

## THE RELIGIOUS TATTOO: MUCH MORE THAN SKIN DEEP

Jerome R. Koch, Texas Tech University

Kevin D. Dougherty, Baylor University

### INTRODUCTION

Among the earliest school memories for most of us is “Show-and-Tell.” We find something important to us, show it to others, and tell the story behind it. A rock from the yard. A picture of someone we love. A token of our achievement. But it’s the story that matters most, and the rock, picture, or trophy are the punch lines.

In the prologue to his novel, *The Gates of the Forest*, noted author, Holocaust survivor, and Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel tells a story from the tradition of the Jewish Hasidim.<sup>1</sup> This is an 18<sup>th</sup> century sect known for story telling, and defined in part by other shared sensory experiences such as costuming and dance. The story (abridged) is as follows:

When the great Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light the fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted. ... The years passed. And it fell to Rabbi Israel of Ryzhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire, and I do not know the prayer, and I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story, and this must be sufficient." And it was sufficient. God made man (and woman) because (God) loves stories.<sup>1</sup>

Stories are foundational to the human experience, especially so perhaps with respect to religion. It seems innately human that we situate ourselves within some larger, cosmic story that provides meaning and moral order.<sup>2</sup> Cosmic stories are often told through religious symbols.

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1. Elie Wiesel, *The Gates of the Forest*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966).

2. Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

The Cross of Christ. The Star and Crescent. The Star of David. The Hindu Om. These are among the most recognizable images that anchor religion to culture and signify religious identity for individuals who wear them.

Michelangelo's painting of the Sistine Chapel ceiling recounts the story of creation. The twelve Stations of the Cross in Roman Catholic sanctuaries tell the story of the Christ's atoning sacrifice and death. The Wailing Wall in Jerusalem is the holiest site for Jewish prayer, so named for the sadness and travail expressed throughout Jewish tradition by the storied destruction of the Temple. The Kaaba at the center of the Great Mosque is regarded as the holiest of holy places in Islamic faith and practice. Much like the Jewish tabernacle, it represents the dwelling place of God, and it is in the direction of the Kaaba that devout Muslims face when they pray throughout the day. Buddhists make pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya, the place where the Buddha received his enlightenment. Each of these places and practices embed the stories of religious history, tradition, hope, and mission within the lives of faithful people. Homogamous religious space engenders trust.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, encounters and conversations can make otherwise secular space a sacred place for those so engaged.<sup>4</sup>

If God loves stories, and the places and practices and traditions which show-and-tell them, God must **really** love tattoos. Tattoos are part of the storytelling that people use to make

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<sup>3</sup> Joey Marshall and Daniel V. A. Olson, "Local Religious Subcultures and Generalized Social Trust in the United States: Local Religious Subcultures and Generalized Trust." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 57, no. 3 (September 2018): 473–94. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12539>.

<sup>4</sup> Nancy T. Ammerman "Finding Religion in Everyday Life." *Sociology of Religion* 75, no. 2 (2014): 189-207.

and convey meaning in their lives.<sup>5</sup> Tattoos are a form of adornment that contain implicit stories. Sociologists Kang and Jones explain,<sup>6</sup> “People use tattoos to express who they are, what they have lived through, and how they see themselves in relation to others and to their social worlds”.<sup>7</sup>

Tattoo acquisition is a growing trend. The percentage of American adults that have at least one tattoo doubled from 14% to 29% in the past ten years, and nearly half of all Millennials (born in the 1980s to mid 1990s) are tattooed.<sup>8</sup> While there is an equally growing body of research examining the antecedents, outcomes, and correlations for tattoo acquisition, there is very little written about religious tattoos. We analyze and reflect upon these trends in four phases. First, we present a brief history of tattoos and tattoo behavior that sets the cultural context for tattoos today. We then discuss the evolving relationship between tattoos and religion in the United States, with particular attention to the beliefs and practices of the Millennial generation and generation Z (born after 1996). Next, we report findings from our research on the prevalence and meaning of religious tattoos on college campuses, including photos of religious tattoos from one Christian university. Finally, we discuss the implications for the study of religion through the growing trend toward religious tattoo acquisition among emerging adults.

## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF TATTOOS**

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<sup>5</sup> Anne M. Velliquite, Jeff B. Murray, and Deborah J. Evers, “Inscribing the Personal Myth: The Role of Tattoos in Identification,” *Research in Consumer Behavior* 10 (2006): 35-70.

<sup>6</sup> Miliann Kang and Katherine Jones. “Why Do People Get Tattoos?” *Contexts* 6, no. 1 (February 2007): 42–47. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ctx.2007.6.1.42>.

<sup>7</sup> Kang and Jones, “Why Do People Get Tattoos?” 42.

<sup>8</sup> “Tattoo Takeover: Three in Ten Americans Have Tattoos, and Most Don’t Stop at Just One,” Harris Poll, Accessed July 19, 2019, <http://www.theharrispoll.com/health-and-life/Tattoo>.

Humans have been marking their bodies with tattoos for millennia. The mummified remains of Oetzi the Iceman were found in the Italian Alps in 1991. His remains date to approximately 3250 BCE. Sixty-one separate tattoos, nearly all perpendicular lines, found in nineteen groupings adorn his body.<sup>9</sup>

Polynesian and South Pacific indigenous cultures have used tattoos as signs of affiliation, identity, and masculinity, for centuries. Heavily tattooed men showed their strength and tolerance for pain by obtaining, over time, an outfit of ink from the knees up onto and through the torso. Culturally, this process was the male equivalent to childbirth. It demonstrated forbearance and pain tolerance. Tattoos among Micronesian women were more lightly applied and signified ornate beauty and sensuality. Christian missionaries, with harsh and sometimes deadly conversion tactics and punishments for apostasy nearly ended the practice of cultural tattoos; it did not re-emerge in full throughout the South Pacific until the 1980s.<sup>2</sup>

Tattoos in the U.S. show up first (more or less) among sub-groups of individuals who are socially distinct. For example, returning sailors, others in the military, and criminals in prison are de-humanized in varying ways by the institution to which they are essentially confined. A ship. A submarine. A platoon. A prison cell. Tattoos became a way to uniquely adorn an identity, and also signify affiliation with the Navy, Merchant Marine, or, more nefariously, a prison gang. Outlaw Biker subcultures are still codified and solidified by specific tattoo images. Finally, in a side note about side-shows, by the mid 1800s numerous circus midways included “The Tattooed Lady” among many other rather scornful displays of so-called human oddities.

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<sup>9</sup> Marco Samadelli, Marcello Melis, Matteo Miccolo, Eduard Egarter Vigl, and Albert R. Zink, “Complete mapping of the tattoos of the 5300-year-old Tyrolean Iceman,” *Journal of Cultural Heritage* 16 (2015):753-758. doi: 10.1016/j.culher.2014.12.005

While scientific studies are only recently coming to the fore regarding tattoo acquisition, motivation, and meaning, early theories of crime and criminality regarded tattoos as indicative of a lower-order criminal mind and/or deviant personality.<sup>10</sup> These ideas were also embedded in medical research that identified tattoos as signs of mental illness.<sup>3 11</sup> Few today would link tattoos to mental illness, but there remains a lingering bond between tattoos and crime. In a recent study of over 100,000 inmates in Florida state prisons, three quarters had tattoos.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, tattoos are not just for “sailors and jailers” anymore. One hardly ever watches an American concert, sporting event, or movie/television show absent visible, elaborate, and obvious tattoos on the performers or athletes. Significantly, these are the types of celebrities who stand as contemporary role models. Thus, while tattoos still signify subcultural identity among bikers, military personnel, and prisoners, tattoos have become mainstream in the United States, most noticeably for younger generations. Over a third (36%) of Generation X and 47% of Millennials have a tattoo; as compared to only 13% of Baby Boomers.<sup>13</sup> The rising popularity of

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<sup>10</sup> Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero, *Criminal Woman, the Prostitute, and the Normal Woman*, Translated by Nicole Hahn Rafter and Mary Gibson, Duke University Press, 2004. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822385592>.

<sup>11</sup> Richard S. Post, “The Relationship of Tattoos to Personality Disorders.” *The Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology, and Police Science* 59, no. 4 (1968): 516–24. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1141832>.

<sup>12</sup> “Prison Tattoos: A Statistical Analysis of the Art on Convicts’ Bodies,” *The Economist*, Accessed July 13, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/christmas-specials/2016/12/24/a-statistical-analysis-of-the-art-on-convicts-bodies>.

<sup>13</sup> Harris Poll, “Tattoo takeover: Three in Ten Americans Have Tattoos, and Most Don’t Stop at Just One.”

tattoos in the United States highlight the central importance of self-expression and individuality for Americans born since 1970.<sup>14 15</sup>

### **TATTOOS AND RELIGION: PAST AND PRESENT**

The perception that religion prohibits tattoos is a lingering stereotype. Some people point to a divine prohibition against tattoos recorded in sacred scriptures, such as the following verse from the Jewish Torah and Christian Old Testament: “Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the LORD.”<sup>16</sup> Christian missionaries used this text as warrant to control the behavior of converts, and it is still routinely considered prohibitive among conservative Christian groups. The cultural stigma toward tattoo-wearers, and the attendant assumption that they are gang affiliated or otherwise socially deviant, seems especially prominent among conservative Catholics and other Christians in Latin America. Brenneman details the experiences of gang members who convert to Evangelical Christianity.<sup>17</sup> Their gang tattoos become problematic as they seek a new identity and are yet remain marked-for-life as it were as part of the gang they seek to renounce. Tattoo removal is often sought, and offered, within the Evangelical community.

Empirical evidence suggests a continued religious bias against tattoos and tattoo wearers. For generations, religious people in the U.S. have been among the least likely to be tattooed. A

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<sup>14</sup> Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled--and More Miserable than Ever Before* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Twenge, Jean M. Twenge. *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*. (New York: Atria. 2017).

<sup>16</sup> Lev. 19:28 (NIV)

<sup>17</sup>Robert E. Brenneman, *Homies and Hermanos: God and Gangs in Central America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

2014 nationally representative survey of over 15,000 U.S. adults found that people without tattoos are more active church-goers.<sup>4</sup> Thirty-one percent of Americans without a tattoo attended religious services weekly or more in 2014; only 14% of tattooed Americans reported that same frequency of attendance.

While the religiously based stigma associated with tattoos persists – gangs, criminals, and sinners – an interesting change is now in progress. One in five tattooed adults state that their tattoo makes them feel more spiritual.<sup>18</sup> For some, a tattoo is an expression of religious faith. Pop singer Justin Bieber has over 50 tattoos, including a full Bible verse on his left shoulder:

Your word is a lamp for my feet,  
a light on my path

Psalm 119:105

This is one of many tattoos with religious significance for Bieber. Other celebrities with religious tattoos are singer Mary J. Blige (cross on her upper left arm), actor and rapper Nick Cannon (a massive crucifixion scene across his entire back), actress Angelina Jolie (text of a Buddhist prayer over her left shoulder blade), and English soccer star David Beckham (multiple depictions of Jesus and angels).

Younger generations of religious conservatives are finding their way to tattoo parlors as well. In her 2004 book *Born Again Bodies*, religious studies scholar Marie Griffith wrote:

“Tattoos, once reviled by mainstream Anglo-Americans as seedy, low-class, and even satanic, now enjoy a refurbished reputation and are all the rage among growing segments of evangelical

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<sup>18</sup> Harris Poll.

youth culture.”<sup>19</sup> Others have observed this trend. Sociologists Lori Jensen, Richard Flory, and Donald Miller documented the popularity of religious tattoos among Gen X evangelicals. They described religious tattooing as “an extreme expression of an extreme faith.”<sup>20</sup> These inked expressions of faith are championed by Christian tattoo parlors and professional organizations such as the Christian Tattoo Association and Alliance of Christian Tattooers.

### **TATTOOS AND RELIGION: ADORATION, ADORNMENT, TRANSFORMATION**

Expressing who we are, or imagine ourselves one day to be, is remarkably similar when discussing religion, tattoos, and how they intersect. Religious faith and practice connect us to a power beyond our selves, and often beyond our imagination. Yet that power is reflected in what we think, how we act, and how we let others know of those connections. Religion expresses and reflects adoration. Tattoos are adornment. Religious tattoos connect adoration and adornment to who we are and how we express ourselves.

Outward symbols of religious identity and affiliation are common. Necklaces with a cross or Star of David are customary pieces of jewelry worn by Christians or Jews. The various outer garments worn by Muslim women are vivid indicators of identity and affiliation. A clerical collar or nun’s habit not only identifies professional clergy, the wearer assumes responsibility for behavior in keeping with this outward declaration of religious identity. Tattoos accomplish many of the same things: identity formation, group affiliation, and impression management.

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<sup>19</sup> Marie R. Griffith, “Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 10, no. 3 (2007): 243, <https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2007.10.3.125>.

<sup>20</sup> Lori Jensen, Richard W. Flory, and Donald E. Miller, “Marked for Jesus: Sacred Tattooing Among Evangelical GenXers.” in *GenX Religion*, ed. Richard W. Flory and Donald E. Miller (New York: Routledge, 2000), 28.



Without overstating its meaning, the trilogy of novels by Stieg Larsson featuring *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* illustrates the point. This is who she IS.

Religious rituals combine adoration and adornment. Among liturgically-minded Christians, the Sacrament of Holy Baptism provides a literal answer to the question, “How shall this child be named?” The so-named child is immediately initiated into the Christian fellowship and, theologically, reborn, beloved of God. The broadly used liturgy for this seems to metaphorically anticipate contemplating tattoo acquisition: “(Name), child of God. You have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the Cross of Christ forever.”<sup>21</sup> Candles are lit. Oil anoints the head of the initiate. Adoration and adornment.

Sanders and Vail conceptualize tattoos as adornment of self in relation to others.<sup>22</sup> Acquiring a tattoo involves, “pleasure of place (exotic) ... ritual (courage, self assertion) ... Positive response (admiration, praise, etc.).” It is a familiar theme expressed by contemporary tattoo scholars and ethnographers (e.g., DeMello 2000; Atkinson 2003; Kang and Jones 2007; Yuen-Thompson 2014). Clearly, tattoos are social as well as personal.

In a survey of college students in the 1990s, Greif, Hewitt, and Armstrong found that self-expression was the dominant reason given for acquiring a tattoo.<sup>23</sup> Yet, tattoos also are affiliative—they connect individuals to others, be that a tribe, a gang, an organization, or a

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<sup>21</sup> *Lutheran Book of Worship: Hymns*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978. Musical score.

<sup>22</sup> Clinton B. Sanders, and D. Angus Vail, *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Judith Greif, Walter Hewitt, and Myrna L. Armstrong, “Tattooing and Body Piercing: Body Art Practices among College Students,” *Clinical Nursing Research* 8, no. 4 (1999): 368-385.

subculture. Jensen et al. contend that religious tattoos hold comparable meanings.<sup>24</sup> They serve functions of individual expression and group identity. An example of religious tattoos expressing both affiliation and veneration is the regularly seen Catholic icon of the Virgin Mary inked on Latino inmates.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, we take special note of the congruent motivations and manifestations of religion and tattoos on the matter of transformation. Among the most ancient religious rites involve prayers and liturgies for healing. Much public religious discourse recounts the story of an individual's transformation or conversion to a faith tradition. Even absent organized religion, 12-step self-help programs are deeply spiritual and become pivot points for amendment of life and a forward movement away from strife.

DeMello<sup>26</sup> and Yuen-Thompson<sup>27</sup> highlight the strategic use of body modification, especially among women, to reclaim identity, and also engender a sub-cultural identity marking turning points in women's lives. These moments/events include, but are not limited to, coming of age, commemorating an achievement, memorializing a loved one, surviving a catastrophe, or

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<sup>24</sup> Jensen, Flory, and Miller, "Marked for Jesus: Sacred Tattooing Among Evangelical GenXers," 15-30.

<sup>25</sup> The Economist, "Prison Tattoos: A Statistical Analysis of the Art on Convicts' Bodies."

<sup>26</sup> Margo DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> Beverly Yuen Thompson, *Covered in Ink: Tattoos, Women, and the Politics of the Body* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

recovery from illness. For example, survivors of sexual assault and other traumas are turning to tattoos to help them heal.<sup>28</sup>

The use of tattoos to mark turning points in life is not exclusive to women or the abused. Velliquette, Murray, and Evers found analogous patterns among tattooed men and tattooed women pertaining to other transitions in life – marriage, childbirth, loss of a loved one.<sup>29</sup> Koch, Roberts, Armstrong, and Owen provide additional evidence for the transformative application of body art among suicide survivors.<sup>30</sup> Koch and Roberts,<sup>31</sup> Koch and Maloney,<sup>32</sup> and Dougherty and Koch<sup>33</sup> move this inquiry forward and have found specifically religious tattoos signifying transformation, memory, restoration, and hope.

Not all tattoos are intended primarily for others to see. Psychologist Sam Gosling points out that the orientation of a tattoo on someone’s body determines whether a tattoo is for others or

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<sup>28</sup> December Maxwell, Johanna Thomas, and Shaun A. Thomas, “Cathartic Ink: A Qualitative Examination of Tattoo Motivations for Survivors of Sexual Trauma,” *Deviant Behavior* (2019): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2019.1565524>.

<sup>29</sup> Velliquette, Murray, and Evers “Inscribing the Personal Myth: The Role of Tattoos in Identification,” 35-70.

<sup>30</sup> Jerome R. Koch, Alden E. Roberts, Myrna L. Armstrong, and Donna C. Owen, “Tattoos, Gender, and Well-Being among American College Students,” *The Social Science Journal* 52, no. 4 (2015): 536–41. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2015.08.001>.

<sup>31</sup> Jerome R. Koch and Alden E Roberts, “The Protestant Ethic and the Religious Tattoo,” *The Social Science Journal* 49, no. 2 (2012): 210–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2011.10.001>.

<sup>32</sup> Patricia A. Maloney and Jerome R. Koch, “The Young Adult’s Religious Tattoo: Respect, Reverence, Remembrance,” *Sociological Focus* 53, no. 1 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1080/00380237.2019.1703863>

<sup>33</sup> Kevin D. Dougherty and Jerome R. Koch, “Religious Tattoos at One Christian University,” *Visual Studies* (2019): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2019.1687331>.

for self.<sup>34</sup> Tattoos oriented to be visible, upright, and/or readable to the owner are self-directed identity claims. Tattoos that face out toward others, as most do, represent other-directed identity claims. We believe this distinction is particularly important in understanding religious tattoos as reminders of conversion or transformation.

The preceding paragraphs outline our argument for the major purposes of religious tattoos. In short, we assert that the acquisition of a religious tattoo begins with a strong sense of Divine (adoration). The religious tattoo brings that emotional connection to life on the body (adornment). And in many cases, the meaning of the tattoo punctuates a life-changing experience (transformation).

### **MILLENNIALS AND RELIGION**

A key driver of the evolution of tattoos and religion is generational change. Just as Generation X is more tattooed than Boomers, Millennials outpace Gen X in the acquisition of permanent body art. Our focus is the religious tattoos of the most heavily tattooed generation in American history: Millennials. To understand the meanings and motivations for their religious tattoos, we must first understand the religious beliefs and behaviors of this youthful generation.

It is widely reported that the Millennial generation in the United States is less religious than previous generations. The evidence includes a higher percentage of Millennials who claim no religious affiliation, lower rates of religious participation, and more pluralistic religious beliefs.<sup>35 36 37</sup> Analyzing college-age emerging adults (18 to 23 years old), Smith and Snell discovered that fewer than one in ten attend a place of worship weekly.

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<sup>34</sup> Sam Gosling, *Snoop: What Your Stuff Says about You*, (New York: Basic Books, 2009).

<sup>35 36 37</sup> Vern L. Bengtson, Norella M. Putney, and Susan Harris, *Families and Faith: How Religion is Passed Down Across Generation*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Widespread abandonment of religion by Millennials is disputed by others.<sup>38</sup> Rather than a generational change away from religion entirely, Smith and Snell conclude that emerging adults exhibit a “religious slump” that is more characteristic of their age than their generation.<sup>39</sup> They argue that Millennials today are no less religious than previous generations at the same age.

What is accepted, however, is the emphasis of Millennials on individualism, diversity, and equality.<sup>40 41 42 43</sup> Millennials are distrustful of authority and tradition, including organized religion.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, for many, personal spirituality is prized over institutional religion.<sup>45</sup> The same as the tattoos that adorn their bodies, Millennials’ orientation toward faith is highly

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<sup>36</sup> “Religion among the Millennials,” Pew Research Center, Accessed July 19, 2019, <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=510>.

<sup>37</sup> Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>38</sup> Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).

<sup>39</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*.

<sup>40</sup> Bengston, Putney, and Harris, *Families and Faith: How Religion is Passed Down Across Generation*.

<sup>41</sup> Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*.

<sup>42</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*.

<sup>43</sup> Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled--and More Miserable than Ever Before*.

<sup>44</sup> Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled--and More Miserable than Ever Before*.

<sup>45</sup> Bengston, Putney, and Harris, *Families and Faith: How Religion is Passed Down Across Generation*.

individualistic. Millennials are used to being told they are unique and special. Their own names reinforce this idea for them. Writing in 2000, Howe and Strauss give a humorous, but insightful anecdote: “Nowadays, you can go to a middle-school choir concert, peruse a program with two hundred names, and not see two first names spelled the same way.”<sup>46</sup> Millennials expect and embrace this diversity, even in matters of faith.<sup>47</sup>

Yet, there is a minority of college-age Millennials for whom religious beliefs and piety are central. Smith and Snell classify them as Committed Traditionalists and estimate that they represent about 15% of contemporary emerging adults in the United States.<sup>48</sup> In contrast to others their age who are indifferent (25%), disconnected (5%), or disdainful (10%) toward organized religion, Committed Traditionalists have an identity rooted in an established religious tradition.<sup>49</sup> It is on the bodies of these Committed Traditionalists that we might expect to see religious tattoos. However, for the 15% of emerging adults who Smith and Snell describe as Spiritually Open (15%), tattoos may also hold spiritual significance.<sup>50</sup>

A new generation is now entering adulthood. It is too early to know if Generation Z (born after 1996) is strikingly different from Millennials. Research thus far points to shared

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<sup>46</sup> Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*.

<sup>47</sup> Bengston, Putney, and Harris, *Families and Faith: How Religion is Passed Down Across Generation*.

<sup>48</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*.

<sup>49</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*.

<sup>50</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*.

values of individualism and inclusion as well as the continued turn from traditional, organized religion to personal, individualistic faith.<sup>51</sup>

### **NEW RESEARCH ON RELIGIOUS TATTOOS ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES**

Our research on religious tattoos has been building for over a decade. Koch has been studying body art on college campuses since 1999. Dougherty collaborated with Koch on data collection in the early 2000s. Dougherty followed the research with interest from its inception. In 2016, Dougherty incorporated Koch's research into his teaching. The topic of religious tattoos became a focal point. After collecting hundreds of tattoo photos and survey data from thousands of college students, we have a valuable vantage point to explore the understudied phenomenon of religious tattoos on college campuses. The time frame of our data collection results in our study encompassing late Millennials and the front edge of Generation Z.

The bulk of our analysis comes from photos of tattoos taken at Baylor University. Baylor is a useful setting for a study of religious tattoos. The university was founded as a Baptist liberal arts college in 1845. It has grown into a Christian research university of 17,000 students. Ninety percent of students identify with a Christian denomination. Baptist (26%), unspecified Christian (17%), and Catholic (16%) are the most prevalent religious affiliations of students. In 2016 and 2017, students in Dougherty's large sections of Introduction to Sociology at Baylor participated in a semester-long research activity called the Campus Tattoos Project.<sup>52</sup> Students took photos of tattoos on campus and used these photos to write a series of papers about identity, groups,

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<sup>51</sup> Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*.

<sup>52</sup> Kevin D. Dougherty, Jake Kane, and Renae Wilkinson, "Campus Tattoos Project," Assignment published in TRAILS: Teaching Resources and Innovations Library for Sociology, Washington DC: American Sociological Association, Accessed August 15, 2019. <http://trails.asanet.org>.

stratification, and social institutions. Students were instructed to ask verbal permission before taking photographs. As an instructional activity, we did not initially seek IRB approval. It was after two semesters of the Campus Tattoos Project that we realized the research potential of the accumulated photos. We were retroactively granted permission to use student-submitted photos for analysis.

We used photos from one paper assignment for our research. From fall 2016 and spring 2017, we collected 752 photos that students had used to compare tattoos by gender. We coded photographed tattoos for religion (overtly religious or not), location on the body, size (small, medium, or large), and content (image, text, or both image and text). Overtly religious tattoos appear in 145 photos (19% of the entire sample). Of these overtly religious tattoos, 72 are on women (49.7%) and 73 are on men (50.3%). The size and location of religious tattoos differ by gender. Religious tattoos of men are larger and in more readily apparent locations, such as the upper arm or forearm. Women's religious tattoos are small and more often on the wrist, foot, or back.

In Fall 2018, we extended data collection. With IRB approval, we invited Baylor University students with religious tattoos to have their tattoos photographed for research purposes. An email invitation was circulated through Introduction to Sociology courses. Over several weeks in November 2018, a string of students visited Dougherty's office. They signed consent forms and then rolled up their sleeve, pulled down their sock, or otherwise shifted clothing as necessary to display their religious tattoo. Very quickly, we realized that the religious significance of a tattoo is not always immediately obvious to outside observers. The self-described religious tattoos of students included butterflies, light bulbs, maps, phrases, and abstract symbols. In fact, of the 73 photos we took in fall 2018, 41% are what we classified as



“covert religious tattoos.” They are religious to the owner, but these visible tattoos contained images or text that were not obviously or overtly religious to others. Thus, we realized that our previous coding of photos drastically undercounts the prevalence of religious tattoos at Baylor University. The photos shown in this chapter come from students in fall 2018 for whom we have signed consent to use their tattoos in publications.

A third source of data that we will present in this chapter is from a survey of college students. From 2010 to 2013, Koch and several colleagues surveyed introductory sociology students at 12 universities across the United States. The purpose of the survey was to study religion, body art, and wellbeing among college students. Cooperating universities were big and small, public and private, Christian and secular. The final sample size was 3,521 students. Using questions about the number of tattoos and tattoo content, we coded respondents into three groups: no tattoo (84% of the sample), one or more non-religious tattoos (12%), and one or more religious tattoos (4%). This college-age sample had a considerably lower incidence of tattoos compared to the general statistics noted above for Millennials. The sample is not a random sample from the full population of U.S. Millennials. As such, the demographics of the sample – disproportionately Anglo, female, aged 18-20, and in college – account for the discrepancy. Nevertheless, these data enable us to analyze the relationship between tattoo content and religiosity.

In the next pages, we report our own version of show-and-tell. We show representative photos of religious tattoos at Baylor University and tell of ways that college students use

religious tattoos to express (and perhaps to sustain) their faith. With images and words, we document religious tattoos as a form of adornment that expresses identity, and transformation.<sup>53</sup>

Add note/citation for Dougherty and Koch, 2019.

### Presentation of Identity

Tattoos convey meaningful messages about who individuals think they are or want to be. Religious tattoos identify individuals as people of faith. The way students choose to express their religious identity through permanent ink varies greatly. We saw text and images of different sizes in different locations on the body. A tiny two-dimensional cross or fish symbol (*ichthus*) below the sock line on a foot. A full Bible verse with multiple lines of text across the back or down the side torso. Some religious tattoos are monochromatic. Others have an array of colors. Fourteen different books of the Bible are referenced in students' religious tattoos. They come from the Old Testament and the New Testament. When full verses are used, they are taken from different translations of the Bible.

Amidst this vast variation, there are patterns. Nearly three-fourths of the religious tattoos feature an image, either by itself (51%) or with text (21%). Figure 1 is representative of religious tattoos on college men in our photos. This male student has a cross tattoo with Jesus's face on his upper arm and the text Romans 1:16 below. This Bible verse is "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who

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<sup>53</sup> Kevin D. Dougherty, and Jerome R. Koch. "Religious Tattoos at One Christian University." *Visual Studies* (2019): 1–8.

believes...”<sup>54</sup> The image and scripture reference communicate an identity claim. The individual is proclaiming to others his belief in Jesus as the crucified savior.

Figure 1: Cross and Bible Verse Tattoo on Upper Arm of Male Student



The tattoo shown in Figure 2 depicts the evangelical identity of another student. The young woman in the photo believes that she must share her faith “to the ends of the earth.” She has found a dramatic, personal image that implies an imperative for mission around the world. The tattooed map on her upper back gives permanence to her identity as a missionary.

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<sup>54</sup> Rom. 1:16 (NIV)

Figure 2: World Map Tattoo on Upper Back of Female Student



Students' religious tattoos connect faith to other aspects of identity, such as gender or ethnicity. A woman has the first half of Psalm 46:5 (New International Version) tattooed on her upper back, stretching from her left shoulder to upper spine. The monochromatic cursive script reads:

God is within her, she will not fall

Psalm 46:5<sup>55</sup>

The feminine pronouns in this verse actually refer to a geographic location: Jerusalem, “the city of God.” This woman’s tattoo personalizes the verse to capture a belief in the in-dwelling presence and power of God for women. This tattoo captures a belief in the in-dwelling presence and power of God for women. Roughly a quarter of religious tattoos (28%) are entirely text. The verse that we encountered most often in students’ religious tattoos also pertains to women.

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<sup>55</sup> Ps. 46:5 (NIV)

It is Proverbs 31:25. Four women have this verse or its reference tattooed on them. As seen on the right shoulder blade of one woman: “She is clothed with strength and dignity and laughs without fear of the future.” Proverbs 31:25 (New Living Translation).<sup>56</sup> In the New Living Translation, this verse is from a section of Proverbs labeled “A Wife of Noble Character.”<sup>57</sup> Hence, a tattoo from this passage of Christian scripture affirms a gendered religious identity that prizes marriage and motherhood for women.

Religious tattoos likewise overlap with ethnic identity, although not always in ways that we expected. Our Lady of Guadalupe, a popular depiction of the Virgin Mary, is tattooed on the forearm of a male student. The student is not Latino or Catholic. He is Anglo and attends a non-denominational Protestant church. He explained his choice of the Virgin Mary tattoo as a symbolic link to his mother’s Italian heritage.

#### Affiliation

Religious tattoos also indicate affiliation. The constitutively Christian cross is the dominant religious symbol tattooed on Baylor students. Some variation of a Christian cross appears in 61% of the religious tattoo photos. Figure 3 shows a cross image that we saw repeatedly. It is a Coptic Cross. This image has a very long history as a tattoo. Egyptian Christians (*Copts*) have distinguished themselves for centuries from Muslim Egyptians by getting a small cross tattoo, typically on their right wrist. In a country with a history of religious rivalry, Egyptian Christians use this religious marker to gain entrance into Christian churches and Christian schools. A small cross on the wrist is a favorite religious tattoo of women in our sample.

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<sup>56</sup> Prov. 31:25 (NIV)

<sup>57</sup> Prov. 31:25 (NIV)

Figure 3: Coptic Cross on Wrist of College Woman



Another recurring symbol set that illustrates affiliation are the Greek letters *Chi Rho*. Chi Rho is a reference to Christ. These letters are one of the earliest symbols of the crucifix. It was used by Roman emperor Constantine in the third century. We saw these letters on men's legs, shoulders, and torso. Like the Coptic cross, Chi Rho locates an individual within the Christian religion. Not surprisingly for students at a Christian university, countless variations of the cross and other Christian symbols are tattooed on Baylor students.

Figure 4: Chi Rho Religious Tattoo on Upper Leg of College Man



Not all of the religious tattoos we observed are Christian. We saw several examples of non-Christian affiliation. A male student has a Hindu deity on his left shoulder. A woman has the hamsa hand, a Middle Eastern symbol of happiness and luck, covering the right side of her torso. The palm shaped image represents to her a connection with Middle Eastern spirituality.

In general, the religious tattoos of students reflect a broad affiliation with a religion. At Baylor, the affiliation expressed through religious tattoos is overtly Christian. Interestingly though, we did not see any names or logos of churches or denominations. We saw other types of logos that convey affiliation to universities, sports teams, cities, and nations. Similar tattooed affiliations to religious organizations are absent. This finding matches what others have argued about the religious moorings of Millennials and Generation Z.. They embrace a faith that is more personal and individualistic than traditional and institutionalized.

## Transformation

As indicated throughout our narrative, tattoos tell stories. We found repeated instances of religious tattoos revealing stories of transformation and healing. The tattooed symbols in Figure 5 are a mathematical expression that mean God is greater than the highs and the lows. We saw this tattoo in 11 photos. We do not know the origins of this tattoo or if it is exclusive to Christians, but we have learned subsequently that it has become popular as an expression of religious meaning.<sup>58</sup> In our photos, it is on men and women in varied places on the body, although the wrist is typical. The woman who has this tattoo in Figure 5 battles depression. When things get dark for her, she looks at her wrist to remind herself that God is in control. The message faces her. It is a self-directed identity claim. We discovered that religious tattoos in our photos are more likely than non-religious tattoos to face the owner. A quarter of religious tattoos (26%) face the owner, as compared to 18% of non-religious tattoos. This difference in percentages is statistically significant. Other examples of self-directed religious tattoos on college women are “fear not” and “In God I trust” on inner forearms and “i am His” on the wrist. In addition to the wrist, men have self-directed religious tattoos tattooed on their upper arms. One man has an elaborate angel wing tattooed on his outer arm and shoulder. On his inner bicep is the Bible verse: “For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. Psalm 91:11” (New International Version).<sup>59</sup> It reminds the man of God’s consistent protection.

Figure 5: Self-Directed Religious Tattoo of Female Student

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<sup>58</sup> Carol Kuruvilla, “These 10 Tattoos Have Deep Spiritual and Religious Meaning.” *Huffington Post*, Accessed on November 25, 2019. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/these-10-tattoos-have-deep-spiritual-and-religious-meaning\\_n\\_56407716e4b0307f2cadf3ee](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/these-10-tattoos-have-deep-spiritual-and-religious-meaning_n_56407716e4b0307f2cadf3ee).

<sup>59</sup> Ps. 91:11 (NIV)





Reminiscent of the mathematical expression in Figure 5, other covert religious tattoos carry meanings of transformation. One young woman has a row of numbers and letters on her left forearm. They are the latitude and longitude coordinates of her childhood home where she saw faith modeled and embraced the faith as her own. The numbers and letters on her forearm encapsulate her conversion story. Others have commemorative tattoos to honor deceased loved ones, such as a cross with text below that states “In loving memory of...” The story of these tattoos are stories of relationships, love, and loss.

### Religious Tattoos and Religiosity

Using student survey data from 12 universities, we compared levels of religious faith and practice for three groups of students: those with no tattoos, religious tattoos, and non-religious tattoos. The survey instrument employed questions from the well-known General Social

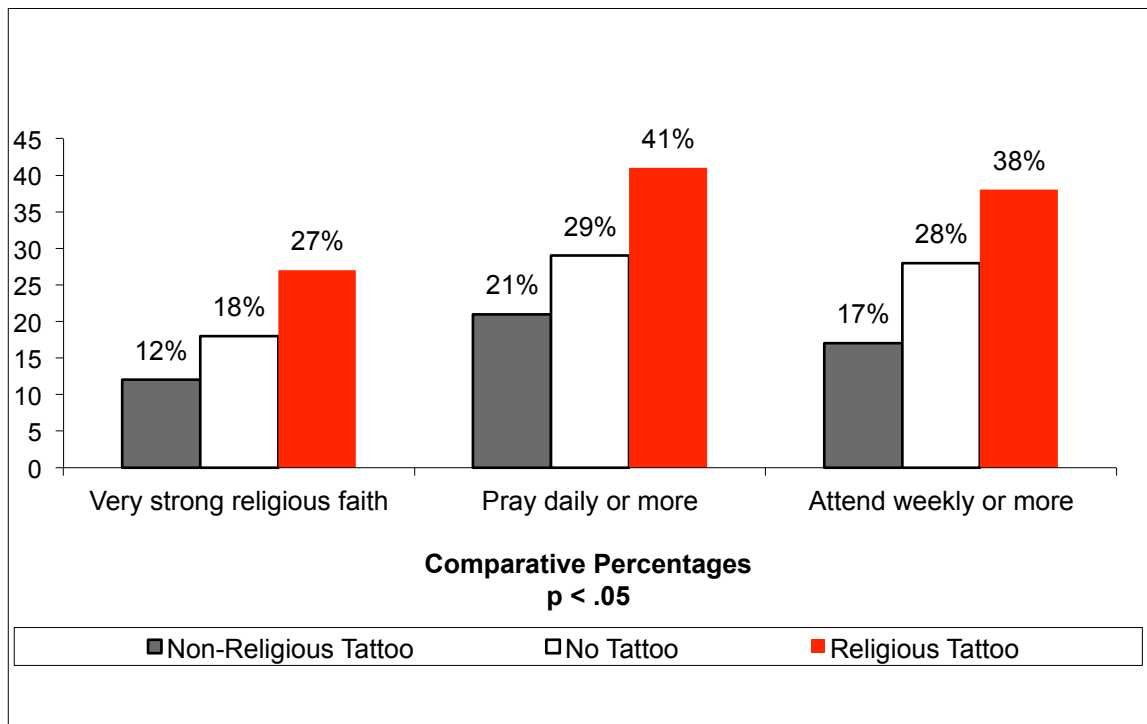
Survey.<sup>60</sup> Respondents with religious tattoos were more than twice as likely to report a “very strong” religious faith compared to those with non-religious tattoos. Those with religious tattoos also prayed more frequently and attended religious services more often. Figure 6 portrays these results. There is a familiar pattern in these graphs. People with religious tattoos report the highest levels of religious faith and practice; people with non-religious tattoos report the lowest levels; and those with no tattoos are in the middle. College students with religious tattoos seem to fit the Committed Traditionalist category of Smith and Snell.<sup>61</sup> They are individuals with active faiths. Beyond private prayer and church attendance, college students with religious tattoos put their faith into action through body art. Yet, they also challenge the assumptions of Smith and Snell as we discuss below.

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<sup>60</sup> Smith, Tom W., Davern, Michael, Freese, Jeremy, and Morgan, Stephen L., General Social Surveys, 1972-2018 [machine-readable data file] /Principal Investigator, Smith, Tom W.; Co-Principal Investigators, Michael Davern, Jeremy Freese and Stephen L. Morgan; Sponsored by National Science Foundation. --NORC ed.-- Chicago: NORC, 2019. 1 data file (64,814 logical records) + 1 codebook (3,758 pp.). -- (National Data Program for the Social Sciences, no. 25).

<sup>61</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*.

Figure 6: Comparing Religiosity for College Students with Non-Religious Tattoos, No Tattoos, and Religious Tattoos



## DISCUSSION AND FURTHER REFLECTION

We have learned that religious tattoos are much more than skin-deep. Displaying a religious tattoo is a show-and-tell event. Others see it and, either through conversation or conjecture, learn a story. Even tattoos that are concealed beneath clothing remind the wearer of who he or she is, and often to whom he or she is connected. Our analysis of religious tattoos on college campuses enables us to extend the show-and-tell game to speak about religion in the Millennial generation and Generation Z.. On first glance, the vast variety of tattoos on campus may suggest that young Americans' quest for individualism fully explains the choice of body art. Yet there are less obvious stories to be told. As sociologists, we look for patterns. These

patterns tell us important things about the use of religious tattoos to express more than unique identity.

To help set the stage for observing patterns, we invoke the influential work of sociologist C. Wright Mills. Mills (1959) described what he believed we all have, and all use – even without knowing it by name – the Sociological Imagination. Briefly defined, this is a “Quality of the mind that helps us learn, and think through, what is happening to us and around us.”<sup>62</sup> This raises crucial questions about our social being and sense of self. Such as, “Who am I and what am I doing in my world?” Conversely, “what is happening in my world that shapes who I am and who I want to be?” Finally, “How does my life change the world?” There is much insight to be gained about our selves and our world by examining the meanings and manifestations of religious tattoos within the latest generations for whom tattoos are most prevalent.

We have learned that virtually any tattoo expresses something deeply meaningful about an individual’s identity. Getting a tattoo involves a significant commitment of time and thought, self-reflection, pain, and not trivially, money. When these complex processes result in a religious tattoo, an added dimension of the expression of faith brings added meaning to the symbols. Much as wearing a cross-shaped necklace identifies individuals as Christians, a cruciform tattoo adds to its meaning because it cannot be removed. The link between self and one’s Christian faith cannot be taken away. Younger generations are forging this link in new ways, often outside the doors of religious congregations. Their religious tattoos highlight ways that they understand their faith, relate their faith to other salient aspects of identity, and practice their faith.

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<sup>62</sup> C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford [England] New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

Belonging involves affiliation. Here we activate our sociological imagination to see the link between self and society. Imagery is at the heart of religious expression and culture. Religious art and sacred music link self and society. Images become anchors and touchstones to stories, histories, unifying experiences, and perseverance through crises. Imagine: The sound of call-to-prayer in Mecca; reciting the Passover liturgy in a synagogue in Jerusalem; or singing “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” on Reformation Sunday in Munich. Each of these events, repeated in similar fashion across the world and through the centuries, connects self and society. Similarly, we present the religious tattoo. A single image of a cross, a crescent, or a star-of-David not only signifies a personal identity but belonging to a vast, historic tradition. For young Americans, religious tattoos characterize affiliation to broad religious traditions more so than to a denomination or congregation.

A religious tattoo can also signify transformation. Religion is a source of solace, stability, and recovery for emerging adults whose lives have been disrupted by pain or brokenness.<sup>63</sup> Religious tattoos can be part of a therapeutic process. We recall again the strategic acquisition and display of body art to champion healing and hope.<sup>64 65 66</sup> On the student survey, one male respondent wrote that he obtained his religious tattoo after losing his virginity. The tattoo’s purpose was to record and remind the young man of his re-commitment to Christian faith

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<sup>63</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*.

<sup>64</sup> Demello, *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*.

<sup>65</sup> Thompson, *Covered in Ink: Tattoos, Women, and the Politics of the Body*.

<sup>66</sup> Koch, Roberts, Armstrong, and Owen, “Tattoos, Gender, and Well-Being among American College Students,” 536–41.

and life.<sup>67</sup> That story, in microcosm, captures the power of a religious tattoo to depict and perhaps even drive personal transformation.

Herein lies another important insight about religious tattoos. They may serve to sustain higher levels of religiosity. Smith and Snell discuss causal mechanisms that explain why teens who are religious remain religious as college-age emerging adults.<sup>68</sup> One of the causal mechanisms they identify is drive for identity continuity. “When people understand themselves to be the kind of selves for whom faith is highly important, the basic human interest in sustaining a continuously coherent identity will—all else being equal—tend to motivate them to remain highly religious into future years.”<sup>69</sup> Religious tattoos provide an indelible marker of identity. If the natural tendency is for people to seek consistency in identity, the religious tattoo becomes a form foreshadowing. We lack data about people with religious tattoos over time, but this is an intriguing line of research for the future. Does the presence of sacred symbols etched into a body prevent defection from the faith?

We have a caveat for Smith and Snell. Smith and Snell wrote that Committed Traditionalists “keep their faith quite privatized in a way that does not violate American society’s broader ‘culture of civility; that requires tolerance and acceptance of difference.’”<sup>70</sup> Millennials and emerging adults in Generation Z with religious tattoos are Committed Traditionalists in

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<sup>67</sup> Jerome R. Koch and Alden E. Roberts, “The Protestant Ethic and the Religious Tattoo,” *Social Science Journal* 49, no. 2 (2012): 210-213.

<sup>68</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*.

<sup>69</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, 236-237.

<sup>70</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, 166.

terms of religious belief and religious behavior, but they are not practicing the type of private piety described by Smith and Snell.<sup>71</sup> Their tattoos represent a public proclamation of their religious identity, affiliation, or transformation. Jensen et al. observed the same of GenXers with religious tattoos.<sup>72</sup> They concluded that religious tattoos blur the line between public and private, sacred and profane. Hence, overt religious tattoos may be personal but not private.

Another useful extension of our findings is in relation to everyday religion. The concept of everyday religion has gained popularity in recent years because it moves analysis of faith and spirituality outside the doors of religious organizations. It refers to the way average people experience faith).<sup>73</sup> Research on religious tattoos is a nice complement to studies of everyday religion. After all, people with religious tattoos, especially overt religious tattoos, are expressing their faith in any social setting they enter. Religious tattoos help define the individuals as religious people.

In sum, young Americans' interest in, and acquisition of religious tattoos empower them with a visible sense of who they are and to whom they belong. These sacred images and texts also can signify pivot points of conversion and transformation. In all cases, religious body art seems to reflect a level of adoration for the Divine power in a person's life. The tattoo transforms adoration to adornment.

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<sup>71</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*.

<sup>72</sup> Jensen, Flory, and Miller, "Marked for Jesus: Sacred Tattooing Among Evangelical GenXers," 15-30.

<sup>73</sup> Ammerman, *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Hasidic Jews are distinct because they wear unique clothing and they maintain specific dietary, hygiene, and worship practices. Adopting a distinctive look and embracing a subcultural identity in the name of religion is quite akin to the motivation for and manifestation of religious tattoos, and the stories they represent.

<sup>2</sup> For a broader discussion of Polynesian culture, tattoos, and Christian religion, see Van Dinter (2005).

<sup>3</sup> For an elaboration of the historic association of tattoos with crime, deviant subcultures, and mental illness, see Yuen-Thompson (2014, 21-34). This work is nuanced in discussing the foregoing in light of gender roles and sexism.

<sup>4</sup> A summary of data collection and major findings from the Relationships in America Survey 2014 is available at <https://relationshipsinafrica.com/>.



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