

# **Can evangelicals live with high court's broadened symbolism of the cross? Court allows cross but secularizes it: Court allows cross but secularizes it**

News in the [June 1, 2010](#) issue

Many evangelicals cheered when the Supreme Court ruling allowed a cross to remain as a war memorial in California's Mojave Desert. However, some Christians, including some in the evangelical camp, caution that a celebration may not be in order.

The high court's decision on April 28 was based largely on Justice Anthony Kennedy's determination that "one Latin cross in the desert evokes far more than religion." Rather, he said, it "evokes thousands of small crosses in foreign fields marking the graves of Americans who fell in battles."

In other words, the cross is more than a Christian symbol. That line of thinking is, at best, "a mixed blessing," said Carl Esbeck, a professor at University of Missouri's law school.

"I'm concerned about the government co-opting the symbol for its own purpose, which, among other things, has a detrimental effect on evangelistic religion, such as Christianity," said Esbeck. "You get people who look at the cross who say, 'Well, it's just part of American culture.' Well, no, a Christian wants to look at the cross and say, 'No, that's a symbol of where Christ died for our sins.'"

Esbeck has an unlikely ally in retiring justice John Paul Stevens, a stalwart church-state separationist. In a dissenting opinion, Stevens said, "Making a plain, unadorned Latin cross a war memorial does not make the cross secular."

The debate over the cross's symbolism had already made an appearance during the Supreme Court's oral arguments last October. When Peter Eliasberg, an attorney for the ACLU Foundation of Southern California, argued that "a cross is the predominant symbol of Christianity," Justice Antonin Scalia called his contention that the cross only memorializes dead Christian veterans "outrageous."

In the April ruling, the Supreme Court remanded the case to a California district court, which must reconsider a congressionally approved transfer of the cross to private land. In the meantime, Christian leaders—particularly evangelicals—continue to debate Kennedy's interpretation of the cross's symbolism.

Secularizing the cross worries leaders of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. K. Hollyn Hollman, general counsel of the committee, said there is a "danger" that people in favor of piety on public property will downplay the spiritual significance of the symbol.

But another prominent Baptist said evangelicals can be comfortable with Kennedy's perspective on the cross.

"I think that most American evangelicals would acknowledge that it probably is, in our culture, more than a Christian symbol," said Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. That's fine, he said, "as long as it's not less than a Christian symbol." Land said he'd rather have the cross stay up under Kennedy's line of argument than have authorities eradicate crosses from cemeteries on government land.

Read Schuchardt, an expert on symbolism and iconography who teaches at Wheaton College, said the cross's meaning had changed long ago from the early centuries when it was known as a Roman tool of power and execution. "Like all symbols, they go through an evolutionary process that almost always drains them of their original meaning by adding secondary and tertiary meanings," he said.

Christian ethicist David Gushee said the Supreme Court's affirmation of the multiple meanings of the cross shows that it is not a clear legal win for Christians who want to see crosses erected in the public square. "The conservative Christians . . . would see this as a victory for their kind of longstanding fight in the culture wars," he said. "It's not as unambiguous as that." -Adelle M. Banks, *Religion News Service*