

# Shroud Center still pushing false claims

Once again, the forces of ignorance and superstition have raised their ugly heads. Once again, the media has been only too happy to play along. Once again, Colorado Springs is being made to look foolish. How many times must this farce be staged?

Last week, the Denver Post fell hook, line and sinker for a press release from the Turin Shroud Center, which I am embarrassed to say is located in our fair city. The center, thankfully open by appointment only, is one of the most shameful practitioners of pseudoscience in the world today. It is dedicated to the proposition that the Shroud of Turin may be the burial cloth of Jesus. And nothing, least of all evidence, will stand in its way.

The Post article, picked up by media outlets all over the country, was headlined as "Springs prof revives shroud riddle." Unfortunately, there is no "prof" and there is no riddle. The "prof" in question is a part-time lecturer. The riddle was solved long ago.

No one would be more excited than I to find the burial shroud of Jesus of Nazareth. It would be an incredible historical event, one of the most significant in all of archaeology. But the Shroud of Turin is not it. It's a forged medieval relic, one of hundreds.

The world is full of exciting and mysterious things, but the Shroud of Turin is not one of them. Let's see why.

The Shroud of Turin has no pedigree before the mid-14th century; it has no historical provenance. It simply appeared in 1357, in the custody of the French mercenary Geoffroy de Charney. Curiously, Charney never explained how he managed to acquire the world's most sought after religious relic, when so many others before him had tried and failed.

Some years later, a local bishop denounced the shroud as a forgery. Bishop D'arcy wrote that his predecessor "discovered the fraud and how the said cloth had been cunningly painted, the truth being attested by the artist who had painted it, to wit, that it was a work of human skill and not miraculously wrought or bestowed." The D'arcy letter is archived at the Bibliotheque Nationale de France. It is available to any scholar who wishes to view it.

The shroudies will tell you, and the Post apparently believes, that no one knows how to produce an image like the one on the shroud. Not true. Numerous researchers, including college chemistry students, have used a well-known medieval rubbing technique to produce images with all the supposedly "mysterious" properties of the shroud. These results are available to anyone who cares to look.

In 1978, the world's top forensic microanalyst, Walter McCrone, examined the shroud. When given swatches to analyze, his lab reported red ochre and vermilion paint, not blood. In fact, blood has never been found on the shroud. This is not surprising, since blood turns black over time, not the reddish-brown of the shroud image. Sure, shroud believers claim to discover blood whenever they look, but that's hardly the same thing as passing the well-known chemical tests for blood. Every time those are performed, they come up negative.

But wait, there's more. If you order now, you'll learn that three different pieces of the shroud were sent to three different radiocarbon dating labs for analysis. Every single lab gave a date from — brace yourselves — the mid-13th to the late-14th century. Did I mention the shroud has no historical provenance before 1357?

Undaunted, the shroudies (who believe first and ask questions later) decid-



OPINION

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ed that some form of biological contaminant must have skewed the results. This idea was all the rage among the shroud crowd, until real scientists actually ran the numbers. They discovered it would take a mass of bacteria weighing twice as much as the shroud to get the date back to the time of Jesus. Suddenly biological contamination was out of favor.

Now comes the latest Shroud Center salvo of silliness.

They've decided it wasn't bacteria or fungi contaminating the tests, it was carbon monoxide. Enter the fine physicists at the Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit, who happily agreed to do a test. They clearly have more patience than I do. Maybe because they're British.

The Oxford lab exposed modern linen to high levels of carbon monoxide, and found absolutely no evidence of radiocarbon alteration at all. None. They therefore concluded, surprise surprise, that the original radiocarbon dating is correct. ORAU's own Web site now says, and I quote, "International radiocarbon dating experts confirm the Turin Shroud is a medieval fake." In other news, moon implicated in tides. Film at 11.

Were the recent Oxford results reported by the Post? Or the history of the 50-odd alleged burial shrouds of Jesus floating around Europe in the 14th century? Not a chance. Instead, the article focused on the fact that the Shroud Center's director, never one to be stymied by actual evidence, has presumably managed to persuade Oxford to run more tests. That's all. Apparently, trying the patience of real scientists is more newsworthy than trying their experiments.

Why are the shroudies pseudoscientists, and not the real deal? Real scientists seek to increase knowledge, while pseudoscientists seek to increase mystery. They want to show that their pet hypothesis might be true, instead of showing that some testable hypothesis is false.

Pseudoscientists report only evidence that supports their claims, while ignoring everything else. They believe science can never come to definitive conclusions about the past. This is exactly what believers in creationism, astrology, ghosts, ID, ESP, crystals, UFOs and faith healing do. To say that science supports such things is dishonest and wrong.

Why does any of this matter? Why spill so much ink (excuse me, red ochre and vermilion paint) over a piece of cloth? Why not let the shroudies have their fun? Can't I just get a life?

Sorry, I can't. Here's why.

First, the practice of pseudoscience in Colorado Springs contributes to the image of our community as a fundamentalist backwater. It makes us look like we refuse to accept the Enlightenment notion that there is a world outside of ourselves that operates according to principles independent of our belief in them, principles that can be understood and harnessed through what we now call the Scientific Method.

In my opinion, such a portrayal was a factor in the Post's decision to run the story.

Second, and more importantly, the fundamental conflict of our age is not religion versus science, theism versus atheism, Christianity versus Islam, or faith versus reason. It is reason versus unreason: Belief in harmony with evidence versus dogma in spite of evidence.

I know which side I am on. What about you?

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