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Deciphering 'The Da Vinci Code'

Dan Brown's novel The Da Vinci Code has become a blockbuster best-seller since its publication in 2003. This summer, Sony Pictures will release a full-length motion picture based on the book. Given the renewed interest in Dan Brown's novel, this commentary and review of the book is republished by request.

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Given the renewed interest in Dan Brown's novel, The Da Vinci Code (just released in paperback editions), this commentary and review of the book is republished by request. It was originally published July 29, 2003.

The summer publishing season seems always to include a thriller that leaps to the top of the best-seller charts and stays there until the fall—when readers get serious and return to school and work. The Da Vinci Code is this year's winner, sitting at the top of the Amazon.com ratings this week and listed at second place in the New York Times hardcover fiction list. The book was on the top of that list last week, and it has made the list for 18 straight weeks. Not bad for a book with a seemingly unmanageable mix of plot structure, conspiracy theories, and mountains of detail about Catholic orders, renaissance art, theological heresy, and theoretical mathematics. Hooked yet?

I was forewarned about the heresy in the book, and so I started reading with a determination to force my way through an unpleasant read. It wasn't hard. As a matter of fact, the plot was so engaging, and the content of the book was so rich, that I had a hard time putting it down. Dan Brown may or may not actually believe what he writes, but he writes so well in this genre that the average reader will not even care. That is the problem.

Devotees of suspense novels read for the sheer pleasure of the intellectual engagement—not so much with big ideas, but with the conspiratorial mind. Brown took a big risk in this novel, betting his narrative on a conspiracy involving virtually everyone even remotely connected with Christianity throughout the last 2,000 years. The forces arrayed in this conspiracy include the Knights Templar, the Masons, the Roman Catholic Church, Interpol, and a secret society known as the Priory of Sion, which is claimed to have included as Grand Masters no less than Sandro Boticelli, Isaac Newton, and, of course, Leonardo Da Vinci.

Sorting all this out for the reader are characters ranging from Robert Langdon, a Harvard art historian, to an albino monk/assassin, who is sent by Opus Dei, a Catholic order close to the papacy. The murdered director of the Louvre has a mostly silent part, speaking primarily through secret codes and ciphers left written in his own blood as he died. A cast of other characters is necessary for the narrative to work and the plot to unfold.

But the human characters take a back seat to the grand conspiracy that gives the book its plot, and in that conspiracy is the heresy. The Da Vinci Code's driving claim is nothing less than that Christianity is based upon a Big Lie (the deity of Christ) used by patriarchal oppressors to deny the true worship of the Divine Feminine. Still hanging in there? If you thought The Last Temptation of Christ was explosive, The Da Vinci Code is thermonuclear. The book claims that Jesus Christ was married to Mary Magdalene, that a child was born of this marriage, and that Mary and her child fled after the crucifixion to Gaul, where they established the Merovingian line of European royalty.

Art historians may quibble with Dan Brown's details, and mathematicians may take issue with his summary of the Fibonacci Sequence, but as a theologian, my problem is the author's toying with such an easily dismissed heresy. Brown has crossed the line between a suspense novel and a book promoting a barely hidden agenda, to attack the Christian church and the Gospel.

In order to deliver on his conspiratorial plot, Brown has to lay the groundwork by having his main characters deny the inspiration and authority of the biblical text and replace Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John with the gnostic gospels found just after World War II at Nag Hammadi. The gnostic texts are called the “unaltered gospels,” and the New Testament texts are dismissed as propaganda for the goddess-bashers. One character (hint—watch him carefully) explains that all this is “the greatest cover-up in human history.” Jesus (“the original feminist”) had intended for Mary Magdalene to lead the church after His death, but “Peter had a problem with that.” So, Mary Magdalene hit the apostolic “glass ceiling” and was sent off to Gaul, taking with her, not only her child, but—you guessed it—the Holy Grail.

Heard this all before? The main contours of this plot have been found in many books published in the occultic literature. *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* by Michael Baigent, Henry Lincoln, and Richard Leigh (1983) made the same claims, but in what claimed to be a non-fiction expose—not a suspense novel. *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* sold by the thousands. The *Da Vinci Code* will likely reach millions. Never underestimate the commercial potential of a heretical conspiracy packaged in a seductive novel. Brown will take his millions to the bank.

I said that the book’s [hereafter TDC] heresies are easily dismissed, and they are—at least to anyone with a real interest in the identity of Jesus and the history of the church. Calling the Nag Hammadi texts “unaltered” gospels is like reading the official Soviet histories as objective fact—complete with leading figures airbrushed out of the photos. TDC claims that the New Testament is simply the result of a male-dominated church leadership inventing Christianity in order to control the Roman empire and subsequent world history and then to oppress women and repress goddess-worship.

In TDC the heretics are the heroes and the apostles are unindicted co-conspirators. The Great Satan is Emperor Constantine, who, it is claimed, never even became a Christian, but knew a good marketing plan when he saw it. Constantine supposedly called the Council of Nicaea in 325 in order to invent the idea of Christ’s divinity (and celibacy) and then turn out the heretics, thus burying the real story of Jesus (and Mary Magdalene) forever. “It’s all about power,” one character explains. That’s why Constantine “upgraded Jesus’ status.”

And the Council of Nicaea? There, TDC reveals, the Emperor led the bishops to declare Jesus as the Son of God by a vote. “A relatively close vote at that,” the text elaborates.

The real Council of Nicaea adopted a creed in order to reject the heretical teachings of one Arius, who taught that Jesus was not of the same substance as the Father. Brown weaves fact and fiction with such recklessness that the average reader will assume all these claims to be factual.

The Council of Nicaea did not “invent” the divinity of Jesus. This was already the declaration of the Church, claimed by Jesus himself and proclaimed by the apostles. The council boldly claimed this as the faith of the Church and named Arianism as a heresy and Arians as heretics. A close vote? Only two out of more than 300 bishops failed to sign the creed. Not exactly a cliff-hanger.

The Nag Hammadi texts as the real gospels? Not on your life. The texts are easily identifiable as gnostic literature peripheral to the Church. The early Church did not establish the canon (official set of New Testament writings) at Nicaea, though a general consensus was already evident at that gathering. The New Testament writings were recognized and set apart because of their authorship by one of the apostles and by their clearly orthodox content—in harmony with the other New Testament writings as recognized by the churches spread throughout the Greco-Roman world.

Much more could be considered, but the main issue is this: How plausible is such a conspiracy? The threshold of credibility for this conspiracy requires us to believe that the entire structure of Christian theology is a sinister plot to fool the masses. Further, we must believe that the leaders of this conspiracy knew that Jesus was not the Son of God, but were willing to die for this cause by the millions. As C. S. Lewis once argued, people might be willing to be martyrs for a lie if they are innocently deceived, but very few will die for what they know to be a lie.

Credibility for this conspiracy requires belief in the claim that the truth, known by millions, has been kept secret from the world until now. Specifically, until the release of *The Da Vinci Code*.

What about the atheists—the rationalist opponents of Christianity? What about the liberal theologians who dismiss the deity of Christ as mythological baggage? They must be greeting *The Da Vinci Code* with excitement, right? Not hardly. The strange and unsustainable logic of this conspiracy theory has not impressed the skeptics. Shirley MacLaine might

take the argument seriously, but not Richard Dawkins.

The book's thesis requires the reader to believe that virtually every major work of western art includes an embedded code, and that this code is evident all around us if we will just see it. Of course, to pull this off Brown has to see symbols (especially phallic symbols) everywhere. Freud was a rank amateur.

A late night conversation with a close friend reminds me of the attraction of a conspiracy theory—with or without evidence. This brilliant friend, holding a Harvard doctorate, told me that he was absolutely certain that President John F. Kennedy was the victim of a great international conspiracy including world communist leaders, the Mafia, J. Edgar Hoover, and various Hollywood celebrities. After laughing out loud, I realized my friend's utter seriousness. My rational faculties were in full outrage despite the lateness of the hour, so I simply asked my friend what evidence would be required to prove or to disprove his thesis. He looked me straight in the eye and told me that the evidence was so hidden that the truth would never be known in our lifetimes. So—hold onto your theory without the evidence and be unmoved, regardless of the facts.

Those who want to believe the heresies of The Da Vinci Code will hold to them tenaciously—whatever the evidence. Clearly, the book attacks the Gospel, but the truth is unshaken.

The Da Vinci Code will soon fall from the best-seller lists, be remaindered to the outlet malls, show up in paperback, and may even interest Hollywood. The faith of the Church remains intact.

G. K. Chesterton reminded us that orthodoxy is not only true; it is infinitely more interesting than heresy. It is alive and compelling and life-changing. Heresies come and go by fashion. The truth is unchanged and unchangeable. Caveat Emptor.

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