

THE ECUMENICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE SHROUD OF TURIN

(Perugia: Revised 2006)

by

The Rev. Albert R. Dreisbach

*The Atlanta International Center
for the
Continuing Study of the Shroud of Turin, Inc.*

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When I first began to lecture on the Shroud of Turin, I had very real reservations as to how it would be received by the larger ecumenical community. What I have discovered in the intervening years is that the Shroud needs no such apologist. It is now, as it was on that very first Easter morning, self- authenticating. In presentations ranging from the Salvation Army to the Syrian Orthodox, Christians of all persuasions are beginning to acknowledge not only that the Shroud is Christianity's most precious artifact; but that it is

also "the" most significant visual aid available to the religious educator for teaching about our Lord's Passion, Death and Resurrection.

There are many "testimonies" regarding the impact on the beholder at his or her first encounter with the Image(s) of the Man of the Shroud. One example will serve to make the point:

It was in the late forties when I first saw a photograph of the vastly imposing image on the Shroud of Turin... For me the face on the Shroud was the image that seemed no guess at all but the thing itself... At once it surpassed the variously moving guesses of artists in the Roman catacombs, the Byzantine mosaicists, Mantegna, Leonardo, Rembrandt and Rubens... Carbon dating now concludes that the linen is medieval in origin. But no one has shown how an artist produced an object so complex in historical accuracy and still so mysterious in its physical properties... *all the Christs I imagined thereafter began in the unanswerable eloquence of the Shroud [Italic added.]*¹

A THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR SINDONOLOGY

The strength of the Shroud is its vividness to history - a vividness that antedates any New Testament writing - and that moves the Word of God into a new visual language. By means of this vivid witness, we see the face and body of the actual historical Jesus and we have our resurrection faith shaken but finally reshaped in a form closer to that of the first disciples.²

The point of this paper is two-fold: [Slide 1.]

1. The Shroud is for "all sorts and conditions of men and women" without respect to denomination. God lifts it up now as on that first Easter morn when it was initially discovered so that "All may be drawn unto Him" who is the Risen Lord and Christ.

2. In the words of Ewa Kuryluk, the Shroud is "**a textile *acheiropoietos* - a skin-cloth-icon created through the touching of Christ with the purpose of touching others**".³ [Emphasis added.]

We would agree that many twentieth century Christians in general and its theologians in particular see little or no reason to devote even the slightest effort to the study of the shroud (*i.e. sindonology*). Their reasoning takes something like the following tack: "I already accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and I made that decision long ago without the slightest idea that there even was a Shroud! Why should I waste any of my time

reading about the Shroud? And, by the way, didn't C- 14 testing prove that it was a "fake" anyway? Though a popularly held view, unfortunately in the long run it proves to be both simplistic and founded on the sands of *misplaced concreteness*. A "simple" faith may indeed be a beautiful one, but that does not necessarily make it either "true" or based on verifiable fact. The Church of the Latter Day Saints of Christ strives to lead a very moral life based on *The Book of Mormon*. Devout as their belief may be, not one of the many alleged geographical sites mentioned in their "legends" has ever been discovered and/or verified by archaeology.

Roger Chambers [Disciples of Christ (Campbellites)] moves us to a deeper level of consideration in his incisive article entitled "The War of the Shroud":

The resurrection is of course, the foundation of the Christian system. *The apostolic church established its credibility objectively and evidentially, i. e. eyewitness testimony. Skeptics were invited to check the evidence. Never was it suggested that anyone accept the resurrection on emotional or devotional grounds ("You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart).*

As the church of the first three centuries evolved into an imperial state church, it adopted *dualistic epistemology* (theory of knowledge) as codified by Augustine. This to say that the unbeliever is incapable of faith so God infused it into the elect by a miraculous process. *Faith emerged the enemy of reason*. The move from learned faith to infused truth was, of course, the move from evidence to mysticism...⁴

When we look at the twentieth century, we discover that both Barth and Bultmann have injected their own ideological bias into the contemporary Protestant mind set. The Rev. Dr. David Scaer sums it succinctly in noting:

Karl Barth based his theology on a concept of "God's Word" which had no need of real history. The reluctance of much of conservative Protestantism to tackle such thorny theological questions as the authenticity of the shroud may, in fact, derive from the unrecognized Barthianism that relies on the "Heavenly Word" and ignores historical questions. Answering historical questions often in fact, considered the height of unbelief by the followers of Barth...⁵

James P. Carley offers a telling analysis of the cost of haughtily dismissing the "concrete" and its role in nurturing the faith of countless believing Christians:

Relics depend on faith ... When Henry's [*i.e.* Henry the VIII of England] agents smashed the pagan images, as they called them, and undermined the trust the pious had put in their efficacy, they managed to destroy a whole metaphysical system in which relics functioned as meaningful links with the immortal world. Much superstition was no doubt overcome at the Reformation, but it was done at great psychological cost. Protestant man became considerably more alone in the world than were his Catholic predecessors who had their tangible links with eternity.⁶

Even a conservative biblical scholar like Gary Habermas is quite forthright in proclaiming:

Especially distressing are some evangelical critiques based on partial information.... One uncanny facet becomes immediately obvious in a study of the shroud. What looks at first report to be rather problematical has repeatedly turned out to fit very closely with the known facts....

An exegetical study of the relevant portions of the NT does not render the shroud fraudulent. To the contrary: Not only are there no discrepancies, but the shroud is compatible with the data, and certain texts (such as John 11:44 and 20:67) actually favor the type of burial depicted in the shroud. Second, burial like that of the man of the shroud was apparently practiced by Jews in Jesus' time as revealed by the Essene community, the *Code of Jewish Law* and the Mishna ... Since we have found that the shroud is neither proven nor unproven by the gospel texts and that it is a viable option, a third point might now be stated. The actual authenticity of the shroud must be made on other grounds, such as scientific and historical investigation....

[In fact,] not only does the shroud provide some exciting new evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, but it complements the extremely strong historical evidence for this event as well. In fact, the evidence from the shroud is strong enough that **if Jesus was not buried in this garment, then we might have a problem, for it would seem that someone else would have appeared to have risen from the dead.**⁷ [Emphasis added.]

All are agreed that there were no human witnesses to the actual moment of Resurrection. Therefore it should come as no surprise that the trend in biblical scholarship has been to focus on the *subjective impact* of this event rather than upon the rather scanty *objective traces* of same which are available for a more empirical analysis. The Resurrection was primarily an objective event which involved matter and occurred in space and time. As such, there should be no *a priori* reason to eliminate the possibility that this event left a physical trace - a "trace" which we still have with us to this day and known as the Shroud of Turin. If the artifacts of Jericho are legitimate physical traces studied to trace the

empirical history of that city, why should the Shroud - possibly the only artifact of the most important event of all time - be dismissed as unworthy of the most exacting analysis of which man is capable? Surprisingly enough, biblical scholars seem to overlook the fact that the Shroud is the only relic mentioned in the Bible after the Resurrection [Jn 20:5-7]. The Cross isn't mentioned after the Crucifixion, or the Crown of Thorns, or anything else, just the Shroud. Why?⁸

Mark Heim, a Baptist pastor, goes beyond Habermas in his own carefully developed line of reasoning which argues that:

Jesus being truly human such traces did exist and, for all I know, still exist unless a first century Marty [*i.e.* The Rev. Dr. Martin Marty, Lutheran and publisher of an influential Protestant journal, *The Christian Century*,] followed him about tidying up. Dangers of abuse of any such remnant there surely are, but that does not mean we should resolutely purge ourselves of any intimation that *the resurrection was nastily tangible* - was, well, *real: like a cloth you can hold in your hand..* What changed [the apostles] was not the moral impact of anyone, but rather a firsthand encounter with reality, the resurrection witnessed to them by Christ's actual presence among them by what we loosely call evidence. Evidence did not and could not compel them to believe, but *it was the occasion for their believing. If it were not to play even this role, then why any resurrection appearances at all?* Were the disciples simply to make up the idea of the resurrection on their own? Were they like *est* initiates, simply supposed to "get it"? That is not what the Gospels indicate. The disciples got it, but prodding was required".⁹ [*Italics added.*]

The Shroud of Turin: Its Ecumenical Implications

History may provide a clue as to what the cloth's future ecumenical implications may be. After almost 2,000 years since its discovery in the Empty Tomb, the Shroud has been on the move both literally and figuratively. If Ian Wilson's thesis is accepted that the Image of Edessa-Mandylion- Shroud of Turin are one and the same, then this burial linen truly has traveled from the Tomb to Turin. In the process it has survived a flood at Edessa, the sack of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade, a near disastrous fire at Chambéry, and the most recent fire of 1997 in which it was once again saved from the flames of a "suspicious" fire which severely damaging and nearly destroying the Guarini Chapel. As I began to reflect upon its journey through time I also began to discover the ecumenical dimension of its travels. Could it be that, in addition to its physical preservation through the ages, God also has intended it to be an ecumenical bridge and

unifier? Until the day when we can once again share One Cup and One Loaf, what could serve as a better focus for ecumenical unity than this "Polaroid" of the Resurrection? "To the Jew first and also to the Greek" (**Rom. 1:16**), the Shroud has moved from the East to the West. Is it merely by chance that in the process it has been "lifted up" so that "all" are being drawn to Him whose sacred image it bears? Is it merely by chance that those first Jewish disciples who visited the Holy Sepulchre learned of the fullness of the Resurrection from this sacred linen's very emptiness - an experience so powerful that it sent them forth into all the world to share the fullness of its Gospel message? Was it by chance that an afflicted Parthian king was cured and converted by it? Was it merely by chance that our Orthodox brothers and sisters were privileged to be its custodians for nearly 1200 years, meticulously recording in their iconography and numismatics the features of our Lord which it bears? Could it be that God assigned them this very role in response to those first Greeks who approached St. Philip with the plea that "we would see Jesus" (**Jn. 12:21**)? Was it by chance that the Church of Rome was to become its next and faithful guardian? And is it by chance that now in the twentieth century the worldwide Protestant community is currently coming to appreciate the Holy Shroud's true significance? Finally, is it simply by chance that in the twenty-first century many in the worldwide Protestant community are coming to appreciate the Holy Shroud's true significance?

History's very preservation of this Holy Cloth should alert the total ecumenical community to a divine purpose which should not – and must not - be ignored. Though no branch of Christianity has ever required belief in the Shroud's authenticity as an article of faith, many denominations are now coming to perceive that it can do much in the way of adding both depth and detail to a faith already held. One 6th Grader after a visit to the **TURIN SHROUD EXHIBIT** (a 5,000 sq. ft. on display in Atlanta, GA from 1982-1987) [**Slides 2 & 3**] noted: "I never knew before that He hurt so much for us. I am going to try to live better for Him." A "lapsed" adult who had not darkened the doors of a church in over twenty-one years, confessed with tears in his eyes "My visit to the **Exhibit** has changed my life. I didn't do much with the first half, but I would like to give the second half back to God." Lest one think that he was merely overcome with the emotion of the moment, I can tell you that not only does he now serve on the governing board of

his local congregation, but I had the privilege of writing a letter of recommendation for him to begin his formal seminary training.

Daily at the **Exhibit** we came in contact with many who would never attend services at a local parish, let alone even visit any church to see an exhibition devoted to an alleged "relic". For many of them the "religion" of the twentieth century is symbolized by the scientist's white laboratory jacket - certainly not the black cassock of a priest. However, quite frequently these devotees of technology discovered a truth long ago known to their theological brothers and sisters. They came to *scoff*, but they stayed to *pray*. Once again this phenomenon is well described by Mark Heim who astutely observes: "Maybe the greatest attribute of the Shroud is that it creates *doubt in the doubter*, and God doesn't need much of a toehold to get a start."¹⁰ Like St. Thomas before them, some of these "doubters" find themselves profoundly moved when they discover that although in 1978 Science went to test the Shroud, in reality it is the Shroud which still continues to test the scientists. We should not be surprised if God once in the 21st century again converts *doubtful skepticism* into *dedicated service*.

Are we so blind that we fail to discern that in the study of the Shroud our Lord is once again being "lifted up (to) draw all" to Himself (**Jn. 12:22**)? Is it not possible that once again "when the time had fully come," (**Gal. 4:4**) God is using this autograph of His Son scripted in His own Blood to make Him known as never before to a generation blessed with analytical methods heretofore not technically *possible*? *Mirabile dictu*, could this "Polaroid of the Resurrection" and the means to reproduce same via printed and electronic media all over the world now have the potential even to be more fully appreciated than it was 2,000 years ago? Truly, such implications are staggering. History's very preservation of this Holy Cloth alerts the ecumenical community to a divine purpose which cannot and should not be ignored. Though no branch of Christianity has ever required belief in the Shroud's authenticity as an article of faith, many denominations are now coming to perceive that it can do much in the way of adding both depth and detail to a faith already held.

At the Exhibit we had mimeographed forms for visitors who would care to share their reactions with us. One of these from a gentleman from California caught my eye. He wrote: "Questioned for the first time my lack of belief... profoundly moving...my knees

are still weak." Only time will tell the full impact of the Shroud on this man's life, but I have a hunch that God has gotten another "toehold."

Should we Christians be amazed at much a response? I think not! On that first Easter morning the Magdalene "saw two angels...in the place where Jesus had lain...one at the head and one at the feet." (**John 20:21**). Could this be the very first description of the ventral and dorsal images of the Man of the Shroud? Fr. Gerald O'Collins, S.J., originally a non-believer in the Shroud's authenticity, now uses it as "a" way by which some can be led to Christ. He notes that in the Old Testament the primary emphasis was on the ear as the organ by which God was known (*i.e.* "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is One" (**Deut. 6:4**)).¹¹ However, a shift in the senses occurs in the New Testament when the Beloved Disciple stoops to look into the Empty Tomb and "*saw* and believed." (**John 20:8**).

Although the linen is now legally the possession of the Pontiff and all his successors, its message is for all the world. In truth it belongs to no denomination - possibly not even to Christianity - for in reality it is **GOD'S 'LOVE LETTER IN LINEN' TO ALL MANKIND.**"

Certainly the Rev. Dr. James Kennedy, a Presbyterian, acknowledges this truth in a sermon entitled "Save the wrappings."¹² Dr. Kennedy observes that our Lord was born in a borrowed cave, wrapped in linen swaddling clothes, and buried in a borrowed tomb enveloped in a linen shroud. In between these two events was "the Greatest Story Ever Told."

Are not we in the twenty-first century being called by God to use these "wrappings", which God has taken such pains to preserve, to supplement our witness to reaching the hearts of those for whom He lived, died and rose again? We would do well to heed Sir Wycke Bayliss who astutely observed that there are at least two Gospel "traditions": an early one in art and a later one of the written Word. The **artist** portrayed Him as **The Son of Man** while **the writer of scripture** brings us to the deeper truth that this He is also **the Christ, the Son of God.**¹³

The Rev. David Scaer, a Lutheran, challenges all Christians with his profound article entitled: "The Shroud of Turin - Protestant Embarrassment or Opportunity?" In addition to Protestantism's natural aversion to relics, Scaer notes that undue reliance on revelation

through the written Word fails to give just due to the Word made flesh in and through history. Scaer concludes:

The Shroud of Turin may very well be an authentic link with a past which was not only sacred but real. Acceptance of the authenticity of the Shroud obviously cannot be made a criterion for orthodoxy, but a prior refusal to consider the question borders on disregard of the historical claims of Christianity. Perhaps we shall be given the same opportunity as Peter and John to see the burial garments of the Lord. (**John 20:6,7**).¹⁴

Given that possibility, we of all people should give special heed to a *caveat* offered by the late Anglican Bishop John A.T. Robinson:

If in the recognition of the face and hands and feet and all the other wounds (on the Holy Shroud), we, like those who knew Him best, are led to say, "It is the Lord!", then perhaps we may have to learn to count ourselves also among those who have "seen and believed." But that, as St. John makes clear, brings with it no special blessing (**20:29**)--rather special responsibility (**17:18-21**)¹⁵

That "*special responsibility*" is to get beyond the linen to the Lord - to see Him in the faces of the dispossessed, the victims of injustice, the poor, the neglected and all the others for whom He died. "Facts" learned about the Man of the Shroud do not guarantee dedicated service in His Name, Alas, these "facts" can become nothing more than religious erudition in pious garb unless they lead to the deepening of the student's own faith reflected in *concern for* and *service to* those for whom the Man of the Shroud came to minister.

THE ECUMENICAL IMPERATIVE: PRESERVATION AND PROCLAMATION

All of us who are called to the apostolate of the Holy Shroud have an obligation to get beyond the linen to the Lord whose Image it bears. Thus, we have a mandate to look beyond the limitations of the present to the fullness of the possibilities for the future. Greater ecumenical cooperation and participation is the wave of the future, and all Christians - especially those of us with this privileged ministry of the Holy Shroud -

should be prepared to offer their special "gift" to the larger Church family when the occasion permits.

It has become increasingly clear since the Holy Shroud's last public expositions in 1998 and 2000 that this sacred linen has drawn world-wide ecumenical interest and support. As Fr. Anthony Delessi of the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, Georgia has so wisely observed: "We Roman Catholics have been its custodians for the last eight hundred years after stealing it from the Greeks (*i.e.* Orthodox) who performed that function for the first twelve centuries. But in truth, it belongs to no one denomination - maybe not even to Christianity. Rather, it is in actuality 'God's love letter in linen= to all mankind."

With the beginning of a new millennium and the computer technology which will be even more marvelous and utilitarian than what is presently available, we have both an ecumenical *imperative* and *opportunity* to proclaim the Shroud and its Gospel as never before. While debates as to its authenticity and relevance will continue both within the Roman Catholic Church and among the Greek Orthodox and various Protestant denominations, the window for joint exploration and study has never been more open. One does not have to raise the thorny issues of Apostolic Succession, all male priesthood, *etc.* in the common search for the meaning of this linen artifact left by the Lord Himself. God willing, more and more Christians will come to share the insight of the Blessed Sebastian Valfré (1629-1710), an Oratorian and chaplain to Duke Victor Amadeus of Savoy, that: "the Cross receives the living Saviour and gives Him back dead; the shroud receives the dead Saviour and gives him back alive."

Even before Turin and others like Emanuella Marinelli and the Jacksons had established links with the Russian Orthodox, the following quote from two of their monks appeared in an issue of *Diakonia*:

...anything which God lifts up to inspire our search for inner truth commands our veneration. If the Holy Shroud lifts us up to a sincere search for God, it becomes an icon. In this sense, we might be so bold as to say that the crucial question about the Shroud, which must pass beyond the Shroud and touch on the power of the resurrection itself, makes its historical authenticity secondary. We must take great care, then, not to join with those who hate the spiritual and unwisely condemn something that God, in His wisdom, may have set forth to wake a sleeping people.¹⁶

Both the **Mass** and the **Office of The Holy Shroud**, first authorized in 1506 by Pope Julius II, may someday become approved liturgies employed to celebrate our common ecumenical devotion to the Holy Shroud. Just such an evening office was celebrated as early as 1984 in Atlanta to commemorate the opening of the **TURIN SHROUD EXHIBIT** at the Omni. [Slide 4.] At the conclusion of the service, His Grace Bishop John of the Greek Orthodox Diocese of Atlanta, turned to me and said: "Thank you very much for picking our day." I didn't fully understand the significance of his remark until he reminded me that August 16th for the Orthodox is the Feast of the Holy Mandylion commemorating the occasion in 944 A.D. when the Shroud was first shown to the public in Byzantium following its arrival the previous day from Edessa in southeastern Turkey. What made things all the more amazing was that those who had scheduled the dedication had no idea of the significance of the date. It just happened to be the one night that all the various clergy had free on their busy calendars. Was it merely coincidence, or was it yet another sign of God's larger purpose for his Son's burial cloth? Such a gathering reveals how easily a traditional office can be adapted to permit joint participation when supported and approved by the larger ecumenical community.

The following January, bishops, clergy and laity of the local Roman Catholic and Episcopal dioceses returned to the **TURIN SHROUD EXHIBIT** to sign a mutual covenant of cooperation and unity. [Slide 5.] The participants had agreed upon the **EXHIBIT** as an appropriate and neutral site for the covenant's signing rather than selecting either of their respective cathedrals

TIMING

THE TIME IS NOW! It is not by chance that God has chosen the 21st century with its great technological revolution to be the chosen vehicle for revealing some of the mysteries of the Holy Shroud. Ironically, the very rational empiricism responsible for sophisticated skepticism and agnosticism is being used by God to "convert" former non-believers. Countless stories can be told of those who "came to scoff, but stayed to pray" in their investigation of the Shroud. Recent word from India tells us of amazement on the part of Hindus and Buddhists that Christianity is willing to submit its most precious relic to rigorous scientific investigation. Neither of these faiths can offer

anything for such empirical scrutiny. In 1986 over 90 Muslim high school and college students holding a convention in Atlanta requested a group tour with discussion to follow at the **TURIN SHROUD EXHIBIT** so that they might learn more about Christianity. Jews have been "completed" or "converted" as a result of their study of this holy cloth. Overseas missionaries continue to request pictures of the Man of the Shroud having learned that this "visual aid" has a profound effect on illiterates for whom reams of printed material would have no effect.

We who are part of the "Shroud Crowd" do not have to be convinced of the power of this Fifth Gospel. However, unless we take steps to insure continuing sindonological research and promulgation of the Shroud's many truths for future generations, we run the risk of having our great "treasure" buried under apathy and neglect. Unfortunately, history records that many a shroud group has come and gone over the years. Who will bear the banner of our holy apostolate for future generations of English-speaking devotees? My own fervent prayer is that a full-fledged university, complete with a seminary which serves either or both Roman Catholic and Protestant students as well as the larger undergraduate body, will step forward to provide both the permanency and prestige required of such a program.

But, and this is a very crucial "but", without careful planning at this moment in history our fondest dreams may be reduced to dust. As one old saw states it so well, "God provides the *inspiration*, but he expects man to supply the *perspiration*." In a more theological vein, God has abundantly provided His *prevenient grace*; we are now being asked to respond with our own *cooperating grace*. The current group of scientists whom God has used to provide so many insights about the Shroud will eventually "lose interest" after the last test results are printed in their professional journals. Oddly enough, the very confirmation of a 1st century date by C-14 testing may result in diminished interest and/or the widely-rumored decision by the Church to inhibit further testing. At best, the scientists can give us only a probability figure that the Man of the Shroud was an historical personage named Jesus of Nazareth. As there is no laboratory test for "divinity", they can never tell us that this Son of Man was also the Son of God - our Lord and Saviour the Christ. The latter Gospel is known only to the eyes and hearts of Faith. It is we - the members of the Church - who are called upon by God to proclaim the *eternal*

meaning and *divine purpose* of the Holy Shroud long after the hard, empirical data which it yields has been filed and forgotten by the scientific community.

Now, when the time is right, God has called us to be "conservatives" in the best sense of that word. We are called to *conserve, preserve, and promulgate* the essential message of the Holy Shroud for future generations - moving them beyond the linen to the Lord. **With ever more challenges like those of Marino & Benford,¹⁷ Rogers,¹⁸ Brown¹⁹ & Whanger²⁰ and others questioning the flawed C-14 dating of 1998,** the time will be right as never before to "recruit" the support of churchmen and academes alike to establish a permanent and on-going vehicle for the continuing study of the Holy Shroud. God can use even the hubris of the university as the choice for a permanent repository, that of contributors both large and small, and the very limitations of our own weakness - all to establish a vehicle for His Silent Witness on linen for future generations. It is our decision to chose whether or not we will accept God's call in this venture. He does not need us, but He is offering us the chance to be part of this great plan. Like Joshua, we are being confronted with the challenge of "Choose you this day whom you will serve" **THE TIME IS NOW!** Do we have eyes to see and ears to hear? Or, will we like the priest and Levite secure in our own faith - walk by "on the other side" once again failing to hear our Lord's "Is it nothing to you who pass by?" **THE CHOICE IS OURS. HOW WILL WE RESPOND?**

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