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## **From Humiliation to Honour: The Cross of Christ as a Symbol in the Modern Western World**

ROBERT REVINGTON  
Knox College, Toronto School of Theology

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### ***Introduction: Showing the Cross***

Although George Stevens's 1965 film *The Greatest Story Ever Told* may not do justice to the claims of its title (as it has a 41% rating on the website *Rotten Tomatoes*), it does have a number of striking images.<sup>1</sup> Stevens's film is an adaptation of the Gospels. Early in the film, Mary and Joseph are returning to their home country, after hiding in Egypt to escape Herod the Great's slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem.<sup>2</sup> They are greeted by a sobering sight: as they look at the road ahead of them and see hundreds of crucified men from a Jewish insurrection, the crosses stretch far into the distance.<sup>3</sup> The image of all the crosses serves to foreshadow the eventual fate of Christ, while also reminding the audience that many people were crucified in the ancient world. Nonetheless, in a later interview, the film's star Max von Sydow recalled:

The fact that Mr. Stevens had the courage to show this line [of crosses] ... that raised a lot of criticism because, as you might have noticed, in pictures of Golgotha, nobody is supposed to be crucified like Christ, in order to give people the idea that he was the only one

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who really was crucified. So showing all these hundreds or thousands of people being crucified, that was something which was rather bold.<sup>4</sup>

Today, it might seem surprising to think that in 1965 it was controversial or “bold” to show people other than Jesus being crucified. In any event, the meaning of the “Cross” as a symbol changed over time as it became so closely identified with Jesus. It is the argument of this paper that because the cross became synonymous with Jesus Christ, it changed from a symbol of humiliation to a sacred symbol, but as this change occurred, the cross also changed from a symbol of dishonour to a symbol that was *capable of being profaned*. This essay will follow the trajectory of the cross as a symbol across the centuries and examine a number of modern situations where the cross was used symbolically and even became a source of controversy. Still, the significance of the cross has diminished in the modern western world even since George Stevens’s film was released in cinemas. Although a controversial use of crucifixion imagery will still provoke strong reactions from Christians in the modern western world, Christ and his cross do not hold the same power in wider culture as they used to.

#### ***Early Christians Did Not Make Artistic Representations of the Cross***

Long before George Stevens’s film, crucifixion was a fact of life in the ancient world, but not a positive one. Christian apologists are fond of observing that the word “excruciating” was invented (in the original Latin) because there was no word that could do justice to the pain of crucifixion.<sup>5</sup> Even so, the American comedian Lenny Bruce used to say that if Jesus was executed in the twentieth century, “Catholic school children would be wearing little electric chairs around their necks instead of crosses.”<sup>6</sup> Despite that claim, in the early centuries of church history, the cross itself was not widely depicted in Christian art; as Robin Margaret Jensen writes

apart from very rare examples, Christ is represented as triumphant over death, but not undergoing it. Contrary to the dominance of the crucifix in both Byzantine and medieval iconography, early Christian art seems to have deliberately avoided any graphic presentation of the savior’s death.<sup>7</sup>

Many scholars think “that early Christians, still relatively close to the actual event, might have been averse to representing their divine savior

suffering so shocking or gruesome a death.”<sup>8</sup> The cross was a symbol of humiliation in the ancient world. Nonetheless, Eduard Syndicus writes that “pictures of the Passion and the crucifixion did not begin late because Christians had to be gradually educated to regard the symbol of shame as the symbol of victory.”<sup>9</sup> Christians still *respected* the symbol of the cross. Although he was probably exaggerating, the third century theologian Tertullian said that Christians made the sign of the cross on their foreheads “at every forward step and movement, at every going in and out, when we put on our clothes and shoes, when we bathe, when we sit at table, when we light the lamps, on couch, on seat, in all the ordinary actions of daily life.”<sup>10</sup> Walter Lowrie concluded that “the cross was never held in greater honor” than in the early centuries of church history.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, even if the cross was held in honour by Christians, that does not mean they necessarily would have wanted to portray this gruesome form of death artistically – particularly given how the wider culture viewed crucifixion. Lowrie says that “we can understand that Christians were loath to depict the common patibulum or gallows upon which the worst criminals suffered. This would make them subject to the cruellest misunderstanding.”<sup>12</sup> The Christian understanding of the cross was a source of confusion among their contemporaries; the early Christian theologian Origen had to defend Christians from the odd criticism that they worshipped Jesus *because* he was crucified, and some pagans were under the mistaken impression that Christians worshipped anyone who got crucified.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, “as early as the second century, pagans accused Christians of praying to a cross,”<sup>14</sup> while some third century Christians had to fight the charge that Christians worshipped “the cross in the same way that pagans worship idols.”<sup>15</sup> When Christians did not represent Jesus on the cross in art, it may have been related to “public relations, propriety and even safety,” because, before Emperor Constantine’s time, “Christians had reason to fear the scorn and misunderstanding of their neighbors.”<sup>16</sup> Misconceptions about the cross opened up the Christians to misunderstanding from their contemporaries because the cross did not have positive connotations.

In the early centuries of church history, Christians found ways to visually represent the cross by proxy, using other symbols, or “crypto-crosses.”<sup>17</sup> They could use anchors, axes, plows, ships’ masts, trees, or the Greek letter *tau* to fill this role, or substitute images of the lamb, or Abraham sacrificing Isaac to convey the same point.<sup>18</sup> Robert Milburn thinks that “motives of reverence or conservatism” had made artists want

to represent the crucifixion symbolically rather than “openly.”<sup>19</sup> Put differently, Christians found other ways to convey the idea of the cross.

Eduard Syndicus thinks that early Christian artists would have been hesitant to depict the cross artistically because “the sublime idea of redemption could not be made into the act of execution with which fourth century Christians were still familiar from their own experience.”<sup>20</sup> To put that idea another way, as long as crucifixion was a common practice, an image of crucifixion could not convey the truth of redemption to an audience that was familiar with it, and it was a gruesome thing to portray. Syndicus adds: “The paradox of the idea of the death of immortal God either forbade any attempt at portrayal or else necessitated more symbolism than art had hitherto employed.”<sup>21</sup> Granted, Syndicus also argues that the early church “did not locate the redemptive work of Christ so exclusively as we do in the Passion, but rather in his earthly life as a whole, in his teaching, his miracles and the sacraments he instituted.”<sup>22</sup> On this point, Syndicus’s argument seems unconvincing in light of Paul’s letters. In 1 Corinthians, Paul says: “but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,”<sup>23</sup> and Paul also said: “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”<sup>24</sup> Regardless, portraying Christ on the cross was related to “the problem of idolatry” as well, because the problem was “not only whether one can represent the incarnate deity visually, but also how one does it respectfully and truthfully.”<sup>25</sup> As Jensen says,

The possibility that such representations would have been so graphic as to seem to almost profane a holy mystery appeals to the power of imagery and the deep emotions it can stir. A static portrayal of Jesus crucified would seem to ‘freeze’ the episode in an untenable way, undercutting Christian emphasis on the resurrection by concentrating on the crucifixion. Such a view would account for artistic presentations of the passion that skip from the carrying of the cross to the empty tomb.<sup>26</sup>

Beyond that, there are other reasons why the crucifixion was not portrayed in art. Some scholars have theorized that the cross was not depicted in art because it was taboo to depict such a sacred mystery; admittedly, this is not an especially strong explanation.<sup>27</sup> Anna D. Kartsonis suggests that various Christological controversies about the two natures of Christ made artists unwilling to depict Christ crucified because there were complicated theological questions to take into account regarding how Christ’s

sufferings should be presented.<sup>28</sup> Still, in spite of all of the explanations that have been put forward, it is more important to emphasize the *stigma* of crucifixion. Crucifixion had humiliating connotations because of the types of people who were crucified; as Jensen observes, “Crucifixion was a barbaric mode of execution reserved for slaves, foreigners, or low-class criminals and traitors.”<sup>29</sup> It was a punishment used almost exclusively for the lower class or brigands and was very rarely used for high-ranking Roman citizens; in fact, if “a prominent citizen was crucified, it could become a legal point against the governor responsible for the edict.”<sup>30</sup> Christians did not have much legal status or social status, and it may have been “too much to ask that Christians openly represent the instrument of shame in times of persecution and ridicule.”<sup>31</sup> As Jensen writes,

ironically, among the rare extant examples of a crucifixion is the . . . graffito found on the Roman Palatine Hill that depicts an ass-headed figure affixed to a *tau*-cross and the inscription: “Alexamenos: worship god.” If we conclude that the cartoon was drawn by pagans in order to mock the Christian religion, the lack of other kerygmatic images of crucifixion may be understood by contrast.<sup>32</sup>

F. van der Meer says that as long as crucifixion was practiced, the earliest Christians would not have wanted to portray something as horrifying as the act of crucifixion; by way of comparison, he notes that ancient images of the Massacre of the Innocents in Bethlehem never directly show the soldiers touching a child.<sup>33</sup> On a similar point, Harris writes that “crucifixion was, quite simply, a form of public execution, a horrible judicial torture. To an onlooker, crucifixion conveyed not only agony but disgrace.”<sup>34</sup> As a parallel,

if in the days of public hanging a religious sect had adopted the gallows, with one of its members swinging on it, as their symbol, it would have struck eighteenth- and nineteenth-century society as a deliberate affront, an assertion of lawlessness. Christians in the early centuries were subject to spasmodic persecution. Moreover, we know that from as early as the New Testament, they wanted to present themselves as respectable and responsible citizens of the Roman world, identifying with the best elements within it [ . . . ] So there was little motive to display Christ on the Cross and every social reason why this should not be done, even though of course the Cross was a central element in Christian preaching of the period.<sup>35</sup>

To conclude, the cross was not portrayed artistically in the early years of church history because it had humiliating and dishonourable connotations, although those connotations may have been stronger for *non-Christians* than the Christians themselves. The Christians were not *embarrassed* by the crucifixion, but crucifixion was a symbol of embarrassment in the wider culture and could cause misunderstandings. André Grabar writes that “it is often said that the image-makers did not dare to approach the subject of the Crucifixion, but this is a gratuitous affirmation, particularly in view of the fact that the theologians of the same period treated it constantly.”<sup>36</sup> Despite these words, being able to reflect on the theological significance of a humiliating execution is different than wanting to represent it artistically – especially when that humiliating form of execution was still practiced. When crucifixions stopped being performed, it became easier to depict them in art.

#### *The Cross Becomes a Symbol of Honour*

In the fourth century, the cross began to be understood differently and to be honoured and respected in different ways – because Christianity became dominant. The cross became a symbol of victory, as Emperor Constantine associated it with a vision he had before his victory in the Battle of the Milvian Bridge.<sup>37</sup> Constantine turned the cross into “the public emblem of victory, and put it in the hand of the statue of himself erected by the citizens of Rome.”<sup>38</sup> Therefore, “Constantine and his successors . . . promoted the cross as a sign of victory and success, not of humiliation and failure.”<sup>39</sup> In addition, Constantine discontinued crucifixion “as a form of capital punishment,” and this decision helped eliminate the stigmas and connotations associated with the punishment.<sup>40</sup> It should also be noted that in Constantine’s time, pilgrims began to travel to Jerusalem to see “the true cross of Christ;” as a result, Jensen believes that the emergence of the cross as an image in Christian art “significantly coincides with the widespread practice of making pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and when there to visit the sacred places (*loca sancta*) that marked episodes in the life of Christ . . . Tours of the most sacred of all shrines, the Holy Sepulchre, must have countered any reticence about representing the historical actuality of the crucifixion.”<sup>41</sup> Be that as it may, the outlawing of crucifixion and the removal of the negative connotations of crucifixion itself was probably more important. Christianity became ubiquitous in the Roman world after the time of Constantine, and around the same time,

crucifixion lost its stigma when it ceased to be a popular form of execution, and the meaning of crucifixion changed. After Constantine, the church had more power in Roman society and the popular stigmas about crucifixion likewise changed in the wider culture as a result.

The point to take from this discussion is that *after* the early fourth century, the cross eventually began to be depicted artistically more and more often, and eventually it ceased to be a symbol of humiliation the way it had been before. For example, by the time of John Chrysostom (349-407 CE), Chrysostom could write the following in his commentary on Psalm 110:

Consider the cross itself, how much power it symbolizes. In former times, you see, this cross was a death with a curse on it, a death of ignominy, the most shameful of all deaths. Now, on the contrary – lo, it has become more honorable than life itself; more resplendent than a crown, everyone wears it on their forehead, not only ashamed of it no more but even taking pride in it. Not only private citizens but even crowned heads wear it in preference to the crown – and rightly so: it is nobler than crowns beyond number. The crown adorns the head, after all, whereas the cross protects the mind. The cross is a safeguard against the demons, it is a panacea for the soul’s ailments; it is an invincible weapon, unassailable rampart, insuperable protection; it overwhelms not only assaults of savages and enemy raids but even the forces of the fierce demons [ . . . ]<sup>42</sup>

From these words, it is clear that Christ’s cross was revered. Furthermore, although the precise dating of some of these stories is unclear, one can also see that Christ’s cross had a uniquely honourable status in Christian martyrdom accounts. Various later traditions hold that Saint Andrew asked to be crucified on an X-shaped cross because he did not think he was worthy to be crucified in the same way as Jesus.<sup>43</sup> St. Jerome (347-420 CE) recorded that Simon Peter had asked to be crucified upside down, “asserting that he was unworthy to be crucified in the same manner as his Lord.”<sup>44</sup> Having said this, before Jerome’s day, in the second-century apocryphal text *The Acts of Peter*, Peter gives a different reason for wanting to be crucified upside down, as he says:

For the first man, whose race I bear in mine appearance (or, of the race of whom I bear the likeness), fell (was borne) head downwards, and showed forth a manner of birth such as was not heretofore: for it

was dead, having no motion. He, then, being pulled down who also cast his first state down upon the earth established this whole disposition of all things, being hanged up an image of the creation . . . the figure wherein ye now see me hanging is the representation of that man that first came unto birth . . . For it is right to mount upon the cross of Christ, who is the word stretched out, the one and only . . . For what else is Christ, but the word, the sound of God? So that the word is the upright beam whereon I am crucified. And the sound is that which crosseth it, the nature of man. And the nail which holdeth the cross-tree unto the upright in the midst thereof is the conversion and repentance of man<sup>45</sup>

Peter sees himself in the place of Adam, who sinned and fell, but in a metaphorical representation of salvation, Christ is the “upright beam,” and the nail holding up the cross signifies repentance. One can see why Jerome’s simpler explanation caught on instead! Jerome’s explanation fits with the trajectory of treating the Cross as a symbol of honour.

At a much later date, the history of hot cross buns also testifies to how crosses came to be regarded differently because of their association with Christ. With hot cross buns, the cross on the buns obviously represents Christ’s cross, but the bun’s spices recall the spices that were brought to Christ’s body, and the sweet fruits signify that Christians do not have to keep eating plain foods (as Lent ends).<sup>46</sup> In 1592, during the reign of Elizabeth I, the London Clerk of Markets publicly forbade people from selling breads like hot cross buns except for Good Friday, burials, or Christmas; if one did not comply, the hot cross buns were given to the poor.<sup>47</sup> When James I ruled England (1603-1625), further efforts were made to limit the sale of hot cross buns; as a result, for some time, people mainly made hot cross buns in house kitchens.<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, because of their association with the cross, hot cross buns baked on Good Friday have various powers in folklore. It was believed that hot cross buns would not grow mouldy, would have healing powers, would ensure long-lasting friendships, would prevent shipwrecks or house fires, or, if hung in the kitchen, would guarantee that other breads would come out perfectly.<sup>49</sup> In these cases, the cross was not just a positive symbol, but a symbol of mystical power – and ultimately, this point can be traced to its association with Jesus specifically.

In any case, the symbol of the cross came to be regarded much more positively after Constantine outlawed crucifixion. Constantine’s particular use of the cross as a symbol of victory is confined more to his time and



place, but the cross ultimately received honour because it was closely identified with Jesus – who was the central figure of what became the dominant religion in the Western world.

### ***The Meaning of the Cross and the Sacrifice of Christ in the First World War***

The cross of Christ – and equally so, the *sacrifice* of Christ – had particular associations during and after the First World War because it came to be associated with fallen soldiers. During the First World War in Britain, there was a contentious issue between the church and the wider culture: what was the theological meaning of the sacrifice of young British soldiers?<sup>50</sup> The historian Adrian Gregory notes that there was a popular print in Britain during the war that “showed Christ taking a soldier in his arms.”<sup>51</sup> Sir James Clark made a print that juxtaposed the crucified Christ above a fallen soldier.<sup>52</sup> Gregory concludes that “the informal civic religion of wartime Britain” was “the redemption of the world through the blood of soldiers.”<sup>53</sup> Gregory observes that this posed a problem for the churches because “it was a heresy.”<sup>54</sup> One British theologian wrote: “Let the Church preach sacrifice at all sorts of services, but let her – at any cost of numbers – keep the Holy Sacrifice as her central mystery and glory.”<sup>55</sup> As many soldiers died and families sought to find meaning in these deaths, the church still had to be careful not to conflate the deaths of fallen soldiers with the death of Jesus. An evangelical organization in Britain published a pamphlet strongly articulating that the death of a soldier was no substitute for Christ’s sacrifice.<sup>56</sup> The official Church of England was in an uncomfortable position; the Church did not want to promise that fallen soldiers would automatically go to Heaven, but it was against the public mood to say so.<sup>57</sup>

These issues went beyond Britain. A stained glass window in Burford, Ontario linked Christ’s suffering to that of a fallen soldier as well, as “the sacrifice of the infantryman became one with the sacrifice of the lamb of God in atoning for the sins of the world.”<sup>58</sup> An artist named Charles Sims made a painting called *Sacrifice* that depicted “Christ on the cross overlooking representatives of the Canadian population” both on the home-front and on the battlefield.<sup>59</sup> Canadian and British people needed to make meaning out of the colossal suffering of the First World War and the sacrifice and cross of Christ became a way to do so – even though it could create some dubious theological associations.

To a similar end, although it seems unlikely to have happened, “one of the most repeated and widely recorded atrocity stories of World War I” was that the Germans had crucified a Canadian soldier at the Second Battle of Ypres in April 1915.<sup>60</sup> The story was exploited for propaganda purposes. When the United States entered the war, this story was depicted in an image to sell liberty bonds; the image showed the Canadian being nailed to a tree by a German, accompanied by the words “Your Liberty Bond Will Stop This.”<sup>61</sup> The story was portrayed visually “to lift the public out of complacency and into battle.”<sup>62</sup> Francis Derwent Wood made a bronze sculpture of the alleged event in 1918; the sculpture was called *Canada’s Golgotha*, and it showed “a soldier nailed to a barn door surrounded by German soldiers jeering at him.”<sup>63</sup> As Suzanne Evans says, “the story presented the death of a soldier in the religious framework common to a majority of the fighting men.”<sup>64</sup> The Canadians could not verify the story; even at the time, Canadian general Arthur Currie did not believe the story of the crucified Canadian, and Canadian press censor Ernest Chambers suggested that the story “had been invented in a certain sector of the state of New York . . . for recruiting purposes.”<sup>65</sup> More recently, the historian Desmond Morton said: “It was a remarkably useful story. In a Christian age, a Hunnish enemy had proved capable of mocking Christ’s agony on the cross . . . providing a means of transforming casual colonials into ruthless fighters.”<sup>66</sup> Whatever the origins of the story might be, part of the reason it had value was because of its implicit association with the revered cross of Christ. A significant point to emphasize is that, again, the cross of Christ became a way to make meaning out of the war.

After the war, the cross became the dominant graveyard symbol to represent the sacrifices of fallen soldiers. In parts of England, using the “crucifix” for war memorials was contentious for iconoclastic Protestants.<sup>67</sup> Although those iconoclastic Protestants may not have liked the use of the cross as a visual symbol in this connection, their views did not carry the day. Following the war, “The Cross of Sacrifice” became the dominant symbol for Commonwealth war cemeteries; in the design, this cross also has a sword enclosed within it. Sir Reginald Blomfield made the design and said he wanted

to make it as abstract and impersonal as I could, to free it from any association with any particular style, and above all, to keep clear of any of the sentimentalism of the Gothic. This was a man’s war far too terrible for any fripperies, and I hoped to get within range of the infinite in this symbol of the ideals of those who had gone out to die.<sup>68</sup>

Allen J. Frantzen believes that Blomfield's cross was "antireligious," because even though it shows a cross, it "focused on the spiritual" but avoided "the contemporary of recently fashionable language of piety."<sup>69</sup> Despite Frantzen's claim, it must still be emphasized that The Cross of Sacrifice derived its meaning from the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Without Jesus, the cross would be a symbol of humiliation rather than martyrdom.

Overall, the Great War was unlike anything that had preceded it, and the sacrifice and cross of Christ became an essential way to make sense of it. The fact that the cross of Christ became identified so closely with the war is a testament to the power that the cross held in the public imagination – especially given the scale of the suffering in this war. For people trying to interpret the horrors of war, the cross of Christ became one of the only things that could do justice to these experiences. The use of the cross as a wartime symbol further testifies to how its meaning had changed over the previous two thousand years.

#### ***More Recent Conflicts Involving the Cross***

The following point must be emphasized: *as the cross became a symbol of honour, it also became a symbol that could be profaned*. Even so, in the modern Western world, the cross does not carry the power it did at one time. Although Christians would criticize what they perceived as dishonourable use of the cross, their protests do not always make that much difference in the wider culture. It has already been observed that George Stevens's film earned some criticism for daring to show people other than Christ getting crucified, but other cases are more overt. There are other recent examples where crucifixion imagery was controversial in modern culture and these are instructive.

In 2006, the pop singer Madonna included a segment in her world tour where she would wear a crown of thorns and perform "while suspended on a gigantic cross."<sup>70</sup> Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox churches complained about Madonna's concert tour and described it as blasphemous.<sup>71</sup> Madonna said publicly that her performance was "no different than a person wearing a cross or 'taking up the cross' as it says in the Bible. My performance is neither anti-Christian, sacrilegious or blasphemous. Rather, it is my plea to the audience to encourage mankind to help one another and to see the world as a unified whole."<sup>72</sup> Madonna claimed that the set piece with the cross was meant "to bring attention to

the millions of children in Africa who are dying every day (or) are living without care, without medicine and without hope. I am asking people to open their hearts and minds to get involved in whatever way they can.”<sup>73</sup> She also said, “I believe in my heart that if Jesus were alive today he would be doing the same thing.”<sup>74</sup> Whether Jesus would choose to be a pop singer is unclear.

As part of the tour, Madonna performed in Rome, near Vatican City, and Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish leaders in Rome all condemned her show.<sup>75</sup> From one of the churches in Rome, Father Manfredo Leone said: “Being raised on a cross with a crown of thorns like a modern Christ is absurd. Doing it in the cradle of Christianity comes close to blasphemy.”<sup>76</sup> A cardinal named Ersilio Tonino said: “This is a blasphemous challenge to the faith and a profanation of the Cross. She should be excommunicated. To crucify herself . . . in the city of popes and martyrs is an act of open hostility. It is nothing short of a scandal and an attempt to generate publicity.”<sup>77</sup> A Vatican bishop named Velasio De Paolis said: “How this woman can take the name of the mother of Christ, I don’t know. Her show represents the rotten fruit of secularism and the absurdity of evil.”<sup>78</sup> Collectively, these strong words attest to the fact that the cross had changed from having humiliating connotations to becoming something that could be profaned *because it was specially identified with Christ*. Instead of being a humiliating form of execution, the cross itself could now be profaned. After all, Madonna did not desecrate an image of the crucified Christ; she simply put *herself* in crucifixion imagery, but the symbol of the cross itself was strong enough that it was a problem. Still, these protests hardly made a dent in the overall success of Madonna’s world tour. Although NBC had been uncertain about whether to show the crucifixion segment in a television broadcast, at the time, Madonna’s tour was “the highest-grossing tour ever by a female artist.”<sup>79</sup> Hence, it must be emphasized that although the cross was a symbol that could be profaned, in the twenty-first century, even if Madonna really did profane it, there were no dire consequences either.

In December 2006, a different kind of crucifixion made headlines in Metchosin, British Columbia.<sup>80</sup> A local artist named Jimmy Wright attracted attention when he put a cross in his front garden – but instead of Christ, he crucified a figure of Santa Claus!<sup>81</sup> Wright was criticized by people in his neighbourhood, including a local woman named Jennifer Blair, who said that children “think Santa’s at the North Pole getting their toys ready, not on a pole in Metchosin.”<sup>82</sup> Another woman said: “I think

it's an evil way. Kids see things like that and children – they see that on the front page – think that's terrible."<sup>83</sup> Wright commented: "Santa represents frivolous consumption. That's all he is. He shot Jesus right out of the saddle. He's the focus of Christmas."<sup>84</sup> Thus, Wright said, "I don't know how it came into my mind but I thought I'm going to take Santa Claus and I'm going to crucify him."<sup>85</sup> This story attracted news attention at the time, but in the grand scheme of things it did not have that much importance. In this case, it is worth noting that the objections seemed to revolve around the fact that *Santa Claus* was involved rather than the connection to the crucifixion of Jesus.

In another controversial story involving cross imagery, "in 2011, four self-professed Christians entered an exhibit displaying Andres Serrano's photograph *Piss Christ*. Arriving with hammers, they threatened the guard, smashed the protective glass, and slashed the image."<sup>86</sup> Natalie Carnes compares this destruction to the Islamic response when the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* published cartoons about the Prophet Muhammad; two gunmen murdered twelve people at the magazine's offices.<sup>87</sup> In the artist's own words, Serrano's picture *Piss Christ* shows "a plastic crucifix submerged in urine."<sup>88</sup> In an op-ed piece, Serrano defended both the picture and the freedom of expression, but said that when he originally created his photo in 1987, he had not expected it to be so controversial.<sup>89</sup> Yet his photograph would be vandalized multiple times through the years, and Serrano had received threats.<sup>90</sup> Serrano's work was vandalized in Australia and Sweden as well.<sup>91</sup> Serrano denied that he had blasphemous intent, saying:

For me, *Piss Christ* was always a work of art and an act of devotion. I was born and raised a Catholic and have been a Christian all my life. As a child and especially as I was preparing for my Holy Communion and confirmation, I often heard the nuns speak reverentially of the "body and blood of Christ." They also said that it was wrong to idolize representations of Christ since these were only representations and not holy objects themselves. My work was, in part, a comment on that paradox. I am neither a blasphemer nor "anti-Christian," as some have called me, and I stand by my work as an artist and as a Christian. Where the photograph has ignited spirited debate, that has been a good thing. Perhaps it reminds some people to question what we unthinkingly fetishize (and thereby often minimize) in lieu of pondering seriously what the crucifix actually symbolizes: the unimaginably torturous death of Christ, the Son of God.<sup>92</sup>

Serrano had said he did not tolerate blasphemy.<sup>93</sup> He believed that his picture offered a critique of the “billion-dollar Christ-for-profit industry” and that it provided a “condemnation of those who abuse the teachings of Christ for their own ignoble ends.”<sup>94</sup> Even so, Jean-Pierre Cattenoz, the Roman Catholic bishop of Avignon, called the piece “odious,” and wanted it removed.<sup>95</sup> Back in 1989, the Republican senator Alphonse D’Amato originally described the picture as “shocking, abhorrent and completely undeserving of any recognition whatsoever,” and added that “millions of taxpayers are rightfully incensed that their hard-earned dollars were used to honor and support Serrano's work.”<sup>96</sup> A 1989 editorial in the *Arizona Republic* asked: “What if it were the image of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. in that jar of urine?”<sup>97</sup> One might ponder what the question reveals about the status of Martin Luther King Jr. in comparison to Christ in modern Western culture. Regardless, Carnes observes that ironically, both Serrano’s picture *and* Christ himself (in the first century) were understood as blasphemous.<sup>98</sup>

Ironically, Serrano – and to a lesser extent Madonna and the man who crucified Santa Claus – was being iconoclastic about his society, but trying to make a point about the crucifixion of Christ in a culture that had come to take it for granted. Although the way Serrano made his point might not be for all sensibilities, and it is debatable whether he was successful in his end goal, Serrano seems to have wanted to depict the cross as he did so that people would be quickened to its scandalous implications anew. The cross was formerly a symbol of dishonour, and it became a symbol of honour that could be “profaned” in the eyes of the faithful – because it was so closely tied to Christ himself. Yet the meaning of the cross also became something that Christians (and society) could get *complacent* about.

On this point, there might be a fruitful comparison between images and words about Jesus. Dorothy L. Sayers adapted the Gospels for the BBC in a series of radio plays in the 1940s and was harshly criticized for not using the old English of the King James Bible, but Sayers later said: “The slight shock of hearing a familiar statement rephrased quickens one to the implications of the original: that is why *The Man Born to Be King* startled quite a lot of people into realizing what the Gospels were actually saying.”<sup>99</sup> Similarly, C.S. Lewis compared J.B. Phillips’s *modern* English Bible translation to “seeing a familiar picture after it’s been cleaned.”<sup>100</sup> Even further in that direction, when Aldous Huxley wrote a book about theology, he deliberately *avoided* quoting the King James Bible because

“familiarity with traditionally hallowed writings tends to breed . . . a kind of reverential insensibility . . . [and] an inward deafness to the meaning of the sacred words.”<sup>101</sup> For *The Man Born to Be King*, Sayers wrote: “Tear off the disguise of the Jacobean idiom, go back to the homely and vigorous Greek of Mark or John, translate it into its current English counterpart, and there every man may see his own face.”<sup>102</sup> This effect can be compared to Serrano’s already-quoted words about his picture: “Perhaps it reminds some people to question what we unthinkingly fetishize (and thereby often minimize) in lieu of pondering seriously what the crucifix actually symbolizes: the unimaginably torturous death of Christ, the Son of God.”<sup>103</sup> When the cross of Christ is not recognized as a humiliating scandal, the full implications of the Gospel story are lost. Having said this, to varying degrees, one can understand the position of the people who objected to Serrano’s picture, Madonna’s concert, or the hundreds of crucified people in the film *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. These objections point to the fact that for Christians, the cross was a revered symbol.

The issues surrounding representations of the Cross relate to other forms of art. In different mediums, across the centuries, there have been questions about whether Christ can be represented artistically without breaking the Ten Commandments. The first play adaptation of the Gospels is from roughly the fourth century – a Greek play called *Paschon Christi* – and after this play, “the Passion was not to be staged again for nearly a thousand years.”<sup>104</sup> The famous Oberammergau Passion Play did not begin until the seventeenth century. Scotland banned biblical plays in 1575, and after King James VI of Scotland came to England, in 1606, he forbade English actors to say the names of or act as any person of the Trinity; it was considered blasphemous.<sup>105</sup> The Puritans were against *all* forms of theatre, although Charles II did not share those sentiments. Even in 1902, Laurence Housman asked Edward Gordan Craig to produce a Nativity play, but the play had to be done *privately* because it showed “the holy family” on stage.<sup>106</sup> Hence, at a press conference for Sayers’s Bible plays in the 1940s, James Welch said that Jesus had not been depicted in any popular British plays since the medieval period.<sup>107</sup> For that matter, in a different medium, in 1844, when Elizabeth Barrett Browning used God’s name and made Christ a character in one of her poems, in her preface she felt compelled to defend herself against charges of irreverence.<sup>108</sup> The discussions about representing Christ’s crucifixion in art should be understood with this wider context in mind.

In any event, the meaning of the cross has changed over time.

Instead of a symbol of shame, Christians saw it as a symbol that could be profaned because of its connection to Christ. Yet for most of the twenty-first century Western world, it is neither, but a symbol that generates indifference because it is familiar.

***Conclusions: The Cross as an Image***

G.K. Chesterton once pondered how Jesus cried on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34).<sup>109</sup> Chesterton called it “the cry which confessed that God was forsaken of God,” and reflected that “God seemed for an instant to be an atheist.”<sup>110</sup> At its core, the cross is about emptiness. It is meant to be a scandal that these things would happen to God himself. In the early years of church history, Christians did not depict the cross artistically because the cross itself still carried certain stigmas. As time went on, it became more acceptable to depict it, and it became a symbol of honour. As it became a symbol of honour, it also became a symbol that could be profaned – at least, in the eyes of Christians. In doing so, did the idea of the cross itself become like an idol? Such questions are difficult to answer. Regardless, the examples studied in this essay show that the cross held power even in the twentieth century. The cross was an essential symbol during the First World War in various ways because it became tied to the sacrifices of the war itself. Alternatively, when George Stevens made a film about Jesus, it was controversial to show people other than Christ being crucified, even if inspired by the historical circumstances of the first century. In any event, the work of Madonna or Andres Serrano demonstrate multiple things. *Images of the cross were no longer considered problematic because of the humiliation of crucifixion itself, but because of the association with Christ.* In addition, though more so in the case of Madonna, despite the protests of certain Christians, the opposition to these images was still not earthshaking in society as a whole, and that can be taken as evidence that, in many quarters, the modern West does not revere the cross as it once did (or is not as “passionate”). It should not be understated that Madonna’s controversial tour was still incredibly successful, and Serrano’s work still got displayed all over the world, even with opposition. To a similar end, the 1979 Monty Python film *Life of Brian* was harshly criticized by church organizations for allegedly mocking Jesus’s crucifixion because near the end of the film, a group of crucified men sing the song “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life.”<sup>111</sup>



Despite those criticisms, the film has still gained a reputation as one of the most successful comedy films in history.<sup>112</sup> It is debatable whether all of these examples really profaned Jesus's crucifixion, but they do show that for certain Christians, the cross could be profaned. Therefore, the cross went from a symbol of humiliation, to a symbol of great honour (by virtue of its association with Christ), to a symbol that – in the overall context of twenty-first century culture – no longer holds the power it once did. Still, the cross became a revered symbol because it was identified with Jesus.

### Endnotes

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2. *The Greatest Story Ever Told*.
3. *The Greatest Story Ever Told*.
4. *He Walks in Beauty: The George Stevens Production The Greatest Story Ever Told*, directed by Michael Arick, disc 2, *The Greatest Story Ever Told: Special Edition* (Beverly Hills, CA: United Artists, 2001).
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6. Stephen Mansfield, “The Torture and Killing of Jesus,” December 12, 2014, *HuffingtonPost.com*, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/stephen-mansfield/torture-and-the-killing-o\\_b\\_6313722.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/stephen-mansfield/torture-and-the-killing-o_b_6313722.html)
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8. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 133.
9. Syndicus, *Early Christian Art*, 103.
10. Tertullian, *De Corona*, eds. and trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *The Writing of Quintus Sept. Flor. Tertullianus* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869), 1:336.
11. Lowrie, *Art in the Early Church*, 110.
12. Lowrie, *Art in the Early Church*, 110.
13. *Contra Cels.* 247. See Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 134.
14. Syndicus, *Early Christian Art*, 103.
15. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 134.
16. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 134.
17. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 136-37.
18. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 137.
19. Milburn, *Early Christian Art and Architecture*, 109.
20. Syndicus, *Early Christian Art*, 104.
21. Syndicus, *Early Christian Art*, 104.
22. Syndicus, *Early Christian Art*, 103.
23. 1 Cor 1:23 (New Revised Standard Version)
24. 1 Cor 2:2 (New Revised Standard Version)
25. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 134.
26. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 133. See also, Pocknee, *Cross and Crucifix in Christian Worship and Devotion*, 38.
27. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 133-34.
28. Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 34-35.
29. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 134.

30. David W. Chapman, *Ancient Jewish and Christian Perceptions on Crucifixion*, WUNT 2. Reihe 244 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 44.
31. Shepherd, Jr., "Christology," 112.
32. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 134. See also, Lowrie, *Art in the Early Church*, 110; Harries, *The Passion in Art*, 12; Shepherd, Jr., "Christology," 112. For the idea that this image is a *Christian* rather than a pagan image, see Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, 48-50.
33. Van der Meer, *Early Christian Art*, 120.
34. Harries, *The Passion in Art*, 12.
35. Harries, *The Passion in Art*, 12.
36. Grabar, *Christian Iconography*, 132. Grabar thinks that artists were concerned with representing Christ's victory over death, rather than the death itself.
37. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 148.
38. Syndicus, *Early Christian Art*, 104.
39. Shepherd Jr., "Christology," 112.
40. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 133. See also, Harries, *The Passion in Art*, 12.
41. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 154.
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51. Gregory, *The Last Great War* 156.
52. Jonathan Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), 40-41.
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61. The picture was by an artist named Fernando Amorsolo. See "Your Liberty Bond Will Help Stop This – Sus Bonos de la Libertad Ayudarán á Dar Fin Con Esto," *Library of Congress*, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002722586>
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63. Evans, *Mothers of Heroes*, 52. See also, Tippet, *Art at the Service of War*, 81-87.
64. Evans, *Mothers of Heroes*, 52.
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