Thorn (2004) report similar levels of quasi-militancy from women using tattoos to, essentially, remember who they are. Similarly, a largely internet "grouping" of men distinguish themselves with the name "Straightedge." In addition to acquiring heavy levels of tattoos, they distinguish their lifestyles from stereotypically heavily tattooed males with the catch phrase, "I don't smoke; I don't drink; I don't f\*\*k." Williams and Copes 2005; Williams 2006).

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

In contrast with those discussed above whose primary motivations were remembrance of self – to be oppositional to or distinguish themselves from others - many didn't mention a desire to be counter-cultural in their motivations in getting the tattoo, even when pressed. Their motivations tended to be internal, rather than in response to an external source. These remembrance tattoos did not have a connotation of action involved. These motivations are reminiscent, in part, of a very early rationale for acquiring a tattoo. The famous (in such circles) tattoo artist Lyle Tuttle first became well-known for his work on Janis Joplin. Following her death and through the years, he memorialized her well-known heart-on-the-left breast tattoos for hundreds of fans and aficionados (Vidan 2015).

More to the point, in the first sub-category of remembrance tattoos (of a loved one with a shared faith), we were surprised that there was a sub-sample of respondents with tattoos that they identified as religious, yet the respondents may or may not have considered themselves to be strongly religious (although they did have a history of shared faith with the loved one – or, at least culturally identified with that faith). The majority of respondents in this category did, however, see themselves as at least somewhat religious. This apparent contradiction was resolved as soon as we realized that these religious tattoos held meaning to the respondent because of an association between that religion and a loved one, usually a parent or grandparent. Often, but not always, the loved one would be deceased and these remembrance tattoos would be similar to religious memorials to that person: “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.” In the case of this respondent, he shared the

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

same religious faith as his grandmother, but the motivation that was primary and that he spent the most time on in his answer was about his grandmother. This was similar to another respondent who told us that his “tattoo is a cross with II Timothy 4:7,8...the week before [my grandfather] died he told me to walk with God and never steer off the path.” This verse is about receiving a heavenly reward after maintaining one’s faith against opposition.

Another respondent mentioned getting a tattoo of a cross with an American flag in the background and crossed rifles in the foreground because “America is my guardian, God is the center of all things, and the infantry is my creed.” From its appearance, it is not obvious that such a tattoo should be classified as remembrance, as opposed to reverence/personal meaning, but the remembrance classification emerges once the respondent is asked about the meaning behind and function of his tattoo *for him*: this respondent mentioned that he got it because of military service in Iraq and that it was symbolic of those comrades lost in battle. The shared group identity and symbols with those deceased comrades caused the respondent to remember said deceased comrades when seeing the tattoo, hence making it more meaningful to the respondent – so much so that he noted that he had written a paper on the interconnection between religion and tattoos for a college class. The oppositional nature of this tattoo is connoted through the guns and language used: using a word like “guardian” suggests that there is some element to be guarded against. In context, the respondent might have meant guarding against forgetting his deceased comrades, but also guarding against external forces that wish to violate his way of life (which would include his religion).

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

Interestingly, we found that the respondents in the above sub-category predominantly identified as white and/or Hispanic – particularly, Catholic Hispanics. This might reflect that respondents see their religious affiliation and culture as intertwined, and thus memories of a loved one may implicitly call up memories of religious events or shared rituals, and vice versa. While our data are not generalizable and we consider this an area for future research, we note that there is a racial and ethnic pattern that might be of interest in tattoo motivation and type.

In the second sub-category, remembrance tattoos of the respondent's own faith did not involve a loved one, but did have the primary motivation of reminding the respondent of his or her deity, usually in the face of others' opposition. The main difference between this subset of tattoos and the reverence/personal meaning tattoos was again not in form or content, but in meaning and usage. The respondents whose tattoos fell into this category didn't report using or seeing their tattoos as cues for behavior (in that revering a deity is generally an active process on the part of the respondent), but as *reminders* of the existence of that deity: "on my left ribcage I have a part of the Bible...religiously, it means believe in God the way you want, not by the way others do." Here, the opposition is not against religion in general, but against believing the way that others do. Even when pressed, respondents pointed to the calm feelings that they got "when I see it. I don't have to do anything or be anyone – I just have to remind myself that He is, and I can be still." Another respondent noted that her tattoo "says never alone with a dove because God's always with me and the dove is a religious symbol." While respondents obviously had to ascribe some sort of personal meaning to the symbols in order to be reminded of their deity, these tattoos were not pointed to as actively causing

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

some sort of behavior or attitude on the part of the respondent. The opposition was not one of actively telling others that they were incorrect, but of “going one’s own way” with faith and being reminded that one’s deity is powerful.

This also leaves open the question of whether the meanings and functions of tattoos can change in the same respondent over time. Our data indicate that this can be the case, especially with these two sub-types of tattoos (reverence/personal meaning and remembrance/of one’s own religious faith). That order (reverence to remembrance) seemed to be chronological on the part of some of our respondents. That is, some respondents noted getting the tattoo to drive some sort of behavior, but as the respondent got used to seeing the tattoo on his or her body, the function changed: “I used to be a lot more...aggressive? about my faith and tell a lot of people about it. But now that I’m older, it’s more about focusing on me and making sure that I have a good relationship with him. I don’t need all that, just to know that He’s there and loves me.” This statement can be contrasted with the respondent’s words above in the reverence section that the purpose of his tattoo is to “bear the Gospel” and proselytize. While certainly not all religious tattoos will change in meaning over time, our data indicate that it is possible during the course of the respondent’s life, perhaps in response to the respondent’s social circumstance. Additionally, since our data is solely from college students, this indicates that this sort of change can actually happen in a relatively short period in a person’s life (in that our oldest respondent was 23 years of age and the legal age for tattoos is 18).

### ***Respect***

The third major category of tattoos identified, respect, was also easily broken down into two subcategories: respect of another religion/culture and respect of a loved one without

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

a shared faith. Again, these are tattoos that the respondents themselves identified as religious, yet the casual viewer may or may not consider said tattoo to be religious. This category of tattoos did not actually signify a connection with a deity or divine force for the respondent. Rather, the respondents with these tattoos generally considered themselves either a- or anti-religious, despite identifying their tattoos as religious in nature. This category emerged from the apparent disconnect in that logic – how could a respondent have a religious tattoo, yet be apathetic or oppositional to religion itself?

The answer to that question emerged through the dual subcategories within respect – for another culture and for another person with whom the respondent did not share a religious faith. In that former subcategory, the content and sometimes even stated meaning of the tattoo was not religious. Several respondents mentioned getting tattoos that they identified as religious that had no *religious* meaning whatsoever to the respondent him- or herself, but did have personal meaning to the respondent while having religious meaning in another religion or culture. For example, several respondents mentioned tattoos of the Buddha. Some of these respondents overtly identified as Christian, and had Christian tattoos (the fish design or a Biblical reference) elsewhere on their body, but mentioned wanting tattoos of Buddhist imagery to “show respect for another religion” or to “remind myself to strive for inner peace.” Some respondents mentioned just liking the aesthetic qualities of the imagery. However, respondents still classified those tattoos as religious, leading us to believe that, for at least some of these respondents, the definition of religious tattoo is any tattoo that has religious meaning in any context – not just a tattoo of the respondent's own personal religion. These tattoos tended to be found on visible areas of the body, perhaps because of their

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

aesthetic/decorative qualities. It's also possible that such tattoos serve as symbols of being educated and cosmopolitan to the respondent and to others, thus the respondent needs to have them in a place where others can see and appreciate that identity advertisement. We note that this is different from those who were using their religious tattoos in such a manner because it's unlikely that these respondents will use that tattoo of, for example, the Buddha, to spread Buddhist tenets. Additionally, they are not claiming to be members of the Buddhist faith themselves – rather, they're claiming to be members of a group that is educated enough to know about Buddhism.

While we focus in this paper on the meanings that the respondents themselves give to their tattoos, we must note that this co-optation of another culture's religious symbols raises the question of cultural appropriation, or “the use of a culture's symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture” (Rogers, 2006, p. 474). In short, yes - we certainly can see this occurring in our sample, and is an important area of future research. Overall, the respondents in this sub-category identified as white and non-Hispanic. Some were self-aware enough to admit to cultural appropriation, albeit not using that terminology: when talking about an ankh symbol, one respondent said, “well, I feel a little weird about it now because it's not really mine, but I admired the ideas at the time and still think it's important, so I think about it in terms of its meaning, not being Egyptian.” This is fascinating insight into those who get tattoos for respect purposes: the respondent sees the religious meaning as objective to the symbol and not culturally derived, thus his continued “use” of the symbol is legitimate.

Interestingly, there were several respondents within this Respect category who stated that they got a religious tattoo out of respect for another culture, but the symbol

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

that they chose is not one that would be considered religious in that culture (or in the respondent's own culture). For example, one respondent got "a pictograph of the Mayan calendar. I think it looks really detailed and decorative." The Mayan calendar, while containing some references to religious feast days, is not as clearly religious as, for example, a tattoo of Quetzalcóatl (the feathered serpent god). We initially thought that these respondents may have missed the word "religious" in the prompt or interview question and were instead telling us about all of their tattoos, but further writings on the page or later statements during the interview seemed to indicate that the respondents had other tattoos that they didn't consider religious about which they did not write. For example, one stated, "and then the other ones are just regular." In context, the use of the word "regular" means "non-religious," so the respondent is clearly differentiating. Thus, for these respondents, tattoos that they consider symbolic of another culture become conflated with "religious," perhaps indicating a belief that all symbolic tattoos are religious because of the larger meanings that those symbols have.

This dimension of respect is somewhat surprising given the more common and broadly based veneration and expression of religious symbols that have deep emotional meaning. However, what we see here is tangentially embedded in an early piece of tattoo research highlighting the appropriation of Maori tattoos by non-Maori, largely for aesthetic reasons (Pritchard 2000). This opens the way for examining perhaps a continuum of motivation for the use of "other-cultural" symbols in tattooing. To what extent is this more or less interest-based appropriation and/or value-based veneration?

The second sub-category within Respect was based on respect of a loved one with whom the respondent did not share a religion. This was a smaller in number category

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

than some of the others, but was distinct enough in motivation from the others to necessitate its own grouping. This differentiates these respondents from those who have tattoos in the remembrance category (who are memorializing loved ones *with* a shared faith). We separated these respondents again because of their motivation behind the tattoos: they certainly did wish to remember the loved one, but the religious iconography or words that accompanied the tattoo primarily indicated respect for the loved one and the fact that the loved one had a deep religious faith. Unlike those in the remembrance category, these respondents only put the religious tattoo on their body because of the connection with the loved one, rather than any connection they themselves felt to the religion. In the words of one respondent: "I'm not Christian myself, but my cousin who died had a tattoo of Phillipians 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." This is a very distinct motivation from the one noted above by the respondent who had the rosary tattooed on her body to not only remind herself of her grandmother, but also as a reminder "to be strong in my faith." The respondent with "I can do" on him picked a tattoo with no obvious religious meaning to an observer, but it is a reference to his deceased cousin's own religious tattoo. However, this respondent noted that, although he saw it as a religious tattoo, it was "more about [the cousin] and to be persistent." Both individuals had meanings to the tattoo beyond the loved one (some sort of character trait or virtue they wished to strengthen in themselves), but it was distinctly areligious in the respondents who we categorized as respecting the loved one without a shared faith. We didn't see any racial, ethnic, or gender pattern among this group.

## CONCLUSION

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

Religion, as a structure in society, is simultaneously intensely personal and strongly group-driven. Individuals interact with other adherents in their faith and their deity, then use the emotional energy generated by those interactions to overcome the trials of everyday life (and, presumably, grow stronger in that faith). Thus, it is no surprise that, for a variety of reasons, and coupled with the increase in number of tattoos in American society and high rates of spirituality in Millennials, college students would chose to mark themselves with tattoos they see as having religious meaning. We classify those reasons, using those their self-reported motivations and uses for their tattoos, into three main categories: reverence, remembrance, and respect. These categories also differ because of the primary motivation of the respondent, placement on the body, and content.

For those whose primary motivation was reverence, the meaning of, and rationale for acquiring their tattoo generated action regarding their own religious beliefs. That is, their tattoo either advertised their group identity (thus sometimes inviting conversation about their religion – particularly those tattoos in non-English languages), or had personal meaning that caused them to not only remember to have faith in their deity, but act upon that faith. These tattoos also tended to be more visibly placed.

This differed from those whose primary motivation was remembrance. While some of those in the remembrance category got the tattoo to remind them of their own faith, reverence tattoos seemed to express more inward emotions than to generate motivation to act. Their tattoos linked inward, personal faith to loved ones – often deceased – from whom their faith was generated, and because of whom their faith persisted. These tattoos were also likely to be placed in areas covered by clothing.

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

The third category, respect, was something of a surprise. It became clear to us that, while many of these were not obviously religious – they lacked traditional symbolism such as crosses or crescents – these symbols were deeply spiritual. Respondents indicated the overall aesthetics of the art, and their interpretation of its spiritual content, showed deep respect for another culture. Moreover and in that vein, these tattoos showed respect for a loved one with whom the respondent did not necessarily share a specific faith, but with whom they were deeply and emotionally tied. Interestingly, even when the respondent would deliberately note to us that s/he was not religious, or got the tattoo because of its aesthetic qualities, the respondent still classified the tattoo itself as religious in nature. This suggests that the definition of religious tattoo differs significantly by person, and likely even changes over time.

Tattoos express personal beliefs, manage both one's personal identity, and signify group affiliation. Religious tattoos add content to, and offer linkages between, motivation and meaning. This research further amplifies how religious tattoos express the permanence of beliefs, and the enduring emotions that come from special relationships, with respondents' Deity and their loved ones. We expect to see more religious tattoos as the prevalence of body modification increases. We imagine the motivation for this form of religious expression may also be engendered, and emboldened, by contextual effects as well as personal spirituality/religiosity. This is partially evident in the disproportionate number of religious tattoos from respondents at Christian universities, and embeds this research in the more general area of inquiry related to religious subcultural identity and "Moral Communities." (Wellman 1999; Adamczyk 2012)

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

Thus, more research of this type shows promise in advancing how we understand the rationale behind, and the manner in which, young people derive personal meaning within their cultures and sub-cultures, and use emerging and growing trends to form and express their identity with it.

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

### REFERENCES

- Adamczyk, Amy. 2012. Understanding Delinquency with Friendship Group Religious Context. *Social Science Quarterly* 93(2): 482-505.
- Alper, 2015, November 23. Millennials Are Less Religious than Older Americans, But Just as Spiritual. *Pew Research Center*. Accessed 8/3/17 from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/23/millennials-are-less-religious-than-older-americans-but-just-as-spiritual/>
- Armstrong, Myrna L., Alden E. Roberts, Jerome R. Koch, Jana C. Saunders, Donna C. Owen, and R. Rox Anderson. 2008. Motivation for Contemporary Tattoo Removal: A Shift in Identity. *Archives of Dermatology* 144 (7): 879-884
- Atkinson, Michael. 2003. *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Atkinson, Michael, and Kevin Young. 2001. flesh journeys: neo primitives and the contemporary rediscovery of radical body modification. *Deviant Behavior* 22:117-146.
- Becker, P.E., and H. Hofmeister. 2001. Work, family, and religious involvement for men and women. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40: 707-722.
- Burger, Terry D., and Deborah Finkel. 2002. Relationships Between Body Modifications and Very High-risk Behaviors in a College Population. *College Student Journal* 36(2): 203-213.
- Charmaz, Kathy. 2005. Grounded Theory Methods in Social Justice Research. in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research, Third Edition*. Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, eds. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- DeMello, Margo. 2000. *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Drews, David R., Carlee K. Allison, and Jessica R. Probst. 2000. Behavioral and Self-Concept Differences in Tattooed and Nontattooed College Students. *Psychological Reports* 86(2): 475-481.
- Fowler, J. 1994. Moral stages and the development of faith. In *Fundamental Research in Moral Development*. B. Puka, ed. New York, Garland Publishing Inc.
- Glover, R.J. 1996. Religiosity in adolescence and young adulthood: Implications for identity formation. *Psychological Reports* 78(2): 427-431.
- Glaser, Barney G & Strauss, Anselm L. 1967. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*:

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

- Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company
- Greif, Judith, Walter Hewitt, and Myrna L. Armstrong. 1999. Tattooing and Body Piercing: Body Art Practices Among College Students. *Clinical Nursing Research* 8(4): 368-385.
- Hawkes, Daina, Charlene Y. Senn, and Chantel Thorn. 2004. Factors That Influence Attitudes toward Women With Tattoos. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* 50(9-10): 593-604.
- Kluger, Nicolas. 2012. Le Tatouage Religieux. (The Religious Tattoo). *Annales de Dermatologie et de Vénérologie* 139(11): 776-782.
- Koch, Jerome R., Alden E. Roberts, Myrna L. Armstrong, and Donna C. Owen. 2004. Correlations of Religious Belief and Practice on College Students' Tattoo-related Behavior. *Psychological Reports* 94: 425-430.
- Koch, Jerome R., Alden E. Roberts, Myrna L. Armstrong, and Donna C. Owen. 2010. Body Art, Deviance, and American College Students. *Social Science Journal* 47(1): 151-161.
- Koch, Jerome R., and Alden E. Roberts. 2012. The Protestant Ethic and the Religious Tattoo. *The Social Science Journal* 49(2): 210-213.
- Koch, Jerome R., Alden E. Roberts, Myrna L. Armstrong, and Donna C. Owen. 2015. Tattoos, Gender, and Well-Being Among American College Students. *The Social Science Journal* 52(4): 536-541.
- Kosut, Mary. 2000. Tattoo Narratives: The Intersection of the Body, Self-Identity, and Society. *Visual Sociology* 15: 79-100.
- Kosut, Mary. 2014. The Artification of Tattoo: Transformations within a Cultural Field. *Cultural Sociology* 8(2): 142-158.
- Lane, David C. 2014. Tat's All Folks: An Analysis of Tattoo Literature. *Sociology Compass* 8(4): 398-410.
- Madfis, Eric, and Tammi Arford. 2013. The dilemmas of embodied symbolic representation: Regret in the contemporary American tattoo narratives. *The Social Science Journal* 50: 547-556.
- Pritchard, Stephen. 2000. Essence, Identity, Signature: Tattoos and Cultural Property. *Social Semiotics* 10(3): 331-346.
- Rogers, R. 2006. From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation. *Communication Theory* 16: 474-503.

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

- Sanders, Clinton R. and D. Angus Vail. 2008. *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Shannon-Missal, L. 2016, February 10<sup>th</sup>. Tattoo Takeover: Three in Ten Americans Have Tattoos, and Most Don't Stop at Just One. The Harris Poll. Accessed 8/3/17: [http://www.theharrispoll.com/health-and-life/Tattoo\\_Takeover.html](http://www.theharrispoll.com/health-and-life/Tattoo_Takeover.html)
- Vidan, Katie. 2015. Janis Joplin: The First Tattooed Celebrity. Tattoodo. Accessed 10/16/17: <https://www.tattoodo.com/a/2015/12/janis-joplin-the-first-tattooed-celebrity/>
- Wellman, James K. 1999. The debate over homosexual ordination: Subcultural identity theory in American religious organizations. *Review of Religious Research* 41: 184–206.
- Williams, J. Patrick, and Heith Copes. 2005. How edge are you? Constructing authentic identities and subcultural boundaries in a straightedge internet forum. *Symbolic Interaction* 28: 67-89.
- Williams, J. Patrick. 2006. Authentic Identities: Straightedge subculture, music, and the internet. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35: 173-200.
- Wohlrab, Silke, Jutta Stahl, and Peter M. Kappeler. 2007. Modifying the Body: Motivations for Getting Tattooed and Pierced. *Body Image* (4)1: 87-95.
- Yuen-Thompson, Beverly. 2015. *Covered in Ink: Tattoos, Women, and the Politics of the Body*. New York: New York University Press.