

## Reclaiming the Sacred:

### The Swastika and Orsi's Problem of the Holy



This paper examines Paul Strand's "Swastika (a.k.a. Hitlerism)" through Robert Orsi's concept of the holy, exploring how the swastika's sacred origins contrast with its appropriation as a Nazi symbol. Strand's depiction of a skeletal Christ on an inverted swastika invites reflection on the limits of reducing sacred symbols to historical associations. Drawing on Orsi's view that

the holy transcends social and historical categories, I explore how the swastika, viewed through a sacred lens, retains complex meanings beyond its Nazi connotations. Comparing Strand's work to Robert Moskowitz's "Untitled" calls for a broader understanding of the sacred as resisting simple categorization.

Paul Strand's "Swastika (a.k.a. Hitlerism)" is, according to the Jewish Museum website, an inherently political piece from The Radical Camera: New York's Photo League, 1936-1951 exhibition.<sup>1</sup> This exhibit, part of a collection documenting the politically engaged work of street photographers from the Great Depression to the Cold War,<sup>2</sup> intrigued me

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<sup>1</sup> "Swastika (a.k.a. Hitlerism)," The Jewish Museum.

<sup>2</sup> "The Radical Camera: New York's Photo League, 1936-1951," The Jewish Museum.

for its connection to Orsi's discussion on the problem of the holy. The museum describes the exhibition as capturing not only city life but also early 20th-century Europe through a politically charged lens.<sup>3</sup> Strand's photograph, taken in 1938, printed in 1960, and acquired in 2007 at Sotheby's New York<sup>4</sup> was first published in a 1939 journal alongside a text by Dashiell Hammett stating, "Humanity must not be crucified on a swastika!"<sup>5</sup> The swastika will serve as a focal point for this paper and opens a discussion of Orsi's problem of the holy.

In his work, Orsi contends that a thorough understanding of the holy or sacred must go beyond social and historical frameworks. He argues that "social accounts that pretend to be exhaustive distort those experiences and diminish them, precisely as historical and cultural phenomena."<sup>6</sup> An example of such distortion lies in Strand's identification of the swastika solely with Hitlerism: Swastika, also known as, Hitlerism. Reducing the swastika to a symbol of Nazi evil overlooks its more complex sacred origins, seizing it exclusively as a historical artifact rather than a symbol with intrinsic sacred meaning. This approach, which focuses solely on its Nazi association, precludes an inquiry into the swastika's deeper significance as a sacred symbol, beyond the social and historical. Instead, Orsi's method encourages us to see beyond imposed historical values, allowing us to

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

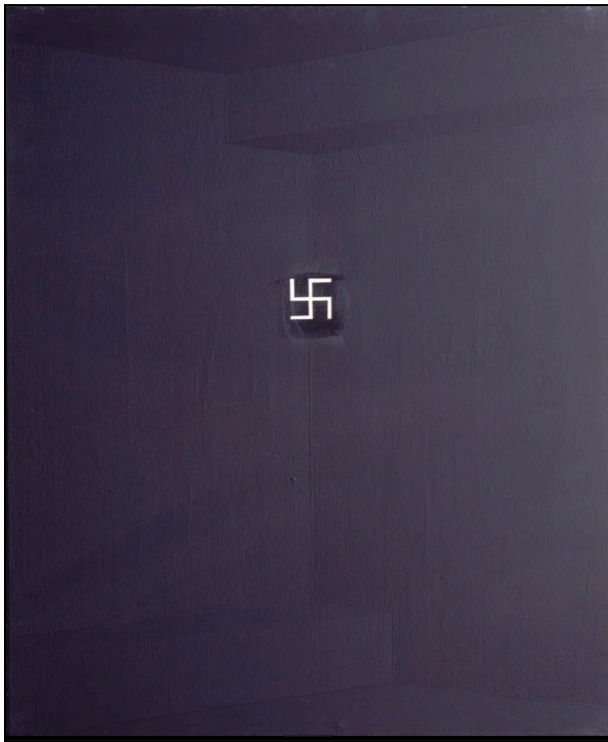
<sup>4</sup> "Swastika (a.k.a. Hitlerism)," The Jewish Museum.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Orsi, 84

explore what remains when the object is viewed through a sacred lens. In other words, we have to dis-invert the swastika in order to understand it really.

Robert Moskowitz's "Untitled," another piece in the Jewish Museum, provides a possible direction. Here's a picture of it:



The museum's description of this piece is worthy of being fully quoted: *"The swastika has been widely used throughout the ancient and modern world as a symbol of prosperity and good fortune. In its ominous twentieth-century manifestation, it has become a symbol of ultimate evil, directly related to the Nazi regime. Robert Moskowitz's white swastika, reversing the black form*

*employed by the Nazis, is, according to the artist, about the memory of the Holocaust. This reversal is also a defiance of the Nazi destruction of this once benevolent symbol, pictured here trapped in the 'corners' faintly suggested in the painting."*<sup>7</sup>

Note how the "once benevolent" symbol is now described as "about" the memory of the Holocaust, thus moving the viewer away from the social and historical fact of the Holocaust to the memory of it. It thus speaks to

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<sup>7</sup> "Untitled," The Jewish Museum.

Orsi's paraphrasing of Otto, that "the holy is apprehended as immediately and undeniably real."<sup>8</sup> In other words, it is apprehended immediately by its evil connection to the Holocaust but also undeniably real in its sacredness as a benevolent symbol in itself, apart from its social and historical connection. Paraphrasing O'Connor, Orsi further attests that "the holy stands apart from the person [or people] experiencing it, as real [in its original sacred connotation] as bread, blood, and water."<sup>9</sup> To relegate the swastika only to its immediate connection to Hitlerism is to abjure its undeniably real sacredness.

For the purposes of this short paper, it is not suitable to say more here about the original sacredness of the swastika. My intent was only to show that applying Orsi's concern with the holy and his theoretical method of uncovering the undeniably real sacredness of immediately and historically apprehended objects opens a new venue of academic inquiry into the holy that is not delimited by time, place, and specific circumstances. This is how we should understand Orsi when he claims that for theorists of the holy, "it does not present itself in nor can it be encapsulated by the categories of good and bad. The key category of the holy is its [sacred] realness"<sup>10</sup> — one which should be inquired into, as Orsi suggests, and thus be uncovered.

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<sup>8</sup> Orsi, 86

<sup>9</sup> Orsi, 86

<sup>10</sup> Orsi, 103

## Works Cited

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