



## Psychological consequences of religious symbols in public space: Crucifix display at a public university



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### ABSTRACT

The question of the presence of religious symbols (e.g. crosses) in public space is an important topic in public discourse, leading to many political disagreements and legal disputes. What seems to be missing in the debate about crosses in public space (schools, universities, hospitals) is an assessment of the psychological consequences that these symbols might have for religious and non-religious people visiting, studying and working in such places. The present experimental study examined the influence of religious displays in a public university room on the psychological state of students: their self-esteem, as well as positive and negative affect. The study found that the religious symbol reduced negative affect among students who identify strongly with religion and those who frequently attend religious ceremonies. The negative effects on non-religious students were less pronounced. This result is discussed with reference to self-affirmation theory, environmental psychological theories and more recent findings on the social consequences of more subtle religious exposures.

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“A crucifix on a wall is an essentially passive symbol (...) It cannot be deemed to have an influence on pupils comparable to that of didactic speech or participation in religious activities,” pronounced the European Court of Human Rights on the presence of crucifixes in classrooms of state schools (ECHR, 2011, p. 29). This sentence was preceded by a large debate about the presence of religious symbols in European public schools. Such debates are linked also to a more general question about the impact of religious symbols present in living space on people’s well-being and psychological functioning.

### 1. Space and subjective well-being

Why do we happen to be happy? Why are we sometimes unhappy? Answers to these questions usually refer to our dispositions, particularly our temperament, and the material conditions of our life, our abilities and efforts, proximate social environment and systemic socio-economic factors. It is less noticeable that one of the determinants of our subjective well-being is the physical space we inhabit and how it is construed. In a Swiss study, an improvement in perceived environmental housing quality increased the well-being of inhabitants (Kahlmeyer, Schindler, Grize, & Braun-

Fahländer, 2001). In Australian studies, before and after controls for family composition, social class and culture, the children living in commercial streets, particularly in inner-city areas, stood out from all the others in their feelings of loneliness, dislike of other children and feelings of rejection, worry, fear, anger and unhappiness (Homel & Burns, 1989). Not only features of the environment, but also aesthetic preferences seem to be significant. Galindo and Rodriguez (2000) found that affective responses (comfort, arousal, sadness, boredom, tranquility and safety) were associated with aesthetic judgments of landscapes in which people lived. A more recent British study found a relationship between natural environments and experiential feeling states – both positive and negative (Hinds & Sparks, 2011).

The effects of physical surroundings on psychological states are not necessarily direct, however, and could also be mediated by group-related factors, self-concepts and social identities. It is well established that social identity – derived from group membership – is a crucial source of positive self-esteem and well-being (Tajfel, 1978). People suffer psychologically when they are convinced that their in-group has not been accepted or has been excluded from an important social context such as a neighborhood, workplace or classroom (Murphy, Steele, & Gross, 2007). Recent findings suggest that physical space severely affects people’s social identity (Haslam, Ellemers, Reicher, Reynolds, & Schmitt, 2010). For example, Cheryan, Plaut, Davies, and Steele (2009) found in a series of studies that the

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presence of objects stereotypically associated with computer science (e.g. comic books, electronics) reduced women's interest in science, the effect being mediated by a reduced sense of belonging within that context. Thus, construal of one's physical surroundings is affected by one's social identities.

In environmental psychology, self-identity has often been related to place attachment, the concept describing a person's emotions connected to a place (Cooper Marcus, 1992; Relph, 1976). Place attachment is "intimately linked to preservation of a sense of personal identity" (Rowles, 1983, p. 300) and objects are invested with symbolic meaning connected with past experiences and memories (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). Other authors have developed the concept of "place identity," claiming that it is a far more complex phenomenon than place attachment, as it goes beyond emotions and the sense of belonging to a particular place, including attitudes, values, thoughts, beliefs, meanings and behavioral tendencies influenced by physical space (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983). Places that were cultural settings for childhood socialization become models for the future selves of their inhabitants. Thus, objects in childhood homes (e.g. religious artifacts) not only express individual identity, but can also shape it (Hummon, 1989). Being in religious places connected with a positive social identity, and dealing with objects important to a religion-based social identity, could therefore affect the sense of subjective well-being.

Another interesting observation about relations between people and objects was made by the sociological studies of interaction (Goffman, 1967). This tradition of theorizing focuses on demeanor as the expression of people's manifestations of self-image to the audience in everyday action. Each action toward another person or inanimate object can communicate self-image as well as deference (respect of another person). From this perspective people's behavior toward religious symbols in public space represents not only their religious behavior but could act as a ritual of self-presentation in everyday life. This corroborates with the findings of environmental psychology that suggest that placing any object in public space can serve as a social ritual and a process of social structuring. Seminal studies by Zweigenhaft (1976) showed that faculty members who placed desks between themselves and students created psychological borders that represented status hierarchies (such settings were preferred only by senior faculty). Such spatial behavior is linked to students' feelings and the formality of the professor (Morrow & McElroy, 1981). Similarly, locating a religious symbol in a public space might not only be a form of identity performance but also a status-defining action that creates stratification between in-group (religious) and out-group members (non-religious).

## 2. Religious symbols' effect on individuals' psychological states

Symbolic aspects of environment have been of interest to the environmental psychologist for several decades (see, for example, Goffman, 1967; Knapp, 1980; Rapoport, 1982; Ruesch & Kees, 1966; Zweigenhaft, 1976). Religious symbols have only attracted attention more recently, however (e.g. Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 1993, 2001, 2004, 2009). The presence of religious symbols in the public sphere is widespread and distinct. In Western culture, these symbols mainly convey meanings pertaining to Christianity, although the multicultural nature of most Western societies (e.g. North American) is expressed in the presence of symbols specific to other religions, for example, Islam, Buddhism or Judaism. Some of the symbols are revealed by believers themselves (e.g. crosses worn on necks, mezuzahs on doorposts), but others are present in public institutions and spaces (crucifixes in classrooms, large seasonal displays for Christmas or Hanukkah). Given that society is

diversified in terms of religious beliefs, the effects of exposure to these religious symbols can vary.

Arbitrary decisions by a powerful individual or a small group of people in shaping urban space are a typical case of "autocratic control" (Mazumdar, 2000). This form of control can take several forms, which include control by imposition, by creative, demonstrative, destructive, or self-glorifying intervention, by selective non-intervention, by oversight and by supervision. The common core of all those forms is the imposition, not always official, of urban solutions that affect social life and psychological state. Control can be derived from and be closely linked to not only the political, administrative and social, but also the religious structure of society.

Religious symbolism is present not only in outdoor urban space, but also in more proximate indoor environments. This is especially important in the case of immigrants, who try to create space to cultivate their religion, regardless of the majority. In an ethnographic naturalistic field study, Mazumdar and Mazumdar (2009) offered the concepts of "home as religious space" and "ecology of religion" to describe how religious artifacts and landscaping helped immigrants renew connections with past experiences, environments, and people. They found that the Hindus in South California transform their newly acquired secular residences or houses into what they consider to be appropriate space by creating altars, which become a repository of religious objects and artifacts, and by incorporating various forms of religious art into their homes. Thus, the worshippers organize their private space religiously in order to elevate their well-being. Mazumdar and Mazumdar (1993) posit that religion through rituals connects people to places, and places as settings for sacred behavior and socialization connect people to religion.

In Christian cultures, emblems with a religious connotation include crosses and other installations less literally connected with religious mythology but popular because they derive from age-old traditions. Decorating Christmas trees is one of the most widespread seasonal customs in the latter category. As a cultural symbol, it marks an individual as coming from a Christian background. Schmitt, Davies, Hung, and Wright (2010) examined the psychological consequences of a Christmas display on participants celebrating vs. not celebrating Christmas and, in another study, those identified as Christian, Buddhist, or Sikh. In the former study, the display enhanced well-being of celebrators and harmed that of non-celebrators. In the latter study, the negative effect of the display on non-Christians appeared to be mediated by reduced feelings of inclusion.

In neither study did the participants, including non-celebrators nor non-Christians, expect the Christmas display to have a negative effect on them. Actually, they expected a relatively positive effect. The researchers interpret this result as a case of influencing well-being by identity-relevant symbols in physical space. According to them, the local physical environment has consequences for intra- and intergroup relations (see Haslam et al., 2010). Members of minority groups in the presence of a dominant cultural symbol can experience diminished feelings of inclusion, and suffer from negative mood and low self-esteem. The presence of a dominant culture symbol communicates who defines the norms of the local context, reminding those who do not share the dominant culture that they are not mainstream. The presence of dominant cultural symbols can also have positive effects for those whose identities are reflected in dominant culture (Schmitt et al., 2010).

Christmas display is a part of a wider environmental field of influence. The December school curriculum often takes Christmas into account and it influences children's well-being. Ribak-Rosenthal and Russell (1994) found that US children's emotion and self-concepts in response to Christmas holiday celebrations in public schools differed, depending on their cultural background. Non-Christian children experienced a significant decrease in happiness and satisfaction from October to December. A significantly greater percentage

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