

PASSIONATE SYMBOLISM

In all the recent debate, pro and con, over the degree of truth in the tale of Christ's crucifixion, I have yet to see the most important element brought up. That is, what does it mean? Is there a symbolic interpretation or not? And if we accept this as a literal story, regardless of the numerous historical inaccuracies it appears to contain, must we necessarily close our minds to its symbolic reverberations?

All the arguments I've encountered focus on the degree of literal truth in the accounts. Even those that make the story out as a non-literal myth fail to provide the key to its understanding, being content to describe the historical, factual weaknesses of a literal interpretation. But we are still left without comprehending the importance of the image.

The central motif is of a man, Jesus Christ, nailed to a cross of wood, where he dies in agony. Later, he returns to life, leaving his tomb empty.

The cross is a symbol for the world of manifestation. It is one of the most universal symbols of our species. The ancients used it to indicate the harmonious interrelation of the four elements—earth, water, fire and air—which, as principles, comprise the structure of the whole universe. The fifth, or quint-essential, element is the space in which the other four exist. It is the *crux* of the matter. In Cartesian terms the cross is formed of a horizontal and a vertical axis. The vertical symbolizes metaphysical factors such as time and personal development, while the horizontal is comprised of objects and their images in the mind. Again, the entire manifested universe is epitomized in this scheme of the cross.

In Christian terms the horizontal and vertical are described as the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God. One's "neighbors" spread out across the earth are the horizontal breadth, and the divine, which comes "down" from "above" and is to be looked "up" to, is the vertical component. Once again, the symbol

of the cross is the balanced inclusion of everything in creation, since metaphysical factors are created just as surely as the physical. It's not especially important that the bottom of the vertical axis is exaggerated in Christianity, as the axes have no end, they merely have to be displayed as finite graphics. The elongated vertical "reaches down" to everyone, no matter how humble.

In the Christian context, Christ symbolizes the spirit of divinity, the Light. This is described in a number of ways, but the idea is essentially that he is an emissary of God, an injection of spirit into our world in order to "save" us from our mundane preoccupations. Interested non-Christians could recognize Christ as an image for truth, regardless of the source.

So here's the point of the crucifixion imagery: the spirit is ever new, ever fresh, ever relevant to the present moment. Our ideas, however, don't usually remain as flexible. Often we cling to them even when they aren't appropriate to the situation in which we find ourselves. Since it is elusively difficult to rise above our immanent condition of fixed needs and ideas to love life in all its freedom, we inevitably associate the greater context with the material world as we have come to know it in the past. In the process we substitute our preformed ideas for the living dynamism of the present. If we identify the spirit of aliveness with a static image of the material world, we in essence "fix" it in place. When we do this, it is as if we've nailed it to the cross of materialism. Taking the spirit literally, instead of spiritually, on its own terms, "kills" it, making it a pathetic, dead thing.

From a scientific perspective, we know that light is present throughout the universe but only becomes visible when it interacts with material objects. The unmodified light becomes veiled in a sense by the objects it illuminates. By observing only objects, we lose sight of the light that has brought them to us.

Whenever we encounter the once-ubiquitous image of Christ nailed to the cross, we are being reminded how we deaden the living spirit whenever we focus on the outward form. Isn't it

paradoxical that conceiving of the crucifixion as a literal event kills the spirit of the symbol in exactly the way the image symbolizes in the first place! Once again, we take a reminder of freedom and liberation in the spirit and make it a prison. We “bury it in a tomb” built of the most inert material substance, symbolized by stone.

“Christ died to save sinners.” This salvation means the image of death on the cross was meant to teach us to cease in our simplistic attitudes that kill the spirit, and tune in to its light. It was not to teach us that by some magical process a divine being removed our responsibility for our own lethal ignorance. This is a complete reversal of the point, and the lethality of such ignorance may be seen far and wide in the “true believers” who continue to hate their neighbors in the name of peace and love.

In modern terms, the significance of this image should remind us that what we take for our picture of the world is only an image created in our brains out of nervous agitation produced by the stimulation of our senses. By the very process of interpreting the world we transform this raw input into a fictionalized version based on a lifetime of inference and lightly-educated guesswork, thereby downgrading or in a sense “killing” the original. We are so mesmerized by this intriguing picture that we forget it is a flawed approximation and mistake it for reality. We insist on its truth, and are ready to fight to defend it. The struggle to overcome this inherent limitation of our organism is the scientific equivalent of the religious quest.

Happily, there’s also a resurrection in this story. The light of the spirit is not killed; it cannot be killed. It always “comes back to life.” If it was dependent on our limited understanding it would long ago have perished, but fortunately it is not. Time and again it pushes away the stone of our ignorance and emerges unseen from the sepulcher in which we’ve laid its remains. This signifies its return to its natural unencumbered state.

Since humans cannot seem to stop killing the spirit by taking it as literal truth rather than as dynamic instruction and inspiration, (or as scientific “fact” instead of provisional hypothesis), we are

left at least with the hopeful message that no matter how wrongly we treat our birthright of heavenly bliss, we can only kill it temporarily. It is ever reborn. All we have to do is cease demeaning the ineffable essence by nailing it to the cross of habit, and it will blossom forth once again. Scientists and the faithful alike should be reminded of the need for humility in a world where our feeling of certainty expands in direct proportion to our ignorance.

One obvious corollary should be mentioned, of the many lessons that could be drawn from this image: each of us begins our quest as a dutiful soldier who nails the spirit to its crucifix at the behest of the authorities. We ourselves, then, are the cause of the death of the spirit through our fixations, not some foreign cult of “infidels.” Each of us makes this mistake all the time. We’re built this way. We need to be constantly reminded that our fixed notions deaden the spirit and prevent its free circulation within us. That’s precisely why we’ve been given this symbol to ponder. To blame others for causing this universal situation is to utterly miss the point, to once again gleefully drive nails into the helping hands of a divine messenger of liberation.

Now, do we still want to take this story literally?