

## Islam and tattooing

### An old question, a new research topic\*

Abū Bakr looked out over his people from the enclosure while Asmā' bt. 'Umayy was steadying him with tattooed hands [*mawshūmat al-yadayni*]. He said, 'Will you be satisfied with him who I have left as [my] successor over you? For, by God, I do not shun the effort [to reach] the best opinion, nor have I appointed a relative. I have designated 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb as my successor; therefore, hear him and obey.' They responded, 'We hear and obey.' (al-Ṭabarī 1993: 146–7.)<sup>1</sup>

Apart from its great significance relative to the formation of early Muslim society, the above quotation from Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'riḫ al-rusul wa'l-mulūk* (*History of the Messengers and the Kings*) contains an interesting, if incidental, bit of information: the hands of Asmā' bt. 'Umayy were tattooed. This fact, as we shall see in the following discussion, is an important reminder that when scrutinizing and comparing historical sources on religious dogma and societal practices, discrepancies between theory and practice are commonly found.

While most Muslim theologians have argued on the basis of the ḥadīth-literature that tattooing is *ḥarām* (forbidden), it is nonetheless possible to find both historical and contemporary examples indicating that, at different times and in different places, this art was practiced by certain Islamic groups. The historicity of the above quotation and the election of 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb has, of course, been called into question—not the least by historians associated with Shī'a Islam, but also by other ḥadīth-reports which stress that Asmā' bt. 'Umayy was tattooed prior to the rise of Islam, that is, in the age of *jāhiliyya*

\* I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Abdulwahid Morrone and Tetz Rooke, both have commented on, discussed and improved my arguments for this text on several occasions.

1 A reference to Asmā' bt. 'Umayy tattooed hands can also be found in Ibn Sa'd 1904: 207.

and consequently it is argued that this practice has nothing to do with Islam. For example, in the *Tahdhīb al-Āthār*, which is collection of ḥadīth by Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, the practice of tattooing is associated with the *jāhiliyya* and the fashion of the Berbers, but this background information is not mentioned in the *Tārīkh al-rusul waʾl-mulūk*.<sup>2</sup>

Although discussions concerning the art of tattooing with needles and colour have occurred in most societies and cultures, from Greco-Roman antiquity until today, in terms of Muslim societies, it is evident that most Islamic authorities have concluded that tattooing, or *al-washm*,<sup>3</sup> is forbidden and contrary to religious law.<sup>4</sup> It is here important to note that the Arabic word *washm* should not be confused with *wasm*, which refers to cauterising, marking or branding and can be found both in the Qurʾān and in popular literature on folk medicine.<sup>5</sup> With specific reference to *washm*, or tattooing, it has been well documented that certain Muslim groups (e.g., the Berbers and the Bedouins) in places such as Africa, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iran and West Pakistan have used tattoos for beautification, prophylaxis and the prevention of disease (especially for sicknesses caused by supernatural forces such as the

2 For the purpose of this text I have used an online edition of the *Tahdhīb al-Āthār*, see ḥadīth no. 154, Book 1/168. For the whole text, see <http://www.islamport.com/b/3/alhadeeth/motoon/%DF%CA%C8%20%C7%E1%E3%CA%E6%E4/%CA%E5%Do%ED%C8%20%C7%E1%C2%CB%C7%D1%20%E1%E1%D8%C8%D1%ED/%CA%E5%Do%ED%C8%20%C7%E1%C2%CB%C7%D1%20%E1%E1%D8%C8%D1%ED%20001.html> (accessed on 15 October 2010).

3 *Al-washm* is the most common Arabic word for tattooing, but words like *daqq*, *dagh*, *khāl* and *sham* are also used when referring to this practice. While all the theologians mentioned in this article use the term *washm*, *daqq* is often used as well. Among the Aghāch Eris of the Kuh-e Giluyeh region in southwest Iran, the word for tattooing is *khāl*, and branding is called *dāgh kardān*, see Oberling 1962: 127.

4 A detailed discussion of tattooing and branding, and of the methodological and source-critical problems related to this field, can be found in Jones 1987: 139–55. C. P. Jones especially emphasises that, often, it is very difficult to determine whether the sources are referring to branding with hot irons or tattooing with needles and colour. Because of this, many of the early sources that mention this custom have been misinterpreted by academic researchers. A similar methodological problem is discussed by Per Beskow, who notes that we are not even able to ascertain the precise nature of the mark that is supposed to have been placed on the foreheads of the initiates of Mithras (Beskow 1979: 487–501). He concludes: ‘There is no evidence for branding or tattooing, nor for crosses or X-marks applied to the bodies of the initiates, nor any indication that such marks were considered to symbolise the sun in the mysteries’ (Beskow 1979: 499). For Judaic opinions on tattooing, see ‘Tattoo’, in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 15, 1971: 832.

5 Regarding this practice, see, for example, Ghazanfar 1995 and Ambros 2004: 289.

evil eye).<sup>6</sup> Among Islam's lay populations, tattooing has been considered significant as a healing practice for a very long time despite the formal opinions of Islamic scholars and theologians. And while in more recent times these Muslim groups appear to have abandoned past notions about the function of tattoos, which had caused a certain waning of the practice,<sup>7</sup> of late it has had a resurgence—although for reasons that differ from those of distant times. The rise of interest in tattoos among Muslims has been directly observed by a handful of contemporary researchers, and is indirectly indicated by the fact that many contemporary Muslim authorities have expressed growing concern about the practice.<sup>8</sup> In 2007, for example, the newspaper *Radikal* (2.5.2007) reported that the Turkish *Diyanet* (Directorate of Religious Affairs) had decided to ban tattooing, judging it to be contrary to Islam.<sup>9</sup> The article also mentioned that the *Diyanet* was determined to combat local traditions that accepted the practice of tattooing and curb its recently renewed popularity, especially among Turkish youths. Because they fear that Muslims worldwide will be influenced by the explosion of interest occurring in the West, many of today's theologians consider it essential to explain why tattooing is problematic from the perspective of Islam.<sup>10</sup> This development has been further spurred on by the fact that many Muslims are actively seeking advice and clarification about where Islam stands on the matter of tattoos.

- 6 See, for example, Smeaton 1937, Carswell 1965, Kossiakov 1966, Schöning 2002: 308–14, Oberling 1962 and Turner 1987: 272. Cf. also Westermarck 1918: 219, and van Dinter 2005 (especially Chapters 7 and 8).
- 7 The fact that the practice of tattooing had begun to wane at a certain historical point is confirmed by Winifred Smeaton, who, in 1937, wrote: 'Tattooing is a custom which already shows signs of disappearing, especially in the cities. It is rarely observed among the upper classes, and it is despised by city-dwellers of the lower classes as well.' (Smeaton 1937: 53.) Cf. Lancaster 2002: 160.
- 8 During a May 2007 workshop in Turkey, for example, I personally observed that Istiklal Caddesi, one of Istanbul's most popular streets, contained a good number of tattooing and body-piercing studios.
- 9 'Önce dövme sonra tövbe', *Radikal* 2.5.2007. I would like to thank Hege Irene Markussen for her translation of the above mentioned newspaper report and for bringing the views of the *Diyanet* to my attention.
- 10 Post-Saddam Hussein Iraq provides a good example of a Muslim country in which the increased demand for tattoos is very evident. Largely due to the arrival of American and other Western troops, many of whom came well adorned with tattoos, a good many Iraqis have been drawn to the practice, despite the fact that tattoos and tattooing are officially banned by the religious establishment as something contrary to Islam. With regards to this development, see Partlow 2006.

While it would certainly be interesting to empirically test whether or not the processes mentioned above have engendered a new attitude of acceptance among the general Muslim population, the aim of the remainder of this article is first to sketch the background of the more formal theological discussion on tattooing (especially in the ḥadīth-literature). Secondly it aims to examine a number of contemporary religious texts that specifically deal with Muslim theological opinions about this practice: what is considered to be the problem; and what types of arguments are employed by the selected theologians in their attempts to provide answers. Is it possible to see the renewed interest in tattoos as an example of the fact that there is a gap between theory (what the theologians say) and practice (what the believers actually do)? At the outset, however, it is important to note that this article explores the views of only a handful of theologians, whose arguments and conclusions may not be representative of all Muslims. Nonetheless, it can confidently be said that regardless of the historical period, geographical location, or Islamic tradition to which they belong, most Muslim scholars basically agree with the theological opinions expressed herein.<sup>11</sup>

## I

Muslim theologians often justify their prohibition of tattooing by citing the following Quranic passage: '[Satan] will command them (his devotees) to change what Allah has created' (Q4:119). However, apart from this rather vague and indirect reference, there is no mention of *washm* or tattooing in the Qurʾān—that is to say, the Arabic root consonant *w-sh-m* cannot be found in this seminal text.<sup>12</sup> Thus for a primary historical discussion on this topic, one must turn instead to the ḥadīth-literature.

11 For example, it is possible to find several *fatwas* condemning tattooing on the homepage of Ask the Imam (<http://www.islam.tc/ask-imam/index.php>), headed by Mufti Ebrahim Desai, from the Darul Ifta, Madrasah inʿaamiyyah Camperdown, South Africa (see, for example, 'Regarding the Rule of Tattooing in Islam. . .', <http://www.islam.tc/ask-imam/view.php?q=16590> and 'Can a Muslim have a Tattoo of a Moon and Star on His/Her Body?', <http://www.islam.tc/ask-imam/view.php?q=14769>). In *The Beard between the Salaf & Khalaf*, Muhammad Al-Jibaly notes, in relation to tattooing, that it is forbidden for any believer to change the way Allāh has created things—in this case, the body. Al-Jibaly's book is published by Al-Kitaab & al-Sunnah Publishing, but it is possible to download it from <http://www.al-sunnah.com/pdf/beard.pdf>.

12 It should be mentioned, however, that the Qurʾān does contain two references to 'branding/marking': according to Arne A. Ambros's *A Concise Dictionary of Koranic*

In a search conducted on the Muslim Student Association's online ḥadīth-database, the query 'tattooing' generated thirteen 'hits' in Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī and one 'hit' in the partial translation of the Sunan Abū Dā'ūd; the query 'tattoos' generated one 'hit' in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim and four 'hits' in Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī. Regardless of the possibility that this search engine contains some errors and that its Arabic-to-English translation is questionable, it is nevertheless a useful tool for locating specific topical discussions in the vast body of ḥadīth-literature. As a further measure, the findings in the search engine were compared with A. J. Wensinck's *A Handbook of Early Muhammadan Tradition* (1927: 227, s.v. 'tattooing'). Since most of the *aḥadīth* references to tattooing are found in al-Bukhārī, I include a table (see pp. 242–3), which provides an overview of the topic under discussion. The numbering of the books (which varies between different editions) and the English translation used to create this table are taken from the Arabic–English edition of the Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī, published by the Darussalam in Riyad Saudi Arabia (1997).

It is argued by Sunni Muslims who follow the *shāfi'ī* school of law that tattooing causes impurity, that tattoos are prohibited by the prophet Muhammad (see, e.g. Ibn al-Naqīb al-Miṣri 1997), and that those who are decorated with tattoos are contaminated with *najas* (Izutsu 2002: 241).<sup>13</sup> Why tattoos are considered *najas* by the *shāfi'ī* school of law is explained in the following *fat-wa* by Amjad Rasheed:

Tattoos are considered filthy [*najas*] in our school and they prevent the validity of prayer. This is because tattooing—according to the explanation of the fuqaha—is extracting blood from the hand (for example) using a needle and then mixing a coloured pigment with it that will mix with the blood and then dry so that its substance remains on the outer body. (Rasheed 2005.)

*Arabic*, the verb *yasimu* in Q5:35 means 'to brand' and '*inna fi dālika la-āyātin li-l-mutawassimīna* in Q15:75 can be translated as 'marking' (Ambros 2004: 289).

- 13 Here it must be emphasised that in the entirety of the Qur'an, the term *najas* appears only once, and in a passage that makes no direct reference to tattoos: 'O you who believe, polytheists (*al-mushrikūn*) are only *najas* [i.e., entirely contaminated]; do not let them draw near the sacred mosque after this, their year' (Q9:28). According to A. Kevin Reinhart, although it is generally believed that the 'contamination' referred to in the above quotation is *not* transferable to others, being a polytheist nonetheless 'disqualifies one from attending the sacred mosque'. Beyond this, however, the 'filth' of polytheism is equated by some Islamic scholars with the 'filth' of dogs and swine—two animals that Muslims are directed not to even touch. See Reinhart 2001: 410.

Vol., book, narrator	Report
Vol. 3, Book 34 ( <i>The Book of Sales</i> ), No. 2086, p. 175. Narrated: 'Aūn bin Abū Juhaifa	My father bought a slave who practised the profession of cupping. (My father broke the slave's instruments for cupping.) I asked my father why he had done so. He replied, 'The Prophet forbade the acceptance of the price of a dog or blood, and also forbade the profession of tattooing, or getting tattooed [ <i>al-wāshima wa-l-mawshūma</i> ] and the eater of <i>Ribā</i> (usury), and one who gives it, and cursed the picture-makers.'
Vol. 6, Book 65 ( <i>The Book of Commentary</i> ), No. 4886, pp. 340–1. Narrated: 'Alqama	'Abdullāh (bin Mas'ūd) said, 'Allāh curses those ladies who practise tattooing and those who get themselves tattooed [ <i>al-wāshimāt wa-l-mūtashimāt</i> ], and those ladies who get their hair removed from their eyebrows and faces (except the beard and moustache) and those who make artificial spaces between their teeth in order to look more beautiful whereby they change Allāh's creation.'
Vol. 7, Book 68 ( <i>The Book of Divorce</i> ), No. 5347, p. 170. Narrated: Abū Juhaifa	The Prophet cursed the lady who practises tattooing and the one who gets herself tattooed [ <i>al-wāshima wa-l-mustawshima</i> ], and one who eats (takes) <i>Riba'</i> (usury) and the one who gives it. And he prohibited taking the price of a dog, and the money earned by prostitution, and cursed the makers of pictures.
Vol. 7, Book 76 ( <i>The Book of Medicine</i> ), No. 5740, p. 351. Narrated: Abū Hurairah	The Prophet said, 'The effect of an evil eye is a fact.' And he prohibited tattooing [ <i>al-washm</i> ].
Vol. 7, Book 77 ( <i>The Book of Dress</i> ), No. 5931, pp. 432–3. Narrated: 'Abdullāh	Allāh has cursed those women who practise tattooing and those who get themselves tattooed [ <i>al-wāshimāt wa-l-mustawshimāt</i> ], and those who remove their face hairs, and those who create a space between their teeth artificially to look beautiful, as such women alter the features created by Allāh.
Vol. 7, Book 77 ( <i>The Book of Dress</i> ), No. 5939, p. 435. Narrated: 'Alqama	'Abdullāh cursed those women who practised tattooing [ <i>al-wāshimāt</i> ] and those who removed hair from their faces, eyebrows etc. and those who created spaces between their teeth artificially to look beautiful, as such ladies alter the features created by Allāh.
Vol. 77, Book 77 ( <i>The Book of Dress</i> ), No. 5937, p. 434. Narrated: Ibn 'Umar	Allāh's Messenger said, 'Allāh has cursed the lady who lengthens (her own or someone else's) hair artificially, and also the one who gets it lengthened, and also a lady who tattoos (herself or someone else) and also the one who gets herself tattooed [ <i>al-wāshima wa-l-mustawshima</i> ].

Vol., book, narrator	Report
Vol. 7, Book 77 ( <i>The Book of Dress</i> ), No. 5943, p. 436–7. Narrated: Ibn Mas'ūd	Allāh has cursed those women who practise tattooing and those who get it done for themselves [ <i>al-wāshimāt wa-l-mustawshimāt</i> ], and those who remove hair from their faces, eye-brows etc. and those who create spaces between their teeth artificially to look beautiful, and those ladies who alter the features created by Allāh.
Vol. 7, Book 77 ( <i>The Book of Dress</i> ), No. 5944, p. 437. Narrated: Abū Hurairah	Allāh's Messenger said, 'The evil eye is a fact,' and he forbade tattooing [ <i>al-washm</i> ].
Vol. 7, Book 77 ( <i>The Book of Dress</i> ), No. 5945, p. 437. Narrated: Abū Juhaifa	The Prophet forbade taking the price of blood and the price of a dog, and he also forbade the one who takes (eats) <i>Ribā</i> (usury) the one who gives <i>Ribā</i> (usury) the woman who practises tattooing and the woman who gets herself tattooed [ <i>al-wāshima wa-l-mustawshima</i> ].
Vol. 7, Book 77 ( <i>The Book of Dress</i> ), No. 5946, pp. 437–8. Narrated: Abū Hurairah	A woman who used to practise tattooing was brought to 'Umar. 'Umar got up and said, 'I beseech you by Allāh, which of you heard the Prophet saying something about tattooing?' I got up and said, 'O chief of the Believers! I heard something.' He said, 'What did you hear?' I said, 'I heard the Prophet (addressing the ladies), saying, "Do not practise tattooing and do not get yourselves tattooed [ <i>lā tashimna, wa-lā tastawshimna</i> ]."'
Vol. 7, Book 77 ( <i>The Book of Dress</i> ), No. 5940, p. 436. Narrated: Ibn 'Umar	The Prophet has cursed the lady who lengthens her hair artificially and the one who gets her hair lengthened, and also the lady who tattoos (herself or others) and the one who gets herself tattooed [ <i>al-wāshima wa-l-mustawshima</i> ].
Vol. 7, Book 77 ( <i>The Book of Dress</i> ), No. 5948, p. 438. Narrated: 'Abdullāh	Allāh has cursed those women who practise tattooing and those who get it done for themselves [ <i>al-wāshimāt wa-l-mustawshimāt</i> ], and those who remove hair from their faces, eye-brows etc. and those who artificially create spaces between their teeth to look beautiful, and those women who alter the features created by Allāh.

According to this opinion, the process of tattooing is causing impurity because it creates a mixture of blood and coloured pigment to remain upon the surface of the skin. Since the tattoo will always contain a trace of this drawn blood, 'the prayers of a person with such a mark are not valid until the tattoo is removed, because blood is filth and it is not valid to pray with traces of filth on one's body' (Rasheed 2007). Today, however, one can create a tattoo via

modern processes that no longer involve the ‘mixing of dye with blood after it exits onto the outer surface of the body’ (Rasheed 2007); since it is precisely the trace of blood that is said to be the cause of the impurity, this should meet the above objection, making it theoretically possible for a Muslim to wear a tattoo and perform a valid prayer. This notwithstanding, the followers of the *shāfi‘ī* school of law in any case insist that all forms of tattooing, regardless of method, are unlawful and prohibited by Islamic law. Sheikh Amjad Rasheed makes the point as follows: ‘tattooing is unconditionally unlawful regardless of the method that is employed because it involves altering Allah’s creation without necessity, even if it no longer comprises the infliction of pain or the filthification of the skin’ (Rasheed 2007).

## II

When attempting to analyse theological discussions, it is important to remember that there tends to be a gap between the opinions and interpretations of theologians on the one hand, and the so-called common beliefs, practices and customs of lay Muslims on the other. This discrepancy is clearly illustrated in several passages of Edward William Lane’s classic book, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836). Among the many portrayals in this book, there is a vivid description of how certain Egyptian women apply indelible markings to their bodies in order to beautify themselves—a tattooing practice that is clearly at odds with the strict opinions of the ‘*ulamā*’. Lane writes:

Among the females of the lower order, in the country-towns and villages of Egypt, and among the same classes in the metropolis, but in a lesser degree, prevails a custom somewhat similar to that above described [i.e., the *henna* colouring]: it consists in making indelible marks of a blue or greenish hue upon the face and other parts, or, at least, upon the front of the chin, and upon the back of the right hand, and often also upon the left hand, the right arm, or both arms, the feet, the middle of the bosom, and the forehead: the most common of these marks made up the chin and hands are represented in the next page. The operation is performed with several needles (generally seven) tied together: with these the skin is pricked in the desired pattern: some smoke-black (of wood or oil), mixed with milk from the breast of a woman, is then rubbed in; and about a week after, before the skin has healed, paste of the pounded fresh leaves

of white beet or clover is applied, and gives a blue or greenish colour to the marks: or, to produce the same effect, in a more simple manner, some indigo is rubbed into the punctures, instead of the smoke-black, &c. It is generally performed at the age of about five or six years, and by gipsy-women.<sup>14</sup> The term applied to it is “*daḳḳ*.” (Lane 1973: 39–41.)<sup>15</sup>

Lane also notes that women in Upper Egypt tattoo their lips and that both male and female Copts decorate themselves with a tattooed cross symbolising their religious affiliation (Lane 1973: 41, 531).<sup>16</sup>

The descriptions given by Lane could be easily supplemented with numerous examples from similar studies of countries dominated by Muslim traditions, customs and cultures.<sup>17</sup> Although it is rather rare, these studies sometimes contain accounts of tattoos having been used for the purpose of expressing Muslim belonging. The following quotation from John Carswell’s 1960s interview with a tattoo artist in Beirut, for example, clearly indicates that Muslims have practiced tattooing as a means of demonstrating their religious loyalties and/or beliefs:

- 14 Regarding so-called gipsy women that perform tattooing, see Newbold 1856: 292 and Sinclair 1908.
- 15 It should be noted that Lane uses the verb *daqq* to refer to tattooing rather than the verb *washm*, which is used by the modern theologians who will be discussed herein. According to Hans Wehr (1979: 331–2), *daqq* means ‘crushing, bruising, braying, pounding; pulverization, trituration; grinding (down); beat(ing), throb(bing); bang(ing), knock(ing), rap(ping); tattoo(ing)’. With regard to the terminology of tattooing, see also Smeaton 1937: 53; Carswell 1965: 41 and Schönig 2002.
- 16 Tattooing is also explicitly forbidden in the Old Testament, where it appears to be adversely associated with so-called pagan cults; cf. Lev. 19:28, Dt. 14:1. Victor Turner is convinced that the Second Council of Nicaea forbade tattooing in AD 787. However, to the best of my knowledge, the text issued by the Second Council of Nicaea makes no direct reference to this practice. Cf. Tanner 1990: 131–56. See also May 1989: 520 and Turner 1987: 270. Maarten Hesselt van Dinter also provides a large number of references to the practice of tattooing among Christians (2005: esp. 36–40). For references regarding modern tattoos among the Copts, see van Doorn-Harder 2005: 37.
- 17 Apart from Westermarck 1918: 219, who discusses tattoos and tattooing, see, for example, Maxwell 2003: 109; and the cover of Lila Abu-Lughod 1986. Several historical and ethnographical accounts, and even photos, are provided in Schönig 2002: 308–14, Abbildungen nos. 120–4. I am indebted to Ingvild Flakerud for introducing me to Maxwell’s travel book, as well as his references to tattoos and tattooing. A general overview is also found in van Dinter 2005.

. . . the fanatical followers of Imam Ali, the Shi'ah sect, tattoo the forked sword to show their love of him [i.e. Imam Ali]. The followers of Abu Bakr, the Sunnis, tattoo another design of two curved crossed swords with the words *'llah Mohammed* between the blades. (Carswell 1965: 42.)

The use of tattoos among Shi'a men and women is further confirmed by P. Molesworth Sykes's early twentieth-century notes from a field trip to Persia (1909). In these he observes that Shi'a women had 'birds, flowers, or gazelles tattooed, but occasionally verses from the Koran' and that victorious male wrestlers and/or gymnasts (the sports of the *zūrkhāna*<sup>18</sup>) were honoured with the tattooing of a lion on the arm (Molesworth Sykes 1909: 177–8).<sup>19</sup>

The case of Sharif Olayan presents a more contemporary example of tattooing for the purpose of highlighting one's religious affiliation. To celebrate his Muslim heritage, Olayan, an American of Middle Eastern cultural background, had himself tattooed with the Arabic expression *al-mu'minūn*, which means 'believers'. Olayan explains his decision as follows:

Having an Arabic tattoo is risky in both the Middle-Eastern and Western parts of the world. Being recognized as a sign of sin in the Muslim world and a sign of terrorism here in the U.S., my tattoo represents the word "al-moomenoon," meaning "believers." It is a word that is frequently used in the Qur'an and, for me, it is a word that goes beyond "believing," or having faith in an aspect of religion. "To believe" means having faith in both the world and humanity as a whole. The term will have different meanings to different people and, because of that, every single person must discover that meaning within himself or herself. (Quoted in Udelson 2008: 100.)

The above quotation provides an example of the complexities that can be involved when assessing the reasons for tattoos and other forms of bodily decoration within specific cultural contexts. While most Muslim authorities have reacted to this practice with the preconception that it is against Islamic law, it is nonetheless evident that throughout history, and for a variety of reasons, lay Muslim populations have considered tattoos and other types of indelible bodily decoration to be legitimate forms of cultural and/or personal expression.

18 On the importance of this institution, see Chehabi 2002.

19 On the popularity of tattoos among women in Iran, see, for example, Mottahedeh 2006: 36–7.

Turning once again to an historical perspective, Victor Turner's article in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, 'Bodily Marks', provides a *possible* reminder of the inevitable gap between theory (in this case a prohibition) and practice (what people actually do) (Turner 1987: 271).<sup>20</sup> In his article, Turner attempts to establish that both Christians and Muslims 'bore tattoos as evidence of having made pilgrimages to the sacred places', especially during the time of the Crusades. He notes that by marking their bodies in this way, such persons were testifying to the fact that they had performed an obligatory visit to a holy place (for example, Jerusalem).<sup>21</sup> While interesting, Turner's claims must here be presented with the following caveat: I (and apparently others) have thus far been unable to locate even one Arabic or 'Muslim' text that confirms his contentions; nor, to my knowledge, has anyone been able to locate a reference to pilgrimage tattoos in classic non-Muslim academic studies of either Mecca or the *ḥājj* ritual (see, e.g., Snouck Hurgronje 1970 or Peters 1994). Despite this apparent absence of direct references, A. T. Sinclair and Maarten Hesselt van Dinter contend that they have discovered an indirect link between tattoos and the *ḥajj* in the Turkish language: that is to say, the Turkish word for tattoo is believed to be *haji*, the very name given to those that have undertaken a pilgrimage to Mecca (Sinclair 1908: 363 and van Dinter 2005: 179). Unfortunately, as with Turner's claim, no one to my knowledge has been able to find lexical support for the contention that *haji* means tattoo: the common Turkish words for tattoo are *döğme*, *dövme* or *dövün*; and in the eastern

20 C. P. Jones quotes, for example, the seventeenth-century traveller Jean de Thévenot, who writes: 'We passed the whole of Monday, the 29th of April, having our arms marked, as all the pilgrims usually do: the operation is performed by Christians of Bethlehem belonging to the Latin rite. They have several wooden moulds, among which you choose those you like the best. Next they fill them with charcoal powder. Then they apply them to you in such a way as to leave the mark of what is engraved on them. After that they take your arm by their left hand, stretching the skin tight; in their right hand they have a little stick with two needles, and they dip it from time to time in ink mixed with ox-gall, and prick you with it along the lines made by the wooden mould; that is presumably harmful, and as a rule there ensues a slight fever which lasts a very short time, and the arm remains swollen to three times its normal size for two or three days.' (Quoted in Jones 1987: 141.) For example, tattoos are associated with Satanism and a destructive youthful life; see 'Satanism in the Eyes of Shari'ah', [http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask\\_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1171897372251](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1171897372251) (accessed on 15 May 2007).

21 Similar data is found in Sinclair 1908.

and south eastern parts of Anatolia, the word is either *deq* or *daq*.<sup>22</sup> Thus it appears that when subjected to critical scrutiny neither of the above claims holds up. When it comes to *Christian* pilgrimages, on the other hand, numerous textual sources lend support to Turner's view.<sup>23</sup>

### III

Although the question of tattoos and tattooing touches upon a large number of issues that are central to Islamic theology and Muslim cultures, the vigorous debate on this subject among contemporary Muslim theologians appears to have escaped the notice of the Islamic Studies and History of Religion researchers.<sup>24</sup> One reason for this concerns the influence of earlier anthropologists and ethnographers who concluded that tattooing was a vanishing art form in cultures dominated by Islamic and Muslim traditions. The recent unexpected rise of tattooing as a popular art form among the cultures and the peoples of the Muslim world has once again drawn Islamic theologians to this issue and proved the opinions these earlier Western scholars to have been premature (see, e.g. Smeaton 1937: 53). Today, over and above the standard citations in classical dictionaries such as the *Lisān al-Arab* (s.v. 'w-sh-m'), the matter of tattoos and tattooing is being addressed by official Islamic agencies such as the *Diyanet* (already discussed above), as well as a variety of contemporary Muslim authorities, including the influential Egyptian born Yūsuf al-Qaraḏāwī, who is counted as one of the most important authorities for Sunnī Muslims today.<sup>25</sup>

Al-Qaraḏāwī, who addresses the subject of tattooing (*washm*) in his book *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam* (2001), argues on the basis of the Qur'ān, and more explicitly on the basis of the ḥadīth-literature, that individual beautification is vain and that all attempts to alter the physical creation of God are acts of disobedience caused by Satan. Like most Islamic theologians

22 I would like to express my gratitude to professor Éva Á. Csató Johanson at Uppsala University, Sweden, for discussing the Turkish vocabulary of tattooing with me. See also Birkalan-Gedik 2006: 46.

23 In addition to earlier references in this article, see van Dinter 2005: 36–40.

24 An early example is, however, found in Herber 1921, and there are some indirect references to this debate in Schönig 2002. A poor attempt to analyse Islamic opinions about tattooing is also found in Ibrić 2010.

25 Background information and a discussion on Yūsuf al-Qaraḏāwī's theology and his use of new information and communication technologies are given in Mariani 2006. See also Skovgaard-Petersen 2004; Skovgaard-Petersen & Gräf 2008.

who have addressed this matter, al-Qaraḍāwī relies upon an indirect reading of the same Quranic verse which was quoted at the beginning of this article, and is here quoted once again:

[Satan] will command them (his devotees) to change what Allah has created (Q4:119).

In keeping with this passage, both al-Bukhārī and Muslim report that the Prophet Muhammad cursed ‘the women who tattoo and the women who are tattooed’. For his part, al-Qaraḍāwī emphasizes that the application of tattoos to the body causes pain and suffering (2001: 85–6, Arabic text p. 80).

Since Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī’s opinions concerning tattoos and tattooing have been expressed with complete assurance, it should come as no surprise that the (Egyptian/Qatari) homepage *IslamOnline.net* also have contained discussions about Islam and tattoos. Since this homepage has gone through major changes, my findings are based on material retrieved in winter/spring 2010.<sup>26</sup> In addition to al-Qaraḍāwī’s publications, media appearances and involvement with the European Council for Fatwa and Research, *IslamOnline.net* has been a primary platform for ‘calling people to Islam.’<sup>27</sup> It should thus come as no surprise that the other theologians hold similar opinions regarding tattoos and tattooing, but also ones that contain noteworthy exceptions. For example, Sheikh Ahmad Kutty, a senior lecturer and Islamic scholar at the Islamic Institute of Toronto, Ontario, Canada, notes that the prohibition against tattoos is an important reminder of the glorious nature of the Qurʾān. This is illustrated, he claims, by the fact that certain infectious, and even deadly, contemporary diseases (e.g., HIV and hepatitis) can be contracted during the process of tattooing; although these diseases were previously unknown to mankind, the fact that God prohibited Muslims from decorating their bodies with tattoos proves to Sheikh Ahmad Kutty that He must have known about

26 Ahmad Kutty: ‘Islam’s Stance on Tattooing’, [http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask\\_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503549748](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503549748) (accessed on 29 May 2005); A group of Islamic researchers: ‘What Islam Says on Tattoos’, [http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask\\_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503544192](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503544192) (accessed on 22 September 2003); and Muzammil Siddiqi, [http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask\\_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503543310](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503543310) (accessed on 18 January 2004).

27 On the importance of this homepage, see, for example, Gräf 2008.

them at the time of the revelation.<sup>28</sup> This form of argument is an example of a so-called scientific reading of the Qurʾān—that is, argumentation that stipulates that most (if not all) modern advances and scientific discoveries have been known to the Qurʾān.

Another opinion that slightly diverges from al-Qaraḏāwī's is found in Dr Muzammil Siddiqi's response to a request by a resident of the United States that he issue a *fatwa* regarding converts who were tattooed prior to becoming Muslims.<sup>29</sup> In his answer, Siddiqi, a former president of the Islamic Society of North America, stresses that although Islam prohibits tattoos, if they were created before conversion, the believer is forgiven ('Islam takes away the sins done before it').<sup>30</sup> The questioner also expressed concern that his tattoos might cause problems when entering Mecca during the *hajj*. In response, Siddiqi calms his fears as follows:

When Hajj becomes obligatory on you, you should perform it and do not neglect it because of tattoos on your body. No one should stop you from going to Hajj because of tattoos. I have seen hundreds of pilgrims, men and women, who come from some countries and they have all kinds of tattoos on their faces and bodies. It is forbidden in Islam, but among some tribes in Africa, unfortunately, it is still practised, even among Muslims. (Muzammil Siddiqi, see footnote 26.)

A similar question was raised on the website *Ask-the-Imam* by a twenty-four-year-old practising Muslim woman who had acquired an arm tattoo at the age of sixteen. *Ask-the-Imam* is an online South African *fatwa* service which advances the Deobandi interpretation of Islam. The service is headed by Muhammed Zakariyya Desai, who answered the young lady as follows:

28 Kutty, see footnote 26. A similar argument is used by the *Diyānet* (see earlier reference).

29 This concern is also shared by a Muslim convert who posted a video in which he shows his tattoos on youtube.com, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=05EunQRqGqI> (accessed on 17 June 2007).

30 A similar argument is found in Mufti Ebrahim Desai's *fatwa* on 'persons that have received tattoos before they became Muslims'. See, Mufti Ebrahim Desai, 'I know that it is haraam to get a tattoo. But what should a person do if he received it before becoming Muslim?' <http://www.islam.tc/ask-imam/view.php?q=8113>.

If it is possible to remove the tattoo, you should do so. However, if it is difficult and painful to remove it, you could try and use some camouflage to cover it in some way. You will be excused if it cannot be removed.<sup>31</sup>

#### IV

In conclusion, it is clear that all of the Muslim authorities discussed in this brief overview strongly disapprove of tattoos and tattooing. According to the followers of the *shāfi'ī* school of law there are three reasons that tattoos are unlawful (*ḥarām*):

1. The needle that penetrates the skin causes unnecessary infliction of pain.
2. By the mixing of the dye with the blood that exits after the needle's penetration tattoos are affected by filth.
3. Tattoos alter Allāh's creation without necessity. (Rasheed 2007.)

Despite the prohibitive declarations of the *'ulamā'*, it is clear that a number of Muslim groups and tribes have, for various reasons, acknowledged tattooing as an accepted social practice. While tattooing at one time seemed to be a vanishing practice among so-called traditional groups in the Middle East, Muslims and others throughout the world have again become interested in tattoos.<sup>32</sup> Especially in Western societies, bodily decorations such as tattoos, piercing and scarification have developed into a widely accepted art form (cf. van Dinter 2005: 19–20). And because modern information, transportation and communication technologies enable such trends to spread quite rapidly, Muslim communities are today more exposed to—and tempted by—these forms of expression than they were in previous times (see, e.g., Udelson 2008). This development is indicated, for example, by Joshua Partlow's report that after the arrival of tattooed American and Western troops, tattoos gained a new popularity among Iraqis in post-Saddam Iraq (Partlow 2006).<sup>33</sup> While the sight of tattooed Westerners may have indeed *inspired* certain Iraqis to also wear tattoos, it is evident that tattoos can be used to provoke Muslim

31 Muhammad Sakariyya Desai, 'Sallam I am a 24 yr practising sister stupidly at 16 I had a tattoo on my arm,' <http://www.islam.tc/ask-imam/view.php?q=18087>.

32 See, for example, Al-Zoubi 2009 for contemporary examples from Syria.

33 This development in Iraq becomes even more complicated since Saddam Hussein used tattoos and amputation as an efficient form of punishment, see van Dinter 2005: 183.

resentment as well. This is said to have been the case with James Stevens, an American soldier who, in an environment peopled by so-called Islamic extremists, tattooed the Arabic word *kāfir* (infidel) on his body so as to proclaim his atheistic worldview and provoke believing Muslims (Udelson 2008: 98–9). It should come as no surprise then that to curb the manifold influences of Western pop-culture, various Muslim theologians have eagerly issued legal answers that ban tattooing, labelling the practice as un-Islamic.

While this overview has primarily focused on the arguments of Muslim theologians, the academic study of Islam and tattoos will require the outlining of other potential fields of inquiry and the further formulation of fruitful questions. In terms of the first of these requirements, I suggest that future research in this field would do well to focus on tattoo artists and/or studios in the Middle East, Europe and the United States; moreover, when it is observed that individuals with a Muslim cultural background are attempting to acquire a tattoo, researchers would do well to examine the reasons that underlie this decision. As to the second requirement, the following questions come to mind: is it possible to identify specifically ‘Muslim’ or ‘Islamic’ motives for obtaining a tattoo—that is, motives that the studied individuals specifically associate with Islamic or Muslim traditions? Has the Muslim debate about tattoos changed over the past decade? Are there significant differences between the debate in countries dominated by Islamic and Muslim traditions on the one hand and the debate in Europe and the United States on the other? With regard to the issue of Islam and tattoos, is there a gap between theory (the fact that many Islamic scholars officially consider tattoos un-Islamic) and practice (the fact that certain Muslims *de facto* accept tattoos as an integral part of contemporary Islam)? This is the case, for example, among the followers of the Five Percenters in the United States—a sectarian group influenced by Islamic traditions that is not considered authentically Muslim by either *sunnī* or *shī‘a* Muslims, nor by a Yemeni tattooist who was interviewed in Hanne Schönig’s book *Schminken, Dürfe und Räucherwerk der Jemenitinnen. Lexikon der Substanzen, Utensilien und Techniken* (2002).<sup>34</sup> For academic scholars of Islam, the debate about tattoos provides a good example of how Islamic theology is debated and applied; thus it is important to document Muslim arguments both for and against the notion that one can wear a tattoo and still be a ‘good’ Muslim. The answering of this question and the further development of this analysis will require additional field studies, interviews

34 On the Five Percenters see Knight 2008. See also Schönig 2002, especially Abbildungen no. 124.

and textual analyses of both historical and contemporary Muslim discourses on tattoos and tattooing.

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