

Spirituality and Tattoos

By

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Certificate of Ethical Acceptability for Research Involving Humans

This is to certify that the Research Ethics Board has examined the research proposal:

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and concludes that in all respects the proposed project meets appropriate standards of ethical acceptability and is in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2) and Atlantic School of Theology's relevant policies.

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Dated this 30th day of November, 2016 at Halifax, Nova Scotia.

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Spirituality and Tattoos

by Falen McNulty

Abstract: This ethnographic study looks at the links between non-attending Christians and their tattoos. Why did they get a religious tattoo? Does it have any connection to spirituality? What does it represent for them? This research investigates the reasons behind people getting religious tattoos and the spiritual significance of any tattoo they have on their body by interviewing people from across Canada that have religious tattoos.

Introduction

The start of this project had its seed planted many year ago in a conversation with my brother. We were both home from the military for our summer vacation, he was into the tattoo culture of the military by then. He came home sporting his most recent tattoo, a large cross on his forearm. Now there is something to note here, my brother was not and is still not a church goer though he does call himself Christian. My mom asked him why and his answer “just because I don’t go to church does not mean I don’t believe in God.” For me that has always raised the question, “Why do people get religious tattoos?”

Purpose and Relevance

My interest in this topic was piqued in first year at the college, when a conversation around grad project came up and what was of interest at that time for us. The idea of looking at tattoos and people’s connection to them came very quick to me

and stayed with me through my degree. The idea of the project was refined through conversation to get at the heart of people's tattoos.

Tattoos can have a link to a spiritual side. The church over the years has had an ambivalent position on tattoos. Some still hold true to the Leviticus 19:28 passage about not marking one's own body, while others have turned to the New Testament and the sayings of Paul that he was marked for Christ as a reason to support tattoos.

The history of tattoos in society, especially in mainstream society has changed over time. Tattooing is not something that new, there have been cases of mummies found with tattoos that date back almost five thousand years.¹ During the Second World War, tattoos became something that many sailors had, usually some form of a pin-up girl on their forearm. In some cases, tattoos were used to mark people to dehumanize them, like the Jews and homosexuals during the holocaust or to mark criminals. The trend of tattoos was embraced by the merchant marines, bikers, and goths.² Although they did not become popular in culture until more recently, there have been some famous people and monarchs that have had tattoos including King George V and Edward VII.³ At some points in history tattoos were a source of pride, mainly with soldiers during the time of the crusades. Christian soldiers would be marked with the Jerusalem cross to ensure if they were killed they would receive a Christian burial.⁴ As recently as the nineteen

¹Cate Lineberry. 2007. *Tattoos: The Ancient and Mysterious History*. (January 1. Accessed November 18, 2016. [http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/tattoos-144038580/.](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/tattoos-144038580/))

²Cassandra Franklin-Barbajosa. 2004. *Tattoo: Pigments of Imagination*. (December. Accessed November 18, 2016. http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0412/online_extra.html.)

³Alex Stevenson. 2008. *Probing Question: What is the History of Tattooing?*. (June 20. Accessed November 18, 2016. <http://news.psu.edu/story/141345/2008/06/20/research/probing-question-what-history-tattooing>.)

⁴Cassandra Franklin-Barbajosa. 2004. *Tattoo: Pigments of Imagination*. (December. Accessed November 18, 2016. http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0412/online_extra.html.)

sixties, tattoos were considered anti-social⁵ and were something often criminals had. By the 1970's there had been a noticeable resurgence in tattoos. They were popularized by influential rock stars like Brian Jones, Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, Bill Wyman, Charlie Watts, and Ian Stewart. By the 1980's they had become more culturally accept. And now, tattoos are regularly seen on public figures, athletes, models and movie stars, though it was said that if you were an upstanding citizen you certainly would not have had one.

Today we can say that tattooing has become mainstream. For example, TV shows Like *Miami Ink* on TLC network profiles tattoo artist Ami James and Chris Nunez and their shop. As well the show profiled people coming in to get tattoos. Tattoo shops went from small shops, where the unruly went, to super hip boutiques. An example of this would be Ghost Town in Okotoks Alberta, where you can get a tattoo, hair cut and beard trim all in one stop. People became so interested in the show *Miami Ink* that it actually had four other shows spin off from it. You may recognize the artist Kat Von D. She started out on *Miami Ink* but moved to Los Angels to open a new shop which was featured on *LA Ink*. People from all walks of life were attracted to the show Miami Ink and its spin offs, inspiring them to get tattoos. Everyone from someone walking down the street to celebrities like Brantley Gilbert, the Country Singer, Chris Jacobs, host of TLC's *Overhaulin'* and Craig Ferguson, actor and comedian appeared on *Miami Ink* to get tattoos.⁶ Tattoos have continued to grow even after all of the shows finished airing. It is

⁵Hoag Levins. 1997. *The Changing Cultural Status of the Tattoo Arts in America*. (Accessed October 21, 2016. <http://www.lateliertattoosupply.com/news/32-the-changing-cultural-status-of-the-tattoo-artist-arts-in-america.html>.)

⁶Wikipedia. 2016. *Miami Ink*. (Accessed November 19, 2016. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miami_Ink.)

now said that the population base in which tattoos are growing is the middle-class females.

While Western society seems to have embraced a tattoo or body art culture, we in the world of the church need to return to our roots in order to critically engage this phenomena. So let me return to Leviticus 19:28 states “You shall not make any gashes in your flesh for the dead or tattoo any marks upon you: I am the Lord.” (NRSV) Taken out of context, this seems to clearly say that one should not get a tattoo. If we look at the verses before it there are many instructions about what one should not do. In looking at commentary about this passage and the time it was written, you have to look at the context of the day and the reasons why these instructions may have been given. Pastor Chuckk Gerwig, Pastor to Students and their Families at Santa Cruz Bible Church in Santa Cruz, California wrote the following about this passage

In this passage, God is speaking to his covenant people Israel. He is specifically telling them to stay far from the religious practices of the surrounding people groups. The prohibited religious practices in these verses include eating bloody meat, fortune telling, certain haircuts related to the priests of false cults, cutting or marking the body for dead relatives, and consulting psychics. All these practices would lead God's beloved people away from Him and toward false gods that were not Gods at all. In the midst of this context we find the word translated “tattoo marks”. It is important to note here that the context of this passage is not one of body décor but one of marking one's self in connection with cultic religious worship. Bible commentaries tell us much about the eastern religious practices that God was warning His people to shun.⁷

Gerwig is putting into context what was going on for the Israelites at the time. It seems that the Lord in this verse is actually telling us to stay away from creating false idols or gods.

⁷Chuckk Gerwig, 2007. *Tattoos and The Bible*. (Accessed November 18, 2016. [http://www.sacredink.net/tattoo_and_the_bible/.](http://www.sacredink.net/tattoo_and_the_bible/))

Now, to look at some of the New Testament references and what does Paul mean by “he bears the marks of Christ on his body?” Matthew Henry says the following of this section of Galatians “The apostle had in his body the marks of the Lord Jesus, the scars of wounds from persecuting enemies, for his cleaving to Christ, and the doctrine of the gospel.”⁸

The agreement could be made that we are made in God’s image as was Christ and because Christ was permanently marked for God, we should be able to be marked as well.

Though the argument is ongoing in the theological world because some feel that tattoos take away from the beauty of the body, which God created, comparing a tattoo to that of graffiti on a work of art,⁹ while others feel it marks who they belong to and see them as a way of communicating to others that they are Christians. Similar to the Christian Crusaders mentioned earlier.

Rationale

With this tension in mind, the research began. As a researcher, it was an honour to work with people from across Canada who had such a passion for their tattoos and their art.

An ethnographic piece of research was conducted with three people and two tattoo artists from across Canada in order to gain a better understand of why people get religious tattoos. Ethnographic research provide the opportunity to include different

⁸Bible Hub. 2016. Galatians 6:17. (Accessed November 18, 2016. <http://biblehub.com/galatians/6-17.htm>.)

⁹Tim Drake. "Tattoo taboos: Catholics debate the morality of body art." (*National Catholic Register* 84, no. 35 (September 7, 2008): 1. *ATLA Catholic Periodical and Literature Index*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 6, 2016).)

groups of people that could wrestle with different questions. It also allowed for the inclusions of conversations about tattoos with a variety of people within the culture. By using this method, the researcher can become a part of the conversation as well. Being a person with tattoos this has a direct affect on me as a person and how some people in the church view me. The three participants vary in age from early twenties to late thirties and the two artists vary in experience from just starting out to long time artist. The participants all had some connection to a church in their earlier years but no longer attended church at the point of the interviews.

Questions that were asked to the participates were:

- Of all the Body art you could have gotten, can you tell me why you got the religious ones you did?
- How did you feel when you got tattoo “X”?
- How have your tattoos shaped you?
- What is your experience of others towards your tattoos?

And questions to the artists were:

- How do you feel about doing religious tattoos?
- Is religious body art any different from non-religious symbols for you as an artist?
- Do you feel that people getting religious have a spiritual connection?

Emerging Themes

In working with the data a number of themes came into view. I will focus on three which are: Pain, memory/connection and healing. Through other topics like regret where touched on it was given enough focus during the interviews to do more the make a few comments on it.

The idea of pain in relation to needles puncturing the skin is reasonable and obvious, the fact is that pain was touched on by every one that I spoke to. The actual physical sensation of extreme discomfort reveals a more existential dimension of pain, one that resonates with a theology of pain. The theology of pain and suffering is not new to the church but was a focus for Pope John Paul II. Pope John Paul II noted “the fact that suffering is something complex, enigmatic and intangible that must be treated with full respect and compassion and even with awe; but this does not justify the attempt to understand it, since only in this way will it be possible to come to terms with it.”¹⁰ Many times the theology of pain is mixed with the theology of suffering because they seem to go with each other so well. Even the Pope did this, Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragán writes the following as a summary in part to what the Pope was saying: “Through Christ's solidarity with all humanity the human pain of all time; was suffered by Christ in his passion and his redeeming death. Thus, human pain and suffering are transformed from something negative into something positive, into a source of life, as it were because they become redemptive.”¹¹ This is part of the pain connection for people, that for some it has a redemptive power. It was not about creating a false idol but about creating a remembrance of the love that was shared.

“Each person in his or her suffering is united with the suffering of Christ, and thus this suffering mysteriously becomes a source of life and resurrection. Pain and suffering

¹⁰Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragán. 2005. *A Christian Understanding of Pain and Suffering*. (September 7. Accessed March 18, 2017. <https://www.ewtn.com/library/Theology/barragpain.htm>.)

¹¹ Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragán. 2005. *A Christian Understanding of Pain and Suffering*. (September 7. Accessed March 18, 2017. <https://www.ewtn.com/library/Theology/barragpain.htm>.)

are the door to the encounter with Christ and in him to the experience of his presence as life and resurrection, through the work of the Spirit of Love, who is the Holy Spirit This is what Our Lady, the Virgin Mary was the first to do, and with her, all the saints.”¹² This is another part of suffering through a tattoo as part of a journey of suffering to help in a healing process or in a move forward in life. The Pope’s words on suffering and Christ’s suffering becoming a source of life is a key factor in the journey through the tattoo process as it related to that of the participants.

The Pope thus situates us in the heart of the mystery whose light dazzles us. For we find ourselves in intimacy with the Blessed Trinity, in the loving reality of the unity of the Triune God and in the depths of this mystery. This is the central mystery of the entire Christian religion, not in the abstract nor in an immensely remote way, but in a closeness present in human history into whose temporal dimensions eternity bursts, through the historical Incarnation of the Word with his birth, life, passion, death and Resurrection.¹³

From this, the point to draw on this that is we are living in to our pain and suffering then we are finding a way to God’s love. This is where people with tattoos, must be careful because it can cross the line to becoming a false idol rather than a link to the experience of suffering associated with the tattoos.

As Christian’s the role of pain and suffering as a dimension of the salvific act is not lost on us. So how does the experience of pain bring about a transformation?

¹² Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragán. 2005. *A Christian Understanding of Pain and Suffering*. (September 7. Accessed March 18, 2017. <https://www.ewtn.com/library/Theology/barragpain.htm>.)

¹³ Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragán. 2005. *A Christian Understanding of Pain and Suffering*. (September 7. Accessed March 18, 2017. <https://www.ewtn.com/library/Theology/barragpain.htm>.)

One participant said “when I get to stressed out I want to get tattoos because the healing process, like that pain for a few days, is refreshing sometimes.” Another said “the pain felt, felt good. It is hard to explain it, it's not suppose to feel good but I didn't mind it.” And finally, “The pain was a release and a step forward.”

The pain was a release, for this person because it was a way to let go of all the hurt they were feeling about the loss of a friend in a car accident. From speaking with this person, it was clear that the accident had great affect on her, one because her friend died and, two, because she and her parents survived. There was a lot of pain and suffering, thought she was not forth coming with any other details about the accident or her grief.

One of the artist uses tattoos and pain as part of a spiritual journey to help people heal. He said this about his practice. “I do a lot spiritual process with my clients before the tattoo to help them connect to the divine and sometimes they have a Benevolent Experience in the process. I follow the ways of the ancients, the indigenous tribes, shamans who evoke and invoke through the tattoo process. This was tattooing origins in sacred ways. I apply modern day sciences to a process I created from Trans-personal psychology counseling, NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) and hypnosis. This enables the person to connect to the source and will any time in the future. This is the focus of my work today to bring back tattoos sacred origins”

The pain for some is a way to access their deeper emotional injury. In the review of the literature, the data was replete with references to the pain of our spiritual journey and the pain of a tattoo. In the article “Tattoos and Spirituality” by Laura Hamilton, notes “Not only does it take conviction, it can also take a great deal of time, effort and yes – pain. Sitting in the tattoo parlor experiencing the sting of the needle can be a metaphor

for the difficulties of life that we must endure.”¹⁴ Hamilton put in to words what it seemed others did not want to, the direct reference to the pain of tattoos and the connecting to the pain we endure in life.

The other thing that came up in the articles that relate tattoos and spirituality is the link to pain and suffering is that of a journey. This was reinforced by Jacob B Myers in *Holy Ink: The spirituality of Tattoos* (2012). In this article, he talks about his wife’s journey to her first tattoo. He looks at how the body has become a canvas that we use to express our beliefs, pain, suffering, and joys. The part that stood out in his article is where he compared tattoos to footprints unaffected by tides, because they are fixed in living memory and can serve as monuments that allow one to retrace both spiritual and existential pilgrimage.¹⁵

For one of the participants, all three of the themes tied to one tattoo she had. She said that even though that one was not overtly Christian, it was the one that had the most profound effect on her. Three years after the car accident she got a tattoo of a butterfly because it was her friend's favourite thing and also covered up her own scar from the accident.

She said, “I felt a scene of closure from accident, mom and dad and I were in it and she didn’t make it, I was 16 years old when I got the tattoo but when the car accident happened I was 13. So it was a big sense of closer. And the pain felt, felt good. It is hard to explain it, it's not suppose to feel good but I didn’t mind it right on my hip bone which is really suppose to be one of the most painful areas.”

¹⁴Laura Hamilton. 2013. Tattoos and Spirituality. (July 29. Accessed October 06, 2016. <http://www.psychicsuniverse.com/articles/mind-body/body/tattoos-and-spirituality.>)

¹⁵Jacob D. Myers. 2012. Holy Ink: The Spirituality of Tattoos. (July 30. Accessed 10 6, 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jacob-d-myers/the-spirituality-of-tattoos_b_1555916.html.)

For one participant, the memory of one tattoo was the start of a story and a journey. “Really a lot of my tattoos are random or just like I got this one tattooed because I was sitting in traffic and there was a tattoo shop there and I didn’t want to sit in traffic so... but that’s a memory, I remember all the time this random time I got this tattoo and now the tattoo artist is doing the piece on my back, so it’s the beginning of a story right?” What started out as getting a tattoo because he was essential “stuck” turned in to a relationship of trust to do a bigger piece of work.

As we were speaking about how that random tattoo came about and how it ties in to some of the other work he has had done. It was clear the memory and the connection that he had.

The final theme that I would like to touch on is that of healing. That the tattoos were part of what has helped them deal with different situations in their life. With the themes of Journey and healing coming up in the articles, the conversation around that idea with the participants was interesting to note with one of them saying “I can see that, like the meaning of tattoo, I can see that [a journey, through pain, suffering and healing] as being helpful. I had lost a bunch a weight and said if I keep it off for a year I would tattoo my hole side. So when I was 25 I tattooed my whole side, so that was one. I guess they do have some meaning.” The idea that there is a relationship between healing and pain and the pain being connected to a deeper sense of suffering, one connected directly to loss and grief.

The themes of loss, healing and connection to tattoos has come up a lot over the last year. It filtered in to numerus conversations with different people about this project. One thing that became clear to me was that some of the apparently non-religious tattoos

that people, have possess a greater spiritual significance and connection than some of the overtly of the religious ones do. This study began by seeking to find out why people get religious tattoo, what emerged is a greater understanding why people get memorial tattoos and tattoo in general. It raises a further question about religious tattoos, that's was not looked at in this research, and this is if the symbol is being put on their body as a reminder of something not present in their life? Many memorial tattoos are just that a reminder of what is no longer in our life, this is another question that could use more research.

With this project in mind, over the last year, I have been speaking to people about the tattoos they have and what they mean to them. I wanted to get a sense about how tattoos in general had change in society. I have heard many people talk about their life's journey and how it is represented in their tattoos. One, a few weeks ago at the market, explained her sleeve tattoo to me. It was of all fruits and vegetables. To her it was her past, present, and future. She was more then happy to share her story and struggles and in a way her faith that were represented there.

This was the interesting part of this research, it took on a life of its own when talking to people about tattoos in general and the overall view of them in society and how different generations view them.

This past summer while I was serving in a parish, I sat down with a 90+ year old women, and we were talking about my project. I still remember her saying, "Well an upstanding young lady like yourself would never have a tattoo."

What a door this opened. Much to her surprise I have tattoos, and this gave us the opportunity to have a conversation around mine as well as some that my friends have.

By the end of the conversation she openly said that her opinion towards tattoos had changed and that she wanted to know more people's stories about them.

For me this was part of the connection and memory of them because it opens up communication among people and helps us engage with different generations. This research has been the start of many conversations, and even sometimes debate, debate about the biblical implications and conversations about how tattoos tell a story.

As a member of the younger generation in the church I have seen the struggles going on with building connections between the generations. Speaking with this women and other members of the church about this project was eye opening experience for all of us. It opened a door to conversation and greater understand of each side positions on the topic with out any one getting defensive.

Implications

This study would be remiss if it did not touch on the matter of regret raised about having certain tattoos in these interviews. These regrets arose in relation to the question, "Has your perception of your tattoos changed over time?" All talked about the fact that it was a way to carrying things with them but two expressed that they wished they had waited till they were older to get their first ones because of the regret and need to cover them up. But even regret is a part of the journey. It points to a maturation, one that is demarked by a mark in the flesh. This is one theme that in future I would like to explore more as I feel the connection to their journey and wanting to cover them up may have deeper meaning that was not explored in this research.

This is where I can see this being useful for the church and the church using this research. It can help open the conversation between generations. How in my thirties I

view tattoo culture and how a WWII war bride views a tattoo maybe very different, but in using this project as a starting point for the conversation we can engage each other and our views to build bonds of understanding.

As a follow up to the research, one participant said the following “You sparked a large introspective revelation re: tattoos, my life, and how they represent where I'm at in that point in life. My first regretful tattoos were meaningless bullshit that I just did for the sake of doing it, which is very me from age like 12-18 until I found myself. And then I put more thought into them and they became more reflective of me as a person. Mind blown.” Sometime we do not reflect on why we do things until someone asks.

This is a take away for me, to ask the question, the answer might surprise you. This has been an on-going process through this research. The question has elicited a great deal of feed back from people about their views before and after the presentation. One person even noted how the project caused her to look at the deeper meaning behind her own tattoo that was two years on the planning to get. These revelations came as a welcomed surprise. But it reaffirmed the sense that tattoos are a passage way to deeper meaning in the lives of people. This is useful in the church because in asking question behind why we do what we do, we can sometimes find there is a deeper meaning there, one we did not realize at the time even.

The connection between tattoos and peoples personal spiritually certainly came through in this research along with the three themes of Pain, Memory/Connection and Healing. Although this started out looking at religious tattoos, the connection people feel to other tattoos can have a greater connection or meaning then the religious ones. They are a personal story told through art on their body. This project has been so fruitful for so

many reason, one major reason was people's willingness to share their story, journey and faith with me. Some of the tattoos discussed in this project would not have been visible everyday, and these are the ones that people had the most to say about. It reminds me that as a leader in the church we can not read a book by its cover, we have to get to know the story that is written inside.

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Appendix A

Literature Review

by

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Jody Clarke

Rev Dr

October 27th, 2016

In reviewing literature for this research project, I found a few common themes around pain, suffering, and faith. I plan to explore these topics in reference to my research as well as each other.

In the review of the literature, I found many statements around the pain of our spiritual journey and the pain of a tattoo. In the article *Tattoos and Spirituality* by Laura Hamilton she says the following about getting a tattoo “Not only does it take conviction, it can also take a great deal of time, effort and yes – pain. Sitting in the tattoo parlor experiencing the sting of the needle can be a metaphor for the difficulties of life that we must endure.”¹⁶ This article was the first time that there was a direct reference to pain, though other articles had alluded to it, pain was not clearly stated.

Most articles make reference to how old tattoos are, as they date back to as early as 3300 BC. They also point out how the culture around tattoos has changed since the beginning of 1960 to current day. Hoag Levins says in his article *The Changing Cultural Status of the Tattoo Arts in America* “The cultural status of tattooing has steadily evolved from that of an anti-social activity in the 1960s to that of a trendy fashion statement in the 1990s. First adopted and flaunted by influential rock stars like the Rolling Stones in the early 1970s, tattooing had, by the late 1980s, become accepted by ever broader segments of mainstream society. Today, tattoos are routinely seen on rock stars, professional sports figures, ice skating champions, fashion models, movie stars and other public figures who play a significant role in setting the culture's contemporary mores and behavior

¹⁶ Laura Hamilton. 2013. *Tattoos and Spirituality*. (July 29. Accessed October 06, 2016. <http://www.psychicsuniverse.com/articles/mind-body/body/tattoos-and-spirituality>.)

patterns.”¹⁷ Throughout his article, he looks at how Tattooing has evolved through the years and points out that fact that now it is the most popular among, suburban women, as he referees to as “the soccer mom” or “the hockey mom.” This point from Levins speaks to the ever-changing culture that has brought tattooing from gangs and prisons to everyday people. In an article from *Christian Century*, the author who is listed as RNS opens with “Exit the drunken sailor and lovesick adolescent. There is a new gang of marked men and women in tattoo lore: evangelical Christians.”¹⁸ All of this speaks to an overall cultural change that has gone on around tattoos in general.

The other things that have been coming up in the articles that relate tattoos to spirituality are the link to pain and suffering. Getting a tattoo is a journey, this was reinforced by Jacob B Myers in his article *Holy Ink: The spirituality of Tattoos*. In this article, he talks about his wife’s journey to her first tattoo. He looks at how the body has become a canvas that we use to express our beliefs, pain, suffering, and joys. The part that stood out in his article is where he compared a tattoo to footprints unaffected by tides because they are fixed in living memory and can serve as monuments that allow one to retrace both spiritual and existential pilgrimage.¹⁹

Andrew McCarthy, a retired professor from Anna Maria College, did a similar research project in 2010 which was published in 2012 called “The Ink is Flowing: A Study of Religious Meaning in Tattoo Culture.” In reading his study, I have found a few

¹⁷ Hoag Levins. 1997. *The Changing Cultural Status of the Tattoo Arts in America*. (Accessed October 21, 2016. <http://www.lateliertattoosupply.com/news/32-the-changing-cultural-status-of-the-tattoo-artist-arts-in-america.html>.)

¹⁸ “Tattoos as evangelical chic.” *The Christian Century* (115, no. 36 (December 23, 1998): 1240-1241)

¹⁹ Jacob D. Myers. 2012. *Holy Ink: The Spirituality of Tattoos*. (July 30. Accessed 10 6, 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jacob-d-myers/the-spirituality-of-tattoos_b_1555916.html.)

things of interest that would apply to my research. One was that he had not restricted his study just to tattoos but had also included piercings, something he said that if he were to do again, he would restrict. He also pointed out that most people are more than willing to talk about the tattoos they have and the story behind them when they were not on the defensive about their tattoos. He also looked at some of the cultural aspects, and noted the following from Kathryn Tanner “culture is not to be understood as an event but as a process.”²⁰ He also stated “In other words, like culture, faith is a process before it is ever an assent or a condition or a characteristic of the believer. Sometimes faith includes a movement through non-faith”²¹ McCarthy at the end of his study points out that there could be much more research done on the link between tattoos and spirituality, though his study did generate meaningful material.

In looking at this one must not lose sight of the fact that not all are in favour of tattoos and some people that have them wished they did not. In an article by Tim Drake, “Tattoo Taboos: Catholics debate the morality of body Art” he looks at both sides as well as the cost of removing tattoos. Within his article, he makes reference to theological issues around the matter, which I will save for a later discussion on the issue. He also looks at how culture has changed through the years around tattoos and even goes as far as to reference Hoag Levins from an earlier article. This article is of important note for my research, as I may encounter the same aspect, which is some have religious tattoos that now regret them.

²⁰ Andrew McCarthy. 2012. "The Ink Is Flowing: A Study of Religious Meaning in a Tattoo Culture." (*Imaginatio et Ratio* journal 41-54.)

²¹ Andrew McCarthy. 2012. "The Ink Is Flowing: A Study of Religious Meaning in a Tattoo Culture." (*Imaginatio et Ratio* journal 41-54.)

The idea of it being a theological issue for some people came up in both the article from Drake and in an article by S.M. Hutchens, "Marked Men: The Christian and the Tattoo." This article takes a closer look at some of the theological issues around tattoos as it was written for Touchstone in 2010. It is interesting to note that in this editorial, the common verse from Leviticus come up, which is generally used as a reason why it is a sin to have a tattoo, though it also points out that there are New Testament grounds for having tattoos. The author also draws attention to the fact that in the surround parts of the passage from Leviticus it also says one should not trim their beard or cut the hair on their head, something to ponder as part of theological reflections on the matter.

Part of what I think the literature has brought out for me is the fact that this is also about the story behind the tattoos. McCarthy points this out in his research; they are part of the story and part of people's life journey. Our feelings about our tattoos may change over time as well. Similar to our spiritual journey we evolve over time. Hamilton points this out as well says "And sometimes we find that our tattoos no longer truly exemplify who we've become. That's also an indication of growth and change along the path. You may appreciate having that reminder on your skin, or you may decide that the energy of that symbol no long fits. But you still learn about yourself."

Andrew McCarthy did an interview with Phyllis Hanlon for an article called "The Deeper Meaning of Tattoos" in which it points out that all tattoos are connected with something, the self, a higher power.²² The article concludes with the following "In

²² Phyllis Hanlon. 2011. The Deeper Meaning of Tattoos. (March-April. Accessed October 6, 2016. [http://spiritualityhealth.com/articles/deeper-meaning-tattoos.](http://spiritualityhealth.com/articles/deeper-meaning-tattoos))

other words, a tattoo is often a story that is waiting to be told. So if you meet someone covered in tattoos, the easy way to start a relationship is to ask what the stories are about." As I read that line, I knew that is where my research was to start. Asking the story, and if there is a spiritual connection, it will come out in the story of the tattoo. Knowing that it may also come with pain, anger, joy, love and fear.

The literature that I have been reading around this has shown the need for more research into why people feel it is important to express their faith in such a permanent way on their body.

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Pattenden, Rod. "Atheist critic blind to current religious symbols." *Eureka Street* 21, no. 19 (October 7, 2011): 11-12. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 6, 2016).

Phanon, Anattiphong. "Comparison of the manifestation of the baptism in the Holy Spirit with the spiritual tattoo in Thailand." *Asian Journal Of Pentecostal Studies* 18, no. 2 (August 2015): 71-92. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 6, 2016).

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Appendix B

Theological Essay

by

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Jody Clarke

Rev Dr

December 5th, 2016

Tattoos can have a link to a spiritual side, not all do that is for sure. The church over the years has had a differing position on tattoos. Some still hold true to the Leviticus 19:28 passage about not marking one's own body and others have turned to the New Testament and Paul saying that he was marked for Christ as a reason to support tattoos. The shift of perceptions about tattoos in society has affected how people see tattoos, but what are the theological impacts from that?

The history of tattoos in society, especially in mainstream society has certainly changed over time. In the nineteen sixties, tattoos were an anti-social activity²³ and were originally something criminals had. If you were an upstanding citizen you certainly would not have had one. During the Second World War, tattoos became something that most sailors had, usually some form of a pin-up girl on their forearm. Tattooing is not something that new, there have been cases of mummies found with tattoos that date back almost five thousand years.²⁴ In some cases, tattoos were used to mark people, like the Jews during the holocaust to dehumanize them or to mark criminals. The trend of tattoos was embraced by the merchant marines, bikers, and goths in basic black.²⁵ Though they did not become popular in culture until more recently, there have been some famous people and monarchs that have had tattoos including King George V and Edward VII.²⁶ At some points in history tattoos were a source of pride, mainly with Roman soldiers but

²³ Hoag Levins. 1997. *The Changing Cultural Status of the Tattoo Arts in America*. (Accessed October 21, 2016. <http://www.lateliertattoosupply.com/news/32-the-changing-cultural-status-of-the-tattoo-artist-arts-in-america.html>.)

²⁴ Cate Lineberry. 2007. *Tattoos: The Ancient and Mysterious History*. (January 1. Accessed November 18, 2016. <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/tattoos-144038580/>.)

²⁵ Cassandra Franklin-Barbajosa. 2004. *Tattoo: Pigments of Imagination*. (December. Accessed November 18, 2016. http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0412/online_extra.html.)

²⁶ Alex Stevenson. 2008. *Probing Question: What is the History of Tattooing?*. (June 20. Accessed November 18, 2016. <http://news.psu.edu/story/141345/2008/06/20/research/probing-question-what-history-tattooing>.)

during the time of the crusades, Christian soldiers would be marked with the Jerusalem cross to ensure if they were killed they would receive a Christian burial.²⁷ With the resurgence of tattoos coming in the early seventies with influential rock stars like the Rolling Stones getting tattoos, they had become for more culturally accept by the eighties. Now tattoos are regularly seen on public figures, athletes, models and movie stars.

Tattooing became an even more mainstream in the early two thousands because of shows the on the TV network which profiled tattoo artist and their shops. Tattoo artists Ami James and Chris Nunez brought tattoo to mainstream television with a show called Miami Ink in 2005, along with other artist in their shop they profiled both the artist and people coming in to get tattoos. Tattoos had gone from small shops that the unruly went to into mainstream popularity and it didn't stop there. People became so interested in the show that it actually had four other shows spin off from it, including LA Ink which had artist Kat Von D leave the Miami shop to open her own in Los Angeles. The attraction of the show drew people from all walks of life to get tattoos done on the show. Everyone from someone walking down the street to celebrities like Brantley Gilbert a Country Singer, Chris Jacobs, host of TLC's Overhaulin' and Craig Ferguson, actor and comedian appeared on the show to get tattoos.²⁸ Tattoos have continued to grow even after all of the shows finished airing and it is now said that the population base in which tattoos are grown the middle-class female.

²⁷ Cassandra Franklin-Barbajosa. 2004. *Tattoo: Pigments of Imagination* . (December. Accessed November 18, 2016. http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0412/online_extra.html.)

²⁸ Wikipedia. 2016. *Miami Ink*. (Accessed November 19, 2016. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miami_Ink.)

In looking at the passage from Leviticus chapter nineteen verse twenty-eight, which says “You shall not make any gashes in your flesh for the dead or tattoo any marks upon you: I am the Lord.” (NRSV) taken out of context seems to clearly say that one should not get a tattoo. If you look at the passages before it there are many instructions about what one should not do. In looking at commentary about this passage and the time it was written, you have to look at the context of the day and the reasons why these instructions may have been given. Pastor Chuckk Gerwig, Pastor to Students and their Families at Santa Cruz Bible Church in Santa Cruz, California wrote the following about this passage

In this passage, God is speaking to his covenant people Israel. He is specifically telling them to stay far from the religious practices of the surrounding people groups. The prohibited religious practices in these verses include eating bloody meat, fortune telling, certain haircuts related to the priests of false cults, cutting or marking the body for dead relatives, cultic prostitution and consulting psychics. All these practices would lead God's beloved people away from Him and toward false gods that were not Gods at all. In the midst of this context we find the word translated “tattoo marks” in verse 28. It is important to note here that the context of this passage is not one of body décor but one of marking one's self in connection with cultic religious worship. Bible commentaries tell us much about the eastern religious practices that God was warning His people to shun.²⁹

²⁹ Chuckk Gerwig, 2007. *Tattoos and The Bible*. (Accessed November 18, 2016. [http://www.sacredink.net/tattoo_and_the_bible/.](http://www.sacredink.net/tattoo_and_the_bible/))

With the above passage from the pastor, putting context to what was going on for the Israelites at the time, it seems that the Lord in this passage is actually telling us to stay away from creating false idols or gods.

The editorial in Touchstone Magazine called *Marked Men: The Christian & the Tattoo* by S. M. Hutchens, says the following

The Synod has no position on this subject. It should be kept in mind that the prohibition in Leviticus 19:28—“Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the Lord”—belongs to Old Testament levitical or ceremonial law—which has been set aside or annulled with the coming of Christ (Col. 2:16-17; Acts 15). Leviticus is full of such laws, including the command one verse earlier: “Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard.” For Christians, matters such as this lie in the area of Christian freedom and wise judgment (such as, for example, taking into account health concerns, the perceptions and sensitivities of others, and the counsel of Christian parents and advisors).

Even in this case, the church was not willing to take a position on this Leviticus passage but in its response, did point out that it was from Levitical law which has been set aside or annulled with the coming of Christ. Later in the same Touchstone Magazine, the author also points out that though God did forbid this at one time that maybe he would excuse the action of putting a Christian symbol on your body because of the great act of love that it is. In the article *Tattoos as evangelical chic*, a passage from Paul’s letter to the Galatians is where in which it says “From now on, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.” (Galatians 6:17 NIV)

What does Paul mean by he bears the marks of Christ on his body? Matthew Henry says the following of this section of Galatians “The apostle had in his body the marks of the Lord Jesus, the scars of wounds from persecuting enemies, for his cleaving to Christ, and the doctrine of the gospel.”³⁰ The agreement could be made that we are made in God’s image as was Christ and because Christ was permanently marked for God, we should be able to be marked as well. Though the argument is ongoing in the theological world because some feel that tattoos take away from the beauty of the body, which God created, comparing a tattoo to that of graffiti on a work of art,³¹ while others feel it marks who they belong to and see them as a way of communicating to others that they are Christians, similar to what the crusaders did.

World Life Ministries has a bible study series in which it covers this passage from Galatians, it says the following of Paul’s writing

What did he mean when he said - Galatians 6:17? He had in mind a common custom of those days, namely, that of branding certain people with a hot searing iron. For example, slaves were branded as a mark of ownership; they were also branded as a mark of shame, for if a man ran away and was recaptured his master would brand him as a mark of shame and ignominy; soldiers were branded as a mark of allegiance to their generals, just as, at one time, soldiers would have the crest of their favourite general tattooed upon their arm; and religious devotees

³⁰ Bible Hub. 2016. Galatians 6:17. (Accessed November 18, 2016. <http://biblehub.com/galatians/6-17.htm>.)

³¹ Tim Drake. "Tattoo taboos: Catholics debate the morality of body art." (*National Catholic Register* 84, no. 35 (September 7, 2008); 1. *ATLA Catholic Periodical and Literature Index*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 6, 2016).)

would frequently be branded by the priests in some heathen temple as a mark of devotion and fidelity.

The brand-marks of the Lord Jesus upon the body of Paul consisted of each of these. They identified him as the slave of Christ (Philemon 1:1); they were the marks of shame and reproach in the eyes of the world (1 Corinthians 9:22); they were the brand-marks of the soldier (2 Timothy 4:7); and they were marks of devotion and fidelity (2 Corinthians 5:14).

But what were the actual marks? They were the bodily scars and blemishes which he had received as the result of the persecution he suffered because of his faithfulness to the Lord Jesus.

From this one could argue that a modern day religious tattoo is the same idea as Paul's marks, that we are marking ourselves as a slave to the Lord.

With modern culture, what it is today and the social acceptance of tattoos, what does it mean now for the church and its position on tattoos? As the synod stated the old laws were abolished in the coming of Christ, there for maintain some of the old laws and taking them out of context is not beneficial for the church or its people. Within the New Testament, there are points which we need to consider what it means to be marked for Christ and as Christ's own. We sign people at baptism on the forehead with either water or chrism to mark them as Christ's own. Some people have now taken that a step further to putting ink permanently on their own body to mark themselves. In a way, the suffering you go through to get a tattoo and mark one's self is like a new birth similar to that of baptism as you are not the same person when it is complete.

The theological debate around tattoos will continue for many years to come because each and every person that picks up a bible will interrupt what they are reading differently. None of us knows for certain what was meant by any of these passages what we do know is that we should not judge others based on their interruption. There is only one judge we have to answer to for our action and that is God himself. Personally, I do not feel that the passage from Leviticus still holds much sway, and that like Paul, we can be marked for Christ. If God had a huge issue with tattoos, I personally do not think he would have called me to this ministry as I had my first tattoo long before I ever felt my call to minister.

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APPENDIX C
Introductory Letter

The Spirituality of Permanent Religious Body Art

Falen McNulty
660 Francklyn St.
Halifax, NS B3H 3B5
Falen.mcnulty@astheology.ns.ca
506-543-3763

Date:

Dear (name of potential Participant):

My name is Falen McNulty – I'm a student at the Atlantic School of Theology, and a postulant for ordination in the Diocese of Fredericton. As part of the course work for my third year of study, I am conducting a research project, under the direction of Dr. Jody Clarke, about the spirituality of permanent religious body art.

For my study, I am interviewing people that have religious tattoos that do not attend church.

I would like to invite you to participate in this study, as a person with tattoos. The main purpose of this study is to develop a theory about people's link to spirituality through their tattoos. Your participation would entail one face-to-face interview at a location of your choosing or via skype.

If this sounds like something you would be interested in, please let me know via e-mail (falen.mcnulty@astheology.ns.ca) or by telephone message (506-543-3763), and I will follow up with further information.

Sincerely,

Falen McNulty

APPENDIX D
LETTER OF INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

The Spirituality of Permanent Religious Body Art

Falen McNulty
 660 Francklyn St.
 Halifax, NS B3H 3B5
 Falen.mcnulty@astheology.ns.ca
 506-543-3763

Dear (name of Participant):

Thanks very much for indicating your interest in participating in my research study, “The Spirituality of Permanent Religious Body Art” What follows is some information about the process, as well as a consent form which I would ask to you sign and return to me.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board of Atlantic School of Theology. If you have any questions or concerns about the study, please contact Dr. Jody Clarke, jclarke@astheology.ns.ca

All participants will be provided with a copy of the final study report and will be invited to the public presentation session in March of 2017. The final study report will also be available to the general public through the library at Atlantic School of Theology

Outline of the Study Objective and Methods

What this study seeks to do is to form a theory based on the multiple realities of how you, the participants, experience your tattoos and spirituality.

I’ll be interviewing 3 or 5 people from different parts of the country who have expressed an interest in the study. The interviews will be one-on-one, face to face conversations or via skype, which will be audio-recorded, then transcribed.

The transcribed interviews, and notes taken from observation, will form the primary data for the study. If needed, follow-up interview questions may furnish further data.

The four main research questions to be asked are as follows:

- Of all the Body art you could have gotten, can you tell me why you got the religious ones you did?
- How did you feel when you got tattoo “X”?
- How have your tattoos shaped you?
- What is your experience of others towards your tattoos?

Secondary questions arising from the conversation will depend on your responses.

Interviews will be conducted at a place of your choosing with due regard for confidentiality. You'll be asked to allocate a minimum of 90 minutes for the primary interview. I may ask you to consent to a follow-up interview for clarification of data collected during the primary interview, as well.

Potential Benefits of the Study

In being invited to articulate your experience of religious tattoos, you will be asked to reflect on your connection to God and how it has developed over the course of your spiritual journey. You may already have done some reflection on the question of whether the tattoos have some kind of spiritual connection for you or you may not. This may lead to further, and hopefully useful, reflection about your own experiences of religious tattoos within church and wider society.

Potential Risks to Participants and Methods of Mitigation

During the interview, you may discover feelings about the tattoos that you haven't had before, particularly if you've held strong views about religion one way or another. This might be upsetting to you, or raise potential conflict for you. Rev Dr Jody Clarke has agreed to be a sounding-board for any conflicting feelings that may come up as a result of this interview process.

Confidentiality Protocols

Data for this study will be in the form of audio recordings, the transcriptions of these recordings to text, and ancillary written notes taken during each of the interviews. Conversations will be recorded using a digital recording device and the audio file of each session transferred to usb that is password protected.

Recordings for each session will be erased from the recording device once they have been transferred to computer hard drive and usb following each session.

Both written notes and usb's for each session will be identified with a code (not the name, date or place of the individuals interviewed) and this information stored in a separate and locked filing cabinet.

Written documents developed during the execution and reporting of this research will be kept on a password protected personal computer (electronic form) and in locked filing cabinets (paper form); however names of participants, dates and locations of interviews are not relevant to the study and will not be reported in these written documents. The audio files and notes taken for this research will be kept until the completion of this study in March of 2017 and then sealed and transferred to Dr. Jody Clarke (Atlantic School of Theology) for secure storage for a period of two years following which they will be destroyed.

Contact Information for Research Supervisors

Dr. Jody Clarke (902) 425-5315, jclarke@astheology.ns.ca

INFORMED CONSENT FORM*The Spirituality of Permanent Religious Body Art*

Falen McNulty
 660 Francklyn St.
 Halifax, NS B3H 3B5
 Falen.mcnulty@astheology.ns.ca
 506-543-3763

I am a student enrolled at the Atlantic School of Theology. As a part of my course work under the supervision of Dr. Jody Clarke, I am conducting a research project about the spirituality of permanent religious body art.

For my study, I am interviewing people that have religious tattoos but do not attend church in order to find out what their experience has been with a focus on their individual spiritual life.

Your participation in this project is very much appreciated.

I will take notes and audiotape our conversation. The tapes and transcripts will be held in a secure environment until the completion of this course of study, at which time they will be destroyed. This project will be completed by the end of April, 2017. If you are willing to participate in this project, please read the following and indicate your willingness to be involved by signing your name at the bottom of this page:

1. I acknowledge that the research objectives, methods and procedures have been outlined to me. Any questions I may have had regarding the procedures have been answered to my satisfaction.
 I know that I can contact the researcher at any time, should I have further questions. I am aware that my participation in this study is purely voluntary and I am assured that personal records relating to this study will be kept confidential. I also understand that I am free to withdraw from this study at any time.
2. All information obtained in this study will be kept strictly **confidential and anonymous**. Audio files and field notes will be kept under lock and key until the conclusion of this project at the end of April, at which time they will be destroyed. Names and revealing facts will be changed, thus providing anonymity. To further protect individual identities, this consent form will be sealed in an envelope and stored separately. Furthermore, the results of the study will be presented as a group and no individual participants will be identified.

If you have any questions, please contact the student researcher, Falen McNulty, at falen.mcnulty@astheology.ns.ca. (506-543-3763)

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board of Atlantic School of Theology.

By signing this consent form, you are indicating that you fully understand the above information and agree to participate in this study.

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Please keep one copy of this form for your own records.