




# The Shroud of Turin

## Does It Prove the Resurrection?

The Shroud of Turin has been venerated for centuries as the burial cloth of Jesus Christ. If it is indeed the Lord's shroud, what does that mean to us in terms of the Resurrection and our Christian faith? Three theologians offer their opinions. By Margery Cunningham



**T**he Holy Shroud of Turin is a piece of handwoven, creamy-white linen about 14 by 3-1/2 feet. It bears the front and back image of the body of a man, as if he were laid down on his back and the cloth folded over him. He is bearded, with eyes closed and hands crossed over his abdomen. His long hair is pulled back into a ponytail.

Nail wounds are in his wrists and feet. He appears to have been stabbed in the right side. His head bears marks of many small puncture wounds. His face is swollen, especially the nose and cheek. The torso—particularly the back—and the legs and upper arms give evidence of being

whipped: The skin is broken. A knee is bruised.

Though the body from the image appears horribly abused, the face—even in disfigurement—is noble, serene, dignified. The man is about 5'11" tall, his weight judged to be about 175 pounds, and his age 30-35 years.

Following a belief-legacy at least 600 years old, there are many who consider this to be the shroud, or burial cloth, of Jesus of Nazareth.

And there are those who see in the evidence of the Shroud a message, a statement of "truth," about the central event in the Christian religion: the resurrection of Jesus.

The Shroud is arguably either the greatest relic or the greatest hoax of Christendom.

## Going Beyond the Bible

**I**n an Wilson suggests some of the cloth's history in his book *The Shroud of Turin: The Burial Cloth of Jesus Christ*. The Shroud surfaced officially, but unassumingly, in 1357 in France as an object of veneration for pilgrims. It eventually was deeded to the House of Savoy, the cradle of the kings of Italy.

Today the Shroud's legal owner is the exiled King of Italy, Umberto II, who resides in Portugal. The Archbishop of Turin—presently Cardinal Anastasio Ballestrero—is the Shroud's custodian. For the past 400 years the cloth has been in Turin except for a brief time during World War II. It rests in a chapel of the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, rolled up and locked in three fitted caskets: wood, metal, wood.

And its history before the 14th century? Wilson's fascinating reconstruction traces the Shroud from Jerusalem following Jesus' death to Turkey (Edessa and Constantinople), and includes kings and princes of the Church, crusaders and Knights Templar, the low and the high, the devout and the skeptic.

The Wilson account also hypothesizes that the Shroud's real nature (as burial cloth) was concealed since it had been folded many times and—with just the face showing—was venerated as an image of Jesus. It became a source for many of the early "portraits" of Jesus.

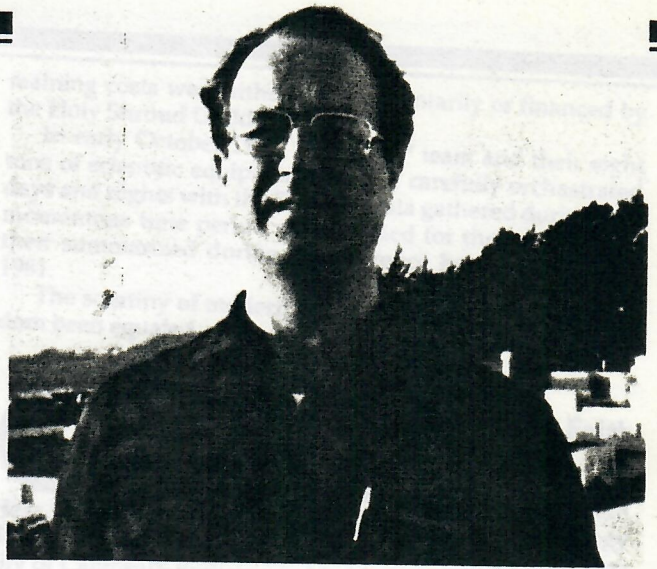
To bring the Shroud and the questions it raises into religious and theological focus, I interviewed three theologians from the University of San Francisco. Father Paul Bernadicou is chairman of the theology department, one of the finest in the United States. A native Californian, Bernadicou is a Jesuit, European-trained, with a doctorate in Biblical Spirituality.

Since relics and relic devotion are often said to belong to an era now past (an era perhaps more superstitious than our own), emphasis on the Shroud at first seems wrong, according to Father Bernadicou.

"Questions on the Shroud don't appear to be central to our Christian belief," he remarks. "But let's look at it again: The Shroud has to do with the Resurrection of Jesus in some way. What do we *really* believe about the Resurrection? If we know what people think *resurrection* is, then we can get an idea of what they believe the Resurrection of Jesus was all about. Do we think of a physical moving of a dead body, a raising of a corpse to life? That would be a literal interpretation. Or are we perhaps saying something about experiencing Jesus as truly *alive* with us, within the Church? That might be called a symbolic interpretation."

The priest has found most people do not approach the Resurrection with an understanding of the Bible in the fullest sense, as theological literature. Instead, many think Scripture is simply biography or history, and that what is said about Jesus and his Resurrection must be understood literally. But if we look upon the Bible as theological literature, the Resurrection stories must be seen as symbolic and literary accounts. From this viewpoint, maintains Bernadicou, it would not be necessary to trace the Shroud back to Jesus since the Shroud is not needed for one to believe in Jesus and the claims of Christianity.

The Shroud exists in a place where science and religion meet, can disagree or agree, part friends or walk comfortably together, separate but equal, declares Bernadicou. "This poses a problem for many people," he reflects. "Look at the Book of Genesis. It does not give us a scientific account of the origins of the universe; it is not a videotape of what happened at the dawn of creation. What it is is a kind of epic poetry which expresses the conviction and hope of the



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Jewish people about the blessedness of life, and how humankind can relate to the world God made."

Father Bernadicou points out that the Resurrection stories and the Genesis story, though different in many ways, share many of the same *literary* qualities. "They are not realistic descriptions of what happened, where it happened, or even how. They are speaking rather from a vantage point of religious hope and belief, and not in the factual style of a newspaper report or a natural science experiment.

"The underlying conviction of the Resurrection stories is that this man Jesus who had died is *alive!* They don't elucidate how the Resurrection happened scientifically and empirically. So to claim that the Shroud may give some kind of historical and scientific testimony to Jesus' Resurrection is to wander outside the evidence given in the Bible. Even if the Shroud were proved to be authentically the cloth from which Jesus was miraculously raised, it would give evidence for a specific type of resurrection about which the Gospels say nothing directly."

## Analyzed by Modern Science

**J**ust what is this Shroud? Is it a wonderful piece of "poetry," someone's artistic representation of Jesus caught at the moment of death; or some hard data to be used for a hypothesis about the nature of the Resurrection?

Two who found the Shroud an irresistible mystery were John Jackson and Eric Jumper, friends and Air Force officers together in the mid-70's. Trained scientists (physics, engineering, aerodynamics)—serious, generally skeptical—they knew of the few previous occasions when the Shroud was approached in order to explore "scientific" questions. Perhaps the most significant (and the earliest) was in 1898 when an amateur photographer was permitted to take a picture of the Shroud. When Segundo Pia developed his photograph, to his astonishment the negative plate proved to be a positive—strikingly clear, anatomically detailed and precise. This meant that the image on the Shroud acted as a sort of photographic negative.

This raised some crucial questions. For example, if the Shroud was a fake (that is, a piece of cloth with an image painted on its surface), how did an artist prior to the 14th century know enough to include in the painting the properties of 19th-century photographic science?

Using very sophisticated space-age instruments and technology, and working as yet only with photographs of the Shroud, Jackson and Jumper found that the image contained a kind of three-dimensionality. Their VP-8 Image Analyzer, used in obtaining information from interstellar space, can pick up the distance of an object from a light source and reflect this as dimension, or vertical relief. Applied to ordinary photographs, a blurred and distorted image emerges. But when they applied this same technology to Shroud photographs, Jackson and Jumper found to their amazement that a three-dimensional image of the body was produced on their computer screen. From this data, the two men were later able to make mock-up copies of the Shroud "body" in bas-relief, out of cardboard and fiberglass.

Soon a project was underway to gain access to the Shroud with sophisticated equipment capable of testing it for "authenticity." Jackson, Jumper and 30 others from various research projects around the country became affiliated as STURP—Shroud of Turin Research Project. The members were from such places as the Los Alamos National Scientific Laboratory, the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Lockheed and Brooks Institute, and represented the disciplines of medicine, physics, chemistry, engineering and photography, among others. (All labor on the project was donated and carried out in off-hours. Equipment was rented or borrowed; Kodak and Polaroid furnished the film used. Re-

maining costs were either borne voluntarily or financed by the Holy Shroud Guild.)

In early October 1978, the STURP team and their eight tons of scientific equipment had five carefully orchestrated days and nights with the Shroud. Data gathered during that momentous time period were studied for three years, and then summarized during a conference held in the fall of 1981.

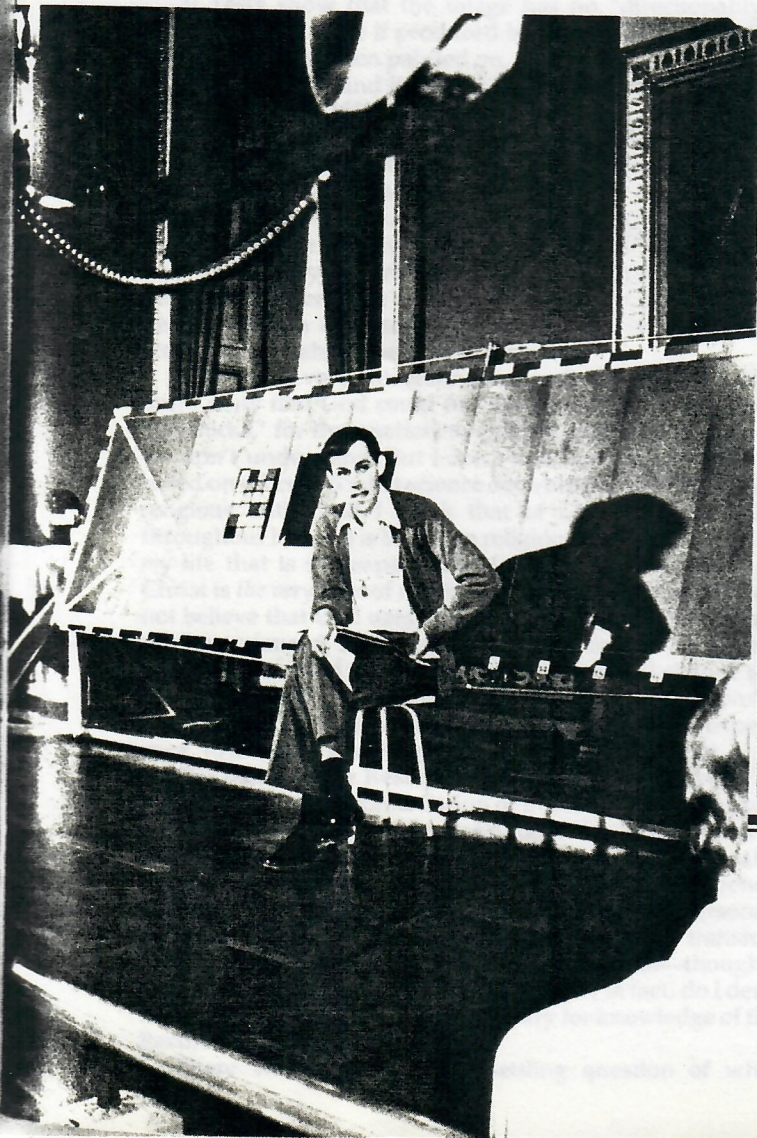
The scrutiny of modern science upon an artifact has seldom been equaled.

## Science Doesn't Create Faith

**C**ommenting on the STURP findings is Dr. Hamilton Hess, a member of the University of San Francisco theology department for many years. Hess was trained at the University of California-Berkeley and holds a D.Phil. from Oxford. His areas of professional interest are patristics—the study of the Church Fathers—and more recently, environmental theology and ethics.

STURP discovered:

1) There does indeed appear to be blood on the Shroud—an all but fast and unanimous conclusion. (One renowned microscopist, Walter McCrone, not a member of STURP but given samples to analyze, does not concur.) The rather remarkable "blood stains," positioned anatomically correctly on the cloth for a man crucified, beaten and pierced, are not smeared. How could a body be lifted from a burial cloth without smudging?



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2) Tests show that the image has no "directionality," which it would have if produced by a brush stroke had the image and stains been painted on.

3) The Shroud and its image have withstood assaults of fire and water; in 1532 it was nearly destroyed. Molten silver from its casket melted onto the folded cloth, burning through the folds. Water doused the fire and soaked into the cloth. Neither scorch nor stain, visible today (even though the burn holes were carefully patched), changed the intensity of the image. A light yellow-wheat color, the image rests only on the very uppermost tendrils of the linen threads of the Shroud. Seen close up, it is so faint that it almost disappears. Under a microscope, the "blood" is found to have crept into the fabric; the image has not.

"That's all very interesting," asserts Dr. Hess, "and I don't deny that God could use the Shroud (or relics, even 'gimmicks,' for that matter) to enrich our faith in ways that we don't understand. But I don't find that my own faith is based on relics and what science determines about them. My religious faith (and I think that of Christians generally throughout history) is based on religious experience. And in my life that is the experience of Christ; my experience of Christ is the very basis of my resurrection faith. Actually, I do not believe that God uses 'gimmicks' to support the historical, 'experienced' reality of the Resurrection. If he did so, and if he intended us to rely on them, it would change the character of faith from an intuitive way of knowing, involving a belief in things beyond the realm of ordinary experience, to a way of knowing based on tangible evidence.

"So belief in the Resurrection would be no different in kind from belief in atomic fission or in the fact that eggs cook in boiling water. My understanding of the Resurrection is that it is an event beyond and above and outside of the realm of history as we usually use that word; something happened at the Resurrection to transform Jesus' person and personality totally. And frankly, I find it doubtful that Jesus' transformation would leave traces on a piece of cloth—though I don't deny that it could have done so. Nor, in fact, do I deny that God could make faith unnecessary for knowledge of the Resurrection."

There still remains the unsettling question of what

formed the image on the Shroud. Is it the result of vapors, sweat and/or body chemicals mixed with spices used for anointing the dead? It is known that vapors diffuse randomly in the air around the source, and yet the Shroud image is extraordinary in its precision and reveals even the contours of the dead man's hair, and what appear (to some) to be coins laid upon the closed eyes. The significance of this—if indeed these are coins—is that the image formed over the organic as well as inorganic material.

## What Formed the Image

**B**ut what formed the image? Needless to say, the STURP team puzzled over this. Most of them conclude that the image was formed by direct contact with a body. There was an attempt to duplicate a scorched-look image on pure linen (it is possible to scorch linen by wrapping it around, say, a hot statue), but experiments failed to produce an image, outline or picture rivaling the Shroud's fine detail and clarity. Dr. Jumper has postulated that a short burst of radiation is capable of producing an image like the Shroud's.

But after studying the results that some of the most advanced testing the 20th century can apply (including photography, spectroscopy, infrared thermography and reflectance, ultraviolet fluorescence, X-ray fluorescence and radiography), STURP members say that the image on the Shroud remains a mystery in many respects.

The Shroud probably was crafted in the first century, according to results of three separate studies. Some of the pollen spores taken from the cloth were identified as coming only from Turkey or Palestine, proving that the Shroud did not spend its entire pre-1357 existence in Europe. (The criminologist who conducted this test, Max Frei, is convinced the Shroud is of first-century origin.) When Gilbert Raes, a professor at the Ghent Institute of Textile Technology, studied the weave of the linen, he found it to be a type common in the Middle East in the first century A.D. Raes also discovered traces of cotton intermingled with the linen threads. (Cotton is grown throughout the Middle East but not in Europe.) And Jackson and Jumper claim that the objects placed over the man's eyes were coins, matching the same size and markings of those minted between 14 and 37 A.D. by Pontius Pilate.

The test that would pinpoint more accurately when the Shroud was made is the carbon-14 dating procedure. This process estimates the age of organic material by calculation using the rate of deterioration of the radioactive carbon-14 isotope. Carbon 14, contained in all living things, begins to deteriorate at a known rate when the living thing dies. In the Shroud's case, the flax from which its linen was made started to decay when it was cut. So far, permission has not been given to carbon-date the Shroud, as a small part of it would have to be destroyed, an action its custodians oppose.

But all the scientific testing in the world does not get to the heart of the mystery. Dr. Hess points out the danger of insisting the Shroud is "proof" for the Resurrection.

"We all float through periods of relative belief and relative doubt in our lives," Dr. Hess says. "That is normal and healthy, I think. But the fundamental affirmation that the religious person holds through life—the very basis of one's religious beliefs—comes from the experience of God. The Shroud, for some people, is like a clue to unraveling the mystery of Jesus' Resurrection from the dead, and they become intrigued with the possibilities it appears to hold out to them. Perhaps people sense that the Shroud is saying something like, 'Look, there is more to life than what appears on the surface.' Perhaps the Shroud points—not to what we first think it does, *proof* for this or that—but to a yearning we all have for a greater reality in our lives."

Hess's words seem to be a *caveat* to the credulous indi-



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vidual who searches the heavens for "divine sky-writing, a person who bases his or her Christian faith on historical events claimed to be miraculous." Is the Shroud such a handy hanger for some?

## The Place of the Miraculous

**F**ather Vernon Ruland, S.J., speaks about the place of the miraculous in our lives and its implications for the Shroud. A professor of psychology and religion at the University of San Francisco, he has a Ph.D. in Religion and Literature from the University of Chicago.

An animated, active speaker, Father Ruland talks about the undisturbed relationship he has perceived throughout his life between science and religion. His teachers and mentors from Catholic grammar school on seemed comfortably at home with the theory of evolution, and encouraged an open attitude towards it. There was an acknowledged presumption that the experimental and other human sciences can always be reconciled with religion, though at first they may seem to conflict. "As a result," Father Ruland adds, "I have always loved Meister Eckhart's caution that truth is something so wonderful that if 'God' could be conceived as somehow departing from truth, I'd cling to the truth and let 'God' go."

"The hidden agenda in talk about the Shroud among devout people seems to be that this image was directly imprinted there by God; and that because we have the Shroud, and not the body, we have miraculous 'proof' of the Resurrection. Generally, I prefer a low-profile response to what's conventionally called 'miraculous.' Jesus himself was not just a miracle worker with a magic kit; in fact, he seemed irritated by people who interpreted his healings solely in terms of 'miracle.'

"I like the way St. John uses miracle in his Gospel—as sign and symbol, in a kind of exfoliating revelation. There is a gradual self-disclosure by Jesus to the man born blind, the woman at the well, the mourners of Lazarus." Looked at in this way, "miracle stories" in Scripture don't just dazzle us,

much less compel our faith, but nurture and bring into focus a faith which may already be present.

"Yet," Father Ruland continues, "I cannot agree with many Christians who claim without blinking an eye, 'Even if you were to show me that Jesus never existed historically, I would still believe in him as a tremendous symbol, a metaphor, the center of my whole life.' They seem ready to edit out the actual figure of Jesus, while at the same time retaining (sometimes enshrining) the values he stands for. For me, it makes all the difference that a concrete Jesus lived and died in this moment of time, on this square foot of earth, with actual blood flowing in his veins. These beliefs distinguish Christianity essentially from all other world religions. The uniqueness of my faith is that it's tied to an actual event, a real historical God-man. I believe that *in* and *through* the tangible Jesus we reach the transcendent God."

But how does one symbolize the Resurrection? How does one represent it as a physical occurrence? "The great religious painters tried to do just that," states Father Ruland. "They had everyone all tumbled down upon the ground in amazement, rendered unconscious by what they had experienced on Easter morning—Jesus holding a lamb or a banner, opening the gates of hell. Perhaps the Shroud fits in here, as a way to picture the Resurrection, but not the Shroud as mere miracle in and of itself, nor as plausible scientific evidence for the Resurrection.

"Miracles, miracles—we don't even know the mysteries of nature well enough, much less 'miracles.' People complain that nothing is sacred anymore. The point is that *everything* is sacred, and we don't realize it. We don't appreciate what it means to say that Jesus died a fully human death, so how can we grasp that as God he overcame human death?"

Father Ruland pulls out a small folio of his poems and opens it to one entitled "A Matter of Course."

Prized for its rare sky  
caesarean and sheathed  
in a silver niche  
the meteorite ranked

beside common quartz  
fades to mere cinder.  
Pedigrees delude.  
We trust the import

soprano, vin blanc,  
each pureblood Hawaiian  
a presumptive prince  
of love and surfboard.

Why overrate things  
scarce, exotic, strange?  
The natural is  
not so natural.

The mystery and puzzlement of the Shroud will continue as each generation brings to it questions peculiar and unique to that time. This scientific era is earnestly seeking answers to its own questions. Perhaps for now, for this moment, one answer to these questions is in the form of yet another question: Why indeed "overrate things exotic, strange," when all around us "the natural is not so natural"?

*Margery Cunningham is a counselor for Emergency Family Service in San Francisco, where she works with parents who abuse their children. She has two master's degrees, one in theology, the other in educational psychology/counseling, from the University of San Francisco. She describes herself as "old enough to have nurtured eight children (and let go); received back six grandchildren (and holding tight); listened to the music of the spirit within and set myth to the strangled lyre (and still singing)."*