

Whiskers, Teeth and Toes: The Interfaith World of Relics

Maureen Fiedler | Jul. 2, 2009 NCR Today

I always thought that relics were largely a Catholic phenomenon. You know: the toe of St. Francis Xavier, the Shroud of Turin, the finger of Mary Magdalene. And I certainly did not think relics would make interesting reading. Then, I came across a fascinating new book called *Rag and Bone: A Journey Among the World's Holy Dead* by Peter Manseau.

In that book, he spins tales about the whisker of Mohammed's beard, the tooth of the Buddha, and the hawking of relics — mostly fake ones — at Catholic monastic "fairs" in the Middle Ages. Wars have been fought over some of these miscellaneous body parts. It sounds crazy until you realize that that they are signs of power, dominion and sometimes territory that is much larger than a hair or a tooth.

Then, he reminds us that nations too have "relics" that give substance to a kind of "civic religion": Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial in Israel, and the monuments on our own Mall in Washington, DC.

Peter is our lead guest on Interfaith Voices this week, and the interview is humorous and fascinating. [Come visit us.](#) [1]

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