

IDEAL ATTITUDES CONCERNING RESEARCH
ON THE SHROUD OF TURIN

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At the outset, let me make it clear that this is a theoretical summary of attitudes which I personally consider ideally correct — or completely wrong — concerning inquiry on the Shroud of Turin. This is presented merely as a working outline. It is not, however, concocted from my own brain independently of outside experience. I think that I could offer names for every individual opinion presented here either for praise or for no-praise, but in the interest of charity, let us allow such names to remain suppressed.

My primary supposition is that the Shroud exists for the world, and therefore is the strictly private possession of no person and no group, no matter what the legal possession title might be. Legal possession should be exercised for the purpose of protecting the Shroud from destruction, harm, ridicule, and stupidity; not for any purpose of stifling research and publicity to help the world be aware of the evidence for the Shroud. Any aura of "secrecy" makes the Shroud a suspect subject for many.

Another supposition is that one should avoid veering to extreme, cynical rationalism which would prevent an open mind to objective research; or in the other direction, one should avoid veering to emotional piosity, which would likewise prevent an open mind to the results of solid, objective research. As for the pious approach, if the individual man or woman postulates that some miraculous influence exists in the case of the Shroud, this automatically prevents all discussion and examination, on the basis that a miracle by definition is beyond human experience and beyond human probing. However, the assumption that highly providential conditions of time and temperature and humidity and historical preservation existed is not the same thing as shouting "miracle." Such an assumption of a providence in the order of nature does not hinder investigation from

the natural sciences in any way.

I suggest that all research proceed along the lines of the dilemma proposed long ago by some Shroud pioneer researcher; first, did the body of a human male make the marks on the cloth? Second, is that body the body of Jesus Christ? To my mind, research on the Shroud has been hampered by a fuzziness between these two distinctions. To assume or to deny that the Man of the Shroud IS Jesus Christ, as some have done, in order to hold this or that theory as to the interpretation of the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, is patently unscientific and illogical. This has happened only too often. The rule for the Shroud study must be the search for truth and truth alone; then let the chips fall where they may, even though the finding of new objective truth may uncover new problems and new questions. Is this not the rule in all areas of human knowledge, that the more we discover, the more we find we do not know?

At this point, all of us should recognize the demands of rigorous logic, noting that any theorizing we do should fit the rules of the discipline of minor logic, namely, it must explain everything that should be explained, with no biased emphasis on slurring over its possible contradiction of things that should be explained. Historically, Shroud researchers only too often exemplified this erroneous principle of selective explanation; my own opinion is that Vignon, Barbet, and Wuenschel were shining examples of the correct use of logic, when they had to come to the rescue of the Shroud because some other writer had claimed too much weight for his tentative or slight evidence.

Another point we should remember is the logic of distinguishing between internal or circumstantial evidence and external or human-testimonial evidence. Up to the time of Secondo Pia's primitive photograph, we must remember that the external negative testimony of history, so exploited by Ulysses Chevalier, held the field. Most of us have concentrated on the opposite type of internal or circumstantial evidence, which we should admit does have its limitations. Hence, any assistance we can get from positive external evidence of history is all the more to the good.

The demands of some researchers for full and uninhibited examination of the Shroud cloth represent to my mind a wild and utterly unwarranted outlook that forgets the need from protecting the cloth from unintentional no less than intentional harm. On the other hand, an attitude for excessive reverence which would prevent any responsible and detailed study seems equally reprehensible. In this connection, the religious affiliation — or non-affiliation — of the

researcher should have no bearing on the outcome of his or her studies, since the question of the origin of the Shroud is certainly not a part of official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church or any other group, as far as I know. The history of repeated papal approvals should be properly interpreted as an approval for devotional reverence, not necessarily as the critical acceptance of historical authenticity borne out by scientific studies.

I conclude this very short summary with a tribute which I think is long overdue to the past pioneers who ought to be mentioned here for the selflessness of their work, the objectivity of their research, and the courage they manifested before the scathing scorn sometimes heaped on them by scholars differing with their opinions: I particularly single out Paul Vignon, Pierre Barbet, and Father Edward Wuenschel. Their attitudes should be the ideal for all of us, a tradition looking for the truth and the truth only, not sacrificing the Shroud to personal ambition for popularity, notoriety, money, or jealous self-aggrandizing control. We all know how much the Shroud has suffered in history from these curses: the thirst for money or power or notice. But we also know and can be encouraged by the example of living persons around us, whose ideals continue to protect the Shroud from abuse in one direction or the other. I borrow a comment in this connection, from the field of dignity in sex education, where I have had some experience in combatting the denial of values. A student once said, "Yeh, they told us all about sex, but they didn't tell us what to do with it." So, too, in the case of the Shroud: what good is all the research in the world, if we do not utilize it rightly, if "we don't know what to do with it." So noble a question as the identity and characteristics of the Man of the Shroud merits only equivalently dedicated and premium intellectual outlooks.