

A Cross Awry

by

Lord Northbourne

Studies in Comparative Religion, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Spring 1974) © World Wisdom, Inc.

www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

IN a modern re-arrangement of the interior of a church, a large wooden cross was on the point of being hung over the altar at an angle of 45 degrees or thereabouts, presumably for some reason claiming an “artistic” justification. The error was averted, but it may be of interest to consider why the original intention can properly be called an “error.”

The cross as a symbol of the sacrifice of Christ is traditionally placed in an upright position, with the “stem” vertical and the “arms” horizontal. When it is represented on a flat stone or on paper there is always a clear indication, by lettering or otherwise, as to which side of the surface represents the top, and the cross is placed accordingly; its symbolical orientation is then independent of the position of the stone or paper. Sometimes also Christ is depicted as carrying it, but then it is in a temporary position, which has of course its special significance, but is not the position in which its principal religious significance resides. That significance is centered on the circumstances of the historical event of Christ's death, which itself is central to Christianity. Therefore the upright position is an essential part of the Christian symbolism of the cross, and must not be departed from whenever the cross is used as a Christian symbol.

A Christian need go no farther than that; nevertheless he can if he wants to, because the cross has a cosmic and metaphysical significance which includes and universalizes its historical and religious significance, without in any way invalidating or detracting from the latter. On the contrary, it universalizes and makes timeless the historical event on which Christianity is centered. The universality of the cross as a religious or “esoteric” symbol needs no emphasis: it is perhaps the most world-wide of all symbols in one form

or another, not always graphic. This aspect of the matter will be returned to later. Meanwhile, the scope of the cosmic aspect of the symbolism of the cross can be hinted at, but scarcely more is possible without writing a book, or even several books.

The cosmic significance of the cross can be considered from many points of view, of which the most relevant to the upright position of the cross is one which relates that position to the law of gravitation, the most ubiquitous and inescapable of the laws governing the universe of our experience. It is our direct experience of the operation of that law that is relevant, and not any supposed mathematical explanation of that experience. It may also be remarked in parenthesis that, if there are situations in which this law is apparently inoperative, as for instance, in an orbiting satellite, it is because the force (or tendency) of gravitation is neutralized locally and temporarily by an equal and opposite force (or tendency). The law is nowhere abolished. Our experience of gravitation is such that, wherever one may be, there is always a “down,” an “up,” and a “sideways.” This is conspicuously the case with our situation on earth which, although it is only a particular case of a general situation, is the one that affects us directly and is therefore most relevant to our habits of thinking and best used as an example to illustrate principles. We can only look at things effectively from what is ineluctably our human situation; and we can only look at them at all, and more particularly take any sort of synthetic view of them, in so far as the cosmos as a whole—the “macrocosm”—is reflected in man—the “microcosm.” It has often been said that man is “a little universe,” and it is this analogy between man and the universe that alone makes it possible for man, in one way or another and to a greater or less degree, to “comprehend” the universe, whereas no other creature can do so.

In our present situation, “down,” or earthwards, and “up,” or sky-wards, are specific directions wherever we may be on the earth at any given moment, if, as is natural to us, we take ourselves as point of reference. “Sideways” is at right angles to the vertical axis defined by “up” and “down,” and it is represented by a surface, the surface on which life is manifested. The surface of the earth is spheroid, as we know, but not as we feel. The manifestation of life is a resultant of the meeting at that surface of that which is above it

with that which is beneath it; the radiation of the sun vivifies the earth which otherwise would contain only the potentiality of life. The cosmic cross is everywhere; its center is wherever we may be.

This, very briefly, is the macrocosmic aspect of the matter, as it affects each of us directly, and it is outward with respect to ourselves. There must be something analogous in the microcosm, and therefore in ourselves as such; but being only analogous it will not be identical. There must be a “down” in which resides the potentiality of life, and an “up” which realizes that potentiality, and an “area” in which that potentiality is manifested. The “down” corresponds to the heart, the physical center of our being, without which there is no possibility of life, and it is the psychic center as well, the two being inseparable in life; the “up” corresponds to the head, the center of intellection and control; the area in which the two meet, and which is so to speak the instrument of their joint activity, corresponds to the rest of the body. This is only one example of how the “cosmic cross” is manifested within the microcosm as well as in the macrocosm. From a different point of view the human figure, upright with feet together and arms outstretched, is also analogous to the cross in a more evident but less profound sense. These two analogies taken together can confer on the traditional figure of Christ nailed to—and thus as it were forming part of—the cross, a profundity and a universality far transcending those of the ordinary conception, but not thereby invalidating it.

Such analogies as these and those that follow are in no sense accidental. They exist simply because everything in the universe, great or small, physical or psychic, obeys the same cosmic law, each in its own way and according to its own constitution. It will be noticed that the analogy between the geometrical symbol of the cross and the constitution of the human being is connected with the “uprightness” of both. (Man occupies an upright or “axial” position; the animals are horizontal; the plants are upside down: but this suggests a digression which need not be pursued). The word “uprightness” as applied to human character gains greatly in impact from these considerations. Is it less used in that sense than formerly? If so, is that because the qualities it implies are less regarded?

Thus the cross reflects the constitution both of the cosmos and of man; the

involvement of man proves (if proof were necessary) that its symbolism is not solely “material”—although Descartes did his best to limit it in that sense—but includes the psychic aspect of all that is “natural”. The separation of the two aspects is in any case quite artificial. Now, if the horizontal part represents a plane, the simple cross in most of its many forms is a two-dimensional projection of a three-dimensional figure. The horizontal plane represents existence in all its expansion, and we are on that plane, and indeed of it. Here our direct experience, which is always more real than any of its elaborations, comes in again. Wherever we may be, there is always not only an “up” and a “down” and a “sideways,” but the surface of that “sideways” is defined by another cross, that is to say, by two lines at right angles, corresponding in our case to a “polar” line and an “equatorial” line, the former North-South and the latter East-West. In other words, for us there is always, not only an “up” and a “down,” but also a “forwards,” “backwards,” “right” and “left,” or a North, South, East and West, according to whether we adopt a “dynamic” or a “static” point of view. Thus there are six directions, representing each of the three dimensions followed in two opposite senses, and each of those directions is qualitatively distinct from the other five. In the case of “up” and “down” this is obvious in the case of the other four perhaps less so. They are most easily considered in their “static” aspects, as N.S.E. and W. In the direct experience of inhabitants of the Northern hemisphere, North is cool, South is warm, East is dry and West is moist. In the Southern hemisphere North and South would of course be reversed, but the picture is the same. These natural characteristics also correspond to qualities or tendencies in the human soul, manifested on the plane of existence but not transcending it.

Such, very briefly, are some of what may be called the “human” aspects of the symbolism of the cross. In its cosmic and purely geometrical aspects that symbolism is of a daunting complexity. It is dealt with fully in *The Symbolism of the Cross*, by René Guénon; an English translation has been published by Luzac. It includes the symbolisms of the points of the compass, the winds, the seasons, the wheel, weaving, the swastika and many other things. Incidentally, the swastika is a vertical projection of the three-

dimensional cross, in which the plane of expansion is conceived as rotating. Its use as a badge has brought it into disrepute; nevertheless, like all the other forms of the cross, its essential significance is “sacred,” that is to say, it is relatable to the *philosophia perennis*, the undying wisdom that unifies all the sacred traditions, but is necessarily “mysterious,” “secret,” or “esoteric” because it transcends the conditions of terrestrial existence, and is therefore not accessible to a science or a philosophy based on observation. In general, the simpler the form of the symbol the less particularized it is, and therefore the wider is the range of its application. This applies fully to the cross in its simpler forms.

As an example of the complexity of these matters, an ambiguity in the interpretation of the cosmic symbolism of the cross may be mentioned, affecting the downward or earthward significance of the stem. The symbolism of “earth” can be either beneficent or the reverse, according to how it is envisaged. As pure potentiality, earth is innocent and virgin, only awaiting irradiation from above to become maternal and productive ; in this aspect it is the maternal principle, also symbolized (one has to be bold to add this in the present atmosphere) by the Virgin Mary. Was not her maternity “from above,” and did she not stand at the foot of the cross? On the other hand, as pure indistinction, earth is darkness and chaos; in this aspect it is the abyss, the place of obscuration and destruction. Such double meanings are frequent in symbols, but they always correspond to a reality on the plane of existence as well as on a higher plane. In the present case, earth is in fact at one and the same time the substratum of life and the destination of death. The cross itself can be a symbol of discord: two lines at right angles represent naturally two incompatible tendencies. Did not Christ himself say “I came to bring, not peace, but a sword”? These matters are not easy; but how could it be easy to understand the mysteries underlying all existence? Symbolism has to be absorbed rather than learnt; its comprehension demands an orientation of the whole being rather than a mental acuity or erudition.

The cross in its Christian version alone has many different forms. It is often multiplied by additional cross-lines added to the basic four, and so on several times over. Many Coptic crosses are of this character. It is also often combined with the circle—a symbol no less universal—as in many Celtic crosses. There are also special forms such as

that of the “Chi-Rho” where the two Greek letters “chi” and “rho”—the first two letters of the name “Christ” in Greek—are combined to form a sign which closely suggests a perspective representation of the three-dimensional cross with an added loop. The last-mentioned form has a curious affinity with the Ankh, the “looped cross” of ancient Egypt. The simple cross appears again on the Chinese “Trigram” where two horizontal lines represent heaven and earth, and a cross between them represents man—the “mediator.” In non-graphic form, the three “gunas” or “tendencies” of Hinduism, respectively upward, expansive, and downward, are regarded as inherent in the cosmos, and the qualities of being every are governed by their balance on that being. The rosary is met with all over the world in various forms; it is a multiple cross in which the cord is the axis and the beads the expansions. Their multiplicity suggests the rhythms through which the eternal act of creation is manifested in the universe.

Such instances are quoted simply as evidence of the antiquity as well as the universality of the symbolism of the cross, which is always an image of the principles on which the reality of the universe is founded. It is nothing less in Christianity, despite the fact that it is so commonly regarded as more limited in scope, as little more than a memorial of a historical event of particular significance in Christianity. The Christian interpretations of its significance are peculiar to Christianity, but the sign itself is not. To some people this fact may detract from the validity of the cross as a specifically Christian symbol; to others it may appear on the contrary that, if Christianity were to attach such fundamental importance to a symbol which was in any sense arbitrary and not founded on the deepest realities of the human situation, that indeed would constitute a serious detraction, not only from the validity of the symbol, but also from that of Christianity itself. That being the case, surely the sign as such ought to be taken to signify the universality of the essentials of Christianity rather than their specificity; that is to say, the universality, not of the outward forms of Christianity, but of the all-comprehending mystery, in itself indefinable, that inspires and validates those forms. And if that be so, there seems to be no justification for supposing that the essential significance of the sign is different in the case of the other religions that make use of it in one form or another,

even though they formulate that significance in different ways. The cross is woven into the very texture of our existence outward and inward, Christian and non-Christian. The word “woven” is the right word, for there is a symbolism of weaving closely connected with the symbolism of the cross.

The cross could even be taken as the symbol *par excellence* of the transcendent unity of religions.

God is One; the universe is multiple; it came from God and to God it must return. The One became many—this is the cross envisaged centrifugally—in order that the many might return to the One—this is the cross envisaged centripetally. In the Christian perspective this becomes: God became man in order that man might become God. Since man represents the universe before God, this perspective is sufficient in itself, though it may not be the only valid perspective.

That which has no name—the non-identifiable (because both ubiquitous and dimensionless) Center—deploys itself, first along the vertical (ontological—intellectual) axis, and then on the horizontal (existential) plane. Central to that plane, and therefore at its point of intersection with the vertical axis which gives access to what is above the plane and to what is beneath it, is man. All other beings are relatively peripheral and are denied that direct access. Man may look only outwards and get lost in the outer darkness of the periphery; or he may look inwards and find himself as he really is.

There remains the question of “artistic” justification. Art is symbolic and didactic; it is a means of communication more direct and less analytical than verbal communication, and far more powerful for good or for evil than is generally recognized. Formerly—for example in Europe before the Renaissance—the arts were directed mainly towards the adornment and preservation of religion and tradition. Their apparent simplicity and conventionality is in conformity with a realization, perhaps not always fully conscious, of the fact that the symbols can never be fully equated to its celestial model, and that therefore traditional rules alone can preserve it from subversive innovation. The resulting beauty is something more than purely aesthetic. Nowadays the arts admit no such

directing principle and no such discipline and have lapsed into chaos and ugliness. The natural world is seen, not as a symbol, but as a model; first in its visible aspects which are more or less neutral, but more recently and increasingly in its inferior psychic aspects which are anything but neutral. The didactic function of art is thus being exercised more and more in an anti-religious, anti-traditional and finally actively subversive direction, usually without any such conscious intention on the part of the artist. Of this tendency the incident now under consideration is a very minor, but perhaps not wholly insignificant, example.

The only purpose of these observations, in themselves so incomplete and leaving so many questions open, is simply to suggest the range of the implications of what at first sight may seem to be a trivial error; the misorientation of a cross.

There will come a time, brethren, when... the ten moral courses of conduct will altogether disappear, the ten immoral courses of action will flourish excessively; there will be no word for moral among such humans — far less any moral agent. Among such humans, brethren, they who lack filial and religious piety, and show no respect for the head of the clan — 'tis they to whom homage and praise will be given, just as today homage and praise are given to the filial-minded, to the pious and to them who respect the heads of their clans. The world will fall into promiscuity, like goats and sheep, fowls and swine, dogs and jackals,

Chakkavatti Sihanada Suttanta