

Spirit and Story Archive

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Close Encounters

By Robert Rabinowitz

There can be few symbols more alien to Jews than the crucifixion, Jesus writhing in his mortal agonies on the cross—the cross under whose shadow marched the Crusaders, the Inquisition and the Ku Klux Klan. It was thus reassuring to me as a student to hear my campus rabbi compare the closed, forbidding nature of the cross to the openness of the star of David. (Imagine using a giant star of David to ward off vampires and ghouls instead of the conventional crucifix.) But recently I came to understand something of the power of the cross.

Over Thanksgiving, my wife and I went with friends to see the movie "Dogma," a Generation X satire on, and critique of, the Catholic Church. The film was briefly controversial among Catholics who thought it terribly blasphemous to cast singer Alanis Morissette as God, to make the whole religion business look somewhat tired and worn and to have angels of distinctly dubious moral stature as lead characters. I have to confess (confession being in tune with the mood of this article) that I did not think too much of the film. But, for me, the irony and irreverence of the movie effectively expressed the director's concern for those aspects of religion that institutionalization can obscure. (It would be interesting to see a comedy that gave Judaism such sustained treatment.)

Perhaps what happened to me as I left the cinema is a tribute to the movie, especially since Jesus was curiously absent from it. As we came out onto a wet and dark Upper East Side—the whole scene lit with puddles reflecting neon blues, yellows and reds, as if I entered the street trailing cinematic lighting effects—I simultaneously saw a pan-handler sitting on the sidewalk with his hand out toward us and a disabled man struggling as he hobbled on his crutches across the pedestrian crossing, his legs twisted and spindly. And then the power of the symbol of the crucifixion hit me with full force: Wherever humanity is suffering or humbled, there is God suffering and humbled.

Now I could have made this argument drawing on traditional Jewish conceptions of tselem elokim, that people are created in the image of God. But it was the power of the Christian symbol that engaged me and triggered such an overwhelming emotional and spiritual response. I saw, in my mind's

eye, the crippled man as Jesus crucified, his arms— hooked over their crutches— as Jesus' arms and the pan-handler's hand as an embodied expression of the human dependence and infirmity that flows from the cross.

In the months after that experience, I have been reflecting on its meaning and making a small but significant mental inventory of the other times in which the power of Christianity has touched me. There was the class I taught for CLAL as part of our Judaism, Christianity and Islam curriculum. We were studying the "suffering servant" text from Isaiah 53 which describes a servant bearing the burden of others' suffering and punishment. I was trying to overcome the attitude that Christian ideas are totally alien to Jews. So I asked the class the question, "Is there anybody in the world for whom you would be willing to suffer in order that they would not have to?" "My children" was the obvious answer. We would take on their suffering out of our love for them. Then I asked the class to imagine a God who loved us so much and was thus willing to take on all of our suffering and punishment. The moment of realization that accompanied that interchange remains vividly in my mind. ("Oh great!" I can hear my parents saying. "He goes to work for a Jewish organization and learns about the power of Christianity.")

Another time I was listening to a news report on the radio about the Peace and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. That set me to thinking about that tremendously effective process which was modeled explicitly on Christian ideas of confession and forgiveness. A few weeks previously, I had read a comment in a magazine from the same rabbi mentioned above (although we were now, 10 years later, both in a different country) that the public response to the Monica Lewinsky affair had been a vindication of the Jewish approach to repentance as opposed to the unforgiving attitude of Christianity. The South African process was a very powerful counterproof to that rather unconvincing claim. Does that make Christianity right?

What is a good Jewish boy to make of his newfound appreciation for the power of Christian symbols? It's not as if I remotely believe in any of the accompanying theology about the incarnation of God, humanity's irretrievably fallen state, etc. (I feel strangely bound to emphasize this.) My first impulse was to look for Jewish texts that conveyed similar messages, such as the Talmudic passage that describes the Messiah sitting among the poor binding and unbinding the wounds with which his body is covered (Tractate Sanhedrin 98a). But then it felt somewhat dishonest to graft the impact of one symbol onto another passage that had not had the same effect on me when I read it. I reflected on this with a colleague who suggested that what I had experienced was "the voice of the other." I agreed that a necessary pre-condition of pluralism is the ability to say "I don't believe what you believe but I understand why you would be justified in believing what you believe." But this response proved to be ultimately unsatisfactory. My response to the Christian symbols feels like a part of me and not the disembodied voice of someone else inside my head.

It's funny. I don't feel any less Jewish since I had these experiences. If anything, I feel more confident of my Jewishness and more spiritually integrated in my life. And I certainly don't think that I am a worse person. These experiences have affected me positively. But the claim that these symbols make on me is incongruous. I just don't know where they fit within the system of my beliefs. It's as if they are sitting in the northeast corner of my mind, a crazy patch detached from the quilt of my moral and spiritual convictions. And what I am not sure about now is, does it really matter? Is it really OK just to collect spiritual symbols from different faiths and cultures and to live by them without even trying to reconcile or integrate them?

It might be said that my flirting with Christian symbols is an example of the sort of relativism that reduces religions, in all their incommensurable diversity, to sources of personal gratification without regard for theological coherence. And worse, this is the particular symbol under which many of my ancestors suffered and died, despite its professed embodiment of divine love. Or maybe such symbols operate on a different level where the whole point is their power, not their coherence. In recent years, many Jewish groups, of all denominations, have increased their spiritual appeal and intensity by appropriating terminology and symbols from Eastern religious traditions. I suppose the challenge boils down to this: Is it desirable or possible for Jews to overcome our profound distaste for the cross and learn from its power without incurring condemnation for betraying our ancestors' suffering and our religious integrity?



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