

Relics Little More Than a Show of Faith

- **Bryan Patterson** -

"Superstition is to religion what astrology is to astronomy; the mad daughter of a wise mother" – Voltaire

THE great religious reformer Martin Luther was bothered by the existence of phony religious relics. Luther famously wondered how 26 of Jesus' disciples could possibly be buried in German churches, when only 12 existed in the Bible.

A generation later another reformer, John Calvin, noted that European Catholic churches housed enough "genuine" splinters from the cross on which Christ was crucified to rebuild Noah's Ark.

Calvin listed several churches claiming to have the genuine crown of thorns, others claiming to have water pots used by Jesus to change water into wine, and even a remarkably well-preserved piece of broiled fish that the disciple Peter supposedly offered to Jesus 1500 years earlier.

A Roman church exhibited the supposed crib of Jesus every Christmas Eve. Other well-known relics were the Messiah's baby teeth, his father Joseph's carpentry tools, bones of the donkey on which Jesus rode into Jerusalem, Pilate's basin and the empty purse of Judas.

Constantinople was crammed with fake relics, including letters in Jesus' own hand, the gold brought to the baby Jesus by the three wise men, the 12 baskets of bread collected after the miraculous feeding of the 5000, the trumpets of Jericho and the axe with which Noah made his ark. Even the alleged foreskin of Jesus was displayed by French Benedictine monks of Charroux.

Superstition and idolatry continue to accompany so-called religious relics in the 21st century.

Last week in Arizona, thousands visited a touring exhibit of relics including remains of yet another crown of thorns, a piece of wood from the table of the Last Supper and a splinter from the cross. Many came in the hope that laying eyes on the relics would cure them of illness. It did not matter that the remnant from the cross was a mere sliver, or that the large nail on display contained only shavings from the ones said to be used in the Crucifixion.

A couple of weeks earlier, Buddhist faithful packed an exhibit in Los Angeles in search of some healing power among a display of pearl-like crystals said to have been found among the burial ashes of Buddha.

In Sri Lanka, one of the most popular temples for the sick is one in which a tooth supposedly from the Buddha resides. Other Buddha teeth are housed in Taiwan, China and Singapore.

And although the Prophet Mohammed forbade the collection of relics, some mosques proudly claim to house some of his beard hairs, sandals and clothes.

Today, the Vatican is in possession of two skulls, each claimed by a different Pope to be the disciple Peter's.

The cult of venerating relics continues among the superstitious despite so many being revealed as fakes.

Some bones that were at one time acclaimed as the bones of Catholic saints have been exposed as the bones of animals.

In Spain, a cathedral once displayed what was said to be part of a wing of the Angel Gabriel when he visited Mary. It was found to be a magnificent ostrich feather.

Last week, Israeli authorities charged four Israelis and a Palestinian with creating and selling fake antiquities. The ringleader was Oded Golan, owner of the James Ossuary -- a little box of bones that some claimed was physical proof of Jesus' existence.

The James Ossuary, with the inscription "James the son of Joseph, the brother of Jesus" has created controversy for the past two years.

COINCIDENTALLY, new analysis of the controversial Shroud of Turin, which some say could be the burial cloth of Jesus, recently found the relic could be genuine.

This counters an earlier examination of fibres that found the shroud to be a Middle Ages fake.

Does it matter one way or the other? Christ and the apostles did not use religious relics. Jesus said we could contact and be healed by God directly, so relics seem superfluous.

It's intriguing to think that the Shroud of Turin may have once contained the crucified body of Christ, but what do any of these supposed discoveries mean in terms of faith?

The answer is nothing. You will learn nothing more from the shroud, nails and bits of wood than you would from the 10-year-old grilled cheese sandwich with a image of the Virgin Mary that sold for \$45,000 on eBay.
