

Relics, faith and truth

William Grimm UCA News | Oct. 30, 2010



A mural from the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, Sri Lanka (Dreamstime.com/Valery Shanin)

Each summer, the city of Kandy, Sri Lanka, hosts a two-week-long Buddhist festival, Esala Perahera.

The main feature is a daily procession through the streets featuring thousands of torchbearers, dancers, drummers and other musicians. Each group of performers is followed by a decorated elephant. Even the elephants get into the mood, doing a sort of ponderous pachyderm pavane.

Since that is not all they do, at the edges of the procession are men carrying shovels. In all, some 100 elephants take part. The largest, flanked by two other big tuskers, bears on his back a shrine that houses what is believed to be a tooth of the Buddha.

Could the shrine really contain a tooth of a man who died four or five centuries before Christ? Well, teeth are durable things. I have run my finger along the serrated edge of a tyrannosaurus rex tooth 65 million years old.

But, even if it could be two and a half millennia old, is the tooth in Kandy in fact a relic of the Buddha? There is no way to verify that, and perhaps it does not matter.

In the Middle Ages, European Christians were caught up in a relic-collecting frenzy. Churches, monasteries and rulers vied to have the most valuable relics. Because the risen Christ ascended into heaven, relics of the Lord were especially hard to come by. Several churches claimed to have his foreskin left over from his circumcision on the eighth day after his birth, but those ?relics? have disappeared.

The relic collection of Charlemagne (circa 742-814) still sits in the Aachen Cathedral in Germany. Every seven years (the next time is in 2014), pilgrims are shown the cloak of the Blessed Virgin, the swaddling clothes of the infant Jesus, the loincloth worn by Christ on the cross and the cloth on which lay the head of St. John the Baptist after his beheading.

The authenticity of any of these relics is less likely than that of the Buddha's tooth in Sri Lanka. But, once again, as in the case of that tooth, perhaps it does not matter.

The medieval theologian and Archbishop of Canterbury Stephen Langton (circa 1150-1228) was asked to resolve a dispute between two places that claimed to have the same relic, the skull of John the Baptist.

After studying the evidence, such as it was, the archbishop issued his verdict: Both places had the skull. One had the skull of St. John as a young man, and the other had his skull as an older man.

When I first read of that verdict, I chuckled at the gullibility of our medieval forebears. However, on further reflection, I realized that Langton and the people to whom he gave the verdict were actually very sophisticated.

After all, they knew as well as anyone that the quota of human skulls is one per person. What Langton was saying, in effect, was, "If you need the skull of John the Baptist in order to draw closer to Christ, you've got it." And people accepted his verdict. Authenticity does not matter; results do.

Worshippers praying before the tooth of the Buddha or the robe of the Virgin are probably not concerned one way or the other about authenticity.

Some may believe that the relic is real; some may be convinced that it is not. Most are more focused on their prayers and hopes for comfort, healing and enlightenment for themselves and others. The relic is merely a point of focus. And God who loves all God's children listens to those prayers and hopes.

Like God, we must look deeper than appearances to see the heart that prays using what may, in effect, be lies in order to reach truth. At the same time, however, we must be careful that relics and legends reinforce an orientation to truth, not displace it.

We can see an example of truth being displaced in the mistaken denial of the fact of evolution because it does not hew closely enough to the two creation stories in Genesis.

Those pious fictions are meant to be foci for attention, not scientific expositions. Those who concentrate on the stories in the wrong way are as mistaken as those who try to build their whole faith upon certain wonders, apparitions, relics, personal revelations, devotions or personalities.

The ultimate test of the value of teeth, swaddling clothes, splinters of the cross, devotions and the rest is the one Jesus gave us. "By their fruits you will know them." If they lead to trust and service, then they have served their purpose.

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