War Memorial Crosses Symbolize Christianity and Endorse Religion

Should Religious Symbols Be Allowed on Public Land?, 2011


The cross is not a neutral symbol that loses its religious significance when used to commemorate America's fallen heroes. In fact, most dictionaries define the cross as a symbol of Christianity. Thus, the Supreme Court cannot effectively argue that a war memorial cross on public land is not a religious symbol so that it will appear objective when the Court has actually based its decision in deference to the values of the dominant—Christian—society. The Court was wrong in Plessy v. Ferguson when it argued that racial segregation did not reflect attitudes of racial superiority, and the Court is wrong to argue that a war memorial cross is not unconstitutional government endorsement of Christianity.

What do you see? [see box on following page]

Do you have much doubt about it?

It could be the letter "t."

But suppose it is eight feet tall and erected by the Veterans of Foreign Wars on federal land to honor American soldiers who died in World War I.

What is it?

I checked a dozen dictionaries, encyclopedias, and similar sources. Here is what I learned. It is "a symbol of Christianity." It is "the best-known religious symbol of Christianity." It is "the principal symbol of the Christian religion." It is "an emblem of Christianity." It is "the most familiar and widely recognized symbol of Christianity." It is "the symbol of Christian faith." It is "the cross of Christ's crucifixion."

There doesn't seem to be much doubt about it.

Distorting the Meaning of Symbols

Except to some of the justices on the Supreme Court of the United States. According to Justice Anthony Kennedy, joined by Chief Justice John Roberts and Justice Samuel Alito, in this week's [April 2010] decision in Salazar v. Buono, the "cross is not merely a reaffirmation of Christian beliefs. It is a symbol often used to honor and respect those whose heroic acts, noble contributions, and patient striving help secure an honored place in
history for this Nation and its people. [...] It evokes thousands of small crosses in foreign fields marking the graves of Americans who fell in battles, battles whose tragedies are compounded if the fallen are forgotten."

So, it's *not* "a symbol of Christianity"? It's *not* "the principal symbol of the Christian religion"? It's *not* "the symbol of Christian faith"? It's *not* "the cross of Christ's crucifixion"? It's a neutral symbol that just happens to be "used to honor [...] those whose heroic acts [...] help secure an honored place in history for this Nation."

The inherent message of the cross is not a neutral testament to fallen heroes, but a potent affirmation by government of the Christian religion.

And the American flag doesn't symbolize America? And the swastika doesn't symbolize Nazism? And a burning cross doesn't symbolize the KKK [Ku Klux Klan]? And the Golden Arches don't symbolize McDonald's?

In its 1896 decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation. In so doing, the Court considered the symbolic meaning of the legally mandated separation of blacks and whites into "colored only" and "white only" railroad cars: "We consider the underlying fallacy of the plaintiff's argument to consist in the assumption that the enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority. If this be so, it is not by reason of anything found in the act, but solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it."

The Court is wrong in *Salazar* for the same reason it was wrong in *Plessy*: In both cases, the justices allowed meaning to be determined by the perceptions of the dominant forces in society, who like to imagine that their understanding of the world is neutral, natural, and objective. It is not.

The inherent message of segregation was not one of racial neutrality, but of racial subordination and inferiority. The inherent message of the cross is not a neutral testament to fallen heroes, but a potent affirmation by government of the Christian religion. This our Constitution does not allow.

**Further Readings**

**Books**


Periodicals and Internet Sources

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• Will Connaghan "What in God's Name Is Happening?" Daily Record (St. Louis, MO), December 15, 2006.


• Liz F. Kay "'Holiday' Trappings: Common Sense Works," The Sun (Baltimore, MD), December 17, 2006.


• Laurel S. Marsh "Myths About the ACLU and Religion," Prairie Fire, February 2010.


• Tracie Simer "Is America Really a Christian Nation?" Jackson (TN) Sun, July 4, 2009.


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