



**His Holiness Khalifa Hazrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad
A New Champion for the Shroud?
by David Rolfe**

The Shroud of Turin does not make life easy for its champions. Mention an interest in the Shroud in general conversation and, before the next few syllables can be uttered, a glazed and vaguely patronising expression begins to form. Echoing in the recesses of the listener's subconscious somewhere will be the C14 verdict given by the late Prof. Edward Hall that anyone giving credence to the subject is a "*flat-earther*". Well, greetings to my fellow "flat-earthers". As the proud new editor of this august journal my aim, with your help, is to resurrect this subject to its rightful place as the profound and fascinating mystery that, for anyone who has taken time to examine it with an open mind, it undoubtedly is. That applies to wherever one might stand on the religious spectrum from Dawkinite to Pope and everything in between and in all the various expressions of the world's faiths. I had almost given up hope that this might be remotely achievable. However, an inspired decision made by the his Holiness, the Khalifa, pictured above, has restored my optimism.

Of course, the Shroud does garner headlines from time to time but so does Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, Crop Circles and the Bermuda Triangle. The Shroud and its image hovers in a general public awareness of "weird things" which probably have a simple explanation if only one cared to look. But these days, few people do care. Why? Because the late Professor Hall went way beyond his brief and certainly outside his field. When asked to explain the Shroud, he proclaimed: "*There was a multi-million pound business in making forgeries during the fourteenth century. Someone just got a bit of linen, faked it up, and flogged it.* Mmm...From the moment that sentence was uttered and reported and given Professor Hall's "alpha" status, the doors

of academia slammed shut on the subject. Overnight The Shroud of Turin became “taboo” for distinguished scholar of all disciplines who wished to retain credibility. Thankfully, there are a few braver and more insightful exceptions.



The person sitting next to Prof. Hall when this verdict was uttered was the “independent” overseer of the Carbon 14 test, Prof. Michael Tite. (Left.) It may come as a surprise to some that, without any fanfare, and in the absence of any corroborative evidence, Tite, himself, nearly three decades later, has now been forced to reject the “*faked it up*” theory and come up with one of his own.

BBC World Service Radio has a strand that they seem to use mostly for giving trainee reporters something to get experience on and one duly went along to Oxford to interview Michael Tite on his experiences with the Shroud. The Professor, given the low profile of the event, was probably more relaxed and unguarded than he might otherwise have been. (The whole interview will be on the BSTS website so you can judge for yourself.) Here is the essence of it: Prof. Tite discounted Hall’s assertion that the Shroud must be “faked up” as there is: “*No evidence for paint and also a medieval forger would have done what all medieval artists did which was to place the nails in the palms which we now know through both experiment and archaeology is not how crucifixion works.*”

You might, at this point, just like the BBC reporter, have begun to think that a retraction or at least a question mark over the irrefutability of the C14 date was about to come forth. The professor continues and gives us his own theory. “*The cloth must have once wrapped a genuine victim of a crucifixion.*” The reporter is, at this point, mentally rehearsing his acceptance speech for the Sony Radio Awards for achieving the scoop of the year. “**Oxford Professor Reverses C14 Verdict on Shroud**”. A hope quickly dashed.

“*Given the unassailability of the C14 medieval date*”, Tite continues, “*This must have been a medieval crucifixion*”. Now the reporter is really confused. “*But...who?...why?...what?*”. “*Well...*” Replies the Professor. “*It was the time of the crusades and I think some Muslim soldiers must have given a captured Christian soldier a crucifixion in mockery of Christ.*”

“But what about the image?” Asks the reporter. The Professor explains that the perfectly homogenous and graduated image along the 14ft length of the cloth must be the chance result of staining by bodily fluids exuded during decomposition “*somehow or other*” interacting with the linen. Well, there you have it. Case closed. Again!

You will notice that I used quotation marks around the word “independent” in describing Prof. Tite. The reason is that Harry Gove, in his book on the whole C14 affair, called Tite’s independence into question. He reported a conversation that suggested that Tite was lined up to succeed Hall *before* the C14 test was carried out and implied that the future of the department would be on a much sounder footing if Oxford was (a) successful in being selected to date the Shroud and, (b) also by implication, if it could do so definitively.

If Harry Gove’s report is true then Professor Tite would not only have compromised his own integrity but also that of the British Museum who he was then formally representing. I have put this to Professor Tite on two separate occasions and asked him to comment or refute it. He has chosen not to do so. I will be sending him his own personal copy of this publication and hereby invite him again to deny this. If he does, I will apologise profusely for repeating Gove’s assertion in the next edition. I will also send a copy of this to the British Museum. It seems fair. Which is more than can be said for the way Hall and Tite treated their opportunity to date Shroud.

The Church, in all innocence, assumed that by yielding to the clamour for the C14 test to be carried out, they could, at the very least, rely on the labs to put their best objective and dispassionate foot forward. How wrong could they be.

Up for grabs in the highly competitive world of C14 dating were the Lab’s respective commercial futures. Not all of them would be chosen. Behind the scenes a bitter fight for contention was underway. Of course, they all dutifully went through the motions required of them to ensure that the test, whoever carried it out, could be definitive. They established protocols both for themselves and for the Church to keep to in order for the test to be reliable.

I had a close up view of these machinations. The BBC and RAI, following their success with my 1978 film on the Shroud, *The Silent Witness*, had welcomed my proposal for a follow up on the C14 test. Turin, in discussion with the Vatican, also agreed that this film would be the most appropriate and independent way of recording the whole process and announcing the result. A contract was drawn up.

It was to be an ambitious project made possible by the established protocols. The most significant of which, from the film’s point of view, was that the test would be carried out “blind”. The labs would not be able to distinguish

between the Shroud and other control samples. This meant that the evening of the broadcast could climax with the announcement of the result.

Such a TV “moment” justified the resources and budget I had put forward which also included the costs of ensuring that STuRP - the Team that examined the shroud in 1978 - could have participated and brought their unique knowledge of the cloth to bear on the selection of the most reliable areas of the cloth to select the *multiple* samples from as laid down in the protocols.

The project collapsed when Prof. Luigi Gonella, the coordinator of the exercise, at the very moment the contract was to be signed, informed me that the established protocols could/would not be adhered to but the test would go ahead anyway. You can imagine my disappointment. It was only when John Klotz published his meticulously researched treatise* on the whole affair in 2016 that I fully understood the background to what had happened.

However, the C14 bandwagon had gathered so much momentum that, despite the diverse reasons that had led to the abandonment of the protocols, it could not be stopped. If the Church had pulled out it would have seemed that they had lost their nerve and the Labs finally selected by Prof. Michael Tite, Oxford being one, were never going to let this opportunity slip from their grasp.

There was another, more positive, reason the Church did not pull out. The weight of evidence as laid out so clearly in Ian Wilson’s best seller and my film which accompanied it had established a body of evidence that, at the very least, revealed the Shroud to be a spectacularly unique Christ-like artefact with a potentially viable ancient Middle-Eastern provenance. The world-wide publicity created seemed to have given society a pause for thought on the inevitability of the decline in Christianity triggered by the dawn of the Age of Reason and the concomitant reassessment of the historicity of the gospels. Among the faithful and the uncommitted there was a certain “hope”, for want of a better word, in the air. In the UK there is even a detectable flattening out of the rate of decline in C.of.E. attendance.

In the intervening years between the release of *The Silent Witness* and Ian’s book, he and I were involved in another film/book project. I had been appointed as producer/director of the UK’s new Channel 4’s first foray into religious broadcasting. The new channel was free of the oversight from committees made up of the great and good from the major religions which all TV in the UK had been up to this point. My then employer, LWT (now merged into UK’s ITV) had put a proposal forward for a major series with the title *Jesus - The Evidence*.

I, together with researcher Jean Claude Bragard (who would later become

Head of BBC's Religious TV), were to have two years and a very generous network budget to make three hours of film on the subject of the historical Jesus. Like all such projects it was natural to have an associated book and I put forward Ian Wilson for the task and he was duly appointed. There was something slightly masochistic in my suggestion as Ian and I had had plenty of quite lively disagreements over the Shroud project but the success of the end result allowed me, at any rate, to regard them as productive creative tensions. To a large extent this was repeated with *Jesus - The Evidence*. As author of the accompanying book, Ian, as a practising Catholic, was inclined to look at the evidence as a glass half-full while the TV series, under my direction, portrayed it as half-empty.

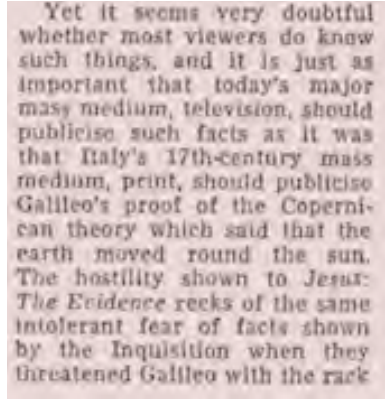


The religious authorities and much of the Christian public were outraged by the iconoclastic thrust and accompanying imagery which included an exploding effigy of Jesus in his depiction bearing his sacred heart. Even I, looking back now, think this was unnecessarily offensive. At the time, I had felt it justified as it conveyed the palpable anger I had felt in researching the subject. It had not taken long to discover that the teachings of the church to the ordinary person in the pews were patronisingly simplistic. None of the insights into the redactional aspects of the gospels as revealed by New Testament scholarship during the previous hundred years or so had been allowed to filter down. Presumably, because the laity might not be able to look beyond the historical realities to see the "greater truth" as could only be revealed by faith alone. Mmm...

Where am I going with this? You may well ask. The series became the target of a very vitriolic and well orchestrated campaign mounted by

Evangelicals to discredit it. With one or two notable exceptions, the reactionary elements of the press fell in with them as it gave them a stick with which to beat the new and fiercely independent Channel 4. It was even relayed to me that the Queen, as Defender of the Faith, was displeased.

There were some cooler heads. While he was no fan of the series as a piece of filmmaking, Chris Dunkley, highly respected TV critic of the Financial Times, gave it a lot of space and I reproduce a key paragraph here. I include it because it includes a reference to Galileo and I will argue that what happened with the C14 testing of the Shroud also has something to do with what happened to him albeit centuries ago. Something, subconsciously perhaps, has to explain why Professor Hall, a highly respected scientist, should have spoken so “*unscientifically*”, when he made his damning pronouncements about the Shroud.



Yet it seems very doubtful whether most viewers do know such things, and it is just as important that today's major mass medium, television, should publicise such facts as it was that Italy's 17th-century mass medium, print, should publicise Galileo's proof of the Copernican theory which said that the earth moved round the sun. The hostility shown to Jesus: The Evidence reeks of the same intolerant fear of facts shown by the Inquisition when they threatened Galileo with the rack

Given what we now know and acting as I am sure he would with any other secular artefact for dating, instead of his “rant”, I would have expected Prof. Hall to have said something more measured and scientific. For example: *“We were delighted to have been among the laboratories chosen for this task. As you might expect, there was a great deal of discussion about how to make sure we would get the most accurate and reliable result. To that end a series of protocols were agreed among all the participants, the church included. These were approved by the representative of the British Museum who were appointed by the church to be the independent adjudicators of the test. I have to tell you that for various reasons, when the time actually came to carry out the test, all five of the agreed protocols had been set aside.*

“The Dead Sea Scrolls were recently dated and we can be quite confident about their C14 date because they were found in protective clay jars in a cave where that they had lain undisturbed for two millennia. The Shroud, on the other hand, is entirely different. We do not have full knowledge of its manner of keeping or of the vicissitudes - including at least one major fire - to which it may have been exposed over its potential age range. It is unlikely but nevertheless possible that such things may have had an affect on the chemistry of the cloth.

“All this said, I can tell you that the single sample from a corner that we were eventually given to test is from around 1260-1390. A date that fits within the object's known provenance.”

If Hall had *wanted* to be particularly fair and scientifically judicious he would have added something like this:

“Among the protocols abandoned was the appointment of the scientific team who had previously studied the shroud. They would have selected a range of different sample sights to be certain that we would not test a sample from an anomalous area. This omission is regrettable as was the original stipulated protocol that the test was performed blind alongside the control samples. It is perhaps relevant to point out that the reason for this was not of our making. Professor Tite of the British Museum who was charged with selecting control samples, despite access to the world’s other collections, could not find a medieval linen cloth that had a similar weave pattern. On this basis, the Shroud’s cloth itself would appear to be a very rare example of a medieval linen.

We were not charged with any responsibility except for dating and, as I have said, I have no doubt about the accuracy of the date of the specific part of the cloth we eventually were to have access to.

You ask me to comment on what the Shroud could be if it is not authentic. This I am wholly unqualified to do. However, I can comment that given the value of relics in the middle ages the temptation for someone to try and fake something like the Shroud must have been considerable. But that said, as far as I know, there are no detectable traces of a medium such a forger would have used or an explanation for the way the various minutiae of a Roman crucifixion are depicted. In that sense, irrespective of this dating of one fragment of a corner, the cloth remains a genuine mystery that science has so far not been able to unravel.

Instead, what we got from Hall was: *“There was a multi-million pound business in making forgeries during the fourteenth century. Someone just got a bit of linen, faked it up, and flogged it.”*



Prof. Edward Hall (L) and Prof. Michael Tite announcing the C14 result in Oct. 1988.

Why should such an eminent and respected scientist have behaved and spoken so unscientifically and without any of the parenthetical qualifications and caveats that he would certainly have included on any other purely secular dating objective?

Here is my theory in two parts: The C14 dating of the Shroud was a potential tipping point. Pending the result there was a degree of “held breath” in the air in both the religious and secular worlds. A 2,000 year old dating would reinvigorate the

Church and could even reverse its decline. A Church which, up to this point, had *still not* formally pardoned Galileo. I am not suggesting that this fact was actually weighed in the balance. However, this was the first moment in history when the Church had come, not as the ultimate authority, but as a “suppliant” to Science. It had, in effect, come to ask “Science” to validate its most significant relic and Science was to pronounce a verdict. And “Science”, personified by Prof. Hall, could not help itself. Given the opportunity, he made his pronouncement with the same cavalier contempt that the Church had heaped on scientists from Galileo to Darwin down the centuries. For good reason, the last thing a scientist might wish to see was a resurgent and unreformed Church.



Galileo facing the Inquisition prior to imprisonment and Charles Darwin as personified by Archbishop Wilberforce.

The second part of my theory is more to do with Hall’s own self-interest. However disposed he might have been his main motivation in vying to be appointed to perform the test was to establish his lab’s ability to date and to *date definitively*. The last thing he needed was something that his investors, waiting in the wings, might see as inconclusive and producing an anticlimax. And, if Harry Gove is to be believed, he had successfully “neutered” the test’s “independent” invigilator, Michael Tite, by lining him up to succeed him.

So, with this background in place, let me turn to the headline of this article. His Holiness, Hazrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad, unknown to me until three years ago, is the fifth Khalifa (Caliph) of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community. Elected to this lifelong position on 22nd April 2003, he serves as the worldwide spiritual head of an international religious organisation with membership exceeding 10’s of millions spread across over 209 countries.



His Holiness Khalifa Hazrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad views the Shroud of Turin for the first time during the 2010 exposition.

This community is perpetually endangered by its beliefs in the Messiah which caused it to break away from both the Sunni and Shia branches and resulted in other sects of Islam to ostracise the community. Though committed as any other religion to share and spread its beliefs it completely disavows the use of violence and not least for Jihad as we have come to understand it. On the contrary, “*Love for all and hatred for none.*” is its slogan. Both Sunni and Shia branches of Islam have pronounced a fatwa against all its members and many Ahmadiyyas were slaughtered in Pakistan from where most have now fled to find safer homes abroad.

In 1984, President Zia of Pakistan, under political pressure from Saudi Arabia, followed up earlier strictures and declared Ahmadiyya’s collectively to be “heretics” to Islam and from that moment, as things are, they will never be safe from persecution anywhere in the world. This was evidenced recently when a popular Glaswegian Ahmadiyya newsagent was stabbed to death in his own shop. The world HQ for the Ahmadiyya Community is now in the UK but they have large and growing communities around the world informed by a highly effective international broadcasting arm.

It was returning to London from a visit to the Italian community by the Khalifa in 2010 that this part of the story begins. The drive back to London coincided with a rare exposition of the Shroud and the Khalifa readily took up the suggestion that they divert via Turin in the hope of seeing this famous image of Jesus. Jesus (*referred to as Isa or Yeshua in Islam*) is as revered in Islam almost as pivotally as he is in Christianity. The central Islamic belief is that Jesus, though tried and condemned by Pilate, was rescued by Allah and risen to heaven while a substitute was crucified in his place. And, of course, there was no resurrection element to that event.

The Ahmadiyya belief is quite different. It believes that Jesus, himself, *was* crucified but did not expire on the cross. Instead, with the aid of certain known ointments, he was kept alive but inert until rescued, spirited away and eventually continued his ministry in India for which there is some circumstantial evidence. Does this sound fanciful? To a Christian believer, of course. To a dispassionate believer? Is this any more unlikely or fanciful than a bodily resurrection?

I am aware that the majority of BSTS Newsletter readers will, like me, be Christian and may find this discussion veering off into unwelcome and uncharted waters. Please bear with me. Based on my experience making *Jesus - the Evidence* I am more open to the idea that “biblical” is not necessarily always “historical”. This has not stopped me doing my best to be a constructive and faithful member of my local Anglican congregation. There I sit with many like-minded folk who have taken advantage of the protestant tradition to feel free to believe what we can and to see Christianity in the context of the evolution of the religious ideas that developed onwards from Christ’s teachings and the dramatic impact he had on his early followers.

Irrespective of any religious designations, such as “Saviour”, I regard the historical Jesus as a my personal “Hero”. His teachings, his dramatic distillation of the archaic Judaic laws and the prayer he left us combined with the self-sacrificial nature of his willingness to die for what he preached is enough for me. I would certainly like to think that he has “saved” me from myself, at least. This is sufficient to enable me to identify comfortably with and remain part of the religious culture into which I was born.**

The ability to reconcile an intellectual position with a religious one is important. Not just for me, personally but, it seems, for society as a whole. This appears to be what President Putin has concluded after the Russian experiment with enforced secularism. Under his patronage the Russian Orthodox Church is now resurgent. A nation’s peoples need more than just politics to hold them together. This brings me to the crux.

It is self-evident and an indisputable fact that religious belief and personal adherence to one major religion or another is due to an accident of birth. Marriage can be another factor but then other forces are clearly at work. Some may step sideways into another denomination but that is not significant for the purpose of this argument. How many grow to adult maturity and then, with no coercion, however well meaning, dispassionately examine all the available evidence from around the world and then choose objectively one major religion over the others? I submit they are few, indeed.

Back to the beginning of this story. The Khalifa was warmly welcomed in Turin by Monsignor Ghiberti and given his own personal viewing of the Shroud followed by an open discussion in which he was able to explain the reasons for his particular interest and how his interpretation of the cause and nature of the image may differ from others. The image on the Shroud clearly had a profound effect on the Khalifa. Like Judaism, Islam eschews artificial figurative images of any kind. The Shroud sits outside that restriction and provides a unique potential common bond with Christianity. It soon became clear that the Khalifa wanted to learn more about the Shroud and to explore further its ability to create bridges.

The first I heard about the Ahmadiyya Community was in 2015 when I received an invitation to attend their annual “Jalsa Salana”. This is a huge event attracting up to 40,000 visitors. These are mostly Ahmadi from the UK but also from around the world and also a contingent of non-Ahmadi guests. The editor of the Ahmadiyya run magazine, *The Review of Religions*, Amer Safir, had persuaded Barrie Schwartz to travel from Colorado to speak about the Shroud. He also invited Pam Moon from Birmingham in the UK to bring her extensive Shroud exhibit. There was to be a section of the event devoted to the Shroud. I was impressed. Since the dead hand of the C14 result this was the biggest event dedicated to the Shroud the UK had ever seen and it was to become an annual event.

2017 saw the Shroud element expanded still further and a dedicated conference room erected for a range of speakers which included Barrie, Bruno Barberis from Turin, Mark Guscini (on the Sudarium of video) from Spain and myself. But what was I to speak about? I am not a Shroud researcher. Through the six quite different films I have made on related subjects over the last 40 years I have met and got to know many, though not all, of the most eminent Shroud researchers and New Testament scholars.

The invitation to speak at the 2017 conference coincided with a beautifully produced 3-part BBC 4 series on *Science and Islam*, presented by Jim Al-Kalili. This proved inspirational for me. The original Caliphate centred in Baghdad was an open and highly sophisticated centre of learning that pioneered medicine, mathematics, physics and astronomy. One of its leading scholars, Ibn al-Haytham (965ce - 1040ce), was to provide the first statement of what we now regard as “The Scientific Method”: *“If learning the truth is your goal, then make an enemy of all that you may read and attack it from every side. Suspect even yourself so that you may avoid prejudice or leniency.”* This is the approach we were allowed to make with *“Jesus - the Evidence”*. How apt that we should all now apply this to the study of the Shroud of Turin.



Bruno Barberis (Top Left), Mark Guscini (Top Right), David Rolfe (Centre Left), Barrie Schwartz Centre Right, Pam Moon (Below).

I came up with something that I believe the Shroud of Turin *might* represent. Fortunately, it requires no further scientific examinations or research endeavours to stand it up or shoot it down. I offer it for your consideration. You are only required to take in the image on the Shroud as you perceive it. Only self-evident or otherwise uncontroversial subjective observations need be considered. Everything emanates from the image on the Shroud and nothing more.

1. It is indisputably a unique, unfathomable and, (so far) unrepeatable image of a man with Jewish features who has been crucified the way we now know that the Romans inflicted this kind of punishment.
2. The absence of evidence of any artifice in the creation of the image makes it acceptable to those religions that would otherwise reject it.
3. The man is naked. This is not surprising as this is consistent with what we know of Roman crucifixions.
4. Despite the horrific injuries it appears, in its “negative” image, as if the man has “transcended” the normal limits of endurance to arrive at some kind of “peace”.
5. Based on forensic pathological observations there is a majority view that the image is of a corpse. A minority view argues that this fact remains beyond certainty.
6. A virtue of the nudity is that there is no apparel or artefact or, indeed, anything else that bestows any specific pointers towards any one of the world’s religions or their denominations that revere Jesus. In short, while deeply religious in its connotations, it is entirely neutral in its affiliations.

Most cities of the world have a generic tomb to the unknown soldier where all can gather to mourn a specific loss. How many such losses have been caused and continue to be caused by religious division, persecutions and all-out war?

I submit that the image of the man on the Shroud is a view into another tomb. A tomb that contained, if not the elusive historical figure of Jesus, then someone very much like him. And whether the image was somehow created in a moment when Jesus himself was in the tomb or whether it is the product of some unknown later master-forger or of another process we do not understand, the unique nature of the image remains the same - a profound mystery.

Jesus’s first followers were his fellow Jews. He is sacred to all branches of

Christianity and Islam and is revered by Hindus and Sikhs. His teachings have parallels in the ancient Vedas and Buddhist Sutras.

The Shroud is an image - or a banner if you will - under which all religions of good faith could, perhaps, one day, gather as one without any fear of submission or heresy. How many objects in the world can claim that? To achieve this it has only to be released from the unjust sentence passed upon it by a blind and prejudiced "Science" just as Galileo was eventually reprieved from the unjust sentence passed by a blind and prejudiced Church.

With the impetus inspired by Khalifa Hazrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad this has become a possibility. Preparations for the 2018 *multi-faith* UK conference on the Shroud are underway. It is fitting that it will take place in the year of the 30th anniversary of the C14 test.

**The Coming of the Quantum Christ, Amazon.*

*** I am open to the idea of a bodily resurrection and everything that would go with that but it is not essential to my faith. When I try to visualise the historical Jesus I find the crucified but "transcendent" image on the Shroud much more conducive to me than any other. However, that said, and somewhat tantalisingly, if authentic, the Shroud potentially holds out the prospect of an insight into that ultimate mystery. Based on the evidence we have, however unlikely, many believe that the best explanation for the properties of the image remains some sort of radiation event emanating from the body. For an accessible summation of this evidence I refer you to the interview with Paolo di Lazzaro conducted by Louis C. de Figueiredo. This, among other items, along with space for your own views and comments, will be on the BSTSNewsletter.com website for subscribers. Your password to access this will be sent to all subscribers on application via the website.*

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