

# The Shroud of Turin and the Resurrection Problem

## An Anglican/Episcopal perspective

by **Daniel R. Porter**

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*To be convinced, skeptical, or merely intrigued are all fair responses to becoming well informed about the Shroud of Turin. To not become well informed is to ignore one of Christianity's greatest mysteries.*

***“The quest for the Shroud can lead only to the quest for Christ”***

- Dr. John A. T. Robinson, Anglican Bishop and Biblical Scholar  
Author of *Honest to God*

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In his recent book, *Jesus Christ: the Jesus of History, the Christ of Faith*, J. R. Porter, Professor Emeritus of Theology at the University of Exeter, wrote of the Shroud of Turin:

In recent years, the cloth has attracted widespread attention because of the possibility that modern scientific methods might determine its date to and provenance. In 1988, a carbon-14 test dated the cloth to ca. 1260 - ca. 1390 CE, with a margin of a century on either side, thus branding it a pious medieval forgery.

However, this verdict has not quite settled the issue. Other evidence suggests an earlier date, for example a number of early medieval images of Christ that closely resemble the facial features of the shroud image. It is not a painting and it has proved difficult to explain how it could have been created in late medieval times. Whether or not it dates back as far as the first century CE – let alone depicts the actual body of Jesus – the shroud retains, for many, its mysteries.

But what if the Shroud is first century cloth? What if it is Jesus' burial cloth? I am a theologically liberal thinking person — brought up on Bishop Robinson's *Honest to God* and now an avid reader of Marcus Borg — and I accept many things in the Bible that are scientifically or historically implausible as something of a metaphor. For me, these questions about the Shroud's authenticity were daunting. For no matter how I might try to separate the mysterious and inexplicable image on the Shroud from my metaphorical interpretations of the Resurrection, I could not do so. The image and the event seemed interconnected. Scientists who study the Shroud are better at making the separation by stressing that science can only go so far in explaining things. But I lack their scholarly methodical restraint. My imagination takes over and I wonder if the image was formed by the act of resurrection. If the Shroud is real then maybe the Resurrection was really a physical, bodily, historically factual event. Metaphorical thinking about the Resurrection was challenged.

Of course, I have not been alone in thinking that the Resurrection was open to modern and alternate scientifically acceptable interpretation. One need only look at the works of

the Jesus Seminar Fellows such as John Dominic Crossan or some highly published thinkers such as Bishop John Shelby Spong, the former Episcopal bishop of Newark, to see this. And, one need only look at the academic landscape of the last two hundred years of the "questing" for the historical Jesus to see that many notable scholars question physical resurrection. Dr. George Carey, the Archbishop of Canterbury, in his recent book, *Canterbury Letters to the Future*, characterizes modern notions of the Resurrection thus:

Since 'resurrection' collides with our human experience of death – dead men are not known to live again – there are those who seek refuge in other interpretations of the resurrection event to avoid its downright embarrassment ...

Among Anglicans, and among all of the major Christian traditions, there are many who do believe that the Resurrection happened in a real, physical, bodily sense. Others do not. Many Christians prefer to think of the Resurrection as symbolic, allegorical, metaphorical, or possibly something of a spiritual occurrence outside the realm of understandable space and time. A miraculous physical resurrection simply defies prevailing worldviews: So, too, do all miracles in the sense of what C. S. Lewis called "rare exceptions to the ordinary laws of nature." In this age when skepticism is so fashionable, when people who think as Lewis did are themselves the rare exceptions, when the Resurrection is seen as something other than a historically real event, and when we are "downright embarrassed" to voice beliefs that challenge the prevailing scientific worldview, it is also hard to accept the possibility that a real relic of Jesus' burial might exist today. Yet, the Shroud of Turin, the purported burial cloth of Jesus, continues to mystify us. It defies science and history's best attempts to irrefutably disprove or prove its authenticity.

The prima facie case against the Shroud of Turin's authenticity is strong. It seems historically implausible: It surfaced in Europe in 1357, a time known for its medieval fake-relics. In 1988, scientists at three prominent radiocarbon dating laboratories demonstrated that the cloth's origin was, likely, between 1260 and 1390 — medieval. But the greatest challenges to its authenticity are the scientifically implausible images of Jesus on the cloth — dead men are not known to leave detailed images of themselves on burial wrappings. The images seem scientifically preposterous.

But new evidence has been emerging since 1988 that not only challenges the carbon-14 tests, but also argues convincingly for authenticity. Broadminded Christians in all major traditions, including Anglicans, are accepting the possibility that it might be the real thing. I have changed my mind and now accept its possible authenticity. Doing so has not been without a lot of difficulty. I had always thought that the Shroud of Turin was an absurd, superstitious relic. Now, after studying the evidence for two years, I think it may be real. This has caused me to seriously rethink the Resurrection.

The newer evidence that is emerging is not from religious fanatics, as some suppose, but from reputable scholars: archeologists, historians, chemists, physicists, botanists, palynologists, forensic pathologists, image analysts, art historians, textile experts, and

technical photographers. Most of them are from leading academic institutions and prestigious scientific establishments including the Los Alamos Laboratory, the Israel Antiquities Authority, Sandia Labs, the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, and the Enrico Fermi Institute at the University of Chicago. Their work warrants consideration.

The on-again, off-again, now on-again claim for the Shroud of Turin's authenticity is — as we shall see — an intellectually challenging, worldview-defying enigma. This is just the sort of problem Anglicans love. The more intellectual a challenge, the more we seem to love it. And if an intellectual challenge seems preposterous, all the better. As an Episcopal nun (who wishes to remain nameless but was a masterful teacher) once told me, “we Anglicans even think that by changing angels to metaphors we can count them dancing on the head of a pin.” Silly? Yes, but illustrative. The evidence concerning the Shroud is so persuasive (and so important) that it needs serious theological, biblical, historical and scientific vetting. Anglicans are good at this sort of thing. (Of course, so too, are Catholic, traditional Protestant, Evangelical and Orthodox thinkers).

Anglicans have a passion for scripture, reason and tradition, which when taken together, define our approach to faith and thought. There is nothing about this piece of cloth that doesn't fit this paradigm. The details on the cloth conform to details in the passion and crucifixion narratives in ways that can only make us ask if it is the burial wrapping mentioned in all four Gospels? Biblical scholarship is needed to test this. Reason, which Anglicans always apply to scripture, is also crucial. There is no other way to approach the question of the Shroud's legitimacy but with carefully reasoned science, history and biblical analysis. Tradition is an important ingredient, as well. Tradition to Anglicans means we value the past. We are constantly attempting to learn from earlier wisdom — from the early church fathers, our Catholic heritage, protestant influence, a history of evangelism, our Jewish roots, and the great contributions of the Orthodox branch of Christian faith. Tradition is important because, while we may be better informed in the twenty-first century — about some things — we are not necessarily any smarter. Tradition is important because it compels us to be open-minded. There is no other way to study to Shroud but with an open-minded, reasoned and scriptural based examination of the facts. Serious shroud researchers, who consistently argue that there is nothing irrefutable in their work, who consistently insist on peer review, and who truly want more research and analysis, deserve such critical assessment. Anglicans, of course, are not really unique in combining scripture, reason and tradition into a faith shaping process. It's just that we make a big deal about it. It is our adopted discipline and we should encourage its application to a constructive and well-informed vetting of the Shroud.

## **A Few Facts**

The Shroud is an old bloodstained, dirty piece of linen cloth containing life-sized front and back images of a naked man who appears to have been crucified. Its first appearance in Western European history was during a time of unbridled superstition in demons, witches, magic, and miracle-working relics. It was a time of war, plague, and political

turbulence. One year before the Shroud's first exposition, England's Black Prince had defeated the French at the battle of Poitiers and captured John II of France. Adding to the political turmoil, the pope was in Avignon, not Rome — some even believed that the plague was God's retribution on the whole world because the pope was not in the eternal city. In this climate of superstition, naiveté and disorder, a lucrative market in false relics flourished. The Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 acknowledged the problem with false relics but church authorities did little to curb the market in them. Our knowledge of this history rightly conditions us to be suspicious of any medieval relic from Europe.

Yet despite our modern-day suspicions, there was some excitement just a few years ago when it seemed that the Shroud might be real. Scientific examination of the Shroud in 1978 suggested many things about it that gave credence to that possibility — most prominently the facts that it was not a painting, the bloodstains were real human blood, and the images exhibited strange negative and 3D qualities. At the same time, historical theories were being floated that suggested that the cloth had made its way to Europe by way of Edessa, an early Christian community. The Shroud, or a cloth very much like it, was in Edessa in 544 CE. In 944, the cloth, known as the Holy Mandylion and the Image of Edessa, was moved from Edessa to Constantinople. It then disappeared from history in 1204 when Constantinople was sacked during the Fourth Crusade. There is some evidence that it was in Athens three years later in the hands of French knights and it may be the same piece of cloth that surfaced in 1357 in the hands of a French knight. The Rev. Albert R. (Kim) Dreisbach, an Episcopal priest and a significant Shroud scholar, illustrates the confident mood stemming from the 1978 studies and the newly articulated history as he describes an event that took place in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1983:

The Greek Archbishop, the Roman Catholic Archbishop, the Episcopal Bishop and the Presiding Bishop of the AME Church gathered before the world's first full size, backlit transparency of the Shroud and joined clergy representing the Assemblies of God, Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists and Presbyterians in an amazing witness to ecumenical unity. At the conclusion of the service, His Grace, Bishop John of the Greek Orthodox Diocese of Atlanta, turned to me and said: "Thank you very much for picking our day." I didn't fully understand the significance of his remark until he explained to me that August 16th is the Feast of the Holy Mandylion commemorating the occasion in 944 A.D. when the Shroud was first shown to the public in Byzantium following its arrival the previous day from Edessa in southeastern Turkey.

That was in 1983. In 1988, five years later, the carbon-14 testing "revealed" that the Shroud was medieval. That news, to all who hoped that the Shroud was real, was devastating. A headline in the New York Times stated: "Test Shows Shroud of Turin to be Fraud." Other newspapers around the world reported much the same thing. One of the radiocarbon scientists jubilantly declared that anyone who now believed that the Shroud was real must be a member of the Flat Earth Society. The public, by and large, accepted the verdict. Even the Vatican briefly accepted the verdict. The Shroud seemed to be a fake. The public tuned out.

But now, just a few years later, a very different picture is quietly emerging among the scientists and historians who continue to study the Shroud. The procedures of the carbon-14 tests are being seriously questioned. Limitations in radiocarbon dating are now being openly recognized, particularly as they might apply to the Shroud. We now know that the tested samples probably contained some newer fiber from mending. They also seem to have included some biological organisms that were not removed during cleaning. More profoundly, in the light of a preponderance of compelling scientific and historical evidence, people are beginning to recognize that the carbon-14 tests simply do not make sense. This includes medical forensic analysis that reveals a body in a state of rigor mortis with no signs of decomposition and bloodstains that show no smearing or pulling apart as would be the case if a body were unwrapped while removing it.

The newer data and numerous peer-reviewed research papers are dramatic in the story they tell. The Shroud does not appear to be a forged relic, nor a product of any known natural process, nor a work of art. Thomas Cahill, perhaps best known for his book *The Gifts of the Jews*, is a thoroughly modern Catholic historian who finds “the data immensely intriguing and largely convincing.” In his latest book, *Desire of the Everlasting Hill*, he gives credence to the Shroud and devotes several pages to it. He keenly reflects a newly emerging sense among scholars that the Shroud may be real. Gary R. Habermas, a prominent Evangelical historian, also believes it is the real thing. In his book, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ*, (fourth printing, revised 2000) he argues that the Shroud is possibly authentic because of the scientific and historical evidence. Gary Habermas is widely read and respected. He, too, reflects changing opinions among Christians of all traditions. He writes:

There is certainly no proof at this point, and the shroud could still turn out to be a fake, although the data appear to dictate otherwise. It would seem that, even if it did not belong to Jesus, the shroud is at least an actual archeological artifact, thereby still providing some important information concerning death by crucifixion. The absence of bodily decomposition shows that the body was not in the cloth very long. Further, if the body was not unwrapped and if the image was created by scorch from a dead body, we have some potential data that could be highly evidential consideration in favor of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

By 1999, Father Dreisbach was able to write enthusiastically:

In presentations ranging from the Salvation Army to the Syrian Orthodox, from the Bible Belt to the Biretta Belt, Christians of all persuasions are beginning to acknowledge ... that the Shroud is Christianity's most precious artifact.

## **The Newer Evidence**

It is useful, here, to take a look at a brief outline of some of the most compelling evidence. Some of this evidence is very new and some of it is newly verified by recent studies:

- Textile analysis suggests that the cloth originated in first century Israel and that it was produced on a Syrian or Egyptian loom used during the time of the Roman occupation of Palestine. It appears to be identical to unique linen cloth found at the Masada fortress.
- Pollen and floral “imprints” place the Shroud in the environs of Jerusalem, likely in springtime. Certain pollen spores also place the Shroud in areas of Turkey that include Constantinople and the early Christian community of Edessa.
- Spectrographic chemical analysis of travertine aragonite calcium, found on the Shroud’s fabric, strongly suggests that it was once in direct physical contact with one of Jerusalem’s limestone caves or tombs.
- Detailed forensic evidence shows that a towel sized cloth, the Sudarium of Oviedo – which has been in Spain since the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE – once covered the same human head as the Shroud.
- Numerous portraits of Jesus in icons and on Byzantine coins appear to be artistically derived from the face on the Shroud of Turin. The earliest of these was created in the mid-sixth century CE and is located at a Sinai monastery.
- Three-dimensionally encoded information along with photographic-like negativity virtually eliminates the possibility that the Shroud was created in medieval times. These physical characteristics, not found in art or any known forgeries, can be confirmed by anyone with a personal computer and over-the-counter graphics software.
- Medical forensic analysis of the body image – some of it only clearly visible with photographic and computer image enhancement – is so realistic that only a modern day pathologist can explain it. This includes contusions that are specifically consistent with flogging with a Roman flagrum whip. The body is in a state of rigor mortis and shows no decomposition. Some of the medically correct imagery is supported by recent archeological finds that would not have been known in medieval times.
- Bloodstains, which have been proven to be real human blood, show the proper medical characteristics of serum separation and clotting that could only occur if the blood flowed from “real” wounds of a human body in contact with the cloth. Yet there is no evidence of unwrapping.
- The images are composed of microscopic lengths of oxidized and dehydrated fibers that are part of the thread of the cloth. These darkened strands of cellulose

fiber are called pixels because they form the Shroud image in much the same way that an image is formed on a computer screen or a half-tone printed photograph. No known artistic technique or any known natural process could have produced these microscopic pixels.

To face this evidence is to face the question of how the images were created. Are the images the byproduct of a resurrection event? Are they miraculous images? This is a problematic question for Anglicans, all Christians, and many non-Christians as well. Most shroud researchers, to their credit, avoid metaphysical or supernatural interpretations and stress the point that science and objective history can only go so far in providing explanations for the images. But, as I stated earlier, it is hard for me, (and probably many people), to not speculate beyond such methodical scholarly restraint.

But it is hard, as well, to be totally objective in facing the evidence. Bias plays a role. What we may believe about the Resurrection colors how we perceive the evidence — whether we believe it was a real, physical, bodily event as Anglican theologian and historian N. T. Wright argues; a metaphor for God's promise as we might find among Jesus Seminar thinkers such as Marcus Borg; or a myth devoid of any contemporary meaning as the former Episcopal bishop of Newark, James Shelby Spong, would have it. Resurrection thinking even affects whether or not we will look at the evidence. It shouldn't be that way, but it is.

## **The Resurrection Problem**

No one disputes that the Shroud of Turin is a centuries old linen cloth. And no one disputes that it contains realistic looking front and back images of a crucified man. Indisputable, as well, is the fact that images on the Shroud are similar to photographic negatives, which, when photographed in negative, reveal extraordinary details, particularly in the face. Furthermore, the image contains three-dimensional encoding which can be plotted as an isometric topography of a human form as was done with NASA imaging equipment and can now be done with standard ray-tracing software. It is, beyond question, a topographic map, in negative tones, of a human body. It is difficult to imagine that anyone would make an image this way and a natural process has yet to be identified that could produce the image.

The body images are not the only images on the cloth. There are some baffling floral and plant imprints on the Shroud including one of a particular variety of bean caper (*Zygophyllum dunosum*) that is only found in the Jerusalem area, western Jordan, and areas south of Jerusalem including the Sinai. One floral image, a Chrysanthemum — though a poor geographical indicator — is clearly visible to the naked eye. The Chrysanthemum is particularly interesting because it is found in a sixth century Pantocrator icon and on Byzantine coins. Other plant images can best be seen with the aid of photographic or computer enhancement. (There may be other images, including coins, but these have not been sufficiently verified by peer review.)

The chemistry of the floral images and the body images is particularly amazing and defies a complete explanation. Suffice it to say that all imaginable and expected natural processes have been ruled out including scorching heat, vaporous chemical reactions, and any contact mechanism. So too, artistic and proto-photographic methods have been sufficiently eliminated. Theoretical physicists have suggested that the imagery is consistent with proton or alpha particle bombardment but that seems to challenge current scientific understanding. Since no other viable alternatives have been proposed the images are a mystery.

Bloodstains on the cloth exhibit a peculiar forensic characteristic in that they show no sign of being smeared while wet, or cracked and pulled apart while dry. These forensic characteristics of smearing or pulling apart are expected if a bloody human body were separated from the Shroud. Nonetheless, the stains are medically accurate, serum separated, clotted, specific vein and artery bloodstains — real human type AB blood — created by physical contact with a human body. Thus the bloodstains are a mystery.

And because the images and the bloodstains are so mysterious and so inexplicable, some speculate that they could only be a byproduct of a miracle: the Resurrection.

## **Vetting**

To be convinced, to be skeptical, or to be merely intrigued are all fair responses to a well-informed understanding of the Shroud. The data, however, must be tested by theologians, biblical scholars, more historians and more scientists. Serious shroud researchers want this. I have discussed this with several Shroud scholars and have yet to find one who does not agree. The vetting, however, must be well informed and thoughtful. What little skepticism is being articulated today is mostly polemic and frivolously selective with facts.

We can certainly do better than when preeminent historian, biblical scholar, and Jesus Seminar Fellow, John Dominic Crossan — seemingly impressed by the medically accurate forensic detail of the Shroud's images and bloodstains — presupposes an understanding that it is a “medieval relic-forgery” and then writes: “I wonder whether it was done from a crucified dead body or from a crucified living body. That is the rather horrible question once you accept it as a forgery.” He then befuddles everyone by arguing that if the Shroud was real and if the Gospel accounts were accurate, “Wouldn't the Shroud of Turin make those events understandable as exaltation, rather than resurrection?”

This is gibberish. It is uncharacteristic of Crossan (whom I greatly admire) who is generally thorough with detail and logical in his assessments. Does Crossan imagine that *his* medieval crucifier and faker of relics added pollen and dirt from the environs of Jerusalem? Did the forger add images of flowers, some which are geographically specific to the Holy Land region? Did he use a fine quality linen cloth that was very likely produced several centuries earlier in the Middle East? Did he flog his victim with a

Roman flagrum – where did he get it, how did he know about it? Did the relic faker take the trouble to ensure that, when his victim was crucified, his bloodstains would match those of the Sudarium that has been kept in Oviedo, Spain, since the eighth century? Why and how, we must ask, in an age when any sliver of wood could pass for a piece of the cross and a bramble could pass as part of the crown of thorns, did *Crossan's* faker go to such elaborate troubles?

A letter written by (then) a student at the University of Indiana, Danusha Goska, to shroud researcher Barrie Schwartz offers a useful perspective:

There are two consistently un-addressed flaws in the arguments of those who contend that the shroud must be of medieval origin, created by contemporaneously available technology. The first flaw is that even if technology had been available to create an image with all the remarkable features of the shroud, there is no way to explain why an artist would have done so.

This question must be explored not via carbon dating, NASA imaging, or pollen tests, but, rather, by comparison with other relics from the medieval era. I have not seen research by experts in medieval relics that attempts to compare and contrast the shroud with comparable artifacts from the medieval era. Does the shroud look like other relics, or does it not? If, as I suspect is true, it does not look like other relics from that era, then it behooves anyone who argues for a medieval date to explain exactly why...

In the writings of church reformers like Erasmus and Martin Luther, one can read descriptions of medieval relics. In fact, many relics once popular in the medieval era can be visited even today. Reformers like Erasmus and Luther expressed open contempt at the gullibility of the Christian masses. Bones that were obviously animal in origin were treated as if the bones of some dead saint. Random chips of wood were marketed as pieces of the true cross; random swatches of fabric were saints' attire.

Why, in such a lucrative and undemanding marketplace, would any forger resort to anything as detailed and complex as the shroud? Why would a forger resort to an image that would so weirdly mimic photography, a technology that did not exist in the Middle Ages?

Well, one might argue, the forger created the highly detailed, anomalous shroud in order to thoroughly trick his audience. This argument does not withstand analysis. The relic market is profoundly undemanding. It was profoundly undemanding in the Middle Ages; it is barely more demanding today...

The shroud does more than not follow the simple rules of relic hawkers. The shroud not only does not follow the laws of the expressive culture of medieval relics, it defies them. For example, blood is shown flowing from the man's wrist, not his hands. It is standard in Christian iconography to depict Jesus' hands as

having been pierced by nails. This was true not only of the medieval era, but also today. What reason would a forging artist have for defying the hegemonic iconography of the crucified Jesus? Anyone who wishes to prove a medieval origin for the shroud must answer that question, and others, for example:

Items of expressive culture are not found in isolation. They are not found without evidence of practice. If one excavates an ancient site and finds one pot, one finds other pots like it, and the remains of failed or broken pots in middens.

If the shroud is a forgery, where are its precedents? Where are the other forged shrouds like it? Where is there evidence of practice shrouds of this type? If the technology to create the shroud was available in medieval Europe, where are other products of this technology? Humankind is an exhaustively exploitative species. We make full use of any technology we discover, and leave ample evidence of that use. Given the lucrative nature of the forgery market, why didn't the forger create a similar Shroud of Mary, Shroud of St. Peter, Shroud of St. Paul, etc.? And why didn't followers do the same?

## **Acceptance**

If we are to accept the evidence concerning the Shroud, and thousands do, we should recognize that it is science and history confronting and challenging the prevailing worldview that unnatural things don't happen. For those who are scientifically inclined, it may seem like an Alice in Wonderland nightmare. The evidence seemingly gives credence to the "the postmodern contention" — as historian Joseph Ellis describes postmodernism — "that no such thing as objective truth exists, that historical reality is an inherently enigmatic and endlessly negotiable bundle of free-floating perceptions." The Shroud is important because it challenges what we may believe about the Resurrection. It challenges extant historical and biblical scholarship. It challenges two centuries of historical and theological progress in the scholarly "quest" for the historical Jesus. It challenges the discourse on science and religion. And as Pope John Paul II states — a man keenly aware of intellectual dilemma — the Shroud of Turin "challenges our intelligence."

To ignore the Shroud, once given the opportunity to comprehend it, seems wrong. Admittedly, it is difficult to approach a study of the Shroud free of our religious (including anti-religious), scientific and cultural biases. But in doing so, we may seek new ways of knowing about Christ. Whether we believe that the Shroud is real or not, understanding it exposes us to think anew — and in new ways — about the passion story, the crucifixion and the Resurrection.

**“The quest for the Shroud can lead only to the quest for Christ”**  
- Dr. John A. T. Robinson, Anglican Bishop and Biblical Scholar  
Author of *Honest to God*

The above quote, about postmodernism, by Joseph Ellis is from *Founding Brothers: the Revolutionary Generation*. It has nothing to do with the Shroud of Turin. A better and more hopeful definition for postmodernism is provided by the Rev. Canon Frank Harron, II, a former vicar of Washington National Cathedral and now scholar-in-residence at Trinity Episcopal Church Wall Street in New York City. It is the best definition I have found:

The postmodern understanding of the way we determine truth joyfully shares personal perspectives. Truth is not separate from the person. Authenticity is a criterion of validity. Diversity and complexity are welcomed, indeed required. Truth is now always from the standpoint of individuals. The truth we can know is always approximate, tentative, provisional, learned from ourselves and from one another. It is dynamic and can come from expected and unexpected places.

Personally, I am not much into postmodernism. Truth, to me, is more absolute and empirical and not "approximate, tentative, provisional." But I do accept the idea that truth can come from expected and unexpected places. The Shroud of Turin is, for me, one of those places.

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Daniel R. Porter is a lifelong Episcopalian. He is a member of Trinity Church, Wall Street, in New York City.

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