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**BIBLICALLY INSPIRED TATTOOS IN FORENSIC EXAMINATIONS MADE ON
INMATES' BODIES IN PRISONS TERRITORIALLY ASSIGNED TO THE
FORENSIC INSTITUTE OF MEDICINE FROM CLUJ**

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Abstract: Since ancient times, tattoos were a form of expressing spiritual trends or a life style. Our country does not have a very complex culture regarding tattoos or persons who practice this kind of art and thus for their bearers the majority of existing tattoos lack a special meaning. In forensic science, by conducting physical, traumatic expertise or by postponing the punishment, we find, a lot of times, persons in detention for different criminal acts, and the examination of these is necessary. According to this retrospective study, we noticed an increased frequency of biblical tattoos in the case of convicts from the prisons that belong to Forensic Institute of Medicine from Cluj. We will try to find explanations in the forensic literature for the marks they have and if these have a special meaning for them, and also for the circumstances in which these were made. We will also present the church's point of view regarding these practices.

Key Words: inmates, tattoos, Christianity, psychology, prison

Introduction

Along history, a lot of statements for and against tattoos were made, but the practice of tattooing managed to survive since ancient times. About 12000 years B.C., the ones who had wounds on their bodies tried to heal them by rubbing ashes. After the wounds healed, in their place remained black marks which had the appearance of drawings. Among the oldest tattoos that were kept, there is a mummy over 5200 years old, proving one more time that tattoos were the most ancient art form. There is little knowledge about the identity of the first people tattooed on this planet and this issue is still debated. The last discoveries make reference to the Ancient Egypt and to the Eskimo people.

Over time, tattoos had different purposes such as right of free way, marks of a social rank, symbols of spiritual and religious devotion, decorations for braveness, sexual and fertility signs, proof of love, punishments, but they also worked as charms for protection and for the identification of slaves and convicts¹.

Data from forensic literature

Today many people tend to associate tattoos with gangs and criminal groups. However, it is noticeable that biblical tattoos are extremely popular. According to the forensic literature, for Christians it is a unique and personal way of having a Christian iconography and a religious imagistic always in hand. Unlike the Jewish belief, Christianity does not have rules against tattoos, except some warnings issued to the youth that advise modesty in showing these to other people.

According to the people examined, a lot of them say that as long as it is a good choice, a biblical tattoo can be a strong symbol which resonates with a lot of young Christians.² But the Church does not approve this kind of practice, because they say this kind of tattoos are not like the old ones from the time of Moses.³ A wide variety of symbols have been transformed in tattoos, but none is as popular as the holy cross (Figure 1-5).⁴ The most seen tattoos are different representations of the holy cross, being the most suitable Christian symbol. Some of these tattoos, which are seen in the case of convicts, are illustrating Jesus on the Holy Cross, while other illustrate the cross, often reproducing the wood's texture and the thorn crown hanged by one of its sides. Some of them have the appearance of crossed nails, of big nails like those used in Jesus' crucifixion.⁵



Figures 1-3 (left to right). 1. A tattoo illustration of a cross and united pray hands; 2. A tattoo of the back with Jesus crucified⁶ 3. A cross with wings - tattoo on the shoulder⁷.

The Hispanic biblical tattoos can also be found in our country, representing an interesting subspecies. If you know something about paintings, you wouldn't be so surprised to find out that most of the Mexicans, like others Hispanic peoples, even if it is about some persons who belong to some criminal gangs, are deeply religious and they count on the Christian symbols to be identified and protected. It seems that in our country, there are some Hispanic tendencies, even if their owners do not understand their true meaning, but they tend to believe in the penitence which this tattoo can bring to them. These representations are more complex, a lot of them illustrating a saint's image, Jesus's or Virgin Mary. (Figure 6-10). Often, Hispanic tattoos represent words in the form of a biblical quote, accompanied, sometimes, by the name of a beloved one. Convicts declare that these complex tattoos allow them to expose their identity and feelings on the skin.⁸

Prison tattoo history

The oldest data are derived from the Greek culture, where slaves or prisoners were "engraved" with different symbols. The same gesture identification practice is found in the Roman Empire at the level of the forehead, because the idea of capitalizing the mark of prisoners existed since ancient times.⁹ In the 13th century China all criminals were tattooed, thus spreading the topical art of tattooing among the population at that time. In Japan it was designed a complex system of tattooing the prisoners and especially the criminals, where they mentioned the place where the crime took place and the type of act, this having as consequence that the most tattooed inmates perpetrated the biggest number of crimes. At that

time this method, referring to the tattooing, was considered a substitute penalty for cutting the nose or the ears. The practice has persisted over time, changing its involuntary character, becoming more of a requirement and a reason for pride in the case of incarcerated criminals.¹⁰ Even in our days they continue these practices in Japan within the well-known Yakuza clans.

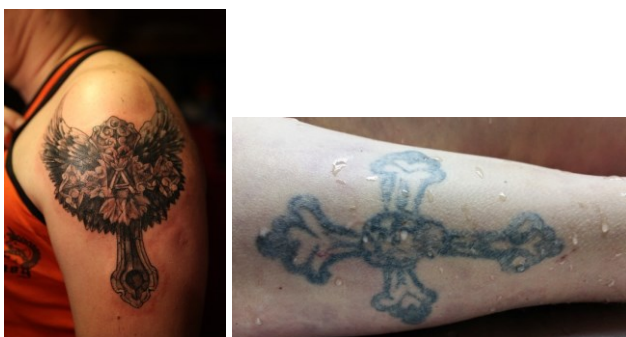
Also the tattooing of prisoners with serial numbers was mandatory in some parts of America and in France. In the World War II the Nazi tattooed their prisoners from the concentration camps, and Mussolini marked with ink all his prisoners before they were exiled on the island Lipari.¹¹

Tattoos in the forensic activity

Regarding this professional area in which the forensic science develops its activity, we can say that we encounter, in many cases, when we elaborate the expertise report, persons who have biblically inspired tattoos. We find them both in the case of living persons, but also in the case of deceased persons. (Figure 5). The forensic science comes in touch with the convicts through the postponement of punishment reports, the forensic certificates for different aggressions or the examinations from the psychiatric expertise reports.¹²

Ordinarily, the tattoos made on the convicts' bodies offer clues about the crimes they committed or about their personality. We can also find a large number of tattoos that have different connotations to people who use drugs and to people with psychiatric disorders. These can also be part of the forensic expertise, and they have, most of the time, criminal implications¹³.

In the criminalistic and forensic practice, the importance of the tattoo lies in pointing out the individual characteristics which could constitute an identification element.¹⁴ The particular skin signs represent just a small part of the forensic criteria of identification of deceased persons in suspicious circumstances.¹⁵



Figures 4-5 (left to right). 4. A tattoo on the shoulder illustration of a cross with wings¹⁶ 5. A tattoo on a dead body illustration of a cross and the face of Jesus

In Romania, the culture of tattooing is not widespread, lacking a code of conduct for those who practice this job. As a consequence most tattoos are made on 'the black market', in illegal cabinets or prisons and also with equipment of poor quality. According to some convicts' testimonies, a lot of them have contracted, because of these practices, blood transmitted diseases, but this did not constitute an impediment for them in tattooing new works of art in order to acquire a certain statute in prison. Thus, taking into account this point of view, a problem of public health could be identified.¹⁷

At the international level, there is a tattoo culture in which each tattoo has a certain role and connotation in establishing the role of a member in the society he belongs to.¹⁸ This aspect is more often observable in prisons, but with significantly reduced implications in Romanian prisons, where there is no well-established hierarchy.

Tattoos in prison

For those in prison tattoos are like business cards, or similar to diplomas of graduation for other people. These tattoos strengthen the state of aggression; they are like a sign of warning and require respect, by establishing a certain position within a hierarchical framework. In our country this kind of prisoner tattoos determine the rank within the hierarchy, with the remark that facial tattoos belong without any doubt to the satanic sects.¹⁹ According to certain studies, these satanic sects are present in all prisons in the country. The prisoners believe that they exercise a spiritual influence on them and, because of the crimes committed, they have been chosen by the dark side to serve evil and to bring balance in a context of spirituality. Tattoos on the face always have a special meaning, and they may vary from the drawings, quotes or unspecific items. The active or passive character of a member from the sect is expressed through the type and density of the tattoos on his face. Usually those selected in these groups are young inmates, at their first infringement and at their first sentence, since according to the guardians they find a social group in these sects.²⁰

The problems occur after the execution of the sentence, when the former convicts do no longer belong to a specific spiritual group and because of the tattoos done in prison, they are frequently persecuted by society. Often they do not find their place within society, due to an aggressive behavior and a high tendency to commit crimes. Once they committed an illegal deed, these former inmates are easily recognizable, because of their distinctive tattoos. As it was already mentioned, during detention inmates tend to acquire a specific status on the basis of tattoos, therefore these occupy on their bodies a place as visible as possible.²¹

With the exception of religious tattoos or those of satanic origin, it is expected to find in Romania a tattoo code, just as there is a code of

religious tattoos which will be discussed in the next chapters. The current data, in particular that provided by prisoners at the Colibași penitentiary, indicates the following classification. Samurai tattoos have the most powerful impact, and are worn by those who make the law in prisons and the ones who are the leaders of some particular networks. This type of tattoo was inspired by the members of the Yakuza Japanese Group. Aries, Taurus, lion, tiger, wolf, dragon or pitbull tattoos are made by those who are inferior in rank to the group leaders described previously, so many of them have the same tattoo. Other types of tattoos define the personality of the prisoner such as tribal designs, names of some enemies or loved ones, some city names or threatening words.

Within the Romanian prisons making tattoos regardless of their meaning and purpose is a highly complex and risky process. Against those who are caught executing tattoos with appliances or specific components, a report is submitted based on which the possibility of timely release is cancelled. Tattooing apparatus used in prisons consists in most cases of a little engine that is found in an old cassette device, while the ink is obtained either from relatives or by burning and melting the sole of shoes.²²

Medical implications of tattooing

In prison, due to the fact that protection policies forbid that the inmates dispose of any edgy and/or angular objects, nor they allow the possession of any professional tattooing instruments, the tattoo equipment is extremely versatile.²³ Instead, one can usually encounter different and primitive tattooing methods, such as sewing into the skin a colored thread using a needle. Other methods, which consist in the making of a stamp with sharp-edges designed to leave a mark on the skin are being followed by covering the injured areas with a layer of some kind of ink or colored substance that would penetrate the skin. The same method can be applied by using a wooden mold on the surface of which a multitude of nails create a certain pattern. The creativity of inmates grows up to causing marks on someone's skin by using shear objects covered with ink, or to manufacturing, out of different objects, some manual machines for engraving ink within the skin. Moreover, for preparing the ink, the inmates sometimes use ashes, burnt plastic from different recyclable objects, pen ink or burned paper mixed with shampoo or toothpaste.²⁴

Even though, in many cases, these tattoos are made by respecting certain sterile conditions, complications can sometimes occur, for the art of tattooing requires quite a few invasive maneuvers.²⁵ To be sure, the occurrence of these complications is much higher within the prisons where the living conditions are very poor. In these ill-equipped prisons, one can often and easily witness the performance of previously described techniques. In most of the prisons, one can, as well, notice that the

maintenance of tattoo instruments is very poor, if not even entirely missing. Complications usually appear on a tattooed area not only because of the invasive nature of tattooing techniques, which critically affect the integrity of the skin, but also because of the rather improvised methods and materials used, or because of the injected substance. Further, the occurrence of infections or other complications is in direct ratio to the extent of skin area which has been involved in tattooing.²⁶ Affections such as local infections represented by contact dermatitis, or allergic reactions, anesthetic scars with or without formation of keloid are very common among inmates.

These only add up to other blood transmitted diseases, such as Hepatitis B or C, HIV. Tuberculosis and Tetanus, associated with the carrying out of a tattoo, are more likely to be found in precarious conditions, like those which are specific for prisons. In this respect, the legislation which regulates the special conduct, and which establishes the minimal degree of sanitation and sterilization needed in the studios where such maneuvers are carried out by using professional instruments, cannot be applied within the boundaries of a prison, for they are incompatible with prison regulations.

However, once with the progress of different techniques, tattoo removal methods by using acids, derma abrasion, laser treatment, or, ultimately, surgical excision have been created to counterbalance tattooing. Yet, again, regardless of the method chosen for the removal of tattoos, there are always risks involved in the process, among which, the most significant ones are burns or infections. Besides that, one has to always take into consideration the fact that the areas can remain with certain scars, or with either a minor or a major anesthetic aspect, depending on the size of tattoos or on the area involved or even on each body's individual response to such procedures.²⁷

Psychological aspects of the inmate

An insight of the psycho-social phenomena, as well as of the circumstances which can occur in a prison environment is necessary, because this type of institution, which is specialized in the enforcement of custodial penalties distinguishes its psycho-social profile from any other institution or organized group of people.²⁸ Moreover, the individual's arrival to prison is neither a proper voluntary act, nor an obligation of citizenship (as is the case of admission to a hospital or soldiering). Rather, it represents a form in which the institution of the state sanctions the individuals who have strayed from its moral and legal norms. Once one enters the prison, depending on age, psychological structure, social and cultural level, one feels the effect of confinement and reacts in a personal way to this new situation.²⁹

Confinement involves multiple forms and, from the qualitative point of view, gives rise to a phenomenon which has been particularly reported as the incarceration shock. This leads to a complex range of psychological and psychosocial upheaval, starting with detention crisis which manifests as closing oneself into the shell of silence up to aggressive behaviors and autoagresive behavior. Compared with an accidental isolation, a confinement circumstance born out of incarceration entails an absolutely specific consequence: the disposal of one's own personality symbols. This is due to the fact that the detainee is obliged to wear the prison uniform, which standardizes the way of living and fades up to undo individual differences.³⁰

From a psychological viewpoint, the tattoo represents a topic that has been thoroughly studied by many criminologists such as Lombroso, H. Mahamat, who issued various theories about the origin and significance of tattooing. T. John, believes that the tattoo has a great psychological and judicial importance, whereas it reveals both the individual's identity, as well as one's own various habits, fantasies and character traits. The low level of intellectual education and culture seem to encourage the emergence of this phenomenon and might represent the main cause for choosing get tattooed. There are several reasons for which one chooses to get a tattoo in the prison environment: Imitation - they argue "I decided to get a tattoo because I saw others." P. Popescu Neveanu shows that each individual exudes around oneself certain feelings, such as radiation, creating a psychological field. People living within the prison community cannot keep these above mentioned fields isolated for themselves and, at a certain point, these fields are transforming into a great psychological field of collective life. This mostly represents a process of unconscious imitation of others.³¹

From a psychological point of view, what is related to getting tattoos with biblical or religious implications, as a response to prison atmosphere is that certain elements producing behavior and personality changes usually seed in one's mind, highlighting the need for religion as a primary element of the meaning of life. Belonging to a certain religion, as well as religious denomination represents a socio-cultural marker which is taken into consideration in the medical examination of a prisoner. The prisoners' look and appearance is questionable in terms of a practical adherence, yet sometimes it becomes very important to the prisoners who have personality issues, or who express psychiatric pathology and delusional ideation. Religious tattoos can be performed as a result of delusional conditions with the implication of a religious background.³²

Psychological implications of tattoos

The atmosphere created within prisons is very unique and different from the rest of the social environments. According to a study³³, the

impact or the effect of freedom deprivation, combined with the inmates personal character can be regarded as elements of the equation underlying the marked growth of tattoos among inmates.

We aim at arguing that the presence of tattoos on inmates' bodies can be correlated with social biases which influence a certain conduct. Among the first persons who have noticed that there were some psychological implications regarding tattoos on prisoners and criminals in general was Lombroso. In his opinion, where there is a tattoo, regardless of its nature, there is a personality disorder that manifests itself precisely by this tattoo and by what this tattoo represents. In the medical field, tattoos are commonly used in postoperative aesthetic surgery to hide some of the areas which are affected with unsightly scars that do not submit to treatment, or in the case of large areas with intensive burns.³⁴

In the literature regarding this topic, there is a study which differentiated the tattooed detainees from the point of view of their personalities. Thus, there were discovered two types of personalities: a first group is constituted by those who talk a lot and argue for tattoos with mentioning every detail, every meaning and a second group which gathers those who are rather introverted, thus letting the tattoos talk for them. We all agree that tattoos reveal one's own thoughts or prejudices, the affection, the fear or the hate that one can feel for others. Thus the tattoo becomes a form of non-verbal communication.³⁵ A special group is represented by the inmates who, at any given moment, gained a certain military rank and, thereafter, they got tattooed choosing a specific drawing "Death Before Dishonor". In their case, a psychological appraisal led to the conclusion that these people were affected by certain psychological deviations which had been caused by some dishonorable circumstances to which they were subjected to.

The same study classifies the delinquents into several categories. A first group, defined as "primitive" encompasses the category of rapists and other criminals, out of which, 26% were tattooed with different messages. The second category consists of those who are accused of embezzlement and theft. They are called "non-primitive" and 44% of them had at least one tattoo. It is therefore quite easy to notice that there is a direct connection between the tendency towards crime and the presence of a tattoo. Yet, in reality, there are very many people who have tattoos and have no problems with the law.³⁶

Tattoos as defense mechanisms. A Psychological approach of getting tattooed

There is a variety of definitions regarding the meanings of defense mechanisms. Within our paper, we will use the one given by Șerban Ionescu, Marie-Claude Jacuet and Keith Lhote's in the book entitled "Defense Mechanisms": Defense mechanisms are unconscious mental processes

aimed at reducing or cancelling the unpleasant effects of either real or imagined dangers reshuffling the internal and/or external reality and whose manifestations and behaviors, ideas or mixed forms-can be either conscious, or unconscious.³⁷

It is well known that tattooing is an almost final scrap of skin as well as that it represents a scrap upon one's psyche. It is known that it has the meaning of building-up a new identity, or, at least, of creating a new image of oneself. The body is a shell that keeps the identity, and the tattoo is a means of expression, which may reveal the life story of the tattooed person, the story of a crime or the story of one's retributions, the story of his/her past or of his/her present.³⁸

The Goffman studies also revealed that the practice of tattooing is not done randomly, but that it rather takes into account the readiness and individual freedom of each person, being directly linked to his/her personality. Studies have shown that tattoos originated from the need, the desire to communicate different experiences, either past or present, the need to be visible within the society. Thus, tattooing involves a self-change, a desire that is born from the need of the individual to rediscover his/her own body and the peace of living with it. But this change is followed by a series of consequences of networking and socialization with others.³⁹ A body transformation requires a change in the self-image, which entails a change in the way one socializes with others. A tattoo allows others see a drawing on one's skin, a mark that reflects one's soul just like a mirror, opening up the path for a journey of which, at the moment, not even its author is always aware. One could regard the practice of getting a tattoo as part of some kind of initiation ritual, an experience that offers one the opportunity to get rid of certain concerns. Such tattoos can be considered as defense mechanisms used by humans unconsciously, in order to diminish the anguish generated by inner conflicts between the requirements of instinctual, moral and social laws.⁴⁰ By getting tattooed, a person communicates with the others. Moreover, tattoos help a person, as well as the others surrounding him/her, better understand their lives.

On the other hand, tattoos usually relate to the superstitious character of a person and, especially, to their religious beliefs. The persons having multiple religious tattoos are regarded as extremely superstitious. A significative example is that of Latin Americans, among whom, the most common religious tattoo is the crucifix. The biblically inspired tattoos are very well tolerated by the inmates, provided that these tattoos are not mixed or on the same segment of the body with other types of tattoos. Usually, the biblically inspired tattoos occupy a special place on the body, usually on the chest, back or arms. From a psychological point of view, it has been argued that the subsequent modifications of certain tattoos usually represent a change within the prisoner's behavior. An important change of personality traits is indicated by the replacement of vulgar tattoos with tattoos with religious subject, or with biblically inspired

tattoos. This replacement usually signifies either a big change in the inmate's life, or, at least atonement. At any rate, these modifications of tattoos are signs of regretting the past crimes made by the inmate.⁴¹

The number of tattoos on a prisoner's body could, easily, be the subject of a psychological study. For, according to another study upon the relation between confinement and tattooing, the decision to get, while being imprisoned, even only one tattoo, no matter of its nature and meaning, is related to the pre-psychotic or psychotic phenomenon. Moreover, the same study shows that the presence of more tattoos, with different meanings and with no apparent correlation between them, on the body of one inmate, from a psychological point of view, is usually a sign of a psycho-neurological disorder.

Moreover, the decision to get certain kind of tattoos in some specific areas on the body leads one to presume that some personality types are prone to these decisions and that there are more complex psychological implications to this phenomenon. Among the main personal reasons for which a person decides to get a tattoo, one can find the following: self-decoration, instinct, narcissism, exhibitionism, sadomasochism, belonging to a group, imitation, fetish, ad, homosexuality, ethnic belonging, etc.⁴²

A close connection has been established between the antisocial character related to a personality disorder, to the use of alcohol or drugs, to bipolar disorders, to schizophrenia and getting tattooed. Recent studies in this field have found a stronger connection between tattoos and sexual fetishes supporting schizophrenia or paraphilia. In patients with psychiatric disorders, besides getting tattooed, self-mutilations are common. However, it would be too much to consider tattoos as a symptomatology in the setting of a certain disease, even if it is one of psychiatric nature.

However, returning to the inmates, another study has showed that there is a direct ratio between the levels of social disadvantage of the people and their predisposition to get tattooed. More precisely, persons coming from marginalized environments are prone to getting tattoos on their bodies.⁴³

The significance of Christian tattoos

The data from the forensic literature bring in discussion the Christian tattoos among the convicts, referring to the Russian mob. Although tattoos which represent churches, devils, wolf heads, crosses, portraits, military gallons and other drawings with similar themes seem to have no particular meaning other than what is symbolically entailed by the drawing itself, in fact, the way in which the drawings are made establish a certain role for bearer.⁴⁴ For example, the number of spires represents the prison years or the number of convictions each convict had. To define a convict's personality, sometimes there is added a note such as the

following: “The church is God’s house and jail is that of criminals”⁴⁵. A cross drawn on the chest usually symbolizes the fact that its bearer is a thief. This type of tattoo is considered to be an extremely important one and it literally it means “the prince of the thieves”. The Virgin Mary and the Baby Jesus (Figure 6-8) mean that the convict was a thief when he was a little child.⁴⁶ The prisoners encountered in the forensic practice at the Institute of Legal Medicine from Cluj do not exactly know what these drawings really mean, yet they look for their multitude and size. From their point of view, the meaning of tattoos is either related to an intense feeling, to an experience which needs to be symbolically embodied or it is a mere copy of other tattoos which mark the bodies of their colleagues.⁴⁷



Figures 6-8 (left to right). 6. Tattoo illustration of Jesus and Virgin Mary⁴⁸. 7. Tattoo illustration of Virgin Mary⁴⁹ 8. Tattoo illustration of Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus⁵⁰

The meaning ascribed by the prisoners to certain types of tattoos could be indexed under the form of a hierarchy. Some of them represent a tribute, being made either in remembrance of a missing person, or to honor a very important person who is still alive, such as parents, friends, and mentors. Others signify regret for the victim of his/her crimes.⁵¹ Some convicts see the biblical tattoos as accessories without a specific meaning; these tattoos just look good or amplify the sense of faith of the bearer. Some people of the prisons say that tattoos personalize the person’s character.⁵² These reflect their pleasures, hobbies, unique moments, as a complex self-portrait, as well as they may also refer to one’s pain or regret regarding criminal acts. Tattoos help them always remember the way they made decisions or what experiences or thoughts have changed them. These can be exemplified through some texts or biblical quotes.⁵³

Christianity theory

From a Christian standpoint, tattoos are known to have a certain

pagan origin and that they are still used as a kind of path towards the mystical communion with the spirit world. In antiquity, wizards or fighters believed that tattoos could help them receive power over the enemy. That might be one reason why Christianity has received rather negative connotations. In addition, from religious point of view, getting tattooed is considered a sin. Moreover, complying with the fact that tattoos have been more and more effused among inmates in jails, today, Christians are more inclined to treat tattoos as sign of rebellion against the social order. In short, today's Christians consider tattooing a form of self-adulation which is assimilated to idolatry.⁵⁴ Therefore, even tattoos with religious messages are reduced to a mere flattering speech, for, as opposed to prayer, they are not helping one get much closer to God, but, rather, they simply faith. Without any doubt, a tattoo is a part of the body and death will bring it into nothingness, as it brings the body into dust.

Yet, sometimes, for the bearer, it is more important that "tattoo" of God which should be imprinted in the very soul of every Christian.⁵⁵ Also wearing the cross should be done in secret and in a spiritual way, focusing on believing in what it represents, without the need for a materialized form consisting in a tattoo which could be seen like a deceptive and unrelated mark.

Another Christian aspect related to tattooing takes into consideration the importance of modesty. For, one of the Bible's messages is that one has to take care what we cover our bodies with, in order to respect the precept of avoiding attracting others' attention upon oneself. That is why tattoos, just like any other jewelry, have no other intention but to attract attention, thus straining the principle of modesty. If for Christians, their bodies belong to God and represent means that help one achieve redemption or, more precisely, a temple for the soul, then, one must have God's permission to mark it in any way. Yet, this permission has to be written down within the Holy Bible. More thoroughly explained, the Orthodox Church's message is that God should rather be in one's heart and in one's thought. God certainly cannot be found as imprinted on one's skin, in the form of tattoos or other signs.⁵⁶

A retrospective study regarding biblical tattoos in Forensic Science

A retrospective study made within the Forensic Institute of Medicine from Cluj based upon the cases of persons whose bodies were tattooed with drawings inspired by biblical themes, cases encountered from 2012 to 2014, we have noticed a certain typology of religious tattoos. In the making of expertise reports, forensic certificates and other reports used for the injunction of punishment regarding the convicts from the prisons which belong to the territorial liability of the Forensic Institute of Medicine from Cluj, we discovered 34 tattoos inspired by biblical themes. Out of these 34 tattoos, the majority, more precisely, 21 one of them,

represented a cross; 6 of them were drawings of the face of a biblical character, 4 of them represented a rosary while 3 of them took the form of a quote. All those tattoos belonged to a number of 26 convicts, all male, with ages between 19 and 56 years old. This type of tattoos was also found on 6 corps, of which 3 had a sudden death, 2 traffic accidents and a murder. From these cases, the crosses placed on one's shoulder, back or chest, as well as a slain dragon or a saint's face could be considered the most significant.



Figures 9-10 (left to right) 9. Tattoo on the arm illustration of a beloved one face⁵⁷; 10. A back tattoo illustration of an archangel⁵⁸

Biblical aspects

In terms of the religious doctrine, the only mentions regarding tattoos are to be found in Leviticus 19:28 - “You shall not make any cuts in your body for the dead nor make any tattoo marks on yourselves: I am the Lord!”⁵⁹.

A simplistic understanding of this excerpt would mean to interpret it in the way that one is allowed to get tattoos in the name of God. However, another excerpt of Bible offers the following advice: “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatsoever you do, do it all to the glory of God” (I Corinthians 10:31)⁶⁰. Moreover, in Timothy 2:9-10, the Bible impels one to dress-up modestly⁶¹. Or, what modesty basically means is to eschew attracting attention upon oneself, whereas tattoos, as well as piercings, are used, firstly, with the intention to impress.

Interpretations

Perhaps, for Christians, the most important truth is also the ultimate one: that people's bodies belong to God and, therefore, this idea should be reflected by the way in which each believer takes care of his/her body or uses it. Interesting enough, the majority of the convicts argue that in prison one gets close to God unknowingly, and, thus, a need to mark themselves with a tattoo representing a Christian theme arises. This type of tattoos reminds one that there is someone above and that everyone deserves his/her place for his/her actions⁶².

Thus, when they do not profess faith, tattoos are unsuccessfully used as replacements for personality traits, for character, culture, and erudition, for sense of humor, joy, openness and creative uniqueness⁶³. They are only marks of a desperate search for one's own individuality, a pursuit for an always more fascinating personality. However, these searches for personal fulfillment follows the wrong path, sometimes confounding milestones with places where completion could never be found, neither will it ever be.⁶⁴ Christians often believe that even if there are lots of people who do not express their belonging to a certain religion/denomination by getting involved in charity acts, or by praying, or by getting tattooed or by any other similar modalities, it seems to be somewhat logical that, at least towards the end of life, for most people, the seed of belief in a divine power starts to bear fruit.⁶⁵

Notes:

¹ C. Lineberry, *Smithsonian Journal*, 01 January 2007. Available from: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/tattoos-144038580/?no-ist>

² E. Frunza, „Tatuaje Criminal”, Available from: <http://reformacomunity.tumblr.com>

³ I. V. Istrati, „Biblia și tatuajele”, *Articole teologice*, 23 Mar 2012. <http://www.doxologia.ro/studiul-sfintei-scripturi>

⁴ L. Bonea, „Art Tattoo and Photography”. Available from: <http://www.fanarttattoo.ro/>

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