

## ***The Da Vinci Code, Jesus, and History: Imagining Christianity Past and Present*<sup>1</sup>**

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Did Jesus of Nazareth have a wife? Did he father a child and a lineage of kings? Do his blood descendants even now walk among us? Is the Christian messiah the victim of a tragic conspiracy, a vicious and masculine plot to conceal the true gospel and hijack the church? These are the claims of Dan Brown's unlikely and wildly popular novel, *The Da Vinci Code*.<sup>2</sup> This cliff-hanger and page-turner weaves together alleged fact and frenetic fiction in a succession of 105 rapid-fire chapters; it is a magnetic mystery and a narrative confession of faith. Should this novel and its stunning claims be taken seriously? Will the hype surrounding it soon blow over, only to be replaced by the next outlandish "big thing"? Every cultural, media, and economic indicator suggests that *The Da Vinci Code* is here to stay for the foreseeable future. In fact, the novel has garnered a significant global following, generating a fervent subculture and early signs of an embryonic religion. Indeed, *The Da Vinci Code* has significant implications not only for theologians and historians, but even more so for pastors and lay people, for discipleship and evangelism. It is vital to understand the international media event spawned by *The Da Vinci Code*, the book's profound reimagining of Jesus of Nazareth and his message, and the cultural and religious currents in which church, believer, and seeker now swim.

### ***The Da Vinci Code Event***

This surprising bestseller opens in a dimly lit hall with a grisly murder. The body of Jacques Saunière, curator of the Louvre in Paris, lies contorted on the floor of the museum's Grand Gallery. French Judicial Police awaken Robert Langdon, Harvard professor of religious symbology, in his Parisian hotel and drive him to the crime scene in order to examine the bizarre and bloody clues left by the dead curator.<sup>3</sup> They are joined at the scene by police cryptographer Sophie Neveu, who happens to be the murder victim's granddaughter. Armed with tantalizing clues and a mysterious key, Langdon and Neveu flee the museum and begin a wild twenty-hour road trip. With the French police and a homicidal albino hot on their trail, the

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the members of the adult Sunday school class at the First Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan, for getting me started on this project. They invited me to teach several classes on this subject in March of 2005, and provided a helpful sounding board and critique for my ideas.

<sup>2</sup> Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003); edition cited in this article. See also Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code: Special Illustrated Edition* (New York: Doubleday, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Langdon is the hero of Dan Brown's previous novel, *Angels and Demons* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001) and apparently the main character in his forthcoming *Da Vinci Code* sequel, *The Solomon Key*. A marker of Brown's popularity is the appearance in September 2005 of a book purporting to reveal salient themes and background for the as yet incomplete and unpublished *Solomon Key*: see *Secrets of the Widows Son: The Mysteries Surrounding the Sequel to "The Da Vinci Code,"* eds. D. A. Shugarts and D. Burstein (New York: Sterling, 2005).

fugitive professor and cryptographer soon enlist the assistance and company of British royal historian, Leigh Teabing. The cryptic directions left by the deceased curator take them to a Swiss bank in Paris, by clandestine flight across the channel to England, on to the Temple Church in London, Westminster Abbey, and finally to Rosslyn Chapel in Scotland.

Murder and suspense comprise only half the book. Along the way Robert Langdon and Leigh Teabing unveil to Sophie Neveu the meaning of arcane religious symbols, the proper interpretation of ancient texts, and the nature of long guarded secrets. Christianity as we know it today is a profound and carefully constructed deception. Since the fourth century the Roman Catholic Church in particular has distorted and concealed the actual identity and message of Jesus of Nazareth. Over the centuries a clandestine society – the Priory of Sion – has protected and concealed ironclad evidence that will one day expose traditional Christianity as a fraud. The Priory’s grand masters and sacred guardians have included Sandro Botticelli, Robert Boyle, Isaac Newton, Claude Debussy, and, most of all, Leonardo Da Vinci, in whose paintings the message of the society and the secrets of true Christianity have been encoded. The murder of Louvre curator, Saunière, the family lineage of Sophie Neveu, the secrets of the Priory, and *The Da Vinci Code* itself all point to the greatest treasure of all – the Holy Grail . Even now members of the conservative Catholic association, Opus Dei, wage an ancient war to suppress the truth, capture the Grail, and eradicate all evidence of true Christianity.

Dan Brown’s unique fusion of thriller and religious ideology has proven magnetic. *Newsweek* has anointed *The Da Vinci Code* “the most popular – and controversial – novel of our time,” and *Time* has intoned, “The novel that ate the world.”<sup>4</sup> The book thrives in virtual reality: on January 30, 2006, a Google search for “Da Vinci Code” identified 6,480,000 webpages. Indeed, global interest has been staggering from the beginning. Doubleday publishing released *The Da Vinci Code* March 18, 2003, with a print run of 215,000 hardcover copies. In just over one week the book soared to number one on nationwide fiction charts, prompting Doubleday to rush a second printing of 44,000. On June 9 surprised author Dan Brown was poised across from Matt Lauer on NBC’s *Today* show. The book was still holding the top spot, one million copies were now in print, and the media circus was just beginning. By November of 2003, ABC had aired a documentary, “Jesus, Mary, and Da Vinci.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Devin Gordon, “The ‘Code Breakers,” *Newsweek* 147 (1), January 2, 2006, 94. The novel and soon-to-be-released *Da Vinci Code* film was also the cover story of the new year’s first issue, devoted to significant events anticipated in 2006; Michelle Orecklin, “The Novel That Ate the World,” *Time Magazine*, April 18, 2005, 118, InfoTrac OneFile. Hope Coll. Lib., Holland, MI, 21 January 2006, <http://infotrac.gale.group.com>.

<sup>5</sup> Charlotte Abbott, “Code Word: Breakout; can Bookseller Buzz make a Bestseller?” *Publishers Weekly* 250 (4), January 27, 2003, 117; Daisy Maryles, “Veni, Vidi, DaVinci,” *Publishers Weekly* 250 (13), March 31, 2003; 19, both articles from: InfoTrac OneFile. Hope Coll. Lib., Holland, MI, 21 January 2006, <http://infotrac.gale.group.com>. NBC Today Show, NBC News transcript, June 9, 2003, Matt Lauer interview with Dan Brown, [www.danbrown.com/media/todayshow.htm](http://www.danbrown.com/media/todayshow.htm); Charles McGrath, “Another Holy Mystery. D.

Meanwhile, Christian publications were beginning to initiate a fierce campaign to discredit the book.<sup>6</sup> One year after its appearance, *The Da Vinci Code* was still going strong, a fixture on the top hardcover bestseller lists with seven million copies in print in forty languages.<sup>7</sup> At the two year mark, press runs had reached ten million in the United States and twenty-five million copies in forty-four languages worldwide. *Barnes & Noble* reported that *The Da Vinci Code* had dominated sales in their stores for an unprecedented twenty-four months. In London, Dan Brown received the British Book of the Year award for 2004; he was hailed as the author who had saved the publishing industry. Finally, in May of 2005, for the first time since its appearance, *The Da Vinci Code* fell out of the top five on the *New York Times* hardcover fiction list. Shortly thereafter it would ascend yet again, especially around the Christmas holidays.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile in the previous year alone Dan Brown had pocketed a cool 76.5 million dollars in royalties; *Forbes Magazine* ranked Brown number twelve among the world's most powerful celebrities. Has *The Da Vinci Code* peaked? This is not likely. As of late January, 2006, the book was back at the top of the *New York Times* hardcover list. On March 28, 2006, the paperback is scheduled to be released with a five million copy print run, to be followed seven weeks later by the blockbuster film, *The Da Vinci Code*, directed by Ron Howard and starring Tom Hanks.<sup>9</sup> And the novel is only the beginning of the story.

A steady ripple effect has emanated from *The Da Vinci Code* since its appearance in March 2003. Dan Brown has not only brought exponential growth to Doubleday, but he has also generated a wave of literature supporting, echoing, and attacking his book. Related titles already in print as well as new books have benefited

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Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code*," *New York Times Magazine*, November 23, 2003, 23-24; retrieved 8 December 2005 from WilsonSelectPlus database.

A steady stream of documentaries regarding the book have been produced and aired, including: "The Real *Da Vinci Code*," aired on Channel 4 in England in February 2005 and later on the channel DiscoveryTimes (Paul Hoggart, "Demolition Job on *The Da Vinci Code*," *Times*, London, Features, 23, LEXIS-NEXIS. 8 December 2005 <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/universe>), PAX-TV's "Breaking *The Da Vinci Code*,"—May, 2005. NBC Dateline's "Secrets to the Code; Facts and Fiction in Dan Brown's Novel," June, 2005. "Unlocking Da Vinci's Code: the Full Story," gave the National Geographic Channel its highest ratings ever (Laura Crock, "The *Da Vinci Crock*," *Salon.com*, 29 December 2004, LEXIS-NEXIS. 8 December 2005 <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/universe>),

<sup>6</sup> See below, note 31 below; and annotated bibliography at the end of this article.

<sup>7</sup> Mark S. Burrows, "Gospel Fantasy: dismantling *The Da Vinci Code*" (Cover Story), *Christian Century* 121 (11), June 1, 2004, p. 20, InfoTrac OneFile. Hope Coll. Lib., Holland, MI, 21 January 2006, <http://infotrac.gale.group.com>.

<sup>8</sup> Hillel Italie, "Two Years after Publication, *The Da Vinci Code* keeps Selling," March 8, 2005, The Associated Press. Edward Wyatt, "For 'Code' Author, 24 Months in a Circus," *New York Times*, March 21, 2005, Sec. E, 1, 13 December 2005. LEXIS-NEXIS. 8 December 2005; both articles, <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/universe>.; M. Orecklin, "The Novel..." (as in n. 4, above). "Da Vinci Nod," *Hollywood Reporter* 388 (41), April 21, 2005, 5; for helpful charts on rise and fall of *The Da Vinci Code* sales in England, see "The Da Vinci Year," *Bookseller* 5171, March 25, 2005, 17; both articles from: InfoTrac OneFile. Hope Coll. Lib., Holland, MI, 21 January 2006, <http://infotrac.gale.group.com>.

<sup>9</sup> Jennifer Johnston, "Da Vinci Code Author," *Sunday Herald*, 17 July 2005, News, 4. "Five Million for 'Da Vinci,'" *Publishers Weekly Daily*, 9 January 2006; [www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA6298026.html](http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA6298026.html).

profoundly. In addition to seventy guides and books promising to enlighten or forewarn the reader and unravel the intricacies of the novel, publishers such as *Inner Traditions/Bear & Co.* are now targeting a new literature category – “Alternative Christianity.” Publishers are hunting for the next hot book either to ride *The Da Vinci Code* wave or make a splash in a related, but popular and fertile field; meanwhile rumors swirl of a J. K. Rowling/Dan Brown collaboration featuring Harry Potter and Robert Langdon. Some booksellers surmise that Dan Brown has launched a new literary genre combining history, mystery, suspense, and religion.<sup>10</sup> The impact on the world of bookish education – the university – is still to be measured worldwide, but British universities have witnessed a 25 percent upswing in applications for art history courses since *The Da Vinci Code* appeared in 2003.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, Dan Brown’s novel is now reshaping tourism and travel in Europe. Fodors has issued a special edition guide for those striking out on a *Code* pilgrimage.<sup>12</sup> *Da Vinci Code* bus tours and hotel packages have sprung up in London and Paris. Tourists have been flocking in record numbers to key sites from the novel, including the neoclassical church, Saint-Sulpice, and, of course, the Louvre museum in Paris, the Temple Church in London, and Rosslyn Chapel near Edinburgh, Scotland. The Opus Dei house, normally an inconsequential address in London, has been inundated with seeker-packed buses.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, in Rennes-le-Chateau, France, the mayor has been compelled to create a concrete, tourist-proof

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<sup>10</sup> Steven Zetichik, “Riding along with ‘Da Vinci,’” *Publishers Weekly*, 9 February 2004, 18-19. Liane Hansen and Martha Woodroff, “Next Literary Sensation,” National Public Radio, *Weekend Edition*, 17 April 2005. LEXIS-NEXIS. 8 December 2005, <http://lexis-nexis.com/universe>. Hillel Italie, “2006 Brings Many ‘Da Vinci’-Esque Books,” Associated Press wire, 13 December 2005. LEXIS-NEXIS. 24 January 2006 <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/universe>. Nicholas Pyke, “After the *Da Vinci Code* come the *Da Vinci Clones*,” *Independent on Sunday* (London), First Edition, 20 March 2005, News, 22. LEXIS-NEXIS. 8 December 2005 <http://lexis-nexis.com/universe>. Jim Milliot, “Inner Traditions bets on ‘Alternative Christianity,’” *Publishers Weekly* 1 November 2004, 14. “Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code* spawns new religion, *Bookseller* 5172, 1 April 2005, 6. InfoTrac OneFile. Hope Coll. Lib., Holland, MI, 21 January 2006, <http://infotrac.gale.group.com>.

<sup>11</sup> The University of Birmingham in particular has witnessed such an upswing; Dr Tom Henry, a reader from Oxford Brookes University, confirms that the book is being used in field trips to Paris as a negative example: “It simplifies to an extreme level what art history is about. *The Da Vinci Code* shows students how not to go about art history”; Sholto Byrnes, “*Da Vinci Code* Fans Line up to study Art History,” *Independent on Sunday* (London), 19 June 2005, News, 9; LEXIS-NEXIS. 8 December 2005 <http://lexis-nexis.com/universe>.

<sup>12</sup> *Fodor’s Guide to the “Da Vinci Code”: On the Trail of the Bestselling Novel*, eds. J. Paull, C. Culwell (New York: Fodors, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> “Eurostar follows the *Da Vinci* Trail,” *Travel Weekly (UK)*, 13 January 2006, 26, InfoTrac OneFile. Hope Coll. Lib., Holland, MI, 21 January 2006, <http://infotrac.gale.group.com>. Tom Dyckhoff, “Worship at the *Da Vinci* Altar,” *Times* (London), 2 August 2005, Features, 2; LEXIS-NEXIS. 8 December 2005 <http://lexis-nexis.com/universe>. Beth Bakkum, “*Da Vinci Code* Literary Tours,” *Writer* 118, 2005, 10. InfoTrac OneFile. Hope Coll. Lib. <http://infotrac.galegroup.com>. “*Da Vinci Code* Package.” *International Travel News* 30 (2005), 97. InfoTrac OneFile. Hope Coll. Lib. Holland, MI, 21 January 2006, <http://infotrac.galegroup.com>. “Package Special at Concorde Hotel Du Louvre; View to a Kill and Food for Thought,” *Market Wire*, 14 December 2004, LEXIS-NEXIS. 8 December 2005 <http://lexis-nexis.com/universe>. Rebecca Ford, “Tracing the *Da Vinci Code*,” *Express*, 26 March 2005, Features, 62, LEXIS-NEXIS. 8 December 2005 <http://lexis-nexis.com/universe>. John Cornwell, “Stranger than Fiction,” *London Times*, 16 January 2005, Features, 16, LEXIS-NEXIS. 8 December 2005 <http://lexis-nexis.com/universe>.

grave to discourage code-crazed explorers. "Codehead" has now appeared in travel jargon.<sup>14</sup> Devotees of key sites may further enhance their experience via the *Da Vinci Code* diet, *Code* bathroom designs, and soon the video game.<sup>15</sup>

Despite massive sales and a thriving subculture, many reviewers have been deeply critical of Dan Brown's style and story-telling. His book has been labeled a "cheesy-thriller," "pop esoterica," "pulp fiction," "mind candy," and "fluff," as schlock bred for an itinerant humanity marooned in planes and trains, terminals and stations.<sup>16</sup> Yet sales continue unabated.<sup>17</sup> A significant part of *The Da Vinci Code* phenomenon is its clever mixing of ancient paganism, new age spirituality, and variant forms of Christianity. Religious curiosity and critique has kept this novel selling.

### According to the CODE: Jesus and the History of Christianity

There are many ways to approach the identity and significance of Jesus of Nazareth: exegetical study of the New Testament, analysis of his Jewish and Palestinian background and formation, review of shifting images in religious art, discussion of his person and work in theology. *The Da Vinci Code* offers the opportunity to ponder Jesus as he is embedded in popular media, to observe the interaction of ancient texts and traditions with current religious impulse, sentiment, and cultural style. This novel makes no attempt at subtlety; the portrayal of Jesus is imaginative, uninhibited, and unrestrained by tradition and scholarship.

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<sup>14</sup> Rennes-le-Chateau mayor, Jean-Francois L'Huillier, explains his reburial of Abbe Berenger Saunière (1852-1917), the historical figure on which the fictional Jacques Saunière is based: "The world has gone mad. They come here and stomp all over the place with no respect for anything anymore. They set off explosions and climb over the cemetery wall to dig up the dead"; Brian Bethune, "Cracking *The Da Vinci Code*," *Maclean's*, 20 December 2004, cover story, 34, LEXIS-NEXIS. 8 December 2005 <http://lexis-nexis.com/universe>. Lloyd Evans, "Give us a Clue: intrigued and impressed by *The Da Vinci Code*, Lloyd Evans mingles with the Codeheads in Paris," *Spectator* 298, 28 May 2005, 49-50, InfoTrac OneFile. Hope Coll. Lib., Holland MI 21 January 2006. <http://infotrac.galegroup.com>

<sup>15</sup> "Da Vinci Code Diet brings carbs back to the Plate," *Nation's Restaurant News* 39, 10 October 2005, 16; "You've Read the Book, Now Try the Diet," *Food Management* 39, August 2004, 120; Mary Jo Peterson, "The Da Vinci Code of Kitchen and Bath Design," *Kitchen & Bath Design News* 23 (2005), 28-29; all three articles: InfoTrac OneFile. Hope Coll. Lib., Holland MI 21 January 2006. <http://infotrac.galegroup.com>. "2K Games signs exclusive worldwide Agreement with Sony Pictures Products to publish *The Da Vinci Code* Video Game," *Business Wire*, 2 November 2005, LEXIS-NEXIS. 8 December 2005 <http://lexis-nexis.com/universe>.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Szimhart, review: *The Da Vinci Code*, *Cultic Studies Review* 3 (2004), <http://culticstudiesreview.org>. Laura Miller, "The *Da Vinci* crock," *Salon.com*, 29 December 2004, LEXIS-NEXIS. 8 December 2005 <http://lexis-nexis.com/universe>. Ted Schmidt, "Breaking *The Da Vinci Code*: a Necessary Antidote," *Catholic New Times* 28 (2004), 18, InfoTrac OneFile. Hope Coll. Lib., Holland MI 21 January 2006. <http://infotrac.galegroup.com>. Ingrid D. Rowland, "Pop Esoterica! Leonardo da Vinci at the Beach," *The New Republic* 231, 16 August 2004, 21, InfoTrac OneFile. Hope Coll. Lib., Holland MI 21 January 2006. <http://infotrac.galegroup.com>.

<sup>17</sup> One review sums up the conundrum of the novel: "It is terribly written, its characters are cardboard cutouts, the dialogue is excruciating in places and, a bit like a computer manual, everything is overstated and repeated—but it is impossible to put the bloody thing down"; cited in David Smith, *Observer*, 12 December 2004, News, 23, LEXIS-NEXIS. 8 December 2005 <http://lexis-nexis.com/universe>.

In a series of decisive conversations among Harvard professor Robert Langdon, cryptographer Sophie Neveu, and British historian Leigh Teabing, we discover a Jesus set free from a conspiracy that has long contorted his gospel and obscured his true identity. “Many scholars claim the early church literally *stole* Jesus from his original followers, hijacking His human message, shrouding it in an impenetrable cloak of divinity, and using it expand their own power”; so clarifies Leigh Teabing, esteemed British historian and fictional character in *The Da Vinci Code*.<sup>18</sup> At the heart of Christianity is a dark secret, a grab for power and control, sudden and severe, funneling all sacred power and religious meaning away from true believers to the Roman Catholic Church. Lost to most of posterity is a “historical figure of staggering influence, perhaps the most enigmatic and inspirational leader the world has never ever seen...Jesus toppled kings, inspired millions, and founded new philosophies,” yet he was a “mortal prophet...a great and powerful man, but a *man* nonetheless.”<sup>19</sup> Fortunately thousands wrote of his life, including over eighty gospels. But in the early fourth century, Constantine (d. 337), emperor of the Roman Empire, threw his weight behind flourishing and ascendant Christianity. Although not himself a true believer, Constantine shrewdly warped the faith to fit his imperial designs at the Council of Nicea (325). He synthesized Christian and pagan symbols, rituals, and divinities, thereby obscuring the humanity of Jesus. He reduced the Bible to the four Gospels that fit his conception of the Christian savior: “By officially endorsing Jesus as the Son of God, Constantine turned Jesus into a deity, who existed beyond the scope of the human world, an entity whose power was unchallengeable.”<sup>20</sup> The Vatican became the guardian of this now majestic, omnipotent being and in turn sought to suppress all documents speaking of the original Jesus: “almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false....”<sup>21</sup>

Fortunately, though pursued and persecuted relentlessly by the Roman Catholic Church, devoted followers of the original Jesus have managed to keep his identity and message alive. In fact, at the heart of Christianity is not only Jesus of Nazareth, but also the apostle to whom he entrusted his true church – not Simon Peter, but the wife of Jesus, Mary Magdalene. The Dead Sea Scrolls and Nag Hammadi documents, and especially *The Gospel of Philip*, attest to the marital status of Jesus – not surprising since Jewish men of Jesus’ age were required to marry: “Behold...the greatest cover-up in human history. Not only was Jesus Christ married, but He was a father... Mary Magdalene was the Holy Vessel. She was the chalice that bore the royal bloodline of Jesus Christ. She was the womb... and the vine from which the sacred fruit sprang forth!”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *The Da Vinci Code*, 233.

<sup>19</sup> *The Da Vinci Code*, 231, 233

<sup>20</sup> *The Da Vinci Code*, 233.

<sup>21</sup> *The Da Vinci Code*, 235.

<sup>22</sup> *The Da Vinci Code*, 245-248; quote, 249.

Throughout *The Da Vinci Code*, Langdon and Teabing unfold the full significance of Jesus' original message and of Mary Magdalene, the long-sought Holy Grail. Jesus and his original followers promoted a timeless devotion to the sacred feminine and the divine goddess, embodied in the life and very womb of Mary Magdalene.<sup>23</sup> Through sexual union with the female men once achieved oneness with God and honored the sacred and life-giving power of woman.<sup>24</sup> The early church celebrated sexuality, but Constantine demonized the sacred feminine and converted Christianity from matriarchy to patriarchy. The suppression of women in the church is typified by a smear campaign against none other than Mary Magdalene, a campaign that falsely and successfully labeled her a prostitute.<sup>25</sup>

The message of Jesus – as further expounded by the fictional Langdon and Teabing – endured, initially through Mary Magdalene, who fled to France with their daughter, Sarah, and thereafter through the Merovingian line of Frankish kings. For centuries a clandestine organization, the Priory of Sion, has been dedicated to protecting and preserving the direct descendants of Jesus, secret documents revealing his original gospel, and the very bones of Mary Magdalene herself – the long sought-after Holy Grail.<sup>26</sup> In fact, in the early twelfth century, the Knights Templar under the guise of crusading in the Holy Land, excavated in the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and discovered indisputable evidence of the lineage of Jesus. Members of the order in the early fourteenth century were charged with heresy, sodomy, and blasphemy; they paid with their lives, as Pope Clement V (1305-1314) continued the Vatican's unremitting war against the Priory of Sion and search for evidence capable of overturning Christendom. Yet clues abound in art and literature concerning the Priory and its desperate mission. Scattered throughout the pages of *The Da Vinci Code* are introductions to a myriad of symbols and images depicting the sacred feminine and alluding to secret Christianity. Nowhere is this more evident than the paintings of Leonardo Da Vinci, who served as grand master of the Priory and painted Mary Magdalene to the right of Jesus in his masterpiece, *The Last Supper*.<sup>27</sup> *The Da Vinci Code* imagines a fresh and current confrontation between the stringent *Opus Dei* of the Roman Catholic Church and the Priory of Sion, a deadly clash, which annihilates the leadership of the Priory and imperils the Holy Grail.

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<sup>23</sup> Dan Brown salutes the presence of the sacred feminine in his own life—his mother Connie Brown and his wife, Blythe; See “Acknowledgments,” *The Da Vinci Code*, iv.

<sup>24</sup> *The Da Vinci Code*, 24, 125, 257; Langdon clarifies: “Historically, intercourse was the act through which male and female experienced God. The ancients believed that the male was spiritually incomplete until he had carnal knowledge with the sacred feminine. Physical union with the female remained the sole means through which man could become spiritually complete and ultimately achieve *gnosis*—knowledge of the divine....By communing with woman man could achieve a climactic instant when his mind went totally blank and he could see God....Sex begot new life—the ultimate miracle—and miracles could be performed only by a god. The ability of the woman to produce life from her womb made her sacred. A god,” 308-309.

<sup>25</sup> *The Da Vinci Code*, 124, 249, 329.

<sup>26</sup> *The Da Vinci Code*, 249, 256, 454.

<sup>27</sup> *The Da Vinci Code*, 158-160, 235-243.

## Breaking Down the Code: Analysis and Critique

Given the rather unpleasant responses to Dan Brown's style and story-telling and the extraordinary or even outrageous claims he makes about history and Christianity, what accounts for the staggering success of this novel? Never underestimate marketing. Credit at Doubleday must go to editors who recognized the appeal of Dan Brown's manuscript, doled out some five thousand advanced copies of the book at regional shows, and brought *Borders* and *Barnes & Noble* on-line well before *The Da Vinci Code* went on sale March 18, 2003. An enthusiastic endorsement from the *New York Times* appeared March 17. Anticipation and demand were primed.<sup>28</sup> Additional factors may account for the sustained and even exponential interest in the novel. Some have underscored postmodern skepticism of religious institutions, especially in light of the Roman Catholic clergy abuse scandal. Others have pointed to American culture post 9-11, typified by a "back to basics" mentality about religion and values and anxiety about secret societies, such as al-Qaida and its radical, violent, and fundamentalist agenda. Moreover, the unique mix of religion, art, and history in Brown's novel—the illusion of nonfiction in a thriller—sparks interest: is *The Da Vinci Code* true?<sup>29</sup> But support may actually be generated by a most unlikely source—Dan Brown's religious critics.<sup>30</sup> In magazines and periodicals, pamphlets and study aids, Christians have decried and deciphered, examined and analyzed all things *Da Vinci Code*.<sup>31</sup> A wide range of books have appeared to counter the supposed facts about Jesus of Nazareth and Christian history, extending the money made from this cultural juggernaut (see bibliography). The Roman Catholic Church has taken even more stringent action. *The Da Vinci Code* has been banned in Lebanon at the request of Catholic officials. Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, archbishop of Genoa and former high-ranking member of the Vatican office

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<sup>28</sup> Charlotte Abbott, "Code Word: Breakout" (as in n. 5, above). Janet Maslin, "Spinning a Thriller from the Louvre," *New York Times*, March 17, 2003, E8.

<sup>29</sup> "Mark Ritson on Branding: Da Vinci Marketing Code is the Real Bestseller," *Marketing*, 12 January 2005, 23; Ted Schmidt, "Breaking the *Da Vinci*" (as in n. 16, above), Mark Borrows, "Gospel Fantasy" (as in n. 7, above), Laura Miller, "The *Da Vinci* Crock" (as in n. 16, above). Liane Hansen and Martha Woodroof, "Next Literary Sensation," (as in n 10, above). Jason Cowley, "The Author of Bestselling *Da Vinci Code* Has Tapped into our Post-9/11 Anxieties and Fear of Fundamentalism," *New Statesman*, 13 December 2004, 18-21, InfoTrac OneFile. Hope Coll. Lib., Holland MI 21 January 2006. <http://infotrac.galegroup.com>.

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Faiz, "Old Tosh and Balderdash: Earnest Critics Keep *The Da Vinci Code* Alive," *Presbyterian Record* 129 (2005), 38.

<sup>31</sup> Among the articles noteworthy in comment, content, and reaction are: Sandra Miesel, "Dismantling the *Da Vinci Code*," *Crisis*, 1 September 2003, [www.crisismagazine.com](http://www.crisismagazine.com). Gerald O'Collins, "Sensational Secrets," review of *The Da Vinci Code*, *America* 189 (2003), 15. "Christians Counter *The Da Vinci Code*," *Christian Century* 121 (2004), 9 March 2004, 13-14. Ben Witherington III, "Why the 'Lost Gospels' Lost Out: recent gadfly theories about church council conspiracies that manipulated the New Testament into existence are bad—really bad—history" (cover story), *Christianity Today* 48, June 2004, 26-32. Mark Burrows, "Gospel Fantasy" (cover story), *Christian Century*, 1 June 2004 (as in n. 7, above). *Christianity Today* offers study guides for the books, "Engaging *The Da Vinci Code*" and "*The Da Vinci Code* and other Heresies," see <http://store.yahoo.com/biblestudies>.

on doctrinal orthodoxy, may have been appointed directly by the Vatican in the spring of 2005 to deal with the impact and claims of the novel.<sup>32</sup>

In light of the ink spilled and anxiety heightened, does *The Da Vinci Code* offer a valid, plausible, and historically verifiable version of ancient Christianity? Not at all. Scholars have had a field day debunking Brown's interpretations and invocations. Sandra Miesel sums up: "So error-laden is *The Da Vinci Code* that the educated reader actually applauds those rare occasions where Brown stumbles (despite himself) into the truth."<sup>33</sup> To put it another way, one marvels at the amount of creativity and imagination invested in the book, for there is very little actual history present. Part of the difficulty lies in Dan Brown's seeming lack of serious research combined with his own fervent imagination and assertions about "facts" in the book.<sup>34</sup>

Yet, it is precisely Brown's claim about "facts" that has given *The Da Vinci Code* apparent and initial cachet. Even in interviews, Brown gives varied accounts of historical reality, swinging between a grand embrace of many details as definitely true to the admission that places, organizations, and people exist, but interpretations and stories built around them are fantasy.<sup>35</sup> The wary reader resonates with fictional

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<sup>32</sup> "Catholics Help Ban Code," *National Catholic Reporter* 40, 15 October 2004, 4, InfoTrac OneFile. Hope Coll. Lib., Holland MI 21 January 2006. <http://infotrac.galegroup.com>. "Vatican Appoints Official *Da Vinci Code* Debunker," *Guardian Unlimited*, 15 March 2005; Dennis Greenan, "Top Cardinal Blasts *Da Vinci Code*," ANSA English Media Service, 16 March 2005; Elisabeth Rosenthal, "Vatican Goes on Offensive against *Da Vinci Code*," *International Herald Tribune*, 17 March 2005, 1; last three articles: LEXIS-NEXIS. 8 December 2005 <http://lexis-nexis.com/universe>.

<sup>33</sup> Sandra Miesel, "Dismantling *The Da Vinci Code*" (as in n. 31, above).

<sup>34</sup> Sources of Brown's historical reconstruction appear to be cited in Leigh Teabing's fictional reading room; *The Da Vinci Code*, p. 253. Providing much of the pseudohistorical underpinning of *The Da Vinci Code* is Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln's 1980s bestseller, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (New York: Dell, 1982), a book that has been entirely discredited in theme and detail. For a brief and helpful overview of the book and the larger hoax on which it rests, see Bill Putnum and John Edwin Wood, "Unraveling the *Da Vinci Code*," *History Today* 55 (2005), 18-20, InfoTrac OneFile. Hope Coll. Lib., Holland MI 21 January 2006, <http://infotrac.galegroup.com>. So considerable is Brown's reliance on *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* that Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh have begun plagiarism proceedings against him; Joel Rickett, "Brown Accused of Plagiarism: *Da Vinci Code* Sales Threatened by High Court Action," *Bookseller*, 21 October 2005, 3, InfoTrac OneFile. Hope Coll. Lib., Holland MI 21 January 2006. <http://infotrac.galegroup.com>.

Other books on Teabing's shelves clearly informed Brown's novel. Neither Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince's *The Templar Revelation: Secret Guardians of the True Identity of Christ* (Carmichael: Touchstone, 1998), Margaret Starbird's *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar: Mary Magdalen and the Holy Grail* (Rochester: Bear & Company, 1993) nor her *The Goddess in the Gospels: Reclaiming the Sacred Feminine* ((Rochester, VT: Bear & Company, 1998) constitute recognized scholarship in the academy.

<sup>35</sup> On the *Today* show Matt Lauer queries: "How much of this is based on reality in terms of things that actually occurred?" Brown replies: "Absolutely all of it" (as in n. 5, above). On his website Q and A, Brown is more careful and cagey: "How much of the novel is true?" "*The Da Vinci Code* is a novel and therefore a work of fiction. While the book's characters and their actions are obviously not real, the artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals depicted in this novel exist" [for example, Leonardo Da Vinci's paintings...] "These real elements are interpreted and debated by fictional characters. While it is my belief that some of the theories discussed by these characters may have merit, each individual reader must ...come to his or her own interpretations. My hope in writing this novel was that the story would serve as a catalyst and springboard for

character, Robert Langdon, as he walks toward the entrance to the Louvre: “As he moved toward the mist of the fountains, Langdon had the uneasy sense that he was crossing an imaginary threshold into another world.”<sup>36</sup> Spiraling through the plot is a subtle and clever argument, an argument not at all logical but rhetorically seductive in its interplay of seeming factuality and actual imagination. Brown’s now famous and infamous disclaimer page – “FACT” – does not appear alongside the acknowledgments (which one hopes *are* factual), but after the title page and thus as part of the fabric of the story, a piece of the fiction: “All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.”<sup>37</sup> It is this sleight of hand throughout the narrative that impresses the reader with an apparent veneer of authority and honesty. Robert Langdon – trustworthy, curious, and humble – is a Harvard University professor, an expert on symbols, the sacred feminine, and religion generally. Sir Leigh Teabing, initially charming and chivalrous, claims the title of British royal historian. Sophie Neveu, virtuous cryptographer and grieving grandchild, wins the readers support with her calm and grace. These three characters can be trusted in their efforts to preserve the secret religious truth for which Sophie’s grandfather died. They understand that truth and fact must be ferreted out of puzzles, riddles, and sketchy evidence: “The connections may be invisible...but they are always there, buried just beneath the surface.”<sup>38</sup> Fact is implied by suggestive phrasing, such as “well-documented” history (for the spurious Priory of Sion) or “countless references...explored ad nauseum by modern historians” (in this case attesting to the marriage of Jesus).<sup>39</sup>

A number of literary luminaries, including Benjamin Franklin, Alfred Tennyson, and Samuel P. Huntington, have been credited with variations on the proverb, “A half-truth is worse than a lie.” The virtue of a half-truth is that it gives a lie or deception credibility because, although false, there is still some truth to it. The listener hears this half-truth or fragment of truth and is more likely to believe everything

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people to discuss the important topics of faith, religion, and history”;

[www.danbrown.com/novles/davinci\\_code/faqs.html](http://www.danbrown.com/novles/davinci_code/faqs.html).

<sup>36</sup> *The Da Vinci Code*, p. 19; Sophie Neveu has a similar experience: “Sophie felt as if the entire night had become some kind of twilight zone where nothing was as expected,” 42. Later, Langdon reflects yet again: “He suddenly felt as if he were living in some kind of limbo tonight...a bubble where the real world could not reach him,” 286.

<sup>37</sup> *The Da Vinci Code*, 1. Brown writes on his website: “If you read the ‘FACT’ page you will see it clearly states that the documents, rituals, organizations, artwork, and architecture in the novel all exist. The ‘Fact’ page makes *no* statement whatsoever about any of the ancient theories discussed by the fictional characters”; [www.danbrown.com/novles/davinci\\_code/faqs.html](http://www.danbrown.com/novles/davinci_code/faqs.html). The “FACT” page in Brown’s novel, however, includes “descriptions” as factual and “accurate” and does not provide the qualifier that such descriptions merely “exist.”

<sup>38</sup> *The Da Vinci Code*, 15-16.

<sup>39</sup> *The Da Vinci Code*, 113, 247; Langdon on the marriage of Jesus: “Sophie, the historical evidence supporting this is substantial;” 254; another dramatic claim: “Countless scholars of that era chronicled Mary Magdalene’s days in France, including the birth of Sarah and the subsequent family tree,” 255.

asserted.<sup>40</sup> Dan Brown uses half-truth masterfully in *The Da Vinci Code* to heighten a sense of the historical, as a few examples reveal.

The first five centuries of Christianity witnessed disagreement and debate about the humanity and divinity of Jesus and the relation between the two (fact). In the novel Sir Leigh Teabing shows that the earliest Christians were devoted to an entirely human Jesus. He argues that under the sway of Emperor Constantine believers have come to embrace a Jesus who is mostly divine. Actually, Teabing has his finger on the right issue (fact), but his grasp of the past is slippery. The Council of Nicea (325), summoned ultimately by Constantine, did rule on the issue of the divinity of Christ. Meanwhile Constantine's primary concern seems to have been that the bishops there gathered reach agreement on the matter; he did not personally stipulate the decision. But most early Christians had already confessed the humanity *and* divinity of Christ centuries before Constantine. And those believers championed in *The Da Vinci Code* as supporters of a human Jesus – the so-called Gnostic Christians – actually tended to reject the humanity of Jesus altogether in favor of a divine or completely spiritual Jesus.<sup>41</sup> Thus, the fictional Teabing, renowned and knighted historian, has everything backwards and turned around, but there is a fragment of truth present.

If the fictional Teabing and the author, Dan Brown, are confused about the humanity and divinity of Christ, how did they do with the marital status of Jesus? *The Da Vinci Code* draws on accounts that recognize that a circle of women were in close proximity to Jesus and supported his ministry. According to the New Testament their presence was especially prominent at the crucifixion and as witnesses to the resurrection (e.g. Mark 15: 40-41; 16:1-8). Mary Magdalene was the first witness to see Jesus after he rose from the dead (John 20:11-18). Moreover, substantial evidence exists that women did hold positions of leadership early on in

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<sup>40</sup> Benjamin Franklin: "Half a truth is often a great lie"; Samuel P. Huntington, "Partial truths or half truths are often more insidious than total falsehoods." Tony Robinson has a similar take on *The Da Vinci Code*: "When people don't know the full story but know enough to fuel their interest, their imaginations fill in the gaps," Tony Robinson, "My Quest to Prove the *Da Vinci Code* wrong..." *Express*, 2 February 2005, News, 31, LEXIS-NEXIS. 8 December 2005 <http://lexis-nexis.com/universe>. Laura Miller is convinced that both *Holy Blood*, *Holy Grail* and *The Da Vinci Code* rely on what she calls "the big lie": Both books are "... proof of the adage that the hardest lie to refute is the Big Lie. Unlike, say, speculation about the "real" author of the Shakespeare plays, these theories span so many historical specialties—ancient Hebrew customs, early Christian texts, regional French folklore, ancient and contemporary church history, medieval dynastic minutiae, Renaissance and neoclassical art, esoteric movements of the early modern age, and so on—that no one person has the expertise to refute all of the fabrications," Laura Miller, "The Da Vinci Crock" (as in note 16, above).

<sup>41</sup> For a concise and colorful treatment of these issues see Bart D. Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction in the 'Da Vinci Code': A Historian Reveals What We Really Know about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Constantine* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004), 14-23. I will cite Ehrman frequently in this section, since he presents the state of scholarship and is not at all intent on providing some sort of apologetic for historic Christianity or the New Testament. As an example to the contrary, see his *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2005).

Christianity and were later disenfranchised.<sup>42</sup> *The Da Vinci Code* runs with the biblical accounts and manufactures a clever conspiracy, supposedly found in non-canonical Gospels (those not included in the New Testament). In some of these texts not only women were prominent, but *the* woman—Mary Magdalene. She was among those closest to Jesus, married him and bore his child. Jesus entrusted Mary Magdalene, not the apostle Peter, with the future of the church.<sup>43</sup> The later mistreatment of women in the early church was part and parcel of a successful campaign to erase Jesus' devotion to the sacred feminine and conceal his marriage to Mary Magdalene. She was subsequently portrayed as a prostitute by the church. In reality, the soiling of Mary's reputation is true, but not much else from the novel.

Reputable scholars of the New Testament and early Christianity, regardless of their religious convictions, are in agreement that no actual evidence exists either for Jesus as a follower of a goddess religion or his nuptials with the Magdalene.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Mary was deemed a prostitute, perhaps at first by Pope Gregory the Great in the sixth century, but there is no evidence that this error was part of a larger conspiracy against the sacred feminine or a married Jesus. The central story about Jesus in *The Da Vinci Code*—his marriage to Mary Magdalene and her secret but crucial role in furthering his genetic line—is untenable.<sup>45</sup> But not all is subterfuge in this imaginative story. Brown certainly appeals to some readers by highlighting the complex and tragic subordination of women in early Christianity.<sup>46</sup> And there is considerable debate about the importance of Mary Magdalene as an apostolic leader

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<sup>42</sup> An excellent summary is found in Karen Jo Torjeson, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1995), 1-50.

<sup>43</sup> *The Da Vinci Code*, 247-248.

<sup>44</sup> Brown is not alone among popular authors in his assertions. See the works in n. 34, above. A twist on the thesis purports that Jesus and Mary are symbols in a sort of religious mythology; in this framework Jesus is devoted to the "Lost Goddess," Sophia (note the naming of *Sophie* Neveu in *The Da Vinci Code*), who is represented not only in the "beloved" disciple of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, but also in Mary, the mother of Jesus, Martha and Mary, sisters of Lazarus; Timothy Frekke and Peter Gandy, *Jesus and the Lost Goddess: The Secret Teachings of the Original Christians* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 79-100. For a thorough and truly scholarly exploration on these issues, see Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2005).

<sup>45</sup> Karen King, an *actual* and currently existing Harvard professor and expert on ancient texts regarding Mary Magdalene, confirms that there is no evidence that Mary Magdalene and Jesus of Nazerath were married. King states: "If there were any definitive piece of evidence that Jesus and Mary were married, it would have been told many times." King and others are similar in their conclusions regarding descendants of Jesus: "Stone Phillips: 'Is there any historical evidence that Jesus fathered any children?'" Prof. [Bart] Ehrman: 'No, there is not a scrap of historical evidence that Jesus fathered a child'; 'Prof. [Ben] Witherington: 'No evidence whatsoever.' Prof. [Karen] King: 'There's no evidence at all.'" See NBC News, *Dateline* transcript, "Secrets to the Code: Facts and Fiction of Dan Brown's Novel *The Da Vinci Code*" (as in n. 5, above).

<sup>46</sup> See Christine Schenk, "What *The Da Vinci Code* Owes to Women," *National Catholic Reporter* 41, 15 July 2005, 12; and Patrick McCormick, "Painted out of the Picture: Part of the Best-selling Appeal of *The Da Vinci Code* is a conspiracy that has kept women from taking their rightful place in the church," *US Catholic* 68 (2003), 36-38; both articles, InfoTrac OneFile. Hope Coll. Lib., Holland MI 21 January 2006. <http://infotrac.galegroup.com>.

in the early church, who may have been in some tension with Simon Peter.<sup>47</sup> Given what is known and unknown about her, it is not surprising that this mysterious disciple of Jesus plays a central and imaginative role in a novel exploring the roots of Christianity.<sup>48</sup>

At the heart of *The Da Vinci Code* is a rejection of the gospels of the New Testament in favor of other, more reliable and telling sources. The inestimable fictional scholar, Leigh Teabing, relates, “More than *eighty* gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only a relative few were chosen for inclusion – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John among them.” The weighty decision concerning selection of the correct gospels fell to the pagan emperor Constantine in the fourth century.<sup>49</sup> Once again, Brown wed a fragment of fact to his fantastic narrative. There were, in fact, other and much later gospels, which did not become part of the New Testament. But Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are by far the earliest gospels; they were accepted as ‘scriptural’ by Christian communities in the second century, long before Constantine was born.<sup>50</sup>

Emperor Constantine shoulders the blame for just about everything in *The Da Vinci Code*. The motives of Constantine have long been subject to scholarly and religious debate. His conversion and late baptism have raised questions; clearly religious *and* political ideals shaped his policies, but surviving sources offer conflicting accounts of his personal motives. From time to time the centuries of Christianity prior to Constantine have been portrayed as something of a golden age – a time when the church was cleansed by persecution and made steely by its subversive and minority status. The alliance of Christianity with Roman Empire brought political power and patronage, incredible wealth, and social respectability to the faith. But the resulting worldliness of the church and the resulting ease of the Christian life moved the most devout to flee to the desert; they ignited the movement we know today as monasticism. In short, since there is a venerable tradition of suspicion regarding Constantine and his age, it is tempting to exaggerate his influence and sew further

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<sup>47</sup> See Karen King’s edition of the gospel attributed to Mary: *The Gospel of Mary Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 2003).

<sup>48</sup> In fact, Mary Magdalene is yet another beneficiary of Dan Brown’s success. She has become something of a “rock star” in print media and has been described as the “it girl” of biblical studies; “Review. *Mary Magdalene: A Biography*,” *Publishers Weekly*, 22 August 2005, 60, LEXIS-NEXIS. 25 January 2006 <http://lexis-nexis.com/universe>. She has also entered the world of basic knowledge distribution: see Lesa Bellevie, *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Mary Magdalene* (Royersford, Penn.: Alpha, 2005). Significant scholarly studies of Mary and her legacy are Ann Graham Brock, *Mary Magdalene, The First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*, Harvard Theological Studies (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003); Katherine Ludwig Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000); and Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (New York/London: Harper Collins, 1993).

<sup>49</sup> *The Da Vinci Code*, 231.

<sup>50</sup> Bart Ehrman estimates the number of gospels known to us in text or ancient citation at about two dozen. He dates the writing of the New Testament gospels between c. 70 and 95 CE (or AD) with 120 CE as the most likely date by which all the books of the New Testament had been written. Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction* (as in n. 41, above), 47-94, esp. 49, 78.

distrust of his reputation. But in response to *The Da Vinci Code*, it is safe to say that Constantine had no role in the selection of the gospels or any books of the New Testament for that matter. He did not promote the divinity of Jesus in order to suppress his humanity. And he did not transform Christianity from a goddess loving religion to a patriarchal faith.<sup>51</sup>

Entire volumes have been written to expose the errors lurking it seems on almost every page of *The Da Vinci Code*. One can commend Dan Brown for maintaining his imaginative approach not only when explicating early Christianity, but also medieval and modern religion. Along with the marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, the secret machinations and heroic record of the Priory of Sion is fundamental to the narrative web of the novel.<sup>52</sup> Unfortunately for Brown, the supposed history of the Priory and the descendants of Jesus it was committed to protect have been discredited. As usual there is some truth in the mix: the Priory did exist – as a fantastic and very recent hoax.<sup>53</sup> Even the creative readings of religious art provided by the fictional Langdon and Teabing, especially those of the paintings of Da Vinci, have been largely ignored by art historians and discounted by scholars generally.<sup>54</sup> Alas, John, the youthful and beloved disciple, and not Mary Magdalene, is seated to the right of Jesus in Da Vinci's *Last Supper*; there is no code.

In *The Da Vinci Code* the line between fiction and fact grows page by page ever more elastic and porous, until it eventually dissolves altogether. Error mingles with truth, legend with history. The summation of the fictional Professor Langdon regarding the history of the Templar Knights captures the novel as well: "...[it] was a precarious world where fact, lore, and misinformation had become so intertwined that extracting a pristine truth was almost impossible."<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> For a general overview of history vs. *The Da Vinci Code* on Constantine, see Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction* (as in n. 31, above), 3-24; and Carl E. Olson and Sandra Miesel, *The Da Vinci Hoax: Exposing the Errors in 'The Da Vinci Code'* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), 132-177; the magisterial work on Constantine's religious and ecclesiastical policies is H. A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2000).

<sup>52</sup> See Brown's "Fact" statement about the *Priory*, *The Da Vinci Code*, 1.

<sup>53</sup> The Priory was exposed as a fraud, created in 1956 and then publicized in 1962. The TimeWatch BBC Documentary, "The History of a Mystery," (1996) gave definitive evidence of the *Priory of Sion* hoax; summarized in Joseph P. Szimhart, "Review: *The Da Vinci Code*" (as in n. 16, above); see also Olson and Miesel, *The Da Vinci Hoax* (as in n. 51, above), 223-239. Brown also provides a complete fabrication regarding the secret mission of the Templar Knights in Jerusalem and overlooks the decisive role of King Philip IV (1285-1314) of France in the destruction of the military order; on the demise of the Templars, see Malcom Barber, *The Trial of the Templars* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1978).

<sup>54</sup> Two art historians have weighed in briefly. See Elizabeth Lev, art historian at Duquesne University's Rome campus, "Leonardo's Real Intention," 12 February 2004, <http://www.ewtn.com/library/ISSUES/ZDAVINCLHTM>; and Bruce Boucher, professor of art history at University College of the University of London; see his "Does *The Da Vinci Code* crack Leonardo?" *New York Times*, 3 August 2003.; a more substantial critique of Brown's artistic license can be found in Olson and Miesel, *The Da Vinci Hoax* (as in n. 51, above), 240-279.

<sup>55</sup> *The Da Vinci Code*, 163. Indeed, perhaps unlike Dan Brown, Langdon is a Harvard historian, "not a pop schlockmeister looking for a quick buck"; *The Da Vinci Code*, 163.

Yet this is a book about fiction, history, and religious belief. Faith does emerge in Brown's imaginative netherworld of sentiment and longing, symbol and allusion. Traditional Christianity offers one version of true religion, the Priory of Sion another – two supposedly equal and viable options: "In the end, which side of the story you believe becomes a matter of faith and personal exploration..."<sup>56</sup> In reality this is another half-truth; the options are not at all equal and not simply a matter of personal preference. Still, *The Da Vinci Code* makes an inviting offer, proposes a kind of faith: choose and imagine your religion, your Jesus and Mary Magdalene, then believe and explore. Enter the world of dreams and mystical fancy, where every religious truth echoes every other, and the nitty-gritty world of Jesus of Nazareth and historic Christianity melt away:

...every faith in the world is based on fabrication. That is the definition of *faith* – acceptance of that which we imagine to be true, that which we cannot prove. Every religion describes God through metaphor, allegory, and exaggeration, from the early Egyptians through modern Sunday School. Metaphors are a way to help our minds process the unprocessable. The problems arise when we begin to believe literally in our own metaphors....Religious allegory has become a part of reality. And living in that reality helps millions of people cope and be better people.<sup>57</sup>

In *The Da Vinci Code* "fact" fades into fiction and fiction melts into "fact." The book weaves together two contradictory arguments in a kind of alternating rhythm. First, there is a steady beat from the first page of the novel onwards: there are long-lost facts, evidence of the true and long suppressed meaning of Christianity, and a radical new and yet ancient history of the very beginnings of Jesus and his religious movement. Second – the other rhythm pounding throughout book – history, fact, and evidence are ultimately unimportant, not essential to faith. Perhaps traditional Christianity is a lie. In the end truth and falsehood are irrelevant anyway; find your own metaphor, embrace *your* chosen reality, ignore history altogether. *The Da Vinci* code entices the reader with the comforts of the historical and the concrete, but in the end weans the reader of both as a prelude to the spiritual and metaphorical way. Unrestrained imagination forms the fabric of faith. In an American religious milieu driven by sentiment, emotion, and intuition, *The Da Vinci Code* thrives and rings true.

### **Responding to the Code: Insight and Opportunity**

Any novel merits careful analysis and some praise when it brings to life a brilliant and courageous, heroic and athletic college professor – a worthy character type vastly underused in the annals of literature and film – indeed, a professor in the

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<sup>56</sup> *The Da Vinci Code*, 256.

<sup>57</sup> *The Da Vinci Code*, 341-42.

mold of Harrison Ford and Indiana Jones.<sup>58</sup> And even if there is precious little history and fact in *The Da Vinci Code*, the unparalleled success of the novel is profoundly suggestive about religious impulses and characteristics of our own time. How should one respond to the book? What does it teach us?

### Offering a Winsome Apologetic

In light of national and international response to *The Da Vinci Code*, scholars, pastors, and lay people would do well to consider carefully their public response to Dan Brown's book. There is no doubt that a colorful and substantial attack on Christianity should be answered clearly and carefully.<sup>59</sup> On the one hand, self-righteous and heavy-handed diatribe is more likely to turn away those newly curious about spiritual matters and those already alienated from the church.<sup>60</sup> On the other hand there is a singular opportunity to explore the nature of scripture, history, and spirituality with church and unchurched. Indeed, *The Da Vinci Code* provides a wide and open window on the religious passions and tastes of a vast public audience. In the guise of a suspense novel, readers may well have uncovered their own inner hunger and yearning for religious meaning and purpose. How does the church connect with those responses?<sup>61</sup> Imagine lectures or discussion groups, hosted by congregations, advertised in warm and inviting ways and meant to draw in all comers interested in the *The Da Vinci Code* and its conclusions. Imagine a winsome and confident exploration of various responses to the book, including the position of the church on matters of scripture, doctrine, and history. Imagine a conversation that connects and unfolds participants and their convictions and questions, creating fresh insight into both the often unspoken assumptions of Christian communities and the spiritual cross-currents of American culture.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Langdon is described in a similar way: *The Da Vinci Code*, 9.

<sup>59</sup> Apologetics is especially tricky in England, where a substantial Christian heritage exists, but religion has become an intensely private matter: "The Christian religion underpins every aspect of our lives in Britain, yet we were terrified to talk about it. It has become a taboo, and when people try to discuss it with us we find it embarrassing and uncool. *The Da Vinci Code*'s phenomenal success shows, though, that people find Christianity fascinating—particularly when it is served up with a juicy conspiracy," Tony Robinson, "My quest to Prove *Da Vinci Code* Wrong," (as in n. 40, above), 31.

<sup>60</sup> A quasi-religious movement devoted to *The Da Vinci Code* has formed, which has sponsored discussion groups and at least one April 1 gathering at the Louvre to mark the anniversary of the novel's original publication date. Ernest Malley, a member of this fledgling movement, stated, "We're sick and tired of Dan's books being victimised by organised religion," in "Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* Spawns New Religion," (as in n. 10, above). I recall reactions to the film, "The Last Temptation of Christ" in 1988; patrons exiting the theater were met with Christians jeering and sporting insulting signs. One self-identified non-Christian spoke in response to the protestors, "I'm really curious about Jesus after seeing the movie, but I would never go to a church to find out more about him."

<sup>61</sup> I am indebted to David Van Andel for this insight; Senior Seminar discussion, January 26, 2006.

<sup>62</sup> This conversation in some cases will be a stretch and will require learning to speak and listen in different cultural circles. Some of us are so insulated from the world in our churches and Christian communities that we speak a language of piety and have a religious bearing, which may confuse and put off outsiders.

Imagine an exchange in which the mysteries of traditional and orthodox Christianity are presented and explored with wonder and delight, competence and precision.<sup>63</sup>

### *Owning up to the Complexity of the Bible*

*The Da Vinci Code* draws on an ever-expanding literature – learned and popular – about the New Testament and early Christianity. Parishioners have very little grasp of the development of the Bible. What scholars know of the formation of the canon of scripture is that it was gradual, complicated, and contested. There were some books that came to be considered as spiritually edifying but not scriptural, and others eventually deemed dangerous and heretical. One must recognize the complexity of this sorting process and have faith that early Christian communities made the correct choices under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Many Christians have long been kept in the dark on such matters; they have not been burdened by questions about the Bible usually confronted in college and seminary courses. The secrecy must end. *The Da Vinci Code* has made the public vitally aware of the variety of early Christian literature and the existence of ancient forms of “alternative” Christianity. Either the wider church must learn how to discuss and communicate the complexity of scripture, the nature of its formation, and the literature with which it competed, or in the end novelists such as Dan Brown and scholars with popular appeal, such as Elaine Pagels and Bart Ehrman, will dominate the public discussion and reshape the religious landscape virtually unchallenged.<sup>64</sup>

### *Recovering the Place of History*

The success and appeal of *The Da Vinci Code* reveals the degree to which a sense of history has lost its place in western culture. On the one hand, Dan Brown in his supposed tapestry of *fact* and fiction claims to bring the true history of Jesus and Christianity into the midday sun and chase away the ecclesiastical conspiracy that has long obscured truth. On the other hand, Brown more or less demonstrates that in the end history itself is not all that important. In fact, the past is whatever we make it to be, need it to be, or would like it to be. Brown’s lack of scholarly or rigorous study of history suggests that precision, accuracy, evidence, and painstaking analysis are irrelevant. There are many interpretations of what has

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<sup>63</sup> Jim McDermott describes a recent church discussion group devoted to the novel and the larger implications for adult Christian education; McDermott, “Krispy Kremes and *The Da Vinci Code*,” *America* 193 (2005), 8-11.

<sup>64</sup> For example, it will be important for parishioners not only to know the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, but also to know the Gospel of Thomas or the Gospel of Philip and explain why these books did not make it into the New Testament and the significance of their claims about Jesus of Nazerath. Pagels and Ehrman have succeeded in reaching a significant popular audience within and outside the church; see for example, Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2005) and Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003) and *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003).

happened previous to us and all such interpretations are radically and simply equivalent; take your pick. Every interpretation requires an equal investment of commitment and faith. At the end of the day, history is not essential.<sup>65</sup>

It is certainly the case that faith plays a role in preferring one reading of history over another. Today we are more aware than ever that every interpretation, reading, and analysis comes from a certain point a view; there is no completely objective reading of anything. This is also the case for the work of every scholar, novelist, and motivated critic of Christianity. Each reader and writer employs a method, a perspective, a lens, and one might say a “faith.” But one essential principle must be grasped – all interpretations and perspectives are not equal. Although every scholarly reading of the past is approximate, impartial, or incomplete, research can be critiqued in terms of the quality of the evidence analyzed and the rigor and consistency of the method employed. No historian can prove any interpretation of the past with absolute certainty, but there are levels of probability on the basis of what we know of the past via surviving documents. In short, the traditional portraits of Jesus and Christianity rest on a significant and substantial body of evidence, especially in comparison with *The Da Vinci Code*. There are echoes of history here and there in the novel – places, people, artifacts, and texts – but the probability that Brown’s perspective might be true pales dramatically and utterly in comparison to the narrative embraced by most Christians. There is virtually no evidence for Brown’s approach, although he certainly has an approach, a way of readings texts and paintings, a kind of ‘faith’ liberated from the constraints of history.<sup>66</sup>

In contrast, Christianity is essentially a historical religion. It not only has a history, but embraces history as a part of its very substance. God creates space, time, and history. God is active in the history of Israel and the church. And at some future point, God will intervene and bring this history to a close. Most decisively, God enters history itself, in flesh and blood, in a particular place and time, in the

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<sup>65</sup> Here Dan Brown resonates with what is being titled, “Gnostic Christianity”; as described above, his novel is not about a different version of historical Christianity, but rather a Christianity without history altogether, James A. Herrick summarizes the “Gnostic” approach, “...gnosticism is the systematic spiritual effort to escape the confines of history and physical embodiment through secret knowledge (*gnosis*) and technique (magic)....Time, history, and the earthly realm are the gnostic’s enemies....” James A. Herrick, *The Making of the New Spirituality. The Eclipse of the Western Religious Tradition* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 179. I have tended to avoid “Gnostic” in this paper because the validity of the term is under fierce debate among scholars of early Christianity. The term is used so often and so widely that it often obscures more than it clarifies. See Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003).

<sup>66</sup> Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy’s self-described “Gnostic” views parallel the religious perspective of *The Da Vinci Code* in striking ways: “Despite the fact that the story of the Son of God who is born of a virgin, works miracles and comes back from the dead is far more supernatural and incredible than the comparatively believable tale of Sophia, we hang on to the idea of its historicity through the powerful force of habit. But it is not history. It is something better. It is myth,” *Jesus and the Lost Goddess* (as in n 44, above), 100.

incarnation of Jesus the Christ.<sup>67</sup> Ultimately the Christian faith is always rooted in the concrete and historical.<sup>68</sup> The great strength of Protestantism has been its firm and tireless commitment to *sola scriptura* – to scripture alone. But this conviction about the Bible can lead to a neglect of the full narrative of Christianity. Perhaps *The Da Vinci Code* will awaken new interest in the history of Christianity, in both the biblical roots of the faith *and* the unfolding centuries of history and tradition.<sup>69</sup> Either the church must recover a valuing and knowledge of its own heritage or authors like Dan Brown will gladly provide a fresh and provocative narrative.<sup>70</sup>

### *Confronting the 'American Jesus'*

As a boy of fourteen or so I read a slender paperback, titled *If the South Had Won the Civil War*.<sup>71</sup> The book captured my imagination as it prognosticated on a hypothetical history of northern and southern nation states in place of the USA. It left me with my own lingering questions about American's role as a superpower in the twentieth century, about the abolition of slavery, and the fate of African Americans. I have admired the "what if" game since my adolescence. What if Margaret Mitchell had gone with the working title of her novel, *Pansy*, instead of opting for *Gone with the Wind*?<sup>72</sup> What if John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, or Martin Luther King, Jr. had not been assassinated? What if I had taken the other job, if you had been called to a different church? What if your spouse, child, or parents had died in that car accident ... or survived it? What if the 9-11 hijackers had failed? What if the early church had continued to support and encourage women in ministry? What if Jesus had been married, if he had been a father? Would he not be more of a "family values" kind of savior? Historians tend to look down on the "what if" game. But the mental exercise serves to stir the intellect and imagination, to take more seriously turning points in history, the contingent nature of continuity and change. The game prompts us to ponder the current state of things and how they got that way.

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<sup>67</sup> The Apostle Paul captures this historical "in-breaking" in his concept of "the fullness of time" (Gal. 4:4). See Justo González, *The Story of Christianity. Volume I: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1984), 7.

<sup>68</sup> James Herrick sums the "Gnostic" view in contrast: "...Christianity with its emphasis on both history and incarnation being the singular example—must be demolished....Gnostic spirituality, then, exhibits a deep suspicion of history and any attendant notion of God's redemptive work in history. The gnostic dispenses with the historical Christ of Christianity, choosing instead to pursue self-salvation through secrets that come from beyond the earthly and heavenly scheme of things," Herrick, *The Making of the New Spirituality* (as in n. 65, above), 179.

<sup>69</sup> A brief reading of the indices of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, LCC 21, eds J. T. McNeill and F. L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) reveals the degree to which John Calvin was not only a scholar of scripture, but also of the Christian tradition, including patristic and medieval sources.

<sup>70</sup> In the Old Testament book of Judges the failure of a new generation of Israel to remember its history has profound consequences; as identity and heritage are lost, new religious practices and beliefs take hold (Judges 3:10-15).

<sup>71</sup> This book has been reissued in a new edition: MacKinlay Kantor, *If the South Had Won the Civil War* (New York: Forge, 2001 [1961]).

<sup>72</sup> André Bernard, *Now All We Need Is a Title* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 81.

Are readers responding to *The Da Vinci Code* because it imagines an alternative universe and religion to their liking? Does the novel expose cultural longings for another sort of Jesus?<sup>73</sup> A short time before the first editions of *The Da Vinci Code* hit store shelves, the media storm surrounding Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* had begun to dissipate. Both Brown's book and Gibson's film have in common a remarkably accessible and human Jesus—Jesus the husband or Jesus the loving son, Jesus the victim of diabolical conspiracy.<sup>74</sup> In fact, Robert Langdon, the lead character of *The Da Vinci Code*, plays out a kind of “imitation of Christ.” Langdon has devoted his life and scholarship to researching the sacred feminine. He is courageous and daring under pressure, thoughtful and sensitive in conversation. In contrast to Langdon's Jesus, the younger Sophie Neveu is a contemporary Mary Magdalene. Langdon guides Sophie into true religion and comforts her as she grieves the death of her grandfather. Before Sophie's intelligence, strength, and cunning Langdon acquiesces. As Langdon and Sophie are in the book, so perhaps Jesus and Mary Magdalene once were.<sup>75</sup>

This American Jesus—as always fashioned in our own image—has received significant attention in a number of recent books on American Christianity.<sup>76</sup> Even a short perusal of these works reminds us that every society subtly and steadily replaces biblical models with images more palatable, comfortable, and attuned to native and local sensibilities. Sensational media like *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Da Vinci Code* provide an invaluable mirror in which to identify and consider our own images and ideas, which may or may not be faithful to the historical Jesus and the original message of Christianity. Given cultural trends it may not be surprising that the Jesus and gospel unfolded in *The Da Vinci Code* has found a good deal of traction even among self-described and quite traditional Christians. It is essential to

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<sup>73</sup> Dan Brown's reflections on these issues are striking: Is *The Da Vinci Code* anti-Christian? Brown: “No. This book is not anti-anything. It's a novel. I wrote this story in an effort to explore certain aspects of Christian history that interest me. The vast majority of devout Christians understands this fact and considers *The Da Vinci Code* an entertaining story that promotes spiritual discussion and debate....Many church officials are celebrating *The Da Vinci Code* because it has sparked renewed interest in important topics of faith and Christian history. It is important to remember that a reader does not have to agree with every word in the novel to use the book as a positive catalyst for introspection and exploration of our faith,” [http://www.danbrown.com/novels/davinci\\_code/faqs.html](http://www.danbrown.com/novels/davinci_code/faqs.html)

<sup>74</sup> I have had a growing suspicion that the view of Jesus prevalent today owes nearly as much to St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) as to the New Testament. The meek and mild, personal and child-friendly Jesus of today lacquers over the confrontational, demanding, and sometimes fierce Jesus of the gospels. *The Passion of the Christ* further humanizes Jesus by drawing on late-medieval passion images and narratives as well as nineteenth-century monastic spirituality.

<sup>75</sup> In fact, Sophie herself is a blood descendant of Jesus and Mary Magdalene in the story. At the end of the novel she hints at a future liaison at which Robert Langdon might find sexual union and religious ecstasy with the goddess, Sophie. *Da Vinci Code*, 448-49.

<sup>76</sup> Richard Wightman Fox, *Jesus in America: Personal Savior, Cultural Hero, National Obsession* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2004); Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003); Bruce Bawer, *Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1997). See the exceptional review by Linda Kulman, “Jesus in America,” *Us News & World Report* 135, 22 December 2003, 44-49.

be conversant with both biblical and historic understandings of Jesus *and* their contemporary counterparts. Without this combination the church is neither in the position to educate its own nor to interact creatively and faithfully with recent trends in the media. Every generation has reimagined Jesus in its own image; those images must be identified, examined, and in some cases shattered. Examining and confronting our misconceptions and cultural idolatries is the responsibility of every theologian, pastor, and believer. But we may not wish to do so. A significant debate about the *Passion of the Christ* concerned its considerable deviation from the Gospels of the New Testament. One scholar has argued that only 5 percent of the movie is actually derived from the New Testament.<sup>77</sup> The response of one individual to this information was striking: “I really don’t care whether or not the film is based exactly on the New Testament; all I know is this Jesus [the film version] works for me.”<sup>78</sup> It is possible that Dan Brown would say something quite similar. In the end, accuracy, history, and standards external to one’s self do not matter. Subjectivity reigns. We become gods unto ourselves.

### Annotated Bibliography

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<sup>77</sup> See John Dominic Crossan, “Hymn to a Savage God,” in *Jesus and Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ”: The Film, The Gospels, and the Claims of History*, eds. K. E. Corley and R. L. Webb (London/New York: Continuum, 2004), 12. Crossan’s position is formidable when one takes the time to read the narrative of nineteenth century German nun, Anne Catherine Emmerich; most of Gibson’s film appears to be based on her graphic imagining of the suffering and death of Christ; Anne Catherine Emmerich, *The Dolorous Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ*, trans. K. M. Brentano, (El Sobrante, Calif.: North Bay, 2003).

<sup>78</sup> Martin E. Marty writes, “Popular culture has simply taken over the task of shaping theology, as in the world of the *Left Behind* series and *The Da Vinci Code*. Faith has become a ‘life-style issue.’ Evangelical Christianity prospers, says one interviewee, because it is so at home with pop culture,” Martin E. Marty, “Faith in Faith,” *Christian Century* 121, 2 November 2002, 47, InfoTrac OneFile. Hope Coll. Lib., Holland MI 31 January 2006. <http://infotrac.galegroup.com>.

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