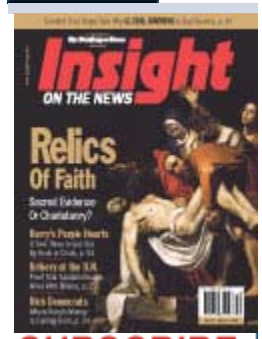




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## Searching for the Artifacts of Faith

Posted April 12, 2004  
By [John M. Powers](#)

During the last six months this country's mass media have discovered that old-time religion. For years references to religion among these blue-states keepers of the popular culture were limited to the usual hooting at "Islamic conservatives" or "right-wing Christians," but suddenly the elite media have caught on that God and traditional religious practice are subjects of great interest to many millions of Americans.

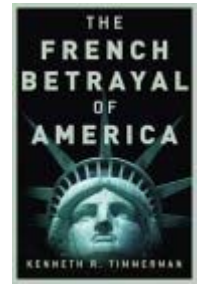
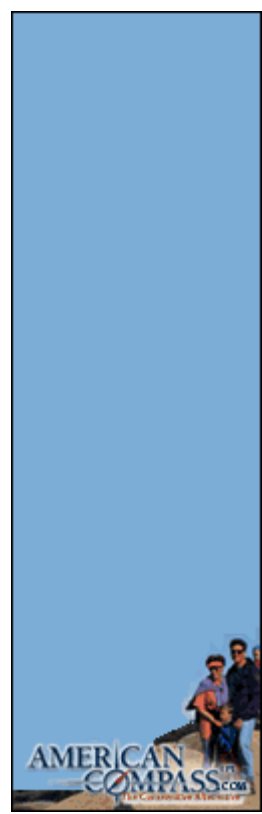
### COVER STORY



*Christians through the ages have longed to see relics touched by the divine.*

Maybe it has to do with money. Despite furious reviews by critics determined to sandbag it, Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*, already has taken in almost half-a-billion dollars worldwide at the box office and still is going strong. Even liberal readers helped to put *The Da Vinci Code* at the top of the best-seller charts, and the evangelical Left Behind series has set publishing records while making the great rapture and prophecies of Revelations seem as modern as this morning's newspaper. Yes, maybe it is all that money which has focused pop-culture attention on Christianity, resulting in TV news documentaries such as the Elizabeth Vargas special, *Jesus, Mary and Da Vinci*, and the Stone Phillips special report on *The Last Days of Jesus*, and Peter Jennings' *Jesus and Paul: The Word and the Witness*, with pre-broadcast publicity including a debate between Jennings and televangelist D. James Kennedy.

Most of these ventures engage issues that have raged worldwide in the centuries since the crucifixion of Jesus. What about differences among the Gospel accounts? Did Jesus survive Golgotha, marry and raise a family with descendants who survive to this day, as the new Gnostics



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say? Who really killed Christ?



As Christians celebrated Easter and Eastertide, Insight chose to reach past the clichés and debates of artists and theologians to examine some of the artifacts thought to have been touched by the divine: the relics of Easter.

**"Then he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it all of you.'" (Matthew 26:27)**

As the Gospels tell the story, Jesus and his disciples sat together for Passover dinner just before his seizure, trials, scourging and crucifixion. During this "Last Supper" Jesus breaks and passes bread, identifying it as his body, and then offers wine in a cup, which he calls his blood. Besides being a moment of sharing food with friends, this event initiated the Christian understanding of the Eucharist or Communion. According to the shared Christian theology, the blood and body of Christ were spilled and broken as atonement for the sins of all humanity. The issue of whether the bread and wine actually become the flesh and blood of Jesus before they are taken in remembrance still is debated by Christians, but their scholars are agreed that the original event took place.

The cup of Christ has taken on a life of its own in legend and mythology. Often referred to as the Holy Grail, its recovery has been the objective of adventurers and treasure hunters, its story the subject of novelists, painters and filmmakers. The comedy troupe Monty Python lampooned King Arthur in the 1975 film Monty Python and the Holy Grail. Fourteen years later Steven Spielberg sent Harrison Ford chasing the Grail in Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade.

Mark Rose, executive editor of Archaeology magazine and a trained classical archaeologist, says that one such story comes from the personal journal of Arlculf, a seventh-century pilgrim to the Holy Land who wrote that, inside a chapel in Jerusalem, he beheld the chalice that Christ used at the Last Supper. The pilgrim describes the cup as a goblet made of silver to hold about a pint and having handles on either side.

Many other stories also make claims about the location of the Holy Grail, says Rose. One tells of a cup thought to be made of a huge emerald. Another insists the cup was looted from Byzantium during the fourth crusade and eventually ended up in Genoa, where it remains today. Still another account puts a cup thought to be the Holy Grail in the cathedral of Valencia, Spain, where it is said to have been pawned by Alfonso V of Aragon. Rose thinks all these claims are suspect.

If Valencia and Genoa are too far away to check out the Holy Grail, consider a pilgrimage to the Chalice of Antioch, which is kept in New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET). According to the MET's account of the chalice, it was found in or around 1908 and was supposed to be from the city of Antioch. This was a major Christian center in the first centuries of Christianity, and it is thought that Mark, who authored the oldest of the Gospels, was a leader in the church at Antioch. This apparently explains the tradition that the Chalice of Antioch is the Holy Grail.

The chalice at the MET has an outer shell decorated with birds, lambs and other animals. There are 12 human figures holding scrolls, thought

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to represent the disciples. Inside the shell is a simple silver bowl, which was believed to be the actual Holy Grail. These claims have not held up, however, and the chalice has been dated as being from the sixth century rather than the first, according to the MET description.

The Chalice of Antioch may nonetheless be consistent with what the actual cup of Christ looked like. Rose thinks the cup probably was a "pedestal bowl" with a "wide flaring rim" and made of silver or clay. But he adds carefully, "You end up pretty quickly into complete speculation."

The Rev. James Willis, author of *The Religion Book*, is a student of the various legends relating to relics and the religious arcane. He points to two theories about the Holy Grail that have been put forward recently and a legend that has stood the test of time.

Both theories put the Grail in the possession of the Knights Templar of the Middle Ages. The Knights Templar were warrior monks who pledged to protect pilgrims to the Holy Land and stationed themselves along what also became the major trade routes. Eventually they became a powerful military force and participated variously in the Crusades, acquiring great wealth, and were rumored to have unearthed many relics of early Christendom, including the Holy Grail. Eventually this order of knights became so wealthy and powerful that it roused the jealousy of King Philip of France and Pope Clement V, who in 1308 sent out orders to capture or kill the Knights Templar and recover their fabled treasures. The knights scattered and some made their way to Scotland where King Robert the Bruce offered them asylum. As this theory goes, the Grail was taken to Scotland and may rest hidden to this day in the beautiful yet haunting Collegiate Chapel of St. Matthew, simply known as Rosslyn Chapel, in the town of Rosslyn just south of Edinburgh.

Another theory goes further, says Willis, and claims that Henry Sinclair, Lord of Rosslyn, took some of the scattered Knights Templar and made his way over the Atlantic to Oak Island, Nova Scotia. There is even some physical evidence to support this speculation, it is said, involving grave markers with Templar symbols, though Willis says he has seen no proof for either theory. He thinks the best guess about the passage of the Grail involves the legend of King Arthur. He speculates that Joseph of Arimathea, the wealthy man who offered his tomb for the body of Jesus, may have been rich from the tin trade, gained access to the Grail after the crucifixion, and taken it with him to Britain while moving his family closer to business and trade opportunities. This eventually collides with the legend of Arthur and the quest with which he charged his knights. One of Joseph's sons, the legend goes, became the Fisher King and held the Grail until finally Arthur's knight, Sir Percival, recovered it.

Making those assumptions about Joseph of Arimathea makes that version of the story the best guess, says Willis. "I think it's the best, though the only evidence is an argument that says it could have happened. ... It makes logical sense," Willis says, adding that none of that means it did happen. He worries that, more than likely, the Grail stories among the Welsh and Britons are the result of early syncretic efforts to persuade pagan Celts to embrace liturgical Christianity. Arthur acts as a bridge, Willis says, between the old pagan ideas of a Holy Grail and the cup of Christ's blood.

Asked if any of the Grail stories or theories are credible, Rose responds flatly, "No." He says the same of other relics that pilgrims can still see

today in various parts of Europe - the claimed "pieces of the true cross."

**"And he, bearing his cross, went out to a place called the Place of a Skull ... where they crucified him. ..." (John 19:17-18)**

Andrew Walther, a Ph.D. who is vice president of the Apostolate for Holy Relics, slowly opens a blue box. Inside is a small white pillow with a round medallion made of metal and glass containing splinters of wood. "Relics of the true cross," he says quietly as he stands in the rotunda entrance of the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington. His colleague Daniel Callahan, director of publications and exhibits at the center, nods solemnly, staring at the relics.

Walther and Callahan organized an exhibit of relics memorializing the Passion of Christ to be shown during Holy Week in Washington. In all, they presented seven relics they claim have been directly associated with Jesus of Nazareth. They have a piece of what tradition says is the burial shroud of Christ, the Shroud of Turin, along with a nail claimed to have been used at the crucifixion and pieces of rock from the sites believed to have been Calvary, Gethsemane, the Holy Sepulchre, and the house wherein was held the Last Supper. It is a hefty collection and one that these intelligent men have no doubt is authentic.

The pieces of the cross are splinters put together in the shape of a cross inside the glass section of the small reliquary. The ones on display in Washington through April 18 are part of a discovery often attributed to St. Helena, mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine, in the fourth century.

Helena went to Palestine seeking holy relics, particularly of Jesus' tomb and the cross. She is said to have obtained a confession from a Jew named Judas identifying the secret place in which she could find the cross. Some accounts say she tortured the hapless Jew, but others have it that he was a good man inspired by God to reveal the secrets. After this revelation, in any case, Helena had the designated site excavated and discovered what is regarded as the true cross in a crypt now located in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. To test its authenticity, the Christian bishop of Jerusalem, Macarius, is said to have touched a sick woman with it, causing her to recover, and when the cross was touched to the body of a dead man he reportedly was brought back to life.

Walther and Callahan believe the story of Helena is pure fiction and that the pieces of the cross probably were found by Macarius. After he found and authenticated them, according to Walther and Callahan, historical documents confirm that one piece was kept in Jerusalem and the rest scattered throughout the world. Some reached Rome and can be seen today at the Vatican. Still others are in the Church of Santa Croce in Florence and Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris.

Pieces of the true cross have proliferated, and none still in existence today are without skeptics. Rose calls into question their existence after 2,000 years, citing the many claims made by soldiers returning from the Crusades. Indeed, claims to have recovered such holy relics often were used to gain fame or purchase indulgences from the church. "The odds are very much against" pieces of the authentic cross having survived to this day, says Rose.

Walther and Callahan, however, believe the tradition of pilgrimage to the holy sites that claim to have pieces of the cross, going back as they do

to the fourth century, may be evidence that they are authentic. "That is a watershed moment in Christianity," says Walther, and the followers of Jesus would have known where these items were located. Once Christianity no longer was suppressed, the relics could be shared and venerated. "To me, it's harder to believe someone chose to die on a cross for me than it is to believe these things are still around," says Walther. "I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't think it was the genuine article. ... There's nothing that is not controversial."

**"Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury." (John 19:40)**

One of the most hotly contested relics associated with Easter is the enigmatic Shroud of Turin, widely believed to be the burial cloth of Jesus Christ. The shroud is in two pieces, presumably a front and back sheet, made of linen measuring 131/2 feet by 41/4 feet. It carries the eerie, faint image of a bearded man, crowned with thorns and having suffered injuries consistent with scourging and crucifixion, as if recorded on the cloth by a photoflash of brilliant light rising from the body.

The confirmed chain of evidence for the shroud starts in France in 1357. In 1443 its ownership passed to the Savoy family in Italy, which in 1578 built a special chapel in the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in Turin, Italy, to display it. The shroud was willed to the Vatican in 1983 but kept in Turin. Unconfirmed histories put it in Turkey before the confirmed trail.

The Shroud of Turin has been challenged ferociously by some elements of the scientific community and its authenticity was thought to have been refuted after radiocarbon tests were conducted in 1988 on a piece of the shroud by three different laboratories. The labs dated it to different years, but all between the late 1200s and late 1300s.

Now those findings have been called into question by shroud researchers. Arthur Tucker, a botanist at Delaware State University, is codirector of a study recently undertaken by a team of scientists to analyze botanical evidence on the shroud. He and other critics say the carbon-dating evidence must be questioned. They say that the shroud suffered damage from a fire in 1532, and normal wear and tear during the passage of 2,000 years, with the result that certain sections were repaired. The area of the shroud from which the sample was taken was "a compromised area which has been sewn and re sewn for display," says Tucker.

It's not zealotry that makes Tucker doubt the carbon dating. Rather he cites botanical evidence taken from the shroud that he reviewed with his team. To start, Tucker says, the composition of the shroud's linen is a "3-to-1 twill herringbone weave." This type of weave has been confirmed by Jewish scholars as consistent with weaving techniques known to have been used during the first century in Palestine. There is evidence on the shroud of other fabrics, but Tucker says that could be the result of contamination.

On the other hand, according to Tucker and his team of scientists, the shroud contains botanical evidence, such as pollen and flower impressions, that link it unmistakably through the years to Jerusalem, Turkey and south-central Europe, which would confirm the trail of historical ownership. Most poignant to the investigation of whether the shroud belonged to Christ is that some of the botanicals found on the



shroud correspond to pollens of Jerusalem during the first century. Tucker's study concluded that 37 different species of pollen or flower impressions on the linen came from the area of Palestine, many of them from the Jerusalem area. Two species of pollen found on the shroud, Tucker points out, overlap only in Jerusalem.

Going even further with botanical evidence, Tucker says his team concluded, based on the evidence gathered in years previous, that all 37 species of pollen from the shroud not only grow around Palestine but "flower or fruit" between March and April. One species of caper found on the shroud flowers only between "3 or 4 in the afternoon."

A shroud made of linen in a first-century fashion with forensic evidence that concludes it is from Jerusalem during March or April, maybe used around 3 or 4 in the afternoon. Could this in fact be the burial cloth of Jesus?

"Most probably, yes ... what we're seeing here is the burial shroud of Christ," says Tucker. He makes this conclusion based not only on the botanical evidence but on other historical evidence, such as images similar to that found on the shroud from coins of the first century.

Even so, to a scientist "most probably" isn't enough. Can any of these relics be authenticated with indisputable evidence? No one has claimed the ability to do so. Rose points out that few archaeological finds from the ancient world can be indisputably shown to have been in contact with specific people of history. He regards the search for relics as a quest of faith and not science. "It involves wanting to have something tangible" to associate with what one believes, says Rose. "It's a personal, emotional sort of thing."

So why pay these relics any mind? What does it matter if the Holy Grail is a myth, the purported remains of the cross just slivers of wood, and the shroud a fake?

For Callahan, "Art and artifact help us preserve memory [and] lead us to Jesus." Callahan and Walther stress that encountering holy relics is never about the object but about the spiritual effect it can have on a person.

While looking at the claimed relics of the cross, Insight spoke with 14-year-old Marc Mendoza of Maryland. "To see a piece of the true cross is really amazing," he says. "It increases my faith in the crucifixion." A reporter asks, "But what if these really aren't pieces of the true cross?" And young Mendoza replies for millions, "You know, I really didn't need to see relics to believe. I already believed."

*John M. Powers is a writer for **Insight**.*

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