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The War of the Shroud

By Roger Chambers

HAVE you been reading about the Shroud of Turin? No? Shame! Yes? Good! Is it the burial wrap of Jesus? Is the three-dimensional figure scorched onto the ancient piece of linen proof of the resurrection? Some say yes, some no. Many don't know that the War of the Shroud is on - again (minor skirmishes occurred in 1898, 1931, 1969, and 1973).

The War of the Shroud ought to be front page, every newspaper, every issue. World Wars I and II are puny by comparison. As history goes, the carnage of Chateau-Thierry and the Bulge were small bloody blips on the screen. The War of the Shroud, logically, is nothing short of universal, eternal revolution.

If the Shroud is scientific proof that Jesus rose from the dead, gone are the foundational assumptions of every world system, political, social, intellectual. Culture, as known East and West, is a huge, fatal mistake. Ancient religions crumble. Millions of books move from library to museum. Destroyed is the academic validity of the world's great universities; the dissertations of German theologians are shelved with Mother Goose. Modern life-style is upended. It's a whole new world! Get the idea?

So far, however, the War of the Shroud looks suspiciously like the Battle of Pygmy Junction. Campus pacifists like to raise the humorous question: "What if they gave a war and nobody came?" Here's one. Doesn't everyone know how important the War of the Shroud? Seems not. Why not?

A theoretical physicist at the University of Colorado set off the present debate on the Shroud. John Jackson used a VP-8 image analyzer, designed to provide computer-enhanced photos of planets, on the negative image on the Shroud. A three-dimensional figure emerged, one which artist and scientist have been unable to duplicate. In 1978 fifty scientists - including Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and agnostics - were allowed five days to apply further space-age technology to the relic.

Research team spokesman Kenneth Stevenson and project-consultant Gary Habermas have written a book interpreting the data accumulated in that test. (*Verdict on the Shroud*. Ann Arbor: Servant Publications.) Because they speak in favor of its authenticity, dissenting team members are trying to block publication. They publicly deny that the Shroud is scientific evidence that Jesus rose from the dead.

The official team statement includes the conclusion:

"We can conclude for now that the shroud image is that of a real human form of a crucified man. It is not the product of an artist. ...the image is an ongoing mystery ..."(1)

As I understand the official statement, the Shroud is not a fraud, but since the name Jesus does not appear on it and the process of image transference cannot be repeated, it cannot be "scientifically" known that that the Shroud is authentic. No explanation, therefore, can be offered.

Why little interest? - I do not here develop the argument for authenticity. I draw attention, rather, to the *shape* and *size* of the debate. The relic might prove to be an elaborate hoax, but is not the *prima facie* evidence strong enough to claim the notice of all thinking men? By implication, yes. In reality, sadly, it will be a relatively minor issue, no matter what the evidence.

Again, why? Lesser reasons exist. Many categorically refuse to notice *any* issue that is ontologically important; they refuse to think beyond beer, sex, TV, and money. It is unrealistic to expect the notice of that large bloc whose philosophical frontier is its own navel. Many evangelicals doubt the pre-thirteenth-century documentation of the Shroud and deny that it is the grave clothing of the Gospel accounts. They dismiss it as a souvenir of medieval superstition, classifying the relic with Noah's beard and Paul's thorn in the flesh. Perhaps it will prove that the latter are correct, but at this writing the evidence seems to be moving in another direction.

There is a deeper and more tragic reason why so few are attending the War of the Shroud. Here it is: The historic church has long since abandoned the field upon which the war must be fought - the only field upon which it could be won.

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 pagan dualistic epistemology (theory of knowledge) as codified by Augustine. This is to say that the unbeliever is incapable of faith, so God infuses it into the elect by a miraculous process. Faith emerged the enemy of reason. (The opposite of faith is *sight*, not reason.) The move from learned faith to infused faith was, of course, the move from evidence to mysticism.

This explains why the official position of the Roman Church on the Shroud is that (1) true faith is sacramentally infused and is verified by papal authority, and (2) the kind of evidence represented by the Shroud has nothing to do with the church's belief in the resurrection. The Shroud of Turin is valuable as a devotional aid, whether or not it is authentic.

Protestant Augustinianism (a gift from Calvin) works from the same subjective base. Apologist Bernard Ramm, for example, says that the task of evidence is to "not so much construct a world view as verify one given by [individual] divine revelation."⁽²⁾ Paul Little, in his excellent book, *Know Why You Believe*, admits that the battle for faith ultimately is won or lost on the field of subjective experience: "Apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, no man will believe . . . it is quite true that an unenlightened mind cannot come to the truth of God unaided."⁽³⁾ If Ramm, Little, *et al.* are right, those who *do not* believe in the resurrection because they are deprived of the miracle of faith *cannot* believe, evidence notwithstanding.

When Alexander Campbell tried to call Protestantism back to the apostolic definition of faith, it wrote him off as a rationalist and went on its merry, mystic way. Mainline Protestantism enjoys the childish comfort of knowing that, since faith is not based on evidence, the lack of it - or contrary evidence - cannot destroy faith. Christianity, you see, can never, according to Augustinian theory, be disproved to the true believer.

Too late for objectivity? - There's a fly in the ointment of this venerable idiocy: a faith that cannot be disproved by evidence cannot be proved by evidence. The intellectual critics of

Christianity know this. The historic church need not expect hosts of believers to follow the scientific evidence of the Shroud - if that's what it turns out to be - down the path of logic to faith. It's too late in the game to change the rules, to call for faith based on objective evidence. Intelligent unbelievers have long-since agreed to segregate "religious" and "scientific" knowledge, and they have every right to cry foul. It's not fair for the church to hide behind the veil of mysticism for centuries and then come out for objectivity when some-thing like the Shroud comes along.

The overwhelming irony of all this is that secular humanism and naturalism have constructed a mysticism of their own. Stevenson and Habermas conclude that the odds are, conservatively, 83 million to 1 in favor of the authenticity of the Shroud. Their opponents refuse to subscribe it despite the astounding probabilities.

Think of it! This is the mind set that eagerly comes down on the side of evolution vs. creation, although admittedly the odds against the chance transition from chaos to biological complexity are at least several trillions to one.⁽⁴⁾ Intermediate forms are absent from the fossil record and genetic models created to explain the process of evolutionary change are found wanting. The evolutionist, nevertheless, has unlimited faith in the mysterious powers of nature, time, and future scientific investigation. Don't expect the Shroud to make believers out of that crowd. They know that the resurrection is impossible, and no amount of evidence will change their minds; they are true mystics.

The War of the Shroud - a war that should happen, but won't. Since one mystic can never convince another, the Shroud will remain a side issue, a curiosity. I hope I'm wrong.

(1) Tom Minnery, "The Shroud of Turin: a Hung Jury." *Christianity Today* (Nov. 6, 1981): 68,69; 88.

(2) *Protestant Christian Evidences* (Chicago: Moody, 1953), p.37.

(3) *Know Why You Believe* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1979). p.3.

⁴See Murry Eden, *Mathematical Challenge to the Neo-Darwinian Interpretation of Evolution* (The Wistar Symposium Monograph no. 5, June 1967).