

The Da Vinci Code: The Gospel According to Dan Brown

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Nearly seventeen million copies sold; columns and special articles in numerous newspapers and magazines; a film in the works; television programs; trips organized to sites mentioned in the plot; books defending or ridiculing it; Christians on the attack or on the defensive. *The Da Vinci Code*, bestseller of the year, leaves few people indifferent. But what is it about this story that has made its author wealthy and stirred passionate discussions?

The Plot

It all starts with a murder, but neither the victim nor the circumstances are banal. The victim: Jacques Saunière, curator of the Louvre Museum. The circumstances: a slow death in the Grand Gallery which leaves Saunière a good quarter of an hour to set the scene. He strips, leaves a cryptic message on the floor (13-3-2-21-1-1-8-5 O Draconian Devil! Oh, Lame Saint!), draws a pentacle and places his body in the form of the Vitruvian man, the famous sketch by Leonardo DaVinci. This message does not reveal the identity of the murderer, an albino member of the Opus Dei, but is destined for the two main protagonists of the novel: Sophie Neveu, the victim's grand-daughter and a specialist in cryptology, and Robert Langdon, a professor of symbology at Harvard. Saunière's goal is to transmit a secret held for centuries by the Priory of Sion, a mysterious fraternal organization founded by Godfroi de Bouillon and of which Saunière is the Grand Master. The Catholic Church always denies this secret and wants to eliminate it because it shakes the very foundations of Christianity.

What starts as a detective story becomes an esoteric thriller which, from the very beginning, draws the reader into an unremitting task of decoding and discovering the truth - the real truth - which has been hidden for centuries. The pursuit and safeguarding of this truth leads the reader at a rapid pace from Paris to Scotland, passing through the Château de la Villette and the Cathedral of Westminster.

And this secret, this truth? ... The Holy Grail. Careful, though. The Holy Grail is not the cup you have heard of but a person ... a woman - Mary Magdalene, wife of Jesus and mother of his children, whose descendants (founders of the Merovingian dynasty) still live today. It is up to Sophie and Robert to discover and protect this information before the

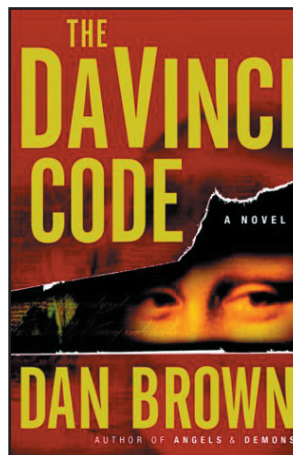
Opus Dei and the Catholic Church get hold of it.

The Reasons of a Success

One could hazard a few hypotheses as to why this book has been such a phenomenal success. Of course, there is marketing and word of mouth. The book sells because people talk about it. And admittedly the author knows how to tell a story. Short chapters with cliffhanger endings leave your mouth watering for more. If you like thrillers, you won't be able to put this one down.

But there is more than that. Symbols, esoteric themes and a flood of conspiracy theories - things are not what we are told they are - undoubtedly add to the book's success.

Instead of the religion and Christianity modelled by the Church over the course of centuries, we need to find the true Jesus, the real significance of the Christian faith. The author also sharply criticizes the Catholic Church, which always strikes a chord, especially in the United States where the Church is enmeshed in paedophile scandals. Add to that a strong hint of feminism and female deity. Finally, there is controversy, cleverly maintained with ambiguity. The book is controversial, and controversy sells as is well known. But what are the reasons for the controversy?



Esotericism and Conspiracy

One of the striking features of the novel is that it contains a cocktail of secret societies, famous historical characters and symbols of western culture. Included, in no particular order, are the Opus Dei, the Knights Templar, the Free Masons, the Rosicrucians, the Apocryphal Gospels, the Qumran and the Nag Hammadi scrolls, the Pentacle, the Nombre d'Or (a.k.a. the Divine proportion), the Fibonacci sequence, Godfroi de Bouillon, Constantine the Great, Leonardo Da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" and "The Last Supper," the Holy Grail, Solomon's temple, Herod's temple, Saint Sulpice, the Louvre, Westminster Abbey, Mary Magdalene, Jesus, Newton, Mitterand, and so on.

But the author does more than just amass a *Best of Secret Societies* list in a few hundred pages. He also promotes certain interpretations of artistic works, notably those of Leonardo DaVinci (hence the title) and a theory about

Christianity and history that can be surprising and even disconcerting.

The Thesis

According to the novel, at the root of Christianity is an androgynous God, neither male nor female. Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married and it was the latter who ought to have been at the head of the church, not Peter. The Church, however, fought against the role given to women in the primitive church and eliminated all reference to Mary Magdalene as a main player of Christianity and the wife of Jesus. Subsequently, the Church deified Jesus. The Scriptures were belatedly filtered to promote the truth of the official Church and the beliefs of the fourth century. Leigh Teabing, English aristocrat and key person in the novel, states in a conversation with Sophie and Robert that “The Bible is a product of *man*, my dear. Not of God. The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds. Man created it as a historical record of tumultuous times, and it has evolved through countless translations, additions, and revisions. History has never had a definitive version of the book.... The Bible as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great” (p. 231). According to Teabing in 325 Constantine convened the Council of Niceae which, among other things, voted on...the divinity of Jesus. “You’re saying Jesus’ divinity was the result of a vote?” Sophie asks Teabing. “A relatively close vote at that,” he replies (p. 233).

Therefore, according to Brown, belief in the divinity of Jesus did not appear until three centuries after the beginning of Christianity. Constantine financed the writing of the New Testament from which writings that disagreed with the recently voted official doctrine were excluded. “The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up, and burned.” (p. 234). Fortunately, notes Teabing, certain forbidden texts survived

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and were discovered. These were the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered at Qumran in the Israeli desert in 1947, and the Gnostic texts discovered in Egypt at Nag Hammadi in 1945. According to Teabing these were “[t]he earliest Christian records. Troublingly, they do not match up with the gospels in the Bible” (p. 245). These texts “[tell] the true Grail story” (p. 234), the story of Mary Magdalene.

And it is this true story that the codes in DaVinci’s “Mona Lisa” and “The Last Supper” allude to. The latter does not represent the apostle John at Jesus’ left, as is often thought, but Mary Magdalene (p. 243). DaVinci was supposedly homosexual and his famous painting, the “Mona Lisa,” is suggestive of Amon the Egyptian god of male fertility and Isis the goddess of female fertility. In the past the pictogram of Isis was LISA. Combining and rearranging the letters of AMON +LISA gives Mona Lisa. The “Mona Lisa” is androgynous and evokes an androgynous god that *Da Vinci Code* 2

is already found, according to Brown, in the Old Testament (p. 120-121). DaVinci allegedly communicated to us the foundations of authentic Christianity in a hidden way.

It is easy to see how these arguments, complete with dates, names and citations of ancient texts, can impress some readers and result in reactions ranging from suspicion to the rejection of the Christian religion. The entire Christian doctrine and history is at stake.

Decoding the Code ?

The author is not afraid of making bold statements regarding art, the Christian faith and the Catholic Church. So what? It’s just a novel, isn’t it? It is neither the first nor the last novel replete with errors. Is it really worth investing so much time and energy in decoding and demystifying something that we won’t even be talking about in a year or two?

Things are not as simple as that. First of all, the book attacks the religion - the faith - of a billion people (Would a similar book dare be published on Buddhism, Islam, or Judaism?). Moreover, testimony abounds of people who take the assertions of the book as rock solid facts. No less preoccupying is the fact that the author himself maintains the idea that the book is historically reliable and that he reveals secrets hidden for ages but fortunately preserved. In the beginning of the book he confirms the historicity of the Priory of Sion, documents of which were discovered in the National Library of Paris in 1975 (see sidebar). He also asserts that “All descriptions of artwork architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.” (p. 1). His website also defends the validity of his information. “Since the beginning of recorded time, history has been written by the ‘winners’ (those societies and belief systems that conquered and survived).” (www.danbrown.com) Apparently there is truth and there is truth.

But the significance of this book does not stop there. It echoes a number of theories that have circulated here and there, some for centuries, even in academic works: Mary Magdalene was Jesus’ wife; there were no clearly identifiable doctrines at the beginning of Christianity which defined the beliefs of and inclusion in an orthodox Christian faith, the latter being the truth imposed by the conquering societies of the fourth century; the text of the New Testament is not reliable; it is in the apocryphal and Gnostic gospels – suppressed by the official Church - that we find the truth; etc.

These theories are found in other recent works. It is known that the author heavily depends on the book *Holy Bood, Holy Grail* by Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln which was published in 1982 and is listed in the bibliography on Brown’s website (Leigh Teabing is actually taken from the names of two of the authors: Leigh and Baigent, of which Teabing is an anagram). A number of the ideas and details of *The DaVinci Code* are also found in the novels by Lewis Perdue, notably in *The DaVinci Legacy* (1983) and *Daughter of God* (1985). All these works have so much in common, according to some, that threats of sue and countersue for plagiarism and slandering are showering.

Reactions and Corrections

The Da Vinci Code does not leave the reader indifferent. It is impossible to count the number of websites devoted to the subject. Art historians have had a field day at Brown's expense by recounting the number of errors and inaccuracies in the book. There are also broad statements without any solid evidence. One example is the assertion that the Catholic Church slaughtered five million women (p. 125). In the French translation of the book this entire fanciful section was cut out. But what are the facts relating to the New Testament? To be frank, not everything in the book is false. But you don't have to look far to find the first of many errors, despite claims of accuracy. A few examples can be given. When the author speaks of Qumran he places the discovery in the 1950's (p. 234) but the correct date is 1947. This error was corrected in the French translation (p. 293, French version). The author also presents the writings of the Qumran and the Nag Hammadi as the first Christian writings (p. 234, 245). The Qumran texts, however, are Jewish documents, many of which date from before the birth of Christianity and are Old Testament commentaries or texts. As to the writings of the Nag Hammadi, they date for the most part from after the second or third century and often use quotes or allude to the New Testament. In another example, when discussing the Gospel of Philip which is one of the writings of Nag Hammadi and which mentions Mary Magdalene as a "companion" of Jesus, Teabing says, "As any Aramaic scholar will tell you, the word companion, in those days literally meant spouse" (p. 246). That may be so, but the text of the Gospel of Philip found at Nag Hammadi is written not in Aramaic but in Coptic, as the author himself mentions earlier. Moreover, according to Brown the Q document - the traditional source that many scholars think was used by Matthew, Mark and Luke in the writing of their own narratives - was written by Jesus himself (p.256). No experts, no matter what their leanings, advance that theory.

As to the biblical Gospels, they have circulated together

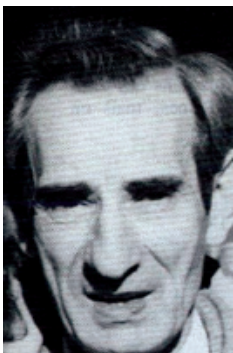
since the beginning of the second century, one generation after they were written. Manuscripts of the Gospels exist which date from the beginning of the second century. Paul's letters have also circulated as a collection from the beginning of the second century. These are the writings that make up the first Christian texts and not those of Qumran and Nag Hammadi.

Furthermore, regarding the composing of what was to become the New Testament, it ought to be pointed out that Constantine and the Council of Nicea didn't have much to do with it. What was essentially the New Testament was already circulating at the end of the second century as numerous documents give evidence. The Gospels and the letters of Paul were circulating as a whole from the beginning of the second century. Contrary to what Brown affirms, the development of the New Testament had already begun well before the fourth century. Ancient texts from the second and third century show that primitive Christianity had already begun to sift through all the available Christian writings a generation after the apostles.

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Finally, asserting that primitive Christianity did not have a fixed doctrine and that its doctrine was that of conquering societies is simply false. Throughout history there have been discussions on doctrine. That's not unusual. Certain discussions could only take place when historical events brought up new questions. But it is clear that since the beginning, Christianity was concerned with doctrinal accuracy. One could not not say just anything about God or believe just anything in the name of Christianity. Most of the ancient documents exist to confirm or refute certain beliefs. This is the case with the Gnostic writings of Nag Hammadi, too. The texts of the New Testament are not

The Priory of Sion



Dan Brown tells us that the historical accuracy of the Priory of Sion is authenticated by documents called "Secret Files" discovered at the National Library of Paris in 1975. According to these "Files," the Priory of Sion was created in 1099 by Godefroi de Bouillon and has counted among its members such famous people as Victor Hugo, Isaac Newton, and Jean Cocteau.

Brown is correct in saying that such documents were discovered in 1975.

But he forgets to mention that these "Files" turned out to be false and were planted in the Library by a Frenchman named Pierre Plantard.

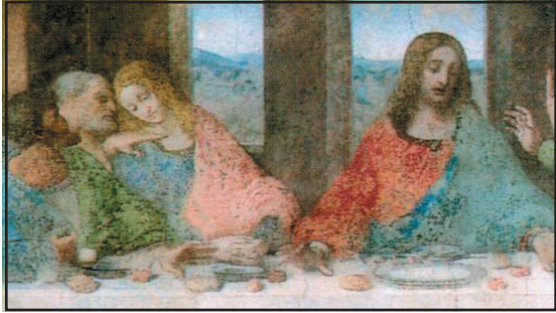
Who was Pierre Plantard (1920-2000)? A virulent anti-Semite and anti Mason who founded different movements during and after the Second World War and who was put in

prison several times. Over the course of time Plantard was implicated in various more or less shady affairs. He is the one who instigated the creation of the Priory of Sion whose statutes were set down in 1956 and revised in 1961. It was also Plantard who brought up the family link between himself and the Merovingian Dynasty.

If Brown mentions the famous "Secret Files" nowhere on his site or in his book does he mention Pierre Plantard. Nowhere? ...Not exactly. Toward the end of the novel we learn that Sophie Neveu is a descendant of the Merovingians from whom are descended the Saint Clairs and ... the Plantards (p. 442). Strange coincidence! Yet another clue that shows that Brown is communicating theories that are far from being without an ulterior purpose.

The history of Plantard and the documents concerning the Priory of Sion are available on the site www.priory-of-sion.com.

Mary Magdalene: Jesus' Wife ?



According to D. Brown Mary Magdalene, mentioned several times in the Gospels, was the wife of Jesus and their children gave rise to the Merovingian Dynasty. The Church, however, eliminated all these bothersome facts. To support this claim, the author quotes a passage from the Gospels of Mary (p. 247) and of Philip: "And the companion of the Saviour is Mary Magdalene. Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on her mouth. The rest of the disciples were offended by it and expressed disapproval. They said to him, 'Why do you love her more than all of us?'" (p.246).

Brown also supports an interpretation of *The Last Supper* by Leonardo DaVinci, which is rejected by most art historians. According to Brown the person to the right of Jesus in the painting is not the apostle John but Mary Magdalene (p.243). Even if DaVinci had wanted to represent Mary Magdalene as Jesus' wife, he painted nearly fifteen centuries after Jesus Christ. His relatively recent opinion is simply one opinion among many. As to the texts of Philip and Mary, they date from well after the Gospels of the New Testament, which mention nothing about a marriage between Jesus and Mary. Whatever one says, these Gnostic texts only represent one opinion popular in some circles only.

What is more, the texts of Philip and Mary mentioned by Brown are not as clear as he would lead us to believe. In the Gnostic tradition when Mary Magdalene "marries" Jesus it is the union of the Soter (the Savior) and the Sophia (Wisdom). Mary Magdalene, the Sophia, is rendered fertile from her barren state by a kiss from the Logos, Jesus, and can then bear children. Note that the name of the book's heroine, Sophie, is derived from Sophia (p.322). These are the secret, restricted theories dating back several centuries that Dan Brown wishes to pass on.

It is rather strange that to support his argument that the Church and the biblical texts have continually diminished the role of women and persecuted them, Brown uses documents which often put them in a very unfavorable situation. A look at the texts of Nag Hammadi that Brown does not mention shows this. According to these, to be saved a woman must, in effect, return to the original androgynous state and become the perfect man. To do this she must be united in a spiritual marriage with a man. This is apparent even in the Gospel of Philip, cited by Brown, which says "The nuptial chamber is not for beasts for slaves neither for women nor for the impure, but it is for free men and virgins" (Sentence 73). These texts are therefore of much less immediate use and much less favourable to women than Brown makes them seem.

exempt from this practice which is why the Gospel of John, partial manuscripts of which exist from the second century, ends by stating, "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (20: 31). Christianity did not wait four centuries to assert certain beliefs, and certainly not that Jesus is the Son of God.

To Read or not to Read?

The DaVinci Code is a novel, nothing but a novel, even though the author seems to have forgotten it. It will delight those who like this type of literature. Personally, I liked it, at least the first part. But it is a book that, while using history, often strays from it, distorts it even.

The author plays on ambiguity to surreptitiously promote esoteric theories found throughout the centuries and which are not completely harmless. For readers it is a cautionary reminder not to mix different literary genres. It is not in novels that one usually finds reliable historical information on which to build a belief system.

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