

At 55, The Peace Symbol Endures. Peace, Not So Much

By Bill Berkowitz

(Dedicated to my grandson Alton Theodore Berkowitz-Gosselin and to all the children who will be inheriting a world hungry for peace.)

The peace symbol is arguably the world's most widely recognized protest symbol. In 2008, on the occasion of its fiftieth birthday, BBC News noted that the peace symbol has been "adapted, attacked and commercialized." At fifty-five, the peace symbol remains a cultural icon, but as it ages, is it more than that?

Originally created as a symbol for the British anti-nuclear movement, it is now ubiquitous: appearing at thousands of anti-nuclear and anti-war protests; adorning posters, buttons, badges, and peace flags; becoming a fixture on postal stamps; and, decorating clothing, beach towels, jewelry, and people's skin.

"Walk through the halls of any elementary or junior high school and you'll see the peace sign all over in kids' fashion, young girls especially - t-shirts, shorts, shoes, backpacks, earrings, pendants," Peace Talks radio pointed out on its website a while back.

The peace symbol was first seen in public on Good Friday in 1958 when thousands of British anti-nuclear campaigners – organized by the Direct Action Committee Against Nuclear War (DAC) and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) -- marched 50 miles from London's Trafalgar Square to the weapons factory at Aldermaston.

When Gerald Holtom, a British designer and former World War II conscientious objector, sat down at his drawing board fifty-five years ago, he was in almost total despair. He later told the editor of Peace News: "I was in despair. Deep despair. I drew myself: the representative of an individual in despair, with hands palm outstretched outwards and downwards in the manner of Goya's peasant before the firing squad. I formalized the drawing into a line and put a circle round it."

According to BBC News, Holtom "considered using a Christian cross motif but, instead, settled on using letters from the semaphore -- or flag-signaling -- alphabet,

super-imposing N (uclear) on D (isarmament) and placing them within a circle symbolizing Earth.”

The American peace activist, photographer, and writer Ken Kolsbun, who communicated with Holtum until the artist died in 1985, published a book five years ago (along with Mike Sweeney), titled *Peace: The Biography of a Symbol* (National Geographic, 2008). The book commemorated the peace symbol's 50th birthday.

According to peacesymbol.com, *Peace* “takes readers on a journey through five decades ... present[ing] 50 years of history in pictures and words to tell the ... story of mankind's elusive pursuit of peace and the symbol that represents that quest.”

It hasn't always been smooth sailing for the peace symbol: In 2006, the Durango Herald's Thomas Munro reported that “During the Cold War, as a symbol of the peace movement and the left, it was immediately defined by many as a symbol of communism. The geometrical similarity of the interior of the symbol to an upside-down cross was fodder for anti-communists who saw in the symbol a subliminal promotion of atheism. Others pointed out that a similar symbol appears on the tombstones of some Nazi bomber pilots.”

In October 1970, Ezra Taft Benson, the 13th President of the LDS (Mormon) Church, former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, and an admirer of the far-right John Birch Society, trashed the peace symbol in a speech at General Conference:

“Have we... ‘polluted the holy church of God?’ ... The auxiliaries of the Church are to be a help, not a hindrance, to parents and the priesthood as they strive to lead their families back to God. Do any of us wear or display the broken cross, anti-Christ sign, that is the adversary's symbol of the so-called ‘peace movement’?”

According to the blog *culturalmormoncafeteria*, Benson “was evidently parroting over the pulpit the political fear-mongering propaganda that had been published by the John Birch Society (in their official publication *American Opinion*) only four months before.”

Titled "Peace Symbols: The Truth About Those Strange Designs," the article “associated” the peace symbol “with a broken cross, Communism, [the] anti-Christ,

and Satanism.” In addition to falsely claiming that the famed British philosopher, mathematician, and peace activist Bertrand Russell had designed the symbol, author David E. Gumaer, who later published a book with the same title, wrote:

“It was the upside-down broken cross. Such anti-Christian and anti-Jewish symbolism is common to Satanists...

“The revolutionaries are pushing this business [of Satanism and black magic] like there's no tomorrow. And those 'peace symbols' are a part of it. They are symbols of the anti-Christ!...

“[T]he actual origin of this Satanic symbol can be pinpointed...

“[I]n America, as thousands of radicalized youths parade that same symbol, the heretics of the Christian have all but adopted the 'sign of the anti-Christ' as their own. And you can be absolutely certain that the Communists planned it that way.”

Despite caterwauling right wing critics, the peace symbol has endured.

Perhaps, as Ken Kolsbun wrote in the epilogue to his book *Peace*, the key to its survival is its “cross-generational appeal”: “Children of today easily identify it. They may not know its original meaning, but they know it stands for good things – be nice to friends, be kind to animals, no fighting. This is a marvelous achievement for Gerald Holtom's simple design. Peoples around the world have marched with it, worn it, displayed it during combat, held it high on banners, and been arrested in its name. Ask any man, woman or child, 'What one thing would everyone in the world want more than anything else?' The answer would surely be world peace.”

The peace symbol is unique; an emblem of hope and aspiration in such diverse settings as Aldermaston, England and Woodstock, New York, Washington, D.C. and Berlin. That it is revered and survives to this day, would likely surprise Gerald Holtom who when he sat down in despair at his easel fifty-five years ago had no inkling of his gift to the world