



Do Religious People Have Tattoos?

Religiosity and Tattoos in a National Sample of U.S. Adults

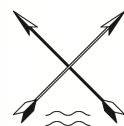
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It is hard to miss the proliferation of tattoos in the United States. A practice that respectable Americans once avoided is quickly becoming mainstream.



Charles Fenno Jacobs: *Much tattooed sailor aboard the USS New Jersey* (NARA 520883)



Tattoos used to be associated with specific subcultures: sailors, soldiers, bikers, inmates. The “tattooed” lady was a popular side-show attraction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

**You shall not make any cuts on your
body for the dead or tattoo
yourselves: I am the LORD.**

Leviticus 19:28 (English Standard Version)



The tattoo taboo was justified, in part, by religion.

In Jewish and Christian scriptures is the verse: “You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19:28, English Standard Version).

While there is not a specific prohibition against tattoos in the Koran, the practice of tattooing is discouraged in Islam, especially among Sunni Muslims.

But attitudes toward tattoos have changed dramatically in the past 20 and even 10 years. One in three American adults now have a tattoo, and most of these have more than one. Reflecting dominant values of individualism and self-expression, Generation X and Millennials have embraced body art. Nearly half of Millennials are tattooed. Men and woman are equally likely to have tattoos.



People are even using tattoos to express their religious faith.

Singer Mary J. Blige has a cross tattooed on her left arm. English soccer star David Beckham has multiple depictions of Jesus and angels on his body.

A growing list of celebrities have religious tattoos.



For the past three years, I've been paying close attention to the tattoos on students at my private, Christian university.

Here is what I have seen...

A cross with Jesus' face on the right shoulder of a young man. The scripture reference Romans 1:16 is inked below.



A full Bible verse and cross image covers the entire side of this young woman.



The phrase "I am His" on the wrist of this female student. The capital H indicates that this is not a reference to a possessive boyfriend, but to God.

After seeing multiple religious tattoos like these, we are left to wonder: Do religious people today have tattoos?



In general, we expect religions to still be a deterrent to tattoos for several conditions.

First, we expect people in sectarian religions to continue to avoid tattoos. Drawing on conceptions of sectarian religion developed by Benton Johnson and Larry Iannaccone, sectarian religions operate in tension with secular society due to distinctive beliefs and practices, such as clothing, diet, or other customs. These beliefs and behaviors create strong ingroup boundaries. Members of these groups likely display high levels of ingroup conformity.



Second, people most engaged in a faith community presumably avoid tattoos. We believe this occur regardless of religious tradition.

For those actively engaged in their faith group, religious people are their reference group. They will model their thoughts and behaviors on these religious people. Highly religious people without tattoos serve as the standard of behavior for other highly religious people, thereby, discouraging acquisition of tattoos.



But, we expect the religious influence of tattoos to vary by age. As noted, Millennials are most likely to have tattoos. The desire for individuality and self-expression may be so strong for younger Americans that religion does little to alter these values. Hence, religion may no longer be a deterrent to tattoos for younger Americans, even those who are religious.

Religious Deterrents to Tattoos

1. **Sectarian religion**
2. **High investment/involvement**
3. **Contingent on age**



To summarize, we believe that religion will continue to operate as a deterrent to tattoos under specific conditions. We summarize these conditions as three hypotheses.

1. People in sectarian religions will be unlikely to have a tattoo.
2. People with high investment/involvement in religions will be unlikely to have a tattoo.
3. The effect of religiosity on tattoos will vary by age, such that the influence of religion on tattoos will be relatively weak for younger Americans.

Family Survey 2014

N=15,738

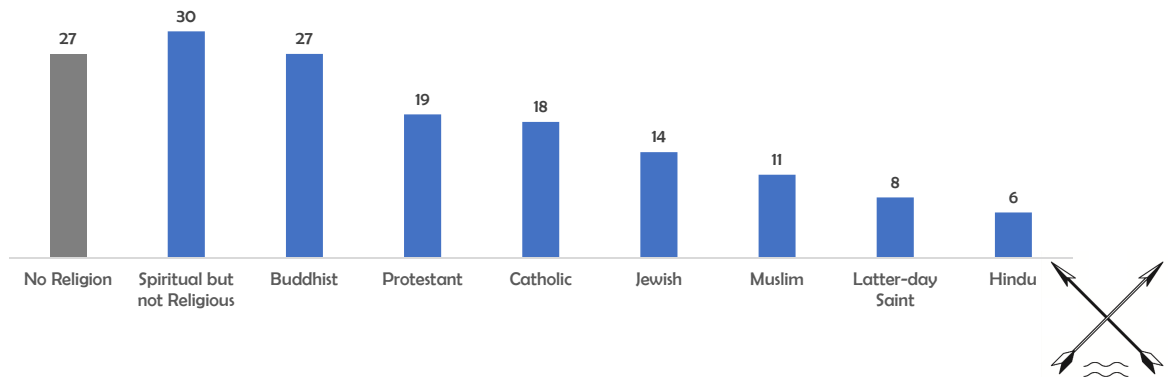


We test our hypotheses with survey data collected by the GfK Group for the Austin Institute for the Study of Family and Culture. The survey was administered to a nationally representative online panel. It was conducted in English and Spanish from January to February 2014.

The survey had over 15,000 respondents, which allows us to examine differences by age cohort and by religious group. In addition, the survey included multiple items on religious affiliation and practice.

Our dependent variable comes from the question, “Do you have any tattoos or body art?” Respondents could answer “No;” “Yes, just one or two small tattoos;” or “Yes, three or more tattoos or significant body art.” For this presentation, we combine the two yes categories to create a simply dichotomous variable to people with one or more tattoos and people without any tattoos.

Percent Tattooed by Religion



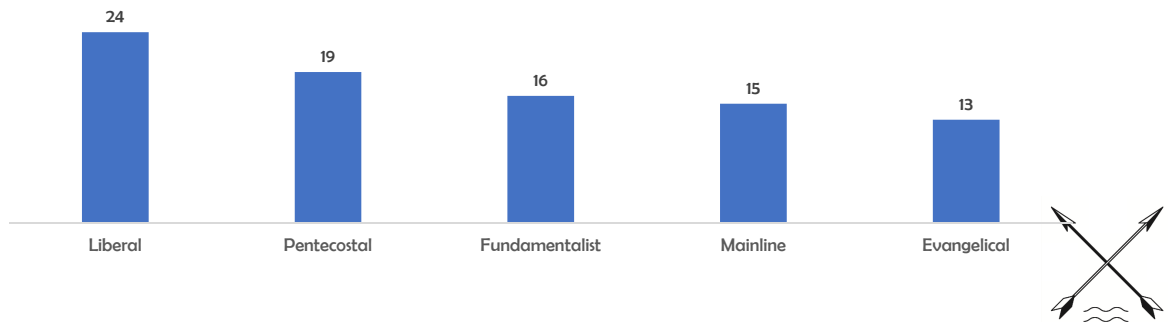
As a preliminary test of our first hypothesis, we examined the percent tattooed by religion. The survey asked, “What is your present religion”

For people with no religion, 27% had a tattoo. Thirty percent of spiritual but not religious people had a tattoo. With the exception of Buddhists, all other major religious groups were less likely to be tattooed than those with no religion or spiritual but not religious.

Religious minority groups (Muslim, Latter-day Saint, and Hindu) were the least likely to be tattooed.

This lends partial support to our first hypothesis.

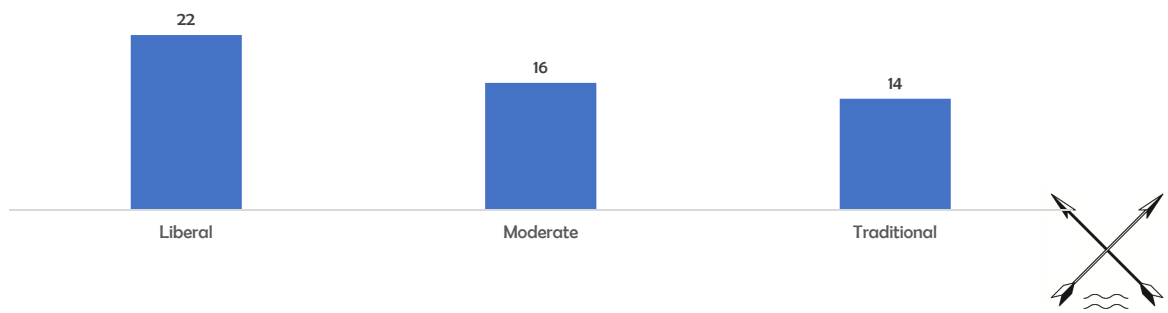
Percent Tattooed by Protestant Tradition



A better test of Hypothesis 1 is provided in the next two graphs. The survey asked a follow-up question about religious affiliation for Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. This follow-up question allows us to explore sectarianism within each of these faith traditions.

Among Protestants, liberals were most likely to have tattoos. Evangelicals were least likely. Other sectarian groups (Pentecostal and Fundamentalist) are in between. Mainline Protestants were also unlikely to be tattooed, although this is more so due to age and education than religion.

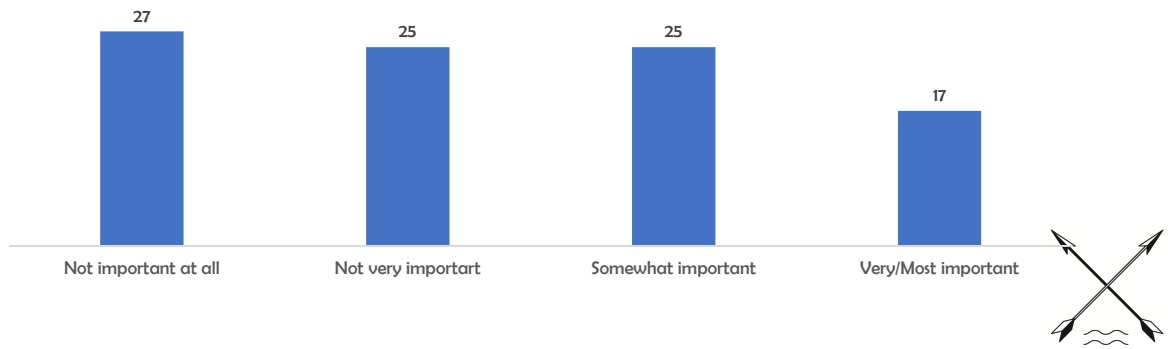
Percent Tattooed by Catholic Tradition



Catholics provide the clearest support for hypothesis 1. Liberal Catholics were more likely to be tattooed than either Moderate or Traditional Catholics. These differences are statistically significant.

The differences are not significantly different within Judaism however. Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Jews were very similar in their penchant for tattoos. Fewer than two in ten Jews of any tradition were tattooed.

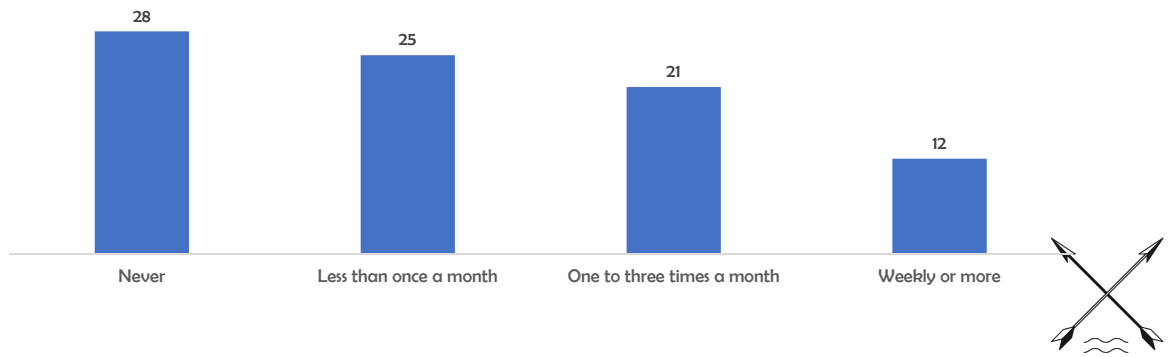
Percent Tattooed by Importance of Religion



To test hypothesis 2, we turn to religious practices. One question on the survey was: How important (if at all) is religious faith to you?

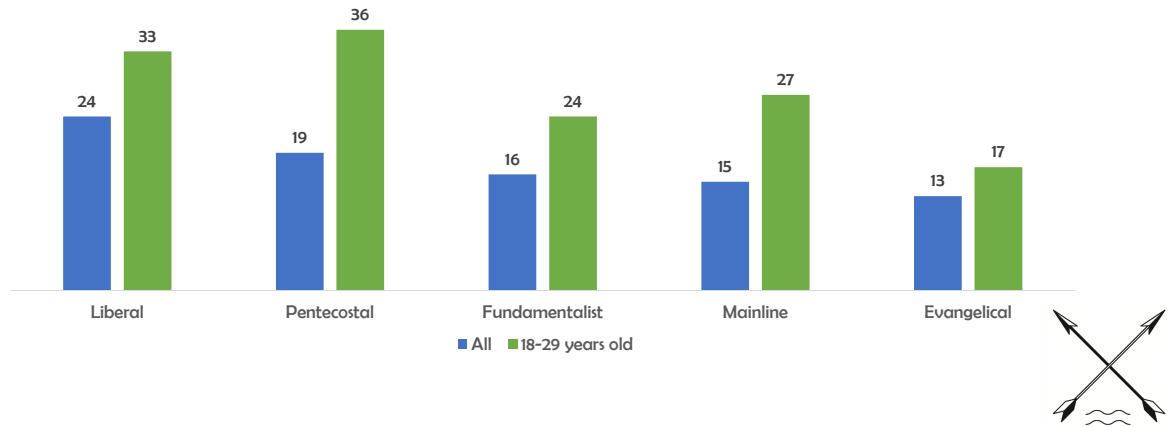
Those who said that religion was “not important at all” had the highest percentage of tattooed individuals, while those who said that religion is very or most important to them had the lowest percentage.

Percent Tattooed by Religious Attendance



The same pattern appears by religious attendance. Here we see a linear decline in percent tattooed by attendance frequency. Those who never attend were more than twice as likely to have a tattoo than those who attended once a week or more.

Percent Tattooed by Protestant Tradition

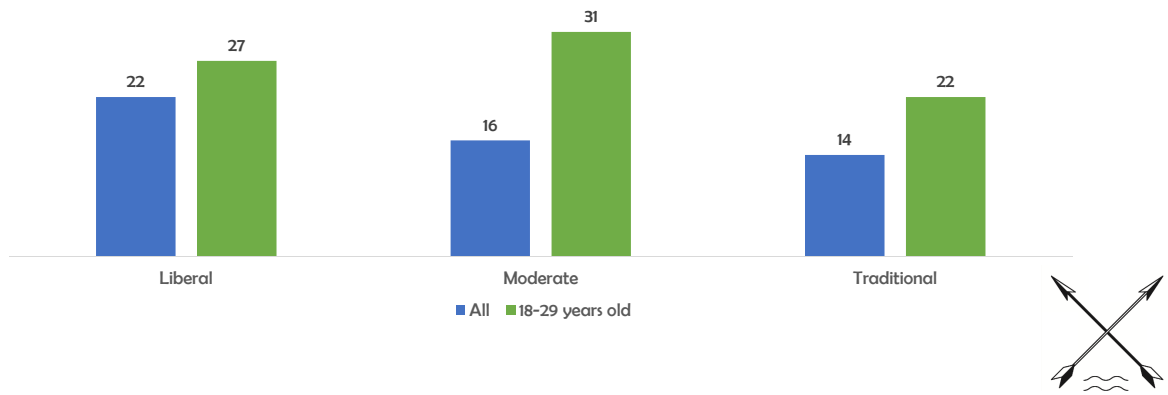


Next, we move to hypothesis 3: do the effects of religiosity differ for younger Americans? We hypothesized that religiosity for younger adults may not be a deterrent to tattoos.

In the next four graphs, we compare people ages 18 to 29 with all respondents for varied measures of religious affiliation and practice.

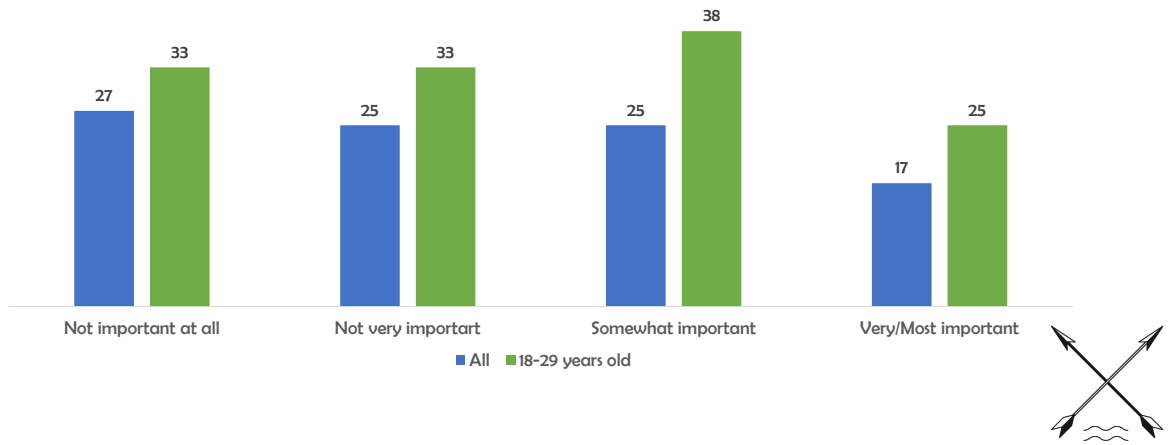
For every Protestant subgroup, a higher percentage of 18-29 year olds had tattoos. Still, Evangelicals were the least tattooed.

Percent Tattooed by Catholic Tradition



Like younger Protestants, younger Catholics are more likely to be tattooed than Catholics overall. For young Catholics however, the percentage tattooed is not statistically different for traditionalists, moderates, and liberals.

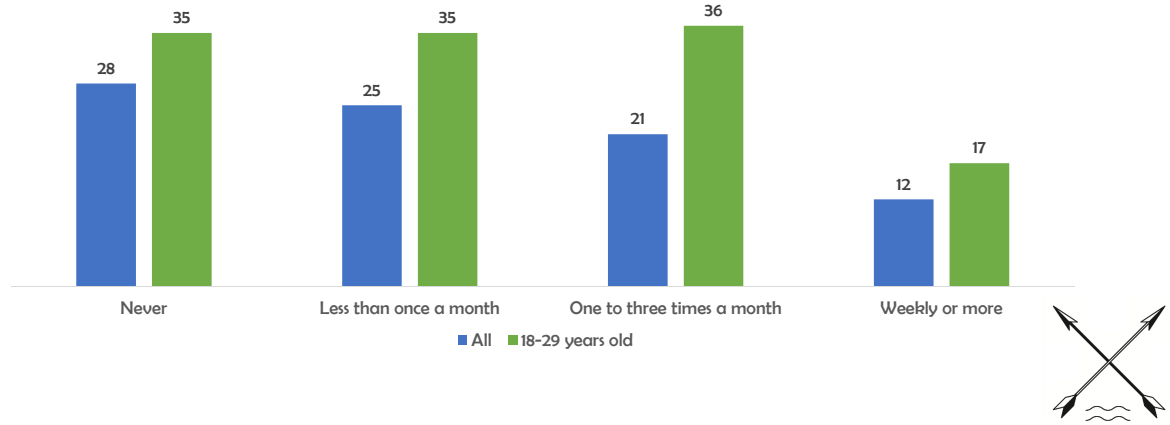
Percent Tattooed by Importance of Religion



Looking at the importance of religious faith to an individual, the percentage tattooed is similar for most groups, except for the most religious (those who identify religious faith as very or most important).

Once again, across every level of religious importance, the young are more likely to have a tattoo.

Percent Tattooed by Religious Attendance



The same pattern appears for attendance. Younger adults at every level of attendance are more likely to be tattooed. The frequency of attendance still matters, but it is only the most active attenders that look different in terms of tattoo acquisition from other religious adherents.

In multivariate models, attendance remains a significant predictor of tattoos. It is more influential than religious importance.

Taken together, these age comparison reveal partial support for our third hypothesis. The effects of religiosity do appear different for younger Americans. The religious effect does not completely disappear however.

Conclusions

1. **Some religious people have tattoos**
 - Religious liberals
 - Less invested/involved
 - Young
2. **Among younger adults, only the highly religious eschew tattoos**



To conclude, do religious people have tattoos? Some do. They are religious liberals, those less invested or involved in religion, and younger adults.

Among religious young adults, only the highly religious eschew tattoos. This suggests a bifurcation that may show up in other ways in society. Rather than religiosity having a linear effect on behavior outcomes (differing by level of religiosity), we see in our findings on tattoos a contract between highly religious Americans and everyone else, including religious moderates, religious liberals, and the irreligious.

The small percentage of 18-29 year olds who are highly religious and have tattoos may be the “committed traditionalists” identified by Smith and Snell (2009). Smith and Snell estimate this category to be 15% of all emerging adults. In our findings, 17-22% of highly religious younger adults had tattoos. It is on these individuals that we would be most likely to religious tattoos.