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The protestant ethic and the religious tattoo

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ABSTRACT

This research illustrates how basic ideas from Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* are reflected in religious individuals' choices in obtaining tattoos. Qualitative responses to survey questions show that, among 60 university students who indicated they have one, religious tattoos reflect asceticism in their lives, point them to service (calling) in the name of God, or provide a level of assurance (or anxiety) regarding life after death. We offer this work as an illustration of how the essence of Weber's work persists in the popular culture of the 21st century.

1. Introduction

The essence of Max Weber's (1904/1958) *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* may be summarized as aptly as any by Little Jack Horner who, "put in his thumb and pulled out a plum and said, "What a good boy am I!" Although he exclaims it to be so, a strictly Weberian update on the rhyme might replace that exclamation point with a question mark. "A good boy?" "Am I?" "Good enough?" The uncertainty in the exclamation is where angst meets asceticism. Given its macrolevel complexity, it's simplistic, if not impossible, to argue that anxious and ascetic Calvinists drove the engines of the Industrial Revolution (Collins & Turner, 1985; Giddens, 1971). However, the logic of Weber's theory poses some interesting questions about the presentation of religious identities, and how individual behavior is intended to reflect a desired sense of self (Goffman, 1959). How do individuals choose the trappings of a lifestyle? How might they show others that their lives reflect a heart-felt commitment to a calling? What kinds of behavior indicate submission to the will of God? (see Atkinson, 2006, for an explication of Weber in light of these questions).

This study is part of a much larger research project on religion and body modification (Koch & Roberts, 2009; Koch, Roberts, Armstrong, & Owen, 2010). Nearly all of the data were compiled into a quantitative data set for other purposes (see below, Section 2). However, one component of the questionnaire allowed respondents, if they had one, to tell the story of what they considered to be their religious tattoo. We had no expectations at the outset that we would learn anything more than the unique stories behind individuals' specific decisions. However, as we read through the responses, a pattern began to emerge. Respondents repeatedly indicated that their religious tattoos were, for them, evidence of the permanence of their faith, outward signs of religious commitment, or memorials to those they've loved and lost (and presumably, who they hoped went to heaven when they died).

We began to sense the spirit of Weber beneath these responses. Previous research has done so similarly. Simons, Simons, and Conger (2004) drew on Weber's logic to argue that religious social control mitigated the probability of adolescent deviance. Quinn and Crocker (1999) demonstrated that overweight women with strong beliefs associated with the Protestant Ethic suffered higher levels of anxiety than those whose beliefs about the Protestant Ethic were less pronounced. Wainright and Turner (2004) did an ethnographic study of top professional ballet dancers, showing that rigorous process of training, enduring injuries, and performing, were understood as key components of their vocation. These high-level dancers

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devoted themselves to a calling such that their bodies in performance gave evidence not only of extraordinary physical and mental stamina, but their commitment to practice and training showed devotion to the other dancers in their company. For them, dancing became a quasi-religion addressing the question, "What a good boy (or girl) am I?"

We intend to show in this work that a religious tattoo is a thoughtfully chosen insignia for an individual's commitment to God, self, and society. It may also be a way of whistling in the dark through a graveyard. The religious tattoo may express the hope that those who choose to express these commitments in this way might just be one of God's elect; it is also visible evidence of such commitments for others to see.

2. Rationale and scope of the study

The concept of "The Protestant Ethic" is embedded in the lexicon of ordinary individuals in that most all of us have heard or used the phrase, but often with little or no knowledge of where it came from or the depth of what it means (Collins, 1996). This study is not designed to fully explicate the nuances of Weber's classic work, much less advance its application to a modern economy. Rather, we use the logic of his thinking on the relationship between belief and behavior to bring his insights to bear on an emerging, and sometimes amusing, aspect of contemporary American culture. Our intent here is to make classic Weberian thought a bit more accessible to those who "know" something about the Protestant Ethic, but really have not thought very much about how this idea might emerge from, if only by way of analogy, another form of religious expression.

3. Method

3.1. Sample

We gathered survey data from four convenience samples of undergraduates, one each at four American universities. Two of these were large, state-supported public institutions; two were highly selective, private religious universities. One of the religious schools was Roman Catholic, the other Southern Baptist. Each state school was in geographic proximity to one of the religious schools. 1753 total respondents represented a response rate of 67%.

Respondents were asked a total of 117 questions concerning their attitudes toward, and experiences with, body modification, sensation-seeking, religion, deviance, and health. Of the total number of respondents, 237 (14%) indicated they had one or more tattoos. Those who had them were subsequently asked, "Does your tattoo (or at least one of your tattoos) depict what you consider to be a religious symbol?" 68 of the 237 tattooed respondents in the total sample (29%) indicated, "Yes." Demographically, the religiously tattooed subsample was similar to the total sample. In both instances, 78% were aged 18–20 and 60% were female. However, the religiously tattooed subsample was 73% White while the total sample was 78% White.

The instructions on the questionnaire then directed these respondents to the last page of the document where, with further prompting, they were invited to write the story of how and why they acquired a religious tattoo, and what the outcome meant to them. Sixty of the 68 respondents who initially indicated they had a religious tattoo responded with a written record. Nineteen of the 60 responses came from students at the religious schools; 41 came from the state schools. While this seems a paradoxical disparity, 44% of the Southern Baptist students who reported having tattoos indicated that at least one of their tattoos was religious—by far the highest percentage of such in the sample.

The Roman Catholic school had only 6 tattooed respondents overall (2%) and only one of those had a religious tattoo. The school with the most students having a religious tattoo was the state university geographically proximal to Southern Baptist. However, that was also the school with the largest number (113) and percentage (22%) of tattooed respondents.

The open-ended set of questions concerning this matter was as follows:

> Question 24A—To be answered only if at least one of your tattoos depicts what you consider to be a religious symbol. Use the back of this page or additional pages if necessary. Please detach this page and return it (along with other pages if applicable) with your answer sheet.
>
> Are you: Male __ Female__ Your age __ Race/ethnicity ____
>
> How long have you had your religious tattoo(s): _____
>
> Please tell us the story of your religious tattoo. Include, but do not feel limited in your discussion to issues such as: What does the tattoo depict? Draw or describe it detail if you'd like. What led you to consider getting this symbol tattooed on your body? Where is it located on your body? What does the symbol mean to you? How has having this tattoo changed your life, or your faith? What else would you like us to know about your religious tattoo(s)? Add additional pages if necessary.

3.2. Analysis

The 60 responses we received were coded as either "Weberian" or "Not Weberian." Criteria for this distinction come from the basic tenets of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.* Asceticism, anxiety, and vocation are the components of Weber's typology for religious individuals' relationships with God, self, and others. A "Weberian" response reflected one or more of those characteristics, defined below. "Non-Weberian" responses were those that did not reflect any of the following rationale.

1. *Vocation*. Does this story, or the image depicted in the tattoo, primarily relate to the respondent's sense of calling to Christian duty, moral, or ethical behavior?

   Weber begins by refining an idea from Martin Luther that every aspect of an individual's life has at least partial religious significance because individuals are "called" to do what God needs doing in His creation (Weber, 1904/1958). Luther himself derived this notion from his

doctrine of Baptism. Christians who are initiated into a church fellowship are "called" to express God's love for the Church, through Christ, in whatever manner of life they choose, or as whatever professional they are trained to become (Luther, 1529/1959).

2. Anxiety. Does this story, or the image depicted in the tattoo, primarily relate to the respondent's concern or worry about issues related to the afterlife?

   Calvinist theology introduces the notion of predestination, that is, the belief that God has chosen, in advance of creation, who will be saved and who will be damned. And yet, while no one can know whether one is or is not one of the elect, the expression of one's calling alleviates some of this anxiety through outward expressions of faith and moderation (Weber, 1904/1958).

3. Asceticism. Does this story, or the image depicted in the tattoo, primarily relate to the respondent's experience of, obligation to, or a desire for, a spiritual life, or quest to express God's love and intent in their everyday life?

   Weber argued that an ascetic lifestyle reduces anxiety. Diligence in acquiring, and prudence in using, even wealth and power link religious belief to economic success (Weber, 1904/1958). Similarly and by way of analogy, a religious tattoo demonstrates a "permanent" devotion to God and marks the wearer as a believer, called to live in ways that are in keeping with their insignia of faith.

4. Results

Forty-four of the 60 responses (73%) were coded "Weberian." Intercoder reliability was .75, an acceptable level with which to proceed. The responses were then categorized according to which component of the Protestant Ethic was most reflected in their responses. We report illustrative examples of the three indicators of the Protestant Ethic.

4.1. Vocation

For Weber, a calling or vocation directs one's actions, which, by faith and identity, express the contributions individuals, make to show God's love and activity in the world (MacKinnon, 1993). Our respondents illustrate this through their discussion of how a religious tattoo reminds them of who they are, and what they are called to do.

An 18-year-old Anglo woman from the Southwest state school sketched the "ichthus" fish symbol and described its meaning for her:

> It's on the top of my right foot (right like the right hand of God). It reminds me of Christ and how he died for me and that I need to live my life for Him.

Expanding on this idea, a 20-year-old Latina woman from the same school wrote this, in more detail:

> I have the word beloved written in Arabic on my right hip. I don't think in any way it has changed my faith, but is just more of a symbol. I experienced a life changing event, of redirecting my life to Christ after much turmoil and tragedy struck my life. I through the tragedy turned from Christ and led an empty life. He has called me back to Him and has called me beloved. That is why I have the tattoo. It is a permanent symbol of a permanent change in my life.

Finally, a 19-year-old woman from the Southern Baptist school simply states what she seems to believe is the effect of her religious belief system:

> A Christian fish on my foot. There is no real story behind. It just symbolizes my faith and that I will always believe in Christ and try to live my life for him.

4.2. Angst (anxiety)

In a sample of young adults, we did not expect to find a great deal of expressed anxiety about the afterlife, or their place in (or out) of it. However, in a small number of cases, respondents discussed their religious tattoo in light of family members and friends who had died. Motivation to obtain a religious tattoo as a memorial suggests at least a nodding acknowledgement to life after death; it may also be an expression of hope that the one they loved made it into the heavenly fold. An 18-year-old Anglo woman—the only religiously tattooed respondent from the Midwest Catholic University reported this:

> After my grandfather died and I attended his funeral, I got a tattoo of a cross on the back of my shoulder in remembrance.

A 23-year-old Anglo woman from the Southwest State University sketched her tattoo and expressed these sentiments even more poignantly:

> Ankh - Egyptian symbol for eternal life. I believe that once you die your soul lives on forever and this symbol stands for it. I got this tattoo after my cousin was shot (along w/her boyfriend and roommates) by a person messed up on drugs. This tattoo is located on my back, right under my shirt neckline. This symbol represents what I believe in, eternal life. This tattoo has not changed my live, but the event that caused me to get the tattoo has changed some of my views.

While not a memorial, an 18-year-old man from the Midwest State University alluded to some level of angst over his own faith and future in this way:

> The tatoo (sic) is a tribal - catholic cross. I got this symbol to show my faith and it makes me feel like I am protected in a way. The tattoo is on the back of my right shoulder. To me, this tattoo means I am a Christian and I believe in Jesus. I guess one reason I got it is cause I don't attend mass except on the holidays and it is a chance to show God I am still a believer and my faith is strong.

Finally, two African-American respondents—one each from the Southwest State and Southern Baptist schools, indicated their religious tattoo expressed their belief in the power of God as it pertains to eternal life. The 20-year-old man from SW State wrote:

> I have a tattoo showing Jesus crucified and a scripture from the Bible. It's on my back. It lets me know what Jesus gave up that I may live.

And the 19-year-old woman from Southern Baptist also seems to catch a drift from John Calvin himself:

> The tattoo is a cross and around it says, "Only God can judge me" which is how I feel.

4.3. Asceticism

Asceticism alleviates anxiety through outward expressions of vocation. A religious tattoo marks a commitment to this process as individuals live and interact with others. With regard to respondents' experience of, obligation to, or a desire for, a spiritual life, or quest, we note the following illustrations.

An 18-year-old Anglo man from the state school in the Midwest responded:

> My tattoo is the (C)hinese symbol "ai" which stands for love. I feel deeply close to god when surrounded by love, beauty, or nature.

A 22-year-old Latina woman from a state school in the Southwest sketched her tattoo for us—a cross with a heart at its center. Next to the sketch, she wrote, "Depicts God's love for us his children". Ultimate sacrifice. She then expanded her narrative with this story:

> My tattoo is a symbol of my faith and closeness to God. I thought about getting a tattoo for 2 years. Then I had decided that if I couldn't find s symbol that I connected with before my 21st b-day then I wasn't going to get one. This just made me feel complete after piecing it together.

A 20-year-old Anglo woman from the Southern Baptist school reported this:

> I have a tattoo of the Holy Spirit dove on my left hip. It's not something you can really see unless I wear low hanging bottoms. I got it during a period in my life where I was re-evaluating my relationship with God. I grew up Catholic so there was really a lack of that. When I got to (names school) I became really involved with a Baptist church and explored my spirituality. I got it as an affirmation of God's presence in my life.

This woman's response speaks to the heart of Weber's own quest for inner-worldly asceticism. More pointedly, our last illustration of asceticism and religious body art comes from a 20-year-old Anglo respondent from the Southern Baptist school. He seems to be directly addressing the tension in Weber's work between ascetic and erotic values (Roth, 1993). Our respondent writes:

> I have an icthus (sic) on my wrist. This is something I got with my brother as kind of a bonding thing and also an accountability to myself. I got this tattoo after I lost my virginity, to commit myself again to purity.

5. Conclusions

This work is clearly illustrative and not definitive. However, taken in sum, these stories and sketches link some of the basic elements of Weber's work to the practice of religious faith in respondents' interest in, and acquisition of, body art. We did not intend to explore, or anticipate seeing, these linkages when we posed the open-ended question on the survey. However, the spirit of Weber came through these responses with what we think is interesting clarity. Further work of this type might pose questions more explicitly directed toward a discussion of how asceticism, vocation, or anxiety factors into decision-making about body modification. Structured interviews and/or focus groups might be a more useful process through which researchers can explore a link between the Protestant Ethic and the religious tattoo.

For us, we find these insights intriguing, and oddly hopeful. Body modification has become part of mainstream culture, especially for young adults, and we note the persistent influence of faith and practice on how our college-student respondents choose to present themselves with body art.

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