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4-2014

### Crossing public space

Justin Kh TSE

*Singapore Management University*, [justintse@smu.edu.sg](mailto:justintse@smu.edu.sg)

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#### Citation

TSE, Justin Kh, "Crossing public space" (2014). *Research Collection School of Social Sciences*. Paper 3362.

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## Crossing public space

By Justin K.H. Tse

Published in Logos Anglican, 2014 April 18

<https://anglican.logos.com/2014/04/18/crossing-public-space>

Coventry Cathedral is an Anglican space blanketed in modern legends that seem appropriate for pious meditation for Good Friday. On November 14, 1940, the German Luftwaffe devastated Coventry, killing thousands while blasting the town, including its cathedral, to pieces. In the midst of Coventry Cathedral's rubble, the church's provost, R.T. Howard, chalked into the wall, "Father Forgive" (see also *Ruined and Rebuilt: The Story of Coventry Cathedral, 1939-1958*). These words have been woven into the Coventry Litany of Reconciliation, a confession of corporate sins with each line's refrain as "Father Forgive." Howard bound together two charred wooden beams into the shape of a cross in that devastated space, while another local priest, the Rev. A.P. Wales, found three long nails and tied them together in the shape of the cross. Howard told the BBC on Christmas Day, "We are trying, hard as it may be, to banish all thoughts of revenge." As the cathedral was rebuilt and opened in 1962, a Ministry of Reconciliation developed there called the Community of the Cross of Nails, named for the nails that Wales found. The current Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, was a residentiary Canon for Reconciliation at Coventry in 2002-7, working in Nigeria at serious risk to his life. Around his neck, he wears the cross of nails.

You might think that this post is about the legend of Coventry—the cross of nails, the Coventry Litany of Reconciliation, the call of the cross to forgo vengeance, the summons to a ministry of reconciliation in everyday life.

It is not. At least, not exactly.

Let me suggest that our Lenten meditation must unwrap the political layers behind Coventry Cathedral, for where there is a cross, there is political contestation. In other parts of the world (say, at Auschwitz), the symbol of the cross has been lambasted for being a sign of Christian privilege.

But the question for somewhere like Coventry is: who cares?

The "who cares" question matters because a town like Coventry is situated in a world that is said to be secularizing. The recent book, *Reconciling People: Coventry Cathedral's Story* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2011), is a fascinating multi-authored account—written by people who themselves have worked at Coventry Cathedral—that peels back the layers of legend to uncover the politics behind the making of this sacred space. Describing Coventry as an industrial manufacturing town with a broadly socialist city council, the authors emphasize that the plan to rebuild the cathedral was initially rejected by the municipal government. Understanding religion to be solely concerned with the transcendent, the council highlighted other economic priorities in light of the wartime devastation. The council was eventually overruled by governor minister David Eccles, and the cathedral was eventually given the go-ahead because of its symbolism of new hope that English traditions had not died in the bombing. Yet the city and the cathedral have always existed in tension, the municipal government often paying attention to the town's economy while leaving the cathedral to articulate how exactly it fits into secular agendas. This has been especially exacerbated as Coventry's economy has become more post-industrial, a euphemism for the departure of manufacturing employment and the rise of unemployment during the political economic restructuring of the 1980s.

In other words, one might ask: who cares about the cross as a religious symbol when it's the secular economic agenda that should take priority? After all, symbols do not put food on the table, pay the rent, and create jobs. The economy does.

This was precisely the question that William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury during the time of the Coventry bombing, sought to answer in *Christianity and Social Order*. Because Temple had a long record

of advocating for labor rights in his formal ecclesial capacity, he had been accused of “interfering” with the secular political economy.

Christianity and Social Order was his answer. Writing in the early 1940s, in the very wartime context that had so devastated Coventry, Temple observed that each country’s economic philosophy educated its citizens to become certain kinds of people:

The Nazis take all young Germans into the Hitler-Jugend and train them in the qualities admired and needed by the Nazi régime. We throw most young Englishmen out into a world of fierce competition where each has to stand on his own feet (which is good) and fight for his own interest (which is bad), if he is not to be submerged. Our system is not deliberately planned; but it produces effects just the same. It offers a perpetual suggestion in the direction of combative self-assertiveness. It is recognized on all hands that the economic system is an educative influence, for good or ill, of immense potency. (Temple 1942/1976: 36).

Temple also noted that members of the church are not exempt from the education of the economy; they live within it! Observing that capitalism in the 1940s (!) had in fact produced “bad housing, malnutrition, and unemployment” (p. 32), Temple argued that the church had to provide an answer to this broken economy. Drawing from his more philosophical works like *Mens Creatrix and Nature, Man, and God*, he contended that the church declares that each individual person has dignity and exists in various social units, especially the family, that must be respected. The “People’s Archbishop,” as Temple was called, proposed that the church must propose an alternative to an economy that is not conducive to human dignity.

Coventry Cathedral spatializes what Temple is talking about. The cross is not standing in Coventry Cathedral as a private religious space. The church is as public as the economy because as the economy educates, so does the church.

This is why the cross matters in a secular economic society. The very logics promoted by English capitalism in the 1940s produced a certain kind of subject and society that the cross stops dead in its tracks. If Temple was railing against the logics of competition, self-interest, and vengeance promoted by English capitalism, the cross says no. “No,” says Temple, to the logics of destruction that require unemployment and lead to what the Coventry Litany calls “our indifference to the plight of the imprisoned, the homeless, the refugee.” “No,” the cross of Coventry says to “the hatred which divides nation from nation, race from race, class from class” and “the covetous desires of people and nations to possess what is not their own.” “No,” says Provost Howard, to the impulses toward revenge that are themselves steeped in this economic subjectivity, “the pride which leads us to trust in ourselves and not in God.” The cross in the public space of the cathedral is nothing short of a political statement, a call to a new education, a sign of a new society that operates on a different logic.

The cross may not directly put food on the table, pay the rent, and create jobs, but it says “no” to “the greed which exploits the work of human hands and lays waste the earth. Father Forgive.’

That is why it is so significant that the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Lent Book for 2014 was Graham Tomlin’s *Looking Through the Cross* (Bloomsbury Academic). The book feels safe. It was used as the Lenten meditations at Holy Trinity Brompton in 2013. It reads like an evangelical calling for fellow believers to look at the world through the eyes of the cross, which sounds exactly like what pious Christians should be doing. But read it closely, and what you find is that what Tomlin is doing in 2014 is exactly what Temple did in 1942. For Tomlin, the cross serves as a public critique of capitalist economic logics. Tomlin begins the book with a cross-centered assault on the contemporary “wisdom” that holds that our upward mobility defines our social status. The cross says no. The cross points to how that very logic creates social destruction. Looking through the cross points to the possibility of a truly moral society, one that replaces political posturing for genuine conversation, class stratification for equality, competition for love.

Tomlin, Temple, and Coventry Cathedral together present an Anglican theology of the cross for our Good Friday reflections. The cross is not a private religious symbol. It is a public political declaration. Its logic is to be embraced before we destroy ourselves.

Father Forgive.

Or, as the Litany concludes, “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”

*Justin K.H. Tse, is a Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada Postdoctoral Fellow in the Comparative Religion Unit at the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington. His focuses on religious publics, including Anglican ones in the Asia Pacific and Asian North America.*