The Christian Cross in American Public Life

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An Encyclopedia

By

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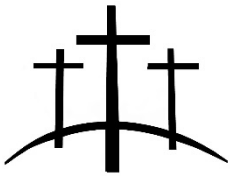
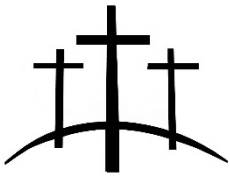


Dedicated to those individuals who have realized, with Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., that the cross is not just something that one wears but something that one bears, and upon which one might even be called to die.



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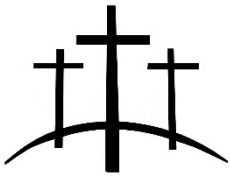

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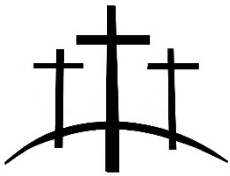


PREFACE

This is the third of three successive books that I have written dealing with religious subjects. The first examined the uses of the Bible in American law and politics, the second explored the role of prayer in American public life, and this one deals with the cross in America. All are written as a series of entries arranged, much like a dictionary or encyclopedia, in an A-to-Z format.

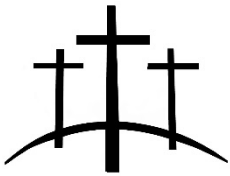
I view each of these projects as ways of demonstrating that, however much it may have changed, religion remains alive and well in America, as James Madison, a prime author of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, argued that it would even with (perhaps even because) of the disestablishment of governmental sponsorship. I have approached each of my books from an interdisciplinary perspective, with the result that many of the subjects that I cover might initially seem to do little to illumine the central topic that I address. Although I would argue that the cumulative impact is arguably greater than the sum of its parts, this volume has led to the humbling realization that just as the text of the Bible is greater than that of any of its commentators, and just as the single fervent prayer of a righteous believer is arguably of greater value than an entire book about prayer, so too, the meaning of the cross for believers will be greater than any single entry that I can write about it.

As I explain in the lengthier introduction that follows, although I include some entries that briefly address the theological implications of the cross, this is not a book of theology, which used to be known as “the queen of the sciences,” but more akin to a work of social science. Although I consider

the cross to be a profound symbol of God's love for humanity, I make no pretense either fully to understand or fully to explicate the spiritual meaning of this symbol, although I deeply admire those who have attempted to do so.

As someone who started my academic college life as a political theorist, it is a bit humbling to recognize that my book does not so much address the significance of the cross as to demonstrate its pervasiveness as a symbol even in a nation, many of whose initial European settlers were wary of any depiction that might become an idol that would do more to obscure than to illume the Deity whom it sought to represent. As this book shows, such fears were not completely misplaced as some individuals continue to view the cross either as a talisman to ward off bad luck, or as an outward adornment rather than as a way of life.

I write as one who reveres what I believe to be the meaning of the cross and would like others to have the same reverence that I do, but my purpose in this volume is to share what I have learned about the role of the cross as a symbol rather than to engage in theological disputes. I would hope that this examination of the role of the cross as a symbol might at least interest others in recognizing the pervasiveness of this symbol and in finding out what all the fuss is about!



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have been teaching at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) since 1989. For the first 19 years, I had the pleasure of chairing the Department of Political Science. For over 15 years, I have been serving as Dean of the Honors College, and the job continues to provide the kind of interactions with highly motivated students that I enjoy as well as a sanctuary for my continuing research. Although I am quite comfortable as a political scientist, as the head of a college that includes students in a variety of disciplines and encourages interdisciplinary approaches, I have been able to work on projects like this one that is not strictly political but that still draws from the knowledge that I have gained through this discipline.

I am grateful for the continuing support of Dr. Sidney McPhee (President), Dr. Mark Byrnes (Provost), and to other deans and colleagues at MTSU. I am grateful to the staff at the Honors College, especially my administrative assistants Wendi Watts and Connie Bartemus, and for graduate student Jeffrey Keever, for helping me with a host of issues in connection with research and Clark Wilson for helping me with formatting and other issues. Over the course of the last few months, I have bent just about everyone's ear on the subject of the cross, and I know that Susan Lyons, Marsha Powers, Sandra Campbell, and Cynthia Phiffer, were especially helpful.

My wife Linda continues to be a good sounding board and reminded me that I should not omit Hot Cross Buns from the discussion. I have called upon both our daughters, Virginia Tehrani and Rebekah Hatmaker, for suggestions, with the former being helpful with a number of issues related to the legality of public displays of the cross and the latter providing some

examples of T-shirts and other items of clothing with cross themes. Matthew Hibdon suggested the addition of an essay on Thomas Kinkade, Judy Albakry directed my attention to the Chapel of the Cross in Sedona, Arizona, and Jeffrey Keever helped me check on the order of my bibliographical entries.

Professor Ken Paulson proved especially helpful in locating some titles of popular songs that deal with the cross, Dr. Dereck Frisby helped me locate a speech on the origin of the Confederate flag and its cruciform imagery, Dr. Michael Federici provided some guidance on Roman Catholic views of the cross and the crucifix, and Dr. Carroll Van West confirmed research I had done on Cross and Bible doors. I fairly consistently go to my associate dean, Dr. Philip Phillips, especially for information on works of literature that deal with the cross.

The individuals at the Walker Memorial Library have continued to help me secure books and articles through interlibrary loan in a timely fashion. Every time I write a new book, I have been grateful to be living at a time when so much qualify information is available through online search engines like Journal Storage (J-STOR), West Law, Google Scholar, and others. At a time when there appears to be an increasing digital divide in grade and high schools, these resources have done much to level the playing field for scholars at college and universities, and I remain grateful to be at an institution that values scholarship enough to provide such access.

In the process of writing a book like this, I have accumulated many debts to scholars whom I have never personally met but whose insights spurred my own thoughts and often pointed me into new directions.

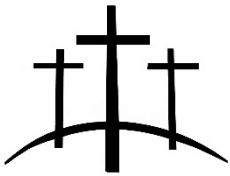
As an individual who works relatively quickly and often has multiple book-length projects going at the same time, I often am more than half-way through a volume before I begin seriously to think about who is going to publish it. At a time during which the COVID-19 virus has thrown a monkey wrench into the work of many publishers, I am grateful to Adam Rummens, Sophie Edminson, Amanda Millar and others at Cambridge Scholars for helping me see this book to fruition.

Although this is a book of scholarship rather than devotion, I still consider myself blessed to have been able to study a symbol that is so central to Christianity and that so complements earlier works that I have done on both the Bible and prayer in American public life. One of the pleasures of writing books about religious subjects is that I almost always have a song that I can

whistle or sing to go with them, so I probably should also commend my family and staff for being tolerant of such feeble efforts.

Although I realize that not everyone will attribute the same theological significance to the cross as other Christians and I do, I hope that this book will at least explain why the cross is so often the “crux” of the Christian message.

—John R. Vile, Middle Tennessee State University



INTRODUCTION

I was educated as a political scientist and have spent most of my life as a college professor and administrator. I published my first book in 1991 and have gained increasing pleasure from publishing such works in the years that followed. Although most of my writings have focused on interpreting written texts, such as works of political theory, court decisions, the Declaration of Independence, and the U.S. Constitution and the people who wrote them, I have become increasingly fascinated by the role that nonverbal symbols play in our lives. This book is one of several that I have authored on such symbols as the U.S. flag, the Liberty Bell, and the National Anthem.

My interest in political documents and symbols led naturally to my interest in religious documents and symbols, which are often tied to them. This is thus the third of three books that I have authored on religious subjects. The first, and most massive of these, was the reference guide that I did on *The Bible in American Law and Politics*. As a Protestant who believes that we derive our most valuable information about God from the Bible, it is perhaps predictable that I would have begun by writing a book on it. That book led me to examine the role of prayer in American public life, which in turn led me to this.

Both Protestant and Roman Catholic theology emphasize the importance of Jesus' death and subsequent resurrection as a means of finding peace with God and securing eternal salvation. As a matter of history, Protestants, especially those who succeeded Martin Luther, have been far more reticent (particularly in early American history) about displaying the cross, and

especially the crucifix. Whereas the Catholic Church emphasized depictions of Jesus on the cross, Protestants were fearful that the object would become an idol and lead to the violation of the Second Commandment. As a consequence, many Protestant churches did not display either a cross or crucifix well into the nineteenth century, when attitudes began to change. Apart from Jehovah's Witnesses (who believe that Jesus was crucified on a stake) and members of the Latter-Day Saints, who rarely display the cross and have warned their adherents about wearing jewelry that depicts it, most contemporary American churches, whether Catholic or Protestant, display one or more crosses, and many are named Calvary, or Mt. Calvary, after the hill on which Jesus was crucified.

The Regular Baptist church in which I was raised in Luray, Virginia was named "Mt. Carmel" (the site of Elijah's vivid and victorious encounter with the prophets of Baal) rather than "Mt. Calvary," but we had far more songs on the latter than on the former. Indeed, our songs, sermons, and prayers were saturated with allusions to the cross. We sang "The Old Rugged Cross," "At Calvary," "Calvary Covers it All," "At the Cross," "Near the Cross," "Nothing But the Blood," "There Is a Fountain," "There Is Power in the Blood," "Jesus Paid It All," "Tell Me the Story of Jesus," "How Great Thou Art," "Redeemed," "Up Calvary's Mountain," "He Could Have Called 10,000 Angels," "Lead Me to Calvary," "Glory to His Name," "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," "There's Room at the Cross for You," and "What a Wonderful Savior." We had equal confidence in the belief that Christ had died for us and that he had risen from the dead, which we expressed through such songs as "He Lives," "Up from the Grave He Arose," and "Because He Lives."

One of the warnings that I remember from childhood, and that I may have interpreted overly literally at that time, was that when I sinned, it was as though I were crucifying Jesus all over again, which was certainly not something that I wanted to do. In a related illustration, which I was delighted to find described in a recent book (Rutledge 2015, 115), I was warned that sinning was like driving a nail into a wooden post, perhaps meant as a representation of the cross. When God forgave us, it was like pulling the nail out, but the nail holes (the bad effects that sins had caused) still remained.

Although some individuals and churches in America have created monumental crosses, and courts have become the focus of disputes about the display of war memorials and other depictions of the cross on public property, I have been unable to find any book that deals comprehensively

with the cross in the United States. There are certainly notable monographs on the theology of the cross, and its implications for race relations, feminism, LGBT rights, and other contemporary issues, but, much to my surprise, there is not even an index entry to either the cross and the crucifix in ABC-CLIO's excellent two-volume treatment of *Religion and Politics in America* or the equally impressive *Oxford Handbook of the Bible in America*. Although I understand that the cross is a far less dominant symbol in the United States than it is in parts of Eastern Europe, in Quebec, or in Latin America, which could undoubtedly use their own guides to the subject, such a central symbol of Christianity surely deserves more attention than this in a nation like the United States where such a majority of citizens identify themselves as Christians and which many further identify as a Christian nation.

The Development of the Cross as a Symbol

The symbol of the cross did not, of course, originate in America, and, as a result, most histories of the cross rightly focus on early Christian, rather than on early, American, history. Deuteronomy 21:23 indicates that, even before the Romans began using crucifixion as a punishment for slaves and for perceived political revolutionaries, individuals who were hung from trees were considered to be cursed by God. Although the gospels do not dwell excessively on Jesus's suffering on the cross, they provide enough information to make it unlikely that Jesus' disciples, who had been either oblivious to or shocked by his claims that he would so die, regarded his crucifixion as anything but a tragedy until they began to get word three days later of his resurrection.

St. Paul noted in 1 Corinthians 1:23 that, although he preached "Christ crucified," the idea was often a "stumbling block" to the Jews and "foolishness" to the Greeks [gentiles]. In a supreme irony, he and other early Christians came to believe that Jesus' otherwise humiliating death had become the means of salvation for believers, which God had further vindicated by resurrecting him from the dead. By contrast, a leading historian of the cross observes that "By the second century, traditional Roman polytheists clearly found the idea of a crucified god ridiculous if not abhorrent. Their perspective was understandable. How could any powerful and immortal god be subject to a humiliating and painful death? How could any believe that a crucified man should be a god?" (Jensen 2017, 11). Graffito from the Palatine Hill area near Rome depicts a donkey being crucified, in apparent mockery of Christians.

One difficulty is assessing when Christians began utilizing the cross as a common symbol is that many cultures had symbols that resembled some forms of the cross, especially in the shape of an "X" or a "+" sign (Steen 2011). Christians today identify the former as the St. Andrew's Cross and the latter as a Greek Cross. These and similar symbols were sometimes, in turn, enclosed within a circle and had radically different pagan meanings prior to Christianity, including the division of the world into four quadrants.

Evidence suggests that Christians began using the sign of the cross relatively early. One of the best pieces of evidence is a writing from Tertullian, an early church father. He observed that in addition to being used in baptismal ceremonies, Christians sign themselves "at every forward step and rising, at every entrance and exit, when we dress, when we put on shoes, when we bathe, when we dine, when we light the lamps, on our couches, on our seats, in everything we do, we trace this sign upon our foreheads" (Jensen 2017, 36). Over time, the Christian use of the cross as a symbol, especially the Latin Cross in which the vertical beam is longer than the crossbeam, appears to have superseded their use of an outline of a fish, or ichthys, the first letters of which stood for "Jesu Christos Theou Huios Soter," or "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior."

As some had warned, there was always the danger that a sign designed to point to what Jesus had done upon the cross would become converted into a magic talisman. Nowhere was this clearer than when, after purportedly receiving a vision of a cross before a major battle in 312 C.E., the Emperor Constantine the Great had the cross emblazoned on the uniforms of his soldiers, and who, after their victory, declared that Christianity would now be the official religion of the Empire that had once persecuted them. Just as the church became increasingly institutionalized, so too, the cross frequently became a sign of military might and conquest rather than of sacrifice and spiritual salvation. The cross would later become the primary symbol associated with the Christian crusades to liberate Jerusalem from the Muslims; to go on a crusade was "to take up the cross." The Knights of Columbus remain a prominent Roman Catholic organization. To this day, songs and books titles evoke the image of "the banner of the cross," "Christian soldiers," "soldiers of the cross," or "heroes of the cross." One of the tragedies associated with the crusades is that, as crusaders proceeded to the Holy Land with crosses emblazoned on their uniforms, in addition to targeting Muslim rulers and their subjects, the crusaders often killed Jews on their way, furthering the enmity that had developed between Christians and Jews in the preceding centuries. The crusades are also at least indirectly responsible for the system of heraldry, by which individuals from different