

# THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

## THE SHROUD OF TURIN

### Its implications for faith and theology

BACK IN 1967, a notable Anglican exegete, C. F. D. Moule, registered a complaint about some of his contemporaries: 'I have met otherwise intelligent men who ask, apparently in all seriousness, whether there may not be truth in what I would call patently ridiculous legends about . . . an early portrait of Jesus or the shroud in which he is supposed to have been buried'.<sup>1</sup>

Through the 1950s into the 1960s many roman Catholics, if they had come across it, would have agreed with Moule's verdict. That work of fourteen volumes on theology and church history, which Karl Rahner and other German scholars prepared, *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* (1957-68), simply ignored the shroud of Turin, except for a brief reference in an article on Ulysse Chevalier (1841-1923). Among his other achievements, the latter had gathered 'weighty arguments' to disprove the authenticity of the shroud. Like his english jesuit contemporary, Herbert Thurston, Chevalier maintained that it was a fourteenth-century forgery.

The classic Protestant theological dictionary, *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, however, took a different view. The sixth volume of the revised, third edition, which appeared in 1962, included an article on the shroud by H.-M. Decker-Hauff.<sup>2</sup> The author summarized some of the major reasons in favour of its authenticity. In its material and pattern, the shroud matches products from the Middle East in the first century of the christian era. In the mid-fourteenth century the prevailing conventions of church art would not have allowed a forger or anyone else to portray Jesus in the full nakedness that we see on the shroud. In any case, no medieval painter could have anticipated modern science, and made of the image on the shroud a 'negative', as Secondo Pia discovered it to be when he photographed it in 1898. Further, the many small wounds around the head, and the great perforation in the right side, do not fit the normal methods of crucifixion, but strikingly correspond with particular details of Jesus's passion reported by the gospel writers: the crowning with thorns (Matthew, Mark and John) and the piercing of the side (John). Then medical experts judged that the corpse and the shroud were in contact for only thirty-six to forty hours. On the basis of these and other arguments, Decker-Hauff concluded that we cannot 'scientifically rule out' the hypothesis that 'the dead man was the historical Jesus'. He hoped that further scientific tests would finally settle matters one way or another.

<sup>1</sup> *The Phenomenon of the New Testament* (London, 1967), p 2.

<sup>2</sup> 'Turiner Grabtuch', cols 1087-89.

Since Decker-Hauff's article appeared, the shroud of Turin has undergone many more scientific tests in a way denied to any other relic. Often this research has been carried on by non-Catholics like Max Frei, a swiss criminologist. He took pollen samples from the shroud, and discovered that some of the pollen came from plants which grow only in the Holy Land. Layers of sediment in the Lake of Galilee which date from the time of Jesus have also yielded types of pollen found on the shroud. The conclusion from the pollen analysis is clear. At some point in its history the shroud was exposed to the air in Palestine.

Even before Decker-Hauff published his piece in 1962, photographic evidence had already excluded the view that the shroud was a painting. Since then, techniques developed by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) for use on satellite photographs have been applied to it. The results were startling. The optic intensity of the image on the cloth stands in a regular relation to the third dimension. Thus NASA scientists have been able to reproduce the face on the shroud, in three dimensions.

Many readers will have seen the BBC film, *The Silent Witness*, which documented the history of the research, from Secondo Pia's first photographs to the use of computer technology. Like many other studies, that film focused on the question: Is the relic in Turin really the burial-cloth of Jesus? But by now the converging evidence has accumulated to the point that John Robinson could admit: 'For me the burden of proof has shifted. I began by assuming its inauthenticity until proved otherwise, and then asking how one explained it. On the hypothesis of a medieval forgery, or any other I could think of, this was very difficult. I now find myself assuming its authenticity until proved otherwise'.<sup>3</sup> It is high time, then, that we moved on from the question of historical authenticity to face issues of faith and theology. What significance could the shroud have for christian belief? What theological implications does it carry? The theme of faith offers a convenient point of entry.

### *The shroud and faith*

Ever since I read Newman's *Grammar of Assent*, I have been convinced that it is much more helpful to examine how *in fact* people *do* come to believe, rather than to start by pontificating on how we think they *should* come to faith. In a BBC television discussion on Maundy Thursday last year, John Robinson called the shroud 'a trigger of faith'. He was on particularly safe ground that evening, as the discussion followed a screening of *The Silent Witness*. The producer and director of that film, David Rolfe, began his three-and-a-half years of investigation of the shroud as an agnostic, and then moved to believe in Jesus Christ. Like others, he saw on the burial-cloth the image of the dead Jesus, and believed in the living Christ.

<sup>3</sup> 'Re-investigating the Shroud of Turin', in *Theology*, 80 (1977).

'Trigger' was a well-chosen word. A gun needs a barrel, a stock and other features, over and above the trigger-mechanism itself. Likewise, no matter what finally triggers off faith, a wide range of elements gets involved in its making: personal needs, questions about the ultimate issues of life, the influence of the christian community, contact with the gospel story and the rest. Rolfe himself neither wishes nor claims 'to base faith purely on the shroud'. But he does recognize that some people in their path to faith 'need a form of underpinning in twentieth-century scientific terms'.<sup>4</sup>

How strong is this underpinning? Granted that Jesus was actually buried in the shroud now kept in Turin, what does this suggest or even establish? Like the empty tomb itself, this fourteen foot long and three-and-a-half foot wide piece of cloth does not *prove* the resurrection. But there would have been no empty tomb, nor would we now have the shroud, unless Jesus had been raised from the dead. Here it is important to note that the shroud bears no traces of the kind of tearing which we could expect if it had been pulled away from the corpse. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to go looking for some knock-down proof that we cannot and will not get.

If scientific study of the shroud were somehow to provide full, 'objective' evidence for the truth of the christian message, faith would be ruled out. Such a mass of evidence that to everyone's satisfaction totally supported the christian confession about Jesus of Nazareth would reduce faith to the necessary conclusion of an argument, and forget that it is a free commitment to a personal relationship. If faith were merely a matter of scientific reason alone, we could run the data through a computer and have our assured result. However, unless it remains a free and fundamental option, faith is no longer faith. Thus absolutely tangible guarantees from the shroud or any other source would rule out, not rule in, real christian belief.

Furthermore, the four gospels provide *the* access to the passion of Jesus, as well as to the story of his life and post-resurrection appearances. The shroud cannot match in value those inspired texts. In that sense, Moule was right in protesting against any enthusiasm for the shroud or other items from the ancient world which would brush aside the canonical gospels.<sup>5</sup>

However, a both/and rather than an either/or attitude describes more accurately many of those three million pilgrims who visited Turin in 1978. I put the question to a number of them: 'In what way does the shroud support your faith?' The fullest answer came from one italian pilgrim. He responded emphatically: 'My faith results from hearing God's word. I believe in Jesus

<sup>4</sup> Interview in the english Catholic Weekly, *The Catholic Herald* (1 June 1979).

<sup>5</sup> The full statement from Moule reads as follows: 'I have met otherwise intelligent men who ask, apparently in all seriousness, whether there may not be truth in what I would call patently ridiculous legends about (let us say) an early portrait of Jesus or the shroud in which he is supposed to have been buried (I am thinking of actual articles in the popular press), and who grew excited over the Gospel of Thomas or some other late apocryphal document, but who brush aside the much earlier and more sober canonical Gospels as unreliable legends not worthy of serious consideration': *loc. cit.*, pp 2-3.

Christ'. But then he added: 'The shroud makes the Jesus I know through the gospels very concrete. When we want to meet someone, we all like to see his face or at least a picture of him'. He ended by reflecting on the threat of doubt: 'We can always argue about the truth of Jesus and Christianity. But people fall silent when they see the face on the shroud'.

### *Science and the shroud*

The shroud triggered faith for David Rolfe when he found the scientific proofs for its authenticity convincing. These proofs come from a wide range of specialities. In a remarkable way the shroud stands at the cross-roads of human science and technology. Here we might fairly adapt the words of Jesus in John's gospel: 'When I am lifted up in death and resurrection, I will draw all sciences to myself — through the relic I will leave behind, my burial-cloth' (Jn 12, 32).

I have already noted how photographic techniques developed by NASA have recently contributed to the study of the shroud. For a long time medical scientists have pointed out the correctness of various anatomical and physiological details of the imprint on the shroud. The markings correspond exactly, not only to what doctors would expect from the corpse of a crucified man, but also to the special features of Jesus's crucifixion which the gospels attest.

Experts in ancient coins (numismatologists) have noted that roman coins from around the time of Jesus (54 B.C. to A.D. 70) show jewish prisoners of war with beards and hair falling to the shoulders. At that time in the Roman Empire other men were beardless. No greek, roman or egyptian portrait of the period shows a man with the full beard and long hair which we see on the Turin shroud. Thus we can be sure of this. The man whose image remains on the shroud was a crucified *Jew* and not some other victim of that atrocious roman method of execution.

After studying the material and weave of the shroud, specialists in the history of textiles admit that it could be a first-century product from the Middle East. Then art experts have pointed to the way depictions of Christ changed in the sixth century. Instead of being young and beardless, he was portrayed as a more mature man with a forked beard and long hair parted in the centre. Did the impact of the shroud lie behind that familiar and standard byzantine image of Christ?

Historians also have played their part in investigating the shroud. On the one hand, they point out that the Emperor Constantine abolished crucifixion as a method for executing people sentenced to death. That suggests that the man on the shroud was put to death some time before the early fourth century.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, however, because historians concentrate on documentary evidence, it concerns them that the available records do not

<sup>6</sup> A 1978 study by a Turin professor, P. A. Gramaglia, has, however, drawn attention to some evidence pointing to crucifixions in the Middle East during the seventh century.

allow them to trace *clearly* and *fully* the whereabouts and history of the shroud before 1353. There are some hints and indications on which Ian Wilson builds in his *The Turin Shroud* to track its earlier history. But no compelling documentary evidence is so far at hand.

Another scientific speciality which still retains a 'yes-but' attitude towards the shroud is biblical scholarship. By now some professionals in the field are satisfied that a long-standing difficulty from the fourth gospel does not count against the authenticity of the shroud. John tells us that when Simon Peter went into the empty tomb of Jesus, 'he saw the linen *cloths* [*othonia*, plural] lying, and the napkin [*sudarium*], which had been on his head, not lying with the linen cloths but rolled up in a place by itself' (Jn 20, 6ff). The plural ('cloths') seemed to rule out a single piece of cloth like the shroud. If a 'napkin' covered the face of Jesus, how could its features have been imprinted on the shroud along with the rest of his body? John Robinson and other exegetes now explain *othonia* as a generic plural for grave-cloths, and hence compatible with a single piece of cloth like the Turin shroud. The *sudarium* they interpret as a band slipped under the chin of dead persons to keep the mouth closed. Such a band would not have interfered with the imprinting of Jesus's face on the burial shroud.

Nevertheless, some modern studies on John's gospel continue to create difficulties, and also reveal a certain conflict between medicine and exegesis. For their part, medical scientists have recognized as correct the detail about the flow of 'blood and water' from the side of the dead Jesus (Jn 20, 34). Such an effect would occur *only* if a crucified man were so pierced *after* his death. The shroud bears the traces of just such a wound inflicted on the right side of the corpse. Leading commentators on the fourth gospel, however, have dismissed any such medical discussion about that blood and water. It wrongly supposes that John here intended to describe some 'objective' episode. Thus Rudolf Schnackenburg called such a discussion 'misleading', and Rudolf Bultmann described it as downright 'comic'. But perhaps what we have here is yet another example of the way in which John's gospel has been found to contain more details from actual history than biblical scholars have been inclined to admit.

All in all, despite some conflicts, like the one between medical scientists and exegetes over the blood and water which flowed from the side of the dead Jesus, various sciences and technologies intersect at the shroud. They each have something to say, but by itself no speciality proves decisive in establishing that the piece of cloth preserved in Turin is genuinely the burial shroud of Jesus. The different specialities complement one another in reaching this conclusion. This modern research prompts two reflections.

First, such scientific research encourages a proper humility. A specialist in one field has to trust or at least respect the specialists in other fields. Second, research on the shroud and its impact on people like David Rolfe illustrate remarkably how scientific reason — in its many fields — can help to bring about faith in thoroughly 'modern' people.

*Centring on Christ*

Contemporary interest in the Turin shroud belongs to a wider phenomenon within the christian community and beyond: a 'back to Jesus' movement. The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) produced sixteen documents, all of which dealt with the updating of the Catholic Church both within herself and in her relationship with other religious bodies and the world. Paul VI became pope during the Council (1963), and naturally devoted his first encyclical to the theme of the Church, *Ecclesiam suam* (1964). But the years since the Council have shown how all reform remains theologically shallow and pastorally ineffective, unless it clearly bases itself on the Founder of Christianity and the New Testament record of his incarnation, life, death, resurrection and sending of the Holy Spirit.

The 1970s brought the sad revolt led by Archbishop Lefebvre and his traditionalist movement. Perhaps no post-conciliar event has exemplified more clearly the need to let Jesus Christ stand at the centre. In an interview published by *Newsweek* on 31 December 1977, the Archbishop managed to avoid ever mentioning our Lord and the New Testament. He appealed constantly to the Church of yesterday — or rather his interpretation of it — as a means for criticizing the Church of today. It is not that his critics have always shown themselves superior in this regard. When I found one of them running a series of lectures under the general title of 'Love for the Church: Love for the Pope', I could not refrain from thinking: 'What about a little love for God the Father and Jesus his Son?'

The popes have in fact been pushing us to focus our theory and practice of christianity more and more on Christ. On 3 November 1976, Paul VI told an audience in Rome: 'There are two simple yet formidable questions which we ought always to put to ourselves: Who is Christ in himself? Who is Christ for me?' Earlier on the day he died, Pope John Paul I remarked to Cardinal Gantin: 'It is only Jesus Christ we must present to the world'. John Paul II, at his inaugural Mass in October 1978, encouraged believers and non-believers alike: 'Do not be afraid to welcome Christ. . . . Have no fear, open the doors — fling them open to Christ and his saving authority'. In an audience on 8 November 1978, he urged the young people present: 'Seek Jesus, love Jesus, witness to Jesus'.

It was no surprise then to find the present Holy Father choosing Christ our Saviour as the theme for his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*. In the last fifty years, this was the second longest encyclical written by any pope, and the only one simply devoted to the mystery of Christ our Redeemer. Fifty times, John Paul II wrote of 'the mystery of Christ', 'the mystery of our redemption', 'the paschal mystery', or 'the mystery of the incarnation and redemption': that mystery 'in which each one of the four thousand million human beings living on our planet has become a sharer from the moment he is conceived beneath the heart of his mother' (*Redemptor Hominis*, 13). If anything, the present Holy Father showed himself even more concerned to

stress the centrality of Christ when he visited Poland in June 1979. He said to the huge crowd gathered for the Pentecost Sunday Mass in the Victory Square of Warsaw: 'Without Christ, man cannot understand himself fully. He cannot understand his identity, his true dignity, his vocation, and his final destiny'. The pope's speeches in Ireland and the United States last September showed the same emphasis on Christo-centrism.

Like the popes, many theologians have turned from specifically ecclesiastical issues to reflect on the mystery of Jesus Christ. I think here of Sebastian Kappen's *Jesus and Freedom* (1977), James Mackey's *Jesus the Man and the Myth* (1979), and Jon Sobrino's *Christology at the Crossroads* (1978), and the other works I discussed in *The Way* for October 1976 and January 1977.<sup>7</sup> At the popular level, the enormous response to Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* demonstrated once again how Christ and his story remain vitally attractive and important to millions.

It was necessary to indulge in this parenthesis, and to sketch some features of the present 'back to Jesus' movement, since it forms the background for the current interest in the Turin shroud. In this whole movement, what special contribution has the Turin relic to make? Obviously it provides some information about Jesus's physical appearance. He was bearded, wore long hair, stood almost six feet tall, and — as the marks of the body indicate — was right-handed. Then for some Christians, the shroud pacifies certain doubts and strengthens their faith in Jesus. We have the shroud because he rose from the dead.

However, the particular contribution of the shroud lies elsewhere. It encapsulates the passion of Jesus. On this piece of cloth, Jesus wrote the story of his suffering and death. In a way that Zechariah and John never imagined, the shroud has fulfilled for millions of people those words: 'They shall look upon him whom they have pierced' (Zech 12, 10; Jn 19, 37). It expresses with terrible directness man's inhumanity to the Son of Man. The shroud reveals what Jesus looked like when we human beings had finished with him. The marks of the scourging — to mention just one horrifying detail — show one hundred and twenty wounds inflicted very systematically by two men on almost every part of the body. The shroud offers us an authentic picture of the suffering servant, the one 'despised and rejected by men' (Isai 53, 3).

As we know, Jesus did not suffer alone, but died between two robbers. He went through his passion in solidarity with all those who must endure cruel torments at the hands of their fellow-men. Pascal's classic statement suggests this never-ending story of suffering which stretches through human history: 'Jesus will be in agony even to the end of the world. We must not sleep during that time' (*Pensées*, 552).

Let us suppose then for a moment that the man on the shroud was not Jesus, but another crucified Jew from the first century whose wounds — by

<sup>7</sup> In a revised form, these articles appeared as *What are they saying about Jesus?* (New York, 1977).

some extraordinary coincidence — just happened to have matched exactly the special details reported by the gospels, as well as the marks left by a 'normal' crucifixion. In that case the shroud would still depict for us a victim of human brutality. It would portray for us someone violently done to death who, whether he knew it or not, suffered together with the man who came from Nazareth 'to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mk 10, 45).

At the last audience before his death, Pope Pius XI gave out pictures of the shroud. That pope died in 1939, on the eve of an atrocious war which would kill tens of millions of people. His gesture was prophetic. It hinted at the solidarity in suffering with Jesus which so many were to experience in Auschwitz, Coventry, Dresden, Hiroshima, Katyn Wood, Stalingrad and all those other scenes of man's inhumanity to man.

Of course, if the shroud spoke to us only of human brutality, it would be enough to make us despair. We could only break down and weep at what happened and what continues to happen. But the picture on the shroud says more. People sense the extraordinary majesty and peace of that ravaged face, 'surely a face that could credibly have commanded the loyalty and faith which the Gospels describe'.<sup>8</sup> In death it seems as if Jesus sees us and blesses us through his closed eyes. He may be completely naked and horribly battered, but the divine beauty shines through.

What we have then in the shroud is a pictorial counterpart to St Paul's message about Christ who 'was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God' (2 Cor 13, 4). 'Vulnerability' catches better what the apostle means by 'weakness'. Who is more vulnerable than a crucified man? And yet through the crucifixion of Jesus, the divine power comes to heal and help us. By its impact on viewers, the shroud of Turin illustrates and re-enacts the mystery of the passion. In his utter vulnerability and seeming powerlessness, the man on the shroud acts to save us.

Among the three million pilgrims to Turin in 1978, there were many Anglicans and other non-Roman Catholics. An old venetian priest remarked to me: 'It was wonderful to see non-Catholic clergy going to communion in the Turin cathedral. Despite all our differences, Jesus and his shroud bring us together'. As part of the total impact of Jesus's death, the shroud continues 'to gather into one the children of God who are scattered' (Jn 11, 52).<sup>9</sup>

Gerald O'Collins S.J.

<sup>8</sup> John Robinson, 'The Shroud and the New Testament', in *Face to Face with the Turin Shroud*, ed. Peter Jennings (Great Wakering and Oxford, 1978), p 78.

<sup>9</sup> I wish to thank Heinrich Pfeiffer S.J., for some valuable and generous help in preparing this article. As regards the literature, Wilson's *The Turin Shroud* (London, 1979) and Jennings's *Face to Face with the Turin Shroud* have already been mentioned. One should also recall Werner Bulst's *Das Grabtuch von Turin* (Karlsruhe, 1978) and Giulio Ricci's *La Sindone Santa* (Rome, 1976). The *Ampleforth Journal* has carried some very worthwhile articles: for instance Maurus Green, 'Enshrouded in Silence', 74 (Autumn 1969), pp 319-45.