

“An Atheist at the Cross” (The Suicide of God Might Be Good News)

“When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.” (John 12:32)

“For the message about the cross is foolishness [to unbelievers]. . .” (1 Cor. 1:18)

“I have been crucified with [a Freethinker]. . .” (Gal. 2:20)

A secular person, a freethinker, an atheist can find something at the cross. It’s even possible, I reason, that the cross itself could draw all people, faith or no faith. Come to the cross with me, I’ll show you.

During my years as an Evangelical Christian, these biblical verses were crucial (“the decisive crux”) in my life. In those youthful years, I would even say those words were my life—absorbed in my memory. **I was a Cross-centered Christian** (is there really any other kind?). To be sure, the Resurrection was of high importance. We were always trying to prove it. It was the exclamation point after the cross (like a **T!**). But for those of us who were “God’s People” and “Followers of Jesus,” the center of it all, our lives, our faith, was: The Cross.

In my liberal seminary days and early ministry, I was in part driven by Bonhoeffer’s “come and die” alongside Moltmann’s “crucified god.” Facing a cross-filled world while sitting on top of the old rugged one, offered a very down-to-the-dirt perspective and practice.

I suspect I could write a book on this, and maybe I will someday, but here’s where my thoughts have arrived after all these years. **First, the summary we all know, maybe:**

- 1) The cross—or a rough pole in the ground—was first and foremost a common tool of execution by the Romans (like our gas chambers and lethal injections)
- 2) In Christian Theology, God Died on the Cross (at least some part of God committed Suicide)
- 3) The death of Jesus of Nazareth (the Human part of God) was a sacrificial event determined by God (the Father killing His Son)
- 4) The sins of the world (those things God decided were wrong about His flawed human children) were forgiven there (blood was required and a drop wouldn’t do)
- 5) You must be a Christian believer before you can benefit from that sacrifice
- 6) Every human being must come to the cross or be tortured (as on a cross) for eternity

Leaving aside, for a moment, 2000 years of fighting over what all this means (between Christians and between Christians and nonChristians), **I come to the cross now for a different reason.** My tendency and temptation is to push it over, to cut it down, to burn it, to sacrifice this ancient symbol of death for all it’s done to divide the world for

centuries. But another tendency is to **re-claim it for all of us, believers and non-believers**. Is this possible, and if so, *why in the world would I wish to attempt that?*

As I say, leaving aside the theological explanations for this event, the story says an ancient Jewish Freethinker was executed by the Roman state. He must have been seen as some kind of criminal threat, an outside agitator, maybe a terrorist, to that paranoid government. Like countless other criminals, he was nailed up and died—a statistic in the Roman judicial system. His students and friends were devastated, without hope. They recovered some of that hope and went on to create a faith, a religion, gathered around the Cross (not the tomb). And, I would guess, what they made would be unrecognizable to the one who hung up there exposed to the world.

Ok, that's essentially the Christian message. Christianity in the cross-hairs. But is it? Should it be?

I know a number of "Progressive" Christians who do not give much time to the cross or atonement theology. They are more social justice or education directed. That's a good step in the right direction, in my opinion, but doesn't go far enough.

Here's another view; not simply "good news" but better news, a message that potentially gives us all, theist and atheist, something to rally around, to work with.

Come to the cross as:

- An almost universal symbol of suffering (if you're a believer: God feels pain—all pain).
- A reminder that death is, as life itself, common to all living things (makes our short life more precious)
- A reminder that Freethinking people (like the founders of all spiritual traditions and those who teach opposing views) are unjustly treated and sometimes killed for teaching "heretical" notions, therefore no matter our beliefs, we should work together for true justice
- A reminder that all symbols are limited and embody the danger of sectarian division if not violence (the ironic image is knocking a cross over someone's head, painting it on a missile or gun. . .or burning it to intimidate)

So, we need not be afraid to come to the cross, to look very closely and even touch it. **Like the non-Christian Nazarene who bled on it like countless other outsiders, the cross—or rough wooden pole in the earth—does not belong to Christians and it never has.** It was no doubt a reusable execution device anyway! We can imagine an ancient Palestinian heretic hanging up there and feel some sadness for that. We can think of how deeply hurt his family and friends were. Then we can imagine all those who have suffered and continue to suffer through injustice, discrimination, through physical or mental anguish (and, of course, Wars of Faith). We can sense that. We can feel it. **By running our hand over the blood-splattered, splintering wood, we can touch our own compassion.** That makes his life, and our own, much more meaningful than spraying a super-naturalizing cover-coat on the whole mess.

Foolishness? Perhaps. But I think not. Wisdom. The message of the cross on which a roustabout named Jesus bled out and died can be revolutionary, if seen in this light. He was not the first to suffer for unacceptable beliefs and not the last. His execution may not redeem or “save” any of us, but his death (and the death of the tree!) will not be in vain if unbelievers can respectfully claim a piece of the old knotted wood guarded by believers, as we find ways of building something more than weapons with its branches.

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