

# The Areopagus

## Deconstructing “The Da Vinci Code”

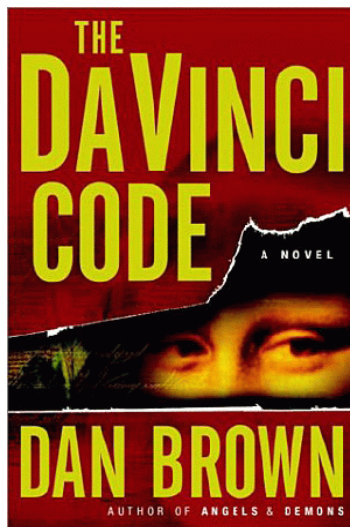
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Ours is an intellectually schizophrenic age of great skepticism matched only by its gullibility. Fastidiously skeptical when it comes to almost anything traditional and orthodox, yet indiscriminately gullible regarding almost anything new or novel, sensationalistic or iconoclastic. Hence, in the realm of religious faith, many people’s fascination with anything extra-biblical and esoteric, especially if it is tied to something salacious or conspiratorial. Such was the case ten years ago when James Redfield’s *Celestine Prophecy* was all the rage, and now the latest sensation is Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*. Currently, the book is number one on the *New York Times* best seller list for hardback fiction, and you’ve probably either read it yourself or know many people who have.

*The Da Vinci Code* is the kind of book that serious scholars tend to dismiss as unworthy of comment. If only it were true. Based on dubious scholarship and replete with factual errors, questionable assertions and crackpot conspiracy theories, the book is impressive for all the wrong reasons. But like other recent publishing sensations such as *The Celestine Prophecy* and Neil Donald Walsh’s *Conversations With God*, *The Da Vinci Code* gets read. And although it’s only a novel, many people take it for... well, the *Gospel* – or at least an alternative Gospel – a deception that Brown deliberately fosters by noting prefatorily, “All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.”

For a novel that revels in the cryptic, the esoteric, and the mysterious, the core theme of *The Da Vinci Code* is surprisingly transparent. That message is succinctly summarized by one of the main characters (doubtlessly speaking for the author) who declares authoritatively, “almost



everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false.” It is the book’s most revelatory statement, both in the context of the story line and in terms of the author’s central operating philosophical premise. One simple, declarative, deconstructionist statement that seeks to sweep away all our misconceptions about historic Christian orthodoxy, which is itself reduced to little more than majoritarian imperialism.

There are far too many historical/factual errors, unwarranted speculations, and illogical connections in *The Da Vinci*

*Code* to mention in a short review, so I’ll cite only a few of the more egregious ones. To begin with, the author gets a lot of his information, including his key theories, from several controversial sources such as...

- Elaine Pagels’ *The Gnostic Gospels*;
- Margaret Starbird’s *The Goddess in the Gospels: Reclaiming the Sacred Feminine*, and

*The Woman With the Alabaster Jar: Mary Magdalen and the Holy Grail;*

- Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln's *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*; and
- Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince, *The Templar Revelation: Secret Guardians of the True Identity of the Christ*.

By strict academic standards, Pagels' work is the least flaky of the bunch, but even it has its share of dubious assertions and eccentric conjectures that can leave well-informed readers shaking their heads incredulously.

Building on a shaky foundation, Brown perpetuates the popular revisionist myth that the Nicene-era Catholic Church arbitrarily set the New Testament canon (one of his characters asserts that the Bible was "collated by Constantine"), doctored the scriptures to divinize the human Christ, and suppressed alternative versions of the Jesus story (such as the so-called Gnostic Gospels) that didn't conform to their narrow-minded dogmas. There's no doubt that many people today are eager to believe this version of Christian history, but it's nonetheless a jaded and jaundiced distortion of reality.

But reality doesn't seem to be a major consideration for Dan Brown. For instance, we're informed that "the New Testament is based on fabrications" and there are "thousands of ancient documents" that provide "scientific evidence that the New Testament is false testimony," but Brown never bothers to identify these "thousands of ancient documents." (Seems like he could have cited at least a few, if in fact any exist at all.) Furthermore, he asserts that church history has been "all about power," but then asks rhetorically, "What is history, but a fable agreed upon?" Now this is a bit inconsistent: if in fact history (and historical interpretation) is nothing but collective fables agreed upon, perhaps his own theory of history (i.e., it's "all about power") is only a modern fable itself. I realize it's probably asking too much to hold a postmodern novelist such as Brown to any rigorous standard of logic, but the "self-excepting fallacy" always reeks of condescending arrogance regardless of the source and context.

Not surprisingly, given today's literary culture, much of Brown's critique of Christian tradition focuses on sexual themes. For instance, he declares that the sacred Tetragrammaton, YHWH, derives from "Jehovah, an androgynous

physical union between the masculine *Jah* and the pre-Hebraic name for Eve, *Havah*," and that the Old Testament Jews in Solomon's Temple worshiped YHWH and his feminine counterpart, the Shekinah, via the services of sacred prostitutes. Now I don't suppose that a total lack of evidence for these assertions should detract one bit from our admiration for Brown's expansive imagination, but facts can be pesky nuisances in the pursuit of truth. Unfortunately for authors with expansive imaginations such as Dan Brown, facts tend to inhibit artistic license. Furthermore, they are indispensably – if annoyingly – necessary for establishing credibility. For Brown, however, he apparently regards facts, like history in general, as mere "fables agreed upon." Except his own facts, of course.

Building on the androgynous YHWH thesis, Brown proceeds to argue that later in history, although the male-dominated and militantly misogynistic mainstream church suppressed goddess worship and eliminated the divine feminine from Christian theology, vestiges of female sexual symbolism were incorporated into medieval architecture. For instance, borrowing from Picknett and Prince's *The Templar Revelation*, he maintains that Gothic cathedrals incorporated female sexual symbolism in features such as arches, "which draw the worshiper into the body of Mother Church [and] evoke the vulva," or that a cathedral's long hollow nave represents "a secret tribute to a woman's womb... complete with receding labial ridges and a nice little clitoris above the doorway." Interesting imagery, to say the least. And suffice it to say that after reading this book, I may never look at a Gothic cathedral in quite the same way again.

In fact, *The Da Vinci Code* is replete with interesting "facts" about Christian history (despite the "fact" that history is only "a fable agreed upon") that are unknown to all but the most esoterically enlightened. For instance, we're informed that Jesus and Mary Magdalene got married and conceived a child, which segues into the legend of the Holy Grail, which was not actually a chalice but Mary's womb in which the blood of the Savior was preserved via their child. After the crucifixion, Mary and some others fled Judea for the South of France where her off-spring eventually married into the French Merovingian royal family. Today, the bloodline survives in several families including that of Pierre Plantard, a leader of the mysterious Priory of Sion. Over the

centuries, the Priory's Grand Masters have included notables such as Leonardo da Vinci, Botticelli, Isaac Newton, Victor Hugo, and Claude Debussy. (Incidentally, most medieval historians doubt that the Priory of Sion ever existed; more likely, it was probably formed some time after World War II.)

Meanwhile, Da Vinci encoded cryptic and subliminal messages of these esoteric mysteries in his art, such as in *The Last Supper*. In case you never noticed, the person sitting immediately to Jesus' right looks rather effeminate. According to Brown, that's not the disciple John but Mary Magdalene. And that 'V'-shaped gap between her and Jesus – well, that's another clue. In Brown's over-active (and over-sexualized) imagination, it symbolizes the female womb. But look again and you'll notice that another disciple to Jesus' left also has effeminate characteristics, as does Da Vinci's painting of John the Baptist. (In fact, Da Vinci, a tortured soul and a repressed homosexual, often painted young men with effeminate features.) Tradition has always held that the apostle John was probably one of the youngest disciples – perhaps only a teenager at the time – and hence, the fact that he is beardless isn't hard to explain. As for the folds in the figure's tunic that Brown contends are breasts – well, we often see what we want to see.

Since *The Da Vinci Code* focuses so much on the darker side of Catholic history and theology, one might dismiss it merely as an anti-Catholic diatribe. Unfortunately, as bad as that is, it's worse than that. In reality, the book is a thinly-veiled attempt to emasculate *all* Christian history and tradition. Literarily, it's a potboiler murder mystery/thriller with unexpected (and oftentimes unlikely) plot twists every few pages. Theologically, it's essentially a Gnostic/ New Age/neopagan polemic disguised as a novel. Historically and factually, it's a mess – an eccentric hodgepodge of deconstructionist history, enticing mysteries, unsubstantiated conspiracies, and secret esoteric codes.

In contemporary postmodern culture, there is no Truth – only stories and opinions – and one person's construct of reality is as good as anyone else's. So here's my opinion: For those with a shaky faith and a weak foundation in Christian theology and apologetics, books like this can be spiritual poison. Cleverly twisting and distorting history, they undermine confidence in the legitimacy of the Bible and the historic Christian

faith. But Christians who have a solid historical and apologetical foundation for their faith should be able to immerse themselves in *The Da Vinci Code* and reemerge unaffected. They may even find it somewhat entertaining despite all the factual gaffes and logical guffaws, and they might find that reading something in common with their non-Christian friends opens up opportunities for serious dialogue. And isn't that what the church should be up to anyway – equipping Christians to engage the culture knowledgeably and critically?

Christians have nothing to fear from truth. In fact, it is truth that sets us free from the bondage of illusion and sin. And the fact that *The Da Vinci Code* is seriously devoid of truth only provides an ideal opportunity for informed Christians to set the record straight. But we can only do so to the extent that we have prepared ourselves to give reasoned and factual answers to those who ask us to defend what we purport to believe – and to do so in a spirit of Christ-like compassion, humility, and love.

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