

CONTRIBUTOR BIO



KEVIN MCLAREN is pursuing his B.A. in History at Cal Poly. He holds two A.A. degrees from Cuesta College, one in History and the other in International Studies. Kevin hopes to one day be a history professor or work in the music industry. As a history student, Kevin holds interests in Ancient Egyptian history/Egyptology, history of theology, history occultism and history of anarchism. He also enjoys reading, writing, and making music.

WORTHY OF VENERATION OR SKEPTICISM?: HOW EUROPEANS REGARDED RELICS DURING MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE EUROPE

By Kevin McLaren

Relics are the (apparent) remnants of Christ, Mary, a saint or a martyr that have been preserved and are said to be imbued with magical powers for the purpose of healing or absorbing virtues.⁵² They are material objects, such as bones, tombs, body parts, jewelry, clothing, canes, equipment, or books that once belonged to a particular individual, most likely a saint. There are early examples of relics in the Bible, such as 2 Kings 13:21, which tells a story of a dead man touching the bones of a virtuous person and coming back to life.⁵³ In medieval and renaissance Europe, different relics had different specified powers, depending on the saint to which they belonged. Different saints provided different powers for whatever circumstances a Catholic endured. For example, Catholics venerated the mummified body of St. Chiara in order to purify the body to keep chastity among nuns, while they venerated the clothing of St. Cuthbert in order to cure

⁵² Merry Wiesner-Hanks, *The Renaissance and Reformation: A History in Documents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 89.

⁵³ 2 Kings 13:21 (King James Version).

sickness.⁵⁴ Relics were encased in special decorated boxes, statues, tombs, vials, chests and specialized altars.⁵⁵ Some churches and/or monasteries in medieval and renaissance Europe were dedicated completely on the basis of a particular relic or were dedicated to the remains of a particular saint.

Although the people of Europe carried out pilgrimages to visit relics to absorb their virtue during medieval and early-renaissance Europe, attitudes toward relics changed during the Renaissance. Relics, reliquaries and the act of pilgrimage obtained importance in medieval Europe because of their mystical, spiritual and healing nature. The Catholic Church justified their veneration. Relics and reliquaries were prevalent in renaissance and reformation Europe until certain theologians began to question the validity, practicality, and true purposes of relics. These theologians emphasized an individual's faith in God rather than faith in relics, which in turn resulted in a renaissance movement away from reliance on relics.

Among scholars, analysis of renaissance relics has oftentimes become contextually muddled because of confusion with other various Catholic images.⁵⁶ This scholarship is also fraught with bias because many of the scholars are Catholic or Protestant, and thus have an opinion about whether the use of relics is right or wrong. Additionally, scholars often under-analyze the evolution of the theological and ideological usages for relics between medieval and renaissance Europe. My survey of Catholic relics provides some contextual history of relics in Europe, but concentrates specifically on the change in perspective regarding relics during the Renaissance.

Medieval justification for the usage of relics began early in the history of Christianity. St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) was a major supporter of the usage of relics in early Christianity and his theological writings became the basis for the use of relics as a means for healing and as tools to better humankind's connection with God. St. Augustine was a strong believer in the magical properties of relics—though he was initially skeptical of their magical properties—and wrote that remains, clothing, and belongings of saints and martyrs essentially held their essence, and therefore, also held the powerful essence of

⁵⁴ Wilfrid Bonser, "The Cult of Relics in the Middle Ages," *Folklore* 73, no. 4 (Winter 1962): 234.

⁵⁵ Wiesner-Hanks, *The Renaissance and Reformation*, 89-90.

⁵⁶ John Dillenberger, *Images and Relics: Theological Perceptions and Visual Images in Sixteenth-century Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 14.

God since saints were God's chosen messengers on earth.⁵⁷ In *The City of God*, Augustine wrote first-hand accounts of relics healing the sick, feeding the poor, and converting non-believers.⁵⁸ Though a strong believer in the magic of relics, Augustine made sure to clarify in *The City of God* that relics should not be worshipped as gods or idols because doing so would be a pagan practice. Rather, St. Augustine suggested that one should venerate relics knowing that they are imbued by the one, true, God.⁵⁹ The strong emphasis that Augustine placed on the veneration and usage of relics was fundamental to the European belief that relics had the ability to heal and should be sought after through pilgrimage.

St. John of Damascus (676-749 CE) was another early defender of relics; he believed they could better support and empower the Christian faith. St. John of Damascus substantiated the influence of relics by placing their importance at the same level as the church or monastery that housed them. He also strongly promoted the idea that God imbued the saints with powers of good as messengers of salvation, and that therefore, their remains forever held God's powers.⁶⁰ For St. John of Damascus, veneration of the dead resulted in miracles and the remains of the dead could be used as a sort of medium to communicate with God or the saint to which they belonged. St. John's *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* became a central text along with St. Augustine's *The City of God*; these texts would cause the Catholic Church to make relic veneration an official practice, as decided during the Second Council of Nicaea in 787.⁶¹

The primary theological text of Medieval Europe that supported and justified the use of relics was St. Thomas Aquinas' (1225-1274 CE) *Summa Theologica*. It would also become the primary Catholic defense for relics during the Reformation. As an encyclopedia-like manual that provided theological guidance on the Catholic Faith, *Summa Theologica* combined elements of many previous important promoters of relics to come to a solid foundational conclusion about the veneration of relics. Part III of *Summa Theologica* explains that relics should be venerated symbolically so as to honor the saints and martyrs that

⁵⁷ Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God* (Lawrence, Kansas: Digireads.com Publishing, 2010), 16.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 608-617.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 617-618.

⁶⁰ John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, trans. E.W. Watson and L. Pullan (Buffalo, New York: Veritatis Splendor Publications, 2012), 269-271.

⁶¹ Bonser, "The Cult of Relics in the Middle Ages," *Folklore* 73, no. 4 (Winter 1962), 236, accessed February 5, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1258503>.

they represent. Because God blessed the saints in a remarkable way, Catholics were to honor their souls, which were now in Heaven, closest to Him.⁶² St. Thomas Aquinas utilized quotes from St. Augustine to provide legitimacy of his claims about relics and to demonstrate the practical use of relics.

St. Augustine, St. John of Damascus, and St. Thomas Aquinas all believed in the magical nature of relics, but they also all professed that relics were not to be worshipped as gods or idols, but instead praised for being blessed by God. The three theologians all made the point that the relics themselves were not what was being worshipped; instead, Catholics worshiped God and honored the saints by venerating relics. These commonalities between Augustine, John of Damascus and Aquinas would be the theological defense for the veneration of relics when reformers challenged the practice later in the Renaissance and Reformation.⁶³ Until later in the Renaissance, however, the ideology put in place by these men would firmly secure the use of relics in the Catholic Church.

Due to the Catholic Church's endorsement of relics, their use became extremely important to European culture and daily life. Medieval Europeans depended on relics in order to heal their ailments, better their lives both financially and romantically, and have personal revelations from God or a saint.⁶⁴ Though medieval theologians made sure to separate relic veneration from worship, it is likely that most medieval Europeans did not think similarly. Rather, they worshipped the relics and reliquaries like idols in order to fulfill personal wants because, as uneducated believers, they did not know the thoughts of the elite theologians. At the height of medieval relic use, thousands of relics were spread throughout the Catholic network of churches, monasteries, chapels and shrines.

Relics revolving around Jesus Christ were extremely popular throughout medieval Europe. Christ's relics included vials of blood, sweat and tears, clothing, and items from the last supper. People flocked to touch or see supposed pieces of the True Cross, the cross on which Jesus was crucified. Other relics

⁶² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica, Part III (Tertia Pars) From the Complete American Edition*, trans. the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 2012), 4589-4610.

⁶³ Nerida Newbigin, "Del grasso di Lorezno un'ampolletta': Relics and Representations in the Quest for Forgiveness in Renaissance Rome," *Journal of Religious History* 28, no. 1 (February 2004), 51, accessed February 5, 2013, EBSCOHost.

⁶⁴ Bonser, "The Cult of Relics in the Middle Ages," 235-236.

revolving around the Passion were popular as well, such as the nails from the crucifixion, Longinus' spear, or the crown of thorns.⁶⁵ Second to only to relics of Christ, relics of the Virgin Mary drew large crowds throughout medieval Europe, especially among women. Many of the Virgin Mary's relics were bodily relics, such as hair, fingernails, breast milk, and stools. However, Mary's material relics, such as clothing, satchels, hairpins and shoes, also gained popularity.⁶⁶ Relics of the saints ranked just below those of Christ and Mary. The constant flow of pilgrimages to visit these relics demonstrates the European dependency on the objects. The Catholic Church monopolized this dependency and used it to better their establishments and gain influence. The medieval practice of utilizing relics to gain popularity, power, riches and political prestige would become the primary reason for the questioning of relics by renaissance and reformation theologians.

By the time of the Renaissance, some theologians began to question the true purpose of relics. Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536 CE), for example, wrote in his *Handbook of the Militant Christian* that relics were unnecessary for achieving true faith and piety, and he wrote that relic veneration convoluted the original messages of Jesus.⁶⁷ Erasmus was concerned that relics and saint veneration provided unnecessary obstacles and diluted the messages about how to achieve salvation.⁶⁸ However, Erasmus kept true to the Augustinian argument that as long as veneration and symbolic regard of relics were separate from worship, then relics were acceptable. Erasmus promoted the inspiration that one may acquire from a relic or saint, but Erasmus still placed emphasis on the individual's piety as the most practical approach to salvation.⁶⁹ Though Erasmus condemned use of false relics such as fake pieces of the True Cross, he did not advocate for their destruction. Erasmus did not intend for these relics to be destroyed because he believed that they could serve another purpose.⁷⁰ When confronted by Protestants later in life, Erasmus suggested moving away from dependency on relics in order to keep the Church unified.⁷¹

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 238-243.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 243-245.

⁶⁷ Desiderius Erasmus, *The Essential Erasmus*, trans. John P. Dolan (London: Meridian, 1983), 65.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 65-67.

⁶⁹ Dillenberger, *Images and Relics*, 174.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Though it was a gradual conclusion, Martin Luther (1483-1546 CE) condemned the use of relics by the mid-1520s because he believed that relics were being used incorrectly. Before declaring that the Catholic Church could not be saved in the 1520s, Luther wrote *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of German Nationality as to the Amelioration of the State of Christendom*, in which he clarified his opinion of relics; he articulated that they were marked by greed, corruption and a competitive drive for power.⁷² To Martin Luther, relics were merely an abused tool of the church to keep people in control and unequal in their quest for salvation. Martin Luther later called for a complete removal of relics and images because he considered them merely a distraction when trying to connect with God.⁷³ Luther saw relics, like indulgences, as a means of fundraising that had become an irrelevant and evil practice of the Catholic Church. He also did not believe that relics had magical properties.⁷⁴ Luther claimed that these relics should be removed in order to restore individualistic faith.⁷⁵ His skepticism toward relics would lead to iconoclastic movements to destroy relics throughout Europe, though he did not necessarily encourage this behavior.⁷⁶

Andreas Karlstadt (1486-1541 CE) was a German theologian and contemporary to Martin Luther. Karlstadt took Luther's message to the extreme and began to preach for the total destruction of relics and images.⁷⁷ He understood veneration of relics to be pure worship of idols and pagan practice. Karlstadt started movements in the Holy Roman Empire to raid churches and destroy all relics, pictures, and sculptures that he considered blasphemous. He wrote *On the Removal of Images* to spark other iconoclastic movements throughout Europe, which it succeeded in producing. Movements to destroy relics spread throughout Europe in the 1520s and faded in the 1570s. Other Protestants followed in the footsteps of Karlstadt, such as Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin, both of whom condemned the usage of relics as a pagan practice of idolatry and called for their destruction.⁷⁸

⁷² Martin Luther, *Selections From His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor Books, 1962), 458.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Wiesner-Hanks, *The Renaissance and Reformation*, 87.

⁷⁵ Dillenberger, *Images and Relics*, 89.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 176-181.

Catholics retaliated against Protestant movements to remove relics from use. For example, Hieronymus Emser wrote *That One Should Not Remove Images of the Saints or Dishonor Them, and that They are Not Forbidden in Scripture* as a direct argument against Karlstadt's *On the Removal of Images*. Similarly, Johannes Eck wrote *On Not Removing the Images of Christ and the Saints*.⁷⁹ Though the two were more primarily concerned with preserving images such as paintings and sculptures of Christ and saints, the two revived the arguments of Aquinas to justify the use of images, and therefore also revived the argument that would be used to defend relics as well. Because the Catholic Church stood its ground on their traditional use of relics, the issue became a primary reason for the split between Catholics and Protestants. Catholics insisted on the traditional arguments of Augustine, John of Damascus, and Aquinas—that relics were in fact acceptable scripturally and spiritually—whereas Protestants regarded the veneration of relics as blasphemous and heretical. Despite movements in certain parts of Europe away from relic veneration, Catholic areas continued to value relics as spiritually important objects.

Though the Renaissance and Reformation saw a gradual change of attitude toward relics for some Europeans, this period saw the opposite effect for Catholics. Whereas many reformers in the German region viewed relics as blasphemous obstacles to faith, the people of Spain maintained the traditional purposes of relics. Philip II of Spain was an avid collector of relics, which he used for religious, political, royal, and secular purposes.⁸⁰ Philip II is an example of a king that took advantage of the use of relics in order to better secure his monarchical rule, gain better support among his subjects, and firmly ground himself as a Catholic king to gain divine loyalty.⁸¹ By maintaining Spanish belief in relics, gathering relics for his own personal collection, and allowing people to see his relic collection, Philip II was able to firmly unify his lands.⁸² Phillip II revolutionized the use of relics in that his collection formed a sort of museum that benefited the economics and education of Spain. Philip II's

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁸⁰ Guy Lazure, "Possessing the Sacred: Monarchy and Identity in Philip II's Relic Collection at the Escorial," *Renaissance Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (Spring 2007), 58, accessed February 5, 2013, <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ren/summary/v060/60.1lazure.html>.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 58-85.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 85.

interest in relics shows an evolution in the use of relics for Catholics, as he did not merely use relics for ideological or spiritual purposes.

Catholic maintenance of relics and Protestant rejection of relics resulted in the eventual division between the Christians of Europe. The split between Protestants and Catholics had a long-term effect on the use of relics. A decline in relic veneration occurred even among Catholics because of their inability to carry out pilgrimages. Going on a pilgrimage became risky due to the threat of Protestant attack.⁸³ The Catholic reformation movements, which attempted to dissolve the use of false relics, led to the identification of Rome as the home for authentic relics.⁸⁴ Because Rome housed these major relics, and not all Catholics could go to Rome, Catholic dependency on relics decreased overall.

Relics in the medieval world were unquestioned because of their justification by medieval theologians such as St. Augustine, St. John of Damascus, and St. Thomas Aquinas. The Renaissance and Reformation saw changes in how people, especially theologians, regarded relics and their purpose. Whereas medieval theologians saw relics as useful tools for absorbing the virtues and spiritual essence of Christ, Mary, saints, and martyrs, renaissance and reformation theologians had various understandings of relics. While Erasmus saw them as unnecessary but symbolically sound, Luther saw them merely as obstacles in the way of God. Relics became an important element in the split between Catholics and Protestants, as some saw relic veneration as heretical and others preserved the medieval mentality of relics as spiritually important. Ultimately, Relics had a profound impact on Europe because of the way they shaped theological philosophy and the way they affected the daily lives of Europeans.

⁸³ Dillenberger, *Images and Relics*, 90.

⁸⁴ Wiesner-Hanks, *The Renaissance and Reformation*, 97-99.

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