

# The Contradictions of the Cross - James B. Klee

**1972 - Originally published in International Journal of Symbology, 3(2) (p. 4-12).**

**Reprinted in Points of Departure (p. 219-230).**

The basic paradox or contradiction of the cross - and perhaps of all sacred signs - becomes manifest once one tries to talk about them. In part, the very "talking about" is responsible. But I think it goes much deeper than that. Generally most of us use our sacred symbols or sacred signs. The controlling factor in their use then becomes that motivational pattern which happens to be dominant and not necessarily the signs' intended meaning or even their original meanings. The symbol becomes a tool towards some end often unstated and even unrealized, if not "unconscious."

We see this immediately when others "use" signs. Think of the difference between the meanings of the swastika to a Nazi and its meaning to a Hindu in India. To most of us who are in our middle years or older, the Nazi swastika has become one of the most alarming signs we have experienced. So alarming indeed that we are shocked at the realization that the cross and swastika are related symbols. In India its meaning is closer to that of an all-embracing unity, a four-armed and four-cornered all-inclusiveness. In a curious way, the swastika reveals one of the more emphatic differences between the East and West - that of all-embracing inclusiveness, non-duality, non-separateness of the East as against the emphasis on oneness, singleness, or unity of the West. Eastern ideas seem to us complicated, muddled, paradoxical, enigmatic. We often pride ourselves on our singleness, clarity or lucidity, purity, directness, unity. The East's multi-armed gods - even two-(or more)-faced or multi-headed - even seem physically abhorrent and we accuse them of idolatry because of the many forms their gods take. Yet we have only one God and he is not to be represented ordinarily. "We" are tempted to say there is only one God, ours of course. "They" are trying to say God is One or All is God. "We" tend towards the purity of exclusiveness partly in consequence of this very symbolic emphasis on the "not this, not that" - and certainly not the other. "They" tend towards the "not this, not that" - alone; "no-thing" (says Suzuki); "nothing special" (says Alan Watts).

We see this same paradox in the Star of David. Again, in India it is seen as a six-pointed mandala, inclusive of six aspects at least. In the Indian context one senses the inclusiveness of the symbol. Yet its more recent use is to merely label one group, either as

a mark on a "foreign" group to be excluded, or even within the group to exclude others. Indeed the star often is a symbol of singleness in the arithmetic sense - be it one of the 13 original colonies, or one of the 50 states, or the lone star state of Texas. In each Western case, the symbol is used to express exclusive pure singleness. Seldom is the sense of the multiple aspects of the figure developed.

The Christian Cross suffers also the same use. We tend to emphasize its singularity rather than its multiple-ness, its four-armedness. Indeed, in the Orient it is often accepted in its singularity but mounted within the folds of the lotus so that the petals may regain the sense of multiplicity despite the sense of exclusive one-ness or only-ness communicated by the Christian Mission. In the Far East the single-ness of the Buddha (the only possible competitor in singularity to Christianity) is softened by the pyramidal form of the seated figure. Thus the contact with the whole is emphasized. By contrast, the slenderness of the base of the cross makes the whole symbol, if not top-heavy, at least needing of suspension "from above." This invisible suspension can make it somehow a little out of touch with life - although not necessarily, as we shall see later. But it is not surprising that it is also a favorite death symbol, especially en masse. Everlasting life perhaps is suggested, but somehow not here. Even the standing Buddha or Bodhisattva stands in the lotus blossom with its multi-pointed petals, a blossom that will rise out of the often dried slimy mud of the village tanks and ponds.

In the East, symbols are often developed to emphasize the sense of multiple union. The Yin-Yang union of opposites, the embracing couples Siva and Consort, the many positioned sexual activities represented on the walls of the temples of India at Konarak or Khajuraho (although ubiquitous throughout India, Nepal, and Tibet) are examples. The copulation of the young Buddha with his consort is often depicted in the Tibetan Tanka scrolls, which represent the many aspects of Buddha's existence. The use of the sexual act in Tantric yoga as part of the totality (albeit the left-hand path) again emphasizes the inclusiveness potential in the symbol which, by and large, we diminish here in the Western world. In brief, the cross does not have to be a pure singularity; we have made it that way as we have used it for our own other purposes.

The West has perhaps made its symbols into objects to a degree not found in the East, at least in my experience except for Islam. In India every sacred sign is somehow locally anchored and relevant. Here Rama trod, Krishna loved, the Buddha meditated, Vishnu

stood. The Ganges and Jumna still flow in familiar places. All belong to the very earth, still the center of the living. The West is mostly a displaced culture, its center long under foreign occupation. Except for the Dark Virgin of Guadalupe, Christianity is not native to America. St. Thomas was as legitimate a mission to India as St. James to Spain, and one senses in Madras an authenticity among those still loyal to St. Thomas not present among us. We are a converted, displaced group who have "read about it" in a book which we carried on our travels about the world. Although there may be some more anchored or native quality to Rome, for some of us still the fact of its secondary-ness, its temporal-ness, its accent on human power and control tend to be predominant. Somehow Rome - like the cross and the church - has been erected by human hands and is, thereby, always suspect. This "constructed" aspect - rather than the more "discovered" quality of sacredness in India - is most marked.

And, perhaps that is why we are so suspicious of what to us seems the most "pornographic" quality of the sacred signs of the East. There is a direct stimulating quality about Eastern signs that make us think of idols or what we call pornographic literature. The tremendous immediacy of the visual, auditory, or olfactory contact of Eastern sacredness is familiar to us primarily in a pornographic context, for it is primarily here we wish our signs to be that direct in their effect. And - of course - to our souvenirs of travels, our pictures of our friends, or our relatives we permit this quality. But in the sexual sphere it is almost as if beyond our control not to immediately respond to the so-called obscene. Hence we censor as much as possible in this area. Here the word or picture too quickly becomes flesh.

The incarnation of the word is a very difficult problem in psychology. (Of course, I am merely a psychologist.) Incarnation is apparently something we do ourselves to our symbols - not something that we can force, count on, stimulate. We can take advantage of someone's preoccupation of the moment - but set out to procure it as in education, religious or otherwise - and we fail most assuredly. Advertising tries its best to take advantage of it, yet the very fact of its enormous prevalence testifies to - at best - an occasional success. If propaganda (political pornography) really works, why the elaborate enforcement machinery that always accompanies it?

Yet there is a nagging sense of the "real-ness" of at least some symbols - a sense of inherency of meaning, if only in origin or discovery, despite the colossal overlay of convention and social agreement. Humpty Dumpty can say "a word means what I want it

to mean.” With written and spoken language he is undoubtedly correct. Even the calligraphy of written Mandarin needs considerable explication to reveal an underlying abstract picture. Meaning is certainly not obvious to the naïve reader to whom it should be if the symbol is to be immediate in its effectiveness. Yet the structure of calligraphic Chinese maintains an archetypal and mandala-like quality that may be immediate in its effect. It is more “organic” or incarnate in that sense. Contrast the multi-propriety sense of the character given in its visual total immediacy with the strung-out list of properties we use in labeling or describing. At least this is true where the Chinese and we both do not have a single “name” for the totality. Again, if we do have a single name we suppress the parts and lose some of the origin. To the next generation, our single name is fairly arbitrary and best learned by rote. Despite the often farcical hunt for Greek, Latin, Saxon, etc. roots, we rarely get back to an archetypal root. Indeed, we still put the “real dirty” parts in Latin to prevent the sense of immediacy which more colloquial language might convey. (Or was this for the extra special titillation of the well-trained - “in” - Latin expert?) No, the root is not necessarily of the sign itself, but once again “organic” - and this organic quality was at least in part the multi-dimensional quality of its context.

We all remember how foreign other languages were - how real and obvious our own - yet we learn even our own. Few sounds of the infant are universally maintained in language. Perhaps the suggestions of a complex - around mater, mother, matter, material, mom, etc. - is all we have. And this reflects the surrounding fact of motherly care for the infant as much as the noise ultimately chosen to represent the particular mother. After that an arbitrariness of choice sets in to emphasize the most representable sign-aspect. We like to think of apples as red despite the fact we peel them and eat the white part. (The best apple I ever ate was green and on a French boat in the Indian Ocean. I am hard-pressed to represent it by green - unripe to me; France - it could have boarded from any port from Spain to India; Boats don't grow apples, neither do oceans. Yet because I cannot find one like it here, it will always participate of its context of a French boat on the Indian Ocean, and green. The French name I've heard, but it will never represent those apples for me unless my present context is changed, for France if indeed that is where they came from. I like to think they could be from Djibouti.)

This global context the Gestalt psychologists have long recognized. We accept meat as red or white - intrinsically so - not as something with the color added as an afterthought

(although this is also becoming common). We are revolted by green meat. In other words, despite the paradigms of the conditioned reflex, we normally develop our representative signs in a reasonably more "natural" context. In that sense, the word does not become flesh - as much as emerge from the incarnate context of family, social group, and its ongoing history. In a way there is no problem about incarnation at all. A mystery, yes - in the sense that life, mind, or soul is a mystery, such-ness as in Zen, it is there. We only make it a problem because of our Western tendency to purify, clarify, and reduce our incarnate symbols to objects - out there, controlled, possessed. But it is also a discovery that we do this and a challenge to us to do it wisely.

In a way that we have occasionally done it well have come the fruits of science and industry, insofar as these have been good. Many of these have been of great value, although worth the profound sense of alienation from the sacred. Indeed, many of us take a vitamin pill with a more profoundly sacred sense than we participate in Communion. And, of course, we also can use our sacred signs badly. The cross as burned by the Ku Klux Klan shows how low it has been permitted to sink in the modern world. The cross in the suburbs rarely rises above the level of a fraternity pin. And historically, it has fared as badly in the hands of its possessors. It was the hilt of the Crusader's sword. It continued its functions as a device for crucifixion even, as in the Penitentes sect of New Mexico - a one-time Spanish fashion taken over-seriously by "colonials."

To get the "object" back into the womb of the mind or the chicken back into the egg is basically impossible. Potentially, both are there as possibilities all along. To give priority to object or mind or body or spirit is essentially an attempt to mechanize any one of these. The vogue of material mechanization so recently current is no worse than the mechanization of the soul of previous ages. In this respect, Jung's notion of the archetype has helped me (but I refuse to accept it as an hereditary animalistic thing, as it was first proposed). An archetype is not a compulsion on the human mind to develop as part of the genetic unfolding as such. We are not a bundle of innate ideas which come automatically in their time despite us. I prefer to think of the archetype as the best we are able to come up with in the contexts we repeatedly face. The cross is in this sense an archetype. It is a symbol that preceded Christianity and developed independently of the Christian tradition. The Maya Indians had a cross as a tree-of-life symbol. And, as such, its top-heavy hovering quality gave just the needed touch of mystery to the living things it represented,

such as the towering trees of the tropical rainforest give in their huge splendor. It also gives the sense of man or bird on two legs only, or the crane and bushman on one. In this sense, like all unbalanced experiences, there is an emergent sense of the dynamic. As a symbol of the moving four-folded inclusiveness it is hard to beat. That others (non-Christians) have seen it too does not diminish our exclusiveness so much as enhance our universality. We have all come to similar conclusions, we are in agreement in our symbols. This, it seems to me, is what is useful and important about the Jungian insights into the archetypes. We share with our neighbors and our predecessors a few basic ways of saying what we realize as important to us.

In a curious way the cross was such a specifically Christian object in my experience – such an exclusive singleness, that this multiple aspect of it came to me long after I had seen it in the four-armed representation of Siva Nataraja and in the technical aspects of multidimensional statistical mathematics as used in Psychology for factor analysis of tests. Then the full meaning of the multiplicity of the cross came to me. Until then it had been a fraternity emblem, the place which designated an end - as a marker in a graveyard, a terroristic warning, a device for crucifixion used by the Pagan and Christian alike for sadistic glee. It had merely been a one, not a whole. It had been more a sign of death than of life. Siva, on the contrary, invited one to the multiple mystery of things – their many-sidedness, their ambiguity. I also discovered that one of the Confucius books of what we would call an ethics was titled The Spring and Autumn Annals. Not good and bad, summer and winter, purely separate or divided entities - but each with the other as an intrinsic part. The Yin-Yang symbol of Taoism also gives both - and Yab-Yum, Shakti-Shakta copulating couples of India and Tibet gave both. The Siva-linga embedded on the yoni as a single expression of all, together, some carved in anatomic detail as to leave no doubt of the sense of 'sexual union still maintains the sense of wholeness' - at-one-ment, as the recent Zen writers emphasize. The Egyptian life cross also gives this with the ankha's ellipse attached to the top of the T of the cross.



In fact, of all such symbols, the ankha came first to me and in good Jungian sense took possession of me. Indeed, of terms of my own iconography I wreathed the cross (about the base) to help fill it and make it more complete (at least "sexually").

One thing, however, which puzzled me for years about Eastern iconography was the relative absence of children. In some of the Khajuraho statues children are present at the sexual embraces, but as participants. Very few of the gods or goddesses seem to be holding a child in a parental way. I have one delightful little modern ceramic from China of an old white-bearded gentleman holding a bare-bottomed infant on his shoulder, but I've seldom seen a feminized Kwan Yin or Kannon hold a child. I say feminized because historically we must remember that Kwan Yin was male, and Eastern male-ness is compassion at its height. The feminine is the 10,000 things of all-knowing wisdom.

In other words, one senses in Eastern iconography a tendency to go round and around to come back upon itself, to be eternal in its changing, to deal in cycles. Here, the Western Madonna and Child takes on an unexpected strong quality of generation which the mutuality of the Shakti-Shakta does not give. And, in this representation of mother and child emerges a more human sense of time as history - a small, little, almost trivial sense compared to the vast cycles of the Hindu cosmology that makes the time scales of modern science seem unimaginative and petty. The symbol of mother and child, one generation to the next, is not entirely one of equivalence. It is one that is unbalanced, dynamic, not ending, forward-leaning, or moving. It is one-dimensional in time, because unfortunately it is a fact that time's arrow moves one way only. Here, of course, the dynamic singleness of the cross is appropriate. One can only go one place at a time. For a displaced group on the move this arrow-like directive quality was especially appropriate. It suited specialization, travel, scientific technology, indeed religious mechanics and technique, reading, ritual, interpretation as a guide to action. Yet it neglected the fact that there were many different places to go, many specialties, many techniques, many rituals, not the

one. And the paradox of celibacy amongst the leaders of a group devoted to mother and child further illustrates the blindness to the complete potential of the symbol.

I am not sure Christianity is aware of this, but in a way it did not have to exterminate its ancestral religions completely because the historical aspect which developed did not always demand exact repetition generation by generation. Not that it did not and does not try, of course. But where earlier groups almost completely eradicated prior religions as to make their own timeless, existing unchanged from "the beginning," Christianity preserved the "Old Testament" as well. We have recently experienced two devastating attempts to rewrite history according to some new scheme so we can see how tempting this can be even today. Perhaps the tension of generation in the symbolic representation of Madonna and Child enabled the new to come without destroying the old or conforming to it. And if I may be permitted to use Toynbee's "Post-Christian" label for Western man, there was hardly any attempt to exterminate the previous Christians. Post-Christians didn't have to. They believed in progress through history and science.

But with the realization of short temporal changes - changes of generation - the symbol takes on an added aspect not before realized and discussed. The symbol not only expresses and represents it, the symbol is also the best means we have to point the way ahead. In a static world the symbol may displace or even replace reality. We live in a world of symbols - a "culture" as some anthropologists would call it. As we look back upon the cultures of Maya, Toltec, Inca, or Christian, they seemed to have all the answers - or at least all the questions. There was little new except the everlasting disappointment and frustration in failing to reach again some ancient "Golden Age." Why it didn't work was easier to ask than to think of other possibilities. One of my teachers, however, could say our greatest achievement is our ignorance, that we not only don't know enough but that we may even have to ask different questions. Here, of course, symbols and those who develop them and perhaps even invent them lead the way. The role of the artist, religious or otherwise, has always served this function too. Herbert Read can see in modern art forms for things as yet unknown. The sense of "all-ness" is now infinitely greater. We can even begin to imagine that which is not familiar on this planet as we probe possibilities in a space beyond our earlier concept of the heavens, indeed of Heaven. Now the symbol becomes an indicator into that which is unknown and may be unexpected. Although its mandala qualities are still necessary to those catching up with the already known all, the symbol



must also serve as a prediction of and pointer towards that yet to come. And although the Existentialist exaggerates the jump into the unknown next, he is correct in saying we are responsible to it and before it. The symbol has now a dangerous aspect insofar as it may point in the wrong direction – not permanently morally wrong such as we could censor – but temporarily wrong, irrelevant, inappropriate under the circumstances. This is very different from the prior world of a final culture.

Yet, here too the cross may still serve. If restored to its full-ness of its two arms akimbo, and if seen in dynamic imbalance of a walking figure - only one of whose legs touch the ground at the time, the other being in suspended searching for the next step - it will be a very stimulating symbol, sacred in its ability to reassure the act of extension into the world still to come. Here again the artist can resume his proper religious function, for the signs which reveal themselves epiphanously in his or our experience are the shortcuts which abridge history and make each present moment so much our own and the presence of the immediate "all" available to us now. For what else have we? None of us can live outside the world of symbols, nor have we for the past 100,000 years. If we cannot say it, talk about it, it does not exist for us personally - although it may be the death of us, or the life of us too for that matter. It is the epiphany of symbolic realization on the part of the artist which gives us the means to continue beyond the present, to make presence familiar and recognizable to all of us. Yet a poor guess, a distorted sign may make things bad, if not worse. The fact of orienting towards the yet obscure makes the act of symbolic presence unusually responsible by prior standards. Today we are in a situation where we by active will re-endow symbols. We let "X" equal what we mean as best we can. We have the responsibility of giving the sign its meaning, especially in its directional aspect. Signs not only represent what has been for us, but we are responsible for "representing" them for what comes next. The fact that all symbols have at one time or another been used neurotically, defensively - like shoulder patches, fraternity pins, or even worse, chips on the shoulder to be merely defended - must not blind us to the fact that to the artist they can come again in an original creative way. Indeed they will again and again, for that is the best we can do. These are the best we can create. And if they are congruent with that of others, other lands, other times, even other species, perhaps we can be a little proud and very thankful. For they are relevant to the whole of life.

