

# The Retrieved Altar Cross of the Luther Church Helsinki

## Sacred Waste Transformed into a Heritagization Frame

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The topic of this article is religious materiality in a Finnish, Lutheran setting. Reflecting on the altar cross of the Luther Church Helsinki – and more specifically the elevated role the cross played in the re-opening of the church in 2016 – the article supports the argument of recent scholars that Protestant engagement with materiality is not unambiguously negative but rather ambivalent. Using James Bielo’s concept of “legitimizing frames” – i.e. boundaries or landmarks within which Protestants feel safe enough to deal with things and objects – the article suggests a so-called heritagization frame. Objects or things used within such a frame induce in people a sense of past events and experiences – preferably events in which God has made himself known in this world. This, in turn, enables people’s engagement with the objects.

### Introduction

When the so-called Luther Church Helsinki was re-opened in 2016, news of the event appeared in all the major newspapers in Finland, but also on the radio and in podcasts, and so forth. Reportedly, it was one of the ten most-read news items of *Helsingin Sanomat* – the largest newspaper in Finland (“Median kiinnostus heräsi” 2016, 3).

To some extent, the stir around the church and the nationwide media coverage that accompanied the inauguration may be explained by the church’s remarkable history. Not least, the fact that the building

had been used as a nightclub and bar since the mid-1990s – an obvious contrast to the more pious activities it had hosted previously – helped to attract the attention of a broader audience.

In hindsight, however, it transpired that, even more than the church’s unlikely history, one single object was of decisive importance in regaining and recapturing the space and generating news headlines. The object was a simple, hand-crafted, wooden altar cross that was lost when dismantling the religious interior in the 1990s. Its shape was that of a Latin cross – devoid of any additional ornamentation – a so-called *crux nuda*. It had been designed by Hilding Ekelund, one of the more renowned architects in early-twentieth-century Finland (Kunnas 2016).

In this article, I reflect on the attention given to this material remnant from the church and discuss why a simple object came to play such an important, almost elevated, role in the building’s reclamation. Discussing the value attached to materiality in a Protestant, and more precisely Lutheran, setting – and analysing how what happened to the cross was perceived and recounted – I argue that what enabled people’s engagement with the cross were the new mnemonic or sensational layers of



The altar cross survived the bombing of the church during the Finnish Winter War.

value that were added to it. Referring to the Dutch researcher Jerrold Cuperus, I suggest that when the cross was thrown on the rubbish heap and later rescued, it was moved from one economy to another. What value it previously had in the so-called “church economy” was replaced or extended by a value in a “heritage economy”.

### Background - materiality in a Lutheran setting

The Luther Church Helsinki was initially built as a prayer house in 1894 by the Lutheran Evangelical Association of Finland – a revivalist organization within the Lutheran state church (Niemelä and Salomäki 2006).<sup>1</sup> In the 1930s, the prayer

1 The association has its origins in the pietistic revivals of the nineteenth century. Today, the Lutheran Evangelical Association of Finland is one of the largest revival organizations in Finland. Just under 4 per cent of the Finnish population belongs to

house was consecrated and transformed into a church. However, in the course of the century, its activity was obstructed several times.

First, in 1939, during the so-called Finnish Winter War, an aerial bomb fell through its ceiling, prohibiting church services for a year. Second, during the 1980s and after the church services and other activities had ended, a squat team occupied the church twice as a result of the housing shortage in the city. Finally, in 1989, the long-term owners sold the church for economic reasons. In due course, the new owners rented out the property and it came to serve as a restaurant and a nightclub for some twenty years (Kymäläinen 2016; J. Dahlbacka 2021, 25–50).

the organization; see Niemelä and Salomäki 2006. The Luther Church is located in the very heart of Helsinki, in an area called Kamppi, on Fredrikinkatu 42.

When emptying the church of its religious interior, the construction workers threw away – among other things – the altar cross on a rubbish heap outside the building. A young theology student, Jukka Hildén, happened to pass by and asked if he could keep the cross. He then transported it to the city of Turku and kept it in a basement storeroom. There it lay untouched and forgotten for more than twenty years until, after hearing about the plans to re-open the church, he decided to return the cross (I. Dahlbacka 2016).

Soon a website was launched to announce and read the word about the return of the cross to the church. The week before the inauguration, it was carried by foot by some 200 volunteers from Turku to Helsinki – a distance of roughly 160 kilometres. Also, an art installation was produced near the church, in which a wooden cross was placed on top of a big container as a reminder of how the cross had been thrown among the waste.

The “crusade” or “pilgrimage” from Turku to Helsinki can hardly be considered an ordinary event by Finnish standards, despite the fact that processions take place on a regular basis within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. These processions are mainly confined to the context of the weekly mass or other church services, such as marriages, funerals, confirmation masses or church inaugurations. The order of worship for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland provides suggestions for such processions both at the beginning, during and at the end of the service. They primarily consist of those serving the assembly, although the congregation may join the procession that takes place at the end of the service. What they all have in common is that a specific processional cross is carried in front of the rest of the procession (Lempiäinen 2002, 214–17;

Ingvar Dahlbacka



The altar cross was carried from Turku back to Helsinki. Elli Barsnes (*née* Pellonperä) was the first to carry the cross.

*Kyrkohandbok för den evangelisk-lutherska kyrkan i Finland* 2003; *Tjäna Herren med glädje:Handledning för högmässan* 2012).<sup>2</sup>

In essence, then, the carrying of the former altar cross from Helsinki to Turku resembled a regular church procession with the cross playing the main role at the front. However, what made the event remarkable and unusual was its public, almost spectacular setting. A journalist who witnessed the procession underscored the extraordinariness of the event by jestingly writing: “One could believe it was about a Catholic

2 As Stina Fallberg Sundmark (2018, 248) notes, on those rare occasions when incense is used, it is carried at the front.

procession if one was more used to those in Finland” (Loponen 2016). Similarly, when asked about the uniqueness of this kind of activity, Silja-Kaisa Pöyliö, the marketing director of the Lutheran Evangelical Association of Finland, admitted to never having heard of anything of the sort in Finland. She reckoned that “pilgrimages like these might be more common in other parts of Europe, in Catholic countries” (interview with Silja-Kaisa Pöyliö 2017). Finally, Jukka Hildén, himself nowadays a priest in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and, as mentioned, the one who found the altar cross, described in an interview what he believed to be the Finnish religious scene:

Crosses and icons still cause bewilderment, even though today fiction and reality run the risk of merging into one meta-narrative. The unchangeable word of God is the fundamental point of departure. However, one object, like this cross, can serve as a fixed point, Hildén says. He is surprised by the attitude Lutherans still take to icons. “You don’t worship icons: they are like windows to heaven ... We don’t worship a particular cross or building.” (Siirilä 2016b, 16)<sup>3</sup>

3 Author’s translation; the original Finnish: “Ristit ja ikonit saavat edelleen aikaan hämmennystä, vaikka tässä ajassa tarinat ja totuus ovat vaarassa muotoutua yhdeksi metatarinaksi. Jumalan muuttumaton sana on peruslähtökohta. Yksi esine, kuten juuri tämä risti, voi olla kuitenkin kiintopiste, Hildén sanoo. Häntä ihmetyttää, miten luterilaisuudessa edelleen suhtaudutaan ikoneihin. ‘Eihän niitä palvota: ne ovat kuin ikkuna taivaaseen ... Me ei palvota tiettyä ristiä tai rakennusta.’”

What all three statements indirectly suggest is that the unusualness of the event could be related to the Lutheran setting and its alleged scepticism about materiality (Fallberg Sundmark 2018, 242; Brodd 2018, 288; Bexell 2015, 62). In that sense, they point to a long-standing scholarly discourse highlighting the purported “Protestant fear of materiality” or at least the “devaluation of” (Keane 2007, 64) or “struggle with materiality” (Meyer and Houtman 2012, 10), according to which language, meaning, content and inward belief are privileged within Protestantism over other material sign systems, media, form and outward behaviour (Meyer 2011, 61). The latter are dismissed as human-made and hence unsuitable or lesser means of getting close to God (Utriainen 2017, 220; Thøfner 2012, 99).

However, over recent decades, scholars have pointed out that Protestant engagement with materiality is, in fact, far from unambiguous but rather somewhat ambivalent (Bielo 2018). These scholars assert that Protestantism can no longer uncritically be labelled as iconophobic or anti-material. Instead, they claim, it represents but one strand of Christian denominations among others that attribute importance to material things (Meyer and Houtman 2012, 12–13). In addition, much of the discourse portraying Protestantism as anti-material has been based on and revolved around Reformed strands of Protestantism. As Minna Opas and Anna Haapalainen (2017, 6–8) conclude: “The ‘Protestant lens’ has, in fact, been a ‘Reformed lens.’” This, they argue, has “left the more moderate side of the Reformation, namely Luther’s theology, with little attention.”

It is neither possible nor necessary to examine here in detail Luther’s view on materiality or, more generally, art. It suffices to conclude, with Sergiusz Michalski,

that although Luther seems to have preferred words to images he was in fact advocating “the complementarity of thoughts, words and images” (Michalski 1993, 28). Luther certainly opposed the cult of relics but not art or objects as such. In themselves, and when not worshipped, he considered them neutral, so-called *adiaphora* without any inherent sacrality. They were means of communicating more clearly the word of God (pp. 26–42). Of interest for my later argument is the attention Michalski gives to what Luther writes in *Against the Heavenly Prophets* about religious art. Michalski quotes a passage in which Luther elaborates on the aims and function of such art and where he writes that works such as holy images and crucifixes can serve “to gaze upon, as a witness, to aid memory, and as a sign” (p. 27).

Luther himself, in other words, saw a value in art and in things, which is why it seems as if Lutheranism has gained a somewhat undeserved reputation for being anti-material. Finland, for instance – as Heikki Hanka (1995, 7, 46) notes – never really experienced any iconoclasm on theological grounds. Whenever images were removed from churches, it was mainly because they were in poor condition or aesthetically obsolete. Therefore, the medieval pictorial tradition survived even after the Reformation. The altar cross of the Luther church seems to provide another example of how Lutheranism deals with or attributes value to materiality.

In order to operationalize the function of the altar cross, I turn to the American anthropologist James Bielo and his typologization of Protestant engagement with materiality. According to Bielo, one may conceptualize Protestant engagement with materiality *vis-à-vis* legitimized frames. Such frames serve as boundaries or landmarks that provide “structures of

expectation and scripts for appropriate action”. He suggests that when Protestants function within these frames, they are prone to embrace religious materiality. However, their engagement with materiality becomes troubled when they find themselves out of frame.

Bielo distinguishes between four legitimized frames, within which Protestants feel safe enough to deal with things and objects. The first frame he calls *devotional*. It refers to materiality used, for instance, when praying or worshipping. The second frame he calls *pedagogical*, which implies a setting within which things and objects are used for teaching and learning. Within an *evangelical* frame, materiality is used for bearing witness to others, whereas usage of materiality within the fourth frame serves to “foster goals of religious entertainment”, such as playing games (Bielo 2018, 371).

When it comes to the altar cross of the Luther church, several, if not all, of these frames were indeed activated by the Lutheran Evangelical Association. More than merely to advertise the re-opening of the church, the cross and the procession were also used to convey the message that “it is never too late to start over” and to create an event in which people could participate (Takaisinkotiin – The website for the return of the cross 2016; interview with Silja-Kaisa Pöyliö 2017). In other words, one could say that both the evangelical or the pedagogical frames and the frame of entertainment were mobilized to facilitate engagement with the cross.

What is more, when interviewed or asked about their participation by news reporters, several of those who took part in carrying the cross expressed a sense of reverence and adoration – of devotion – and likened the procession to a modern, urban pilgrimage (Siirilä 2016a, 4–5). For instance, one of the participants

spoke about a “unique and strongly spiritual experience” where “the symbolism of the Christian journey became apparent” (Häkkinen 2016). Hence, the devotional frame was also mobilized during the carrying of the cross.

The fact that these familiar, legitimized frames were activated probably contributed to giving the altar cross an unproblematic or even prominent role in the course of events. Perhaps, in a way, they made it safe enough for the (purportedly Lutheran) people to deal with the cross and attend the “pilgrimage” even though, as said, it was considered an unusual event in the Finnish milieu. However, it seems as if the cross also served another cause, as more than just a tool of evangelization or marketing. By analysing how what had happened to the cross was interpreted and recounted, I will suggest yet another frame that legitimized and enabled engagement with materiality. I will do this, primarily, by looking at how the cross was described by the Lutheran Evangelical Association on the web page that was set up before the cross-carrying event.

### The altar cross as sacred waste

The departure from our church turned out to be an unusually literal cross – a cross that no one cared or wanted to carry. In renovating the space, the new owner was allowed to do what they thought best with the old movable property, everything from the church textiles to the altar cross. Much was lost, some of it for ever. As if guided, a chance passer-by picked up the abandoned altar cross that had been thrown among the renovation waste, so that the story may have not only a happy ending but, above all, also a new beginning. The altar cross, which was traced to a storage room

in a high-rise building in Turku, has thus been found as if through a miracle. It returns home in May as a valuable reminder that it is never too late to start over. After all, that is what faith and forgiveness are ultimately all about. (Takaisinkotiin – The website for the return of the cross 2016)<sup>4</sup>

When the church was sold, the former owners were faced with a situation they had never experienced before. The text above is from the website that was created to advertise the return of the cross. It summarizes how the sequence of events was understood and described in retrospect. It begins by informing the readers that when the former owners, i.e. the Evangelical Association, moved out of the church, they left most of what was inside the church behind them. Apparently, they did not know what to do with it or did not care about it any more. They left it up to the new owners or the construction workers to decide the fate of the things inside.

The incident draws attention to what is a common – and, because of declining

4 Author’s translation; the original Finnish: “Lähtö omasta kirkosta osoittautui harvinaisen kirjaimellisesti ristiksi, jota kukaan ei jaksanut – tai halunnut – ottaa kantakseen. Uusi omistaja sai tiloja remontoitessaan tehdä vanhalle irtaimistolle, kirkkotekstiileistä aina alttariristiin saakka, mitä parhaaksi katsoi. Paljon menetettiin, osa jopa iäksi. Kuin johdatuksesta tuli satunnainen ohikulkija kuitenkin poimiseksi remonttijätteen sekaan hylätyn alttariristin matkaansa, jotta tarina voisi vielä saada paitsi onnellisen lopun, myös ennen kaikkea uuden alun. Turkulaisen kerrostalon varastokomeroon jäljitetty alttariristi onkin nyt kuin ihmeen kaupalla löydetty. Se palaa takaisin kotiin toukokuussa, arvokkaana muistutuksena siitä, että koskaan ei ole myöhäistä aloittaa alusta. Siitähän uskossa ja anteeksiannossa lopulta on kyse.”

religious affiliation, ever more frequent – challenge wherever and whenever churches are decommissioned, closed down or sold. How do you dispose of all the religious objects inside – from church benches to stained-glass windows, from preacher pulpits to church textiles, and from chandeliers to crosses? Do you throw it away, sell it, or preserve it in what must be an ever-growing pile of redundant religious items? In the case of the Luther church, the decision was to leave most of it behind.

The Dutch anthropologist Irene Stengs has coined the concept of “sacred waste”. The term, and what it refers to, is apt to describe also the kind of obsolete, movable property that can be found within abandoned or redundant churches. According to Stengs, sacred waste refers to

material residues and surpluses that cannot be disposed of as just garbage, but neither can be kept or left alone. Its ambiguous nature, charged with a religious, moral, or emotional value on the one hand, but at the same time a kind of leftover for which no proper destination exists, makes sacred waste precarious matter, and hence often a ground for conflict and contestation. (Stengs 2014, 235)

Stengs further writes that sacred waste always requires a particular treatment. It must be set apart either by being preserved as a relic or as cultural heritage or it needs to be ritually neutralized. However, outside established and internalized ritual settings, people often do not know what to do with sacred waste because a precise protocol for dealing with these kinds of materials is generally absent. An example she mentions is flowers or cuddly toys that people leave at memorial sites or sites of accidents. It is a delicate task to determine what should be

preserved and what should be disposed of. Moreover, if something needs to be disposed of, how should the disposal be carried out (Stengs 2014, 235)?<sup>5</sup>

In another study on sacred waste in a Dutch context, Jerrold Cuperus elaborates on the discussion of the protocols for dealing with sacred waste – or with redundant church paraphernalia in general. Cuperus uses the concept of “economy” to describe how an object can be moved from one context to another or from one economy to another and how this often brings about a change of the object’s value and of how people perceive and use it. Church objects, for instance, are mostly part of an “ecclesiastical economy” (Cuperus 2019, 4–7). If a church object is moved from the church to a market or a museum, it becomes part of a commercial or heritage economy – albeit some of its former sacred value might remain.<sup>6</sup>

Moving objects from one economy to another is not entirely unproblematic. This is true especially in a Roman Catholic context. On the one hand, there are rules and regulations to prevent objects from ending up outside a given economy. Cuperus (2019, 51) writes:

- 5 See also Stengs 2018, 268–69, 274–76. According to Kristina Myrvold (2010, 7), who writes explicitly about religious texts, the lack of normative conducts and formal customs or protocols for disposing of these texts, is prevalent in most religions. This applies also to Christianity, something that has led to an increased concern among Christians in how they should dispose of their old Bibles; see Parmenter 2010, 55.
- 6 The Dutch researcher, Daan Beekers, calls such remaining sacrality “sacred residue”. Beekers describes sacred residue as “that quality of a religious site, or of specific things within that site, that – in the perception or feeling of beholders – persists after the site has lost its original religious function” (Beekers 2016, 39).

Church administrators, heritage agencies, dioceses, and the Vatican collaboratively construct, police, and maintain the boundaries of this economy. Rules and regulations, authorized by tradition, restrict the movement of objects in order to keep them circulating within the sacred economy of the church.

Especially objects relating to the sacraments – so-called “ecclesiastical items” – must either be repurposed in another church or destroyed. Such a “self-imposed or preventive iconoclasm ... protects the boundaries of the sacred economy by preventing circulation of the object outside it, and simultaneously prevents further acts of iconoclasm with the intention of harming the object and its meaning” (Cuperus 2019, 41).

On the other hand, an object is not necessarily eligible for automatic inclusion in another economy. Referring to Mattijs van de Port and Birgit Meyer (2018), Cuperus argues that, for instance, the “formation of heritage requires a ‘politics of authentication’ and an ‘aesthetics of persuasion’”. This means that for an object to be considered as cultural heritage it must be constructed – in a sense almost sacralized – by attributing to it either an authenticating documentation – perhaps a narrative – or an appealing aesthetic value – something that makes it “attractive for an audience” or “suitable for presentation or education” (Cuperus 2019, 54–68). Simply put: those objects within a heritage economy that convey good stories are the most valuable objects (pp. 55, 59).

Looking at the Luther Church and the description on the website, one gets the impression that the cross – as well as other objects within the Luther Church – were considered as nothing out of the ordinary. The cross was simply one object

among many – in the website text collectively called “old movable property”. In a sense, it was sacred waste – a left-over without any proper destination.<sup>7</sup> The members of the association lacked the “instructions manual” or “protocol” advising them on how to deal with the cross and the Lutheran setting provided them with no formal rules stipulating that certain church objects had to be preserved or protected. Therefore, no boundaries prevented it from ending up outside the church economy. It was frankly left at the mercy or arbitrariness of the new owners. They, in turn, found no value in it. It was destined to be destroyed.

### **Escaping economies by obtaining a mnemonic or sensational value**

The cross was destined to be destroyed. In fact, it already lay on the rubbish heap. However, something changed the course of events. The text on the web page states that it was “thrown among the renovation waste”, “abandoned” and “lost”. This, I would argue, is what made the real difference: the cross was thrown away, lost and later saved. It not only moved the cross from one economy to another, it also changed its value or added new value to it. It turned the cross into something symbolically meaningful. In fact, it turned the cross into the most significant of all the church objects.

7 Compared, for instance, to the church benches or the stained glass window, which was situated above the altar. These were actually removed from the church and relocated to other churches. The church benches can now be found in the Rootsi Mihkli Kirik (the Swedish St Michael’s church) in the old town of Tallinn, Estonia, and the stained glass window in Tampere, Finland (Siirilä 2016a, 5; interview with Silja-Kaisa Pöyliö 2017). Perhaps these had a clearer functional or aesthetic value that made them easier to repurpose.



This line of thinking is to take a cue from, among others, Michael Thompson and Krzysztof Pomian, both of whom have studied the life cycles of objects. According to both Thompson (2017) and Pomian (2019), ordinary, everyday objects – so-called ephemera – can sometimes take on new significance and acquire a new status of a sign with symbolic character. Thompson, for his part, argues that societies divide objects into those that decline in value, something that he calls transient objects, and those whose value rises over time, which he calls durable. For an object to pass from the first category to the second – from being transient to durable – Thompson argues that it must pass through a third, covert category. Things that reach this point and reside in this intermediary category he calls rubbish, not because they are rubbish in the true sense of the word, but rather because they are out of use and value at that very moment. For example, a transient object usually declines in value and lifespan, eventually arriving at what Thompson calls “a valueless and timeless limbo”. There it may be found by someone – often someone with high social status – and begin its journey towards the category of durable objects, where it is once again valued (Thompson 2017, 4, 10, 27). Thompson’s description, of course, very much resembles Stengs’s idea of sacred waste.

Applied to the Luther church, Thompson’s model shows the life span of the altar cross. It began as a transient object but turned into a durable object after being saved from the rubbish. When the altar cross was thrown among the other rubbish, it had, quite tangibly, reached the terminus of its lifespan. It was rubbish both literally and in the sense that it had lost its utility value – at least as serving as an altar cross in a church. To some extent, Hildén’s

impulse to pick up the cross was due to his idea of placing the cross among his other icons at home – an idea that, in the end, did not materialize because of its size (Kunnas 2016). Even more, however, one could say it was the object’s character of “sacred waste” that prompted Hildén to rescue it from being disposed of. He describes the situation as follows:

“When you see a cross on a rubbish heap outside a former church building, you can’t help but do something. You have to act,” he says. When thinking about his own contribution, he wants to downplay it. He thinks he only did what needed to be done. He says that he thinks the English word “salvage” fits perfectly in this context. The word salvage is usually used when saving old objects, house doors, or other fine details from buildings that are doomed to disappear. These objects are then given a new life somewhere else without fear of being damaged or forgotten. And through the objects, the tradition is passed on. You salvage and you preserve. According to Jukka Hildén, “salvage” or “the act of saving a ship or its cargo from the perils of the sea” is an appropriate description for what happened to the cross. (I. Dahlbacka 2016, 174)<sup>8</sup>

- 8 Author’s translation; the original Swedish: “När man ser ett kors på en skrothög utanför en före detta kyrkobyggnad kan man inte låta bli att göra något. Man måste agera, säger han [Hildén]. När han tänker på sin insats i sammanhanget vill han tona ner den. Han tycker att han bara gjorde det som behövde göras. Han säger att han tycker att det engelska ordet ‘salvage’ passar utmärkt in i sammanhanget. Ordet salvage brukar användas när man räddar gamla föremål, husdörrar eller andra fina detaljer från byggnader som är dömda att

Hildén's description of what happened and of his role is interesting in light of Thompson's theory of objects passing from one category to another and sometimes being found, rescued and given a second life. And the fact that Hildén later found no real use for the cross, but simply kept it in a storage room, clearly emphasizes its status as sacred waste.<sup>9</sup>

Since value in Thompson's discussion seems to refer primarily to economic or social capital, his theory is well supplemented by Krzysztof Pomian's similar ideas. Just like Thompson, Pomian regards the rubbish phase of an object as an intermediate stage. However, from there, it can pass on to become part of a society's cultural memory and heritage. According to Pomian, most objects that constitute our cultural heritage pass through the sequence of a life cycle that consists of 1. thing, 2. refuse product, and finally, 3. sign with symbolic character (Paver 2018, 54). Things that end up as signs with a symbolic character Pomian calls "semiophors". Semiophors are visible signs of something invisible and ungraspable (Pomian 1986, 92, referred to by Assmann 2011, 14). Pomian also uses the concept of relic, or modern relic, similarly. According to him, the function of relics or semiophors is to preserve the memories of the events or people they are believed to be

försvinna. Dessa föremål får sedan en ny tillvaro någon annanstans där man inte behöver vara rädd för att de ska bli skadade eller bortglömda. Och genom föremålen förs traditionen vidare. Man räddar och bevarar. 'Salvage' eller 'the act of saving a ship or its cargo from the perils of the sea' (att man räddar ett fartyg eller dess last från havets faror) är enligt Jukka Hildén en lämplig beskrivning för det som hände med korset."

9 Cuperus (2019, 50) writes: "By storing the item rather than dealing with it, the item is suspended in a state of 'sacred waste.'"

related to (Pomian 2019, 11–12). In other words – at least according to Pomian's definition – relics are tools for memorizing, not objects with any inherent power.

I am suggesting that when the cross was thrown on the rubbish heap and later saved from it, it passed from being merely ephemera into a semiophor; a visible sign. It became a relic – a materialized remembrance with a new layer of memories added to the cross, or "a valuable reminder" as the web page stated. The irony, of course, is the Protestant rejection of relics in the original sense of the word. In a Catholic context, a relic or an "ecclesiastical object" would not have been so easily discarded. Now, to the contrary, it was the fact that the cross was discarded that turned it into a relic in Pomian's sense of the word. The event attributed to the cross a narrative or memory, or, following Cuperus, it authenticated the cross with a "documentation value".

It is, however, not just any kind of narrative or memory that the cross – in its new capacity as a semiophor or relic – relates to, preserves and reminds us of. The website's text stresses that the cross was picked up by a chance passer-by "as if guided" and that it was "found as if through a miracle". The Finnish idiomatic expressions used here ("Kuin johdatuksesta" and "kuin ihmeen kaupalla") indicate some kind of divine guidance or providence. In other words, what is suggested is that God is the one who acted, and what happened to the altar cross is understood as a testimony of God's intervention in time and space. This makes the cross tangible, material evidence of God's work. Borrowing Pomian (1986, 92, referred to by Assmann 2011, 14), the cross is a visible sign of the invisible and ungraspable, or, referring to Stengs (2014, 235); it is "charged with religious, moral or emotional value".

The cross, in other words, is an example of an object that has a mnemonic or even sensational value, which, in this particular case, is capable of inducing in people a sense of past events and experiences in which God has made himself known in this world. The idea of a “sensational value” is derived from Birgit Meyer’s concept of “sensational form” – a concept that she uses to describe how people make sense of and use what they find transcendental. Meyer writes:

Sensational forms, in my understanding, are relatively fixed, authorized modes of invoking, and organizing access to the transcendental, thereby creating and sustaining links between religious practitioners in the context of particular religious organizations ... the notion of “sensational form” can also be applied to the ways in which material religious objects – such as images, books, or buildings – address and involve beholders. Thus, reciting a holy book as the Quran, praying in front of an icon, or dancing around the manifestation of a spirit are also sensational forms through which religious practitioners are made to experience the presence and power of the transcendental. (Meyer 2006, 9)

Like both Meyer’s “sensational form” and Pomian’s “relic” or “semiophor”, the cross – lacking any inherent power or sacrality of its own – seems to have served as a reminder of or testimony to what God had done, allowing those who came in contact with it to experience the presence, power and memory of the transcendental.

Returning finally to the legitimized frames suggested by James Bielo – namely the circumstances or conditions that are, or appear to be, familiar or safe enough

to allow even Protestants to engage with and embrace religious materiality – I suggest we here encounter yet another frame. Given its capacity to invoke in people a sense of past events and experiences – in this case events and experiences in which God has made himself known in this world – I have chosen to call it the *heritagization frame*. Interestingly, this seems consistent with Luther’s view on images and crucifixes serving as witnesses or memory aids.

### **Concluding words - heritagization frames enabling Protestant engagement with materiality**

In this article, I have discussed how a single, simple altar cross came to play an important role in the re-opening of the Luther Church Helsinki, in 2016. In light of the long-standing and persistent notion that Protestants are sceptical about religious materiality, the positive reception of the altar cross may seem surprising. However, in light, for instance, of James Bielo’s concept of legitimized frames, the positive reception becomes understandable. According to Bielo, Protestants are prone to embrace and engage with religious materiality if the materiality is used within certain frames or boundaries. For instance, using the cross to advertise the re-opening of the church, or as an evangelistic tool, may have contributed to giving the altar cross a prominent role.

I further suggest that the life cycle of the cross – in other words, what happened to it and how this life cycle was recounted – might also give us a clue as to why it was so well received. Referring to Krzysztof Pomian’s concept of “semiophors” – i.e. visible signs of something invisible or tools for memorizing – it seems likely that when the cross was thrown away and later rescued, a new layer of memories was added to it and it passed on from being merely a piece of



The interior of the Luther Church. The original altar cross has been replaced by a new one. The old cross is placed on the wall in the basement.

ephemera into a semiophor. In addition, since what happened to the cross was perceived as a clear sign of God's intervention, the cross became material evidence and a reminder of God's work. As such – since it allowed those who came in contact with it to experience the presence and memory of the transcendental – the cross here functioned within what we might call a heritagization frame. When the cross was thrown on the rubbish heap and rescued from it, it was authenticated with a documentation value from a heritage perspective. What value it previously had in the church

economy was replaced – or rather extended – by a value in a heritage economy.

Even though the story of the altar cross has a seemingly happy conclusion, it is also a reminder of the fragility of memory and the failure of even material remains to survive the ravages of time. Although the cross was saved, the memory it holds is hardly immune to oblivion. As with all forms of memory, the survival of the cross's memory depends on the repetition and transmission of it. The Swedish architect and historian Mattias Ekman puts this in plain language:

If the remembrance of secular history ... is neither included in religious rites nor in affiliated social rituals, one might expect that it would fade with time. The materiality does not tell the story, no more than the cross relates Christian dogma to someone who does not know of Christianity. Prior knowledge is needed if it is to become an aid for memory, but when in possession of that knowledge, the materiality helps to remind us about it and re-actualize it. Active circulation among the members of the congregation is essential if the shared memories shall persist. The story needs to be repeated in sermons and speeches, or be written down and spread. (Ekman 2015, 56–57)<sup>10</sup>

10 See also Pomian, who states that in addition to being set apart, a relic serves its purpose as a medium of memories only if it is “looked at”, “understood by those viewing or reading them”, or “actualized in human minds” (Pomian 2019, 21). Pomian states that a nexus – initially often an oral one that over time is written down – between the relic and the memory it is supposed to convey is necessary: “It is this nexus between memory, message and the object that gives the latter the status of a relic” (p. 12).

Indeed, the earlier history of the cross testifies to the veracity of this claim. When the church was bombed during the Finnish Winter War in the 1930s, the cross seemingly miraculously survived unscathed. This incident was also interpreted as a godly intervention, something that was expressed by a witness to the devastation: “The cross remains. It is a telling symbol” (Forsman 1940, 138–39). Already at that time, the incident added a mnemonic layer of divine providence to the cross. However, judging by the fact that the cross was later thrown on the trash heap, this layer faded over time. One wonders whether the same will happen now.

If we are to believe Krzysztof Pomian and Jerrold Cuperus one important detail separates the two events that could indicate that the cross will not be forgotten this time. According to Pomian, what distinguishes a relic from other objects is that the former has been deprived of its previous utility role or usage value and set apart by being included in a collection (Pomian 2019, 15–16; Pomian 1994, 162). After the bombs fell, the cross continued to serve as an altar cross in the church. In other words, it was never deprived of its functional use or utilitarian role. Or, referring to Cuperus, the cross never left the church economy that it initially belonged to. Today, the situation is different. Since – during the renovation of the church – a new cross was acquired before the old one was found, there was no longer a need for the original cross to serve as the actual altar cross. Instead, the cross is on display on the wall in the church basement. Above all, the fate of the cross gave it an added mnemonic or sensational value. With reference to Cuperus, one could say that the cross escaped the church economy to gain recognition in a heritage economy, where the new layers of memory prevent it from escaping. Perhaps, ironically, this

is what will prevent it from being thrown away again. ■



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