

LETTERS

From Dr. Michael Clift, 9 Glevum Close, Longlevens, Gloucester GL2 9JJ

In the last three and a half years I have managed to present the Shroud to a large number of groups, schools, societies, churches, brotherhoods, and so on. But others have been strangely reluctant to receive it. Recently the Mormons called. I can never turn these polite young lads away so in the course of conversation I told them I'd be willing to talk to their church members. They were immediately enthusiastic, but when they asked their seniors it was a different story. I then invited the two boys to my next talk so they could see and pass on the fact that it does not in any way cut across their dogma. It now seems the older men have relented and in principle will not oppose the talk. But they do not seem eager to give a date. I shall have to remind them that STURP's chief photographer at the 1978 exposition, Vernon Miller, is one of their number.

Michael Clift

From Denis Dutton, School of Fine Arts, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand [reprinted from *Nature* 7 May 1987]

Like most observers keen to know the historical provenance of the Shroud of Turin, I welcome the decision to subject the relic to radiocarbon dating. However, clouds loom on the horizon, in the form of confusions about the protocols for the tests. The procedures as so far understood involve a number of samples of the shroud which are to be divided among as many laboratories. These laboratories will be asked to date dummy samples along with the shroud, and none will even know which of their samples are from the Turin relic. This blind procedure will avoid any possible taint of prejudice on the part of the testing laboratories.

However, such a protocol leaves serious unanswered questions about the possibility of tampering with the samples themselves. How are independent observers to know whether any of the samples which testing laboratories receive are in fact actual linen fragments from the shroud? Are we simply to take the Vatican's word for it? Repeated enquiries in this matter made by me and by the US Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal have so far elicited no satisfactory answers. One prominent shroud authority has given assurances that the British Museum is acting as "guarantor" of the tests. But the relevant person in the British Museum, who was in fact present at the meeting in Turin last autumn which recommended the testing procedure, has declined to divulge any information about testing protocols because of "confidentiality". He has referred correspondents to Cardinal Ballestrero in the Vatican and to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. Inquiries there have so far gone unanswered.

The situation as it now stands is most disturbing. After years of discussion, there is agreement to go forward with C¹⁴ tests on the Shroud of Turin, but apparently so far without due regard for an open disclosure of procedures for taking the samples. Evidence for or against the authenticity of a relic of such widespread veneration involves deep religious passions; for some people there is a great deal potentially to be lost. So there must be no hint that, for example, fibres of mummy linen might have been supplied to the laboratories, rather than actual shroud samples. If those conducting the tests wish the results to be taken seriously, they must offer their procedure to open inspection by independent observers. "Confidentiality" is out of the question.

Denis Dutton

[Editor's note: The "relevant person in the British Museum" referred to by Denis Dutton is Dr. Michael Tite, who has commented in an interview reported in the *Daily Telegraph* on 8 May: "We are also aware of the problems. If there is any risk of the samples being changed, we will not be involved". He also told the *Telegraph* that the Vatican's Pontifical Academy of Sciences had not yet decided on the final protocol for testing.]