

## A Religious Studies teacher shares her thoughts on the Shroud

Marie Carver-Hughes

In the late 1980s, as a relatively new teacher of Sociology at a Catholic comprehensive, I was asked to teach Religious Education to a charming group of Year 9 students. As part of a study on the life of Jesus I chose to show the BBC Time Watch documentary, 'Shreds of Evidence' that reported on the carbon dating of the shroud taking place at the time. I can clearly recall the impact of the programme's conclusion on me and my class, that the Shroud of Turin was a fake. The ramifications of the final declaration that this enigmatic image on a length of cloth was a forgery had to be significant culturally and spiritually for the programme's audience whoever they were, young or old.



*Marie Carver-Hughes*

With specific regard to my class of 13 and 14-year olds that day, I remember that they were keenly engaged throughout the programme; in their questions and comments afterwards, they were probing and open-minded in the discussion following the film. After that lesson we moved onto the next topic in our syllabus and did not return to the matter of the shroud, however, I can't help but wonder what they and subsequent generations were denied by that 1988 verdict.

Forward three decades and David Rolfe provides a total of four hundred students from Christ the King Sixth Form College, over three separate occasions, the opportunity to examine the evidence on the credibility of the shroud. Each presentation was eagerly anticipated by students and staff and the talk did not disappoint. David began by dramatically enfolding himself with a life-size replica of the burial cloth while lying down enabling his audience to visualise how the corpse would have been covered. Over the three talks, he held the audience's attention with skill and sensitivity as he outlined the provenance of the artefact, detailed the scientific research to date and showed a range of images including 3D that carried the audience further into the mystery of the man depicted.

Experts in a range of disciplines: textiles, photography, the study of ancient grains and pollens, criminal forensics, chemistry, physics, anthropology and more have been intrigued by the Shroud and through their own investigations have added to the evidence for its validity. It is not surprising, therefore, that such a presentation would interest staff and students representing a range of faculties at a London sixth form college.

The cross-curricular audience of students and staff representing science, history, sociology, philosophy, art, media and religious studies at Christ the King prepared for each talk from their subject perspective. It was important that the experience would

inform and challenge the students to be critical in their thinking and develop their knowledge.

Sociology student, Catarina, described the talk as ‘Inspiring. It made me very curious to know more. I hope to see the Shroud one day.’ Student of Religious Studies Daniella commented, ‘After the talk I felt disheartened by the underrated appreciation of the relic.’ History student Lois felt ‘frustrated due to the injustice. How could such a magnificent relic be discounted? We need to re-visit the evidence’. Student of philosophy Elliot stated ‘The Shroud talk was a real thought-provoking moment for me. Whether or not you are a believer in the supernatural, it is hard to disregard the miraculous evidence presented and what this could entail. I hope in the near future there is more serious research and discussion into this phenomenon in order to further our understanding of this relic’. Not all were enamoured, with one commenting she ‘learnt about the history of the Shroud. Personally, it is not my cuppa tea, but I can see how others may find it interesting.’

Significantly, the students as a whole were more open to the authenticity of the Shroud than their teachers. This could be a reflection of their emotional and academic maturity but also indicate a generational shift towards the mystical.

History teacher, Duncan Bryson, prepared his students to examine the Shroud as a piece of evidence focusing on key questions to gauge the credibility of the information being presented to them: Is it a reliable piece of evidence? What can we learn from it? How sure can we be of its provenance? How can we look at competing narratives: one that is about forgeries and fakes, the other about an amazing miracle?

The Philosophy and Religious Studies departments reflected on the many historical and scientific arguments to support the idea that the Shroud of Turin is indeed the cloth in which the body of Jesus of Nazareth was wrapped when released from the Cross. Head of department Richard Bolton commented ‘the most persuasive argument this cloth is genuine comes through our encounter with the image itself. When we look, meditatively, at the central figure, the living being of Christ is present. His eyes look out, and deeply, into the one who looks. We sense a being who has suffered terrible agonies but one who has yet transcended these and now embraces us with Divine Love.’ He notes that ‘for those who must consider the phenomenon of religious experience, the Shroud of Turin is Janus-faced in that it points, on the one hand, to an extraordinary encounter with God and, on the other, to scientific questions concerning the nature of matter itself. For the student of religion, nothing else provokes as does this artefact’.

The sociologists in the audience were provided with an opportunity in lessons following the visit to discuss philosophers of science Karl Popper and Thomas Kuhn considering open and closed systems of thought, objectivity, subjectivity, scientific paradigms, revolutions and the role of personal interest in the construction of the scientific

narrative. While the science department encouraged a healthily sceptical approach. In their follow up lesson, the students were encouraged to consider whether the evidence that it was genuinely the Shroud of Christ was irrefutable. Science teacher Charles Pickerel, noted ‘It is clear that the original dating tests were not good enough but there is no compelling evidence that the image is Jesus, it leaves really interesting questions for classroom discussion, natural or man-made we still do not know how it happened.’

Art teacher Isaac Whitcombe loved the mystery of it, ‘that (mystery) is fundamental to art, you have to believe in more than just the object’s material base. I encourage my students to understand the importance of believing in objects and ideas for them to become real. I am not of the view that it is the cloth of Jesus.’

My personal motivations for organising the talk are less objective; I believe the man on the Shroud to be the divine imprint of Jesus as I instinctively felt in my classroom of the 1980s. My position on technology is one of paradox. While I remain indebted to the modern software that has revealed new evidence, I am also concerned that the ubiquity of the internet and social media in childhood leaves our young people in danger of spiritual disconnection. In an age of shifting societal demands we as educators have an obligation to engage our students with mystery and the unknown, one example of which is the Shroud of Turin. There is ample room in the curriculum for the return of the shroud to the classroom, it offers opportunities for creative and collaborative pedagogy as happened with my colleagues.

My first encounter with the Shroud was so profound that I visited Turin for the 2015 Exposition of the Sacre Sindone. David Rolfe’s visits have substantiated my instinct that the Shroud is genuine. I believe the image affects, in some way, all who encounter it. The man on the Shroud leads us, the viewers, to ponder life, death and the eternal.

*@@@@@@*