

## Bodies as Icons – Image and Embodiment in Eastern Christianity

The present paper explores the normativity of images of association and belonging and the recurring challenges of iconoclasm. I propose to look into the patterns of inscribing ritual signs of normative religious belonging while observing the tattoos' prohibitions of Exodus. I will discuss the ways this normatively is conveyed through mystical references to 'engraving of the body' in the fourteenth century hesychasm, inscribing of formal, but invisible signs through the sacraments of baptism, Christian burial (and inscriptions on the skulls in burial crypts) and anointing and through the complex iconography of embroidery, clerical vestments which transform the body into a sacramental map or even a 'theatrical mask'. The paper will also relate the above theological perspectives of body and image with more specific practices of pilgrims' badges and pilgrims tattoos in the practices of Ethiopian, Coptic and Nubian Christian traditions.

I will argue that these patterns represent a very important departure from Islam and Judaism because of the presence of a distinctive theology of Incarnation which develops a different role of images ascribed to the body while maintaining a certain reluctance of permanent tattoos ( which were often associated with pagan and heretical practices) in compliance with the prescriptions of Exodus. And while tattoos and tattooing culture were not essential for the conveying of these essential iconography of status and belonging, the images themselves were essential and have acquired an essential permanence in Christianity which could be compared to the essentiality of tattoos in cultures in which tattoos function in a similar fashion as maps of belonging. And as in Judaism, Christianity and Islam such maps of belonging can be effectively displayed with garments or on the garments, garments have largely evolved in the projecting of the iconography which other bodily images may convey.

In a Christian context and in particular in the diverse and rich practices of the Eastern churches these patterns are shaped by the centrality of the themes of the Incarnation and the Resurrection and the centrality of the human body in reliving these themes in multiple social contexts which require multiple displays of visual bodily signs of the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Resurrection. And apart from the mystical exception of stigmata and other forms of mystical transformations of the physical body, the permanence of this iconography of reliving and participation is articulated through the iconography of garments, textiles, visible displays of belonging and multiple forms of ritual performance.

Do these practices display different attitudes to permanent images of the body or an absence of normative images displayed on the body? Certainly not, not also they do display to a lesser extent the concern displayed by Judaism and Islam because of the centrality of the image in Eastern Christianity and the fluidity of roles the human body may perform in the complex process of partaking into the process of imitation of Christ through concepts like perichoresis and theosis. In that sense the human body could be permanently transformed in different ways and the normative marks of this transformation could take different forms and this physical transformations are signs and symbols of such normative transformation. This does not necessarily tell us why are tattoos approached reluctantly in some forms of Eastern Christianity and accepted by others, but certainly conveys a very strong message about centrality of the permanent signs which the human body may and should display as symbols of normative belonging and rights of passage. It also implies that the greater the social uncertainty is for a religious community the more likely it is for such community to develop more permanent signs of belonging. In that way Augustine's pilgrim on a journey in Ethiopian, Coptic and Ottoman contexts becomes a slave of Christ and the tattoos mark defiant sense of an inalienable belonging in contexts in which such belonging faces mortal challenges.

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