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The False Gifts of the Magi

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The line of people waiting to see the Gifts of the Magi at Moscow's main cathedral now stretches for kilometers. The faithful stand for hours in the cold. The Moscow foundation that brought the relics to the capital was founded by oligarch Konstantin Malofeyev, a man involved in a criminal case for bribing voters and whom VTB bank has accused of credit fraud in London.

This is not happening in the 10th century or in a remote Afghan village. This is happening in 21st-century Russia — in the first country to put a satellite in orbit.

The tradition of counterfeiting Christian relics dates back to ancient times. In 326, St. Helena, a former concubine to Roman emperor Constantius Chlorus, traveled to Jerusalem where she claims to have found the exact spot where Jesus Christ had been crucified, his burial place, the cross on which he had died, four nails and even a plaque bearing the inscription "Jesus Christ: King of the Jews." That would be like someone today revisiting the Battle of Poltava site and literally stumbling over the horseshoes of the steed ridden by Peter the Great.

The most striking thing about all these fakes is how shoddily crafted they are. It seems that they don't even make an attempt at covering it up with even a semblance of authenticity. They have no idea that historical documents and relics differ from today's written records and objects.

The Gifts of the Magi are 28 small gold plates alleged to be the gifts that the three wise men, or kings, gave to the baby Jesus in the 1st century. The gold pieces are decorated with post-Byzantine filigree typical of the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries. There is nothing exceptional about them. You could just as easily pass off an iPhone as a gift originally presented to Jesus, or the tread from the tank that St. George used to crush the dragon.

So why did so many people line up to see them? State-controlled television has much to do with it.

In 2011, Russian Railways head Vladimir Yakunin brought the Virgin Mary's cincture, a belt believed to have been worn by Jesus' mother, to Moscow. It received round-the-clock television coverage, after which thousands of people joined a mad stampede to view it.

In fact, the Church of the Prophet Elijah in Moscow has long kept a small piece of this very same cincture, but there are no lines of pilgrims waiting for hours to see it.

It is clear that believers are lining up not only because a purported holy relic is present, but also because they are responding to all of the hype on television.

The more the Russian Orthodox Church stirs up controversy concerning homosexuals, the less people remember that Patriarch Kirill was once photographed wearing an expensive Breguet wristwatch, which he later tried to have removed using Photoshop. This is the same patriarch who brought legal charges in 2012 against a neighbor for leaving excessive dust in his apartment after doing repairs. The more church leaders rant on about the depravity of the West, the more primitive the Orthodox Church becomes.

Perhaps John Calvin captures this absurdity the best. He once said that if we could gather all of the world's holy relics in one place, "It would be clear that every apostle had four bodies and every saint two or three."

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