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# ***The Da Vinci Code – An Appraisal***

Peter Phillips

*The Da Vinci Code* has become a celebrity in its own right. It is a top-selling blockbuster paperback, and also a new movie starring Tom Hanks, involving some footage shot at Lincoln Cathedral. The book has become part of conversations across the globe, exploring issues of the true nature of Christianity and its founder, Jesus. The book has even revitalized the waning careers of its sources – authors Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln, whose own works are now towards the top of Amazon's bestseller lists helped by the recent unsuccessful plagiarism action in the High Court. The churches of Paris, London and Edinburgh, which are at the heart of the story and the art masterpieces which Dan Brown uses to explore Da Vinci's secret messages, have themselves become the centre of new *The Da Vinci Code* tourist routes. All in all, the book is a populist masterpiece, frequently recommended by word of mouth, while most biblical and literary scholars have slated it out of hand. It is almost trendy to see the book on a bookshelf – a form of rebellion against the establishment which Dan Brown accuses of leading society away from the true meaning of Jesus. If you want to understand what people are saying about Jesus today, then this is as good a place to start as any – perhaps a better place to start than most!

Although the novel is a classic modern page-turning pot-boiler, there is another aspect to the work – an attempt to mix fiction with fact. Dan Brown does not just want to tell a ripping yarn, he also wants to set the story straight about what the Church has done to Jesus and, especially, to Mary Magdalene. The publishers, then, have gone to some lengths to announce the book's credentials by offering a series of positive referrals from major newspapers and reviewers. Some of the comments herald the book as: 'a masterpiece ... a compelling blend of history and page-turning suspense' (*Library Journal*); 'a thundering, tantalizing, extremely smart fun ride' (*Chicago Tribune*); 'a gleefully erudite suspense novel' (*New York Times*); 'a blockbuster with brains' (*The Ottawa Citizen*). The author is similarly praised: 'a master craftsman' (*The Mystery Reader*); 'Dan Brown has to be one of the best, smartest and most accomplished writers in the country' (*San Francisco Chronicle*); 'Brown solidifies his reputation as one of the most skilled thriller writers on the planet' (*Library Journal*); 'Brown doesn't slow down his tremendously powerful

narrative engine despite transmitting several doctorates' worth of fascinating history and learned speculation' (*Chicago Tribune*).

The mixture of fact and fiction is enhanced even more by Dan Brown's acknowledgements citing, 'for their generous assistance in the research of the book', learned societies and centres of culture and learning, both American and European, and to his wife, Blythe, the art historian who provided so much of the research into the art work described in the novel. These acknowledgements encourage the reader to afford the novel an air of scholarly authority and dignity. If the Louvre and the French Ministry of Culture and Project Gutenberg, and the Royal Observatory at Greenwich and the Federation of American Scientists have contributed to the research of this book, then the book would appear to be rooted in fact not fiction.

Such factio (fact + fiction) is not an unknown phenomenon in modern society and the problem of how you unpick truth from factio in the populist mindset is itself a growing issue. West End musicals are full of factio – from *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* which pays but scant attention to the biblical text, to *Les Misérables'* loose interpretation of Hugo's original French masterpiece. On BBC television, we have had the hugely popular 'soap' version of *Bleak House* and the various adaptations of Shakespearean plays in the *Shakespeare Retold* series. These retellings of old stories are always adaptations. But it is often hard to work out what was the true story behind them. I remember an English lecturer at Loughborough University once denouncing *Shakespeare in Love* because ever since the film had been released, his students believed that it was an actual portrayal of how Shakespeare came to write *Romeo and Juliet*. Moreover, the original works themselves were an adaptation of reality – whether Hugo's or Dickens' attempts to recreate reality in the picaresque novels of the nineteenth century, or the author of *Genesis* retelling the story of a presumably long-dead patriarch. When is the truth the truth? When is fiction closer to reality than the truth?

Intriguingly, then, straight after the acknowledgements, *The Da Vinci Code* offers a page entitled 'Fact'. The author explains to the reader that the Priory of Sion is a real organization and that in 1975 Paris' Bibliothèque Nationale found a collection of papers now known as 'Les Dossiers Secrets' which outlined the various secrets of the Priory, including the names of the previous Grand Masters. Secondly, the page reveals information about Opus Dei – apparently a Vatican prelature, 'a deeply devout Catholic sect'. Finally, the 'Fact' page assures the reader

that 'all descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate'.

We are plunged into the whole discussion about fact, interpretation and knowledge which is part and parcel of the postmodern, internet-based society in which we live. There is so much knowledge out there that no one person can even pretend to understand it all – we live with information overload. As such, the populist mind is plunged into an almost infantile mindset of believing anything which any vaguely official document tells them. As such, the realistic, romantic, hectic world which Dan Brown creates in the novel becomes a plausible re-interpretation of reality, backed by a host of official organizations and presaged by stated facts. The world of the novel becomes a believable, trustworthy reality – a much more credible postmodern reality than the world of the *Matrix*, *The Truman Show* or even *Dr Who*!

But there is a difficult side to what Dan Brown has created in his novel. The novel is perfectly suited to a *Friends*-type, Mel Gibson-type adaptation, perhaps along the lines of Jamie Lee Curtis and Arnold Schwarzenegger in *True Lies*. On the surface *The Da Vinci Code* offers a rip-roaring story involving intrigue, murder, secrecy and romance. But underneath this lies an exposé of a whole series of myths/stories which have almost legendary status in the popular mind – the true identity of Jesus, the Holy Grail, the power of freemasonry and the corruption at the heart of the Catholic Church. This is a heady brew indeed.

At its heart, Dan Brown's novel has an identity crisis – is the novel a novel or a thesis; a novel or an exposé; a thriller or a eulogy on the Sacred Feminine? For some, of course, the thriller is just a paper-thin pretence – why would a secret society keep a list of their Grand Masters in a public library? How *accurate* can descriptions and interpretations of art and architecture really be? Exactly who discovered 'Les Dossiers Secrets' – the library itself, a librarian, someone else in the library? For those in the know, the credibility gap Brown is encouraging his readers to leap is massive! But for the masses? Perhaps, in the era of Hollywood and televisual-reality, *True Lies* tells the real story of an attempted terrorist attack which was hushed up by the American Government. Perhaps Dan Brown's take on the history of Jesus is much closer to the truth than the story made up by a Catholic institution led by an exclusively male hierarchy, anti-condom, anti-gay, plagued by high-profile child molestation cases.

Dan Brown's reality begins with the slow and lingering death of the Louvre curator, Jacques Saunière. While running from the albino Opus

Dei monk, Silas, the elderly Saunière pulls a Caravaggio down from the wall in order to trigger the gallery's security systems: a gripping start to the book in which the audience is pulled into sympathy for the dying curator and distaste for the Catholic religion. For the knowledgeable few, however, the credibility gap begins as well. Opus Dei is a lay movement and so cannot have 'monks'. Would a 76 year old curator be able physically or emotionally to pull a Caravaggio masterpiece from the wall of one of the world's leading museums, and survive it landing 'in a heap' on top of him? The ongoing discussion of Saunière's lingering death and Sophie Neveu's eventual discovery of clues around the gallery left for her by her grandfather will make the art critic more and more suspicious – for example, we are told that Sophie easily removes the *Virgin on the Rocks* painting from the wall and it flexes as she handles it. In fact, the version of this Da Vinci masterpiece in the Louvre is 6.5 feet high, and encased in a wooden frame – hardly the kind of artefact a young woman could handle – and the idea that it would flex would suggest that the painting had been left vulnerable to severe damage.

It is now possible to buy a whole host of books which look at the veracity of *The Da Vinci Code*. There are plenty of books which point out the credibility gaps in Brown's story-world. But part of the fun of reading *The Da Vinci Code* is picking up these credibility gaps and also seeing the various hints of the sub-plots which Brown interweaves into his thriller. So here, at the beginning of the work, the curator is given the name of a key figure in French Grail mythology – Berenger Saunière. The parish priest of Rennes-le-Chateau, Saunière claimed to have discovered secret documents hidden within the stone altar of the church, revealing the history of the Priory of Sion and the identity of the true Grail. Saunière became amazingly wealthy soon after this discovery. The documents, he claimed, traced the lineage of Mary Magdalene through the Merovingian Kings of France to the present day under the custodianship and protection of the so-called Priory of Sion – a Templar offshoot. This story is told in one of the main sources for Dan Brown's novel – Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln's 1982 work, *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. Later in the book, the two principal authors are honoured in the names of the strangely-named Grail devotee/millionaire, British historian Leigh Teabing.

Baigent's thesis about Mary Magdalene has little standing in mainline academic research. There is very little to suggest in either canonical or apocryphal literature from the first four centuries of the Christian era that Jesus and Mary ever had any children or, indeed, that they were married. The references in the Gospel of Philip (fourth century?) to the exalted

status of Mary within the group of disciples has to be set against a general absence of Mary from the historical records ... and when is a kiss more than just a kiss? The link from Mary to the French royalty through the Merovingians has little historical foundation. The early Frankish Merovingians had no links with Christianity at all. Bloodthirsty, polygamous opportunists, they saw rich pickings in the collapse of Roman Gaul and so crossed the Rhine to fill a power vacuum left by the retreating Romans. They had nothing to do with Christianity until Clovis entered into an alliance with the Catholic Church in 476, ensuring his dynasty's hold over the disintegrating relic of Roman Gaul. The Merovingians were not of Hebrew descent from the South of France but of Germanic descent from the region around Cologne in Western Germany; famed for their blue eyes and blond hair – not usually characteristics associated with the tribe of Benjamin! And, of course, they did not found Paris, which already existed as the village of Lutetia Parisiorum before the arrival of the Romans, 500 years before Merovech's birth.

Baigent's thesis rests upon a series of intuitive hunches and shallow conspiracies. The records of the parish of Rennes-le-Chateau reveal that Berenger Saunière's wealth came not from a secret stash of Merovingian documents, but from a lucrative practice of selling masses in honour of the local nobility; the Priory of Sion and 'Les Dossiers Secrets' are the creative imaginings of, and the declared forgery by, a pretender to the French throne, Pierre Plantard and his associates. Plantard, his heirs and associates are on record as having dismissed the whole process – they have documented exactly when the forgeries were made and how they made them.

*The Da Vinci Code's* reliance on Baigent's hypothesis is strange. In his other novels, Brown tackles different conspiracy theories concerning the succession to the papacy, the true goings-on at top-secret European Atomic Weapons Laboratories, and the intrigues at the top of the American secret services and NASA. Dan Brown clearly likes his conspiracy theories. In fact, it is clear that the public like them just as much and so, commercially speaking, Brown has matched his product to the customers' tastes. Taking Baigent and other esoteric sources and then adding his own amalgam of conspiracy theory and extravagance, Brown builds up a fictional universe which actually bears little resemblance to historical reality. But so what? What if the pyramid of the Louvre does not have 666 panes of glass; the Dead Sea Scrolls are not Christian documents; there were not hundreds of apocryphal gospels; Constantine

did not oversee or authorize the collation of the canonical gospels? Does all this matter all that much? It is only a story, after all.

In fact, Brown's novel itself undermines two key elements to his story-world – the role of Gnosticism and the role of the Sacred Feminine. The thrust of the novel's 'faction' is that the Church has suppressed Gnostic understandings of Jesus and the Sacred Feminine in preference for male-dominated orthodoxy which praises Jesus as God and denigrates Mary as a prostitute. As such, the novel, especially in its closing chapter, seeks to praise the Sacred Feminine represented by Mary Magdalene and promote a Gnostic interpretation of the Jesus-story. However, I think that the novel seriously misrepresents both Gnosticism and the Sacred Feminine, and rather than affirming these values actually asserts male-dominance, the suppression of the feminine and a deeply anti-Gnostic world-view. Brown is not a Gnostic and it is clear from this, and from his other novels, that he is no champion of the liberation of women from contemporary stereotypes.

Gnosticism is, of course, a slippery term referring to a whole gathering of teaching which lies at or beyond the periphery of orthodox Christianity, Judaism and paganism. Essentially, Gnostic teaching is recognized as such by its elevation of the spiritual above the physical – in other words, by honouring that which is part of the spirit world and denigrating that which is part of the physical. Gnostic texts have a spiritual bias, and admission into the true understanding of Gnosticism, and a true understanding of the spiritual, usually involves a revelation of secret knowledge and a decision to repudiate physical reality in preference for spiritual truth. The movement is always away from physical expression and involvement towards spiritual contemplation and reflection. As such, Brown's thesis that Constantine replaced the Gnostic-led arguments about the humanity of Christ with his own heterodox arguments about the divinity of Christ is exactly the wrong way round! The historical Gnostics sought to distance Christ from creation as much as possible – Christ was seen as an emanation from the divine, a saviour sent by the Father to undo the imperfect creation of Yahweh and to release those souls caught in the prison of that creation. Far from Gnosticism arguing for a human Christ against a Church-imposed divine Christ, it was the Church which was arguing for a truly human Christ against the Gnostic over-spiritualization of Christ and his message. Brown has completely missed the point about Gnosticism. We have here a basic misunderstanding of both New Testament history and Gnostic appreciation of Jesus and his message. Moreover, in suggesting that Jesus married Mary Magdalene and had children, the myth moves

even further from Gnostic reality – the Gnostics were largely ascetic, spurning sexual activity of any kind, preferring spiritual reflection to carnal involvement and avoiding childbirth wherever possible because this meant another soul imprisoned within Yahweh's creation. Jesus and Mary, if they did indeed share a Gnostic world-view, would not have married and they certainly would not have had kids! The Church's insistence on the humanity of Jesus, the frailty of his disciples and the sheer physicality of his death and suffering militate against the Gnostic spiritualization of Jesus and the fantasy world of Gnostic exegesis – a fantasy world explored still by the neo-Gnostics of our contemporary society.

Had Brown understood Gnosticism correctly, then he would have been in for an even greater surprise in his claim that Gnosticism praised the Sacred Feminine. The Gnostic world is not a feminine world and it is certainly not the world of the Sacred Feminine. Gnosticism pays little honour to women and has no place for a female redeemer. So, for example, at the end of the much-hailed Gospel of Thomas, Jesus suggests that the only hope for Mary, and for any woman is to change into a man: 'I myself will lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven' (Gospel of Thomas 114). Gnosticism, as Elaine Pagels has made clear and like the ancient world in general, was a pretty hostile environment for women. It is not the place to go to find trendy alternatives to contemporary and historical male-dominated Christianity.

However, one of the ways in which Brown takes the myth of Magdalene further than even the most outrageous New Testament scholar is to suggest that she represents the Sacred Feminine as seen in the various feminine deities of ancient religions, such as Isis and Aphrodite. In such a mythology, presumably, Mary Magdalene would represent the feminine side of a Gnostic syzygy – a pairing of a male emanation with a female counterpart. In other words, Jesus and Mary represent the two sides of the divine reality. As much as we worship Jesus, we should also worship Mary.

Arguments about the inter-relationship between male and female representations of the divine are not new – the discussion of Wisdom in the Old Testament and Wisdom/Spirit in the New and the role of Mary within populist Catholicism show just one tip of this proverbial iceberg. As such, I think that Brown is on to something more explosive with this issue than with the whole Gnostic/royal blood mythology which he



develops – and others have sought to explore this issue much more cogently and powerfully. Unfortunately, Brown's novel undoes the very image of the Sacred Feminine which he seeks to promote. Let me explain by reflecting on the role which Brown's 'heroine', Sophie Neveu, plays in the novel. Sophie is a brilliant decoder, Jacques Saunière's granddaughter, the unknowing heir to the Priory of Sion. Yet her only role in the novel is to accompany Robert Langdon, to dote on his ability to solve riddles, to provide a foil for his acute intelligence and, throughout the novel, to be the recipient of an endless stream of boorish lectures by elderly, middle-class academic blokes. One of the key sub-plots to the thriller is the gradual education of Sophie as more and more revelations are given about her own identity and the reality of which she is a part. However, throughout the novel, Sophie is a passive figure. She never graduates into action. She is never allowed to initiate any development in the plot – she is the bimbo, the attractive woman at Robert Langdon's side, and her ignorance is the opportunity for the reader to be endlessly lectured by Teabing and Langdon alike.

In fact, the novel is as modernist and androcentric as it comes. Its hero is a middle-aged, middle-class, pseudo-academic from New England. He imposes his interpretation on Sophie. He directs the plot. He is clearly the one with the intelligence. In the end, in the Epilogue, it is he, not Sophie who has actually disappeared from the novel in any meaningful way, who kneels in reverence and 'hears a woman's voice ... the wisdom of the ages ... whispering up from the chasms of the earth'. If only he had waited to hear what Sophie had to say in the beginning, the thriller might have been considerably shorter!

In privileging Langdon and giving Langdon the centre-stage of mystical revelation, the novel misses a wonderful opportunity to explore the Sacred Feminine. Rather than allowing Sophie to emerge, Mary Magdalene-like, from the ashes of Langdon's confusion; rather than allowing Sophie, Mary Magdalene-like, to have the moment of revelation, perhaps in a garden through a haze of tears; rather than allow Sophie to be the reincarnation of the Sacred Feminine, a beacon of hope for humanity at the start of a new millennium, Brown opts for the twentieth-century mainstream script – the reality of male supremacy and the denigration of the female to the passive, supporting role in a world dominated by male, Anglo-American know-it-alls – it is fascinating to note that Hollywood superstar Tom Hanks plays Langdon in the film version, while the role of Sophie Neveu is taken by an almost unknown female actor.

## 'The Da Vinci Code' – An Appraisal

Is *The Da Vinci Code* a masterpiece? It is a publishing phenomenon. It is amazingly popular and has caught the imagination of a large number of people in the western world. It is a rip-roaring thriller which tantalizes its reader. It has romance, intrigue, passion and death – all the hallmarks of a modern success. From a literary perspective, its characters are flat. From a historical perspective, it is factually incorrect. It misrepresents New Testament research, Church History and the contemporary Catholic Church. Moreover, it misrepresents its own heroes – Gnosticism and the Sacred Feminine. But I think, despite the protestations of New Testament scholars and Church historians and art critics, that it will be judged as a phenomenally successful thriller, which offers a tantalizing alternative to American suspicions about Eurocentric scholarship and to a Catholic hierarchy plagued by sex scandals, internal wrangling and massive decline.

Sadly, for me, the novel fails to take up the gauntlet of Gnosticism and the Sacred Feminine, and opts instead to rehash old myths and old ideas. Perhaps the reason so many people in the Church think it is worth studying and reflecting upon in house-groups and study-groups is because it is so traditional and, while offering a tantalizing glimpse of the new, chooses to opt for the safely familiar. I have a feeling that great literature probably does more than that.

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