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**A Brief Comparison
between the Study of the Shroud
and the Philosophical Inquiry on God**

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On October 1978, a group of scientists had the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to dedicate five whole days to study the Holy Shroud of Turin directly, in a small room in a palace belonging to the King of Italy, then owner of the Shroud. This team of scientists is formally known as STURP, the Shroud of Turin Research Project. This project meant months of preparation, intense hours of on-the-site data collecting, and three years of deep analysis and article publication in some of the world's most renowned scientific magazines.

This year, we had the opportunity to participate in a series of lectures given by the Official Documenting Photographer of the team, Barrie M. Schwartz. Simultaneously, we were attending a course on Natural Theology. While studying both subjects at the same time, we happened to stumble on an interesting similarity between them. Evincing our findings will be the main object of this brief paper. Before we proceed, though, it is important that we insist on the fact that this paper does not pretend to offer any proof of the authenticity of the Shroud nor of its divine origin. In a certain way, as will be explained below, its authenticity is presupposed. What we present as a similarity between the study of the Shroud and the philosophical investigation on God should only be taken as secondary and interesting relationship: some kind of vestige of the cause in its effect.

I. THE STURP: PROJECT, RESEARCH, CONCLUSIONS

Through the words and eyes of one of STURP's members, Barrie Schwartz, we've had the opportunity of sharing a firsthand experience of STURP's research. This has enabled us to obtain a holistic view of its history, prospective and outcome, within the bigger spectrum of scientific investigation on the Shroud of Turin. It is always important to remember that STURP continues to be the biggest and most important and comprehensive direct study made directly on the Shroud. That means that most of the studies and theories proposed after STURP's work have their main source of facts in this study's research. Other tests have been made, but none as complete, well thought out or executed as STURP. There have also been other proposals to form research teams similar to STURP, but until now, none has been

fully approved. Bearing this in mind, we want to synthesize STURP's origin, development and conclusions.

It is well known that STURP's beginning can be traced back to the VP-8 image analyzer, revealing the three-dimensional character of the image that we find in the Shroud. After Secondo Pia's pictures in 1898, and the negative properties of the image, this could be considered the most remarkable and outstanding discovery made in more than seventy-five years of continuously increasing study on the Shroud. Very competent scientists from some of the most prestigious scientific organizations start to put together a team with the only end of studying this mysterious relic.

The team was composed of many experts from different fields of science and from more than twenty different organizations. This gave the team access to state-of-the-art knowledge and equipment, combined with a rigorous unbiasedness for the best scientific results. And of course, all at a very low cost, because every scientist and organization that helped did it with a negligible or non-existent economical income. Once the team was put together, they asked the king of Italy, Umberto II, for permission to study the Shroud of Turin, which belonged to him at the time. Permission was granted, and they dedicated months to prepare an extensive and very detailed project. They planned to study the Shroud for five whole days. Since the Shroud is very big, they could be performing more than one study simultaneously. Everything was calculated to the minute, and all was written down in their proposal. It is a remarkable example of dedication and scientificity because every single detail imaginable was thought of and considered during the long planning phase. All this, we must say, was done for only one purpose, to answer one question: how the image of the Shroud was formed.

After months of planning, more than one hundred hours of direct study on the Shroud and three years of research and article publication from home, the STURP had to recognize the fact that their only question, the real end of every test made, was never answered. In fact, up to this day, we still do not know how the image of the man on the Shroud was made. Many hypotheses have been discarded.

We do know many ways in which it was *not* done: but the mystery of its origin continues to overwhelm us.

It is interesting, though, that even after STURP's research many hypotheses have been placed on the table, but all of them can be discarded with evidence collected by STURP. Just to mention some, we know that the Shroud is not a painting; that it is not the product of a scorch from a heated statue); nor was it produced by rubbing iron oxide on linen; and it definitely is not some kind of medieval photograph. STURP's analysis of the Shroud would have immediately found clear evidence to prove any of the previously mentioned theories or any other, if the evidence existed on the Shroud. The problem is that it's not there. Furthermore, there is evidence that proves the contrary: the perfection of the image, its undefined edges, there is no light source (other than the body itself), the absence of certain chemicals or elements necessary for the previous hypotheses... At the end of STURP's research most people thought that there was enough evidence to show that the Shroud was very likely the burial cloth used two thousand years ago to bury Jesus Christ.

Yet all this evidence was not only questioned but rejected and forgotten after the radiocarbon dating test of 1988. When it was announced that the radiocarbon testing indicated the origin of the Shroud between 1260 and 1390, the world was in shock. Skeptics felt triumphant; many believers, deceived. But some of those that did have the facts knew something was wrong. For about twelve years the radiocarbon dating was taken as the ultimate unmasking and final truth on the Shroud, but there were still several scientists trying to prove it wrong. The problem was they all centered their attention on proving the invalidity of radiocarbon testing itself or of the inappropriateness of this kind of test regarding the Shroud because of some kind of contamination or other. All these theories were proven wrong.

It wasn't till the year 2000 when, in a congress held at Orvieto, Joseph Marino and Sue Benford presented the conclusions of their research: there was nothing wrong with the radiocarbon dating test, the problem was to be found in the sample taken. The sample cut out from the Shroud was not pure linen from the original piece of cloth: it had cotton woven through it and it contained a dye to make

the color similar. The solution was so simple, yet it had taken so long to find. Ray Rogers confirmed this theory with thorough examination of a sample extracted from the same place as the sample used for the radio carbon dating. The most incredible fact is that a simple study of STURP's previous images (white light, UV light, chemical composition) showed that the section selected for the sample wasn't ideal.

Trying to summarize, we want to note that the scientific research on the Shroud has always started with an outstanding discovery: Secondo Pia's photograph, the VP-8 image... This has led the scientific community towards investigating its origin or cause. After extensive examination and research, we know what the Shroud *is not*, but we still ignore what *it is*. We can only make assumptions. Probably the only way to know this, would be to witness the formation process of the image, which is, as we know, impossible due to "small" timing difficulties.

II. NATURAL THEOLOGY: A PHILOSOPHICAL WAY TO GOD

Now we must make a great leap, not of faith, but in subjects. We jump from empirical science to philosophy. We will not dedicate this brief section on proving the scientific nature of philosophy nor its validity: all this we presuppose. We also presuppose a philosophy founded on the notion of *esse intensivum*, as it has been proposed by S. Thomas Aquinas and further studied and formalized by several contemporary philosophers, such as Cornelio Fabro and Fran O'Rourke. Within the realm of philosophy, we want to focus our attention on the investigation of the ultimate cause of all being, which by the way we call God. This branch of philosophy is the last part of the metaphysical *resolution* and the basis for its *composition*; it is also known as Natural or Philosophical Theology. Its main goal is to know whatever we can know about the first and ultimate cause of being: its existence, its properties and the procession of everything else from this first cause.

There are several ways to prove the existence of God. These ways may have two different origins. On the one hand, some proofs try to start *a priori* –before

sensible experience— or from a concept: this way has never been fully successful nor totally accepted, because of certain epistemological difficulties. On the other hand, we have several ways that part from our experience of this world and follow up through a causal line towards the first cause of all being. This second method is valid, but it still remains not fully convincing to most people. This is due to the fact that it is not a *propter quid* explanation (from the cause to the effect), but a *quia* (from the effect to the cause). It is, in fact, impossible to prove God's existence with a *propter quid* argument because we would need to know God's cause, and if God had a cause he would be anything but God.

After being able to prove God's existence (*an sit?*) in some way, Natural Theology moves on to the next question: *quid sit*, what is it, what's his essence? We can't know God's essence directly but we can deduct some of his properties from the notion of being and the intrinsic properties he must have as the first cause. Therefore, we proceed in a negative way. We know some that there are some properties we find in creatures, his effects, which we must remove from God because they denote some kind of imperfection. This process gives us notions as infinite (not finite) or simple (not composed of parts). The next step is to recognize that some attributes pertain to God not only properly, but eminently.

With this very brief and maybe too simplistic summary, our goal is not to offer a full explanation on this subject, but to emphasize the method and development of its study. We can see how the question on God has its origin in a natural fact (the existence of things, beauty, order...) that inspires wonder. This question is then formulated and analyzed in a philosophical manner. At the end of the study, we can say that God does exist, he is real (the most "real" being), and that he *is not* certain things. This leads us to deduct certain properties that necessary refer to God. So, by reason alone, we can know something about God, or better said, we can know what he *is not*.

III. THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY AND CONCLUSION

As we have mentioned since the beginning, this paper does not intend to prove anything. Its only goal is to communicate an interesting relationship we encountered while studying the Shroud and the scientific research done by STURP, at the same time we were studying Natural Theology. Rather than a proof of the relationship between God and the Shroud, it could be considered a vestige of God's work in his creation: you can only recognize it after knowing its origin, but once you know it, it pops immediately into view. One could compare this to the vestiges of the Trinity in all of creation.

The relationship is probably obvious after the both analyses that we have exposed above. It's really interesting to note how both studies start from a natural fact, an outstanding and awe inspiring event. This event or fact inescapably attracts thinkers throughout the world and the different ages, human beings thirsty of knowledge, that want to know its cause. But in both cases, even after decades, or centuries, of engaging and detailed research, we can only attain negative answers to our initial question: we get to know what *it's not* instead of what *it is*.

This seems to be an interesting discovery if you do believe the Shroud of Turin to be the burial shroud of Jesus Christ. It is only fitting that an object so unique, so special, which held God's body, God's corpse, and is a continuous testimony of his death and resurrection, to share some of the properties of the one who made this piece of linen become so special. The events of those three days (Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Resurrection Sunday) are so remarkable, so unfathomable without the help of revelation, that it's impossible for us to imagine, let alone explain or reproduce, any single part of it.

If we believe, as is commonly held, that the image on the Shroud of Turin belongs to Jesus Christ and that it was formed, in a mysterious way, during his resurrection from the dead, we know for sure that this phenomenon exceeds our capacity to understand it. Our science can't pretend to explain not just a *hapax*

“*ἱστορία*”¹, but an event that transcends the sphere of nature and resides in the supernatural sphere. This does not mean that no further research should be done or that it would be meaningless. On the contrary, the fact that here we are so near to humanity’s limits, makes it not only more thrilling, but also more necessary to continue our study. Our intellect was not created to fumble and stop on the first pebble in the way, but to reach towards the infinite source of all knowledge and of being itself, towards the limits of the universe... *ad astra!*

¹ “Once (in) history”: Something happening only once in history, playing with the known concept of *hapax legomenon*.