



THE CRUCIFIX – A POWERFUL SYMBOL ... EVEN FOR MODERN DAY UNITARIANS

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Unitarians have traditionally had an aversion to the Christian cross, let alone the crucifix, which, up to a point, is perfectly understandable given our rejection of such key Christian doctrines as the Deity of Jesus Christ and the Atonement.

The prominent Theosophist, Bishop Charles W Leadbeater, after referring to the early Church father Origen as “the most brilliant and learned of all the ecclesiastical Fathers”, quotes from Dean Inge’s classic text *Christian Mysticism* in which Inge writes that Origen taught that “the Gnostic or sage no longer needs the crucified Christ”.¹ The present writer respectfully disagrees. As the Methodist minister Dr Leslie Weatherhead pointed out in a published sermon entitled “The Power of the Crucified and Risen Christ”, the Cross on which Jesus died is:

... the symbol of the greatest energy the universe knows – the divine love which suffers, but never bullies; which knocks, but never burgles; which waits, but never breaks down our resistance; and goes on loving and goes on loving until frankly there is nothing else you can do but surrender to it. It is overwhelming, never tiring, and utterly convincing. It expresses the highest values humanity knows.²

In 1965 my good friend and sometime spiritual mentor Bill Dent wrote a published article entitled “A Case for the Crucifix”. Dent put forward a solid case for a re-interpretation of the meaning of the crucifix, writing:

“If the Son of Man be lifted up I shall draw all men to me.” [Jn 12:32]

This lifting up implies both crucifixion and resurrection, for the latter is the outcome of the former, and dependent thereon. ...

The sign of the Cross is used repeatedly within our Liturgy, and each time it calls upon us to sacrifice the doing of our own wills so that the Life and Will of Heaven can be made manifest through us. ...

The Crucifix has been the inspiration and food of the Saints in their hours of tribulation. It is the signal that has sent them on to acts of selfless devotion and personal sacrifice for the spreading of the "Kingdom here on earth".³

Over the years the Australian priest Dr Ronald Rivett has, in several published articles and talks, put forward many cogent arguments in defence of the sensible use and meaning of the crucifix. He has written of this Power of the Crucified and Risen Christ in the following terms:

... [W]hat we see on the Cross is what Jesus *wants us to see* - a man filled with God, giving the totality of himself in sacrifice to a greater and higher good, as a matter of utter necessity. We see there, on the Cross, self-offering and self-emptying personified. We see a complete rejection of self-concern. And we perceive above all the *motivation* for all this – a wholly pure, selfless and universal love, which is indeed God's love fully manifest. Jesus is saying to us from the Cross: "This is the self-giving I want you *all* to attain. Only in this way can you awaken to new, full, timeless or eternal Life, in the Presence of the Father's glory. So take up *your* cross, and follow me." ... There is no need for us to be nailed to a cross! Crucifixion is not a stereotype of self-renunciation or self-forgetfulness, but an extreme example of it: a potent symbol that has been strong enough to stand the test of time, and to have sufficient dramatic impact on our consciousness, waken us out of complacency, and spur us to emulation.⁴

From an altogether different Christian tradition, the influential Baptist pastor John Piper, in his book *The Passion of Jesus Christ*, speaks, not dissimilarly, about what it means to follow Jesus and to undergo crucifixion:

In a sense, the Calvary road is where everyone meets Jesus. It's true that he has already walked the road, and died, and risen, and now reigns in heaven until he comes again. But when Christ meets a person today, it is always on the Calvary road – on the way to the cross. Every time he meets someone on the Calvary road he says, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). When Christ went to the cross, his aim was to call a great band of believers after him.

The reason for this is not that Jesus must die again today, but that we must. When he bids us take up our cross, he means come and die. ... "Whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me" [Mt 10:38].⁵

There is another sense in which the symbolic power of the crucifix appeals to the present writer, and it was never more beautifully and powerfully expressed than in a sermon delivered by one of the greatest American Unitarian ministers of all time, Dr A Powell Davies, who was for many years the pastor of All Souls Church in Washington DC and the author of many scholarly texts. Davies wrote:

And if we turn to the New Testament we have to remember that Christianity began, after all, not only with a life, beautifully lived, but with a certain man nailed to a cross. A man who cried that his God had forsaken him, yet somehow knew that he was not forsaken.

As I have often said, I have no use, myself, for the conventional Protestant cross, that shiny brass thing with no man on it. In that respect at any rate, the Catholics did better: they left the man on the cross. I could never accept a Catholic creed but I have known for years that the crucifix, a cross with a man on it, was at the real heart of Christianity and an ultimate authentic symbol. What it is trying to say to the world is that faith is not to be had cheaply; that if we will not reckon with the tragic we shall never know the deeper essence of religion; and I think it is also saying that not even God can take mankind off its cross until a world is made that does not crucify the true, the just and the loving; a world that does not stone its prophets and resist the living God whose spirit burns in what they say.⁶

Now, *that* is a mature vision of the cross (indeed the Catholic cross, or crucifix), coming as it does from a religious liberal in a church that, even in 1946, was very much a post-Christian one. Yes, there on the Cross, Jesus was utterly defenceless and vulnerable beyond belief. It seemed as if he did not even have the protection of God Himself: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46).⁷

The early Church father Clement of Alexandria saw Jesus, not so much as Saviour, but as Way-Shower and Exemplar, with the way being one of self-sacrifice and selfless self-giving. Only by such means could one be initiated into the “Mysteries of the Kingdom of God”. Former priest and Theosophist J J van der Leeuw writes that Clement understood Christ’s self-giving as being a living allegory of the need for our own crucifixion of our egos:

The message which Christ brought to man was not that life meant a crucifixion, but that through the crucifixion of our earthly self the spirit within could attain to the new birth.⁸

In more recent times Carl Jung referred to “the high drama of the life of Christ and how it is being re-enacted in the individual soul” as “the Christian archetype”,⁹ something which is highly reminiscent of, and extremely indebted to, Plato’s “archetypal ideas”. For Plato, the archetypes constituted “the intangible substrate of all that is tangible”.¹⁰ Plato’s theory of archetypes helps us to appreciate, interpret and apply to our own lives the life of Jesus, and the key events in that life. Thus, G F Maine, in the introduction to his anthology book *The Life and Teachings of the Master*, writes:

The passion-story, which is fundamental to all the gospels, presents five main episodes in the Life of Christ, and these correspond to successive stages of soul-development in the individual. (1) *The Birth*: The birth of Christ in the heart of the disciple; the awakening to a realisation of his own spiritual nature. (2) *The Baptism*: self-dedication to the service of the Master. (3) *The Transfiguration*: conscious realization of the Divine indwelling. (4) *The Passion and Death-Resurrection*: The sacrifice and death of all that pertains to the separated self-hood; complete self-surrender to the eternal reality of Love. (5) *The Ascension*: union, or at-one-ment, with the Divine.

Thus the beginning of the mystic drama, the birth of the soul into the human kingdom by

way of the gate of generation, becomes an ordered progression which ends with the ascent of the soul to the kingdom of the spirit and its union with the source of Light.¹¹

The present writer does not eschew this esoteric approach. Indeed, he embraces it with enthusiasm, and with the deep conviction that the so-called “Jesus story” is, at a very deep level known to us by spiritual intuition, symbolically representative of our lives and our journeying. However, without the historical Jesus, and *its* story, we have no real way of conceptualizing just what the words used in the Gospels to depict and describe the so-called “Life of Christ” actually mean. Jesus authenticates, actualizes and makes *real* and possible for us what is otherwise not only inscrutable but unattainable. This important fact - so often overlooked or even openly repudiated by Liberal Catholics - has been expressly acknowledged by Bishop Leadbeater himself:

The life of Christ is the prototype of the life of everyone of His followers. We too must pass through those stages, those steps, those initiations through which Christ passed. We must suffer with Him all the sorrow and the pain of Easter week, a veritable crucifixion of all that seems to man worth having; but he who endures to the end, he who passes through that test as he should, for him the glory of Easter is to be revealed, and he will gain the victory which makes him more than man, which raises him to the level of the Christ Spirit.¹²

For Unitarians, this is a vision of Jesus with which we should be able to identify, with both intellectual honesty and at emotional depth – redemption, or regeneration, in the form of being made *free from ourselves and from the world*, so that we can both find, and lose, ourselves in a greater and wider reality that is timeless and infinite, ultimate and ineffable. Identification with both the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith can lead us to a spiritual regeneration aided and assisted by the vicarious spirituality of the Man from Galilee who was able to say, with complete honesty and humility, “I and my Father are one” (Jn 10:30), but this can only occur in the manner referred to above to the extent to which we open ourselves and are otherwise responsive to the outpoured life of Jesus present both in the race consciousness and, mystically, in the depths of our own spiritual lives as part of the Presence, indeed Omnipresence, of the indwelling Divine life within us and also within all created things.

There is, in my opinion, a very real sense in which Jesus, and other holy ones, “saves” us from ourselves. If one is lost in a very dark and heavily wooded forest (in this case, a forest of largely self-imposed selfishness, self-absorption, self-obsession, loveless behaviour and a state of profound separation from others and from one’s true Self), and someone, in this case Jesus, can provide a means of escape and show you the way out of the forest - this state of spiritual darkness - and bring you back into the light of day, then that person may rightly be referred to

as one's saviour, metaphorically or otherwise,¹³ but we must still make the decision, and put in the effort, to leave the forest. No one else - not even Jesus - can do that for us. Sometime Australian priest and Theosophist Brian Parry expressed it well when he wrote:

As St Paul wrote to Timothy -
"Christ Jesus came to save sinners"
Saved, it should be noted, not from hell but from sin itself.¹⁴

Yes, "sin" has an "I" in the middle, and the essence of sin is selfishness, self-absorption and self-centredness. The present writer is not talking about salvation by blood or any form of expiatory or propitiatory sacrifice but "vicarious spirituality" whereby the Holy Ones - Jesus *and* others as well - are able "to show [us] the light [we] seek, give [us] the strong aid of their compassion and their wisdom".¹⁵ By means of their expanded consciousness, the Holy Ones are able to perpetually stimulate all who genuinely seek their spiritual energy and self-giving and enter into their spiritual sphere of influence, so that we can be freed "from our old Adamic, sinful self, into the freedom of a 'life hid with Christ in God'".¹⁶

For me, Jesus' spiritual potency and energy - derived from his self-giving and overcoming - are part of the life of the race and are also a living symbol and allegory of that cosmic Self-giving by which the whole world is nourished, sustained and maintained. What Jesus, in particular, and other Holy Ones have done is to establish a consciousness of Spirit, whether in the form of an "oversoul" or otherwise, into which all committed followers may enter and be nourished and strengthened.

¹ C W Leadbeater, *The Science of the Sacraments*, 5th ed (Adyar, Madras [Chennai]: TPH, 1967), p 129.

² L D Weatherhead, *That Immortal Sea* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953), p 187.

³ W T Dent, "A Case for the Crucifix", 3:2 *The Australian Liberal Catholic*, March 1965, pp 8-9.

⁴ R [A] Rivett, "The Great Unknown: 'I AM the Way - The Way of Jesus'" (adapted from a retreat talk, cont'd), 26:4 *Communion*, Christmas 2008, p 83 [emphasis in the original]. Dr Rivett also makes the point that Jesus gave up his life voluntarily, as his ultimate act of sacrificial self-giving, consistent with the way he lived his entire life. From a cosmic or more esoteric point of view, Bishop Wedgwood states (1929:68) that the sacrifice of Christ, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, was "an act of self-oblation, made voluntarily" (*The Larger Meaning of Religion*, London: TPH, 1929) [Kessinger Publishing reprint], p 68.

⁵ J Piper, *The Passion of Jesus Christ: Fifty Reasons Why He Came to Die* (Wheaton IL: Crossway Books, 2004), pp 94-95.

⁶ A P Davies, "Where Now is Thy God?" Washington DC: All Souls Unitarian Church, 8 December 1946. Online: <<http://www.dmuuc.org/Davies/WhereNowIsThyGod.html>>.

⁷ This notion of the "ultimate defencelessness" of Jesus on the Cross is a major theme in the writings of the sometime Lutheran pastor and neo-orthodox (but otherwise quasi-liberal) theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

⁸ J J van der Leeuw, *The Dramatic History of the Christian Church from the Beginnings to the Death of St Augustine* (Adyar, Madras [Chennai]: TPH, 1927) [Kessinger Publishing reprint, 2005], p 70.

⁹ A K Elliott, *Higher Ground: The Soul's Return to the Whole* [Alternative title: *The Christian Mysteries as the Soul's Seven-Stage Journey to Higher Ground*] (CLC Press On-Line Publication, 2000-2003), Ch 1. Online: <<http://murraycreek.net/higher/About.htm>>.

¹⁰ R Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), p 12.

¹¹ G F Maine, *The Life and Teachings of the Master* (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1953), pp 17-18 [italics in the original].

¹² C W Leadbeater, "Easter", 3:2 *The Australian Liberal Catholic*, March 1965, p 1.

¹³ This is a way of recognizing the redemptive power of the Cross whilst eschewing altogether, as we must, crude and otherwise unacceptable notions of expiatory and propitiatory sacrifice.

¹⁴ [J] B Parry, "Penance - The Key to Freedom", 1:1 *The Australian Liberal Catholic*, December 1962, p 7. Cf 1 Tim 1:15 ("This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief").

¹⁵ Cf *First Ray Benediction*, Liturgy, pp 222, 240.

¹⁶ Parry, *op cit*, p 7.