

THE RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT EMBLEMS: WHAT IS AT STAKE

The emblems of the red cross and the red crescent are both the strength and the weakness of the Movement.

They are its strength because, being the visible and respected symbols of relief to war victims, over the past 125 years they have enabled the Movement to provide protection, assistance and human warmth to millions of wounded persons, prisoners, families and children during the most terrible conflicts mankind has ever known. They are the strength of our Movement because all over the world the image they convey is one of humanity and compassion.

But these emblems are also the weakness of the Movement in that they sow the seeds of division among its members and prevent it from becoming really universal.

In these circumstances one would of course be tempted to try and re-make history. Why did the brilliantly inspired founders of the Red Cross fail to see that the emblem, which they had chosen as a symbol of neutrality in all domains—including that of religion—might be seen as the Christian symbol? Why was it then decided to “put matters right” by accepting the red crescent, and then the red lion and sun, thus emphasizing the emblem’s religious connotation and opening the way to further diversity?

That decision was taken back in 1929. Half a century later the Movement again gave much thought to the problem, but in 1981 it finally opted for the status quo. Because of the well-founded apprehension that a proliferation of emblems would considerably reduce their protective value, the Movement refrained from opening what it feared might turn into a new Pandora’s box. The strength of the emblems, which have now become part of human consciousness the world over, was judged more important than their weaknesses. The profound attachment felt for the red cross and the red crescent prevailed over every other consideration.

The Movement therefore did not dare break with over a hundred years of noble tradition, although admittedly the present situation is neither wholly logical nor indeed entirely right and fair.

However, reflections on the emblem will continue within the Movement as long as it exists, because they are an intrinsic part of its identity.

I should now like to raise two issues which I believe are of topical interest.

The first problem is the improper use of the emblem, which is a subject of constant concern to the National Societies.

Misuse of the emblem—often committed unwittingly—occurs all over the world and is a direct corollary of the high regard in which it is held—indeed, no one would use an emblem that did not inspire respect. But misuse, be it in times of conflict for protection, or in peacetime for commercial purposes, can only lead to confusion and discredit.

Hence the care with which the Movement must try and prevent such misuse, particularly since the victims for whom it was created will be the first to suffer if the emblem is not respected. In granting every National Society the right to display the emblem that they created to protect wounded soldiers on the battlefield, the States laid a heavy burden on those Societies. But the National Societies must not betray the trust placed in them, and although legal repression of misuse is the responsibility of governments, the Societies have a major educational role to play in making the public aware of the significance of the emblem, as part of their programmes to disseminate international humanitarian law and the principles of the Movement.

However, the Movement's first priority today must be to question its own attitude. By permitting use of the emblem, considerable sums could probably be raised for the benefit of the victims whom it is the Movement's task to assist. Is it right to give up this source of income? But can the Movement obtain those funds without violating the law in force, without impairing the image evoked by the emblem and without weakening its protective power, thereby cutting itself off in the long term from those very victims?

These are sensitive issues which the Movement cannot evade; they must be addressed without further delay.

The second problem I should like to raise is the need to maintain the emblem's strict neutrality with regard to religion. Both Christians and Moslems within the Movement have a special responsibility in this respect; they must make every effort to avoid stirring up religious fervour connected with the emblem and refrain from exerting any pressure on governments and National Societies as to the choice of the

red cross or the red crescent. What is at stake here is the fundamental role of our Movement in armed conflicts and its credibility in the eyes of all those—particularly when they are neither Christian nor Moslem—who give the emblem its true significance, devoid of any religious connotation.

A series of historical accounts, articles with general and specific themes and even some very personal opinions appears in this issue of the Review, to stimulate debate on this inexhaustible subject. Is it strength or weakness, or indeed both strength and weakness, that characterizes the red cross and red crescent emblems? We must not forget that the emblems are not an end in themselves; their role is to afford protection to war victims and to contribute to the Movement's efficacy and unity.

That efficacy and unity can be maintained only by means of sustained, open and constructive dialogue. Together we must find the solution to this problem that is close to the hearts of all who work for our Movement's noble cause.

May this issue of the Review be a step in that direction.

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