The Crucifix

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Introduction

As I sat in my room staring at the cold glossy screen of my laptop, I pondered the question of what it means to be a true “Pop Culture Icon.” As usual, I began a Google search party, searching everything from Madonna to Maradona, Hines Ward to Heinz Ketchup. As I searched and searched, I stumbled upon an ad. It caught my eye because I hear and read about the company, and the famous celebrities that endorse it, every couple of weeks or so. The ad was for a “People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals” campaign. The creative, as many for which PETA are known for, was obviously designed with shock value in mind.

The print ad, which features the Polish-born Joanna Krupa (Dancing with the Stars & Playboy) completely naked with a carefully placed crucifix covering her intimate areas and a digital halo over her head, has created turmoil within the Christian community. It has caused some to deem the advertisement as “totally inappropriate.”

This advertisement is what caused me to ask, “How can a suggestively placed crucifix create such a reaction from so many people and how important can this object really be?” So, I began to search once again.

70.3 percent of the Canadian populace and 78.5 percent of the American populace identify themselves as some extension of the Christian faith (CIA World Factbook). In other words, the most observed religion in North America is Christianity. This is to say that over two thirds of the population has some kind of personal belief in Jesus.

If it is true that “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions…the opium of the people” (Marx), then it is fair to say that society is largely run by the belief system. Moreover, if Pop Culture, as we understand it, is created through our human-learned culture, then religion is the prototypical illustration of learned behaviour. Religion, for billions of people around the world, is ingrained in our minds from birth and further cultivated throughout our lives.
This essay will address and analyze the semiotic meaning of one of the most famous and revered religious artifacts in western culture and the world as a whole: the Christian crucifix. It will discuss its application in regard to the Maslowian Hierarchy of Needs. It will also review Marshall McLuhan’s “Media is the Message” theory. Finally, it will examine the importance of this globally esteemed object in my personal opinion.

Semiotics

Basic Semiotics can be broken down into four levels, each with a deeper meaning. The levels analyze the Christian crucifix from its mere visual aspects to its most fundamental meanings.

- **L1 “The signifier”**: A man latched to two wooden boards that are positioned in a “T” shape. The man has long hair, light complexion with a crown on around his head. He is also wearing a cloth around his waist. There is a sheet of paper just above the man’s head which is affixed to the vertical wooden board of the “T.”

- **L2 “The Signified”**: Jesus of Nazareth is nailed to a wooden cross for being proclaimed to be the “Messiah” and “King of the Jews” (John 19, King James Bible). He has a crown of thorns firmly placed on his head and an injury procured from a soldier’s spear on his left side. The nails are pierced through his hands and feet and blood is running down his face.

- **L3 “The Signified”**: Jesus, the man who had given so many so much hope, is being executed and ridiculed for voicing his beliefs and advocating for everyone, including those who have now turned on him. The man who, without an ounce of fear and a heart with ample faith, stood and proclaimed that everyone “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31, New International Bible). The Crucifix signifies the denouement of a man’s struggle on earth against those who opposed him and the eventual demise of a person who remained steady beside his beliefs.

- **L4 “The Signified”**: The crucifix has the unique ability to create an innumerable amount of sentiments to billions of people around the world.

To some, the crucifix is a grim reminder of the inhumanity of man. To others, it conjures up feelings of anti-Semitic belief as a few individuals believe that the Jews are the culprits in Jesus’ death.

But to most, the crucifix is an example of love passion and faith. More than just a man nailed to a cross, for many, this is a saviour, a messiah, and a prophet.
This is a man recognized in Christianity, Judaism and Islam as a respected and revered prophet of God. Maybe not always a saviour, but an everlasting figure in history.

The three-dimensional crucifix is a symbol, an icon and an idol. If it can be argued that religion plays a major force in driving societal values and beliefs, then the crucifix is the irresistible force behind much of Pop Culture as we know it.

**Maslow**

The Christian crucifix is a very unusual topic to discuss in regard to the Maslowian hierarchy of needs. It is an unusual topic because it appeals to those who are familiar with it on several different levels. Depending on who you ask, the crucifix could appeal on each and every level.

Firstly, from a physiological standpoint, one can make the argument that the crucifix is symbolic of how crucial things such as food and shelter can be so easily taken away.

Physiological needs are “... biological needs. They consist of needs for oxygen, food, water, and a relatively constant body temperature. They are the strongest needs because if a person were deprived of all needs, the physiological ones would come first in the person's search for satisfaction” (Simons, Irwin and Drinnien). From a physiological point of view, the essential needs were the first things Jesus was deprived of in his swift apprehension and eventual execution.

On the second level of Maslow’s hierarchy (safety) the crucifix acts as a cloak of sorts. It is a shield for many, a shelter and an object in which one can feel secure.

But, why would a crucifix signify any kind of safety for anyone? Well, the crucifix is more than just a religious symbol. It is what identifies Christians. It is what allows people to reflect on the knowledge that there has been someone strong enough to die for their cause. That there is some sort of entity up above looking down upon and protecting all creatures: human, animal, plant, living or dead.

The crucifix is a symbol which appeals to the safety need because those who believe in it know that if Jesus went through everything he did, it was for a reason and because he never wanted anyone to suffer the same fate.

The third level of the hierarchy (love/belonging) may be the most universal of all needs that is addressed by the Christian crucifix. It is the most common to those who believe in this symbol and the most important.

As mentioned earlier, the crucifix is one of the major forms in which Christians identify themselves. The crucifix acts as the “ichthus” of the modern age. In the book “An Introduction to Christianity,” author Alister E. McGrath says,
“A fish was used as a symbol of Christian identity, on account of its potential as a teaching aid.... The words Ichthus thus spells out the Christological affirmation: ‘Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour.' References to ‘the fish’ can be found in a number of Christian writings, particularly on tombs. The Greek word ‘ichthus’ and the symbol of a fish are both still widely used by Christians” (McGrath 365).

The crucifix, as the ichthus, is a visual representation of what it means to be “Christian.” It embodies the beliefs, rituals and religious culture of the Christian faith. There is no sense of belonging larger than that of which is shared amongst members of the same faith. There is also no greater act of love than the giving of one’s life in the name of humanity. If the basis of Christianity is community and love for one another than the image of the “Saviour” dying in a cruel and inhumane manner is an everlasting reminder that the Christian community is eternal.

It is rather common for people to have substantial self-esteem issues throughout their lives. We, as humans, are subject to many complexes of inferiority and inadequacy. Maslow addresses this need on the fourth level of the hierarchy. Our search for feelings of achievement, self-worth, recognition and respect are often ongoing within our lives.

Many people often have certain figures to which they turn to for strength and understanding. These individuals hold such figures very close to them and often seek them out in their time of need.

In a time when one’s self-esteem seems to be at an all time low, many of us search for something that will make us feel whole, worthy of attention and adequate.

For millions of Christians around the world, the Holy crucifix is that figure. Countless individuals seek out this entity in an attempt to restore their feelings of self worth and help them find the strength to reach their goals of achievement and respect within their lives. They look to the crucifix and as an aid in their times of weakness and beliefs of inferiority.

They see this man of flesh and bone hanging on a cross made of lumber with his hands and feet pierced right through, his head bloodied from the wounds of thorns stabbing his skull. They see a man stripped down to nothing but a white cloth around his waist; a man with a slash wound just above his hip obtained from the steelly end of a soldier’s spear; a man with his head down from the sheer exhaustion and pain incurred; yet, a man who’s final words were “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Yancy 143). They see this and then understand that if one man would go through so much and still have a heart full of faith and forgiveness while never forgetting who he is, they can as well.

Many would argue the self-actualization is unachievable; these people could be right. But, there are also those that would argue the self-actualization is a belief;
something that can be achieved by those who actually believe in it personally and within their own criterion.

For those that observe the Christian faith and those who believe that a higher truth, meaning and wisdom are achievable; the crucifix is a main example of how self-actualization has been fulfilled in the past.

Who could be more self-actualized than the “Son of God?” To be able to give yourself up to eminent death is not an only an example of courage but more so an example of faith and higher purpose. For those that believe in the story of the crucifixion and follow the Christian faith; this is the ultimate example of what it means to be self actualized. This is what people search their whole lives to achieve.

People live to see a day when they may ultimately find the meaning and purpose that Jesus discovered on the evening of his capture. This is why millions believe that self actualization is obtainable and why, although there are deniers, they keep in search of the elusive peak of the hierarchy.

Marshall McLuhan

One of the most acclaimed theories established by Marshall McLuhan was “The Medium is the Message.” But, what if this theory was to be used in a different manner, not only to describe technological media, rather, mediums of the past that are still being used now? By “mediums of the past” I mean, sculptures, paintings, live music and statues.

The three-dimensional crucifix is more valuable to certain individuals than any portrait on a wall or music on the radio. It enhances one’s sensory modalities through touch and sight. Contrary to a picture or film, a three-dimensional object can be felt. The message of the death of Christ would not be as powerful if not for the visual and tactile aspects of the crucifix.

The message would not be lost if the crucifix did not exist, but it is highly unlikely that the message that the Christian churches have been conveying would be perceived in the same fashion. It is the concentration on the medium (the three-dimensional crucifix) which intensifies the message (capture, trial, death etc...) to its fullest extent.

Personal Opinion

“Two thirds (65 percent) of Latinos are Roman Catholic; while Latino Catholics are more progressive across a number of measures than white Catholics, they share common religious orientation that justifies grouping these groups together” (Jones 215).
Being from a “progressive Roman Catholic” family, I never really had an interest in anything that had to do with religion. All I was brought up to understand was that; one, I had to attend a Catholic school and two, that I am to treat others the way I would like to be treated. These were my main objectives as a youth, go to school and be a good person. Religion was never forced upon me.

I would hear the stories orally from my mother; she would relay message of Jesus’ teaching and the way in which he lived his life. I never took much of an interest in such stories as I had no desire to know about something, which I always believed to be, so boring.

It was not until I became a teenager that I became more interested in thinking about life and religion. I would watch the festivals relating to the “Stations of the Cross” during Easter and would reflect on the extraordinary display of faith and devotion from so many people. I did not quite understand why so many people cared so much since I, for one, never cared about anything other than the chocolates and egg hunts.

It was then that I saw something very special. It was not the first time I had seen this object but it had never made such an impression on me as it did that Easter day. It was a giant silver crucifix held up by a neighbourhood priest with alter boys all walking alongside. As the priest made his way down the street through the crowd of eager devotees, I witnessed every person become completely quite, the focus in the air was consuming. It was at that moment that I knew that the crucifix is more than just an average Catholic symbol; the Christian crucifix is the embodiment and definition of Christian Religion.

Conclusion

In closing, we have now discussed and analyzed the Christian crucifix in various ways. We have addressed the iconographic representation of the crucifix from a man affixed to two boards, to the deeper meanings of Jesus giving his life on the cross. We also reviewed, the Maslowian understanding of the hierarchy of needs and in what ways the crucifix aides to such needs. Additionally, we discovered the importance of Marshall McLuhan’s “Medium is the Message” in regard to the three-dimensional Christian artifact. Finally, the essay has uncovered what the crucifix means to me on a personal level.
Bibliography


