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Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

Marked on the Body: Religious Tattoos Research and Photo Exhibition

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Abstract

25% of U.S. adults have tattoos, including nearly half of Millennials. A significant number of these tattoos are explicitly religious: Bible verses, crosses, Yin/Yang symbols, Buddhas, Sacred Hearts, etc, etc.

What do these religious tattoos mean to those who get them? What significance do they hold? Why do they choose the specific images or texts that they do?

For this project, we will answer these questions by conducting interviews with our family, friends, and neighbors about their religious tattoos. We will also take artful portraits of these tattoos, and display the portraits in a photography exhibition.

In doing so, we hope to discover something about how religion “marks” (literally) the lives (and bodies) of our neighbors.

Implementation, in Three Steps

1. *Record an interview with a friend, family member, or neighbor about their religious tattoos and the significance of those tattoos to them.*

Potential Interview Questions:

1. Would you explain your tattoo to me? What does it mean?
2. What does your tattoo reveal about who you are as an individual?
3. What does your tattoo reveal about your religious identity?
4. When did you get this tattoo, and is the tattoo in any way connected to things that were happening in your life at that time?
5. Your tattoo is very large/small. Why did you choose to get it this size?
6. Your tattoo is very visible/discrete. Why did you choose to present your tattoo in this very public/private way?
7. When you look at your tattoo, what thoughts do you have?
8. How has the meaning/significance of your tattoo changed for you over time?
9. How do other people react to your tattoo? How do you think other people interpret your tattoo? What do they assume it might mean?
10. If you could change/alter your tattoo in any way, what would you change?
11. Do you (still) like your tattoo, or do you have any regrets? If you could get a new (religious) tattoo tomorrow, what tattoo would you get?

2. *Take artful portraits of your subject and their religious tattoos. For example:*



3. Write a 1-2 page 'Museum Label' for your portrait(s) capturing in writing the most interesting things you learned about your subject in your interview. This will be displayed next to the photograph in our exhibition for attendees to read.

Grading Rubric

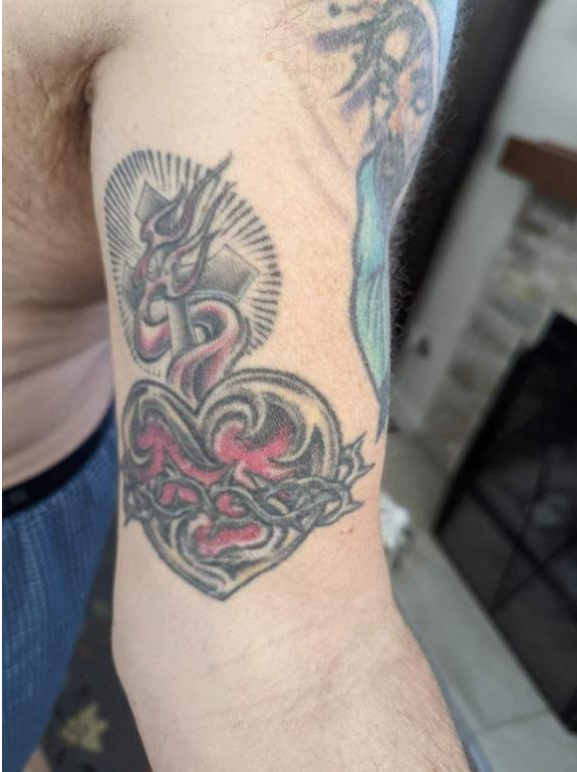
A	C	F
<p>Portrait is artful. Photographer "shows a good eye."</p> <p>Interview is probing, interesting, and wide-ranging. Interviewer shows genuine interest in the subject. Interviewer asks interesting questions that generate sincerely interesting answers from the subject.</p> <p>Museum Label is well-written, insightful, interesting, and free of grammatical errors.</p>	<p>Portrait is okay, I guess.</p> <p>Interviewer asks the required questions but shows no special interest in the subject. The interview is perfunctory, and the answers provided by the subject are not especially interesting or insightful. (This is the fault of the interviewer, not the subject!)</p> <p>Museum label has all requisite parts.</p>	<p>Portrait is fuzzy or otherwise bad, or missing.</p> <p>Interviewer does not ask the required questions.</p> <p>Museum label is poorly written or missing.</p>

See Below for an Example Project with Photos and Museum Label.

For information about the Religious Worlds of New York summer institute for teachers, and more resources to enrich your teaching on religious diversity, visit www.religiousworldsnyc.org.

Example Project

Yancy Watson (55 years old)



I do not have any tattoos, because in my religious tradition (I'm a Latter-day Saint) tattoos are discouraged: our bodies are "temples" and as such should not be disfigured.

My dad, on the other hand, is covered in tattoos. And although he is not conventionally religious, most of his tattoos draw on religious iconography and symbolism. He has an Egyptian ankh and the Flaming Sacred Heart of Jesus, for example.

Since childhood, the tattoo that has most fascinated me is a large tattoo he has on his back. Circumscribing a large sunburst, he has tattooed lyrics from a song called "Counting Blue Cars" by a 90s alt-rock band called Dishwalla: "Tell me all your thoughts on God, because I would really like to meet her."

The song is theologically radical, using the female gender pronoun to speak of God. About the lyric, the lead singer explains that the speaker of the line is a young child, who in his innocence is free from the normal conventions of God-talk:

From that younger perspective, I think we take things in a much more honest way because we are not being biased by how we're supposed to all think the same. So this idea of God, being an omnipotent being, could be a male or female. We always refer to God as a male, so why not make it a female?

I started creating imagery to describe this journey, trying to think about what it was like to be a kid and the things that you would do. It quickly came together— I didn't think too much about it. But it did end up being one of the songs that really affected people both positively and negatively. I never thought I'd ever have a song I'd get death threats for writing.

Feminist theologians have, especially in recent decades, explored the idea of the “Divine Feminine.” But suffice it to say that my dad has never stepped foot in the seminaries where these feminist theologians debate these ideas, or read any books by these theologians. Why does my dad, who by his own admission has only attended church a couple of times in his life, have these lyrics about a Feminine God tattooed on his back?

I asked my dad the same question about the Flaming Sacred Heart of Jesus and his other religious tattoos. He couldn't give an answer. He said, “I'm an enigma even to myself. I must have just had 300 dollars burning a hole in my pocket.”

This explanation was somewhat unsatisfactory to me. He must have chosen these religious symbols for *some* reason— even if they resonated with him at some unconscious level. Symbols, after all, are powerful because they communicate something direct and often ineffable, without the mediation of logic or language. Just because my dad can't articulate why he chose the tattoos need not mean that he had no reason for choosing these tattoos, or that he chose them at random— only that his own reasons for choosing the tattoos were opaque to himself.

My dad did not grow up in a religious home. Although his mom (my grandma) still goes to church, she goes alone; Grandpa is an avowed atheist. “I think when you die, you disappear and that's it!” Grandpa told me, once. My dad's Egyptian ankh seems a repudiation of his dad's atheism; of his ankh, my dad says he “liked the bit about eternal life.”

My dad says he “believes,” though. The content of what he believes is a little hard to pin down. He says he is attracted to Buddhism, which he understands to be about “just being a good person.” He wants people to have fond memories of him after he passes away. But he couldn't be any less concerned with doctrines or theologies.