



THE ATTITUDE TOWARD THE SYMBOL OF THE “CROSS” IN CHRISTIANITY

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Abstract. *This article gives a well-grounded account of the symbol of the cross in the Christian religion: its history, the legends concerning its origin, and the types of crosses. The valuable views of scholars on the symbol of the cross are studied comparatively, and the appearance of this emblem both in history and in the present day is presented in its symbolic expression.*

Keywords: *Christianity, cross, symbol, Jesus Christ, salt, sulphur, mercury, nitrogen, the Bible, types of crosses.*

INTRODUCTION

There are many views about the history of the origin of the cross. The cross is not an invention of Christianity or of the antique world; rather, it was venerated as one of the sacred emblems of the ancient states, including Chaldea, Phoenicia, Assyria, and Egypt. The cross is a symbol that spread to almost all regions of the world: it found its reflection in the mysteries (secret rites) of ancient Egypt and in the symbolic emblems hung on the chests of many statues spread across Central America. The Aztecs, Maya, and Toltecs knew it as a sacred emblem. In Tibetan mandalas the “sky” is expressed in the form of a cross, and this shape was in turn considered a symbol of goodness. In Chinese and Japanese sources it is noted that this symbol held a great status (Reflections on the Gospel of Matthew, 2001:152).

The Cross in Early Christianity

Representatives of the Christian religion call the cross the best of the symbols of all religions. Historically, the cross – depicting two intersecting lines – served in the ancient culture of certain states as a religious symbol that protected them. As stated in J. C. Cooper’s book “An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols,” the northern side of the cross was considered a symbol of strength and victory and, together with the north



wind, also expressed the head and the intellect. The southern side signified the south wind, fire, and feeling. The eastern side signified the east wind and the heart, regarded as the source of love and life. And the last edge, the western side, signified the gentle west wind of the land of spirits, the breath of death (Cooper, 2006:149).

The cross is present in the houses of worship where the rites of the Christian religion are performed and in the homes of believers, and it is also used as a decoration. In the first centuries of the emergence of Christianity, crosses were made without the image of Jesus Christ. The depiction of the crucifixion mainly began to appear in the 5th–6th centuries. In the most ancient of them, Jesus Christ is depicted with a garment on his body and a crown on his head, and on the cross, until the 9th century, in the form of a living, resurrected, and victorious human being. Only by the 10th century did he begin to be depicted in a deceased (dead) state.

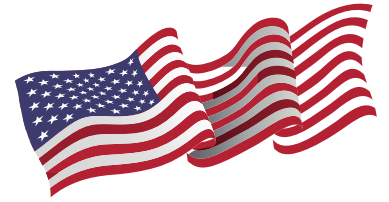
Archaeologists put forward the view that the cross served as a symbol of light for the Rosicrucians and the alchemists, since the letters “L,” “V,” and “X” could have been taken from one side or another of the cross. The alchemists used it to express four substances: salt, sulphur, mercury, and nitrogen. According to other information, earth, water, fire, and air signified the four sides of the cross. In addition, in many magical and mythological rites of antiquity the cross was considered a weapon in the struggle between the devil and evil spirits (Rienecker & Maier, 1999:513).

The Orthodox – one of the three principal branches of Christianity – regard any cross as a symbol of faith and in the likeness of the crucified Jesus Christ. This information pertains only to the four-pointed cross, and it does not mean that the cross became the symbol of the Christian religion only after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Yakovlev, 1977:217).

The Legend of Constantine and Helena and the Finding of the True Cross

There exist a number of views and legends about the history of the origin of the cross, which is considered the symbol of the Christian religion. In particular, in the book “Religious Signs and Symbols” by the scholar Tayevsky, who researches the symbols of Christianity, the following information is given.

Constantine performed the duties of emperor in Rome in the year 306. According to the legends, he belonged to a royal family, and his father raised him in the teaching of the pagan religion. In 312, Constantine and his enemy, the commander Maxentius, were



pagans, while his mother, Queen Helena, accepted the Christian religion. Constantine's mother spiritually prepared her son for the battle that would take place to win the title of Roman emperor. Before the decisive battle, at sunset, Constantine and his army saw in the sky an enormous cross on which was written "By this you shall conquer!" At night, Jesus Christ entered his dream and commanded him to depict the symbol of the cross on the shields and standards of his soldiers. When he awoke in the morning, deeply affected by this dream, he hastened to carry out God's command and ordered the Greek letters "chi" and "rho" – the Christian monogram – to be placed on the soldiers' shields and standards. In the final battle around Rome, Maxentius was defeated. After Constantine had taken Rome, he ordered a statue of Jesus Christ holding a cross in his hand to be erected in the city square. During his reign, Queen Helena always cared for propagating the Christian religion and building churches and houses of worship.

One day, Constantine asked his mother to go to Palestine to find the cross on which Jesus Christ had been crucified. The emperor, considering himself indebted before God, wished by this to glorify Him. As soon as Helena came to Palestine, she set about searching for the cross on which Jesus Christ had been crucified. But for a long time this gave no result. At last, from an old Jew, she learned that the cross had been buried in a secluded place, and that at exactly that spot there was now a pagan temple. The queen immediately ordered that place to be excavated. Indeed, there she found three crosses and, on those crosses, an inscription reading "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." But no one could say on which of the three crosses Jesus Christ had been crucified. At that point a gravely ill woman was brought, and Patriarch Macarius told her to lean upon the three crosses in turn. When she approached the first and second crosses, the woman felt no relief, but when she approached the third cross she was healed at that very moment.

Thereupon Helena, Patriarch Macarius, and all the people who were there recognized the third cross as the cross on which Jesus Christ had been crucified, and they began to worship and kiss it. Emperor Constantine, for his part, was baptized before his death; before his baptism he had considered himself not entitled to perform this sacred rite. Because Constantine and his mother Helena rendered great service in spreading the Christian religion, the church raised them to the rank of saints (Tayevsky, 1993:149; pravoslavieto.com, n.d.). This cross, after some time, passed into the hands of the Persians. Only in 628 was it recovered by the Emperor Heraclius. On the occasion of the



finding of the cross and its recovery, the Orthodox Church every year celebrates the 28th of August as the “Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross” (pravoslaviето.com, n.d.).

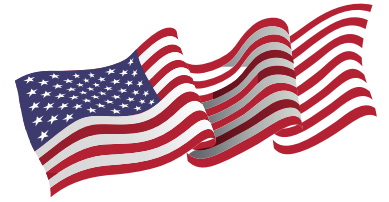
The Form, Elements, and Material of the Cross

Scholars of Christianity teach that the cross is to be understood in a narrow and a broad sense. In the narrow sense, the cross is the perfect symbol of Jesus Christ, who sacrificed himself on precisely this cross. But in the broad sense, the cross has come to serve as a symbol of the washing away of sin and of finding salvation (Handbook for the Clergyman, 1983:174). In what shape and form the cross of Jesus Christ was has not been established by archaeologists. According to the legend of the 4th-century church writers, the cross of Jesus did not differ from the crosses of the two robbers crucified together with him.

It is well known from history that, as an instrument of execution in the ancient world, the cross did not have the same form in different parts of the Roman Empire: sometimes in the form of a piece of wood set upright in the ground; sometimes in the form of two iron bars set in the ground resembling the sign “X”; sometimes in the form of two pieces of wood, of which the longer was set upright in the ground and the shorter attached horizontally across it – resembling the letter “tau” (Tillich, 1955:116).

It is evident that the cross is the principal sign in Christianity, and in the history of its origin and in all the information pertaining to it, the sanctification of the cross is connected with the event of the hanging of Jesus Christ upon it.

In many cases, the horizontal part of the cross was attached not to the upper part of the vertical beam but lower down, taking on the appearance of a four-pointed shape. According to archaeologists, the cross had the following elements: the sedile (seat) – a horn-shaped piece of wood placed at the middle of the front part of the upright beam, lengthwise, so that the person being crucified could lean against it or sit upon it, serving as a support for the feet. A tablet was placed above the head of the person being crucified, on which the crime he had committed was written (Ulyanov, 2010:302). That on the cross of Jesus Christ, besides the tablet written in three languages – “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews” – there were a sedile and a foot-support, is reported in their works by philosophers such as Tertullian (ipckatakomb.ru, n.d.), Irenaeus (gorod.dp.ua, n.d.), and Justin (azbyka.ru, n.d.) (Vinogray, 2001:74-79).



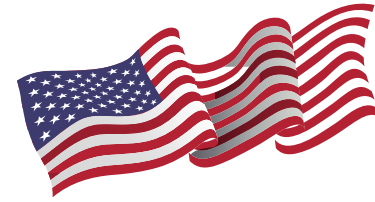
Although crucified persons were usually bound with rope, Jesus Christ was fixed with four nails: two in his hands, and the remaining two driven into his two feet – not into one nail, as depicted in the icons of the Western churches from the 13th century onward. According to the Gospel, this is stated thus: “Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my finger where the nails were, I will not believe” (John 20:25). During this punishment, the clothes of those crucified were removed, but according to many researchers, the clothing on the waist and thigh of Jesus Christ was left. This is proved for us by Nicodemus’s “Apocryphal (church-unrecognized) Gospel,” one of the most ancient monuments of Christian literature (apokrif.fullweb.ru, n.d.).

There also exist diverse views as to the fact that the cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified was made from various kinds of trees. For example, the lengthwise beam was made of cypress, the crossbeam of date-palm, the foot-support of cedar, and the inscribed tablet of olive wood (Eliade, 1959:169). As the instrument of Jesus Christ’s salvation of the world, the cross has been considered the great symbol of Christians from the earliest days of the church.

Types of the Cross

Views regarding the form of the cross are of very great practical significance for the Russian Church. While in the West the Catholics and other branches of Christianity venerate the four-pointed cross, millions of Russians who hold to the ancient traditions venerated a cross with eight sides. They regarded four-pointed and other crosses as heresy (bid‘a).

In the various Christian churches several types of the cross are in use. They differ mainly according to the branch, the region in which they are located, the rank and degree of the clergy, and the types of customs and rites. Among the most famous types of the cross one may cite the Lorraine cross, the Papal cross, the Gamma cross (gammadion), the iron cross bordered with a silver edging, the Celtic cross, the cross bordered with the heads of the Beda (fleur-de-lis) cross, the Coptic cross, the Greek cross, the saltire (X-shaped) cross, the “Red Cross,” the Calvary cross, the cross of the participants of the Crusades, the crosslet cross, the cross of peace, the Holy Cross, the potent cross, the cross of St. Peter, the patriarchal cross, the Latin cross, the “Eastern cross,” and the anchor cross.



CONCLUSION

In sum, the cross is the central symbol of Christianity, yet its roots reach far back beyond Christianity into the sacred emblems of the ancient civilizations of the Near East, Egypt, and the Americas. Within Christianity, the sanctification of the cross is tied to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and to the legend of its finding by Helena, while the form, elements, material, and many types of the cross developed over the centuries and came to distinguish the various churches – most notably in the Russian Church’s attachment to the eight-pointed cross. Thus the cross unites a long pre-Christian symbolic history with the central event of the Christian faith.

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