Redeeming Evil, Part 2: Precedents **[1]**

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Christians have indeed appropriated, adapted, and redeemed practices, objects, and symbols, and I believe that we are better off because of it. In this article we are going to look at only a few examples.

Music

Even today, if one knows where to look, one will find music being treated with suspicion (or even hostility) by certain churches.

During the Satanic Panic of the 80s and 90s, popular music was considered a tool of the devil. The demonisation of music grew largely from a late tradition in English Protestant churches that Lucifer was, before the Fall, the angel of music and “worship leader” of heaven. Lucifer, therefore, understood the power of music and how to use it to seduce believers. This tradition grew out of—what is today considered—a mistranslation in the 1611 KJV Bible. It is true that music can be used to manipulate the emotions of people, and manipulation has no place in worship, but treating certain forms of music as a force of evil is going too far.

But Christian suspicion of music isn’t a modern phenomenon by any means. In the early church, instrumental music was associated with paganism, and therefore not appropriate for Christian worship. That is how so-called Gregorian chant music (which is made from the vocal cords; the instrument of the image of God) became the standard of church worship for centuries.

But there has also always been a recognition that music is part of God’s good creation, and that it is worth celebrating good skill in music. Over time, organs were introduced as instruments in church worship. While organs may seem old-fashioned and even ominous today, their adoption at the time was a recognition that instruments could be used in the worship of God. Today it is common to find all sorts of instruments in church (at least Protestant churches): violins, guitars, basses, cellos, pianos, harps, and more.

These instruments were also not accepted without controversy. The beats of drums are associated with the hypnotic and entrancing (and, by implication, the manipulative and suggestive) power of music. And the Legend of Robert Johnson [2] tainted the reputation of the guitar, associating that instrument particularly with the devil.

It is not only instruments which were appropriated. Secular and folk melodies were also repurposed for worship. Such is the case with one of my favourite hymns, Be Thou My Vision [3]. Another example is O Sacred Head, Now Wounded [4]. Although Christian appropriation of secular melodies has been exaggerated [5], it has happened.

As mentioned, today in churches music is still treated with caution, and sometimes suspicion. Some attitudes remain because of tradition rather than a belief that instrumental music is morally tainted. But, in general, I believe the situation has improved over earlier years. Some churches go, perhaps, too far in the opposite direction, tolerating bad music as long as the lyrics are worshipful, but that is a different topic. We are no longer content to shun music (which genuinely is a beautiful part of God's creation) and surrender it to Satan. This is not cultural compromise, but a developing theology of creation and worship.

The Cross

Christians have redeemed the meaning of perhaps one of the most abominable symbols ever devised. I am not referring to the alleged pagan origins of Christmas trees and Easter bunnies, but the cross. Crucifixion was the ultimate torturous punishment in the Roman world. It was reserved for non-citizens who committed the most heinous of crimes, such as rebellion. It was meant to signify the power of Rome over the vanquished—a warning to deter anyone else from committing the same crimes. The Roman statesman, lawyer and orator Cicero had clear opinions on crucifixion. In his work *Against Verres* (2.5.165), he refers to crucifixion as "a most cruel and ignominious punishment" (Yonge translation). Later in the same passage, he refers to the cross as an instrument which strikes "terror" into condemned people. He also said:

> But the executioner, the veiling of heads, and the very word "cross," let them all be far removed from not only the bodies of Roman citizens but even from their thoughts, their eyes, and their ears. The results and suffering from these doings as well as the situation, even anticipation, of their enablement, and, in the end, the mere mention of them are unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free man.
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> Cicero, Speech before Roman Citizens on Behalf of Gaius Rabirius, Defendant Against the Charge of Treason, translated by Hodge

All of these give us a clue to what Paul meant when he spoke of "the offence of the cross" in Galatians 5:11 (KJV). He didn't mean—like Cicero did—that the cross should not be mentioned in polite company, but that Christians considered Jesus's crucifixion a victory over death, which seemed like madness to the non-Christians of the time. The same idea is expressed in 1 Corinthians 1:18 and 23.

Today the cross is the universal symbol of Christianity: of Jesus's death and resurrection, the central claims of the faith, which demonstrated His divinity to His followers beyond doubt, and made possible the forgiveness of sins. Its purpose of symbolising death, fear, and shame has been reshaped to one of life, victory, and hope. This is a far cry from "the mere mention of [it is] unworthy" of a "civilised" person. Of course, to those who have suffered under or been disillusioned by Christianity, the cross has become a symbol of disdain or oppression, but still it is different from its original connotations.

Symbols do not have meaning in and of themselves. Their significance comes from the meaning that we assign to them. Something can be abhorrent for some, but not others. Many people have visceral reactions when they see certain symbols, such as the swastika, the hammer and sickle, the Star of David, etc. But for many Hindus, Buddhists and Jains, the swastika is an ancient symbol of divinity and good fortune. Other people see hope and redemption of the countless oppressed, working-class masses in the hammer and sickle, where social and economic divides between people have been removed, and people can live in equity. Of course, in the West, many saw the hammer and sickle as symbolising the "red scare", which threatened people's way of life with oppression and deprivation of individualism, and the destruction of their religion. For many Jews, the Star of David is a symbol of identity and recalls ancient divine promises. Yet others have come to see it as a symbol of Jewish nationalism, Zionism, the oppression of Palestinians, apartheid, and even genocide. Symbols have become a shorthand for us to dismiss the humanity of someone using that symbol. They become automatically guilty by association. Once tainted, one can never be freed of that guilt. But this is not

what Christians believe. Christians have demonstrated that a universal association can go from horrific to hopeful. And this “reverse of the flow” of good-to-bad to bad-to-good has a profound precedent in the Old Testament.

Isaiah’s Unclean Lips

Ancient cultures—famously the ancient Jewish culture1—had the concept of “uncleanness”. Contact with something impure, such as a corpse, or having certain skin diseases, would cause ritual impurity, which can then exclude the person from the presence of God, or even just that person’s family and community. A person could be made “clean” again, but the process could be elaborate and time-consuming. In the meantime, the person affected was effectively an untouchable.

But, at least from the Judeo-Christian viewpoint, something remarkable happens in the sixth chapter of the book of Isaiah. Several things, actually: Isaiah gets taken into the presence of God and sees wonderful and terrifying heavenly creatures. He realises his inadequacy for being there, exclaiming, *“Woe is me! For I am undone, because I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King”*. Then the remarkable thing that I want to draw attention to happens:

> Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar. He touched my mouth with it, and said, “Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin forgiven.”
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> Isaiah 6:6–7

The expectation of the day was that impurity or uncleanness flowed from one thing to another. If the “clean” coal touched Isaiah’s lips (which he said was unclean), then the coal should have become unclean. But in Isaiah’s vision of the heavenly realm, cleanness flows from the object to the person. This enables grace: our state before God is not dependent on our efforts striving for ritual purity, but God’s mercy in taking away our iniquity.

The story of Isaiah’s lips being cleansed so that he could become God’s messenger to the people of Judah demonstrated a powerful principle: redemption is possible. The Bible paints people as being tainted by sin, not naturally desiring God, and having hearts that are inclined to evil. But people are not automatically condemned because of this natural state, but rather can be transformed into redeemed people who desire to see God’s Kingdom come.

- 1. Of course, kosher law is still strictly observed by some Jews today. There are many fascinating examples on _Mi Yodeya_. For example, the necessity of replacing kitchen countertops after buying a house [6] from non-Jews, and this answer [7], which suggests disapproval for using the name Anat in ignorance of ancient Canaanite mythology.

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