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Treatise on Relics

John Calvin

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For much of its history the Catholic Church has countenanced the veneration of relics—objects or even bones associated with a saint, or with Jesus Christ himself, that were deemed to have healing power or some beneficial spiritual effect on believers. Despite criticism from some skeptical observers (including even St. Augustine), the belief in relics has continued to this day.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when the Protestant Reformation launched a wholesale attack on Church practices, the use of relics was included among the superstitions that were deplored as a corruption of the Christian faith. John Calvin, one of the chief architects of the Reformation, published this thorough critique of relic worship in 1543.

He runs through the gamut of objects that are venerated in various churches. From the alleged swaddling clothes of Jesus to pieces from the crown of thorns, Calvin pointedly shows how little proof there is that these objects are real and how obviously they are used as a means of taking advantage of the gullible. He is especially scathing and witty on the then-widespread belief in the authenticity of fragments of the so-called True Cross. Calvin remarks that if one were to accept all such claims, one would have enough wood to fill up a ship's cargo hold!

This edition of Calvin's classic treatise includes an interesting introduction by expert investigator Joe Nickell, author of Relics of the Christ, Inquest on the Shroud of Turin, and Looking for a Miracle, among many other books (see www.joenickell.com). Nickell presents a brief biography of Calvin and brings the story of investigating relics up to date by explaining how sophisticated modern techniques are helping to unravel the mysteries surrounding such famous relics as the Shroud of Turin and many other similar venerated objects.

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