

JALSA SALANA

Who would have thought that the Shroud could be important to Muslims? Certainly mainstream Islam considers Jesus an important prophet, but the Quran suggests that just before being crucified, he was taken bodily into heaven, and not entombed at all. The Shroud from that point of view is an interesting artefact but cannot have derived from his dead or resurrecting body.

However, for the Ahmadiyya Community, a small but rapidly growing sect of Islam, the Shroud is fundamental to their belief, even more so than it is for Christians. It is their belief, in distinction from most of Islam, that Muhammad, although pre-eminent, was not the last prophet, but that the founder of their sect, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, appeared in the nineteenth century as the Messiah, bringing to fulfilment the essential promise of peace and unity long predicted both by Jesus and Muhammad.

Part of this tradition is the belief that Jesus was actually crucified, but did not die on the cross. After burial, he revived and gradually made his way to India, where under the name Yus Asaf he preached to the lost tribes of Israel until a peaceful death of old age, and burial in Srinagar, where a shrine over his grave can still be seen.



The relevance of all this to the Shroud lies in the bloodstains, which, according to the Ahmadiyya, trickle down the hair and arms, and appear to emerge from the heart and wrist, in far greater abundance than would have been possible had the originator been dead. In this they agree

with Rodney Hoare, a former BSTS Chairman, whose inquiries at the East Midlands Forensic Science Laboratory led him to a similar conclusion.

With all this in mind it is not surprising that Syed Amer Safir, editor of the 'Review of Religions', the journal of the Ahmadiyya Community, invited Barrie Schwartz to their annual convention in Hampshire, to speak about his involvement in Shroud studies and his understanding of it. Barrie is a Jew, and so he does not believe in the Resurrection either, although he does believe that the Shroud enveloped a dead body. However he generously suggested that a number of British sindonologists accompany him, including David Rolfe, Pam Moon and Simon Brown, all of whom believe in the Shroud's authenticity, and myself, who is inclined towards a medieval provenance. For the first time, this year the Review of Religions was allotted a tent of its own among the vast concourse, which was devoted to a superb collection of early Qurans at one end, and to Pam Moon's excellent Shroud of Turin Exhibition at the other.



[Left to right. David Rolfe, Arif Khan, Pam Moon (in red, behind), Barrie Schwartz, Amer Safir, Hugh Farey and Simon Brown in the Hospitality Tent of the Jalsa Salana.]

The Jalsa Salana is the annual international convention of the Ahmadiyya Community, held in the UK since 1984, when religious intolerance in Pakistan forced the spiritual leader of the Community to emigrate. It is held in farmland in Hampshire, where for a week huge marquees are erected, for meetings, for exhibitions, and for sleeping and eating. Some 30,000 adherents from Britain and around the world attend the three days, and religious and political leaders visit in person or send messages of goodwill. The motto of the community "Love for All, Hatred for None" is very much in evidence in practice as well as in word. The Jewish, Christian and Hindu guests were treated with huge respect, and we were especially looked after by Arif Khan, a senior staff writer for the Review of Religions.

In front of Pam's full size photo of the Shroud, and flanked by supplementary material, Barrie gave two major presentations to packed audiences, and for most of the three days of the convention he, Pam and I held informal conversations with an extremely curious, mostly politely disagreeing, but always courteous audience, eager to learn more about the Shroud, even from those with whom they disagreed. In this respect, a medievalist was able to step back from controversy, as, if the Shroud is not genuine, it presents no obstacle to Ahmadiyya faith, while if it is genuine but shows a dead man, it undermines the belief that Jesus revived and walked to Kashmir.



In keeping with Muslim convention, men and women were largely separated on the 200 acre site (although that didn't apply to guests such as Pam Moon), but special arrangements - somewhat perfunctory I have to say; just a few screens down the length of the tent - were made for interested women to attend Barrie's second presentation.

Sadly I missed two highlights of the weekend, the visit of the Spiritual Leader of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, Caliph Mirza Masroor Ahmad, to the Review of Religions tent, and Barrie's brief presentation to the entire Jalsa, in the presence of the Caliph and 10,000 of the Ahmadiyya Community.



[Caliph Mirza Masroor Ahmad visits the Shroud of Turin Exhibition]

Almost everything concerning the Shroud was filmed, by the Review of Religions camera team and by Simon Brown, himself a Shroud enthusiast, and much of it is available online.

For Barrie Schwartz's presentations:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oz4p4eIHvml>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ms3chGL0oUM>

For an interview with myself:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHw-cQaHr7Q>