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COVER: Staggering fire destruction statistics have prompted scientists to investigate some of the phenomenon's basic components. See page 218. (Cover photograph courtesy of George Hall/Firehouse Magazine)

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COMMENTARY

Turin Shroud: Nature and Supernature

Can the Shroud of Turin really be material evidence for the resurrection of Jesus?

The Shroud of Turin, for those who haven't been following, is a piece of linen bearing the life-size dorsal and ventral images of a man. The image bears the wounds that the gospels say were inflicted on Jesus during his crucifixion. The cloth is reputed to be the burial Shroud of Jesus (SN: 12/23-30/78, p. 442).

The Shroud reposed quietly in its reliquary in the cathedral in Turin, Italy, until the last decade, when it became the subject of scientific investigation. On the whole an impressive argument has been built up that the Shroud may be genuine or at least not the obvious kind of forgery (i.e., a painting) it was accused of being (SN: 5/25/81, p. 259).

The scientists' consensus now seems to be that the image is some kind of scorch, but a very strange one. The Shroud image contains three-dimensional information; it seems to have been made by some kind of projection rather than by contact. How a scorch can be made by projection leaves the scientists with their hands in the air.

In a book just published, *Verdict on the Shroud* (Servant Books, Ann Arbor, 1981), Kenneth E. Stevenson and Gary R. Habermas propose that this mystery was accomplished by some supernatural agency at the moment of Jesus' resurrection. The image on the Shroud is thus physical evidence of the resurrection, the authors suggest; Stevenson is described on the book jacket as a sales representative for IBM and former "team spokesman and editor for the Shroud of Turin Research Project." Habermas is a professor at Liberty Baptist College in Lynchburg, Va.

To whom is this book's line of reasoning likely to appeal? One might think that most if not all Christians would be happy to have the Shroud authenticated as such an important relic. And so they would be if that were all there was to it.

But there is another agenda here. This kind of materialistic explanation is likely to appeal to the sort of mind that wants everything thoroughly explained, codified and taken literally. Call them fundamentalists, literalists, rigorists; for these people, the Shroud is likely to become a marching banner.

In a religion as materialistic as Christianity it is no shame to seek material explanations. Certainly the resurrection was an event that happened to a material body or it is not worth talking about. But the process of explaining can be driven into the ground. There are certain aspects of Christian doctrine that are multivalued and multifaceted by nature. That is their fascination for many minds. Attempts at single minded explanation tend to detract from them, and it is an old tradition to resist them. A faction of people who want to maintain intellectual and spiritual maneuvering room for themselves is likely to oppose efforts to explain the resurrection this way.

Scientific conclusions about the Shroud are thus likely to be fed into religious debate. If past instances are any guide, they are likely to be used by controversialists who have little or no appreciation of what the pretensions and limitations of science really are. The recent attempt of congressional committees to get biologists to say when a human life begins is a case in point. It showed an appalling ignorance of what science is. If there is further debate on the Shroud, it is likely to be no prettier.

As for the Shroud itself, it is hardly authenticated in the manner that, say, Sotheby's would require if they were asked to put it on the block. Ecclesiastical authorities should be much more careful than auctioneers.

The resurrection was not a circus trick. Those who wish to know its meaning for Christians would do better to read Edward Schillebeeckx than Stevenson and Habermas. We may never know for sure what the Shroud of Turin is. Why not let it rest in peace in its reliquary?

—Dietrick E. Thomsen

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