



What does this hand gesture mean in Icons?

This is an extract from a longer post [about the Icon of Christ](#), but deserves a separate entry. It explains the meaning behind the way Christ and the Saints are sometimes shown holding their right hand in icons, as shown in the picture above.

To any Orthodox or Catholic Christian, Jesus' right hand in Icons is unmistakably shown as being raised to give a blessing. The arrangement of the hand is repeated by clergy when blessing others and so the Saints in icons, if they were clergy, often hold their right hand in the same way.

Symbolism of the Blessing

The fingers spell out "IC XC", a widely used four letter abbreviation of the Greek for Jesus (IHCOYC) Christ (XPICTOC). It is by the name of Jesus that we are saved and receive blessings: *"At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth;"* (Phil 2:10).

The three fingers of Christ – as well as spelling out "I" and "X" – confess the Tri-unity of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The touching finger and thumb of Jesus not only spell out "C", but attest to the Incarnation: to the joining of divine and human natures found in the body of Jesus Christ.

Similarities with Buddhist Iconography

The above meanings are worth emphasizing because otherwise there can be some confusion, or even scandal, caused by similar images of the Buddha holding his hands in a very stylized way. In response to this there are a few things which need to be considered:

- There is meaning behind the way Christ holds His hand in Icons; there is meaning behind the way Buddha holds his hands in statues: but there the similarity ends. The symbolic hand gestures of Buddha are called [mudras](#), and whilst they are rich in their own meaning, they are not communicating the same faith as Icons of Christ. If we rejected every medium for conveying Truth just because another religion uses the same medium then we'd be left with nothing! We must accept the similarities and discern the differences.
- Just because a religion was around before Christ was born, doesn't mean that all its teachings predate Christianity. Of the common Buddhist Mudras, the *Vitarka Mudra* is the one which most resembles Christ's right hand in icons. Yet the earliest representations of the *vitarka mudra* show the three fingers straight, rather than curved. Much later we see [images like this one](#), which look remarkably like Christian iconography. Yet the image is from the 8th century **A.D.**, centuries after the iconography of Christ is established. We can be forgiven for questioning just exactly which religion is influencing the other.
- Finally, the Buddhist mudras are didactic; they are hand gestures designed to convey a message. Yet the "IC XC" Christogram is much more than this: it is both a sign and means of blessing. A statue of the Buddha holds his hands *just so* and his devotees are supposed to remember a certain teaching; Christ raises His right hand and Christians receive the blessings of God. More than this, even if His servants, the Saints, holds their hands in the same way, we are assured of receiving the blessings of God, through the name of Jesus Christ

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