

Theological Considerations in front of a Copy of the Shroud of Turin

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Luther and Relics

The Lutheran congregation of Savonlinna-Sääminki in Finland which I serve as a pastor had a high quality copy of the shroud of Turin on display for a month during the summer of 2012. We also had a symposium about the shroud with guest speakers from Turin and La Coruña.

Why am I involved in a matter like this? Isn't it irrational enthusiasm about a Catholic relic? Am I not, as a Lutheran pastor and a Luther-researcher aware of Luther's view about relics? And then, a Finnish bulletin magazine *Ilta-Sanomat* wrote on June 6th 2012 with the authority of an Italian professor that the Shroud of Turin is a medieval forgery. Am I willingly losing my credibility as a theologian?

I don't think so. I am aware of Luther's criticism against the relics and I consider it justified.¹ He gradually arose against the favourite hobby of the Saxonian ruler, Friedrich. He had bought in his collection e.g. four hairs of the Virgin Mary, a part of the cloth where the infant Christ was wrapped in manger and a bread crumb from the Last Supper. Year 1520 there were 19 013 relics in Wittenberg. If you could watch all of them in the exhibition of the Day of all Saints, you would be promised 1 902 202 years release from purgatory.²

Of course all that was a hoax, dangerous for the salvation of souls through faith in Christ! Behind it was a false presupposition that the grace of God is absorbed in the objects the saints have dealt with and is somehow transferred from them to the paying guest of the exhibition. Most of the junk was false.

Those errors were not part of our exhibition. We did not imagine that that copy of the Shroud has absorbed in itself the grace of God. The exhibition was free of charge and nobody got a second of release from anything, not even a detention. The entrance fee to the symposium was 12 euros but even that didn't release any souls from purgatory.

That a great deal of the medieval relics were forgeries, doesn't of course prove that all of them were. Each one of them should be considered individually, scientifically and critically. This hasn't always been the standard procedure. For many hundreds of years it was a known "fact" that there were so many "authentic" pieces of the Holy Cross in European churches that one could build a boat out of them. When this rumour was being really investigated, it was found that there are only about four litres of these pieces, most of them originating from one single olive-tree. Criticism needs criticism.

We had on display a 100 % copy of the Shroud of Turin, unauthentic but accurate. The authenticity of the real Shroud of Turin is a very interesting question. In the exhibition and in the symposium we got critical information about the matter.

¹ Vesa Hirvonen, *Luther ja pyhäinjäännökset* [Luther and Relics]. In: *Teologinen Aikakauskirja* 4/2004, 364-373. Hirvonen shows that in the beginning of his career Luther was not opposed to relics. 1516 he was involved in Fredric's attempts to get some new relics to Wittenberg. Still in the writings of 1519 and 1520 Luther does not deny the holiness of relics or condemn their veneration. However, he criticizes that because of the veneration of relics poor neighbours are often neglected. Soon Luther became more severe in his criticism: Only the word of God and the sacraments have the power to sanctify. During the 1520's the cult of relics was gradually ended in Wittenberg.

² Roland Bainton, *Here I stand. Life of Martin Luther*. 1978. See also Hartmut Kühne, *Ostensio reliquarum. Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte* 75, 400-423.

What has made me to think the Shroud is authentic?

I am no specialist in this area. I still dare to mention some aspects that have made me interested in the Shroud.

The quality of the cloth and the particles of pollen within it show towards Palestine, 2000 BC. The picture in it fits in small details amazingly well with a man crucified by the Romans. This testifies for the assumption that it is not a medieval forgery. In medieval times there was no accurate knowledge about the practice of crucifixion, e.g. in medieval paintings the nails are always driven through the palms of the victim. Why has the man of the Shroud wound of the nails in his wrists? Is it because Jesus of Nazareth was in fact crucified this way and the Shroud has his picture on it?

Why is the picture in the Shroud a negative? Why would the supposed medieval forgery-maker produce such an artefact, when none of his contemporaries could see the details? They were made visible first in year 1898 when the Shroud was photographed for the first time and the photographer looked at the negatives of the film.

And even if the forgery maker had knowledge about a negative picture, how did he work? The picture is not painted or burned, at least not with such a technique that was known in medieval times. The picture consists of a very thin layer on the outer layer of the linen fibres, where the chemical structure of the cellulose has been changed.

On the other hand, the C-14 analysis of three small pieces of the Shroud, in three different laboratories, gave as a result that it originates from the 13th or 14th century. But in science one should be critical also towards the methods of experiment. All those pieces were taken from a place in the upper left corner of the cloth. One must ask, why. At least from the copy it can be seen that just on that place there is a mending patch, a little different colour than the rest of the cloth. Why were the pieces for the C-14 experiment taken just from there? Why not from three different places that would represent the whole better?

About the scientific method

The research of the shroud is no unscientific mumbo-jumbo.

I was taught at the University of Helsinki about the method of science that is so called "hypothetical-deductive method".

Science means that one wants to explain some phenomenon systematically and thoroughly. Then you first come up with some hypothesis that you suppose would explain the phenomenon. Then this hypothesis is critically tested in the light of what is deduced from perceptions about the object, made with different experiments. Through this the hypothesis is strengthened, weakened, or refuted.

In this matter the preliminary hypothesis could be that the Shroud of Turin is a medieval forgery. But when this hypothesis is critically tested by exact observations and deductions made from them, it is weakened. The following details are unexplained: How did the medieval forger work? How could he know so accurate details of the Roman practice of crucifixion? Why are there pollen and particles of earth from Jerusalem in it?

The hypothesis is weakened and initially maybe even refuted. Then one has to come up with a new hypothesis that would explain what the Shroud is and how the picture in it came into being.

Science and the Christian faith touch each other like a tangent

According to one hypothesis the picture in the shroud is best explained so that the dead body under it was charged by a radiation of 2.7×10 to 11 watts during a very short time (parts of a nanosecond).³

That would have required the power equal to that of 50 mid-size nuclear plants in the hands of a medieval forger. They had nothing like that available.

In the mind of a theologian there comes up a new hypothesis: it was God's power, through which he resurrected his Son from the dead.

Here scientific research and the Christian faith touch each other like a tangent. Science can't say that it was God's power. But maybe it can say that no method used by human beings has made the picture.

To me this is theologically very interesting.

The shroud of Turin brings in front of us as a fresh and plausible hypothesis that the resurrection of Jesus was a historical fact. His tomb was empty in Easter morning because God's power was active upon his dead body and resurrected him from the dead in a way that was also physical. As a side-effect a negative-picture of him was produced on the linen cloth.

Bultmann and Tillich about the Resurrection

In theology it is good that such a thought is taken up anew. Too many modern theologians think that it is quite the same for the Christian faith what happened to the body of Jesus. Most likely it was decomposed in a mass-grave. The resurrection would mean that his disciples received a new kind of hope and love. They learned to talk the "mother-tongue of faith" which is symbolic and doesn't include in itself any propositions about the "world of the facts".

Such thinking comes at least partially from Rudolf Bultmann's theology (from the mid nineteen hundreds). According to Bultmann it is impossible in the modern times of electrical light to believe that Jesus was bodily risen from the grave and was transferred to heaven. Such thinking is based on a mythical worldview of antique, which had three layers: hell, earth and heaven. If a modern man is required to believe that Jesus rose concretely and physically from the dead, it would be legalistic and lead to a false conception of faith. In order to preach the gospel of Jesus correctly today, the stories of the New Testament have to be purged from their mythical content. The allegation of a bodily and concrete resurrection, from which there could be any historical evidence, is a prime example of such defect myth. A true faith is born out of the *kerygma* of the gospel, no matter of what happened to his physical body.

Another highly respected (at least in Finland) Lutheran theologian, Paul Tillich, who had his high season during the 1960's, had quite similar thoughts. Tillich said that he did not deny the fact of the resurrection of Jesus, but he emphasized that most of all it is a *religious symbol*. Its content is that in Jesus Christ the existential alienation of a human being is overcome. In him the New Being is given. The resurrection of Jesus is "both a symbol and an event". Tillich's emphasis is, however, that the "event"-aspect of resurrection is an event in the existential consciousness of the disciples.

³ Juha Hiltunen, Valokuva Jeesusesta? [A photo of Jesus?]. Kirjapaja, Helsinki 2009.

As said, he still doesn't deny fact-aspect of the resurrection.⁴ However, he considers it wrong, if one tries to show with evidence that it is probable. One of such attempts he calls a "physical one". It is represented e.g. by the stories of the New Testament about the women finding the empty tomb on Easter morning. These attempts are theologically defect rationalizations of the event, because they interpret it physically. The resurrection of Jesus is identified with the question, whether his body was physically present in the tomb or not. And this is wrong. For, according to Tillich,

"Then the absurd question arises as to what happened to the molecules which comprise the corpse of Jesus of Nazareth. Then absurdity compounded into blasphemy."⁵

That means that even in principle there can be no physical or historical evidence that would indicate it to be probable. Or at least true faith is not at all interested in whether the tomb of Jesus was empty on Easter morning or what happened to his corpse. What is important for faith is that one receives from the symbolical meaning of his resurrection the power to the New Being which overcomes the existential alienation.

For me the Shroud is theologically interesting, because, if it is authentic, it shows the defects of this kind of theology. The stories of the New Testament about the finding of the empty tomb are no false rationalizations. Quite on the contrary, it is absolutely necessary for the true faith that Jesus was physically risen from the dead and the tomb was therefore empty. His disciples did not steal the body, as the Jewish leaders claimed. God had resurrected him with his power.

If it is so, then the resurrection of Jesus is a fact that did not happen principally in the minds of the disciples. It happened in the physical reality. It happened so physically that as its side-effect a negative picture of him was produced on the linen cloth. It happened so physically that "in the time of electric light" we can perhaps say something what happened to the molecules of his body: the vast energy changed them into plasma and they went through the linen.

And therefore we have historical and physical evidence of this event.

I personally think that this is at least interesting for the Christian faith. And we could be thankful to God about this piece of evidence, at least modestly thankful, even when we do not base our faith on it.

⁴ "The certainty that he who is the bringer of the new eon cannot finally have succumbed to the powers of the old eon made the experience of the Resurrection the decisive test of the Christ character of Jesus of Nazareth. A real experience made it possible for the disciples to apply the known symbol of resurrection to Jesus, thus acknowledging him definitely as the Christ. The called this experienced event the Resurrection of the Christ", and it was a combination of event and symbol.

The attempt has been made to describe both events, the cross and the Resurrection, as factual events separated from their symbolic meaning. This is justified, in so far as the significance of both symbols rests on the combination of symbol and fact. Without the factual element, the Christ would not have participated in the existence and consequently not have been Christ. But the desire to isolate the factual from the symbolic element is, as has been shown before, not a primary interest of faith. The results of the research for the purely factual element can never be on the basis of faith or theology." (Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol I, 154)

⁵ "There are three theories which try to make the event of Resurrection probable. The most primitive theory, and at the same time most beautifully expressed, is the physical one. It is told in the story of the tomb which the women found empty on Easter morning. The sources of this story are rather late and questionable, and there is no indication of it in the earliest tradition concerning the event of the Resurrection, namely I Corinthians, chapter 15. Theologically speaking, it is a rationalization of the event, interpreting it with physical categories that identify resurrection with the presence or absence of a physical body. Then the absurd question arises as to what happened to the molecules which comprise the corpse of Jesus of Nazareth. Then absurdity compounded into blasphemy." (ST I; 155–156.)

According the New Testament faith can be born out of evidence

Even in the Bible there are indications that faith in the resurrection of Jesus can be born from physical evidence. According to the Gospel of John:

Peter then came out with the other disciple, and they both went toward the tomb. They both ran, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first; and stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb; he saw the linen cloths lying, and the napkin, which had been on his head, not lying with the linen cloths but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not know the scripture that he must rise from the dead (John 20:3-9)

Also, when the “other disciple” (meaning John the apostle?) had looked more carefully inside the tomb, he was convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead. Was it because the large shroud was not neatly folded or just thrown in one heap, but was in such a position as if the corpse wrapped in it was mystically evaporated or disappeared through it without the touching of a human hand?

A factual piece of evidence that is external to Bible and Tradition

Particularly interesting is the fact that the Shroud is in one sense a voice in the discussion about the interpretation of the resurrection *that is external* to Bible and the Tradition. Of course the shrouds are mentioned in the New Testament. And of course it is mentioned in the Tradition of the Church.

But still, when modern investigation became interested in the Shroud in the early 1900’s and started to find from it interesting details, then the Church and the clergy have not been first and most enthusiastic about it, but have rather been putting theological brakes on the enthusiasm. The Catholic Church, according to my understanding, doesn’t claim that the Shroud is authentic. The official position is something like that it might be authentic or not, but in any case it can help to understand the passion and resurrection of our Lord. The Protestant Churches have traditionally been very negative towards all relics. And many - but of course not all - theologically learned Protestants have in modern times interpreted the resurrection like Bultmann and Tillich.

So none of the churches has emphasized the investigation of the Shroud. The enthusiasts have come among the natural scientist and criminologists, who investigate the evidence of the Shroud as evidence from any ancient object.

And it is them, not the theologians, who have found so many convincing facts from it, that at least for me the Shroud has become a voice in the discussion about the right interpretation about the Resurrection of Jesus.

For me the Shroud speaks for the interpretation that the Christian faith is *also* about “hard facts”. Many would still prefer, like Bultmann and Tillich, that the Christian faith is mostly about a person’s inner values; a kind of personal feeling that gives comfort and power for being ethical.

This kind of an interpretation makes it possible for anyone to make for him or herself that kind of a Christianity that he or she personally likes. Or, if one wants, not to care about Jesus at all, on the basis that no “objective teaching” is more true in religious matters as any other. For some Finnish theologians who interpret the Protestant idea of the “Volks-kirche” (Religion of the nation) in a certain way, this interpretation of “religion” suits very well. They think that it makes the large

crowds stay as tax-paying members of the church, because everyone may take from the teaching of the church what he or she wants, because there are no permanent or objective truths about the matters of faith.

When someone or something challenges this religious autonomy of the western man in a way that invokes objectivity or science, it arouses bitter opposition. The whole worldview is challenged. If Jesus physically rose from the dead, then Christian faith is not purely a matter of what I feel or decide in my personal inner life.

Probably from this results most of the ridicule and criticism against the interest that the Shroud has created. It is not nice that there is factual evidence about the resurrection of Jesus. It is against the fact that I do not want to see the matter that way in my personal inner life.

Christian faith is not only a personal, inner matter. It is that also. But, thank God, the basis of the personal faith is a God who is external to our inner life. He really exists and acts, despite of what we are or how we act. Therefore Apostle Paul said: "If Christ did not rise from the dead, your faith is in vain."

The details that scientific investigation has found about the Shroud are an interesting theological thought-experiment for that, that Tillich was not right. Whether one believes in Jesus or not, still even science almost forces one to ask in front of it: Maybe there after all is a concrete, historical piece of evidence about Christ's resurrection?

A piece of evidence which is in accordance with the *theologia crucis*

This piece of evidence is, superficially looking, quite humble and weak. If you look at this linen cloth with normal vision, it is very difficult to believe that the omnipotent God had something special to do with it. It is quite natural to demand that the Almighty would have given better evidence for his most important act of salvation.

But God is just like this. According to Bible he hides his power into weakness. He hides his might and holiness in passion. Luther called this the "Theology of the Cross" (*theologia crucis*).

For the one who looks at the Shroud superficially, it reveals hardly anything. But for the one who looks carefully and with different eyes (concretely differently, as a negative), for he or she a different, new world is opened, a world of God's infinite power and wisdom, a world that has more than 50 nuclear plants behind it.

Those who do not want to look with different eyes, from them God hides himself. His Son becomes an object of opposition and mock. Something that one must bitterly speak against even if one doesn't know anything about the matter. We heard such talk also in our town of Savonlinna during and after the exhibition.

But this is just exactly what Jesus said about himself: "Hear with your own ears and do not understand, see with your own eyes and do not grasp!"

Faith is not only about hard facts

This whole paper of mine is, of course, talk of faith, not of science. I do not want to claim that science would reach that which is the content of Christian faith. In this sense Tillich was right. In the Christian Church we do not believe only in the facts we know from evidence. We believe through God's work in us.

And we believe so that (through God's grace) we apprehend for us *the meaning of the fact*. We could say, like Tillich, that we believe also in the *symbol* that interprets the fact. We believe in the fact that God has truly risen Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. But in the same time we believe in the *meaning of the fact*: in this act *God has saved me*. In the resurrection of Jesus God testifies for me that Jesus truly has overcome my sin. He has overcome the alienation that separates me from him. God testified in Jesus' resurrection that Jesus' teaching about the loving Heavenly Father is true. It is true also about me, through Jesus. In this way faith becomes also a personal relationship between me and the God who has created me and saved me. If one wants to call this a *symbol* that comes along with the *fact*, like Tillich did, I think this is fine.

Where Christian faith and science touch each other?

Whether the Shroud of Turin is authentic or not, the faith doesn't stand or fall with the answer to this question. In this matter the Catholic Church is correct. The object of faith is Christ, crucified, died and resurrected for us, not some linen cloth.

Still, as I said, the Shroud is an extremely interesting object for faith. In front of it science and faith touch each other. Also through science it is possible to see that some objective facts of our common reality probably can't be explained without supposing the Almighty God and his work.

What such matters are there? Some of them can be found through the following questions:

- 1) Why were the basic physical constants so extremely accurately balanced in the Big Bang? So that the evolving of an ordered cosmos could produce life?

Some scientist have proposed a theory of the *multiverse*: There exists an uncountable number of separate universes. In each of them the basic physical constants are randomly set, whatever they happen to be. However, because there are so extremely many universes, it is statistically likely that in some of them those constants just happen to be so that their constellation allows the birth of life in that particular universe. We have been so extremely lucky that we happen to exist just in such a universe. On the other hand, if it was some other universe with a different set of physical constants, there would be no one to ponder this happy coincidence.

I think that a better explanation is that we presuppose only one universe (because we can in principle know of no other). Its basic physical constants are fine-tuned exactly correctly for the birth of life because its Creator has set them correctly in his Wisdom (Logos).

- 2) How could the first living cell be born out of lifeless matter?

For the lifeless matter doesn't have in itself any idea of *semantic information*, i.e. that a certain sign represents a certain thing. And still, life itself is just that in the proteins of a living cell there is coded semantic information about how the metabolism and reproduction of the organism is handled with. How did this whole idea come up with? Was it that the lifeless soup of chemicals in the primeval sea just somehow got the idea that, "why not start producing semantic information about how to exist in the future?" Or was the reason the one which the Bible gives "In the beginning there was the Logos and the Logos was with God and the Logos was God."? I think it was. It is a better hypothesis than a random birth of information and life.

- 3) Why does the biological evolution seem to be designed for a purpose?

Can just natural selection and random chance really produce the wonderful richness of life? Do not the observations hint that an intelligent Creator is also needed, who is steering natural selection and chance towards a purpose? The same who in the beginning set the physical constants exactly so that they made possible a universe that could produce life? The One who later gave the lifeless matter the information that life needs? The One whom the Bible describes: “In him there was life and life was the light of men”?

4) The Shroud of Turin

How on earth can its details speak so amazingly and superhumanly strong about the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth? Doesn't this testify that God is, besides the Creator, also the Redeemer and the Holy Ghost?

As said, science itself doesn't give these answers. But science can at least say: “So far we can scientifically explain these things but not further. Still it strongly seems that some further explanation is needed.”

So a theological conversation can get started. In it the Christian faith says: “I know the further explanation. God has revealed it to us in his word.”

Food of the soul

Such narrow meeting-points between science and Christian faith are interesting in our times. A contemporary man thirsts after something that is bigger than his or her personal preferences. Something that is true; not an ideology of some interest group for power and money. Something that feeds the soul and doesn't leave it hungry and always searching for something new.

Stop in front of the Shroud of Turin (or its copy), and you might be surprised by the joy of finding that there may, after all, be such a reality. That is not rhetoric of a preacher or a theologian or a politician or a philosopher, but a “hard fact” - a hard fact that challenges you to take sides.

Namely take sides on the question of who the man of the Shroud is. In this question a door is opened into a reality which promises divine food for a human soul.