

# Shroud, Science And Faith: Dialogue Or Conflict?

**BRUNO BARBERIS**

**Associate Professor of Mathematical Physics, University of Turin  
Director of the International Center of Sindonology of Turin**

**ABSTRACT.** The reading, study and meditation on the image of the Shroud of Turin lead essentially at two levels of reflection. On the one hand, the study of the image has a high interest from the scientific point of view, and especially in the last forty years the Shroud has been at the center of a company-wide, articulated and interdisciplinary scientific debate. On the other hand, the tradition has always identified the Shroud with the burial cloth of Jesus of Nazareth, and in more recent times this identification has taken advantage of modern exegetical studies, with relevant results. This has obviously affected the field of Christian faith, thus opening up a debate on the relationship between faith and the Holy Shroud. The recent expositions of the Shroud (1998, 2000 and 2010) have further contributed to highlight its pastoral and spiritual significance.

The two ways of understanding the Shroud are of course often met and clashed, sometimes dividing both the insiders and the common people: Shroud object of faith and worship or object of scientific interest and study? It has grown so much animated discussions, perhaps as never before, favored both by modern means of communication and by the great worldwide interest aroused by the last expositions. But are the two ways of relating to the image really in contrast? The thoughts of many scholars have shown that they can very well coexist as long as their different levels of competence are respected and it is avoided to mix them at all costs forcing conclusions without respecting its peculiarities.

May 25 and 28, 1898: the lawyer Secondo Pia takes the first photographs of the Shroud. These dates are without any doubt a milestone in the history of the Shroud since it is from them that began a completely new and fascinating period: the period of the “scientific history” of the Shroud.

In the last hundred and more years reams and reams have been written about the research performed on the Shroud and today the Shroud bibliography has thousands of works written and published in all the continents. One of the most interesting and characteristic aspects of these studies is that the argument Shroud necessarily combines both scientific and religious themes and interests. This obviously does not have anything negative, on the contrary it has an enormous charm and interest. Often, however, you run the risk of confusing or inappropriately blending the two levels with the result of removing value and validity to the statement, especially when you make the serious mistake of tackling religious problems with scientific methods and, conversely, scientific problems with religious methodologies.

Another serious risk is to let that personal beliefs regarding faith can influence the results of scientific studies. This often leads to forced conclusions, due to the will to prove at all costs preconceived theses or to counter a priori those theses that do not coincide with own convictions. This runs the risk of falling into a fundamentalism that is anything but serious scientific research and that often causes confusion among readers who have the impression of watching a war between opposing arguments rather than a serious and rigorous dialogue, which can also be tightened but that, in order to be really scientific, it must be constructive, respectful of others' opinions and marked only by the search for truth.

The task of the serious scientist is to inform correctly, always distinguishing between sure news and data and assumptions based on data and documents only in part or not at all reliable. Many of the studies done on the Shroud are vitiated in whole or in part by these problems and it is not always easy to distinguish at first sight and clearly among those absolutely serious and rigorous, and those that aren't.

There is no doubt that recent decades have been characterized by a remarkably lively debate about the Shroud, perhaps as never before in the past, helped by the exceptional sounding board provided by modern means of communication. This debate has been triggered by the several studies carried out on the Shroud and mainly by the radiocarbon dating of the Shroud cloth made in 1988, the result of which (medieval dating of the Shroud) has sparked a heated debate not only among scientists and scholars, but also in public opinion.

In reality, at the bottom of this debate there is another one of far greater thickness and older: the controversy between the two opposite "Shroud fundamentalisms": the one that supports the absolute certainty of the identity between the Shroud and the burial cloth of Jesus and the one that reckons that there is no correlation between the two objects. It is obvious that everyone is free to propose and defend one's own theses, but it is also equally natural that such a defense must respect the logical criteria of modern science. On the contrary we often watch discussions and debates in which people start from absolutely arbitrary and preconceived hypotheses, using arguments that go against the most elementary rules of logic and arrive at conclusions absolutely unprovable. In this field the literature is very wide, ranging from the statement that on the Shroud it's painted a self-portrait of Leonardo da Vinci, to the one that it is the work of a medieval forger who used techniques which are unknown for us, men and women of the third millennium, to the one that believes that the Shroud is the "scientific proof of the resurrection", that is the result of a radiation characteristic of the resurrection, as if the resurrection were a natural event, repeatable in a laboratory and therefore testable by scientific methods. And the list could go on much longer.

To force the hand of the scientific data, or to neglect them completely and start from absolutely baseless hypotheses is equivalent to damage and discredit the meaning and the message of the Shroud that make it an object unique in the world. The serious and correct scholar detests the crusades for or against the authenticity of the Shroud image, made for the sole purpose of convincing most people of one's own beliefs without bringing any proof or producing reasons that are in conflict with the most elementary rationality. To start from the assumption that "the Shroud is the burial cloth of Christ" and try to prove it at all costs without taking care to give serious and objective reasons or to start from the assumption that "the Shroud is the work of a medieval forger" and do the same means not only to perform a scientifically incorrect operation but also to make fun of all those who take these conclusions on trust.

The only serious and honest behavior is that of one who, desiring only to know the truth, sets humbly to his research, without pretending to demonstrate any preconceived thesis and indeed rejecting everything that cannot be seriously and scientifically proven. On this road we should be guided by the clear and eloquent words of Saint John Paul II, who said in front of the Shroud on May 24, 1998: "The Church urges [the scientists] that the Shroud be studied without pre-established positions that take for granted results that are not such; she invites them to act with interior freedom and attentive respect for both scientific methodology and the sensibilities of believers".

The discussion on the Shroud necessarily obliges us to enter into the theme of the relationship between science and religion or faith and reason, a very topical subject as our age is often characterized by manifest contradictions and conflicts in this regard. The spread of internet, television debates, newspaper articles have greatly contributed to spread these topics even among people that hardly would read books on this subject. There is however also a strong risk of a widespread misinformation because very often those who are called to speak on these topics are far to be experts and often do not shine nor for objectivity nor for methodological rigor. So often we witness debates-fights in which a priori theories and opinions are argued and where the seriousness and rigor of reasoning are almost always absent.

Rarely there is a serious reflection on these two worlds – the world of science and the world of faith – and on their peculiarities, in order to bring clarity and to check whether there is a real possibility of constructive dialogue and integration. Here is in fact the essential point: is it true, as someone argues, that science and faith can only be incompatible? Is it true that scientific discoveries can make a man capable of knowing the whole truth about his existence and about the meaning of everything is around us? And is it true that therefore faith can best be relegated to a purely subjective and private fact? An American scholar, Ian Barbour, listed four different types of possible relationships between science and faith: conflict, independence, dialogue and in-

tegration. Today it seems that the first two are prevailing, but it is natural to ask ourselves: would be possible to create a constructive and fruitful dialogue between science and faith, even a real their integration in an interdisciplinary perspective? These are questions and issues that affect us as members of the society in which we live, but also and above all as individuals; they oblige us to think seriously because they are the basis of our humanity and the question of the ultimate meaning of our existence in this boundless universe that surrounds us is unavoidable and fundamental.

A scholar who frequently appeared on the subject in several books, official documents and speeches is Professor Joseph Ratzinger, the emeritus Pope Benedict XVI. Among them I would like to remember the beautiful conference held in Turin on June 12, 1998 on the occasion of his pilgrimage to the Shroud. The then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith said: "If a man cannot reasonably question himself about the essentials of his life, his origin and his destiny, on what should and can do, about life and death, but he must leave these decisive problems to an issue separate from reason, then he doesn't raise reason, but removes its dignity. The disintegration of man, thus introduced, at the same time gives rise to the pathology of religion and to the pathology of science". And he concluded: "There is no alternative: reason and religion must return together, without dissolving one into the other. It's the man which is in question, it's the world which is in question".

Personally, I never thought that between science and faith there can be any kind of incompatibility, provided that there is always mutual respect between the respective areas. Science is a source of values that are in communion and not in contrast to those of faith; in every field of science man, thanks to his studies and his research, has gradually become aware of being the repository of a unique privilege: that of being able to decipher the logic of the universe, that is of the world in which we live. On the other hand, science cannot lead to the demonstration of the existence of God, but even to prove its non-existence. Science can only deal with the immanent reality that is with the phenomena that occur in nature. Faith is a gift of God and allows us to penetrate the world of the transcendent in the attempt to understand and grasp its meaning.

Very famous are the words through which, four centuries ago, Galileo Galilei expressed the clear division of functions between science and faith, and at the same time their complementarity: "The intention of the Holy Spirit is to teach us how one goes to heaven, not how the heaven goes"; and more: "The Holy Scripture and nature go both from the divine Word, the former as the dictation of the Holy Spirit and the latter as a very faithful executor of the commands of God". If, reading the first chapters of Genesis, we pretend to find a scientifically correct description of the formation of the universe and of the development of life on Earth, we would make a big mistake of judgment,

since these texts represent a great theological reflection written by authors who lived many centuries before Christ and not a treatise on cosmology.

“Science and faith are both gifts of God”, said Saint Pope John Paul II at a congress of the “World Federation of Scientists”. It’s true because both of them have their roots in a wonderful gift that the Creator gave to man: reason. Science and faith are therefore both essential in order that man can progress in knowledge in a comprehensive manner, developing his whole being and not just a part of it.

Let’s return now to the Shroud: its study necessarily involves a comparison between science and faith. In fact, the reading, study and meditation on the image of the Shroud lead essentially to two levels of reflection. On the one hand, the study of the image has a high interest from the scientific point of view. Especially in the past 40 years, scientists tried to understand in depth its characteristics and origin, launching studies in several different fields of science: physics, chemistry, biology, computer science, forensic science, statistics, and so on. In recent years, the Shroud was therefore at the center of a wide, complex and heated scientific debate at a multidisciplinary level. On the other hand, the tradition always identified the Shroud with the burial sheet of Jesus of Nazareth, and in more recent times, this identification has taken advantage of modern exegetic studies, with significant results. This obviously involved the field of Christian faith, thus opening a heated debate on the relationship between faith and the Shroud. The most recent expositions of the Shroud (1998, 2000 and 2010) further contributed to highlight the pastoral and spiritual meaning of the Shroud.

Of course the two ways of understanding the research on the Shroud are often met but also clashed, sometimes dividing both the insiders and common people: the Shroud is an object of faith and veneration or an object of scientific interest? Often in these last years the two modes of approaching the Shroud have been put in contrast, as if one necessarily excludes the other, as mutually incompatible. It has grown in this way a very animated discussion, perhaps as never before, favored both by modern means of communication and by the great worldwide interest arisen by the last expositions of the Shroud.

For “scientific approach to the Shroud” is usually understood that according to which the Shroud is regarded solely as an object of study and for which the only important issue is to try to answer the questions about the origin and the authenticity of the Shroud. A “pastoral approach to the Shroud” means the reading of the Shroud in the light of its intrinsic message that, starting from its close and indisputable relationship with the Holy Scriptures, becomes a valuable and unique inspirer of the life of faith and the prompter of those works of charity which are its real big fruit. In this regard at the end of his aforementioned speech in front of the Shroud on May 24, 1998 Saint John Paul II said: “May the Spirit of God, who dwells in our hearts, instil in every-

one the desire and generosity necessary for accepting the Shroud's message and for making it the decisive inspiration of our lives".

Therefore to put in antithesis the scientific approach to the religious one is very dangerous because you run the risk on one hand to reduce the Shroud to a "dead object", to an image that has meaning only in itself and that doesn't at all challenge our lives and on the other to turn the Shroud into a kind of idol slaved to a priori and instrumental theses. I am deeply convinced that to leave the presentation of the Shroud to a sole scientific approach or to a sole pastoral approach is neither correct nor useful for any kind of recipient. But then are these two ways of approaching the image of the Shroud really anti-thetic?

I personally think that the two approaches are not only compatible, but rather complementary, forming the two sides, both indispensable, of a correct, effective and comprehensive presentation of the Shroud. They may very well coexist provided that their different levels of competence were respected. In this regard, to avoid any misunderstanding, it is important to recall that the Christian faith is not based (and never it will be based) on the Shroud. Several times I was asked by journalists and interviewers what would happen to my faith in the event that the non-authenticity of the Shroud was proven and of course I always replied that he would not change anything. The Christian faith is based on very different assumptions, but the Shroud can be a valuable support when it is seen as a valuable tool that, through the language of images, helps to reflect on the pillar of the Christian faith: the passion, death and resurrection of Christ.

To all those who put themselves in front of the Shroud free from preconceptions and prejudices a correct presentation gives the opportunity to follow a valuable journey of reflection in search of the mystery of the passion of Jesus, which is narrated in the Gospel in literary form. This path needs to be supported by confirmations and discoveries coming from the scientific studies of the image of the Shroud. But it needs to be supported also by the reflection that allows us to go beyond the image to grasp in its entirety the message of salvation and redemption given to us by Christ's suffering in the long and painful journey of his passion. Therefore the Shroud absolutely needs to be studied and understood by following both the two approaches: that of science and that of faith. Otherwise it will be impossible to fully grasp and deepen the profound message of the Shroud.