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The Stations of the Cross: A Personal Interpretation

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THE STATIONS OF THE CROSS:

A PERSONAL INTERPRETATION

(TITLE)

BY

ROY RUSTY E. SMITH II

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1974

YEAR

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INTRODUCTION

Art is an expression by the artist of his conscious and/or unconscious feelings about the society in which he lives, and societies appear to be based upon complex mythological systems. It is important to realize that the labeling of an event or series of events as myth in no way denies those events a factual basis. In any myth system faith supercedes fact, and the system does not rely upon historical fact for its justification. This project is a personal statement of one of the most important myths of Western society: the crucifixion of Christ.

The result of this study is a series of fourteen drawings entitled, "The Stations of the Cross: A Personal Interpretation." The stations of the cross were chosen because they offered an existing institutional structure for an extended visual study of the crucifixion. This paper investigates the role of myth in society, then concentrates on the crucifixion event, and culminates with the presentation of this artist's visual interpretation of the stations of the cross.

This paper acknowledges that modern day theology has already dealt with the problem of the dual nature of Christ: that the exclusion of one side is the expense incurred when the other side is over-emphasized. However, it is this artist's belief that the great mass of the

church (the church in this paper does not refer to any specific organized church but to all organized Christian churches or, more classically, to the church as the body of Christian believers regardless of affiliation) has not come to an active realization of the human quality of Christ, but has dwelled almost exclusively on his divinity; while a vague acknowledgement of His humanity is present among all Christians, there is no real empathy. The fullness of the myth, whatever the personal interpretation, is lost when the interpretation is not based upon both a human and a divine Christ.

This project is primarily the presentation of personal feelings about the meaning of the crucifixion. Based to a large extent on the belief that a very rich and meaningful myth has failed to reach or maintain its fullest possibilities, it accepts Christianity as a valid myth on the basis of faith, and is not a nihilistic attempt to destroy a system. It is instead a positive attempt to revitalize a myth for the artist and hopefully for others.

CHAPTER I
THE DISINTEGRATION OF MYTH

It is hard to arrive at a satisfactory definition of myth because it is vague by its very nature; it is "a way of implying things that are difficult to state explicitly."¹ Alan Watts offers this definition of myth:

. . . a complex of stories - some no doubt fact, and some fantasy - which, for various reasons, human beings regard as demonstration of the inner meaning of the universe and of human life.²

Man attempts, through the use of myth, to explain those facets of his life which defy a non-metaphoric explanation. The myth with its interpretations is a model of existence that necessarily reflects the context of the world in which it develops. Myths can cease to satisfy their purposes, and when a society outgrows or obscures its mythological justifications and explanations it is in a state of moral despair; disintegrating myths present the illusion, or reflection, of a disintegrating society. When myths malfunction the world becomes little more than "a somewhat stupid machine"³ and until a new, more viable, myth-structure can be effected, man is left in a void; with his whole world collapsing around him. A new myth-structure can be, and often is, constructed around existing myths, as Watts points out:

. . . The transformation of man's understanding does not always or necessarily imply an abandonment of the past. It is not the kind of intellectual change in which old ideas become automatically obsolete or foolish - just because they are old. On the contrary, intellectual growth often shows that we were wiser than we knew⁴

Within the context of religion there is a constant: divine revelation. The "fact" that divine revelation is a constant cannot be "proven" within the rational model; all religions presuppose that "God does not lie."⁵ However, the state of modern religious institutions makes it obvious that failure can also occur here. The religious myth ceases to function effectively not because it is inherently false but because it has been lost in a maze of invalid and superficial additions and mutations in its institutions. A religious system has two basic elements; one, that essence which remains constantly valid because it is God's revelation; and two, the super-structure, those man-made institutions intended to be a vehicle for the preservation and dissemination of the revelation. When the super-structure contains enough institutions that have ceased to be viable, or never were, it makes the whole system appear invalid. In order for the religion to once again serve as an active myth system, the obscuring super-structure must be altered or removed so that a new one that is both true to the underlying myth and relevant to its present historical context can be constructed.

The super-structure fails because the classic function of institutional religion has been the promotion of the status quo.⁶ This reaction has developed from the natural desire of the organized church to perpetuate itself as an institution; but in doing so the institution has

failed to remain "personally and vitally engaged in historical realities with specific times and places."⁷ When the institution of the church defends a society it should do so only because "it sees that system as one which provides it with the possibility of communicating the message it believes to be essential to man,"⁸ and not simply to insure the longevity of its traditions and customs. The church must "adapt more suitably to the needs of our own times those institutions which are subject to change";⁹ this means that all the traditions and customs that the church has instituted as a means of communicating its basic myths are subject to re-examination, re-evaluation, and possible change or elimination. The whole super-structure of religion, in other words, the entire institution beyond the revelations of God, is a fallible construct of man, based on his interpretation of the myth in a particular historical circumstance, and is, therefore, in need of constant change so as to remain true to its mythic foundation in light of its current historical circumstance.

The revitalization of religious institutions requires two simultaneous processes:

- (1) a continuous return to the source of all Christian life and to the original inspiration of a given community, and
- (2) an adjustment to the changed conditions of the times.¹⁰

The changes need to be real changes and not the tacking on of tiny changes to radically immobile structures. McNaspy illustrates the point with the following story:

One religious congregation that I know (and the reader can surely add more), swiftly made a slight change in its garb, then settled down into new rigidity as though it had already had its 'aggiornamento'. So it was that the latter condition proved worse than the former, since any inspiration to real change had been put quietly to rest The imperative need is not for 'changes' but for change. This implies the freedom to change whatever need to be changed and as often and thoroughly as it may need to be changed.¹¹

The Christian myth system is in need of change; it has, in the main, become a self-serving institution of tradition and has ceased to be an active and positive force in the modern world. One segment of the Christian myth system that has lost its full meaning is the crucifixion of Christ. This project, then, is basically a re-examination of the crucifixion in visual terms in hope of effecting a more relevant re-evaluation of this myth or event. This examination uses the format of the stations of the cross, a traditional construct of the Catholic church, to present the events surrounding the crucifixion as a means of focusing attention on the nature of Christ. In the next section, the events depicted in the stations, as best as they can be reconstructed, are briefly described to aid in the understanding of the basis of the myth.¹²

CHAPTER II.
THE STATIONS OF THE CROSS

Crucifixion as a means of execution had a two fold intent; first it was meant as an object lesson for others and a deterrent against future crimes, second it was meant to be the most painful and humiliating death a man could suffer.

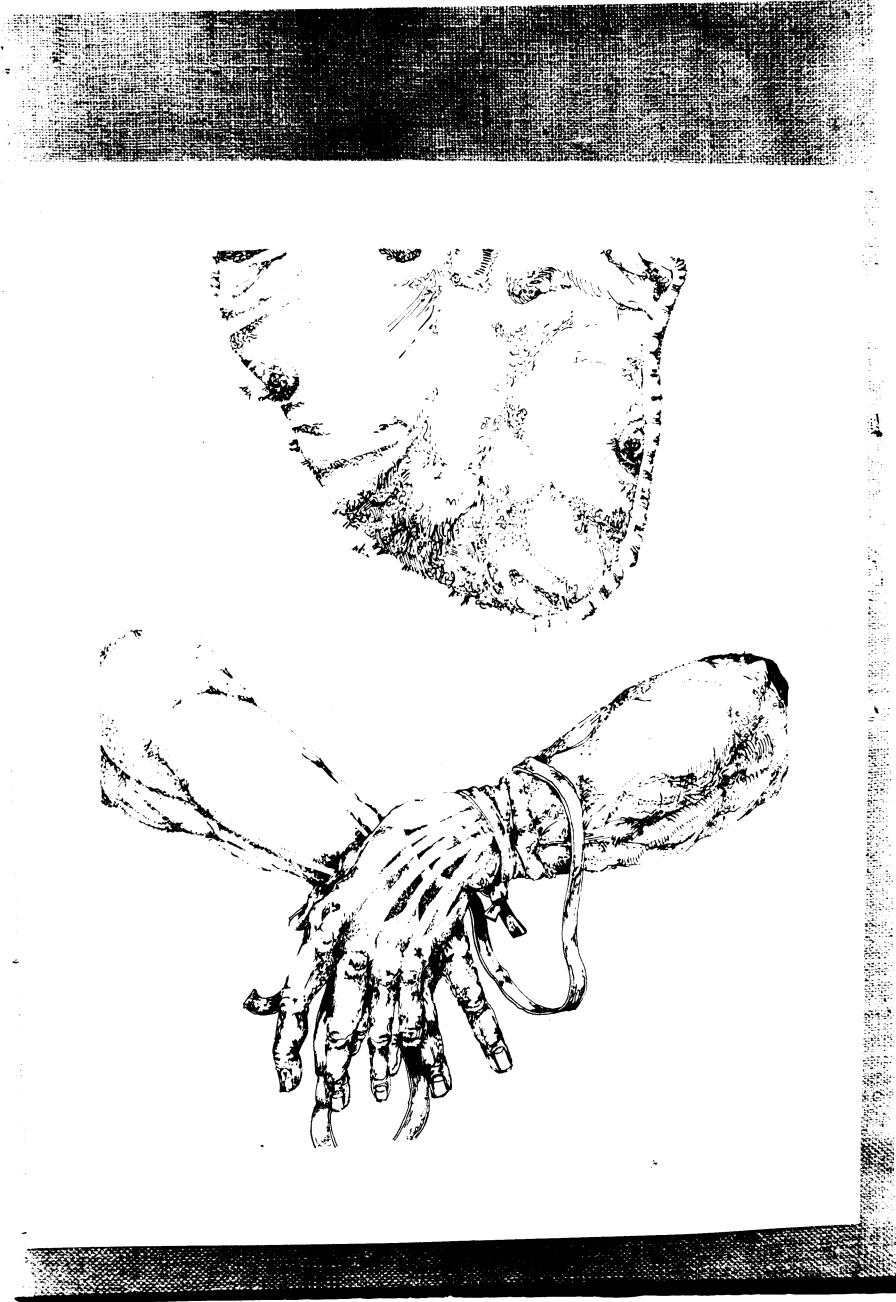
Few more terrible means of execution could be devised. Pain, thirst, the torture of insects, exposure to the brutal spectators, the horror of rigid fixation, all continuing interminably, combined to make it a supreme humiliation and torture.¹³

It was so horrible and degrading that it was against Roman law to crucify a Roman citizen, regardless of the nature of His crime.

In the first station of the cross, Jesus is condemned to die by Pilate. After the sentence had been passed the soldiers who were present began to mock Him. They draped a purple soldiers cloak around Him, fashioned a crown of thorns for His head, put a reed in His hand as a scepter, and then made mock obeisance to Him. After they were through humiliating Him they abused Him physically. This scourging was done with the flagellum, a whip of leather thongs with bits of metal or bone attached to the ends. Although the mockery was the result of the particular nature of Jesus' crime, the scourging was a customary preliminary to the act of crucifixion. The beating was so

PLATE I.

Jesus is Condemned to Death by Pilate



severe that men often died from it; at best it left the victim bloody, with flayed skin, and on the point of physical exhaustion. John places the scourging of Jesus as occurring before Pilate passed sentence; an attempt on the part of Pilate to elicit pity for a man he found to be without guilt. However, Matthew and Mark place it in the customary Roman sequence, as following the passing of sentence, and Luke does not mention it at all. There is no reason to believe that Pilate made any special concessions in the case of Jesus.

Jesus is made to bear his cross in the second station. Contrary to popular mis-information the whole cross was not carried but only the patibulum, or cross-piece, which was often strapped to the victim. Jesus had to carry His cross approximately 1,000 yards; although the route was not long it was not the most direct but was designed to lead the condemned past a large segment of the population in order to further humiliate the victim and to better impress the object lesson. Four stations deal with Jesus' inability to carry the cross: Jesus Falls the First Time (3), The Cross is Laid on Simon of Cyrene (5), Jesus Falls the Second Time (7), and Jesus Falls the Third Time (9). The failure of His strength was not due to the weight of the patibulum, since it only weighed about thirty pounds, but rather to the state of extreme physical exhaustion brought on by the scourging. Simon of Cyrene, who was pressed into service to carry the cross at least part of the way, was a bystander chosen for the task by the soldiers purely by chance.

PLATE II.

Jesus is Made to Bear His Cross



PLATE III.

Jesus Falls the First Time



The titulus, a sign stating the criminal charges, was either hung around the victim's neck or carried on a staff before him. Jesus' titulus read, in part, "King of the Jews"; He was executed because he had claimed to be, or had acted as if he were, the king of the Jews, which was an act of treason to the Roman state. The titulus is the only clue to the type of cross on which Jesus was crucified. Since His titulus was hung over His head it would indicate that the cross extended over His head. Consequently, it is most likely that the crux immissa, or latin cross (+), was used and not the cross of St. Anthony (T), or the cross of St. Andrew (X). It is interesting to note that the X shape of the cross of St. Andrew would draw attention to the genital region while the shape of the crux immissa draws attention to the head.

Of the three remaining stations along the way to the site of execution, two are traditional and have no scriptural foundation, which is not to say that they are invalid, they do not conflict with the total myth system. They are: Jesus Meets His Blessed Mother (4), and Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus (6). The presence of Jesus' earthly mother stresses the fact that Jesus was human and, therefore, that He was suffering as any man would. Veronica is one of the women mourners who followed Jesus and, at one point, wiped the sweat and blood from His face with her veil. The image of Jesus' face miraculously appeared on the veil; a reminder of Jesus' divinity. This station is closely related to the eighth station: Jesus Speaks to the Women of Jerusalem. These women were mourners who always followed the condemned man,

wailing and lamenting his fate. In response Jesus said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children." He went on to mildly rebuke them for pitying Him.

Pity was not the correct response because:

More often than not pity is but a specious self pity, made plausible and comely. It was not of Himself that He was thinking, it was of them . . . what ever else we make of that road to the cross, the conviction comes over us that God is traveling it, not maneuvered into a corner . . . but with the reins of the matter in His own steady hands, dealing with something that way because there was no other way in which to deal with it.¹⁴

While this rebuke may be a strong reminder that Jesus was God, it should not be forgotten that he was also a man.

The place of execution was not far outside the city; it was called Golgotha, which means skull, not because it was a place of execution but more likely because the hill itself resembled a skull. Calvary is derived from the Latin word calvaria which also means skull. When the victim arrived at Golgotha he was stripped of his clothes and left exposed, to further debase and humiliate him. This is the tenth station of the cross.

In the eleventh station Jesus is nailed to the cross. The patibulum was laid on the ground and the condemned man's arms were either tied or nailed to it. We know that Jesus' hands were nailed because of the story of doubting Thomas related in John. The nails were driven through the wrists and not the palms so as to support the weight of the upper body. There is no mention of how Jesus' feet were attached to

PLATE IV.

Jesus Meets His Blessed Mother



PLATE V.

The Cross is Laid on Simon of Cyrene



PLATE VI.

Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus



PLATE VII.

Jesus Falls the Second Time



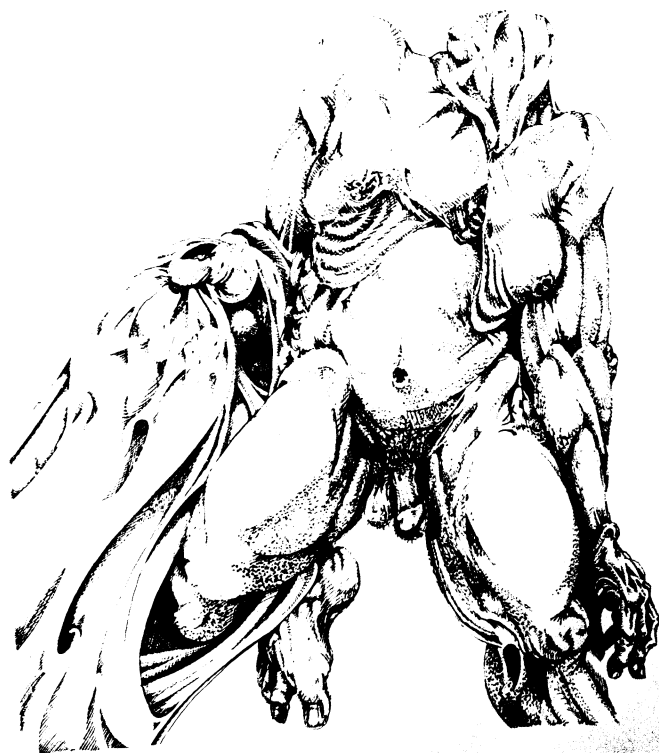
PLATE VIII.

Jesus Speaks to the Women of Jerusalem



PLATE IX.

Jesus Falls the Third Time



the cross. Once the victim was secured to the patibulum he was lifted up and the patibulum was fitted into a notch on the upright, which was a permanent structure at the site of the execution. Since nailed or bound wrists could not fully support the weight of the body there was a device called the sedile on the upright, it was a wooden saddle that the victim straddled and was the main support of the body weight. It was not provided out of any consideration for the victim but rather to prolong the agony by preventing a rapid death. The act of crucifixion itself constitutes the twelfth station.

Christ died within six hours, which was surprisingly quick considering that crucifixion often took two days or more. The only explanation is that His scourging was so severe and brutal that it left Him close to death to begin with. His last words were "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?", (My God, My God, why has thou forsaken me?). The quickness, the abruptness, and the strength exhibited by shouting these final words would indicate that the immediate cause of Jesus' death was the rupture of a vital organ. His last words are from the opening of the twenty-second Psalm and were probably a somewhat common plea issued by Jews in moments of despair. The humanity of Christ is lost in any attempt to explain away these words.

Through the death of Jesus the barrier that had shielded man from the immediate presence of God was removed. This new relationship between man and God is symbolized by the tearing of the veil in the temple. This veil had separated the Holy Place from the Holy of

Holies and symbolized a system in which man had to communicate with God through the intercession of other men.

Jewish law forbade leaving a body hanging overnight, and the coming night was a particularly important one - the Passover Sabbath. To insure that the crucified men would be dead before nightfall a delegation of Jews asked Pilate to have the legs of the condemned men broken in order to hasten their death. This common practice was called the crucifragum. Pilate complied with their wishes and the legs of the two other men were broken, but when the soldiers came to Jesus they found Him already dead. To make certain that the crucified men were dead their sides were pierced with a spear. Blood and water flowed from this wound in Jesus' side, and, although this is physiologically possible, the real significance is spiritual. The blood symbolizes the life of Jesus poured out for man, while the water symbolizes God's spirit, which now became, with Jesus' departure, the vehicle of God's contact with man. It is also another reminder of Jesus' dual nature: man and God.

The body is removed from the cross in the thirteenth station. The family of Jesus owned no burial place near Jerusalem and, because the body had to be interred before sundown, it was necessary to find one in the vicinity. Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin, supplied one. Luke states that he was a member of the council who did not consent to the council's actions against Jesus, while Matthew and John say that he was a secret disciple. To obtain the body, an act

PLATE X.

Jesus is Stripped of His Garments



PLATE XI.

Jesus is Nailed to the Cross

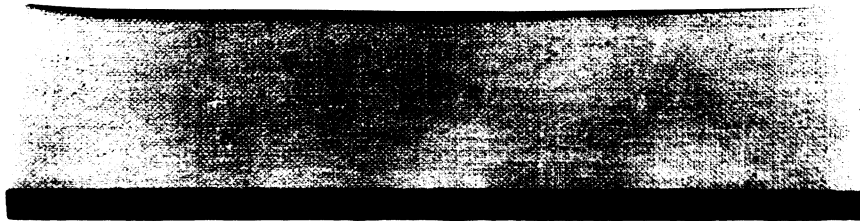


PLATE XII.

Jesus Dies on the Cross

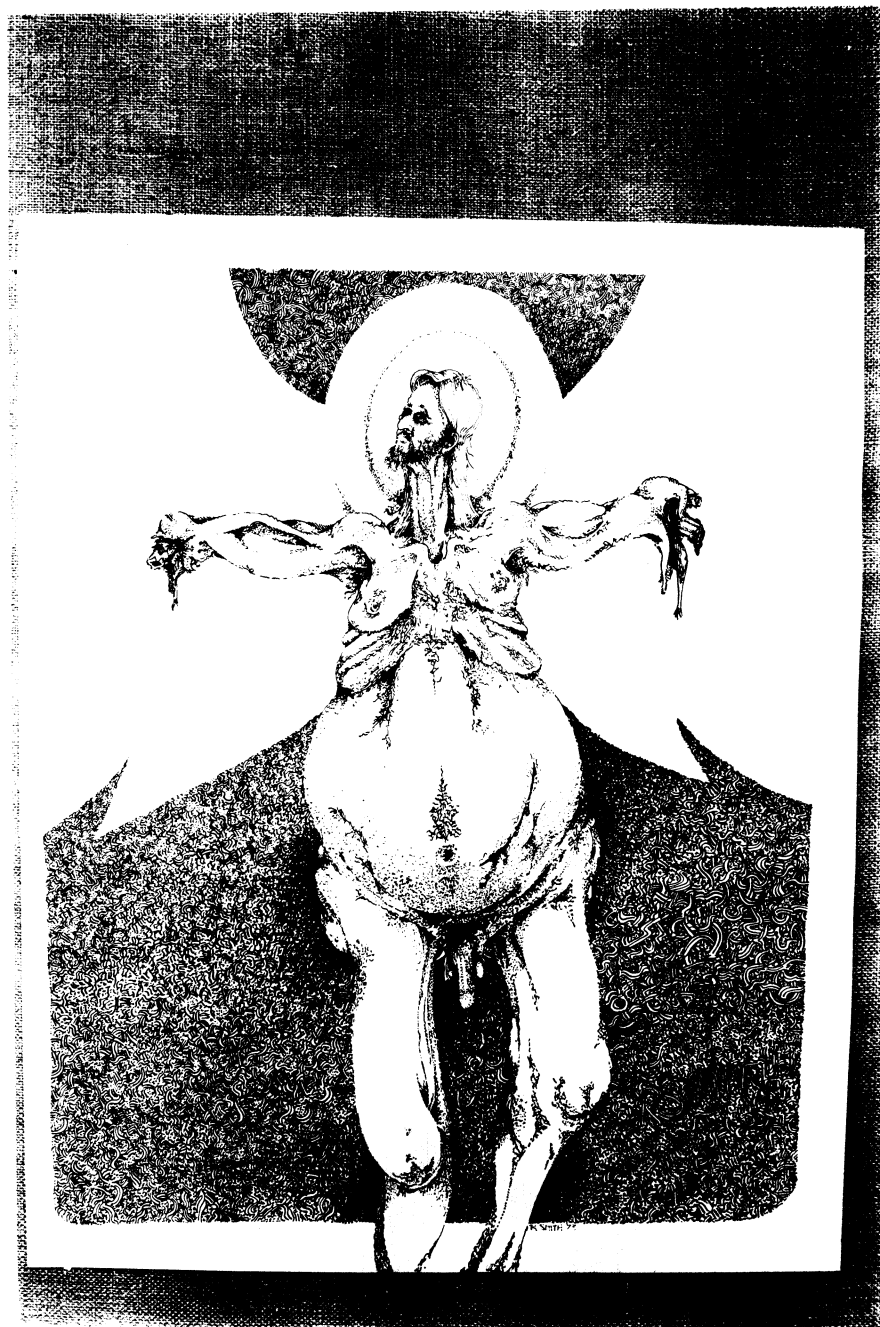


PLATE XIII.

Jesus is Taken Down From the Cross



which Mark indicates required great courage, Joseph had to ask Pilate personally. It should be recalled that Jesus was executed as an enemy of the state and anyone who associated himself with Him could also come under suspicion as a revolutionary. Joseph probably told Pilate that, as a prominent citizen, he wanted to be sure that the religious regulations for the Sabbath and Passover were observed; this request would not have been unusual.

The tomb, hewn from living stone, was a low-ceilinged, two-room structure with an ante-chamber and an inner chamber where the body was placed. A stone was rolled in front of the opening between the ante-chamber and the inner chamber to seal the tomb off after the body had been interred. The tomb that Joseph offered was a fresh one with no bodies in it. Since it was a violation of Jewish law to bury a man who had been executed in the tomb of one's fathers, it was not an honor for Jesus to be buried in an empty tomb but rather a final humiliation. This is the fourteenth and final station of the cross; however, a fifteenth station is becoming more and more common. The added station commemorates Jesus' triumph over death in the resurrection.

PLATE XIV.

The Body of Jesus is Laid in the Tomb



APOLOGIA

This paper is not intended as a restatement of the drawings, but rather a complement to them. The culmination of the project in the drawings should take the place of any written conclusions. It is believed that this visual statement will not translate effectively into verbal media, and that more is to be gained by a visual study of the drawings than any written statement could provide.

Although the physical facts of Christ's crucifixion are not necessary to validate the myth, they do offer a vehicle for re-emphasizing Christ's humanness by dwelling upon those aspects which draw attention to the physical suffering of Christ and, hence, His humanity. For Christ to function as the final blood sacrifice, and thereby the Messiah within the Christian myth structure, it is important that the dual nature of Christ be fully accepted. It is hoped that remembrance of both the Godliness and humanness of Christ will revitalize a myth that is losing its impact and relevance to alienated modern man. A vital myth is a positive means for society to understand itself. If there is truth, it is to be found in myth; the higher ideals of man, the deepest concerns, his very understanding of his origins and the meaning of his existence can best be expressed and understood through myth.

APPENDIX I

All the drawings were executed with a highly flexible medium, fine, or extra fine pen point; no variation in grade of point fineness was used on any of the drawings. A medium weight Grumbacher bristol paper was used. All the drawings measure 24" x 30" in over-all dimensions.

FOOTNOTE REFERENCES

¹Alan W. Watts, The Two Hands of God: The Myths of Polarity (Toronto: Collier Books, 1969), p. 3.

²Ibid., 2.

³Ibid., 11.

⁴Ibid., 41.

⁵C. J. McNaspy, S. J., Change Not Changes: New Directions in Religious Life and Priesthood (New York: Paulist Press, 1968), p. 23.

⁶For a good example and discussion of church and state relationships from the point of view of the state see Konstantin Pobedonostev's Reflections of a Russian Statesman (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1965).

⁷Gustavo Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation, trans. by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973), p. 13.

⁸Francois Houtart and Andre Rousseau, The Church and Revolution, trans by Violet Nevile (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1971), p. 326.

⁹McNaspy, Change Not Changes, p. 25.

¹⁰Ibid., 22.

¹¹Ibid., 21.

¹²The description of the crucifixion is based primarily on William R. Wilson's The Execution of Jesus (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970) and is augmented by: W. Adams Brown, "Crucifixion," in Dictionary of the Bible, ed. by J. Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911); J.D. Douglas, ed., The New Bible Dictionary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing CO., 1967); Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah (Rapid City, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1969); J. C. Lambert, "Crucifixion," in Dictionary of the Bible, ed. by J. Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954).

¹³William R. Wilson, The Execution of Jesus (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), p. 153.

¹⁴George Arthur Buttrick, The Interpreter's Bible (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1952), p. 405.

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