

THE SHROUD AND THE GOSPELS AMONG HISTORY SCIENCE AND FAITH

Some epistemological remarks

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ABSTRACT

Some questions underlie the way of facing the challenge that the Shroud poses to historical, scientific and religious knowledge and thought. These questions constitute as many crucial epistemological points. In order to favour a critical, fair and peaceful debate among scientific disciplines and religious confessions it is necessary to make clear these questions and to free the ground of dangerous misunderstandings.

What do we mean by faith, by history, by science? To which type of faith-reason relationship do we refer? Which historical and scientific standards must be reached to acknowledge the authenticity of the Shroud? And which to accept the historical credibility of the Gospels?

Moreover: what is the relationship between the Shroud and the Gospels? To what degree is faith involved in the process of rational research on these documents? Is it right to give credit to the Gospels as reliable historical sources among those prior to 15th century? Is it possible to consider the hypothesis of resurrection as one of the physical phenomena that could have formed the body image on the Shroud?

This work intends to present what Catholic theological research can offer in order to get to a critical understanding of these questions, in their connection and relevance to the Shroud, the Gospels and Jesus Christ's figure as historical-religious problem.

INTRODUCTION

Just like other matters, but in a quite peculiar manner, the *Shroud* represents a real *provocation to the intelligence*, as John Paul II has affirmed.¹ For two reasons at least:

1. Because the Shroud represents an *enigma* that science is not yet able to solve.

2. Because if the Shroud really should result what it appears to be – namely the burial cloth that wrapped up Nazarene Jesus' dead body in Jerusalem – we should have a highly worth *historical document* at our disposal. The Shroud should prove evangelical narratives about Jesus' passion and death, and at the same time – inevitably – it should set some basic *theological questions*, like particularly the meaning of that death and the possibility of resurrection itself.

This challenge involves on one side – from the point of view of the object's reality – a lot of *historical and scientific disciplines*. On the other hand – looking at the significance of the traces found on the Shroud – it brings in some *theological disciplines*. So in front of the Shroud, a classic and basic matter of the history of culture comes up again: the *faith-reason* relationship, that is the relation between religion and theology on one side and science, history and philosophy on the other side. Such an important challenge requests to be faced according to clear, exact and shared epistemological, hermeneutical and methodological standards, that could open the way in direction

¹ John Paul II, *Homily in the Cathedral of Turin during the Celebration of the Word and the Veneration of the Shroud*, 24/05/1998.

of an appropriate understanding of the Shroud nature and value, either on historical or scientific or religious level.

Starting from a theological contribution, I intend to suggest some notes useful to research *basic epistemological, hermeneutic and methodological criteria* for a critical approach towards the Shroud of Turin.²

Those criteria concern:

- 1.** *Faith* – in the most wide and universal meaning, not exclusively religious – understood such as a way of knowledge peculiar of every scholar, near and together with *reason*.
- 2.** The distinction among the range of pertinence respectively owned by *theology, history* and other *sciences* as to the Shroud.
- 3.** The historical value of *apostolic witness*, besides his faith value.
- 4.** The way of using *Gospels* and *New Testament*, together with other historical documents and scientific instruments, to understand the Shroud.
- 5.** The complex historical event of the *Jesus' passion, death, burial and resurrection* as hypothesis concerning the origin of the Shroud.

SOME QUESTIONS

My remarks start from a sequence of *questions* that can raise in front of the Shroud. Some of these questions frequently emerge in explicit form. Others are more often implicit. And others don't seem to mature in the public debate neither in the personal reflection of the researchers. All must be considered openly, attentively and serenely, without any fears.

What could we think of the Shroud if we did not know the Gospels? Is the Shroud problem inevitably connected to the Jesus problem? Beyond their intentionality of faith, do the canonical Gospels constitute trustworthy historical evidences? Is it historically and scientifically admissible the hypothesis that the image on the Shroud is produced by Jesus' passion, death, burial and resurrection? How much does the faith of the researchers condition the study of the Shroud and of the Gospels? Does the acknowledgement of historicity of the Gospels and of authenticity of the Shroud necessarily bind to believe in Christ? Could the Shroud be considered an evidence of Jesus' resurrection? And can resurrection be considered a demonstration of Christ's divinity?

SOME BASIC EPISTEMOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

Some basic *epistemological issues* underlie these simple questions. From the answers that are given to the firsts depend in good part the solutions to the seconds. Often, in fact, the researchers that compared themselves about the Shroud use same terms attributing to them, in reality, different meanings. It is of fundamental importance, then, to clarify the sense of these concepts to understand each others.

What do we mean by *faith*? What do we mean by *history*? What do we mean by *science*? To what type of *faith-reason* relationship do we refer? What *standards* of historicity and scientificity should have a document to be recognized authentic?

² See Parrini P., *Epistemologia*, in *Enciclopedia Garzanti di Filosofia e Epistemologia, Logica Formale, Linguistica, Psicologia, Psicoanalisi, Pedagogia, Antropologia Culturale, Teologia, Religioni, Sociologia [EGF]*, Milano, 1981, p. 256; Vattimo G., *Interpretazione*, in *EGF*, pp. 450-452; Mancini I., *Ermeneutica*, in *Nuovo dizionario di teologia [NDT]*, Cinisello Balsamo, 1985, pp. 370-382; Sequeri P. A., *Ermeneutica e filosofia*, in *Dizionario teologico interdisciplinare [DTI]*, vol. 2, Casale Monferrato, 1977, pp. 60-73; Molari C., *Ermeneutica e linguaggio*, in *DTI*, vol. 2, pp. 74-94; Serenthà L., *Prospettive per una visione organica della teologia*, in *DTI*, vol.3, pp. 673-681.

ABOUT FAITH

I want to introduce a specific contribution to the solution of such matters coming from Catholic interdisciplinary theological research. I begin with some remarks about the concept of *faith*.³

Semantic, phenomenological and theological analysis of the major religious traditions shows that the meaning of faith is: *to rest one's own heart upon someone or something*. Normally such faith is understood as *religious*, but *non necessarily* and *not always* it is so. It depends on the reference point that is chosen: even human people, causes, ideals, affairs, objectives instead of God.

According to psychological analysis, faith consists in defining one's own life around a *reference point* considered of *transcendent value* and able to practice an *absolute power* in forging one's own existence. Moreover, faith is a *fundamental* and *universal* human feature: every man has a form of faith, nobody can live without it. Psychology also recognizes in faith a *cognitive process* that is separate, parallel and complementary to rational cognitive process.⁴

Theology, that is *intelligentia fidei*, joins the two cognitive processes, the one to believe and the other to reason.⁵ From this point of view, faith shows itself as a form, a way, a method, of *participating knowledge*: it is the way of *empathy*, according to present psychology; the way of *connaturality*, according to the theology of Thomas Aquinas; the way of *love*, according to common experience.⁶

ABOUT FAITH-REASON RELATIONSHIP

How does it place this tendency among different models of *faith-reason relationship* that appear in our cultural outline?⁷ Somebody considers faith and reason antithetical, conflicting, alternatives the one to the other: *aut fides aut ratio*. Among these, who prefers faith to reason develops a *fideistic* model, that is culturally expressed in the enslavement of philosophy and science to theology: *philosophia et scientia ancillae theologiae*. In this formulation, rationality exclusively or primarily serves to agree with faith. To the opposite one, who prefers reason to faith elaborates a *rationalistic* model, that reduces faith to superstition and obscurantism, exalting instead *la lumière de la raison*.

Thinkers by different tendencies, instead, look for a model able to integrate faith and reason in a *cognitive complementarity*. The proposed solutions are different, and the models that derive appear at times incompatible among them. However, all are inspired by a similar concept, well expressed by John Paul II at the beginning of his encyclical *Fides et ratio*: "Faith and reason are two wings that make able the human spirit to rise itself toward the contemplation of truth."⁸ In order not to be closed in itself, in the blindness of fideism and in the darkness of superstition, faith

³ See Fowler J.W., *Stages of Faith*, San Francisco, 1981, pp. 3-15; Malantrucco A., *L'analisi delle dinamiche evolutive della fede nella teologia genetica di James W. Fowler: un'intuizione da riprendere?*, in *Ricerche Teologiche*, 1/2001, pp. 77-106.

⁴ See Pinkus L., *Sul processo di fede*, in Dotolo C. (ed.), *Il Credo oggi: percorsi interdisciplinari*, Bologna, 2001, pp. 29-35; Andreoli V., *Il paradosso di Abramo*, in *Avvenire*, 18/9/2001.

⁵ See Lonergan B., *Method in theology*, London, 1971; Alszehy Z. - Flick M., *Come si fa teologia*, Cinisello Balsamo, 1985; Fisichella R., *La rivelazione: evento e credibilità*, Bologna, 1985; Idem, *Quando la fede pensa*, Casale Monferrato, 1997.

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae. Seconda secundae*, q. 45 a. 2; see Galimberti U., *Dizionario di psicologia*, Torino, 1992, pp. 337-338; Lambiasi F., *Gesù di Nazaret: una verifica storica*, Casale Monferrato, 1984, pp. 39-41; Minotti P. - Moro V., *Rendere ragione*, Torino, 1994, pp. 331-361.

⁷ See the ample and articulated debate that is followed to the publication of the encyclical of John Paul II *Fides et ratio* on the numbers 5/1998, 1/1999 and 2/2000 of the magazine *MicroMega*, directed by Paolo Flores d'Arcais.

⁸ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, Città del Vaticano, 1998.

has to be able to make reason for itself. And reason, on the other side, has to be able to open itself toward different dimensions, abdicating the claim to reach the possession of truth all by itself.⁹

ABOUT SCIENCE

Now, it comes the crucial epistemological issue, that particularly, but not exclusively, concerns *science*. It is the question regarding the judgement criterion about knowledge: *what is truth?*¹⁰

For engraved, it is the same question asked by Pilatus to Jesus during his trial in praetorium, when the Nazarene affirmed that he was come for making testimony to the truth. To this question Jesus didn't answer in front of the representative of the greatest human power at that time. Only to his disciples he said: "*I am the truth!*"...¹¹

Science found itself on *verifiability* criterion, but *truth* is not exclusively identifiable with everything which can be verified. In fact, if everything that is verifiable is certainly true, not everything that is true is certainly verifiable.¹² Therefore, science must to acknowledge and to respect the existence of other different competence fields, as those of *philosophy* and *theology*. To them right peers and possibilities are up to searching truth.

Truth is not the same thing as certainty. *Truth* is the correspondence between the result of the process of human knowledge and objective reality. *Certainty* is instead the subjective awareness, individual and/or collective, of having achieved truth.

What *criteria* must to be used – either on historical or scientific or religious plan -, and what *standards of certainty* are necessary to definitely establish the authenticity of the Shroud? And what *authorities* can resolve this problem?

ABOUT HISTORY

First of all, the Shroud must be considered as a *historical document*.¹³ Every scientific check must be framed on this background. Every consideration of its religious value follows from this starting point. According to *Arnaldo Momigliano*, the study of ancient history is a *game* with its *rules* to be respected.¹⁴ Historians work also for *understanding* past events, not only for *reconstructing* them. It is absolutely necessary to directly know the *sources*, to work on the original documents, not to be satisfied with second-hand elaborations. Besides, every source must not be studied by itself, but in the context of all the others – literary, archaeological, iconographic, oral... –, in an *omnipresent* way.¹⁵

Not every *fact* that happens in the history is *historical*. It is historical only when it is an event full of *meaning*.¹⁶ Both elements are fundamental, in the context of historical investigation. They must be distinguished, but not separated, punishment the loss of the historical value of facts. From one side, *positivist historicism* makes the mistake to exclusively put in prominence the fact sacrificing its meaning. To the opposite side, *kerygmatic fideism* privileges the meaning losing the importance of the fact.¹⁷ They are both unacceptable forms of historical *reductionism*.

⁹ Minotti P. - Moro V., *Rendere ragione...*, pp. 332-333.

¹⁰ Ibidem, pp. 358-361.

¹¹ John 14:6; 18:38.

¹² Minotti P. - Moro V., *Rendere ragione...*, p. 359.

¹³ Russi A., *Relazione introduttiva al Worldwide Congress "Sindone 2000"*, in Marinelli - E. Russi A. (edd.), *Sindone 2000. Atti del congresso mondiale, Orvieto 27-28-29 2000*, San Severo, 2002, vol. 1, pp. XLI-XLIV.

¹⁴ Momigliano A., *Storia e storiografia antica*, Bologna, 1987, pp. 15-23.

¹⁵ Sisinni F., *Intervento*, in Marinelli - E. Russi A. (edd.), *Sindone 2000...*, vol. 2, pp. 407-408.

¹⁶ Lambiasi F., *Gesù di Nazaret...*, p. 39.

¹⁷ Ibidem, *Gesù di Nazaret...*, p. 40.

ABOUT METHOD

What *method* should we use searching truth in such a complex matter as the *Shroud problem*? A prominent scholar, *Jean Guitton*, has given a fundamental contribution to the *historical-critical Jesus problem*.¹⁸ His lesson deserves to be taken back. He asserted that every *method* is good if it remains a method, and every *appearance* is true if it is recognized as appearance. And he proposed the *critical-dialectical* method, that for its features I also retain applicable to the Shroud problem: to pass from the appearances to truth through the plausibility of all the alternatives, of the reasons for and against, up to reach the indisputable least result, that is certainty of impossibility of the opposite solutions.

This method has the merit to consider all the positions in the intent to reach truth. It is useful, therefore, to overcome sterile and harmful polemics. In this sense, Guitton recognized his mental attitude in a motto of *Henry Dominique Lacordaire*, that I would invite to make becoming common patrimony of the Shroud researchers: “*I do not try to convince my adversary that he is wrong, but to join with him in a higher truth.*”

ABOUT EXEGETICAL METHOD

To establish their level of historicity, methods used in the *exegetical analysis* of the evangelical texts deserve a particular attention. It is always necessary to keep in mind that in the field of exegesis there are no dogmas or infallible teachers. Every exegetical method shows determinate *merits* as certain *lacks*, too.¹⁹ Then, it will be useful to enrich the research by *comparison* of different methods and of *results* brought by every of them: philological, literary, historical, theological.

ABOUT HISTORICITY OF THE GOSPELS

Now I come to consider the *historical trustworthiness* of the evangelical texts. The canonical Gospels show from their inside a *claim* of historical authenticity that any external source, – either literary or archaeological or iconographical –, beyond surreptitious or prejudicial interpretations, currently seems to be able to deny.²⁰ Rather, the Shroud fully confirms historicity of the *fundamental nucleus* around which the evangelical narratives have been written: Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection.

In turn, historicity of the evangelical narratives allows to formulate *plausible hypothesis* about the genesis of the Shroud. Conditions subsist so that the canonical Gospels can be counted among *historical sources* preceding the 15th century useful to understand the Shroud.

ABOUT RESURRECTION

Finally, I introduce some remarks about the key event of Jesus’ story, that connects the Shroud to the Gospel. An event, besides, very discussed either to historical or scientific level: the *resurrection*. Now I would not to come to the same end of Paul the apostle at the Areopagus in

¹⁸ Guitton J., *Le problème de Jésus et les fondements du témoignage chrétien*, Paris, 1953; Idem, *Le problème de Jésus: Divinité et Résurrection*, Paris, 1953; Idem, *Jésus*, Paris, 1956.

¹⁹ See Maggioni B., *Esegesi*, in *DTI*, vol. 2, pp. 101-110; Idem, *Esegesi biblica*, in *Nuovo dizionario di teologia biblica [NDTB]*, Cinisello Balsamo, 1988, pp. 497-507; Buzzetti C., *Esegesi ed ermeneutica*, in *DTI*, vol. 2, pp. 110-126; Grech P., *Ermeneutica*, in *NDTB*, 1988, pp. 464-489.

²⁰ Lk 1:1-4; Jn 19:35; 20:30-31; 21:24-25; see also Ac 2:14-36; 3:11-16; 1 Co 15:12-20; 2 P 1:12-21; 1 Jn 1:1-4; II Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, § 19.

Athens: when he began to talk to Athenians about Jesus' resurrection, nobody still wanted to listen to him...²¹

First of all, it is opportune to clarify that resurrection is an *event* scientifically unknown, but *historically known*.²² Science is not able to explain it, but history enumerates it among the events that mostly have marked it. What is unknown to science it is *not* for this reason *impossible*. Any scientific discovery has happened passing from unknowing to knowledge. Science is not able to understand everything. We cannot deny the existence of something for the only reason that we are not able to understand it.

Moreover, it is useful to develop some remarks about historicity of evangelical narratives of Jesus' resurrection. If resurrection were a *myth* rather than historical narrative, why would the evangelists be limited to narrate only its effects and not everything of its prodigious course? Why would they have transgressed in so evident and self-injuring way to usual laws of *fabulation*? Again, the way according to which the apostles came to believe in resurrection – that is the attribution of first testimony to a socially little accredited people as a group of women, as also the difficulties and the delays manifested by the eleven disciples in the maturation of their faith – testifies for *credibility* of the evangelical narratives of the Easter.

"There are two ways to face the resurrection problem", Jean Guitton wrote. *"Two ways that are joined, tied the one to the other as the premises of the first figure syllogism, in which the most greater enunciates an a priori proposition, a demand and the smaller one an a posteriori proposition, an existence. Who believes in resurrection supposes first of all an axiom set by philosophical intelligence, axiom that enunciates: resurrection is not impossible, it is possible and it has its place in a general conception of nature, of being and of becoming. Then comes an experience based on phenomenon. And here we are not philosophers any more, but historians: we study testimonies based on a fact «only in its kind», we assume the attitude of the erudite one. The belief, sees in a deep way, concludes, that is reassumes, synthesizes, recapitulates these two antecedent propositions: resurrection is possible, resurrection has been ascertained. Here, as in the supreme problems, it is necessary to hold together two points of view, two education, two attitudes of spirit: the first one, that is the knowledge of the preliminary one and the implicit one, of that whole logical infrastructure that enters our smallest thoughts, it is a function of the pure thought of the «philosophy»; the second attitude would derive rather from the knowledge of the singular called «history»."*²³

Some consequences follow from a *logical* and *rational* formulation of the resurrection problem. It is methodologically incorrect to start from the *a priori* that resurrection is impossible. It is epistemologically fundamental to distinguish the *fact* of resurrection from its *meaning*. One thing it is to ascertain that a man is risen from dead, other thing it is to assert, instead, that such event is supernatural, or that it shows the divinity of its subject. It is historically and scientifically legitimate to formulate as *hypothesis* of formation of the image on the Shroud a testified event as Jesus' passion, death, burial and resurrection.

Besides, if resurrection has really happened, it is a fact that must have had *physical consequences*, whose traces can scientifically be noticed and analysed.²⁴ We have to try, then, to go up again from the analysis of traces to the understanding of the *nature of the event*, as far as this is possible to human reason by technical and scientific instrumentation that it has at its disposal. From the point of view of the relationship between scientific understanding of the phenomenon and its religious interpretation, the *Shroud problem* shows evident analogies with that of *miracles*.

²¹ Ac 17:16-34.

²² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Città del Vaticano, 1992, §§ 638ss.

²³ Guitton J., *Filosofia della risurrezione*, Roma, 1981 (French original 1978), pp. 11-12.

²⁴ See Lindner E., *La Santa Sindone e la Risurrezione*, Karlsruhe, 1997; Persili A., *Sulle tracce del Cristo risorto*, Tivoli, 2000; Petrosillo O., *Lectio inauguralis*, in Marinelli - E. Russi A. (edd.), *Sindone 2000...*, vol. 1, pp. LI-LXXIII.

recognition. In both cases, fields of competences and limits of involved scientific disciplines are the same.

CONCLUSIONS

I want to conclude my reflection reporting two quotations that can help us to understand the Jesus problem – among history, science and faith – in the light of the Gospels and of the Shroud testimonies.

Rightly noticed Jean Guitton: “*Any miracle, however great, cannot be considered as a proof of divinity. Divinity cannot be proved by a fact, however extraordinary. The proof, the human reason to believe, can only consist in an attestation of this person that attains to himself, to his intimacy. When it is a question to know what an individual is in his more hidden fund, WHO he is, only he is the witness.*”²⁵

In 1956, still without the knowledges about the Shroud that we have today at our disposal, Guitton noticed too: “*I do not know what is to think about the Shroud of Turin, on which the face of Christ, it is said, is printed in negative. I can doubt its authenticity from the point of view of history, of exegesis, of chemistry. Yet I measure the exceptional interest that a test of authenticity would have for that sheet; then Jesus' figure in passion would be proposed to the people of our century without interposition of verifications. Of stories and of human testimonies, that use in direct, defective signs. We would hold the reproduction of the signs of suffering; the Shroud would be an ante litteram photograph, that progress of science did not make conceivable before 19th century, since photography has allowed to find again the negative of the pains-man and therefore to overcome in precision, in suggestion, the Passion Gospel. It will have to leave to an investigation, for which by now we have the means, the care to know how the things are. But the analysis of a cloth, and even the film shot of passion, supposed that it was possible in the year 33, would not give us any light about Jesus' divinity, more necessary to faith than passion, to which it confers everything of its sense. Here we are not to the mercy of a chemical analysis of aromas, or of a determined observation of a historian about fabrics, about customs. Here the texts are to the course of every reader, their study, their comparison is not so much difficulty.*”²⁶

Theologically, resurrection represents only a *sign* of Jesus' divinity that does not constrain to believe.²⁷ The hypothesis that resurrection has originated the image on the Shroud is *not depending* from faith in Jesus as God. The same Jesus, in fact, said: “*If they do not listen to Moses and prophets, not even if a man would raise from dead they will be convinced.*”²⁸

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²⁵ Guitton J., *Gesù*, Leumann, 1997 (French original 1956), p. 222.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 243.

²⁷ See Fisichella R., *La rivelazione...*

²⁸ Lk 16:31.

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