

[or]

by Jennifer Wernimont

The power of [or]: it separates two choices.

The power of a symbol: it says things without speaking them; it influences actions using little effort. It can have multiple meanings, passing stories along and conveying history, malleable as it may be.

If one listens close enough, history says, March to the beat of Hitler's words: give a Jew a yellow star and the back of a hand. Thrust a gun in a Jew-lover's face. Point a hate word at one. Haul a truckload to a concentration camp where you pluck out the weak and bring them to an oven. Spit out "Jew" and proudly don the swastika. Use it to denote the superiority of the German race and the Aryan goals of Hitler. Use it to remember the atrocities and crimes that shamed humanity. Use it to glorify Hitler as an icon. Use it as an "instrument of criminality" as Satarupa Dasgupta, an assistant professor at New York University and published author of several cultural articles, has boldly called it (2). Let it instinctively and unintentionally remind you of violence and hatred.

[or]

If one listens close enough, history says, March to the beat of God's teachings: find love in a brother's heart, seek awareness and cultivate higher wisdom. Study scripture, believe in goodness. Pray in a sacred temple. Be free to worship and meditate. Devote, Om, and...proudly don the [swos-ti-kuh]. According to the article "It's Time for Us to Reclaim the Symbol of Love," the swastika represents the four L's: luck, light, love, and life . It can be used as a charm to drive away evil and bring good luck, long life, and prosperity like people from Mexico and Central America use it (par. 5). It can be used as a good luck symbol like in ancient England and Scotland or used as an emblem of hope for auspicious beginnings like for the Navajo (Dasgupta 9). Let it instinctively and unintentionally remind you of God's goodness.

Flipped by a 45-degree angle and a mirror

[or]

Vertically sitting undisturbed

He made the small moustache what it is today. He is blamed for killing millions of people. He now has one of the most infamous names in history. Hitler's goal was manifested in what is now called the Holocaust: to extinguish those of Jewish descent or anyone who threatened the perfect Aryan race. He had grandiose plans for Germany and was willing to resort to mass murder to see his goals achieved. He created the Nazi party and co-opted a symbol to be used for propaganda and support: the swastika inside a white circle and mounted on a red flag. The swastika, mirrored and turned at a 45-degree angle, had suddenly changed its connotation.

[or]

At its root, there is goodness, for in Sanskrit, “su” means “good” and “asti” means “to exist.” To exist in goodness; may goodness exist. For thousands of years, the swastika has been used as a symbol of purity, tolerance, and love; it literally means, “let good prevail” (Raichura, par. 1-2). One small symbol “has managed to conceive its own system of images whose signified meanings are multifaceted and span over time and geographical barriers” (Dasgupta 6).

One small symbol is confused about its purpose in the world: it exists in the West as the Holocaust and in the East as goodness.

Because of these multiple existences, it is easy to understand why signs and symbols can be misinterpreted. There is subjectivism involved based on culture, knowledge, background, and education. The Winnipeg Free Press received a call from Paula Banerji, a middle-aged resident of Canada concerned about this issue of misinterpretation. After reading about the possibility of banning racist groups and symbols, the swastika being one of them, Banerji decided to speak out. She emphasizes that the intimacy and tolerance of the Hindu religion make for the practice of private traditions, not the promotion of the swastika. She explains that, “In Canada, many people have only seen a swastika in the Nazi context” (qtd. in Sanders, par. 14), overshadowing its original meaning. Here is a prime example of how culture and background have hindered knowledge. Hitler took a different approach. He spread the symbol far and wide, using propaganda to gain support for his cause as represented by the turned swastika. The swastika has become a skewed symbol, and its negative connotations have replaced the meaning that was originally intended for it.

Innocent until proven guilty

[or]

Guilty until proven innocent

As interest and action by Paula Banerji have conveyed, the swastika “captivates mass attention owing to its contemporary application in two oppositional forms” (Dasgupta 1). Modern views of the swastika have tainted its historical purpose, and there are people who want to remove the stain, wishing to enlighten the world of the swastika’s gentleness. There exists a Facebook group called “The Swastika Is Not a Nazi Symbol.” The group contains upwards of 3,700 members; though not large, their goal is admirable and far-reaching: to spread the true, good meaning of the swastika. On their group site, they boldly ask, “How can a symbol be guilty for the acts of a madman?” as originally expressed by ManWoman, a fierce advocate for saving the swastika who travels and speaks on behalf of the symbol. His group, Friends of the Swastika, “declare[s] the swastika to be innocent of the crimes perpetrated under the Nazi banners.” They refuse to let a few years of war completely erase a five-thousand-year history. As displayed by the passionate words of these groups, people do fight to win back peace and restore the swastika’s rarely known other half.

To ban

[or]

Not to ban

When the European Union proposed a ban on the swastika, Ramesh Kallidai of the Hindu Forum of Britain had something to say: "Just because Hitler misused the symbol, abused it and used it to propagate a reign of terror and racism and discrimination does not mean that its peaceful use should be banned" ("International Perspectives," par. 4). Would you ban the cross simply because of the way the Ku Klux Klan uses it? According to Stephen G. Ray, Jr., Professor of Theology at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary and ordained minister of the United Church of Christ, "the cross has historically been at the center of the cultic life of the [Ku Klux] Klan for many years" (55). The Klan has burned the cross and used it for their own purpose: White Supremacy. Though their practices are widely known, violent, and criminal, it would be a "mischaracterization to judge the practice of the Christian faith in a particular context by the use of its symbols, by a particular group or movement within that context" (54). Along these same lines, it would be a mistake to judge the display of a swastika without prior knowledge of where it has been, whom it has seen, and why it exists in that context.

At the heart of these mistakes, there lie deeply rooted human tendencies. There is the tendency to be ignorant: some people believe that Hitler created the symbol for himself, that it never existed prior to his choosing of the pattern (Dasgupta 10). They are unaware of its history. They do not pay mind to cultures that are not their own, causing misunderstanding. Widely used historical textbooks rarely explain the origin of the swastika, leaving it to be associated with Hitler's legacy. Banerji believes that the only way to fix this is through education and tolerance. There is no reason to ban the swastika, but there is reason to reclaim it and return it to its rightful owners, "disarming the neo-Nazis who've used it as a weapon of hate" (qtd. in Sanders, par. 13).

Even further, there is the tendency to be intolerant: in the assimilation of cultures, it is common for one to demean another or refuse to recognize it, perhaps by flaunting the symbol and displaying it to support anti-Semitism while hiding behind its religious interpretation (Dasgupta 7). Those who want to ban the swastika do not embrace the fact that it is deeply associated with the Hindu religion. At the same time, Hindus may not be completely sympathetic to the fact that it now is a disgraced part of Western history. Where will the line be drawn? Will it be drawn down the center of the swastika, forever splitting it into two meanings? Will its infamous mustached owner prevail even after his demise? A ban would succumb to Hitler's purposes. It would give him power over a symbol that was once good and would give him influence over a people that wish to be free of him, even decades later. [or] Will long-term history win over the hearts of those who choose to listen to peace? Hitler appropriated the symbol, stripping it of its historically good meaning, but for thousands of years prior to his reign, the swastika prevailed as a beautifully religious symbol. The struggle now is whether or not humanity is capable of recognizing the multifaceted nature of this symbol.

As Rudyard Kipling says in his poem "The Ballad of East and West," "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." In the battle between East and West, the swastika gets

pulled and ripped. It gets rotated and flipped back and forth. The West was introduced to the extreme hatred of the swastika; the East embraces the swastika as a symbol of unshakable faith. Hinduism is Hinduism and Hitler is Hitler; the two shall never meet.

The power of [or]: it separates two choices.

Violence [or] nonviolence.

Peace [or] hatred.

Tolerance [or] intolerance.

East [or] West.

Most of the time, these choices cannot exist in harmony. They battle it out until one claims victory over the other and smears it across the text of history.

Works Cited

Dasgupta, Satarupa. "Revulsion Versus Reverence: The Swastika and Its Symbolic Significance." Conference Papers—International Communication Association (2009): 1-21. Web. 1 Apr. 2011.

"International Perspectives." Newsweek 29 Jan. 2007: 5. Web.

Kipling, Rudyard. "The Ballad of East and West." Poetry Lovers' Page. Web. 5 Apr. 2011.

ManWoman. "Save the Swastika." ManWoman—Warrior of Sacred Imagination. Web. 19 Apr. 2011.

Raichura, Priti. "It's Time for Us to Reclaim the Symbol of Love." Letter. Leicester Mercury 24 Feb. 2005: 15. Factiva.com. Web.

Ray, Jr., Stephen G. "Contending for the Cross: Black Theology and the Ghosts of Modernity." Black Theology: An International Journal 8.1 (2010): 53-68. Web. 19 Apr. 2011.

Sanders, Carol. "Banning Swastikas a Bad Idea: Critics Argue It's a Symbol of Peace, Good Health." Winnipeg Free Press 21 March 2005: B4. Web. 5 Apr. 2011.