

FACT, FICTION AND FAITH: MAKING SENSE OF THE DA VINCI CODE

Brannon Hancock, B.A. M.Th.

Ph.D. Student, University of Glasgow

Introduction

Let me say it at the outset: despite the arguable merits of his prose style or historical accuracy, Dan Brown is a genius. It takes something special – a good story, clever marketing, a bit of luck, although I draw the line at Divine intervention – to capture the popular imagination the way *The Da Vinci Code* has. Released in 2003, the novel has topped every best-seller list imaginable, and its author even made history in the UK last year by simultaneously holding all four of the top slots for all four of his novels. Preliminary figures estimate that *The Da Vinci Code* has sold 60.5 million copies in print in 44 languages.[1] A film version starring Tom Hanks as Professor Robert Langdon, and directed by Ron Howard (*A Beautiful Mind*) has just been released and is already breaking box-office records – even in Italy, despite the Vatican's adamant boycott. Over a dozen books and hundreds of articles have been published in its wake by defenders and decriers of Dan Brown's heady pseudo-historical, conspiracy-filled murder-mystery-turned-theological-thriller. At the time of writing, a Google web search for the title returns around 239 million hits.

Yes, it seems an entire cottage industry has cropped up around *The Da Vinci Code* (complete with video game – no, this is not a joke!), and a considerable amount of debate to boot. So what's the big deal? It's just a *story*, right? Why all the fuss?

Well, that question is more complicated than you might imagine. But before we get to the fuss, the story itself. . . For sensitivity's sake, I will attempt to discuss the controversy surrounding the novel, the more recent film,[2] without giving away too much of the plot, although I suspect even those who have not yet read the book or seen the film (it's hard to imagine, I know) are at least somewhat aware of the themes and ideas put forward therein that have ignited so much interest and discussion.

The story goes like this: the curator of Paris's famous Louvre museum has been murdered, and the crime scene is strewn with strange clues. Enter Robert Langdon, a Harvard "symbologist" (Dan Brown's made-up academic title), who must solve riddle after riddle with the help of Sophie Neveu (played in the film by *Amélie* star Audrey Tautou), a lovely French cryptologist who also happens to be the dead curator's semi-estranged granddaughter. The two discover an enigmatic ancient society called the Priory of Sion, amongst whose membership lists are geniuses such as Sir Isaac Newton and Leonardo da Vinci. Through Paris, then London, and finally Scotland's Rosslyn Chapel, their search for answers turns out to be nothing less than a search the Holy Grail – which is not a cup, but a "vessel" of another sort. *But will Professor Langdon and the beautiful Sophie survive the sinister Opus Dei, a power-hungry Catholic group intent on suppressing certain long-kept secrets?* (And cue the foreboding music...)

While he's been coy about his success, certainly Dan Brown knew that his novel had all the makings of a blockbuster: religious scandal, revisionist history, conspiracy, violence, sex and lots of suspense. The novelty of Brown's novel is not in the theories it advances – that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene; that their "royal" bloodline still exists to this day; that Leonardo testified to this secret knowledge by hiding mysterious clues in his famous paintings – but in his weaving together of these various themes into a taut, captivating

narrative. In fact, Brown claims his only inventions are the characters and the plot, while the “research” (take this term with a heap of salt) he draws upon has been around for years. This is supposed to lend credibility to his story. He readily admits to his sources, listing his bibliography on his website and even mentioning a few noteworthy titles, like Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln’s 1982 book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, [3] in the novel itself.

However, this appeal to “evidence” is a bit misleading, as several recent publications have shown. As these books are easily available – most with pithy titles like *Cracking...* (or *Breaking...*, or *Decoding...*) *the Da Vinci Code* – some even authored by highly regarded biblical scholars or historians, I will leave the details to the experts. Moreover, it doesn’t seem necessary, or even all that valuable, to challenge *The Da Vinci Code’s* speculations about puzzles in the notebooks and paintings of Leonardo or about the possible significance of the Priory of Sion (which has been exposed as the elaborate hoax of a few creative Frenchmen anyway – a newsflash many *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* enthusiasts seem to have missed). In fact, that so many should take such pains to debunk the *The Da Vinci Code’s* claims strikes at perhaps an even greater mystery: it started out as a *novel* after all, a work of *fiction*; it really shouldn’t merit explanation that fiction writers tend to *make stuff up*. If fantastic conspiracy theories and creative readings of famous paintings make for a good story, more power to the novelist that can pull it off, as far as I’m concerned. And we should probably all applaud anyone who can get the public talking about fine art, Church history and theology.

While I do wish to clarify certain historical discrepancies, and hope readers find this helpful, it might be even more valuable to reflect momentarily on why the novel has caused such a stir, and why Christians especially should consider *The Da Vinci Code* not as a challenge to their faith but rather as an opportunity to engage in dialogue about subjects near to our hearts: namely, the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the history of Christianity, and the Bible.

The History of “His-Story”

From the very beginning, *The Da Vinci Code* blurs the line between fact and fiction. Even before the first page of the story, we read, “Fact: [...] All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.” Most readers take the author at his word, and as it turns out, Brown plays it pretty straight much of the time. His descriptions of the Louvre, Westminster Abbey, and Leonardo’s paintings are pretty much spot on. I happened to visit many of these sites in Paris, London and Scotland shortly after reading the novel and before the writing of this article, and I can confirm that the author did an excellent job in this regard. But when it comes to “documents,” which could include, well, just about anything, he plays it fast and loose. His rather cursory understanding of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Gnostic “Nag Hammadi” gospels (which Brown calls “scrolls” but which are actually *codices*; that is, some of the earliest examples of books as we know them today) is transformed by his characters into deft textual criticism. And his revisionist take on early Church history and his general dismissal of the biblical canon as some sort of patriarchal master-plot is highly questionable, both as history and as ideology.

As the formula for a good mystery story dictates, in the course of *The Da Vinci Code*, key information is often revealed a piece at a time. At the mid-point of the story, a crucial conversation takes place between Sophie, the wide-eyed novice, and experts Professor Langdon and his colleague Sir Leigh Teabing, who don’t entirely agree on the details, the latter being more conspiratorial than the former. It is suggested that with the “pagan” emperor Constantine and the Council of Nicea in 325 C.E., the Christian Church (which is referred to anachronistically as the Catholic Church or even “the Vatican”) unleashed a plan to tout Jesus as divine and repress the “sacred feminine.” According to Teabing, early

Christians believed Jesus to be a fully mortal prophet, and his divinity was decided by a “close vote” (hardly! 316 to 2) at Nicea. To make matters worse, this view is propped up by prioritizing apocryphal and non-canonical texts, such as the Gospels of Mary Magdalene and Thomas, to the exclusion of the New Testament gospels. To Brown’s mind – or, to be fair, to his characters – the gospels of the New Testament, which were also voted on by self-preserving *men*, were selected simply because they supported the notion of Jesus’ divinity. Texts like the Gnostic gospels, which tell a different story, one of a purely human Jesus, were suppressed in favor of those gospels which make Jesus appear more divine.

Now (where to begin?), a few clarifications are in order. First of all, the earliest record that a man named Jesus lived and walked the earth come in the writings of the apostle Paul, and a belief in Jesus’ divinity is already evident in Paul’s letters to the various churches (e.g. Phil. 2:5-7). By the time Constantine called for the meeting of Christian leaders at Nicea, the divinity of Christ was well established, in both scripture and liturgy, as a foundational Christian belief; one of the few, actually. Being a Christian meant, basically, belief in Jesus as the Son of God and in his death and resurrection. The Council of Nicea merely sought consensus regarding *how* to understand Jesus’ divinity in relation to his humanity (and there were, of course, many other items on the agenda besides this one). After outlining the parameters for “orthodox” Christian doctrine, other beliefs, like those of Arius and Marcion, were deemed heretical.

Further, the suggestion that the Gnostic gospels provide a more accurate picture of Jesus is hugely problematic. Granted, the Nag Hammadi gospels and Dead Sea scrolls are perhaps the most significant historical discovery of the last century, and the pictures (emphatically *plural*) these texts paint are indeed valuable and serve to shed additional light on the historical Jesus and his earliest followers. But these texts are not considered by historians to be tantamount to the New Testament gospels as historically valid *evidence* about the life of Jesus of Nazareth. In *Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code*, church historian Bart Ehrman explains that “the oldest and best sources for knowing about the life of Jesus...are the four Gospels of the New Testament....This is not simply the view of Christian historians who have a high opinion of the New Testament and its historical worth; it is the view of all serious historians of antiquity of every kind, from committed evangelical Christians to hard-core atheists” (102).

Additionally, it can hardly be said that these non-canonical sources describe a *more human* Jesus. If anything, these later writings are even more outlandish, more miracle-laden, more incredible than Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, as Gabriel Josipovici elucidates in *The Book of God*.^[4] This all serves to confirm to historians the value of their tried-and-true methodology: *the earliest texts are the most reliable*.

Dan Brown and his characters also misunderstand the process by which the Church Fathers formed the biblical canon, attributing it erroneously to Constantine, whom Brown depicts as the alpha-male behind the whole cover-up. However, historians maintain that while the canon wasn’t “closed” until about fifty years after Constantine’s death (and had virtually nothing to do with him), the process of deciding which books should be regarded as authoritative for the Christian Church began as early as the turn of the second century.

Her-Story: Women of Faith

Which brings us to *The Da Vinci Code*’s most startling suggestion: that the Christian Church sought to re-write the history of Jesus’ life and alleged marriage to Mary Magdalene and bring about the societal subjugation of women by killing off the “sacred feminine.” This theory is not only faulty but rather absurd to anyone who knows their Church history. For

one thing, Dan Brown imbues the early Church with *way* too much power and influence, either not realizing or ignoring the reality that it was more of a sub-cultural movement than anything resembling a univocal organization.

The Da Vinci Code describes a pre-Christian history where women were exalted, revered, and goddesses were worshipped alongside the gods. Well, he's half right. In Greek and Roman pantheons did include both gods and goddesses, but historians maintain that this was *not* a reflection of the status of women within society. Though downplayed in the film so as to protect its mainstream appeal, the novel describes a sexual rite called *heiros gamos* ("sacred marriage"), in which women are regarded as the gatekeepers to spiritual enlightenment via sexual encounter. Brown spins this in a positive light, but in reality, rites such as this are perhaps as extreme an example of female servitude as history has ever seen – in fact, scholars more commonly refer to such practices as "temple prostitution."

In contrast, the message of Jesus as carried forth by early Christians promoted a more radical social vision, one which afforded women a more prominent role than was the societal norm. After his resurrection, Jesus appears first to women, namely Mary Magdalene (and perhaps other women – see St. Mark's gospel), who becomes the key witness to the "good news" of the gospel. For this reason the medieval church gave her the title *apostolorum apostola*, "the apostle to the apostles" – high honor indeed. Also, Paul, especially in his letter to the Romans, recognizes many women as church leaders and servants of the gospel. In contrast to his oft-discussed negativity toward women in his First letter to the Corinthians, Paul is most counter-cultural, and most consistent with Jesus message of love, when he writes to the Galatians: "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*" (Gal. 3:26-28, my emphasis). And it seems unnecessary to point out the place of honor given to the Virgin Mary, most notably by Catholic and Orthodox Christians, but also by most Protestants as well (at least at Christmastime).

Sharan Newman puts it extremely well in her helpful book *The Real History Behind The Da Vinci Code*: "Patriarchy is older than history....Christianity didn't invent patriarchy; it simply accepted it as part of the world in which it was struggling to survive. Despite this, the new religion gave women a chance for independence, albeit within a structure that became more confining over the years" (331). Granted, the Christian faith has a tumultuous history, one filled with violence and injustice toward all sorts of people, but we should celebrate the fact that many churches today ordain women to every sort of ministerial role imaginable – a reality to which the Church of the Nazarene, with the election of Dr Nina Gunter as General Superintendent, can now thankfully testify. Hopefully this indicates that we have learned from the past and are committed to a better future.

As a hypothesis, it's really quite understandable. Wouldn't it be nice if we could pin every injustice against women, and every other injustice for that matter, on some singular suspect like the Roman Catholic faith? Or maybe this problem stems from our very fallenness, for it is evident even in our story of the Fall – woman bends to temptation first, right...? Dan Brown *could* have spent a little more time researching and thinking about these issues and perhaps taken a different angle in his story, but it might not have made for such a compelling story. Instead, he plays to our post-feminist, politically-correct sensibilities and gives us an explanation that everything wraps up tidily, where we have clearly defined good-guys and bad-guys, victims and perpetrators. If only it were that easy...

Religion in the Public Square

It seems religion is on everyone's minds and lips these days, and the reasons for this are many. First, we might recall the reports, beginning in the late-1990s, of sexual abuse perpetrated by the clergy (all of them male).[5] Especially horrifying were those stories involving children. Not only were the scandals themselves outrageous, but the fact that many churches had either turned a blind eye or blatantly attempted to cover up such abuses cut to the core of many Christians – *how could this thing we love so dearly be responsible for such evil?* – and many secular folk reacted with increased animosity toward the Church. Fair or not, it was a major blow to the witness and ministry of Christians everywhere. Second, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the ensuing "War on Terror," and now with renewed fervor after July 2005's London bombings, everyone seems to be talking about religious and cultural pluralism, the need for interfaith understanding and the dangers of fundamentalism. In an ironic reaction, many "secular fundamentalists" like British scientist Richard Dawkins have taken to their soapboxes to spout polemics against Christianity, and indeed all religion, as the source of the world's evil – a sentiment captured by a line from *The Da Vinci Code*: "As long as there has been one true God, there has been killing in his name." Third, consider the turmoil in the Anglican Communion, and other mainline Protestant denominations as well, over the issue of homosexuality, a debate which threatens to destroy both the internal and ecumenical unity of these ecclesial bodies. Both in and outwith the Church, we seem to have developed a taste for religious scandal. And how could we avoid this when it has been our steady media diet for the past few years? Indeed, it should come as no great surprise that many today place more faith in rock stars like Bob Geldof and U2's Bono, in filmmakers from Mel Gibson to Michael Moore, and in campaigns like ONE and Make Poverty History, than in the Christian Church to sort out the world's problems.

We live in troubled times – not the worst we've seen in the past century, mind you, but troubled nonetheless. With every suicide bomber or tsunami, and every ridiculous comment from high-profile televangelists attributing such tragedies to God's wrath, our world makes slightly less sense to us. We need a scapegoat, and if God seems to lofty a target, we take aim instead at something more concrete, more tangible, more *fallible*: that institution built by human hands (or so the cynics suggest) called the Church.[6]

Dan Brown plays with the facts for the sake of his story, which is perfectly acceptable for a fiction writer to do – many Christians seem to miss this point. For others, the problem arises when a novel or film plays on popular misconceptions and (seemingly successfully) passes them off as fact, which has led to certain subsets of the Christian world regarding the book and film as something to be feared, as though it will contaminate readers and audiences with its irresistibly convincing exposé. This reaction, it seems to me, is mistaken on several counts. First, it only contributes to the hype of an already-hyped-to-death cultural phenomenon, while also unnecessarily piquing the curiosity of many who might think, "Well, if this has the Christians in such an uproar, it *must* be interesting!" Also, this attitude attributes far too much power and influence to what is destined to be considered, in probably just a few years time, a cultural "flash-in-the-pan." As is often the case with such controversies – compare Martin Scorsese's 1988 film *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which, unlike Nikos Kazantzakis's far-superior novel, was as unremarkable a piece of cinematic art as Dan Brown's piece of literary art – it is likely to be quickly forgotten. Finally, and far more importantly, this reaction negates, however unwittingly, how irresistible and convincing the *Christian* story is! Our truth is of a variety that *The Da Vinci Code* can never attain, and we needn't cower in fear that we might "lose" souls to the half-baked views of a well-timed pot-boiler, backed by a team of well-paid marketing gurus.

Still, that many readers believe *The Da Vinci Code's* far-fetched theories *as fact* actually hints at something that I find quite remarkable. Despite the shift from print to visual media, we still are a book-reading, and a *book-believing*, culture. If *The Da Vinci Code* demonstrates anything, it's that we still tend to place a lot more weight in the printed word than we do in the projected image – doubtless, had Brown's novel not sold so astronomically well, the film would never have made it to screen.[7] Released a few years ago, the film *Stigmata* (1999, dir. Rupert Wainwright) involved several themes similar to *The Da Vinci Code* – conspiracies about additional "lost" gospels, Vatican cover-ups – and yet it didn't cause much of a stir. I suspect this is, at least in part, due to the fact that we tend to view films with a much keener awareness of their status as fiction.[8] But when *The Da Vinci Code* begins with a page that reads "Fact," we pause to consider, and some of us think, *Well, they wouldn't print it if it weren't true, right?*, failing, of course, to realize that even these "Facts" are a device of Dan Brown's fiction.

And something even more interesting might be at work here. I believe the popularity of *The Da Vinci Code* indicates that people – all people, both in and outwith the Church – still have an unquenchable thirst for mystery. As humans, we seem to have an almost primal need to believe in that which is unbelievable. The poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote that reading literature (and we could extend this to viewing films) requires the exercise of our "willing suspension of disbelief...which constitutes *poetic faith*" (179, my emphasis). In other words, we set aside our tendency to doubt so as to *believe in the story* – we deliberately forget that the story we accept as "true," and in which we subsequently "lose ourselves," is really fiction. Maybe this poetic faith is not all that dissimilar from our Christian faith. We believe in a Mystery, that God became man, and died, and rose again so that we might have life; a God who doesn't hide out in codes and riddles but who is dying to reveal Himself to us. We long to be caught up in the thrill of such a Divine conspiracy.[9] The difference is that our Book has stood the test of time (and continues to out-sell *The Da Vinci Code*, even at its peak). The difference is we actually believe that our "conspiracy theory" – that God so loved the world – holds the hope of salvation.

[An earlier draft of this article was published in the United Kingdom in *Life and Work: the editorially independent magazine of the Church of Scotland*, September 2005.]

Works Cited

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria*. London: J. M. Dent, 1997.

Ehrman, Bart D. *Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code: A Historian Reveals What We Really Know about Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Constantine*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2004.

Josipovici, Gabriel. *The Book of God: A Response to the Bible*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1988.

Newman, Sharan. *The Real History Behind The Da Vinci Code*. New York: Berkley Books 2005.

Notes

- [1] As of May 2006. For this, and nearly endless additional information (of varying integrity) about the book, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Da_Vinci_Code.
- [2] As adaptations go, the film is fairly faithful to the novel; ergo, for the purposes of this essay, I think it justified to discuss *The Da Vinci Code* without distinguishing between the novel and screen versions.
- [3] This book was well on its way to being forgotten before Dan Brown's novel gave it a renewed lease on life. It is, therefore, highly ironic that the authors of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* would file a lawsuit Brown for plagiarism when he both credits them by name in his novel and is single-handedly responsible for their currently booming book sales. One with a mind for conspiracy theories might suggest that this lawsuit, so highly publicized during the weeks before *The Da Vinci Code*'s filmic release, was a clever ruse designed to raise public interest and insure record box-office figures on opening weekend. Fortunately, I am no such conspiracy theorist.
- [4] See in particular chapter 11, "Jesus: Narrative and Incarnation."
- [5] Although they received most of the spotlight, we should consider that these scandals did not just affect the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, on April 22, 2002 the Church of the Nazarene was mentioned by name in an NPR Morning Edition report on sexual scandals involving Protestant clergy. This report, which included a recorded statement by General Superintendent James Diehl, can be accessed online at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1142136>
- [6] And of course, with such a long-standing and far-reaching presence in the Western landscape, the Roman Catholic Church often comes under particular fire, as it does in *The Da Vinci Code*.
- [7] At least not with such a star-studded cast and award-winning director. However, if ever there was a book that was written with the film in mind, it is *The Da Vinci Code*. Although I have not looked into the matter, I suspect that the movie rights were optioned and pre-production started even *prior to* the novel's publication.
- [8] The obvious exception is documentary films. However, with the rise of such ideologically-driven and clearly un-objective documentary filmmakers as Michael Moore (*Fahrenheit 9/11*), the film-going public seems to have even become increasingly aware of the fictive potential of documentary film. Indeed, one trait of the postmodernity is "contextual" nature of truth, and interestingly, Dan Brown has used this line of defense when pressed about how his novel tells a version of history different from the one traditionally held: (to paraphrase the sentiment the author expressed in one interview) "History is written by the winners...who's version do you want to believe?"

[9] While I am not making reference to it here, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* is the title of a book by Christian author Dallas Willard (1998).

**FACT, FICTION AND FAITH:
MAKING SENSE OF THE DA VINCI CODE
BY BRANNON HANCOCK**