

Introduction

Few religious symbols in western Christianity possess the potency and polysemous capacity of the cross. As an icon, it serves as a reminder of the pivotal event in Christian history, the Crucifixion. As a symbol, it represents the meaning of that event, spiritual redemption. As such, it has both literal and allegorical significance. And although representations of the Crucifixion itself did not appear until the early fifth century,¹ the symbolic import of the cross had been established as early as the first century through the inclusion in the gospels of Christ's call to "take up" the cross.² Early Christian writers such as Irenaeus of Lyons, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine of Hippo, furthermore, saw the cross as symbolic of the universe in all its dimensions—height and depth, length from east to west, and breadth from north to south—and often concluded that Christ had preordained the cross as the instrument of his death precisely because of its symbolic potential.³

In the centuries following the fall of Rome, the significative potential of the cross continued to expand. Representations of the cross were exploited in the service of numerous endeavors ranging from architectural projects to military campaigns. By the time that Dante wrote his *Divine Comedy* in the early decades of the fourteenth century, they had become all-pervasive.

The cross had adorned the breast of countless crusaders, its war cry audible in the stroke of their cross-shaped swords. But, just as important, it lent its form to the maps of the Christian world that guided both pilgrims and Christian soldiers to the Holy Land,⁴ representing the known world as a cross at the center of which lay Jerusalem and on which East was also "up." Maps of Jerusalem itself adopted this representation in microcosmic form, as the Holy City was typically laid out on a cruciform pattern as well, with the Temple located at the head of the cross. Thus Jerusalem was the crux of the world, the center of the primary icon of Christian salvation. And to travel to Jerusalem was to take up the cross in imitation of Christ's suffering.

While this central position of Jerusalem reflects the traditional view of the Holy City as the navel of the world, it also reflects its position as the genesis and epicenter of the Christian tradition. The representation of the known world in the shape of the cross served both to attribute a Christian significance to the Mediterranean world and to exclude as non-Christian those places that lay beyond its confines. Moreover, it permitted the places on the map to be interpreted in terms of where they lay on the cross and their proximity to Jerusalem.

The cross also hung in the recesses and apses of Christian churches. Wooden crosses painted with the figure of Christ were often surrounded by saints who had taken up the cross in imitation of their Lord. As a result, the cross on which Christ was depicted became also the exegetical tool through which the lives of those saints could be interpreted. In addition to wooden crosses, many of the apses of medieval Christian churches were decorated with mosaic representations of the cross, sparkling amalgams of thousands of smaller pieces, symbolizing the communion of spirit made possible through the Passion.

Moreover, the cross gave its shape to those many churches of the Middle Ages in which such crosses were found. Churches laid out in the shape of the cross, oriented to the east, recreated symbolically the pilgrimage to the Holy Land, thus linking the trip to the altar, typically located toward the east end of the church, with the journey to Jerusalem.⁵ Indeed, from the fourth century onward, Christian church architecture intentionally sought to recreate the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. In certain cases this allegorical association of the church and Jerusalem was made even more explicit. The Roman basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, for example, contains numerous relics brought from the Holy Land,⁶ and thus affirms the allegorical connection between the church building and Jerusalem. By virtue of this process, which Irving Lavin refers to as the “topographical transfusion” of Jerusalem to Rome, the basilica itself and indeed all of Rome could be understood as the second or New Jerusalem. In fact, says Lavin, it could be understood as “the truer Jerusalem,” where the Lord was crucified a second time in St. Peter (34–35).

The symbolic value of the cross, therefore, underlines the common redemptive nature of the pilgrimage or crusading journey and the cruciform church, which seeks to reiterate the same journey. At the same time, its shape transforms the itinerary or map and the church into related physical manifestations of the same significance. To use the terminology of medieval hermeneutics, the cruciform map and the cruciform church were

“types” of each other, as were the journeys they traced and prescribed. Moreover, they were all “types” of the cross, sharing meaning and explicating their mutual allegorical significance.⁷

Given the all-pervasive cultural presence of the cross and its types, the cruciform church and the cruciform journey to the east, it is hardly surprising that all three figure prominently in the *Divine Comedy*, a poem that plots a journey of spiritual redemption. Images of the cross, references to Jerusalem, and allusions to the great churches of medieval Europe continually underline the redemptive purpose of the poem, a purpose attested to by Dante himself in his letter to his Veronese patron, Cangrande della Scala.⁸

Dante, however, has done more than simply include frequent references to these symbols of redemption. In the *Commedia* the placement of such references reinforces the typological relationship between the cross, the church, and the road to Jerusalem, while providing an allegorical foundation on which to imprint the literal narrative of the pilgrim’s trek. As a result of the correlation between these two levels of meaning, progress through the poem is typologically linked to progress within a medieval church and/or progress toward Jerusalem, either as pilgrim or as crusader.

The inclusion of liturgical hymns, especially in the *Purgatorio*, is one of the more obvious strategies that Dante uses to reveal the typological affinities between his poem and a cross-shaped church. Other strategies may not be as immediately evident but are equally significant. The frequent use of exempla, or the inclusion of images such as the celestial rose of the *Paradiso*, recalls the decorative elements of the medieval church and, similarly, reminds the reader of the affinity between progress in the poem and movement toward the altar and apse.

There are, of course, differences between Dante’s poem and the medieval cruciform church. The reader’s progress through Dante’s great poem is decidedly temporal rather than spatial. It is also mental rather than physical. These and other distinctions indicate that Dante is not imitating a church so much as reminding the reader of the commonalities between his poem and the cruciform church, affinities based in their common underlying structure. Likewise, while references to the road to the Holy Land remind the reader that Dante’s poem is typologically linked to pilgrimage and crusade, certain features of the narrative make it abundantly clear that the *Commedia* is a uniquely Dantean manifestation of the cross, not simply an imitation of the cartographer’s craft.

The *Commedia* is, then, not mere *imitatio*. Insofar as it is “like” a

church, the likeness is attributable to the fact that the cruciform church and the poem both exist as manuals of salvation that provide the Christian with lessons in how to follow the “way.” The church and the poem also both function as mnemonic devices for remembering these lessons. But even more significantly, the church and the *Commedia* function as spatial and temporal vehicles, respectively, for reiterating allegorically not only Christ’s *via crucis*⁹ but also the prototypical pilgrimage journey. Dante is not so much positing that his poem is like a church or the journey it reiterates; rather he is using its cruciform shape to illustrate similarities to the church and to the purpose and the meaning of his poem: that it is the way out of slavery, the slavery of sin, and the way to salvation.

This common purpose is revealed in the song of the newly arrived sinners in purgatory. Their hymn, “In exitu Israël de Aegypto” (*Purg.* 2:46), commonly sung by medieval pilgrims approaching Jerusalem,¹⁰ commemorates the Exodus while linking it to Christian pilgrimage. But at the same time, the song links the poem to the church, for it was also sung during Easter observance. Thus the narrative of the poem is associated with the liberation from slavery, its spiritual fulfillment in the Easter passion, and the reiteration of both in the pilgrimage to Jerusalem as well as its allegorical representation in a cross-shaped church. This fusion is made explicit when Virgil asserts that he and Dante are also pilgrims (“noi siam peregrin” *Purg.* 2:63).

The sin and slavery from which the pilgrim is liberated is thus figured in the descent into the inferno, just as the Exodus was preceded by the descent of Israel into the land of Egypt. As the pilgrim makes his subterranean descent, textual cues such as the story of Ulysses (*Inferno* 26) remind us that, in the world of the living, travel away from the Holy City was equally a descent, for on the maps of Dante’s time, travel west meant travel “down” from the city at the top of the world. Accordingly, as Dante’s poem unfolds, it becomes clear that the downward progress of the *Inferno*, inasmuch as it corresponds to westward movement on the cruciform map, also corresponds to movement away from the altar in the eastward-oriented cruciform churches of the Middle Ages.

In contrast, the purgatorial journey corresponds to the return to the east. It shares the same trajectory as the journey out of Egypt toward the Promised Land. Its hardships, therefore, prepare the pilgrim for arrival in Jerusalem. Its purgative process cleanses him for the eventual ascent to its spiritual counterpart, the heavenly Jerusalem, the City of God, or paradise. But it also corresponds to the trip to the altar in an eastward-oriented

church and the glance upward to the rose window of the apse through which the morning sun shines with blinding brilliance. The altar, Jerusalem, and the top of Mount Purgatory all coincide, superimposed in layers of meanings, and thus the three can each explicate the significance of their respective typological counterparts.

The affinity between the *Commedia*, the church, and pilgrimage serves more than an exegetical purpose, however. Like many of the other structures that Dante incorporates into his poem—for example, literary forms such as the epic or the hagiographical model—the presence of the cruciform church serves as a means of defining the *Commedia* in terms of genre. This is scripture, divinely inspired, the Gospel according to Dante, surely, but it is the poem's affinity to the church that implicitly asserts its spiritual authority. In positing his poem as an instrument of salvation with authority akin to that of a church, Dante challenges the monopoly of the bishops, and in particular the bishop of Rome, over Christian souls—a point made exceedingly clear when Dante's pilgrim is both crowned and mitered with authority over himself at the completion of the purgatorial journey (“per ch'io te sovra te corono e mitrio” *Purg.* 27:141).

The arduous pilgrimage journey and, indeed, the crusade to which Dante links his poem also serve a pseudoautobiographical purpose. In a strategy similar to the inclusion of references to the cruciform church and the road to Jerusalem, Dante includes a series of references that evoke the places of his own wandering. The journey of his actual life is presented, then, as typologically equivalent to progress in a cruciform church and to the journey to Jerusalem. As such, Dante's own life is revealed as the allegorical fulfillment of the *figura* that comprises the literal narrative of the *Commedia*. The poem and the journey it describes, or rather foretells, are therefore also cross-shaped and thus represent the suffering that will redeem him as well as the crusade that he launches against those who have defiled him. The pilgrim's journey is both the cross that Dante bears and the cross that he wields.

And what a cross it is. Like the great painted crosses of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries on which medieval artists superimposed the lives of saints and martyrs on a cruciform background, so too is Dante's cross embossed with the lives of the saints, creating a collective out of separate entities, and attributing to them the redemptive significance contained in the cross. But Dante's cross is also painted with the details of his own *vita*. As episodes from his life and glimpses of the places of his exile flesh out the narrative, each of them forms part of a larger picture, sharing meaning

with the images of saints stretched across the arms of a Cimabue cross. The common shape of the backdrop likens Dante's life story to the medieval lives of the saints, lives that invariably included taking the cross either in martyrdom, pilgrimage, or crusade. The *Commedia* becomes an icon of salvation, while the story it tells elevates its protagonist to the rank of exemplum.

The *Commedia* then serves a dual purpose. It serves as a paradigm, in the same way that a pilgrim itinerary might guide the wandering Christian, but it is also a travelogue, the tale of Dante's own journey, his own trip along the naves of countless churches of his exile, his own pilgrimage to the Holy Land, his own crusade to recover the Promised Land, his own exodus from the slavery of sin. Moreover, the insertion of a vast array of textual cues allows Dante to lend a redemptive significance to his own life by asserting its affinity to other highly pervasive representations of the cross. As Dante plots the progress of his own journey through life along the nave of a cruciform church and on the cross of a medieval map, the meaning of his own particular journey emerges. The journey is Everyman's, but the trip is Dante's.

The Cross That Dante Bears explores all of these aspects of the poem in an attempt to fully understand the purpose and significance of the cross within the narrative structure and the text of the *Commedia*. Accordingly, chapter 1 considers the allegorical significance of the cross and its absorption into the cruciform maps of the Mediterranean and into maps of Jerusalem itself. This introductory chapter also considers how Dante inserts textual clues that reinforce the cruciform structure of the poem and at the same time orient the reader in terms of location, both within the cross of the church and within the cruciform representations of the medieval world. The book then moves on to consider how Dante uses the figure of the cross, as traced on medieval maps, to reveal his poem of pilgrimage as still another manifestation of the cross, textual rather than cartographic. The first half of the book thus considers the ways that Dante uses both explicit and oblique references to pilgrimage, crusading, and their cartographic representations to create an affinity between his project and the cartographer's and, by extension, between the shape of the map and his own representation of pilgrimage and crusade.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 consider the significance of the pilgrimage to Jerusalem and of the crusading voyage to the Holy Land in the context of medieval culture. They consider, more particularly, the way in which the

significance of each has been absorbed into the *Commedia* so as to serve an exegetical function.

The second half of the book follows a similar methodology but, moving beyond similarities between Dante's poem and the road to Jerusalem, considers the affinities between the *Commedia* and the allegorical reiteration of the road to Jerusalem in the medieval cruciform church. In this second part of the book, then, we see how Dante alerts the reader not only to the similarities between his project and those of the cartographer and church architect but also to the allegorical process at play in the creation of such affinities. To this end, chapter 5 considers the allegorical aspects of the medieval church, and in particular the allegorical aspects of the cruciform floor plan. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 examine the correspondence between the allegorical aspects of the cruciform church and the journeys depicted in the *Inferno*, the *Purgatorio*, and the *Paradiso* respectively.

Finally, the epilogue considers the sources of many of the references that Dante uses and proposes that the cross that Dante creates, through the affinities between his poem, the map to Jerusalem, and the shape of the cruciform church, is at its most essential his own. It proposes that Dante's poem, fashioned in the shape of the cross, thus becomes an exegetical device through which he can find meaning and give value to his own life. It concludes that not only is the poem a cross, it is *his* cross, one that is borne in the service of his own redemption and, if read—or, rather, followed—by his readers, might also save them.

The aim of this book is to demonstrate that Dante's poem is, at its most essential, Dante's attempt to place his work and his life alongside the most significant aspects of medieval culture. By necessity, then, the book looks at some of the cities that Dante encountered during his travels and the decorative art contained in the churches he visited, as well as his own experiences with the pilgrimage and crusading culture of the Middle Ages. It looks at how Dante absorbs some of the most striking works of Western art, literature, and architecture, reformulating or transmutating them into his own celebration of the Eucharist mystery, as the material becomes allegorical and the flesh becomes word. As the poem attempts to present its author as a new exemplum, its protagonist as a new saint, the experience of writing is transformed into a redemptive exercise, and the act of reading into a means of taking up the cross. The poem thus posits itself as the cross, the cross on which its author/saint suffered and through which the reader, companion to Dante's pilgrim, might be saved.