



# The Secret Language of Churches Cathedrals: Decoding the Sacred Symbolism of Christianity's Holy Buildings

Richard Stemp

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## **The Secret Language of Churches Cathedrals: Decoding the Sacred Symbolism of Christianity's Holy Buildings** Richard Stemp

Thanks to books and films like *The Da Vinci Code* and its sequel, *Angels and Demons*, interest in secret religious symbols has never been greater. This carefully researched guide takes the reader into some of the world's most famous churches, decoding messages that are hidden in plain sight-in stained-glass windows, statuary, patterned flooring, ornamentation, and even the buildings' architectural design: Why do fierce beasts and grotesque faces peer from the walls? Who chose to depict one particular saint and not another? What's the significance of an eagle? A dragon? A pelican? No one who reads this book will ever again experience a visit to a cathedral in quite the same way.

## **The Secret Language of Churches Cathedrals: Decoding the Sacred Symbolism of Christianity's Holy Buildings Details**

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# **From Reader Review The Secret Language of Churches Cathedrals: Decoding the Sacred Symbolism of Christianity's Holy Buildings for online ebook**

## **Rosemary Standeven says**

I received this copy from the publisher via NetGalley in exchange for an honest review

I love visiting churches, mosques and other sacred spaces, and when I came across this title, I just knew it was for me. The book is filled with wonderful photographs and drawings to illustrate its points. Quite a few of the churches I have already visited (I spent about 4 days just walking round and round the cathedral at Chartres), and the rest are now on my to-do list. Even those places that I have been, I often now see the need to revisit as the book has highlighted a feature that I hadn't previously noticed or paid enough attention to. It is a book that makes you want to explore more and more of the ecclesiastical world, and that gives you the tools to better appreciate and understand what you are experiencing.

The book starts with the exterior church, and explains how the structures were both an invitation and a reminder to worship. The churches made concrete the symbol of protection of the parishioners, and also advertised the power, wealth and might of both the church and the surrounding community.

I am not particularly religious, but cannot help but be overawed when I enter a large church or cathedral – particularly a gothic one. The vast spaces and the height of the buildings just draw you upwards, so that even if you don't believe in God, you are made aware of something that is much greater than you. As the book clearly states, this is exactly what the church designers had in mind – a stunning impact on the senses and a lifting and exultation of the spirits.

The paintings, frescoes, statuary and stained glass were initially to educate the illiterate congregations about the Christian religion, and now provide subsequent generations with a treasure trove of beauty and sublime art.

The exteriors and interiors of churches have changed over time, as the needs and practices of the clergy and parishioners have changed, and this book spells out some of the major influences on church structure and decoration, from the early church, through the glories of Byzantium, the “dark ages”, the protestant reformation, and up to modern times.

My only possible complaint about this book is that it is not long enough. I want more – more pictures, even more history and analysis. I know that is unreasonable, as any book that would fully satisfy me would be too expensive to publish or buy, and far too bulky to read. So this is the best available right now.

I downloaded the book via NetGalley onto my computer, but it is too good to just have that. I have to have a hard copy, and have just ordered one from Amazon. I feel that it won't be the last copy that I buy, as it will make a wonderful for friends and family who, like me, love visiting and admiring churches.

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## **Argum says**

Interesting book, but a lot of print is way too small. Great pictures, and I realize a lot of the side bars are small to accommodate the full page prints on glossy paper. Still hard to read and enjoy. The book is divided in three parts history, parts of the church, forms. It was interesting to see things change over time and what doesn't.

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## **Pam Thomas says**

Having always been drawn to stained glass windows in churches and cathedrals was delighted to chose this book to read. Its a historical decoder about christian art, architecture, together with providing spiritual meaning and stories about each type of window.

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## **Emma says**

This book is gorgeous, full of colourful pictures and detailed diagrams.

I have a real fasciation for religious buildings, amongst other classical and historic architecture, as the most visible of visible history. Each place is a conversation with the past that continues to surprise and intrigue. Yet, as with the art works I see in museums and galleries, I often feel like i'm missing out on the deeper meanings, the hidden undercurrents of the dialogue. This book goes some way to revealing just how much these buildings have to say. The thought and design that formed their construction were directed to specific aims, nothing slapdash or accidental here.

I was quite surprised by how many of the churches and cathedrals I had already visited, but there were many more to add to my travel 'to-be-seen' list. Whether used as an on the spot guide, or a pleasurable reference for the armchair traveller, this book offers an equal amount of beauty and information.

Many thanks to Richard Stemp, Watkins Publishing, and Netgalley for this copy in exchange for an honest review.

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## **Irongretta says**

Sometimes you think about a subject and do not really have an idea of how much you do not know. Now I know that I had known next to nothing – at least about churches and cathedrals (and now I know the difference between the two) - before I read this book. I had luck to get it as a review copy from Netgalley and sincerely hope it gets (more) attention since it is a wonderful guide through the complex world of churches.

As the synopsis already states, the book is divided into three parts. The first one deals with actual, architectural parts of a church like its door, the second with important symbols used in Christian churches\* and the third with the different styles and how one emerged from the other.

What I really liked is the combination of telling and showing. The main text explains a matter and pictures with own little descriptions show what the author is talking about. Since I am in no way someone who knows a lot about architecture in general I found this way of presenting very appealing. Otherwise I would not have had a clue what is meant by "flying buttresses" or how you have to imagine the different vaults. The pictures also serve as a basis for analysis. The author takes for example the famous "Wilton Diptych" and illustrates who can be seen and why, which colours are used for which reason, where the difference is between the two parts and more. You get the feeling you see a whole different painting after reading the annotations.

What I also particularly loved is the way Stemp includes little bits of history to clarify different

developments or phenomenons. For instance, the relatively scarce interior of Protestant churches has to do a lot with the differences in belief. If you take the altar it becomes clear that it is central for Catholic ceremonies illustrating the presence of divine powers while it is of a lesser importance in a Protestant church where the focus is on the sermon. This makes the book so much more vivid and interesting. The language is appropriately accurate and factual, but not too difficult so that you do not have to struggle much while reading. Nevertheless, the book contains a lot of information so that you will have to take time to process it correctly.

What I did not like was the fact the big pictures interrupted the text and I had to constantly turn the pages back and forth if I wanted to follow the main text before I turn to the accompanying material. This might not be a big problem when you have a printed copy but I cannot assess that since I only had a digital. So, if you can, get a proper book. It should be worth it, not only due to the reading convenience but also due to the wonderful, colourful images.

#### Conclusion:

All in all, the book was a really good read with information to help you properly understand a church whenever you visit one (and to see more than usually).

\*Unfortunately, I did not have the pleasure to read the second part in my ARC so that my review deals with the first and the third one.

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#### **Debbie says**

"The Secret Language of Churches & Cathedrals" provides a tour of these buildings, explaining the practical, historical, and symbolic reasons behind their features. The author looked at Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches.

The first part described what you see as you approach and enter the building and explained the architectural features found in a typical cathedral or church. The second part looked at the paintings and sculptures and identified various people and common symbols and scenes for those of us not "in the know." The third part looked at the elements found in the earliest churches and how they changed throughout history.

The book contained many full-color pictures from the outside and inside of churches to illustrate the points made in the text. For paintings, we're shown the overall ceiling, then detail shots with descriptions of what is being show in that section.

I once went on a study abroad tour were we visited many cathedrals. I felt like I was missing half of what I was seeing because I didn't know the intent behind it. I'd recommend this book to those planning on touring cathedrals or who are just interested in the topic.

I received an ebook review copy of this book from the publisher through NetGalley.

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#### **Jon Dodsley says**

Beautiful photography and clear and concise text blended thoughtfully to produce an excellent reference for

lovers of church architecture and history.

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## **Sarah - All The Book Blog Names Are Taken says**

EDIT: The publisher must have seen my note on NetGalley, as they contacted me and sent me a PDF version. I am already in love with it; the pictures alone are amazing. Will review when I finish the text for real this time instead of the jumbled mess NetGalley sent me!

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I received this as an ARC via NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

I do not feel I can give a review at this time. I would like to get a hard copy before doing so. I read this on my kindle and there were so many formatting issues that it almost made no sense at times. Very unfortunate.

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REVIEW:

<http://allthebookblognamesaretaken.bl...>

[www.facebook.com/AllTheBookBlogNamesA...](http://www.facebook.com/AllTheBookBlogNamesA...)

[www.Twitter.com/SarahsBookNook](http://www.Twitter.com/SarahsBookNook)

Review: 4 Stars

Wow. These photos alone, just, wow.

I had originally received this as a ARC via NetGalley in exchange for an honest review, but did not feel like I could originally review it at the time because the file was just so screwed up. I felt like I needed a hard copy because the ARC did not justice to the beautiful photographs. There were huge formatting issues, pictures were literally spliced in half and you might not see one half at all, or find it so many pages later. The text was all out of order - seriously screwed up. Then around 31%, the cover, title page, and copy write appear with that table of contents and intro. It was definitely weird, because I have never encountered a file like this from NetGalley before.

I sent a note through NetGalley to the publisher stating why I did not post a review but did not expect to hear back, as for various reasons in the past I have sent similar notes and never received a reply. I was pleasantly surprised then, not too long later, to get an email from Gemma at Watkins Publishing directly, asking if I would like a PDF copy from them to read and review. I accepted and am so glad I did. The book truly is amazing. Even if there were no text at all, and it was simply photographs of the churches and cathedrals, it would be worth it. It is absolutely stunning.

I am completely fascinated by religious buildings and imagery. I love cathedrals especially, and two of my favorites are St Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh (which I did not get to go inside of) and St Colman in Cobh, Ireland (which I was able to go inside of, and never wanted to leave). St Patrick's in Dublin is also beautiful,

though again we did not get to go in. I think part of my fascination is because I am kind of obsessed with Catholicism, though I am Lutheran. Maybe obsessed is not quite the right word - more like enthralled? - but I watch in eager anticipation every time the Papal Conclave is deciding who the next pope will be. And I dig Pope Francis. A lot. Like, he is a total badass.

Now back to the book...

The architecture alone is amazing but the author goes into such detail about so many aspects of the buildings, I honestly do not really even know where to start. Within the specific buildings showcased, we see beautiful ceilings, mosaics, windows, and so on. The section alone on stained-glass windows was especially of interest and the Good Samaritan Window at Chartres Cathedral in France. In just two pages it really breaks down each section of the window and I found myself thinking back to the variety of stained glass windows I have seen at numerous churches and what scenery or message I might have missed because I was too busy looking at the pretty colors to see the big picture.

I believe this book would be of interest to many - those interested in history, art, architecture and/or religion. It is completely captivating and I am so glad I was able to have a second chance to take a look at this one.

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### **Rosy says**

Almost as beautiful and just not quite as informative as I had been anticipating. I was hoping for a little more detail on symbolism and the history thereof, and although the pictures are lovely and the "decoder" keys very well done, I did need a magnifying glass to get the full benefit. I kept wanting to view these pictures on my computer screen (I haven't checked to see whether that is possible).

I did something I'm not sure I've ever done before: I followed every reference in the text to earlier illustrations and many of them to later ones. This was definitely worth the effort, enabling me to take a second or third look at many pictures, usually to view or consider a different aspect.

A satisfying use of precious hard-copy library space!

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### **Zippergirl says**

Sumptuous.

This guide serves dual purposes: as a handbook for deciphering the hidden meanings in church architecture and symbolism, and a glorious celebration of the beauty and grandeur found in world renowned churches and cathedrals, and tiny chapels in hidden niches.

You would expect to find Manhattan's Trinity Church and Notre Dame de Paris, but armchair travelers will also find modern edifices like The Crystal Cathedral, prior home of the televangelist Robert Schuller and his congregation.

Illustrations clearly explore and explain the evolution of architectural styles, religious themes and structural features. The glossary is a handy aid to the understanding of arcane or technical words and phrases.

While some of the older photos are less than crisp in the reviewer's copy, this is one book that belongs in the library of travelers, photographers, and the pious. Peruse the photographs, read in depth, or use as a reference. "The Secret Language of Churches and Cathredals" will bring a greater appreciation for Christian gathering places.

I received this book in exchange for an honest review.

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### **Ellen says**

Beautifully laid out with lots of high quality images to illustrate the facts. If you are interested in the history and symbolism of the church then you will like this book.

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### **Julie Davis says**

This is a simply superb book with clear, well thought out explanations for symbolism, architecture, history and theology. Richard Stemp blends all together with lavish, well labeled photography which leaves the reader in no doubt as to what is being discussed. This is a book that every church goer, history lover, or architecture buff should read.

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### **Holly says**

A droolingly good read. Yes, it's good enough to make up my own words about it. It's so beautiful that several times I found my mouth hanging agape in awe, which led to the drooling comment I mentioned. Lavish photography and informative breakdowns of more complicated art just so the reader doesn't miss out on all the bits of brilliance contained in a work. Great for accidentally picking up architectural terms without trying. I promise, anyone who goes to church will never look at it the same again, nor any other!

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### **Jodi says**

This was a wonderful book, chockful of color images, diagrams, close-up details on famous churches and their decoration and the meanings behind each and every inch of churches, large and small, famous and obscure. The history and attention to detail were exquisite - I love to visit different churches when I travel, and this book is an invaluable guide to what I see when I do, and a thorough overview of many famous churches I will probably never get to visit in person. I was lucky enough to receive my copy thru the Goodreads Giveaways, and was surprised at how quickly it came - once I opened the cover and began reading and learning, I found I had a hard time stopping when I had to do other things. The author was very respectful of all Christian denominations and beliefs, and I was very happy to see that he didn't seem to have any political agenda on view in his descriptions of the significance of each detail of church architecture,

furnishings, locations and placements. Overall, this was one of my favorite giveaway wins - thank you, Goodreads, for allowing me the opportunity to travel to places I have only read about and dreamed of seeing

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### **Sally says**

Fantastic book. The pictures are glossy and beautiful. Several have detailed descriptions of the images. I found myself amazed at the intricacy of some of the art. Text is detailed, but not confusing. There's also a glossary at the end. This is not just a history of art, but a history of Christianity.

Also, thanks to this book, there are now several more places on my "dream list of places to visit in my life!"

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