Do Christians Worship the Cross? [1]

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Some time ago a friend told me of a Jewish friend of his whom he invited to attend a church service. "I'm sorry," said his friend, "but I cannot go into a church. We [Jews] believe that idolatry is wrong, and Christians worship the cross as an idol." I must admit to being a bit stunned when I heard this story—I had never before heard the accusation that Christians are idolatrous for worshipping the cross. Was this accusation perhaps true? What is the relationship between Christians and the cross?

My friend's Jewish friend had likely seen the inside of churches on TV or perhaps even walked past churches with open doors, and then had seen a big cross in the front of the church. Indeed, the church which I attend has a large one which occasionally hangs against the back wall. It could also be that the Jewish friend may have been thinking of a crucifix. Not all Jews would object going into a church. And not all churches have a big cross in the front. But in this article I am going to address why Jews and Muslims should not think that Christians are committing idolatry.

I shall start by providing some background information. Those pressed for time can skip ahead to the answer which I am going to provide.

What is Idolatry?

First it is necessary to briefly define what idolatry is. Idolatry is the worship of a something material, such as a physical *object* ("idol"). Usually (and historically) this has been statues and carvings which represent a god. But also, especially in Christianity, more abstract idols are discussed which are more relevant to contemporary life. A classic example is money (Matthew 6:24). When a person "worships" (indirectly) money, it is when it becomes a person's primary objective, the thing towards which he or she devotes all of their time and effort to acquire, in the hope that money will provide happiness, fulfilment and peace. However, as mentioned, historically idolatry referred the practise of worshipping an object as if was a physical manifestation of the god which it represented. Judaism1, Christianity2 and Islam3 all condemn idolatry as evil, because

1. it affirms the existence of a god other than the one which is believed to really exist, and/or
2. it tries to associate a physical object or concept with an immaterial and spiritual being which has no shape or form, and
3. is explicitly commanded as sinful by the deity.

And so it *seems* as if Judaism, Christianity and Islam all agree on condemning idolatry. Whence, then, the accusation that Christians commit idolatry?

What is the cross?

Over time, each major religion has become associated with a symbol. Usually there were no committees or divine decrees which established a single symbol to represent that religion. Rather, a symbol had some special significance within the religion and people both inside and outside that religion soon recognised it. A religion might have more than one such symbol, or it might have been a stretch to find one symbol which could commonly be agreed upon to represent that religion.

In the early days of Christianity there were several symbols which people used as a shorthand for their faith. The one was the Ichthus. "Ichthus" a Greek word (ἰχθύς) which means "fish" and alludes to Matthew 4:19, where Jesus uses the analogy of fishing to mean preaching the gospel[4]. Another symbol was the Chi-Rho (☧). These are two Greek letters (chi, "P", and rho, "X") which are superimposed on each other. They are the first two letters of the Greek word Christos ("ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ"), which is translated in English as "Christ". "Christ" is Greek for the Hebrew word "Messiah", which means "anointed one". It is the title of Jesus as God's anointed (chosen/set apart) One for the salvation of mankind.

The ichthus was a symbol of Christianity since the early days of the faith.

Both Ichthus and Chi-Rho are still used by Christians today, but the symbol which has come to famously represent Christianity all across the world is the cross. A cross[5] was an instrument of torture: one recognised by Roman writers to be the most cruel, painful, degrading and shameful[6]. The pain which a person being crucified had to endure was so intense that a new word came into existence to describe it: *excruciating* (Latin: *excruciātus*), which has the same root as "cross" (Latin: *crux*). There was nothing honourable about being crucified. So much so, that Christians were mocked by the Romans for worshipping a man who was executed on a cross (see the Alexamenos graffito [2]). Also, until this day, Islam (which also claims to consider Jesus as a prophet, *Isa*) teaches that Jesus did not die on a cross, as such a fate is unthinkable for a prophet. Possibly for these reasons (especially the first one) the cross became the most recognisable symbol which Christians used[7], as non-Christians were generally disturbed by the thought of it (back in antiquity, the sight of a cross conjured up far more gruesome images than it generally does today—analogous to us today thinking of, recalling or imagining a deadly car crash).

What is a crucifix?

A crucifix is a cross with the figure of Jesus hanging on it. These are typically found in Roman Catholic churches or "high" churches. "Low" churches (typically Baptist, Reformed and Evangelical) churches usually avoid crucifixes in favour of the more plain crosses.

Jews and especially Muslims may argue that it is idolatry to have a depiction of Jesus carved out of wood, stone or metal. However, two things need to be borne in mind in this regard:

1. While Christians do believe that Jesus was fully God, we also believe that He was fully human. He therefore has a human body (which is an integral part of His being), just as He had human emotions and needs.
2. At the Second Council of Nicea of AD 787—which was the seventh ecumenical council—representatives of all of Christendom affirmed that it is permissible to have images depicting biblical figures, including Jesus (so that, at least, the Gospel story could be visually represented to illiterate people).

So while outsiders may think of crucifixes as idols, Christians do not, although some Christians do avoid them in order not to cause exactly this confusion among non-Christians.

Is the Cross and Idol?

The short answer is no. The band *Mike Mains and the Branches* [3] have put it most eloquently [4]:

> I've got a crucifix above my bed, so I forget not to pray, when I go to bed; but that can't save me. no that can't save me.
>
> It's not the wood that saves, it's the man who came and wore it. It's not the cross that saves, it's the man who came and wore it; and He wore it well!
>
> He wore it well!

The point of these verses is to declare that a crucifix is merely a symbol meant to remind us of what Jesus *did*: the purpose which He came to fulfil. The symbol itself should never become the object of worship: rather, it should inspire us think on the sacrifice which Jesus made—and our need for it—and to turn to the living *God* in prayerful reverence.

Roman crucifixion was incredibly painful and degrading. It was designed specifically to maximise the suffering8 of a person and (if left unassisted, unlike the criminals who were crucified beside Jesus) it could take days before someone died on it9. It was for this reason that Jesus had to die by crucifixion: His sacrifice was the ultimate one, where He had to atone for the sin of all of mankind, and therefore it was only fitting that He die in the most painful and humiliating way. It was a terrible penalty. So much so, that even Jews and Muslims cannot accept it, because they believe that a saint could die on a cross, for a person nailed to a "tree" is considered cursed10. But Christians recognise that if it was not for the death of Jesus, that punishment would be fitting for each of us. What is more, we can rejoice, because God has power over death and Jesus resurrected on the third day.

Conclusion

I personally have never witnessed Christians specifically bow down to a cross or crucifix to worship it. If ever, it was in reverence of the Saviour who died on it. Some might argue over semantics, but I do not think that detractors should spend too much time on it: when a Jew prayers toward Jerusalem or at the Wailing wall, do they worship the stones and masonry, or in devout remembrance of the promises (Abrahamaic and Davidic) which God made with their people? And does a Muslim praying towards Mecca worship the stones and masonry, or do so to be united in the Qibla with his brothers in the faith? Christians put crosses in churches to be reminded of the terrible price that was paid for their salvation; it is a symbol of death and life: because Jesus's resurrection followed His crucifixion, crosses are put in graveyards as reminders of the promise that death is not permanent.

The cross itself should therefore not be worshipped. It is not a charm or amulet or something else which holds some mystical power in and of itself11. Its purpose and function is to (graphically, especially in the case of a crucifix) remind us of the price of our sinfulness, and the incredible patience, grace and love which Jesus demonstrated in coming down to earth at a very specific time in human history to be humiliated and executed on our behalf. The cross itself symbolises murderous death: that makes it vile and should not be venerated. But what it *reminds* us of is the price and penalty of our sins, and that as a result, we live in *debt* and *gratitude* to Jesus. His subsequent resurrection proved His sovereignty, and therefore He is worthy of praise and honour and glory.

> "We love the martyrs, but the Son of God we worship: it is impossible for us to worship any other." — paraphrase of Eusebius in *The Encyclical Epistle of the Church at Smyrna Concerning the Martyrdom of the Holy Polycarp*

- 1. Exodus 20:4–6 *et al.*
- 2. Acts 17:16–34 *et al.*

- 3. Surah 4:48 *et al.*
- 4. It is also an acronym in Greek for "Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, Θεοῦ Υἱός, Σωτήρ", that is, "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour".
- 5. Various shapes of crosses were used for execution. Some were straight poles, others were T shaped and others were shaped like the one which we recognise today. While we do not know for a fact the shape of the cross on which Jesus was hung, the cross we know today was probably in widest use and the shape the most recognisable as the torture device.
- 6. See Cicero, *Cicero, pro Rabirio Perduellionis Reo* 5.16 *[5]*.
- 7. According to legend, the pagan emperor Constantine was converted by seeing an omen in the sky of beams of lights shaped as a cross at the battle of Milvian Bridge in AD 312. He therefore understood that the cross symbol was associated with Christ.
- 8. The reason for this was to deter other would-be criminals and insurgents. Indeed, the practise of crucifixion still disturbs us today [6].
- 9. Although a person could also die quickly due to the shock, pain and injuries sustained from the flogging and the nailing.
- 10. Jesus did actually bear the curse of humiliation and death on our behalf, but overcame it through His resurrection.
- 11. Please remember that stories of the efficacy of crosses against vampires are *fiction*!

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