

## Theological Reflections on The Turin Shroud

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In a well-loved Telecoms advert, Beattie [alias BT] is on the phone to her grandson, who has been upset by his poor GCSE results and the inevitable angry parental reaction. She is consoling: “You got geology; that’s an ....ology, a science. You must have been good to have got a science.” Contemplating this, I remembered how in the Middle Ages, Theology, the ....ology which concerned the nature of God, was regarded in Western Europe as the *Queen of the Sciences* and Christology, focusing on the nature of Jesus, the Christ, was thought to be an essential branch of it. Nowadays, although there are scientists who not only accept, but even promote the claims of the Christian religion, this is not generally the case. The once Queen of Sciences is dismissed as not scientific at all. This article aims to restore Theology to what should be its proper position with reference to some discoveries of science itself, to Christian doctrine and scripture and to the Shroud.

At the heart of religion is faith, which can grow or die as a result of our experiences and our interaction with them. It is possible for scientists to have faith and indeed to be committed Christians: there is also an experience of wonder at the beauty and power of creation which often leads to what seems a religious faith in nature by some who claim to be atheists: on the other hand, there is a contempt for religion, sometimes manifest in contempt for the Shroud, which makes one ask if a painful experience from Church involvement lies behind it all. It is possible for all of us sometimes to respond subjectively to experience, even when claiming objectivity. Remembered pain can lead to prejudice. This, however, does not explain the unscientifically negative reaction to the Shroud found in the Church press and indeed in the press as a whole. A cause may be loyalty to a friend as I discovered when I gave my book on the Shroud to a friend of David Sox: it was dismissed.

The contents of the last edition of the Shroud Newsletter were criticised by some well-respected Shroudie for being too esoteric, written for the initiated rather than the public at large. However, as the editor pointed out to his critics the shroud image is a miracle and miracles by their very nature have an esoteric dimension. What makes them of more general interest is the fact that existence, which we all share, is in itself a miracle. From a purely rational point of view, I cannot see why or how Andrew Willie, any other person, or any other object could possibly exist; yet exist we do. In fact, in our expanding universe with the use of radio telescopes, we are able to go back in time almost to the beginning of everything. Here we are confronted by a series of simple mathematical formulae involving mild radiation and also nano-seconds, which if deviated from even very slightly would have meant that creation would not have happened. The claim concerning the creation of the Shroud image by very mild radiation in nano-seconds is thoroughly consistent with this.

In Christian Theology, God is indivisible, yet, paradoxically, the Godhead is a Trinity of three interacting individual parts, known as persons: Father, an essentially male image which offends some feminists, but which reflects how Jesus referred to Him; Son, Jesus' own word for Himself, and described by Bishop John Robinson in his book of that title as, "The Human Face of God" ; and the Holy Spirit, an expression of God's energy and presence in all creation, especially in all that lives, more especially in humanity and most especially of all in Jesus. The first two persons are masculine but in *koine* [common] Greek, the language of the New Testament, the Spirit is regarded as essentially feminine: the female word, *pneuma*, is used for her: it referred originally to the wind and to the air we breathe, but in the writings of the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, she is the power which forms human character. In the Old Testament, as the Nicene Creed tells us, she "spoke by the prophets" and her energy is almost certainly revealed in the shining skin of Moses [Exodus 34 vs. 29ff.] after dialogue with God.

For Christians, she is the origin of inspiration and in St Luke's Gospel, present at His conception [Luke 1 vs. 35] and also, when at His Baptism, [ Luke 3 vs. 21-22] He is commissioned by the Father for his ministry. The Holy Spirit is also the continuing presence of Jesus in the Christian Community at large and so in the individual Christian [Acts 2] to form Christian character. Most importantly, I see her energy behind the light in Our Lord's Transfiguration, his ministry of healing and also the Resurrection image on the Shroud, all as described in issue 92 of our Shroud newsletter by Philippa Foster. A hint of an experience of the light and energy of the Godhead is found in 1 Corinthians 12. vs 1-4, where St Paul speaks of a charismatic experience of his own, which nicely mirrors the experiences many have nowadays.

And what of Jesus, the Christ, described in Trinitarian doctrine as God the Son? Exploring his character and Nature led from earliest times to a different .....ology, Christology. At its centre, lies one question and the attempts to answer it: how can Jesus be, as Christians describe him, both God and Man? This question will find us eventually at the image on the Shroud.

The ancient world had two different classic answers to the question, one from Antioch, the other from Alexandria: the former emphasising, in a "lightswitch" Christology, more the historical character of Jesus as the ordinary human being, who could nevertheless switch himself on to heal and speak prophetically as God's Spirit inspired and circumstances demanded. The latter emphasised the divine nature as somehow within Jesus, as in Charles Wesley's Christmas hymn, *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* where "veiled in flesh the Godhead see." is sung. The two approaches gave birth to many variants and they are still very much with us to-day. They lie behind two modern ways of speaking of Christology: "from below" primarily focused on His humanity and "from above", as in the first chapter of St John's Gospel [vs 1-14] and Philippians

chapter two [vs 5-11], which speak of Christ's role within the Godhead.

The nineteenth century very much concentrated on Jesus the man. One key life of Jesus was written by a French philosopher and theologian, Joseph Ernest Renan, *La Vie de Jesus*. He denied the supernatural, ignored the moral element in Jesus' teaching and pictured him as a friendly charming preacher from Galilee, one wonders how Our Lord could possibly have ended up crucified! However, it was German Protestant Theologians and Early Church Historians who really wrestled with Christology. Of one of them, Adolf von Harnack, it was said by George Tyrrell, a controversial British Catholic theologian, "He looked at Jesus down a deep well and saw his face reflected at the bottom." The wrestling culminated with *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* by Albert Schweitzer, which clearly stated the futility of any quest to make Jesus a man of our time rather than of His own.

However, the wish to make Jesus a man of our own time is still with us, partly the result of a desire to bring Jesus on board to address modern political and sociological concerns. This is attacked quite beautifully in a book published in Britain in 1975, *Jesus Now* by the late Malachi Martin. The book is concerned with those Jesus figures which he sees essentially as distortions of who Our Lord was. Modern Jesus figures listed and explored by Martin include *Jesus One of the Boys*, *Jesus Mystic Gun*, *Jesus Black*, *Jesus Femina*, *Jesus Gay* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. His own Jesus is depicted as always with us, as our *Jesus self*, immutable and not subject to the mindset or politics of any era. However, this means Orthodoxy's *Christos Pantokrator* [Christ Almighty], for example, is denounced for the supposedly secularised use of its all-powerful image by various countries and their imperial rulers. This means there is no hint of a possible link of that powerful image with Christology from above or with the face on the Holy Shroud [1].

Albert Schweitzer's Jesus is extremely interesting. His Jesus is not a nineteenth or twentieth or indeed twenty first century man. As a Lutheran of his time [1875-1965], the Shroud would not have been a matter for consideration for Schweitzer. Rather, his Jesus, like many of His contemporaries, expected the world to end soon. When it failed to do so, this Jesus went to His suffering and death to save His people from the trials of the last days, defining very broadly those whose presence would be with Him in paradise; they not only inevitably include Old Testament Patriarchs and their followers, but even those [unidentified] from other faiths. Jesus is the all-embracing, atoning *Son of Man* and Schweitzer regards him as an imperial figure yet his tribute to Him ends as follows, "He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not, He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou me' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil in our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship and as an

ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who He is [2].”

One feels that Schweizer, who passed most of his life as a Doctor in French Equatorial Africa, would, had he encountered it, have embraced the Shroud as showing Jesus as both *Lord Pantokrator* and, with His terrible mortal wounds, as the *Son of Man*, who died for all of humanity, everywhere.

In the 1960s, *Son of Man* was regarded as Jesus’ designation of himself and in terms of an original Old Testament figure, though this could be one of two people. One designation is found in the Book of Ezekiel and *Son of Man* is how God addresses the Prophet, the other, the normally accepted definition, is an Apocalyptic figure in Daniel 7 vs. 13f.: this goes well with a Christology from above. *Son of Man* is a term used by Jesus in the New Testament and as such it is translated in the Revised Standard Version [my personal favourite.] However, when the New Revised Standard Version was published, the title in the Old Testament stayed the same, but in the New Testament it was translated as *Son of the People*. You should not be surprised to learn that in some pulpits, sermons are being preached on *the Son of Man*, as meaning, “just an ordinary bloke.” That Our Lord most certainly was not.

I certainly knew that John Robinson and his contemporaries often felt otherwise. John Knox, an American Episcopal Scholar raised the issue of the sinlessness of Our Lord in his book, *The Humanity and Divinity of Christ*, the key verse being Hebrews 4 vs 15. The basic question for him was how could a person who is sinless atone for the sins of humanity? [3]. John Robinson in *The Human Face of God* felt that it was Jesus in his humanity who spoke most clearly to the current age and so he wanted to present Jesus the man to contemporary Christians; yet the strange thing is that it is basically charismatic churches of West Indian origin, preaching the complete otherness of Christ, which have avoided the decline which mainstream churches in Britain have experienced [4]. I was, therefore, surprised, puzzled and pleased to see in David Rolfe/Ian Wilson’s first film, Bishop John Robinson’s open-minded endorsement of the Shroud.

That Jesus appeared on Earth at the right moment [*Kairos* in Greek] to enable His story and message to spread easily, has always seemed a sign that God is in control. The Roman Empire, embracing all the countries around the Mediterranean and with good straight roads into a vast interior, also ruled by Rome, provided means for the Gospel to travel. As a result of an evangelistic campaign by Judaism, lasting just over a century before Our Lord’s birth, synagogues existed outside Israel. These were a rich soil for Christianity, a Jewish religion, but without the customs which made many Gentiles sympathisers rather than adherents, especially circumcision and strange food regulations. These synagogues also had their own versions of the Old Testament, translated into Greek, the common language of the Eastern Mediterranean. Such ripeness of timing also ensured that the Shroud, despite a series of threats, dangers and

vicissitudes, itself remained relatively safe, not only just after Jesus's Resurrection, but also down the centuries.

One problem for the first Christians was that the end of the world and Second Coming spoken of by Jesus failed to occur. This, however, fails to do justice to the Old Testament idea that a prophetic word is not just for its own day, but for all time. The fact that something has happened, does not mean that it will not happen again in a different way, or that it has not so far happened does not mean that it never will. The explanation found in 2 Peter Ch3 vs 8 for the delay of the end has been dismissed as too glib. *But do not ignore this one fact that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day.*" But if we regard time as having an eternal element, which, even now, in our viewing the Universe, can take us back to near the beginning of Creation, the Second Coming becomes just part of eternity, to happen soon, sometime or in the distant future. As in the Book of Revelation? The Book of Revelation is occasionally applied literally and thus becomes the possible basis of madness [as in 1978 at Jonestown, Guyana or in 1993 at Waco] or it is rejected completely as nonsense. Seen as simply telling us in poetic language and imagery what death, judgement, heaven and hell are like, it still has great value. Against this background, the Shroud image can still speak to us of the power of Jesus, not only of his resurrection but also in His anticipated Second Coming.

One response to scientific advances over the last two hundred years was to speak of a God of the gaps, responsible for matters for which science had no explanation. Trinitarian Theology however maintains that such a God does not exist. God is in everything. The Man for Others, whose image is on the Shroud, acts as a powerful corrective to those who [ignoring Genesis Ch1, vs. 26.] want to make God in mankind's own image. The corrective is especially important in dealing with those who wish to make Him side with those human values they themselves espouse.

Among the parables in Genesis are two of special relevance to our current situation. The first is the story in Genesis Chapter 3, of Adam and Eve, who assert their moral autonomy against God and bring disaster on humanity. The second is in Genesis Chapter 11, verses 1-9 the story of the Tower of Babel, of the possible use of communication skills to ensure that nothing is impossible and people are like God. We must not exploit the resources of our planet to destroy it, use our communication skills to lie, defraud and cheat or treat those suffering in the current Pandemic with anything other than selfless Christian love.

Neither the story of Adam and Eve nor that of the Tower of Babel is history, but each is more relevant to our present situation than when it was first written down during the first millennium BC. It is extremely important we acknowledge Theology as a science and like all science examine it critically. It is also important that we acknowledge the

authority of the Trinity in the Creative process and the authority of Jesus, whose image upon the Shroud after two thousand years, still shows His ultimate vindication.

## References

1. Martin, Malachi (1975). *Jesus Now*, (Collins, London) pages 35-38.
2. Schweitzer, Albert (1911). *Quest for the Historical Jesus*, (Adam and Charles Black, London) page 401.
3. Knox, John (1967). *The Humanity and Divinity of Christ*, (Cambridge University Press) chapter 3, especially page 49.
4. Robinson, John A.T. (1967). *The Human Face of God*, (SCM Press) especially pages 141 and 142.

Recommended further reading: the books cited in the article, together with *The Church in the Age of Revolution*, Penguin History of the Church Volume five by Alec R. Vidler.

Canon Willie has also published his own book, *The Turin Shroud and the Mystery of Faith*, which is fulsomely endorsed by Dr. Rowan Williams and others. It is available through the BSTS for just £10 including postage within the UK. Send a cheque for £10 made out to British Society for the Turin Shroud to:

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