

The Morality of Tattoos and Body Piercing

by Father Peter Joseph

Many upright people are repelled by modern fads and fashions, such as tattooing, multiple earrings and other body piercing, but feel unequipped to give a clear judgment on the morality of such practices, or to rebut the charge that they are elevating their personal preferences into a moral code. In this article, I will set out some criteria that are relevant to making a moral judgment on these things.

In the Old Testament, the Chosen People were specifically commanded: “You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh...or tattoo any marks upon you: I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19:28). Inspired by God, St. Paul admonishes us: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God?” (1 Cor 6: 19). Being a temple of the Holy Spirit, we owe our body due care and protection and decorum. In some cultures, a special bodily mark or design – on the forehead, for example – signifies a certain attainment or marital status, or whatever, and is socially acceptable. Ethiopian Christians, to name one group, wear tattoo crosses on their foreheads. In Samoa, it was once a widespread custom to tattoo the eldest son or daughter of the local ruling family. In Western societies, earrings and makeup are acceptable as a part of feminine fashions and public presentability. But certain types of body piercing and decorations in our society are extreme and unjustified, and some of them are motivated by anti-Christian sentiments.

It would be impossible to give black-and-white judgments on all bodily decorations. But we can point to a few negative aspects that should be of concern to a Christian. Unless otherwise stated, this article will refer to Western societies only. I will treat the more serious concerns first and then the less serious.



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1. Diabolical images. Tattoos of demons are quite common, yet no Christian should ever sport an image of a devil or a Satanic symbol.

2. Exultation in the ugly. This is a mark of the Satanic, which hates the beauty of God’s creation and tries to destroy it and to ruin others’ appreciation of it. More than just being ugly, some body piercing is the expression of delight in being ugly.

We recognize bad taste in tattoos, rings and studs, by looking at their nature, size, extent and place on the body. Ironically, even florid

and colorful tattoos fade over time and end up looking dark and dreary. When one considers how, in concentration camps, prisoners were treated like animals and branded on their arm with a number, it is amazing to think that people today adopt similar markings as if they were fashionable or smart. This is truly the sign of a

return to barbarity, the behavior of people who do not have any sense of the dignity of the human person.

3. Self-mutilation and self-disfigurement. This is a sin against the body and against the Fifth Commandment. Some body piercing verges on self-mutilation. At best, multiple body piercing is self-inflicted abuse. A form of self-hatred or self-rejection motivates some to pierce themselves or decorate themselves in a hideous and harmful fashion. The human body was not made by God to be a pin cushion or a mural.

4. Harm to health. Doctors have spoken publicly on this health issue. In 2001, researchers at both the University of Texas and the Australian National University reported on harm to health caused by tattoos and body piercing. Some earrings (on the navel, tongue or upper ear) are unhealthy and cause infections or lasting harm such as deformities of the skin. They can also poison the blood for some time (septicaemia). Certain piercings (e.g., on the nose, eyebrows, lip, tongue) do not close over even when the object is removed. Such body piercing, therefore, is immoral, since we should not endanger health without

a reasonable motive. When done unhygienically, tattoos and piercing cause infection. A used instrument, if not properly sterilized, can transmit hepatitis or HIV.

Some have hoped to avoid health dangers by getting “henna” tattoos, which are painted on rather than done with needles. Henna staining is an ancient Hindu wedding custom of painting floral designs on the feet and hands. A German Medical Association report this year found that tourists returning home with hennas done in Bali and Bangkok, among other places, were going to the doctor because of severe skin infections and sometimes lifelong allergies. In some cases also, the coloring agent used meant that the tattoo faded away, but after several weeks of skin irritation, the design reappeared in the form of a reddish tattoo, often very painful for the patient. Allergies developed from 12 hours to a week after the application of the henna, causing intense itching, redness, blistering and scaling.

5. *A desire to shock and repel.* It can be appropriate to shock people, as for example, when one recounts the plight of poor and hungry people, or protests against crimes or terrible exploitation. This can be a healthy thing, when done properly and with due care, to arouse people out of complacency, so that they realize something must be done. But to shock people for the thrill of shocking people, with no intention to promote truth and goodness, is not a virtue, but a sign of a perverted sense of values.

In evaluating tattoos under this heading of repulsiveness, we look at the nature of the images, the size and number of the tattoos, and their place on the body. In evaluating piercings, we consider similarly their extent and location on the body.

6. *Indecency and irreverence.* It is always immoral to get or exhibit

tattoos of indecent images or phrases, or derisive figures of Our Lord or His Mother or holy things.

7. *Signs of a sexual disorientation.* Pirates used to be the only males who wore earrings (for whatever reason!) while sailors and side-show freaks were just about the only people with tattoos. What was once so restricted has now spread to wider sections of the community. In the 1970s, an earring worn by a man in the left ear, or the right, or both, was a code-sign of his personal orientation and thus a form of picking up partners. As such, it was blatantly immoral, and generally an advertisement of one’s immorality. Earrings in boys and men are so common now that they have

lost that significance, but they are never positively demanded by social requirements, as a suit and tie are socially required on certain formal occasions. Even admitting the lack of clear symbolism now, I would expect any seminary to tell any inquirer that he would have to remove any earring or stud before entering, and question him as to when he started wearing it and why. A seminarian or priest sporting an earring is not socially acceptable in the Catholic Church. A good number of parishioners would wonder about the deeper reasons or motivation. No one in such a public position starts to wear an earring without making a deliberate decision. As a wise old Jesuit priest said to me once, “No one changes externals without having changed internals.” It is regarded as what people call “making a statement.” The same code of expected conduct applies to men in other professions, such as policemen or teachers.

Employers and principals should make rules outlawing any such

jewelry for male staff and students. Especially for the young, such rules protect them both from themselves and from peer pressure. The fact is that, still today, earrings are prevalent among females, and in minority use among males.

8. *Unsuitability.* Sometimes people tattoo themselves with a big image of a crucifix or other holy pictures. The human body is a most unsuitable place for such an image, even if it be a beautiful one. Whenever these people go swimming, for example, they are exhibiting this image in an inappropriate fashion. No

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priest would ever go down to a shopping center in Mass vestments, not because there is something wrong with vestments, but because there is a time and a place for donning special religious symbols.

9. *Vanity.* Some men in particular tattoo their upper and lower arms in order to be ostentatious and impressive. It is a means of drawing attention to themselves. No one who meets them can fail to notice the tattoos – to the point at which it is in fact a constant distraction. It detracts from the person, and focuses attention too much on the body’s external appearance. The same can be said for a stud on the tongue, a ring in the nose, or earrings all over one’s ears and eyebrows. These are not part of our culture; at most, they are part of a certain subculture, a minority affectation, devoid of religious or positive social significance. No one is saying it is wrong to dress up, but here it is a question of moderation and discretion. Sacred Scripture implicitly recognizes that it is good for a bride to be adorned for her husband when the heavenly Jerusalem is compared to such a woman (Apoc. 21:2). It is

good for a lady to be well dressed and to use makeup when the occasion calls for it, but everyone recognizes when the embellishment has gone over the top and makes her look seductive or cheap.

10. *Immaturity and imprudence.*

An action acceptable or indifferent in itself can become wrong if the intention or motive is wrong. Some young people adopt outrageous fashions out of an immature desire to rebel against society or against their parents. Such disobedience against parents is sinful. Some do it out of an immature desire to conform to their friends, and others out of an equally immature desire to stick out from everyone around them. Some do it out of boredom, because it is something different, because it gives them a thrill, because it is something for their friends to admire and comment on. Mindless following of fads is always the mark of immaturity. For young people who live at home under their parents' authority, it is enough if their parents express their disapproval of such fashions to know that they should not go ahead. Some young people go to further extremes and vie with each other as to who can pierce whatever part of the body the most. Parents must forbid such behavior absolutely.

Young people can hardly justify the big expenditure (not to mention the pain) involved in getting a tattoo. It is also unjustified and just plain silly to mark your body for life with images of no great worth or with the name of one's current lover. A recent example I heard of gives an idea of the time and expense: a young girl had one arm tattooed up and down. It required two four-hour sessions and cost \$1,000 (American).

Tattoos are more serious than other adornments since they are more or less permanent marks on the body. Many a man or woman have been tattooed gladly in youth, but regretted

it not so many years later when they came to regard it as an embarrassing disfigurement. Once they mature, they pay dearly for the luxury of getting rid of it. The removal of tattoos is expensive and difficult – and can leave scars. The removal of big tattoos requires surgery under a general anaesthetic, with all the potential risks, plus the significant medical and hospital costs. The removal of large tattoos can leave big segments



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of the skin permanently disfigured or blotched, like skin that has been burnt. Many adults find themselves ineligible for some jobs, because businesses will not employ them with their hands covered in tattoos, impossible to conceal years after their youthful folly.

Universal Criteria

In any culture, things can arise, become acceptable, and become part of the culture – but this does not nec-

essarily make them right. Here are some examples from foreign cultures that I regard as equally wrong. In one tribe of Africa, women wear gigantic and heavy earrings that change the shape of the earlobes. In another place, women put coils around their necks and elongate them unnaturally, or put plates in their mouths to make the lips protrude some inches. In China, there was once the practice of binding girls' feet tightly to stop them from growing, because small, dainty feet were admired. These and other drastic alterations to the natural growth of the human body must be judged immoral, as forms of abuse springing from vanity.

It is not always possible to draw an exact line and say where the bounds of moderation have been exceeded. But this does not mean that there is no line. No one can define at what exact temperature a day passes from being cool to cold, but everyone knows that when the temperature is near zero, it is cold beyond dispute. Let us never fall for the ploy that tries to argue from borderline or difficult cases that there are no guidelines or principles, and that there is no such thing as a just mean or moderation, just because they are hard to define.

The human body is meant to be treated with care, not maltreated or disfigured. Its dignity and beauty must be kept and cultivated, in order that it be an expression of the deeper beauty of the soul. ✠

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