The Cross and Creation in Christian Liturgy and Art

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Foreword

What Christians believe about salvation is never expressed completely just in formulae or creeds. Christian faith has always been *enacted*, a matter of physical acts and gestures, ritual dramas of transformation. And Christian art, in its origins, is not about decorative extras or helpful illustrations of stories and doctrines; it is itself a sort of enacting of faith, a means by which we are brought more fully into the mystery being celebrated.

Christopher Irvine, in this original and absorbing book, weaves together what Christians say and what they do, ritually and imaginatively, so as to bring into focus the often hidden core of our beliefs about salvation. We are reminded that what happens in the cross of Christ is the restoration of all things, a renewal of the very stuff of the material world. This event is a new beginning, a re-entry into paradise; and Christian worship affirms precisely this, that we are now brought back into a lost intensity of *presence* to both the world and its maker. The ancient symbolism of the cross as the tree of life in the garden of God's presence is shown to be of cardinal importance to our fuller understanding of what is done once and for all on Calvary.

This study challenges any view of Christ's crucifixion that reduces it either to a human tragedy or to a transaction that 'saves souls': we are taken back into the heart of the biblical and early Christian conviction that this is where the Second Adam breaks the bonds of captivity that have diminished and frustrated humankind and re-clothes men and women in their proper dignity. With an impressively wide range of scholarly reference matched with a lucid and appealing style, Canon Irvine leads us on an exhilarating journey into seeing the central mysteries of faith with new eyes – a true baptizing of the imagination.

Rowan Williams
Master of Magdalene College
Cambridge

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This book is the culmination of a good number of years reflecting on the cross. I gained much from discussion with students at the College of the Resurrection, Mirfield, and with those in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Leeds who attended my classes on imagination, art and theology. Mirfield was in many ways the crucible of much that has come to fruition in this book; and let

me again express here my affection and gratitude to the Brothers of the Community and the College of the Resurrection. I am also grateful to Robert Willis and my colleagues here at Canterbury Cathedral, who have given me the space and much encouragement to continue to reflect on the place of the cross in Christian life, worship and culture. This book has been written not during a period of study leave or a sabbatical but in the margins of a ministry that is set in one of the busiest cathedrals in England. No wonder then that the place, its art and its worship have seeped into what has been written in these pages. Indeed, the sheer wonder of this historic building, its creative community and the rhythm of its shared daily prayer have provided a most congenial setting in which to write this book. Last but by no means least I must thank Rosie, who in kindly reading first drafts of the manuscript realized why so much time was spent during our summer holidays in Italy tracking down crosses in churches, museums and art galleries.

I am also grateful to the following for allowing me to reproduce images as illustrations in this book. To Robin Jensen for her photograph of the Kelibia font in Tunis; to Roger Wagner for his photograph of his *Tree of Life* window at Iffley. I am also grateful to the Chapter of Lichfield Cathedral for allowing me to reproduce their photograph of the Tree of Life nave altar, and to Leonie Seliger and Buffy Tucker for assistance with the Canterbury photographs.

I am grateful to the Community of the Resurrection for permission to cite from the hymn *Immense caeli Conditor* and three psalm antiphons. Other citations are fully acknowledged in the text and fall within what is deemed to be reasonable use. Nevertheless, I here express my gratitude to these authors.

Finally, a work such as this is stimulated and sustained by the regular pattern of daily prayer, and I dedicate this book to two priests who have directed the worship that I have been privileged to share during the long gestation period of this book at Mirfield and at Canterbury Cathedral. These two priests, George Guiver, a member of the Community of the Resurrection, Mirfield, and Robert Willis, the Dean of Canterbury, happily celebrate 40 years of ordained ministry in 2013. This book is affectionately dedicated to them in gratitude for their ministry.

Christopher Irvine
Canterbury Cathedral
O Sapientia, 2012

Introduction

The cross is not only the ubiquitous symbol of Christianity, it is also the very crux of Christian life and worship. A study of Christian origins would reveal how St Paul regarded the very gospel as 'the word of the cross'. He then presented that Word as being ritually enacted in the water ritual of Christian baptism, whereby the candidate entered into the death and resurrection of Christ, and in the Eucharist, which was a ritual showing forth of the death of Christ. Through the ages these rites have been celebrated in specific architectural spaces, which themselves are marked with the sign of the cross. In the design and ground plan of many church buildings the symbols of cosmos and the cross effectively elide, so that on entering the church building the visitor in some sense steps into the cross. Candidates for baptism have been, and in many traditions continue to be, marked with the sign of the cross to indicate their belonging to Christ. In turn, the baptized are sustained in that relationship through the Communion of the eucharistic bread, itself frequently marked with the sign of the cross, and the chalice, which represents the transcendent self-giving of God in Christ on the cross of Calvary. In addition, the president at the celebration of the Eucharist may well make a manual sign of the cross over the gifts of bread and wine during the Eucharistic Prayer.

The cross, in other words, is displayed and enacted in a multitude of ritual acts, and in physical signs inscribed on walls, altars and fonts, each being framed within a designated holy space. From the fourth century the cross was crafted to function as a reliquary, often to contain a fragment of wood from the 'true cross', and then it came to be fashioned as a separate object to be placed on the altar or carried to lead liturgical processions. But what the cross may represent is also shown in what was once known as 'high art', that is, in the plastic arts of

mosaic, sculpture, paintings and glass. The crucifixion became a classic and central subject in the repertoire of painting, and many crucifixions are now to be seen in the art galleries of the western world, so much so that, as Neil MacGregor once noted, Asian visitors to the National Gallery are somewhat mystified by the prevalence of images of suffering in the Western pictorial tradition.[1]

The crucifixion of Jesus Christ is the primary reference point of the cross, and so it is inevitably an object of terrible beauty. Indeed, from Augustine of Hippo to John de Gruchy[2] in more recent times, Christian theologians have articulated the way the disfigured image of Christ crucified not only subverts aesthetic sensibilities but, in the mangled figure of the Crucified, presents the transfiguring beauty of God. In this reading it is this divine beauty that transforms the Christian into the likeness of Christ, the image of the invisible God and divine beauty. But even in this reading the cross is not simply an emblem of universal human suffering, for as in the New Testament, the cross represents both the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ. Later, the cross was seen to be embedded in a whole related pattern of Christian understandings, attitudes and outlooks. The doctrine of the cross, in other words, not only belongs to a doctrine of the atonement but also to our Christology – our understanding of who Christ is – and our doctrine of creation; that is, an understanding of how the triune God relates to the natural environment in which our lives are set. Indeed, Christian doctrines belong to a whole system of related views and understandings that in turn shape the very pattern of Christian living.

For this reason, I shall range broadly over a variety of evidence, textual, ritual and material, in order to recover a sense of the cross that, in many epochs and types of Christianity, has been subsumed under the narrower compass of a more personal, not to say individual and often juridical reading of the divine plan of salvation, and has even been eclipsed by the understandable twentieth-century emphasis upon a 'suffering God' on the cross. In the aftermath of two world wars, European artists such as Graham Sutherland and Francis Bacon took the image of the Crucified as an emblem of the human body breached and

1 An observation made in a discussion following the Scott Holland Lecture delivered by Neil MacGregor at King's College London, November 2008.
2 See John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001).

broken, and theological commentators demanded a historical realism in the portrayal of the cross of Jesus. And yet there were some voices that recalled how the word 'cross' in the writings of Paul and John in the New Testament denoted not only the suffering and death of Christ but also his resurrection. In a considered essay on the symbol of the cross, a pre-eminent Swedish theologian of the atonement, Gustaf Aulén, countered a call to the Church of Sweden to abandon the elegant polychrome medieval art that survived in its old churches and to portray Christ's crucifixion with a brutal realism. Aulén argued that the cross and resurrection belonged together in the witness of the New Testament, and that as a symbol word, the cross held together in tension the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ.[3] The challenge continues to this day as we seek to recover the sense of the symbolic in Christian religious discourse and practice. In part this requires not only a seeing of what is to be seen but a more attentive looking at the design, decoration and art of our places of worship.

And so my first aim in this study is to recover a way of seeing, and for many of us it will be a seeing through our visually cluttered churches to the more focused liturgical art of churches and baptisteries, and to read this in the light of the ritual actions that occur within the architectural framework of our church buildings. Equal attention will be given to what is seen, and what was first commissioned and made for these spaces – to what we may define as the material culture of Christianity. The expression 'material culture' was given particular impetus in the field of history by Eamon Duffy, whose work *The Stripping of the Altars* led to a renewed interest in Christian material culture.[4] It has now become a key issue in the curating of sacred objects in museums and galleries and in the sociology of religion.[5] Concern for the design,

3 Gustaf Aulén, *The Drama and the Symbols: A Book on the Images of God and the Problems they Raise* (London: SPCK 1970), p. 167.

4 'A novel feature of this book (*The Stripping of the Altars*) was the sustained use of the material culture of medieval Christianity – the architecture and furnishings of parish churches and shrines, surviving religious imagery in glass and paint, in wood and stone, and printed (and often illustrated) devotional books. This material culture, more often than not the product of lay investment' – Eamon Duffy, *Saints, Sacrilege and Sedition: Religion and Conflict in the Tudor Reformation* (London: Bloomsbury 2012), pp. 4–5.

5 See, for example, the work of Crispin Paine, one of the founders of the journal *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief*, and David Morgan, particularly his edited collection of essays, *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (London and New York: Routledge 2010).

decoration and furniture of Christian worship is not entirely new in the field of liturgical studies, but I hope that my own work here makes a modest contribution to this fruitful methodology of reading texts, architectural spaces and what occurs within them, and their furnishings and art in relation to each other.

In his work on the English Reformation, Duffy straddled the world of church history and art history, specifically in his study of rood screens. My own liturgical interests have led to an examination of the decoration of the key foci of the performance of the rites of baptism and Eucharist, in particular of altarpieces and baptistery and font decoration, treated respectively in Chapters 2 and 7 of this present study. The identification and the tracing of a specific theme, namely the iconography of the cross and its emerging and repeated linkage with the theme of creation, inevitably narrows the scope of what may be said. But more positively, this thematic approach means that the study is more focused in its attention and in the trajectory of its enquiry. A comprehensive study on the iconography of the cross would require a multi-volume work, but what is presented in these pages, while far from being in any way exhaustive, is a particular mapping of the meaning of the cross. Fundamental to my approach has been a liturgical hermeneutic that has enabled me to both contextualize and read the material and visual evidence in relation to its place and function in Christian worship. This adopted methodology has yielded the sequence of terms in the title: the cross in liturgy and art.

And so although the approach followed in this study ranges broadly over pictorial art, architecture, liturgical rites and text, the focus is on the cross, and particularly on how that image functions in terms of the worship of the Church. The pressing and persistent question throughout the pages of this book is the meaning of what is figured in the imagery of the art of the Church and in the rites that are celebrated in its architectural spaces. Further, in examining the pictorial in relation to the ritual, and the object in relation to its environment, a reading emerges that again and again links the cross with creation. The examination of both textual and material evidence will be selective, as in any thematic study, but what is presented here may well be sufficient proof to show that images of the cross in relation to creation are part of the repertoire of the imagery, both visual and textual, that Christians have used in different epochs and locales to present a public understanding of the two definitive Christian rites of baptism and the Eucharist, and

in the liturgies of the cross. To say that something is found within a repertoire of understandings and stock of images is to say no more than that it is one element among many, or that it is a single aspect of the whole.

More can, however, be claimed about the linkage between the cross and creation when we examine the Franciscan tradition of liturgy and art, for here, as I intend to demonstrate, is a paradigm of the cross and creation. It is not that we are constructing a model out of the elements of Franciscan prayer and the art of their churches, but that there is an intrinsic connection between the cross and creation in these sources, a linkage that clearly resonates with our contemporary preoccupation with the environment and its degradation through pollution, the acceleration of climate change through CO_2 emissions and the rapacious exploitation of natural resources. In part, the corollary of the Christian being grafted into Christ in baptism is the task of caring for this fragile planet, and the urgent task of safeguarding its increasingly threatened ecology.

Many years ago, Paul Bradshaw cautioned against a simple application of the Latin tag *lex orandi, lex credendi* (the law of prayer directs the law of belief) and drew attention to the distance between a theoretical understanding of the primacy of worship and the actual experience of worship.[6] More careful enquiry into the historical development of texts for worship has demonstrated that there is a symbiotic relationship between our forms of worship and doctrinal understandings. Nevertheless, although our liturgical texts are shaped by our doctrinal perspectives, it is perfectly valid to argue for a connection between Christian believing and practice, and practice in the widest sense of the term. For, beyond the theoretical, one can observe how faith is in part shaped and grounded in practice,[7] and therefore extend the *lex orandi, lex credendi* axiom to include the *lex vivendi*, giving us *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi*, which can be rendered 'as we worship, so we believe and live'.

What, we may well ask, does our view of the cross commit us to in terms of the choices we make and actions we undertake? A few years ago, following a presentation I made to a group of Episcopalian clergy in the diocese of Chicago on the figuring of the cross as the tree of

6 See Paul Bradshaw, 'Difficulties in Doing Liturgical Theology', *PACIFICA* 11, June 1998, pp. 181–94.
7 Morgan, *Religion and Material Culture*, p. 17.

life, a participant asked me if I could think of a practical outcome that would follow from holding such a view of the cross. I immediately said that one could plant a tree for Jesus. Having seen the vast expanses of corn growing in the Midwest, this was not a flippant comment. If we believe that God's purpose to renew the face of the earth is presaged in the cross, then implications should be drawn regarding agricultural practices, which in turn affect climate change and global food distribution. The framing of these implications and strategies for their effective implementation really belongs to another book, and one written by another author. Suffice it to say here that the ethical outcomes of Christian belief and worship are necessary and, indeed, urgent matters.

Worship, of course, is directed towards the triune God, and elsewhere I have written about its ultimate purpose as being the shaping of the worshipping community to be Christ's Body, and of how the individual worshipper should be both open to and expectant of being changed, specifically of being formed in the likeness of Christ, by being encountered by God's Word and the Holy Spirit.[8] Christians are made and not born, and in Chapter 7 we will examine both material and textual evidence to see how Christians are made through the water and the Holy Spirit in the celebration of baptism. These aspects are already woven together in the imagery of Scripture. In figurative vocabulary that combines language about water, the Spirit and the flourishing of trees, the prophet, for instance, foretells how God would make a people his own: 'For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring. They shall spring up like a green tamarisk, like willows by flowing streams' (Isaiah 44.3–4).

My intention in this book is to explore and examine further the two-way relationship between worship – both the act of worship and our understanding of what occurs in worship – and art, specifically the iconography of the cross. There are many ways of seeing, but when the cross is seen in a liturgical setting it is regarded as a sign of life. This sign generates the motif of the living cross, a motif that is explored in detail in Chapter 5. The cross as a living cross illustrates the way in which the cross as a sign of God's saving work in Christ is inextricably bound

8 Christopher Irvine, *The Art of God: The Making of Christians and the Meaning of Worship* (London: SPCK 2005).

up with creation, a linkage that we will demonstrate is seen repeatedly in the liturgical art of the cross. This linking of the cross and creation is wondrously shown in the St Clemente apse mosaic reproduced on the cover of this book, and yet this lavish artwork, as we shall see, is closely related to the cross on which Christ died on Calvary. And so Good Friday, representing the suffering and death of Christ, is a constant point of reference throughout this study. But the cross, that noble tree commemorated on Good Friday, is the sign of new life, the life that burgeons in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. Christ came to be figured as the tree of life, and from his cross the greening of creation is prescient. For there on the cross Christ 'handed over' his spirit, anticipating the promised pouring out of the Spirit when 'the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest' (Isaiah 32.15).

It could be said that such a reading of the material evidence linking the cross and creation reflects a cultural preoccupation, if not a neurosis of our own time. No one would question its topicality, but it should also be noted that a keen observation and prophetic reading of nature is well established in Christian sensibility. The theme of the transformation of nature is often seen in the English visionary art of Samuel Palmer, and the Jesuit Oxford poet Gerard Manley Hopkins was deeply affected as a poet and as a person by the landscape and the natural world. In his poem 'Binsey Poplars' (felled 1879), Hopkins laments how we have 'hacked and hewn': 'O if we but knew what we do / When we delve or hew / Hack and rack the growing green!' The tradition of the true cross has a deeper literary and artistic tradition, and its ultimate reference is to the tree of life, that tree that speaks as much about loss as about hope, of a curse as much as a promised healing, and of a new life gained through a sacrificial death and mediated in the rites celebrated by those whose lives have been configured by the crucified and risen Lord.

This is the message of the Easter gospel, and a recent study of an Easter sermon by the seventeenth-century bishop, Lancelot Andrewes, draws attention to how Andrewes saw that the *Triduum Sacrum* – the three days of Holy Week beginning with the Lord's betrayal in the garden of Gethsemane on the night of Maundy Thursday to the dawning of a new day in the garden where Christ had been buried on Easter Day – holds together the aspects of a single yet temporally extended event.[9]

9 Kenneth Stevenson, *Liturgy and Interpretation* (London: SCM Press 2011), pp. 182–4.