

In distress: The designer jeans industry

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [November 15, 2005](#) issue

Soon the fashionistas will fashion a new craze to replace the craze for distressed jeans. I imagine pants modeled after tuxedo trousers: black with a black satin stripe down the sides and with neat undistressed pockets, knees, hems and rears.

Distressed jeans, I hear you saying, have been on the market for years, and you, M.E.M., are only now commenting on them? All right: It may be the tail end or butt end, if you will, of this obsession, but the topic still invites theological comment.

What moves me to take up such a theological theme is the brand name of one distressed-jeans maker: "True Religion." Other brand names also suggest relevance to religion: "Sacred Blue" and "People for Peace." The devotion, the ultimate concern, shown for these jeans invites comment.

First, consider the prelapsarian, "before the fall" jeans. They are Eden-like in their perfection, colors unfaded, stress points true blue. No doubt they are still available, and cost less than the messed and marred garb.

Second, note the human complicity, the actual sins expressive of original sin: you do not have to buy distressed jeans; you can make them. "How-to" manuals are available. Causing distress to fabric means work. You are directed to find the places in the denim where you want to do violence. Isn't that a perfect image for the way we set up targets for sinning and do not merely act randomly? You take sandpaper, an emory board or a nail file and start filing, until the transgression suits your intention. Notice that this stage takes some finesse.

Not all sins reflect violence. To perfect distressed jeans, you must stain them. Again, is not "stain" one of the images or reflections of sin in biblical lore? Read Jeremiah 2:22 and James 3:6.

Next, be sure your sinning does not transgress too far (etymologically: *trans* = "across" + *gradi* = "step"). Restrict the destruction to jeans. Don't go denting cars

or turning milk sour: let the passage of time produce dents and bacterial stress. Jeans only!

In the plot of original sin, actual sin, violence and transgression, there comes a time for redemption. Rachel Dodes in the *Wall Street Journal* (September 24) reports that there are times when jeans themselves virtually cry out: “You’ve gone too far!” “As jeans become more distressed, some wearers are turning to their tailors. . . . Sometimes costing \$200 or more, these repairs can surpass the price of the jeans themselves.” Distressed jeans demand high maintenance.

Do you see analogies to the way things are in the moral life? “Some women spend as much as \$300 for repairs on a single pair of distressed jeans,” with repairs costing \$30 per half-inch.

A friend recalls Depression days in North Dakota. In that era, jeans in the form of overalls got passed down through the family. The parents would invest in a new pair for the oldest. When that child grew, or the cuffs got frayed, they would cut them down and pass them on to child number two. And then repeat the process for the next child. If only the family had known and held on to them: the great-grandchildren could put a Ralph Lauren label on them and sell them for \$100 as “the latest.”