

## Hair: reading

<sup>1</sup> I once saw a short film about a young man being shaved. He sat very close to the camera and stared, he hardly blinked at all even though the person shaving his hair was a little rough at times. I could just see an orange cloth around his neck and there was smoke drifting up in front of him from an invisible source. The young man was obviously going to become a monk and his head was being shaved in preparation. By the orange robe I assumed he was a Buddhist rather than a Christian monk, and the smoke was coming from incense sticks - I could almost smell them! His blank stare seemed to suggest some holy trance or meditation.



<sup>2</sup> When he was completely shaved the barber brushed the fallen hair away and then removed the cloth - I was a little surprised because I thought the monk was wearing a robe rather than having a protective cloth draped over his shoulders. The camera drew back and I was surprised even more. He wore a tight, white t-shirt tucked into jeans that were held up by a pair of braces. He also wore large, black boots. He wasn't a monk at all - he was a skinhead. He was still staring as he leaned forward and picked up the smoking item - not incense sticks at all but a cigarette. He put the cigarette into the corner of his mouth and took a drag. His non-stop staring became menacing. The shaven head no longer meant a peaceful existence, but an aggressive one.

<sup>3</sup> The film cleverly showed the strong, but opposing, symbolism associated with shaved heads. Why do both monks and skinheads shave their heads when their attitude to life is so different? For monks a shaved head is a sign of renunciation, giving up worldly things and putting aside vanity. Early Christian monks had their heads shaved in order to make them appear less sexual, so the act of shaving the head symbolizes chastity. And not just for monks - it is the custom for ultra-Orthodox Hasidic Jewish women to have their heads shaved before marriage. This comes from the traditional idea that they will then be attractive only to their husbands. However, it is also now usual for married women to wear a wig or a head-covering rather than having their heads shaved. In many cultures, long hair is considered feminine and sexy so that women who chose to have their heads shaved, or have very short hair, often have their sexuality questioned.

<sup>4</sup> But skinheads have a different motive to monks. They recognize that a shaved head can send out a negative message. Hair, and what you do with it, can make you more attractive so by removing it the skinhead is saying: I don't care. It's a rejection of society and its traditional values rather than the monk's rejection of vanity (skinheads do, after all, care what they look like). So, the act of shaving the head symbolizes rebellion. It is linked to extreme right-wing politics, male aggression and football hooliganism.

<sup>5</sup> There is a big difference though between choosing to have your head shaved, and having it done against your will. Shaving all over the world is a sign of renunciation but enforced shaving can be shaming and humiliating. Criminals are usually shaved in prison, and women who were thought to have collaborated with the enemy during the Second World War in Europe were marched shaven-headed through the streets. People who are controlled are shaved: soldiers, not necessarily completely shaved, are

made to have extremely short hair - they are expected to take commands unquestioningly.

<sup>6</sup> Long hair also has strong symbolism. Ironically, in the West, hippies in the 1960s grew their hair long as a rejection of traditional values - especially contemporary views concerning war and the use of atomic bombs, and sex. Hippies led an alternative lifestyle and their hair was grown long to express new social, political and moral values - so the act of *not* cutting hair symbolizes rebellion, too!

<sup>7</sup> In contrast, just as the monks shave their heads as a spiritual gesture, Sikhs do not cut their hair for the same reason. In Sikhism, hair is considered sacred and so removal from any part of the body is forbidden. Uncut hair is called *Kesh* and is one of the five holy Ks. For Sikhs this signifies the acceptance of the natural form given by God and they point out that the prophets from the past all had long hair. Especially for orthodox men who wear turbans, it is a way of marking them out from other people.

<sup>8</sup> So what is it about hair that can make it so symbolic? Why does its length represent our religious, political and cultural beliefs? Perhaps this is because hair has some strange properties. Firstly, it's the only part of the body that does not register pain, except at the roots - we can do all sorts of things to our hair and it doesn't feel anything. Secondly, it outlives us - a lock of hair can be kept as a remembrance long after someone has died. Thirdly, it's not alive but, as it can remain in the same state forever, it doesn't seem to be dead either - it's immortal. So the next time you go to the hairdresser for a haircut consider the significance of what you are having done and what your chosen hairstyle says about you!