



Don't Judas God

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Growing up, I was always told never to get a tattoo. I was hearing this in part from my parents but I also felt that my Catholic faith was telling me not to get them either. Now that I'm older and an art student, I've been faced with many questions regarding body modifications, such as tattoos, piercings and implants, since I've been tempted to get them myself. When I was younger, society convinced me that people with tattoos were scary since such body art was often associated with gangs and prostitutes. However within the past couple of years tattooing has become trendy, artistic, and mainstream in America and therefore people's views of them are shifting, including my own. In this essay, I will explore the reasons that have made me think that I shouldn't modify my body; is it my Catholic faith, is it society, my heritage, or simply own morals? I want to draw the connection between the tradition of body modifications and belief systems such as Catholicism. Are there any teachings within Catholicism that say excessive piercings, tattoos, and implants are for or against our faith or was that simply my own interpretation?

The body as temple is a teaching from the Bible. It is geared towards the dissuasion of sex before marriage but my understanding of it has also extended to this respect for the body and life that God has given you. 1 Corinthians 6:19 says, "19Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own." I've always interpreted this as your body isn't your own, it's God's, and therefore you don't have the right to manipulate or purposefully cause harm to it. This has led me to further question how much control we actually have over our appearance. If we willingly change our appearance, are we rejecting what God has given us, our body and our life? Does partaking in aesthetic procedures that purposefully scar and alter the body, coincide with the teachings of the

Catholic faith? When we purposefully experience pain for aesthetic procedures are we partaking in satanic practices? Is there an "interconnectedness of religious sentiments, violence, suffering, sacrifice, and the sacred?"¹ Are Catholics meant to participate in and support the evolution of human aesthetics? Are these aesthetic practices simply self-harm and should we constantly be trying to change and evolve what God has made? In this paper, I will try to answer these questions, explore how religion and body modifications are interconnected, see if they can be lived out simultaneously, and learn their truths.

The Bible is Christian holy scripture and is made up of two parts, the Old and New Testament. The Old Testament is very strict and has many rules pertaining to appearance and diet. It was written between 1200 and 165 BC and is the original Jewish scripture. Whereas the New Testament was written by Christians in 367 AC. Although Catholics focus on the New Testament, the Old Testament is part of our history and past and has a place in our tradition and practice. That's why the topic of body modifications is so uncertain, because there really isn't anything specifically alluding to whether we should or shouldn't get them. Leviticus 19:27,28, which is in the Old Testament, literally says, "27You shall not round off the side-growth of your heads nor harm the edges of your beard. 28You shall not make any cuts in your body for the dead nor make any tattoo marks on yourselves: I am the LORD." There are some verses in the Old Testament that reference body modifications but they can't be taken literally because that would lead to extremist living that doesn't coincide with the modern world. When interviewing Michelle Phillips, a 75 year old devout Catholic, I asked her what she thought of this Leviticus

¹ Armando Favazza, *Bodies Under Siege* (Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 2.

verse. She said the Old Testament is “ancient” and as Catholics “we don’t take all what is written as fact.”²

With regards to body modifications, the church doesn’t have one single rule but encourages everyone to have a regard for safety and respect for life. The consistent ethic of life is an ideology stating that the Catholic church opposes “eugenics, abortion, capital punishment, assisted suicide, euthanasia, and unjust war,” however it does not mention anything to do tattooing, piercings, or implants.³ Another reason why there isn’t much written about body modifications in the Bible is because they aren’t apart of Catholic tradition. We are a nonviolent religion and do not involve pain or bloodshed in any of our rituals. Although Jews do have stories such as Passover, which involves God killing the firstborn of every family unless lambs blood is marked on their doors, we must remember that Christianity originated from Judaism but they aren’t the same. It’s confusing because the Bible is composed of the Old and New Testament however we follow the New Testament more closely. The Old Testament is present simply to remind us of our origins. We also don’t believe in punishment or damnation. Such ideas can be associated with other religions and satanism. Ex- priest Francesco Prelati of the 15th century said by “performing the most brutal and sinful acts imaginable” someone could contact Satan however, all of his attempts were supposedly fruitless.⁴

This draws me to question if body modifications, in the sense of this essay, are defined as such brutal, satanic acts. As early as 1000 B.C. archeologists have discovered body

² <https://www.etsy.com/shop/NeedsRepair?ref=seller-platform-mcnav>

³ Michael Caligiuri, “*Traditional and New Enhancing Human Cybernetic and Nanotechnological Body Modification Technologies: A Comparative Study of Roman Catholic and Transhumanist Ethical Approaches*” (PhD diss., University of Ottawa, 2013), 98.

⁴ Armando Favazza, *Bodies Under Siege* (Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 8.

modifications like elongated skulls. Piercing of the tongue, nose and ear were popular among Indians and Africans. Feet binding in China during the Tang Dynasty was achieved to make women look more feminine and delicate. The women of Myanmar, in Asia, used coiled brass rings to stretch out their necks. Breast removal was common among the Amazonians, the Skoptsy in Russia, and the Babylonians.⁵ Scarification processes such as incisions, burnings, and cuttings were practiced by Africans, Australian Aboriginals, the Maori of New Zealand, and Melanesians of New Guinea.⁶ That being said, can such brutal rituals be satanic if they have been apart of human culture since the beginning? Body manipulations can be performed as part of rituals, medical practices, punishments, grieving, celebrations, or for social status, therefore they are not all about torture and calling on Satan. Michael Atkinson and Kevin Young describe tattooing as a “flesh journey”: “the process of intentionally reconstructing the corporeal in order to symbolically represent and physically chronicle changes in one's identity, relationships, thoughts, or emotions over time.”⁷ Mrs. Phillips noted that scarification has a place in some Christian communities. The Coptic Christians of Egypt have tattooing and branding rituals that are a sign of reverence for and a reminder of their beliefs as well as a way to define themselves as Christians. One Cairo tattoo artist says it’s “a way of feeling the pain Jesus felt when he was crucified.”⁸ Therefore, for the most part, there is an interconnectedness of religious beliefs and sacrifice through scarification, it just varies. Some religions partake in body altering rituals that

⁵ “Body Modification and Mutilations,” last modified Feb 11, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/science/body-modifications-and-mutilations>.

⁶ “Scarification: Ancient Body Art Leaving New Marks,” last modified July 28, 2004, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/7/scarification-ancient-body-art-leaving-new-marks/#close>.

⁷ Nicoleta Colopelnic, *The Tattooed Body* (Cluj-Napoca City: Journal Studia Europaea, 2011).

⁸ “Coptic Christian Tattoos: Signs of Devotion,” last modified Nov 7, 2019, <https://www.tattoodo.com/a/coptic-christian-tattoos-signs-of-devotion-149992>.

honor this intersection while others simply acknowledge and revere it. Whereas the Coptics participate in body modifications to experience Jesus, Catholics consume the body and blood during mass so as to create a connectedness to Him.

In my own life, I've noticed that if a parent has tattoos, they are more likely to allow their children to have them even if they don't hold reference to a personal culture. Therefore, not only did my interpretation of my faith lead me to think that tattoos were wrong but it mostly came from family influence. My lineage consists of Italian, Irish, Polish, and British and tattooing was not culturally practiced by my direct ancestors. No one in my extensive family, that I know of, has multiple tattoos. Michelle Phillips said that she's fine with tattoos but she wouldn't get one personally. It was not within her cultural history to receive body markings but she has no problems with them since they have been around for centuries and are often created as a sense of belonging within certain groups. That being said, did my parents advise me not to get body modifications, not only because it wasn't in their culture but, because they personally don't like them or did society's views of them have an influence?

Growing up, my knowledge of tattoos was very limited since I associated them with criminals and tramp stamps. In the early 2000s, celebrities, such as Britney Spears, popularized "tramp stamps". These were tattoos located on the lower back in which pop culture associated with promiscuity. In the 19th and 20th centuries, prisoners in various countries throughout the world were required to be tattooed on their faces or hands so that when released, everyone in society would know they had broken the law and were dangerous, and would therefore outcast them. Eventually, prisoners started giving each other tattoos so they could break the control the government put on them by marking them with tattoos of shame. By doing this, they became

proud of their body art since it was, and still is, illegal to devise tattooing machine as well as give or receive tattoos in prison. Prisoners started using tattoos to communicate rank within gangs, to show what laws they had broken, and how long they had been in the system.⁹ In El Salvador and many other crime-ridden places “gang markings carry a heavy social stigma...and make members an easier target for rivals and police.”¹⁰ Generally, people know that tattooing is a part of prison/gang culture and often judge people that have them because of it. This discrimination has been present for hundreds of years, especially in the workplace. Business owners want employees to make the customers feel safe and respected which was and sometimes still is why someone may not get hired if they look a certain way, a way that might intimidate the customer. In America, there are many discrimination laws set in place to protect employees however employers can get away with turning people down if it isn't obvious they did so based on appearance. Although a workplace is allowed to have their own appearance policies, these policies can not discriminate against people based on race, national origin, sex, religion, etc. which it might since every person holds their own beliefs. For example, a Coptic Christian might file a discrimination claim by arguing that their religious belief makes it a sin to cover a religious tattoo.¹¹ The point is, there are laws to protect people against description based on their appearance however they are pretty vague and employers ultimately have the final say.

Body modifications can be rooted in culture or can simply be wearable art but sometimes they are meant to push the human body, to see how it can evolve and withstand change. Steve

⁹ “Prison Tattoos Full Documentary,” Youtube video, 48:06, posted by “Documentary Channel,” July 11, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4TPhD1xh0M>.

¹⁰ Jason Motlagh, “No Way Out,” *National Geographic* (2019): 94.

¹¹ “Illegal Workplace Policies: Appearance, Dress Codes, and Grooming Policies,” <https://www.employmentlawfirms.com/resources/employment/discrimination/illegal-workplace-policy.htm>.

Haworth is known for the creation of aesthetic sub-dermal and transdermal implants. In 1996, he did his first procedure of this sort by inserting horns into a clients forehead. His process involves inserting molded teflon or silicone implants in between the layers of skin.¹² In 2004, Steve experimented with inserting magnets into the skin, fingertips specifically, so as to pursue the idea of “attachments of devices onto the human body.¹³” As of 2013, the largest implant he had done was 1.5 inches high. To get this effect, around 10 procedures had to be done to build up the shape so that blood and plasma could continue to flow around the implant. Haworth describes it as, “trans-humanism in body modification.” In response to trans-humanism, Hanna Johnston, a 20 year old Protestant, believes that innovation is good however making things more efficient and striving for perfection is not possible.¹⁴ “We are not God. We will never be perfect,” she said. Hanna believes that it’s less about how you look and more about devoting yourself to God. A couple verses in the New Testament attest to this, one being the New Testament’s Galatians, verse 5:6, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”¹⁵ Hanna’s family does not practice body modifications because of their Chinese heritage and Hanna admitted that she can’t see herself get tattoos. In agreement with Mrs. Phillips, Hanna believes that body modifications are only bad if they are “vulgar and violent.”

¹² “Subdermal Implants Come in All Shapes and Sizes,” last modified April 14, 2014, <https://www.medicalbag.com/home/features/body-modification/subdermal-implants-come-in-all-shapes-and-sizes/>.

¹³ “Steve Haworth - Transhumanism, Back Hacking, Subdermal Implants,” Youtube video, 29:11, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3j1zaryCPhc>.

¹⁴ Hanna Johnston, (appendix pg. 13).

¹⁵ Bible Hub, <https://biblehub.com/>.

This image to the right has been a source of inspiration and wonder for me since the start of this semester.¹⁶ Sandy Perkins, a 51 year old devout Catholic, when first shown this photo, pulled away and said this image was “awful.” I had a similar reaction. My question is, what are this man’s, and many other heavily modified people’s, intentions? Is he making the point that people should stop judging based on appearance? Or is he trying to scare people? In the Youtube video “Dad With 1,000 Tattoos Inks Own Eyeballs,” Bruna, a client getting a touch up on her tattoos, said she got her eyeballs tattooed



Figure 1: Person with Extreme Body Modifications, <https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/13-most-extreme-body-modifications/> (accessed May 1st, 2020).

because she wanted to look different and that “everybody follows the same pattern.”¹⁷ A common theme between highly modified people is that they want to look unconventional. Some might think that these people are seeking attention but Caim, also known as the “Colombian Devil,” says he hasn’t been on social media because he doesn’t want to be labeled for his modifications.¹⁸ He says, translated, his modifications were “a pleasure for myself” and “I think that the Devil is the most perfect and beautiful angel ever created by God, according to the Bible, and if the devil wanted to get followers or just do evil things, he should have the perfect face of an angel so divine, that people would like him.” Caim said he doesn’t care about looking like the Devil though, “this is me and my concept.” This is another common thread between heavily modified people. They want to express themselves and their vision through how they look. Caim

¹⁶ “13 Most Extreme Body Modifications,” <https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/13-most-extreme-body-modifications/>.

¹⁷ “Dad With 1,000 Tattoos Ink Own Eyeballs - Hooked on the Look,” Youtube video, 5:31, posted by “Truly,” May 7, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFMHXaHVCEw>.

¹⁸ “Introducing Caim: The Colombian Devil Man,” Youtube video, 4:19, posted by “TIG Media,” Oct 17, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWEoHccjVxg>.

said, our actions reflect what our souls look like, not our faces. Just as Ms. Johnston was saying, Caim believes that people need to look beyond appearances and start doing good things. He also says body modifications are not fashion.

Caim was right. Not all body modifications are for aesthetic or cultural purposes. Some are more about the ritual, process and pain that comes with getting them. The artists behind Black

Out project are Valerio Cancellier, Cammy Stewart, and Phillip

“3Kreuze.” They view their tattooing methods as a way to critique

“corporate tattoo culture.”¹⁹ Their process involves brutally, in scratching abstract motions, tattooing black ink all over the body.

To the clients, it’s more of a ritual, a right of passage, to say that you survived such pain. It’s about pushing yourself and seeing if

you can make it to the end. Cancellier defines it as “survival

trials.” The process is to remind the clients that “stripped back to the tribal, you were once a warrior” and if you have the

determination you can come out stronger than when you started. These three men are creating

another brutal ritual just like so many other cultures before them. Brutal rituals do have a

presence in at least one, arguably the most important, Bible story in which Jesus willingly

participated in dying on the cross.²⁰ You don’t have to partake in permanent forms of

scarification to find the connection between sacrifice and Catholicism. Even the act of simply



Figure 2: Person Getting Tattooed by Black Out Artists, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/pg5qx7/meet-the-tattoo-collective-who-prioritise-pain-over-aesthetics (accessed May 10th, 2020).

¹⁹ “Meet the Tattoo Collective That Prioritizes Pain Over Aesthetics,” last modified Apr 25, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/pg5qx7/meet-the-tattoo-collective-who-prioritise-pain-over-aesthetics.

²⁰ Armando Favazza, *Bodies Under Siege* (Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 11.

giving up a certain unhealthy food or activity during Lent is a sacrifice Catholics make for the sake of our faith.

Looking at body modification history and in specific cultures, the Bible and it's teachings, current artists and methods that are pushing the human form, and projects that revere pain as a ritual has resulted in one main conclusion: it's within human nature to question, challenge ourselves and grow. We question what we believe and the traditions passed along to us and we physically challenge our existence through pain and procedures. If you are a person of faith you have the choice as to how you want to follow the scriptures because, just as with other belief systems, there is a spectrum. Although our teachings are rooted in tradition, the church does have to evolve and therefore scripture cannot be taken literally. Body modifications and religion are similar because they are rooted in tradition. Although sub-dermal implant and the Black Out project are relatively new, they are setting their own path and story for the future. It's in the act of preserving our ancestors history through our own journeys that we continue to live out the stories and truths of the human race.

In this research, the interviews were the most eye opening for me. By simply talking to others and hearing their interpretations and beliefs I formed my own and was reminded about the core teaching of Catholicism, which is love and acceptance of all. To that point, Cecily Robins, a 40 year old who grew up Catholic and has practiced on and off her whole life, said that is why word of mouth storytelling is so important.²¹ She said that written scripture is often misconstrued as law and reminded me that Christianity originated with the spreading of Jesus' stories by word of mouth. She also said that by sharing stories and histories by word of mouth we allow them to

²¹ Cecily Robins, (appendix pg. 14).

breath and adapt to current times. Free Will was a gift given to us by God so we could make our own decisions and hold our own opinions. Mrs. Robins said that God gave us the creativity and resources to push ourselves to the limits. She also said everyone wants a standard of living and seeks it in different outlets, such as in religion or appearance. As a human, I have the ability to change the way I look, to evolve, and to spread the history of my ancestors. And as a Catholic, my interpretation is that the Bible is not meant to make our decisions for us. We are allowed to do what we want with our life and our body as long as it is guided by goodness and love.

Appendix

The same questions were posed to all the interviewees:

“What do you think of the churches teachings of body modifications? How has that affected your faith? What are your thoughts and actions towards these verses?”

1Corinthians 6:16,17,19

16 Know you not that you are the temple of God, and that the spirit of God dwelleth in you?

17 If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy.

19 Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whome you have received from God? You are not your own.

Leviticus 19:27,28

27 You shall not round the corners of your heads, either shalt thou mar the corners of thy beard.

28 You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you: I am the Lord

Psalms 100:3

3 Know that the Lord is God. It is He who made us and we are His

Do you think people with aesthetic implants, piercing, and tattoos have defiled God’s temple? Do you think they should be allowed into the faith if they have done so? Do those same opinions pertain to someone that has metal screws in them due to life threatening surgeries? What are your thoughts on cyborgs and AI? What are your thoughts on trans humanism?

Do you have to believe in all the values within a religion to be a person of faith?

Michelle Phillips, age:75, life time devout Catholic

What are your opinions on body modifications?

“First of all, I think tattoos are fine for some folks. I do not like the total coverage I have seen where every inch of the dermis is saturated with blue and red ink. As you know tattoos go back many years. Pilgrims who travelled in biblical times would get a tattoo when they completed a pilgrimage. I think Coptic Christians especially practiced this custom Nowadays fraternities, sports clubs promote them for a feeling of belonging.

What are your thoughts and actions towards these verses?

Your references to the old testament, Leviticus is ancient. If you look at readings from Leviticus it also says eat no sea food or pork. We Catholics do not believe in that, so we don't take all what is written as fact. We follow the Acts of the Apostles from the new testament more literally.

You quote from Corinthians which I find a bit confusing since that deals with prostitution and fornication not body modification.

Do you think people with aesthetic implants, piercing, and tattoos have defiled God's temple? Do you think they should be allowed into the faith if they have done so?

I think tattoos, piercings are a personal choice. If it is not done for satanical or pagan reasons our church would probably allow it.

What are your thoughts on cyborgs and AI? What are your thoughts on trans humanism?

Your question about AI, trans humanism is a whole different subject. I find it eery. It would have to be in a very controlled and regulated setting. It could be wonderful to help in the medical field and someday in espionage but, very scary in the wrong hands. Technology is amazing but can they cure cancer and more appropriately now, the corona virus!! Medical advancements in using plastic and steel replacements in joints, hearts and brains are a wonderful use of technology."

Hanna Johnston, age:20, life time Protestant

Notes from phone interview

Hanna has been a Protestant her whole life. Her family is conservative Christian but more Evangelical Baptist.

Can you explain a little bit what exactly you believe in?

There are three churches within her religion: one is more "charismatic" and they preach the gospel, another focuses on the law of the Bible, and the radical middle church teaches the gospels and the law. Hanna follows closely the church of the law of Bible. She grew up with Father as a prominent figure not Jesus.

"What do you think of the churches teachings of body modifications? How has that affected your faith?

She says that her church doesn't believe in body modifications however she is trying to change that. In response to body modifications she sited Galatians 5:6, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." She believes it's more important to follow God then caring about what you or others look like.

Leviticus 19:27,28

27 You shall not round the corners of your heads, either shalt thou mar the corners of thy beard.

28 You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you: I am the Lord

She didn't find the verse from the Old Testament of importance since she doesn't follow the Old Testament.

What are your thoughts and actions towards these verses?

She admitted that her family doesn't believe in tattoos or transgender because they are conservative Chinese. She only thinks tattoos are bad when they are "vulgar and violent" otherwise she doesn't mind if people have then since they are an art form.

When shown the image of the heavily modified man she thought it was fine.

Do you think people with aesthetic implants, piercing, and tattoos have defiled God's temple? Do you think they should be allowed into the faith if they have done so?

She is highly against judging people based on their appearance. She mentioned how there is a difference between Free will and God's will. She and her family don't believe in homosexuality because of their Confucius background as well as the fact that the Bible isn't completely for it. She says that supporting a friend is different from supporting their beliefs. She says she would still be friends with homosexuals or transgenders though.

By not completely believing in everything in our faith are we then not true believers?

When asked if she thinks we should follow the Bible completely she said that a person of faith is supposed to love what God loves and hate what He hates. But you are still a family and you have a core value. You will always disagree on some topics so no, you don't have to believe in everything the Bible says but you do have to have faith.

She said can you even be a true Christian since we all have varying views?

What are your thoughts on cyborgs and AI? What are your thoughts on trans humanism?

She said that those are our actions but God is guiding us. Innovation is good however making things more efficient and striving for perfection is not possible. Making things more efficient is not acting out of the interest of God. She said that we aren't supposed to control things like our appearance or AI. There is a limit of control to what we can do and change and there is a price paid for our freedom.

Cecily Robins, age:40, grew up Catholic and has practiced on and off her whole life

Notes from phone interview

Cecily with religion comes rigidity. In response to 1Corinthians 6:19, she said "you are your own." You are not owned by anyone else. She says that these specific verses involve mysticism and are good intentioned but extreme. She does not think the Bible should be taken literally and that believers should be flexible. They don't have to believe in everything the Bible says.

"What do you think of the churches teachings of body modifications?"

The church's view on body modifications has to do with your individual diocese and church. There are more conservative churches and more modern churches and their teachings vary to a certain degree.

Psalms 100:3

3 Know that the Lord is God. It is He who made us and we are His

"We are His" she says is a "nice thought." She says it makes her feel of sense of belonging.

Do you think people with aesthetic implants, piercing, and tattoos have defiled God's temple? Do you think they should be allowed into the faith if they have done so?

Cecily said that people with body modification have not defiled the temple and she thinks they should be allowed into the faith. They shouldn't be shunned for body modifications.

What are your thoughts on cyborgs and AI? What are your thoughts on trans humanism?

She said God gave us the creativity and the resources to push the genome. There is a difference between transsexual and trans human. Does the church have the same thoughts on those subjects?

She wondered, “what is the protocol for what stories we choose” to follow and the church chooses to preach? Where exactly does it say in the Bible that we can’t be gay? She wondered, “What if you are gay and then change? What does the church think of that?”

Do you have to believe in all the values within a religion to be a person of faith?

Cecily was raised Catholic. She was very devout and looked down at atheists. She still considers herself a person of faith even though she does not actively practice. “We are more alike than different and religion sometimes separates us. When we aren’t understanding of other that’s when bad happens.” She also mentioned that there has been a lot of strife within and between religions. “We need to have understanding and flexibility.” She thinks, “if there were no religions there wouldn’t be opposition.” “Closing borders and taking care of our own is the wrong mindset.” There have been lots of religious wars. “Everyone wants a standard of living.” She says there is a beauty to children because they are “naive and pure.” She thinks, “there isn’t one way of thinking” and that word of mouth is better than these concrete teachings [of the Bible] because they need to evolve over time.

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