

SPIRITUALITY AND THE SHROUD

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Abstract

*The image on the Shroud is an invitation to spiritual contemplation. In the words of Pope John Paul II, it is “an image of God’s love as well as of human sin”. It is also an image of silence, the silence of fruitfulness which allows us to delve to the roots of truth and life and to hear the voice of God. In the words of St Teresa of Avila “the contemplative should regard himself as being within a definite space, God everywhere around, and himself absorbed in Him”. Contemplation is the awareness of God. It is not necessary to know how the image was formed. It is enough to understand what it represents – the sacrifice of Jesus for the redemption of mankind. The detail on the image allows us to contemplate every aspect of the Passion of Jesus, from his treatment at the hands of the Temple guards to the scourging and finally to the Crucifixion itself. Yet the image also shows calmness and peace in death. The horror of the Passion has been succeeded by the peace of the tomb. This inner peace itself reflects the teaching of Jesus. Writers over the centuries, from Athanasius to Thomas Aquinas to the unknown author of the mediaeval English classic *The Cloud of Unknowing* have emphasised how distractions arise to disturb contemplation and inner peace. The early writers pictured these distractions as demons. Today they would be more worldly. In perfect contemplation everything less than God is forgotten. The Shroud enables us to contemplate in a perfect manner and without distraction the Passion, death and resurrection of our Saviour. That surely is its purpose, regardless of whether it is truly the burial cloth of Jesus or the product of human ingenuity.*

Four Questions

There are four questions to which scientific researchers, historians and others interested in the Shroud of Turin seek an answer. They can be briefly stated as what, when, how and why?

The first question, what is the Shroud of Turin, has a simple answer. It is a cloth of certain known dimensions on which there is an image which appears to be that of the crucified Jesus Christ. More detail can be stated but the Shroud can easily be described in scientific terms.

The second question is probably the most contentious. When was the Shroud created? To many it is of 1st century origin and was the burial cloth of Jesus Christ. To others it is a mediaeval artefact dating to no earlier than the 14th century.

The third question is how – how was the image created? No satisfactory answer to this question has ever been produced. If it is indeed the burial cloth of Jesus Christ, with the image being that of Jesus in the tomb, then what mechanism was involved in the creation of the image? There have been many hypotheses, involving chemical reactions, electromagnetic radiation, nuclear radiation or perhaps a combination of any of these. The obvious follow-up question in this context is, was the image caused by a natural phenomenon or was it a miraculous or supernatural event? That is another question to which no conclusive answer currently exists. The mediaevalists, or sceptics, also have a range of explanations. Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince in their book *Turin Shroud: In Whose Image*¹ suggest that the image we know today as that on the Shroud of Turin was created by some form of early photographic process as a self-image by Leonardo da Vinci. Christopher Knight and Robert Lomas connect the Shroud to the suppression of the Templars in France in the early 14th century and propose that the image is that of the last Grand Master of the Templars, Jacques de Molay². Other hypotheses for a mediaeval origin of the Shroud are less dramatic and suggest that the image-bearing cloth is simply a forged relic.

The fourth question, and the one least thought about, is why was the Shroud created? Leaving aside dramatic hypotheses such as the first “selfie” or masonic secrets, the most likely answer is that it was created to illustrate graphically the sufferings of Jesus Christ with the objective of inspiring religious and spiritual reflection and devotion. This answer would apply regardless of whether the image is of divine origin or the work of a highly skilled and creative artist.

The Address of Pope John Paul II in Turin on 24 May 1998³

Pope John Paul II visited Turin Cathedral on 24 May 1998, during a public exposition of the Shroud, and gave a short address. He made it clear that the Church has no specific competence to pronounce on questions such as whether the Shroud is indeed the burial cloth of Jesus Christ, but he urged scientists to continue to investigate the Shroud without pre-established positions. He invited researchers to act with interior freedom and attentive respect for both scientific methodology and the sensibilities of believers. He noted that it was a traditional belief that the Shroud had wrapped the body of Jesus after he had been taken down from the cross.

On the subject of the image itself he said, “...if we reflect on the sacred Linen, we cannot escape the idea that the image it presents has such a profound relationship with what the Gospels tell us of Jesus’ passion and death, that every sensitive person feels inwardly touched and moved at beholding it.”

He went on to say, “Therefore, it is right to foster an awareness of the precious value of this image, which everyone sees and no one at present can explain. For every thoughtful person it is a reason for deep reflection, which can even involve one’s life....”

“The image of human suffering is reflected in the Shroud. It reminds modern man, often distracted by prosperity and technological achievements, of the tragic situation of his many brothers and sisters, and invites him to question himself about the mystery of suffering in order to explore its causes....”

“The Shroud is also an image of God’s love as well as of human sin. It invites us to rediscover the ultimate reason for Jesus’ redeeming death. In the incomparable suffering that it documents, the love of the One who ‘so loved the world that he gave his only Son’ (John 3:16) is made almost tangible and reveals its astonishing dimensions.”

Finally, in a call for contemplation, the pope said, “The Shroud is an image of silence. There is a tragic silence of incommunicability, which finds its greatest expression in death, and there is the silence of fruitfulness, which belongs to whoever refrains from being heard outwardly in order to delve to the roots of truth and life. The Shroud expresses not only the silence of death but also the courageous and fruitful silence of triumph over the transitory, through total immersion in God’s eternal present.”

When reflecting on the pope’s words it becomes necessary to think more deeply about Christian spirituality and how contemplation enhances such spirituality and spiritual belief.

Defining Spirituality

It is difficult to come by a precise definition of spirituality. Within early Christianity it was used to refer to a life oriented toward the Holy Spirit. In medieval times it was broadened to include mental and moral aspects of life - the realm of the inner life rather than that of material aspects of life. Today it seems to be centred on the deepest values and meanings by which people live. Spiritual practices may include meditation, contemplation, prayer, ethical development and spiritual retreats.

In his *Summa Theologica* Thomas Aquinas discusses the question, “How God is known by us”, which may be seen to be the basis of Christian spirituality. He refers to the “essence of God” and how man, a created intellect, can see or know this. Aquinas writes that, “It is impossible for any created being to comprehend God...”

“In proof of this we must consider that what is comprehended is perfectly known; and that is perfectly known which is known so far as it can be known.... No created intellect can attain to that perfect mode of knowledge of the Divine intellect whereof it is intellectually capable.”⁴

Deep stuff indeed! What Aquinas is saying is that a finite mind cannot comprehend an infinite God. However it is possible to establish a link between the finite and the infinite. In John’s Gospel Christ himself is seen as that link: “No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is nearest to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.”⁵ In his farewell discourse Jesus says, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.”⁶ In other words he is the way to a full understanding of the truth and the guide to eternal life.

It is through spirituality that the link between the finite and the infinite, the human and the divine, is established. In Christian spirituality it is Christ, his teaching and his redemptive sacrifice that provides this link. Such spirituality can be described as theology in lived experience.

The question of spirituality is also addressed in St Paul’s Letter to the Romans where he writes, “...the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death...”

“... the spiritual are interested in spiritual things.... Your interests are... in the spiritual, since the Spirit of God has made his home in you.... If Christ is in you then your spirit is life itself because you have been justified; and if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, then he who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to your own mortal bodies through his Spirit living in you.”⁷

Paul thus describes how the Holy Spirit inspires the spiritual link between man and God that is provided through Jesus Christ.

Contemplation

Contemplation is a major component of Christian spirituality. Aquinas refers to the objective or end of contemplation being truth⁸. He refers to the Scottish theologian Richard of St Victor⁹ as distinguishing between “contemplation”, “meditation” and “cogitation” and describes these as various actions pertaining to the contemplative life¹⁰. He further quotes Richard describing contemplation as being “the soul’s clear and free dwelling upon the object of its gaze”, while meditation is “the survey of the mind while occupied in searching for the truth” and cogitation is “the mind’s glance which is prone to wander”.¹¹ There appears to be a hierarchy of mental activity with contemplation at the top of this hierarchy.

From this it can be understood that contemplation involves total focus on the spiritual object or event concerned, such as the Passion and death of Jesus. It is removed from material objects and distractions. The process of contemplation is described by the unknown author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*:

“Lift up your heart to God with humble love: and mean God himself, and not what you get out of him. Indeed hate to think of anything but God himself, so that nothing occupies your mind or will but only God. Try to forget all created things that he ever made, and the purpose behind them, so that your

thought and longing do not turn or reach out to them. It is the work of the soul that pleases God most."¹²

Again emphasis is placed on focusing the whole mind on God and clearing away distractions.

St Teresa of Avila is one of the best-known contemplative saints of the Catholic Church. She was a Carmelite nun who devoted her life to prayer and contemplation. In her Autobiography she wrote:

"With so good a Friend and Captain ever present, Himself the first to suffer, everything can be borne. He helps, He strengthens, He never fails, He is the true friend....

"Our Lord is He by whom all good things come to us; He will teach you. Consider His life; that is the best example. What more can we want than so good a friend at our side, Who will not forsake us when we are in trouble and distress, as they do who belong to the world! Blessed is he who truly loves Him, and who always has Him near him!"¹³

St Teresa opens the door to contemplation of the suffering of Jesus and to the idea that through contemplating his suffering we can bear more easily our own suffering and difficulties.

Ignatian Spirituality¹⁴

The founder of the Society of Jesus, St Ignatius Loyola, is recognised as one of the great spiritual thinkers of the Catholic Church. One of the elements of his spiritual teaching is that God can be found in all things. He developed his Spiritual Exercises on the principle that, just as physical exercise strengthens the body, so does spiritual exercise strengthen the soul. In these Exercises a person sets out to find for himself what God wants. They are conducted in silence, under the guidance of a spiritual director.

Another element of Ignatian spirituality is walking with Christ. Part of the Spiritual Exercises involves entering deeply into the stories of Jesus's life and using one's imagination to place oneself in the Gospel scenes. There is a spirituality about sharing in the story, not only by remembering it but also by taking part in it, so that one might more fully come to know and understand Jesus and his life and teaching.

This can be particularly applied to the image on the Shroud, by using one's imagination to be part of the first Easter morning. One can place oneself in the position of Peter or Mary of Magdala when faced with the empty tomb, terrified and amazed. Or as one of the Eleven, later that day, when Jesus appeared among them causing alarm and fright¹⁵. Bearing in mind the appalling suffering depicted by the image on the Shroud and witnessed first-hand by the disciples, would terror, fright and amazement not be appropriate responses to the possibility that Jesus had somehow returned from the dead? In this way one obtains a greater understanding of the meaning of the image – of what it represents.

Consolation and Desolation

Yet another element of Ignatian spirituality is the concept of consolation and desolation. A person dwells in a state of consolation when he is moving toward God's active presence in the world. That person senses the growth of love, faith, mercy or hope. Desolation is when a person is moving away or distant from God's active presence in the world and experiences anger, resentment, a loss of hope, self-obsession. This frequently leads to efforts to alleviate the discomfort through distractions such as substance abuse or excessive work or social activity¹⁶.

Conversion to belief, or a deeper belief, in God involves a journey from desolation to consolation. Contemplation can provide the basis for such conversion because it has as its objective the truth.

There are three type of conversion – consolation without previous cause, consolation through listening to the inner movements of one’s spirit and reflecting on the experience of life, and intellectual conversion.

Consolation without previous cause is the form of conversion that Paul underwent on the road to Damascus, and Matthew experienced when Jesus said to him “Follow me”, and he got up and followed him¹⁷.

I must include a personal testimony. In a later paper Pam Moon will discuss the Holy Blood of Bruges. My father was born in Bruges and brought up in Belgium, although his family was English. His father had a shipping business in Ghent. My father was raised as an Anglican. My mother was Catholic. My father seemed to have no particularly strong religious beliefs and he left the religious upbringing of my sister and me to my mother until in 1958 when we went on holiday to Europe (we were living in what was then Southern Rhodesia). We visited Belgium, including his birthplace of Bruges, where we visited the Cathedral and saw an exposition of the Holy Blood. I remember seeing it although I was only 8 years old at the time. Immediately after that my father decided to convert to Catholicism and, on our return home, he underwent instruction and was baptised into the Catholic Church on 1 December 1958. He became actively involved in the Church, serving for a number of years as Chairman of the Parish Council in our parish. Such conversions often arise from spiritual experiences and encounters with items of spiritual significance.

We will also later hear a presentation from Kristy Moore Hernandez, on the subject of her journey from desolation to consolation which was completed by an encounter with the image on the Shroud. Consolation was the result of spiritual development and reflection on great unhappiness in life.

In each case there has been an intervention related to the Passion of Jesus Christ, which is so graphically represented by the image on the Shroud.

Reflections on the Image

Pope John Paul II referred to “an image of silence”. The image is also in itself a paradox, which was described by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) when he was Prefect for the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith. He described this paradox as being where we can say of Christ, “You are the fairest of all men” and “He had no beauty.... His appearance was so marred”. He wrote as follows:

“The experience of the beautiful has received a new depth and a new realism. The One who is beauty itself let himself be struck on the face, spat upon, crowned with thorns – the Shroud of Turin can help us realise this in a moving way. Yet precisely in this Face that is so disfigured, there appears the genuine, the ultimate beauty: the beauty of love that ‘goes to the very end’ and thus proves to be mightier than falsehood and violence. Whoever has perceived this beauty knows that truth after all, and not falsehood, is the ultimate authority of the world.”¹⁸

To return to the original question of why the Shroud was created, the answer clearly appears to be that it was created as a reflection of God’s love and a source of inspiration for contemplation of this love as it was expressed through the Passion and death of Jesus. But the Shroud itself is not an object of contemplation. In true contemplation of the redeeming love of Jesus Christ, the physical artefact

that is the Shroud becomes forgotten as a meaningless distraction. In this context the other questions of what, when and how become irrelevant. It is the image that draws us closer to God through its stark beauty, calmness and silence.

References

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4. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia*, I, Q 12, Art 7, Obj 3.
5. John 1:18.
6. John 14:6
7. Romans 8:1-11.
8. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia*, II-II, Q 180, Art 1, Obj 1.
9. Richard of St Victor was a mediaeval Scottish philosopher and theologian who was prior of the Augustinian Abbey of St Victor from 1162 until his death in 1173.
10. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia*, II-II, Q 180, Art 3, Obj 1.
11. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia*, II-II, Q 180, Art 3, Reply Obj 1.
12. *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works* (Penguin Classics 1978), Chapter 3, page 61. The author of these works is not known but it is considered likely that he was an English country parson of the late fourteenth century. It is considered one of the devotional classics of the Catholic Church.
13. *The Autobiography of St Teresa of Avila* (TAN Books, Charlotte, North Carolina USA, 1997), Chapter 22, pages 188 – 189. St Teresa of Avila was born at Avila in Spain in 1515. She was one of 12 children. Against her father's initial objections she left her home in 1533 (the year is not certain) to enter a Carmelite convent. She took her vows as a nun the following year. She was noted for her spirituality. She died in 1582.
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15. Luke 24.
16. Wright V H, *Consolation and Desolation*, www.ignatianspirituality.com.
17. Matthew 9:9.
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