

# The Shroud of Turin – The Burial Cloth of Jesus?

An Ahmadi Muslim Perspective

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*Left to right on the photograph: Bruno Barberis had travelled from Turin; Barrie Schwartz from Colorado; Arif Khan from London and Manuel Olivares from India*

For the past three years the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community UK has hosted a Shroud of Turin exhibition, featuring a life-size replica of the shroud at their annual gathering in the Hampshire countryside. Alongside the exhibition there have been experts in attendance from around the world. Year upon year the exhibition has attracted an increased number of both visitors and Shroud lecturers. The event, in 2017, included lectures from notable Shroud experts such as Bruno Barberis, Barrie Schwartz, David Rolfe and Mark Guscini.

Understandably this phenomenon has led to questions from those not familiar with the Worldwide Ahmadiyya Muslim Community. Who is this Muslim group? Why are they interested in the Shroud? And why on earth would Barrie Schwartz go to their annual convention three years in a row?

In this article, I hope to shed some light on these questions, whilst also sharing my journey as an Ahmadi Muslim trying to understand the Shroud of Turin.

## **Spiritual Caliph and the Shroud**

One unique aspect of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, about which I will share more shortly, is that they are united behind a single worldwide leader. This leader is elected via an electoral college and the position is held until he passes away. Since the passing away of the founder of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad<sup>(as)</sup> in 1908, this system of successorship or

‘Khilafat’(Caliphate) has been a source of guidance and comfort for the Community.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of April, 2010, Hazrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad<sup>(as)</sup>, the worldwide head of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, and 5<sup>th</sup> successor to the founder of the Community, visited the Shroud of Turin Exhibition in Turin, Italy. This was the first time an Ahmadiyya Caliph had seen the Shroud of Turin first hand.

Following on from the visit, the Caliph spoke about his viewing of the Shroud in one of his Friday sermons, which are broadcast worldwide through the Community’s satellite TV station. The weekly sermons are viewed around the world by millions, and after this it was inevitable that the interest in the Shroud within the Community would reach new heights. The event in 2010 was the initial spark that led to a chain of events resulting in the Shroud of Turin exhibitions at the Ahmadiyya annual gathering in the UK.

Immediately after the viewing of the Shroud in 2010 by the Caliph, there was a chance for a brief dialogue with senior officials in Turin. When asked by Monsignor Ghiberti, the Director of the Exhibition, what in particular had motivated his holiness to come and see the Shroud during his visit in 2010, he replied by saying:



*“We were previously unaware that the Shroud of Turin was being exhibited. It was by chance that this programme came about and the Community informed us that the Shroud of Turin Exhibition would be taking place during these days. We are from that section of Muslims who believe that the Shroud of Turin was actually used for the Messiah<sup>(as)</sup>, although our views differ. According to us, Jesus, peace be upon him, was a great, and appointed, Prophet of God. According to Jewish teachings, as crucifixion was something inappropriate for a Prophet, when the Jews put him on the cross, God saved Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> from crucifixion. And we believe the Founder of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community is the Promised Messiah of this age. He stated that the Messiah (i.e. Jesus<sup>(as)</sup>), was treated and Allah granted him life thereafter. This is why I was interested in seeing this Shroud.*

*In this regard, it is a very blessed cloth. However, according to our view, it does not prove his death; rather it proves he was alive. In any case, we also consider this to be a blessed Shroud despite our differing views.”*

At this point the exchange could have expanded into a debate around the classical differences in the beliefs of Muslims and Christians, something that has been around for the past 1,400 years. It was interesting to note, however, that it did not. The Caliph and Monsignor Ghiberti both found common ground quite quickly and it centred around one aspect; the suffering of Jesus Christ. His holiness stated Jesus bore immense suffering. And this is what we say – that he faced suffering.’ Regardless of the religious interpretation of the Crucifixion his suffering for his beliefs, and faith in God are things Christians and Muslims can unite on. The Shroud provides a very vivid and visual depiction of this.

### **Persecution**

For the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, persecution and torture for religious beliefs are sadly occurrences members of the Community deal with on a daily basis. In Pakistan, the persecution is at its most extreme, with discrimination against members of the Community actually enshrined in to the penal code of the country. Ordinance XX was introduced on 26<sup>th</sup> of April 1984, under the rule of General Zia-ul-Haq and remains part of the Pakistani law to this day. This Ordinance effectively makes it a criminal offence, punishable by three years in prison, for any member of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community to ‘pose as Muslims’.

When the state itself brings in laws to discriminate in this way it is no surprise that social boycotts, as well as violent attacks on the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community are common in Pakistan. In 2010, the city of Lahore, where one of my uncles currently lives with his family, was the scene of the bloodiest attack on the Community in recent times. Two mosques belonging to the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, were packed with worshippers attending Friday prayers and they were simultaneously attacked by gunmen armed with automatic weapons and grenades. 86 people were killed and 120 injured.

### **Migration and Integration**

The difficult situation in Pakistan, and other countries in south east Asia, has led to Ahmadi Muslims seeking protection by migrating to other countries. This migration, combined with the missionary zeal of its members, has contributed to the Community now being established in 209 countries of the world. The infamous Ordinance XX effectively made it impossible for the leader of the Community at the time, Hazrat Mirza Tahir Ahmad<sup>(as)</sup>, to carry out his duties as the head of the Community. Days after the law came in to effect he left Pakistan and immigrated to London. Since his immigration the worldwide head of the Community has resided in London. It is another unique aspect of the Community that they are a Muslim group with their worldwide leader based in London. This factor has naturally led to the Community being better integrated into Western society. Since the 1980s the Community have been active in inter-faith events, leading to a deep mutual respect and understanding between the Community and other religious and social groups in the UK.

During the visit to Turin in 2010 Professor Don Tino Negri, the resident expert on Islam at the Seminary in Turin, asked his holiness about the interfaith work of the Community. His holiness replied:

*“We say, and God’s teaching regarding religious matters, is that there is no compulsion in faith. God has set forth the Guidance before us. Whoever desires can follow it and whoever wills can reject it, because in our view transforming people’s hearts or persuading someone to a particular way is God’s work; no one can be compelled.”*

He further expounded:

*“Apart from religion, it is necessary to recognise and identify the values for which man was created. If, on the basis of religion, fights continue amongst people and a lack of respect is displayed, then human values may deteriorate. The world has fallen prey to restlessness; we say that all religions should join together and establish peace in the world, because the teaching that God has given to every religious follower is to spread His message – God’s message can never be one of destroying peace.”*

### **Open to Other Viewpoints**

This openness is a core characteristic of the Community and something guests to the annual convention often remark upon. With this context in mind it is perhaps not surprising that the Community has been able to create a constructive environment for the discussion of the Shroud of Turin. As Barrie Schwartz put it, when addressing the full convention audience in 2015:

*“As I stand here and I look at your motto of ‘Love for All, Hated for None’ I can only look at myself as a shining example of your creed...that the Ahmadiyya Community would invite a Jewish man, to discuss a Christian relic, at a Muslim organisation.”*

### **Differing Islamic Beliefs Surrounding the Crucifixion**

Most Muslims will have no interest in the Shroud of Turin. The orthodox Islamic viewpoint on the Crucifixion tends to be that Jesus Christ<sup>(as)</sup> was never placed upon the cross, but instead lifted in to the heavens and escaped the whole ordeal.

The explanation is then given that someone else was crucified instead of Jesus<sup>(as)</sup>, and made to appear like him. Given this interpretation it is little wonder then that the majority of Muslims would have little interest in the events of the Crucifixion, let alone the Shroud of Turin. This belief is rooted in two verses of the Holy Quran that translates as follows:

***“And their [the Jews] saying, ‘We did kill the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah;’ whereas they slew him not, nor crucified him, but he was made to appear to them like one crucified; and those who differ therein are certainly in a state of doubt about it; they have no definite knowledge thereof, but only follow a conjecture; and they did not convert this conjecture into a certainty. On the contrary, Allah exalted him to Himself. And Allah is Mighty, Wise.”*** – Chapter 4: Verses 158 & 159. 35

There are two main issues with this interpretation of the above verses. Firstly, no mention of any substitute is made at all. A valid interpretation, and more accurate one, would be that it was made to appear that Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> had died as a result of Crucifixion, but that he was still alive. The second issue is that in Islamic theology Allah, or God, is omnipresent and so ‘exalting him to Himself’ can make no sense in any literal terms. The Arabic word used is ‘Rafa’ which translates as ‘exalts’ rather than ‘raises’.

It is precisely this interpretation of these verses of the Quran that was put forward by Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad<sup>(as)</sup>, founder of the Ahmadiyya Community, in his book ‘Jesus in India’, written in 1899. He argued that Jesus Christ (peace be upon him) had in fact survived the Crucifixion, and was nursed back to good health. He then left the area and migrated to the East, to escape the Roman empire, and to continue his mission to ‘the lost sheep of Israel’. He argued his treatise taking evidence from the Gospels, the Holy Quran and Ahadith (sayings of Prophet Muhammed<sup>(as)</sup>) medical literature, and historical records. The section on historical records covered Islamic literature, Buddhist records and evidence from historical writings.

This is the viewpoint held by the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, and it is for this reason that their interest in the Shroud of Turin is greater than any other Islamic group in existence today.

### **What Do Ahmadi Muslims Believe the Shroud Shows?**

If Jesus Christ<sup>(as)</sup> did survive the Crucifixion, and if the Shroud of Turin is genuine, then we should be able to see evidence on the Shroud, proving it had been wrapped around a live body. This is the primary lens through which members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community view the Shroud of Turin, and it is what led me personally to first start reading about it. Fifteen years later, I am one of the many who seem to have more questions than I do answers when it comes to this enigmatic cloth.

There are indeed those who have studied the Turin Shroud and concluded from it that Jesus Christ<sup>(as)</sup> survived the Crucifixion. One of those, Rodney Hoare, was of course a former editor of this very newsletter. Hoare based this conclusion on the absence of any sign of decomposition of the body, the even nature of the image, the large volume of blood on the cloth and the fact an image formed at all. Another notable contribution is that of Dr Miguel Lorente author of the paper “Forensic Analysis of the Image and Bloodstains on the Shroud of Turin: Contributions to the Evaluation of the Circumstances Surrounding the Burial of Jesus of Nazareth” who is of the view the image was made by a living man. Dr Lorente holds a PhD in Forensic Pathology at the University of Granada.

Through my studies on the Shroud I read, of course, many other scholars who were of the exact opposite opinion. Experts such as the late Dr Frederick Zugibe wrote in detail how they felt the Shroud showed irrefutable evidence

that Jesus<sup>(as)</sup> had died on the cross. The deeper I looked, the more questions arose. From the carbon dating results of 1988 to the findings of Ray Rogers about the carbon dating sample in 2005. The rollercoaster on the Shroud of Turin continued. Everywhere I looked were more and more questions.

I had concluded and proved nothing from the Shroud of Turin, yet I continue to have a fascination with this cloth that will not go away. Whether it was real or fake, how was the image formed and why could no one make a version exactly like it today.

### **Conclusion**

The Shroud of Turin presents a mystery to people. It tantalisingly appears to provide something concrete around the Crucifixion narrative and yet highly qualified and experienced researchers and scholars cannot agree on almost any aspect of the cloth.

We may never know for sure what the true origins are of the Shroud of Turin or how it was formed.

One thing I do know for sure is that this piece of cloth has led me to building lasting friendships with people from all around the world, from all dominations and faiths, and brought us closer together than any other object I can think of.

May God continue to foster understanding and collective enquiry between members of the great faiths of the world, and those also of no faith. Amen.

Historic Visit by Hadhrat Khalifatul Masih V to the Shroud of Turin Exhibition, Review of Religions, August 2010

Ibid

Ibid

Matthew 15:24

Jesus in India by Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad is available for free download at [https://](https://www.alislam.org/library/books/Jesus-in-India.pdf)

[www.alislam.org/library/books/Jesus-in-India.pdf](https://www.alislam.org/library/books/Jesus-in-India.pdf)

The Turin Shroud is Genuine, Rodney Hoare, 1994 – pp 69-73

