

What about Decorative Tattoos?: The Human Body in Heaven

Irish Theological Quarterly

1–15

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DOI: 10.1177/00211400231215369

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Abstract

The issue of the exact shape and form of the resurrected human body has been highly controversial and has concerned Christian theology throughout the ages. However, although deliberate body modification practices, such as tattooing, have been playing an important role for civilizations since ancient years, their place in heavenly life has hardly been discussed. In addition, decorative tattooing has a very interesting and also ethically controversial background through time, as one could say that it is both an act of embellishment and an act of mutilation, moving between two contrasted parallels, beauty and deformity. Examining, therefore, the specific questions of whether the risen flesh of the blessed will be perfectly beautiful and freed of any earthly deformities as well as whether it will resemble the resurrected 'wounded' body of Christ or not, this paper deals with the issue of the preservation of decorative tattoos in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Keywords

human body, resurrection, tattooing, modification, mutilation, beautification, Christian theology

In order to identify whether or not decorative tattoos will be present on the eschatological body, the biblical doctrine of the resurrection of the flesh must first be examined. Although the concept of bodily resurrection was scripturally apparent already in the Old Testament (Job 19:25–27, Ps 16:8–10, Is 26:19; 35:5, Dan 12:2), the eschatological purpose of the flesh was most blatantly manifested by Jesus Himself immediately after the end of His earthly life through the Resurrection of His body. The biblical theme of fleshly resurrection has been highly controversial within early Christianity. However,

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St. Ignatius of Antioch and St. Polycarp of Smyrna¹ as early as the first two centuries AD zealously maintained that Christ rose from the dead in the flesh, a doctrine soon established in both the early Western and Eastern churches.²

The bodily Resurrection of Jesus is biblically affirmed in the empty tomb tradition (Mt 28:1–7, Mk 16:1–8, Lk 24:1–6, Jn 20:1–8) and through His appearances. Regarding the former, it constitutes proof that the material reality of the body of Christ has also participated in the Resurrection and, in the words of Dermot Lane, an indicator that ‘material creation does have a future destiny and it is not something therefore that can be cast aside as inconsequential.’³ As for His appearances, Jesus, after His suffering, presented Himself to His disciples over the period of 40 days, giving them ‘many convincing proofs that he was alive’ (Acts 1:3–4).⁴ In the Lukan narratives the risen Christ suddenly appeared to His disciples, who seemed not only reluctant but also terrified, believing that they encountered a spirit or ghost: ‘Why are you troubled,’ He said to them, ‘and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have’ (Lk 24:38–39). Jesus even eats in their presence (Lk 24:41–43), again proving the physicality of His resurrected body.

Additionally, as the well-known Johannine incident with Thomas shows, the risen body of Christ still even bore the wounds of His earthly suffering and death (Jn 20:24–29), the wounds by which the whole of humanity has been healed (1 Pet 2:24). In the view of Candida Moss, these marks reveal not only the physicality of His resurrected body but also His divine identity. She says:

Jesus’ wounds are an integral part of his identity. It is by his wounds that he is recognized as Jesus himself. It is only his infirmities that permit Thomas to identify him as his Lord and God. Once again, in the case of Jesus, the brokenness of his body forms a critical part of his identity. We might argue that, for this author, it is the holes in his hand and side that mark him as God.⁵

However, the fact that in several instances Jesus does not seem to be immediately recognizable (for example, by Magdalene in Jn 20:15⁶ and His disciples in Lk 24:16⁷), raised questions about His resurrected body’s resemblance to His earthly one. The

1 See Donald W. Wuerl, *Fathers of the Church* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1975), 21–24.

2 For a magnificent, comprehensive study on the fleshly resurrection in the Bible and early Christianity, see N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003).

3 Dermot A. Lane, *Keeping Hope Alive: Stirrings in Christian Theology* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1996), 189.

4 All scriptural translations follow the New International Version (NIV).

5 Candida R. Moss, ‘Heavenly Healing: Eschatological Cleansing and the Resurrection of the Dead in the Early Church,’ *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79.4 (2011): 1002.

6 ‘Thinking he was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him”.’

7 ‘but they were kept from recognizing him.’

Catholic priest and theologian Hans Kung, for example, denied any continuity between Jesus' earthly and spiritual body, as, in his view, the latter totally replaces the former.⁸ On the other hand, Benedict Ashley holds that the difficulty in recognition does not seem to imply a different and extraordinary physical appearance, but rather that the witnesses 'could not believe their eyes,'⁹ while Archbishop Averky suggests that perhaps it was because their eyes were full of tears.¹⁰ Finally, just as Jesus' Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, where 'His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light' (Mt 17:2), is a foreshadowing of celestial Jesus, constituting His first unveiling of the splendor and 'clarity'¹¹ of His body, there is a possibility that His resurrected body was not recognized because it was a transfigured body that manifested the glory of the Resurrection. However, Aquinas rejected this idea, asserting instead that 'Our Lord could change His flesh so that His shape really was other than they were accustomed to behold; for, before His Passion He was transfigured on the mountain, so that His face shone like the sun. But it did not happen thus now . . . Hence Luke says (24:16) that "their eyes were held, that they should not know Him".'¹²

St Paul is perhaps the most important biblical author with regards to the body, as his teaching became hugely influential and his body theology constitutes the 'rootstock for much Patristic and subsequent theological elaboration.'¹³ Eschatological resurrection is the Apostle's paramount teaching in regard to the body. 'And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you,' he says to the Romans, 'he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you' (Rom 8:11). Thus, Christ's Resurrection adumbrated a general resurrection of the flesh, since, just as He rose from the grave not only spiritually, humans will eventually be resurrected both body and soul, a notion expressed by many thinkers within the early Church. In the second century the Christian apologist Tatian, for instance, in his opposition to paganism, wrote that 'Even though fire (will) destroy all traces of my flesh, the world receives the vaporized matter . . . God the Sovereign, when He pleases, will restore the substance that is visible to Him alone to its pristine condition.'¹⁴ Human flesh, therefore, is not the prison of the spirit, as Platonists believed, and is even thought of as 'the spouse of the soul in the wedding celebration of eternal life.'¹⁵

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- 8 Bernard P. Prusak, 'Bodily Resurrection in Catholic Perspectives,' *Theological Studies* 61.1 (2000): 79.
9. Benedict M. Ashley, *Theologies of the Body: Humanist and Christian* (St Louis, MO: Pope John Center, 1985), 591.
10. Archbishop Averky (Taushev), *The Four Gospels: Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the New Testament* (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Seminary Press, 2015), vol. 1, 499.
11. Aquinas, *ST III*, q. 45, a. 2.
12. *Ibid.*, q. 55, a. 4.
13. Hannah Hunt, *Clothed in the Body: Asceticism, the Body and the Spiritual in the Late Antique Era* (Farnham; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 32.
14. Tatian, *Address to the Greeks*, 6. The English translations of the works of both Greek and Latin Fathers, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New Advent website (<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/>).
15. Ashley, *Theologies of the Body*, 103.

In addition, St Paul believed that we are all filled with a longing for the redemption of our soul as well as ‘for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies’ (Rom 8:23), a redemption which, as John Paul II understood, guarantees the connection between ‘man’s [sic] hereditary state of sin and his original innocence, although within history this innocence has been irremediably lost by him.’¹⁶ Nevertheless, although all the flesh will be resurrected, only that of the righteous will be glorified, as each one of us will be somatically and spiritually raised from the dead in order to ‘receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad’ (2 Cor 5:10). For the majority of Christian thinkers, Heaven’s bliss and Hell’s punishment, deification and condemnation, eternal life and eternal death will be experienced physically. Moreover, for some, even amongst the risen bodies of the elect and those of the damned, there will be a hierarchy, since the punishments in Hell and the rewards in Heaven differ.¹⁷

However, apart from suggesting that we will be raised imperishable and we will all be changed (1 Cor 15:51–52), which suggests a degree of alteration, St Paul did not give more details about the shape and form that the risen body will take, and this is why its exact status has been the subject of debate over the centuries, especially in the West. For most Christian thinkers, despite the radical alteration of the body, there surely is continuity between the penultimate and the ultimate, as Paul’s image of the seed demonstrates (1 Cor 15:37–38). In the state of bliss, the new body, the ‘spiritual’ one (1 Cor 15:44) is still corporeal, something which manifests the flesh’s capability of resurrection and existence in Heaven. What is destroyed is not the natural body, which remains unchanged, but the decay that comes from sin. As it is written in the book of Acts, about the death and resurrection of David, ‘he was buried with his ancestors and his body decayed. But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay’ (Acts 13:36–37). Thus, the body of the righteous will carry the substance of the flesh but not the flesh’s corruption.¹⁸

Nevertheless, the question of whether our resurrection will move us ‘forward’ to be like Christ or ‘backward’ towards likeness with Adam and Eve is crucial for the question of the preservation of tattoos in the afterlife. Since the two states are substantially different, they will have fundamentally different effects on our bodies as well. For the purposes of this article, therefore, we wish to consider whether the resurrected body of the blessed will return to its Edenic pre-lapsarian state or will resemble the resurrected body of Christ needs to be considered.

16 Pope John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. M. Waldstein (Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), 144 (General Audience 4, 26/9/1979).

17 As Chrysostom, for example, saw, those who did not corrupt their earthly bodies at all, that is, virgins, ascetics, and martyrs will hold the highest rank in heaven and will have the most glorious resurrected bodies. Chris L. de Wet, ‘John Chrysostom’s Exegesis on the Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15,’ *Neotestamentica* 45.1 (2011): 108–9.

18 St Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, 13.22.

Resurrection: Like Christ or like Adam and Eve?

For Gregory of Nyssa and Basil the Great, although the resurrected Christ indeed revealed the unassailable resurrection of our own body, He did not reveal its precise shape and form. According to the Cappadocian brothers, the human body will not pertain to the risen body of Christ but to the first creation.¹⁹ The end will resemble the beginning, since both Fathers conceived the resurrected body as *apokatastasis*,²⁰ as the return of the fallen body to its incorruptible and perfect condition before sin.²¹ In the words of Gregory, although Christ's Resurrection is a paradigm of ours, our resurrection 'promises us nothing else than the restoration of the fallen to their ancient state,'²² a viewpoint largely accepted by the Orthodox tradition which saw the body's post-resurrection condition 'as a reintegration of that which it enjoyed in paradise.'²³ However, according to Gregory and Basil's Latin contemporary Jerome, we will be raised in the condition that Christ Himself was raised²⁴ and this is why our earthly bodies must be elevated toward heaven through virginity, chastity, and fasting. 'I love the flesh,' as he says, 'but I love it only when it is chaste, when it is virginal, when it is mortified by fasting: I love not its works but itself, that flesh which knows that it must be judged, and therefore dies as a martyr for Christ, which is scourged and torn asunder and burned with fire.'²⁵

As Caroline Walker Bynum points out, Jerome and Augustine's stance on the issue were essentially the same.²⁶ In his *City of God* Augustine stated that the resurrection of the body is the 'second' resurrection, since the first is the resurrection of the soul.²⁷ Although the body will carry the substance of the flesh it will not carry the flesh's sin and corruption. Therefore, the bodies of the righteous will resemble the risen body of Christ who was in spirit yet real flesh.²⁸ Thus, Augustine believed that the Christian will move

19 The first Eastern Father, however, to deal with the issue was St Athenagoras the Athenian, for whom, although we will rise as the same persons, our resurrected body will be different from the present one, 'for the bodies that rise again are reconstituted from the parts which properly belong to them.' St Athenagoras the Athenian, *On the Resurrection of the Dead*, 7.

20 *Apokatastasis* is the process of turning back to God.

21 They based this view on 1 Cor 15:45–48 ('If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. So it is written: "The first man Adam became a living being" the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven.').

22 St Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, 17.2.

23 Jean-Claude Larchet, *Theology of the Body*, trans. M. Donley (New York, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2016), 32.

24 St. Jerome, *Letters*, 84.6.

25 *Ibid.*, 84.9.

26 Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2019), 95.

27 Augustine, 20.6.

28 Augustine, 13.22.

forward towards God and not backward to the prelapsarian state.²⁹ Several centuries later, Aquinas took a middle road on this issue when distinguishing between the resurrection of the blessed and that of the damned. He believed that although the Resurrection of Christ extends to both it sets a pattern only for the just, namely those ‘who are made conformable with His Sonship.’³⁰

Regarding contemporary perspectives, it is true that although it has not been widely addressed by Eastern Orthodoxy, Western Christianity dealt extensively with the issue. In 1979, the Holy Office of the Catholic Church affirmed a connection between the risen body of Christ and that of the righteous, stating that the resurrection of the elect is ‘nothing other than the extension to human beings of the Resurrection of Christ itself’ (*Letter on Certain Questions Concerning Eschatology*, 3). However, according to Ashley the resurrected body will resemble the Edenic body as it will restore its pre-lapsarian form, its most perfect form in which God initially created it before the introduction of sin.³¹ On the other hand, Pope John Paul II stated that although there is a connection and continuity between the ‘beginning’ and the resurrected body, ‘in the ethos of the redemption of the body, the original ethos of creation was to be taken up anew,’ since after sin the human person has irrevocably lost his/her original innocence.³²

Finally, some modern theologians followed a more apophatic approach. According to Karl Rahner, although the resurrection is the perfection and termination of the whole person, both body and soul, humans cannot comprehend ‘the “how” of this bodily consummation.’³³ Similarly, for Joseph Ratzinger:

Nothing concrete or imaginable can be said about the relation of man to matter in the world, or about the ‘risen body.’ Yet we have the certainty that the dynamism of the cosmos leads towards a goal, a situation in which matter and spirit will belong to each other in a new and definitive fashion. This certainty remains the concrete content of the confession of the resurrection of the flesh even today, and perhaps we should add: especially today.³⁴

All of the above shows that throughout the ages there has been no unanimity about the nature of the eschatological bodies; for some theologians, they will return to their Edenic pre-lapsarian state, while for others they will resemble the resurrected body of Christ. Others still have argued that they enter a completely new state. Thus, ongoing theological debate on this question is needed.

29 Andrea Wilson Nightingale, *Once Out of Nature: Augustine on Time and the Body* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 42.

30 St Thomas Aquinas, *ST III*, q. 56, a. 1. All the translations of *Summa Theologiae* (*ST*), unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New Advent website (<https://www.newadvent.org/summa/>).

31 Ashley, *Theologies of the Body*, 594.

32 Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 323 (General Audience 49, ‘Christ Calls Us to Rediscover the Living Forms of the New Man,’ 3/12/1980).

33 Prusak, ‘Bodily Resurrection in Catholic Perspectives,’ 67.

34 *Ibid.*, 194.

Resurrected Bodies: Perfectly Entire and Beautiful

Most believe, however, that despite the radical alteration of the body there will be continuity and similarity between the ‘penultimate and the ultimate,’³⁵ since the heavenly body is still a body and does not become a soul. However, many theologians have turned to more specific questions, such as: what age will we have in the resurrected body? What about our height and weight? Will we preserve our sex or will we be sexless like angels? Will there be sexual desire and pleasure? Will we eat and will we need to eat? Will all our matter be raised or some earthly parts will be left behind? What about the length and shape of parts such as fingernails and hair? Finally, will our bodies be more beautiful, and will they maintain their earthly mutilations and deformities? Although all these questions have concerned Christian theology for centuries, the last two will be examined in detail since they are the most relevant here.

The first early Church thinker to systematically deal with the beauty and the earthly mutilations of the risen bodies was Justin Martyr who, in his treatise *On the Resurrection*, argued that bodies will rise perfect from the dead. He wrote, ‘For if on earth He (God) healed the sicknesses of the flesh, and made the body whole, much more will He do this in the resurrection, so that the flesh shall rise perfect and entire. In this manner, then, shall those dreaded difficulties of theirs be healed.’³⁶ Furthermore, Tertullian argued that the same flesh will be resurrected, since if the flesh is not the same the person will not be the same. He also saw this material continuity as the result of divine justice, as it would be unjust on God’s part ‘for one substance to do the work, and another to reap the reward: that this flesh of ours should be torn by martyrdom, and another wear the crown; or, on the other hand, that this flesh of ours should wallow in uncleanness, and another receive the condemnation!’³⁷ Nevertheless, Tertullian believed that even though it will be the same flesh, God will render the bodies of the blessed perfect and impassible regardless of how mutilated they were on earth. In other words, they will recover their integrity in Heaven,³⁸ while even their teeth will be preserved for the sake of physical beauty.³⁹ And St Augustine wrote:

I believe that whatever deformity was present in it . . . will be restored in such a way that, while the integrity of the body’s substance is preserved, the deformity will perish. If an artist has for some reason made a flawed statue, he can recast it and make it beautiful, removing the defect without losing any of the substance . . . let neither fat persons nor thin ones fear that their appearance at the resurrection will be other than they would have wished it to be here if they could.

Thus, although the notion of beauty is subjective and shaped by cultural and social norms, for Western Christian Church Fathers, the risen body will be a perfect body that

35 Ray S. Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1991), 113.

36 St Justin Martyr, *On the Resurrection*, 4.

37 Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 56.

38 *Ibid.*, 57.

39 *Ibid.*, 61.

will take its most beautiful form possible. However, the concept of physical beauty differs between God and humans since what is considered beautiful to humans is not necessarily beautiful to God. In the case of the beautification practices of hair and nail styling, for instance, Augustine believed if hair had been regularly cut and nails regularly trimmed off to cause ugliness, they will not be restored in Heaven.⁴⁰

According to Bonaventure, ‘both the good and the wicked will arise with the same individual bodies they had previously, composed of the same parts, and these true to nature, not only in the principal members and the vital humors, but even down to the last hair and the other members that contribute to the comeliness of the body.’⁴¹ Furthermore, as humans are unified psychosomatic entities, the flesh of the blessed will follow the splendor of the soul in the life to come.⁴² Hence, glorified bodies will be perfectly beautiful and this beauty will correspond directly to the beauty of the soul: ‘as much as the soul itself expresses uncreated Beauty.’⁴³ In addition, St Albert the Great believed that the bodies of both the elect and the damned would not preserve their mutilations because in order for the body to suffer the pains and punishments of hell it must be perfectly formed.⁴⁴

Again, Aquinas thought that at the resurrection the body will not be ethereal or celestial, but it will remain ‘numerically’ the same, a body made of the flesh, the bones, and all the members it possessed during its earthly life.⁴⁵ As the soul is the form of the body, the latter has to remain the same when the two are united again. In addition, the ‘commensurability’ (*commensuratio*) between the two, which is the mutual conditioning of the soul to its particular body and vice versa⁴⁶ is fundamental for Thomas, conditioning that is eternal and confirms the individuality and uniqueness of every human person. Aquinas surmised that since God created human nature without defects, humans must rise without defect, and ‘human nature will be brought by the resurrection to the state of its ultimate perfection which is in the youthful age.’⁴⁷ However, there are two kinds of deformities: those that arise from the lack of a bodily organ or a limb (mutilation), and those that result from ‘the undue disposition of the parts, by reason of undue quantity, quality, or place.’ Deformities of the first kind will be corrected in both the bodies of the good and the damned since all bodies will rise entire. Deformities of the second kind will be removed from the bodies of the elect but remain in the bodies of the wicked as a form

40 Augustine, 22.19.

41 St Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, 7.5.1; *Breviloquium*, trans. D.V. Monti (New York, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2005), 282.

42 Ibid., 7.5.5; Monti trans., 285.

43 Rachel Davies, *Bonaventure, the Body, and the Aesthetics of Salvation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 81.

44 Donald Mowbray, *Pain and Suffering in Medieval Theology: Academic Debates at the University of Paris in the Thirteenth Century* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2009), 146–47.

45 Aquinas, *ST III, Suppl.*, q. 80, aa. 1–5.

46 St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2.81.7–8; *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book 2: Creation*, trans. J.F. Anderson (New York, NY: Image, 1956), 261–62.

47 Aquinas, *ST III, Suppl.*, q. 81, aa. 1–4.

of punishment.⁴⁸ Finally, the glorified heavenly body will be perfectly subject to the soul, obedient to reason, and will possess the qualities of subtlety, clarity, impassibility, and agility.⁴⁹

From the above account, it is clear that many different theological views have been expressed throughout the ages on the actual status of the risen body. However, there is unanimity on two points: first, earthly deformities and mutilations, at least in the bodies of the blessed, will not be preserved. Second, the risen body of the elect will obtain its most beautiful form possible. As Piero Camporesi puts it, Paradise 'is portrayed as a laboratory of physical restoration, an exemplary clinic where the boldest plastic surgery achieves a one hundred percent success rate.'⁵⁰

Tattoos in Heaven: Preserved or Amended?

The resurrected bodies of the elect, therefore, will not have earthly impairments but will be perfectly beautiful. On the question of tattoos, however, we must ask the following questions: how are we to understand body modification practices? Will our bodies preserve their decorative tattoos in the Kingdom of God? To answer such questions we must consider whether tattoos are mutilations or beautification practices.

Although bodies are modified for many reasons, and although there are several reasons why someone may get a tattoo, the majority of authors agree that the main reason for this form of body art is 'the pursuit and attainment of beauty.'⁵¹ The most common reason for modifying the body in this way, therefore, is the desire to increase one's physical attractiveness, and most tattooing belongs to the category of mainstream non-enhancing decorative modification. Indeed, although it is widely accepted that beauty is subjective and shaped by culturally formed aesthetic ideals, nowadays, more and more people look after their external appearance because it is seen as an expression of success in modern societies. It is worth noting that the phenomenon of physical beautification dates back to prehistoric times, as 'humans began to alter their appearance with cosmetics use at least 40,000 years ago.'⁵² The skin in particular has always been used as a 'canvas' for the more superficial markings of cosmetics and body art to the practices of tattooing, piercing, and scarification.⁵³

Nevertheless, although outward embellishment is the first and most common purpose of tattooing, beauty and beautification acquire a completely different meaning between the divine and the human. For Christian theology, beauty has not only an aesthetic

48 Ibid., q. 86, a. 1.

49 Ibid., qq. 82–85.

50 Piero Camporesi, *The Incorruptible Flesh: Bodily Mutation and Mortification in Religion and Folklore*, trans. T. Croft-Murray (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 25.

51 Erica Reischer and Kathryn S. Koo, 'The Body Beautiful: Symbolism and Agency in the Social World,' *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33.1 (2004), 297.

52 Bonnie Berry, *The Power of Looks: Social Stratification of Physical Appearance* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008), 17.

53 Ibid., 61.

dimension but also a moral one, as what is good and ethical is beautiful, while what is corrupted could never be beautiful to the eyes of God even if it is considered delightful and stunning to human eyes. As Eusebius of Caesarea wrote, ‘Christ showed that things which appear mean and obscure and despicable to men are with God of great glory . . . through love toward him manifested in power, and not boasting in appearance.’⁵⁴ Because of the ethical dimension of beauty, spiritual adornment is recommended, while the Church Fathers warned people against not only the futility but even the immorality of external beautification. St John Chrysostom, for instance, thought that concern for the embellishment of our body and the constant effort to make it more attractive is a ‘disease’ and an insult to God’s creative work.⁵⁵ While Bernard of Clairvaux wrote that caring for the embellishment of the body and neglecting that of the soul is akin to ‘entertaining the maid and murdering the mistress.’⁵⁶

Before the introduction of sin, the body was incorruptible and so beautiful that it shone in glory, so much that Adam and Eve did not need to cover it let alone beautify it. Ultimately, if God wanted our bodies to carry images or piercings He would have created it so from the beginning. However, this argument is unlikely to prove conclusive. In any case, the belief that the resurrected body will be perfectly beautiful cannot signify the eschatological preservation of earthly decorative modification practices.

Concerning the connection between body modification and body mutilation, many divergent opinions have been expressed. Despite the fact that in most contemporary cultural and social environments bodily modification practices are now viewed positively and considered completely natural, many people remain skeptical about them. In fact, many disapprove of them, believing they are deliberate self-mutilations.⁵⁷ Indeed, although some non-permanent or semi-permanent practices may seem relatively innocuous, the existence of permanent ones like tattoos has led some psychologists and sociologists to question where modification ends and where mutilation begins.⁵⁸

However, the correlation between modifications and mutilations has not been adequately discussed. In 1956, in his influential article ‘The Morality of Mutilation: Towards a Revision of the Treatise,’ Gerard Kelly tried to classify various types of physical mutilation.

54 St Eusebius of Caesarea, *Church History*, 5.17.

55 St John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Timothy*, 4.

56 St Bernard of Clairvaux, *An Apologia to Abbot Williams*, 8.16; Jean Leclercq and Michael Casey, ‘Cistercians and Clunians: St Bernard’s Apologia to Abbot William,’ in *Treatises I: The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*, vol. 1, ed. M. Basil Pennington (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1972), 53.

57 Mary Kosut, ‘Tattoos and Body Modification,’ in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 24, ed. James D. Wright (Oxford: Elsevier, 2015), 32.

58 See, for example, Armando R. Favazza, *Bodies Under Siege: Self-Mutilation and Body Modification in Culture and Psychology* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 17–19; Victoria Pitts, ‘Body Modification, Self-Mutilation and Agency in Media Accounts of a Subculture,’ in *Body Modification*, ed. Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, 2000), 243; and Thomas Schramme, ‘Should We Prevent Non-Therapeutic Mutilation and Extreme Body Modification?,’ in *The Right to Bodily Integrity*, ed. A.M. Veins (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 419–26.

First, he distinguished between *contraceptive* and *non-contraceptive* mutilations, defining the latter as ‘any procedure, except direct sterilization, which interferes either temporarily or permanently with the natural and complete integrity of the human body.’⁵⁹ Kelly divided the non-contraceptive mutilations into *major* mutilations, which ‘destroy or remove an organ, permanently suppress a bodily function, or cause a notable and permanent impairment of a higher function which depends on the body’, and *minor* mutilations referring to all other non-contraceptive mutilations.⁶⁰ In addition, he mentioned that mutilations can also be divided into *direct* and *indirect*, *licit* and *illicit*, and *self-mutilations* and *mutilations of others*.⁶¹ Based on these distinctions, one might deduce that tattooing, if considered a form of mutilation, would belong to the non-contraceptive, minor, direct, illicit, self-mutilations. The fact, however, that there is not a precise definition of mutilation in the papal documents, combined with the fact that the typical definition given in Catholic manuals is, as Kelly puts it, ‘defective,’⁶² makes the theological examination of the connection between mutilation and bodily modification even more challenging.

However, one year later, in his book *Medico-Moral Problems*, Kelly included body piercing, a practice closely connected to tattooing, as a form of mutilation. Kelly cites the work of bishop Bert J. Cunningham, who believed piercing was a minor form of mutilation. Cunningham believed that although piercing does not remove a bodily member nor seriously impair bodily function, it nevertheless violates the integrity of the body.⁶³ Kelly then offered his own broad definition of mutilation:

[It is] any procedure which interferes, even temporarily, with the complete integrity of the human body. This general description refers to surgery, irradiation, or any other treatment, such as the use of drugs and chemicals. It includes serious things like the excision of a kidney, as well as minor procedures such as blood transfusions and skin grafts. It is not limited to the removal of organs or the suppression of functions; it extends also to such things as circumcision, exploratory operations, cosmetic surgery, and so forth.⁶⁴

In Kelly’s view, therefore, minor body modifying procedures also constitute mutilations. One might conclude that tattooing, as a minor alteration practice, is indeed mutilation. Nevertheless, few theologians have addressed the issue and no official view has yet been expressed by the Christian Church. As a result, one cannot give a definitive answer on this matter.

In an effort to reach a conclusion on this issue, a brief theological analysis of the metaphysics of the human body is needed. Drawing from the biblical appreciation of the

59 Gerard Kelly, ‘The Morality of Mutilation: Towards a Revision of the Treatise,’ *Theological Studies* 17.3 (1956): 328.

60 *Ibid.*, 329.

61 *Ibid.*, 329–30.

62 *Ibid.*, 327.

63 Gerard Kelly, *Medico-Moral Problems* (St Louis, MO: The Catholic Hospital Association, 2012), 7.

64 *Ibid.*, 8.

body, Christianity has always defended the goodness of the body and taught that the human being is a psychosomatic unity, decisively closing the door to any dualistic approaches that downgrade the flesh. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, 'The flesh is the hinge of salvation. We believe in God who is creator of the flesh; we believe in the Word made flesh in order to redeem the flesh; we believe in the resurrection of the flesh, the fulfillment of both the creation and the redemption of the flesh' (CCC 1015). And this respect of our bodies is the reason why we should not treat them lightly or deliberately distort them.

On the other hand, God created the person with intelligent and free will, calling us to share in his creative activity. God does not want us to obediently execute His orders, but rather to be co-workers in caring for His creation, and encourages us to exercise real creativity. The ethical question for Christian bioethics is whether the altering of the human body is an expression of this creativity, and if so, to what extent.⁶⁵ Catholic ethicists deBlois and O'Rourke have argued that bodily interventions are good insofar as they aim for the preservation of the health of the whole body. 'Natural law,' they write:

should not be conceived of as a fixed pattern of human life to which human beings are forever confined. Rather, the Creator has made human beings free and intelligent, and it is precisely this intelligent freedom that is human nature and the foundation of natural moral law. Human intelligence, however, is not disembodied; it depends on a brain and a body that have a specific structure and purpose. In caring for their total health, persons have not only the right but the obligation to understand their psychological and biological structure and to improve themselves even in ways that may seem novel to past generations. Such improvement is good stewardship of the share in divine creativity with which God has endowed humankind, provided it perfects and not destroys what he has given us already.⁶⁶

Moreover, if we turn to magisterial documents like *Gaudium et spes* and *Veritatis splendor*, we see that mutilation is considered an intrinsically evil act. Mutilations are described as 'infamies' (GS n. 27), 'a disgrace,' and 'a negation of the honour due to the Creator' (VS n. 80). Church teaching appears to define deliberate bodily tortures and mutilations which infringe human integrity as intrinsically evil acts. Intentional harm, based on the principle that 'evil may not be done for the sake of good,' is always unreasonable.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, not every mutilation is intrinsically evil and the act itself is sometimes licit. Willful and unjustifiable mutilations, to which both documents refer, are what is condemned. And, of course, one makes an ethical distinction between self-mutilation and medical for therapeutic reasons. The 'principle of totality' tells us that it can be licit to mutilate part of the body if this is necessary for the good of the totality and the preservation of health. Even though, therefore, 'tampering' with our bodily organs and their natural ordinations is ethically questionable, Janet Smith tells us that 'it is also

65 Benedict M. Ashley, Jean deBlois, and Kevin D. O'Rourke, *Health Care Ethics: A Theological Analysis* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2006), 93.

66 *Ibid.*, 94.

67 John Finnis, *Moral Absolutes: Tradition, Revision, and Truth* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1991), 54–55.

certainly true that not all tampering is immoral. For instance, there is little controversy about the moral permissibility of medical procedures necessary for the health of an individual that may result in blindness or sterility.⁶⁸

Although the morality of decorative body modification in general is beyond the scope of this article, the distinction between mutilation and amputation is important for the issue of the eschatological preservation of tattooing. Since decorative tattoos are not undertaken for therapeutic purposes,⁶⁹ they inevitably fall into the category of willful mutilation practices, and thus violate the nature of ‘our largest but also our least known organ.’⁷⁰ Although tattooing does not actually violate a natural function of the skin, except in certain cases of medical complications, skin was not created to carry decorative holes or imagery. Additionally, if willful bodily mutilations are intrinsically evil, and if heavenly bodies are incorruptible and free of sin, one must conclude that they could not carry the effects of negative earthly desires and acts. This appears to suggest that tattoos be classified as mutilation and, therefore, eschatologically excluded.

Moreover, although all deformities and mutilations will be eschatologically corrected in the bodies of the elect, the resurrected Christ carried the wounds of His worldly suffering. He bore all His scars. These mutilations affirm the physicality of His resurrected body and its absolute likeness to its earthly state. Consequently, one could say that defects and mutilations will be evident in the afterlife. Or, to take the point further, ‘If Jesus is recognized by his wounds, then should we not imagine that the resurrection of everyone else will similarly preserve pre-mortem marks, and by extension, all kinds of infirmities?’⁷¹ Since Christ’s marks were the way in which He revealed His identity to His disciples, some could argue that our bodily marks remain in Heaven too. For it is the case that many people think of their body marks as a powerful statement of personal identity and individuality.⁷² Especially for indigenous groups, the practice is critically significant. Body art is a statement of identity and an expression of deep cultural meaning. For the Maori, for instance, tattoos have a cultural, religious, and social significance,⁷³ and the resurgence of traditional tattooing is seen as a practice of cultural identity: ‘the decision to take the marking is about continuity, affirmation, identity and

68 Janet E. Smith, *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 82.

69 In rare cases, non-decorative ‘medical tattooing’ is applied by modern medicine. See Stacie J. Becker and Jeffrey E. Cassisi, ‘Applications of Medical Tattooing: A Systematic Review of Patient Satisfaction Outcomes and Emerging Trends,’ *Aesthetic Surgery Journal Open Forum*, 3.3 (2021): 1–14.

70 Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body: A Theology of Embodiment* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1995), 60.

71 Candida R. Moss, *Divine Bodies: Resurrecting Perfection in the New Testament and Early Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 25.

72 See Rebecca Gowland and Tim Thompson, *Human Identity and Identification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 162.

73 See Dorota Pawlik, ‘Maori’s Ritual Body Embellishments,’ *IDO Movement for Culture*, 11.4 (2001): 6–11.

commitment. It is also about wearing those ancestors, carrying them into the future; as their *moko* becomes a companion, a salient being with its own life force, its own integrity and power, beyond the face.⁷⁴

Nevertheless, none of this definitively determines what our own body's eschatological state will be. The condition of Christ's resurrected flesh should be seen more as a revelation than as an exact paradigm of our own resurrected flesh. As Ashley explains, Christ appeared to His disciples in His exact earthly physical condition in order to communicate to them the retained remembrance of His suffering.⁷⁵ And Augustine, for whom, all deformities will be eliminated, stressed that not only the risen body of Jesus but also that of the martyrs will sustain their earthly mutilations since they will not constitute deformities, but 'a mark of honor, and will add luster to their appearance, and a spiritual, if not a bodily beauty.'⁷⁶ The wounds of the resurrected Jesus, therefore, carry dignity, beauty, and glory, making the body 'more perfected.'⁷⁷

Finally, Augustine's statement that physical appearance will be as each one wished it to be while alive, could lead to further discussion. Beginning with Augustine's claim, one could say that, insofar the practice is willful, it will be eschatologically maintained. On the other hand, such a claim would contradict the established belief that bodies will be resurrected perfect and liberated from any earthly deformity. Given, however, the general context in which Augustine expressed this view, we can assume that the situations that come not from free will but from external factors are what he had in mind. These undesirable situations will be corrected in Heaven.⁷⁸ Thinking about tattoos in particular, then, this statement by Augustine could not lead to the conclusion that these voluntary practices will be preserved.

Conclusion

One of the most common reasons for modifying one's body is the desire to improve physical attractiveness. Tattoos belong to the category of mainstream 'decorative' modification. Linking tattoos with beautification raises questions about body modification and to what extent we can think of it as self-mutilation.

The concepts of mutilation and beautification are key to debates about the exact shape and form of the resurrected body; several theologians argue that the virtuous will be

74 Linda Waimarie Nikora, Mohi Rua, and Ngahua Te Awekotuku, 'Wearing Moko: Maori Facial Marking in Today's World,' in *Tattoo: Bodies, Art and Exchange in the Pacific and the West*, eds Nicholas Thomas, Anna Cole, and Bronwen Douglas (London, Reaktion, 2004), 203.

75 Ashley, *Theologies of the Body*, 604.

76 Augustine, 22.19. Augustine, therefore, is in line with Chrysostom, for whom, there will be 'hierarchy' in the resurrection of the elect.

77 Aquinas, *ST III*, q. 54, a. 4.

78 However, the growing discussion around the desire from some people with disabilities to eschatologically retain their diverse embodiment must also be taken into account.

resurrected in perfect form and free from earthly deformity. Furthermore, throughout the centuries much has been said about our resurrected body's likeness to the body of risen Christ. Most thinkers suggest it will either resemble the resurrected body of Christ Himself or the pre-lapsarian one. Consequently, the fact that decorative tattoos are used as a means of beautification, coupled with the biblical evidence that the risen Jesus maintained his bodily scars, could lead to the impression that such practices might be preserved in the afterlife. However, there is not enough theological evidence to support such a claim, and this remains an area for ongoing theological debate.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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