



## 14. Why Do Some People Make The Sign Of The Cross When Worshipping?

Making the sign of the cross as a sign of self-blessing and a liturgical gesture was very common in the Church from the earliest times, and is referred to by the second-century author Tertullian. St Augustine of Hippo thought it an essential element in the due performance of sacramental acts.

At first, self-crossing was simply performed with the thumb on the forehead, but later was extended to the whole upper body. The Western Catholic tradition is to make the cross from left to right, the Eastern Orthodox from right to left. Curiously, in Russia there is a further divergence - originally, the Russian Orthodox crossed themselves with two fingers of the right hand. The Greek and other Orthodox Churches used three fingers, to symbolise the Trinity.

In the early seventeenth century, the Patriarch Nikon tried to bring the practice of the Russian Church into line with the rest of the Orthodox world. Many Russian Orthodox, calling themselves the Old Believers, broke away from the official Church, insisting on retaining the ancient Russian practices unchanged, including the use of two fingers only for the sign of the Cross. (They figure prominently in Moussorgsky's opera *Khovanschina*.) There are still Old Believers in Siberia and Canada - the descendants of exiles.

The Protestant Reformers denied that any manual gestures could have significance for one's spiritual state and discountenanced the practice of crossing oneself. This has been reflected in the diversity of Anglican practice. While some find the making of the sign of the cross a graceful and reverent aid to worship, others find it unhelpful and distracting. Ideally, of course, what one's neighbour or anyone else does or refrains from doing should have no significance for one's own worship. We can also find comfort in the reflection that one of the chief glories of the Church of England at its best is the number of varieties of usage that can co-exist within it.