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Senior Thesis

The Da Vinci Code Phenomenon

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Introduction

Imagine a suspense novel with a plot that intertwines Christian origins, art history, secret societies, and old Holy Grail tales—hardly seems heart-pounding, right? Think again. The *Da Vinci Code* has topped the *New York Times* Best-Seller list for 47 weeks, climbed to the number one sales ranking at Amazon.com, and has become the fastest-selling adult novel of all time.¹ Dan Brown's 2003 thriller the *Da Vinci Code* has generated more than just a few pennies for the author; it has created an international phenomenon. The public's insatiable appetite for anything to do with the *Da Vinci Code* has not only manifested itself in book sales, but it has also been slated by Sony Pictures for a May release as a feature length Hollywood film starring Tom Hanks. Following this sudden surge of interest by general readership in the *Da Vinci Code* has been an equally strong gain in interest in the topics of importance within the novel. It has caused many to rethink their understanding of history and faith. For many, the alternative view of Christianity and history has been troubling, for yet others it has been a welcome exodus from orthodox views.

Following the ever-inflating interest in the *Da Vinci Code*, has been a caravan of editorial, scholastic critique, and companion literature. After a cursory search, one can easily find ten books written specifically about Dan Brown's novel.² There are books which claim to further prove the information given in the novel and more numerous volumes which serve to undermine Dan Brown's work and "set the record straight." But what is all this controversy and conflict about if the *Da Vinci Code* is a *novel*, a work of

¹ "Decoding the *Da Vinci Code*," Christianity Today [article on-line]; available from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/special/davincicode.html> accessed 20 November 2005 and Jason Cowley, "The Author of the Best Selling *Da Vinci Code* Has Tapped Into Our Post-9/11 Anxieties and Fear of Fundamentalism," *New Statesman* 133 (December 2004): 4718.

² According to a November 29 2005 search of "da vinci code" at amazon.com.

fiction? Well, it is perhaps a bit more complicated than a simple one-sentence answer, but it has become clear that Dan Brown's work has scratched some sort of populous itch, and according to many opponent authors the stakes are high when it comes to matters of personal belief.

Acknowledging that the *Da VinciCode* is a work of fiction, many have been quick to discredit Dan Brown's "research." But before I can delve into the plausibility of the novels historical framework, I must first summarize the novel as to familiarize the reader with the plot.

The story begins with the chilling murder of Jacques Saunière, the curator of the Louvre in Paris. That evening, Robert Langdon, a Harvard professor of religious symbology is called in by the French Judicial Police to help solve the murder. It becomes clear that Langdon is their primary suspect, and he appears to be trapped until Sophie Nouveau helps him escape apprehension. Sophie is a member of the Judicial Police cryptology department and the estranged granddaughter of the late Jaucques Saunière. She helps Langdon escape because she believes he is innocent. Together they flee from the authority's grasp and begin to piece together encoded messages left by her dying grandfather. They soon learn that he was the grand master of a secret society known as the Priory of Sion. This priory was charged with the duty of protecting and keeping the secret of the Holy Grail. The secret would be lost forever unless Langdon and Sophie followed the clues to find its location. During their harrowing escape, they take refuge at the mansion of a royal British historian, Leigh Teabing. He is a Grail-seeker himself and helps Langdon explain the truth about the Holy Grail to Sophie. Together the trio decipher the clues, all the while avoiding the Judicial Police and an albino assassin of the

Opus Dei, a conservative prelature of the Catholic Church. The Grail quest proves to unlock a dangerous truth that must be silenced by some powerful enemies!

Now one may begin to understand the allure presented by the novel to the common reader. But why has a seemingly standard thriller plot created such an outburst of interest among international readership? Perhaps the novel's claims that undermine the origins of the Catholic Church, Jesus' divinity, and the existence of other secrets that are clearly at odds with what one might have learned in Sunday school.

The goal of my work is not merely to regurgitate the critiques of copious literature striving to "disprove" the *Da Vinci Code* since its publication. A significant portion of my discourse will serve to analyze the public reception of and reaction to the novel, which distinguishes my study from those which focus upon the "debunking of its historical narrative. Yet in order to begin to ask and answer questions about the novels affect upon its readership, I must first understand the truth about the history presented within the *Da Vinci Code* in order to explore questions with immediate relevance about the affect that the novel has upon those who read it, and whether these affects are positive or negative consequences. So the body of my research has been delineated in the following manor: the first section will focus upon the "claims" made in the book and their origins in earlier literature, the second section will be a presentation and interpretation of research scrutinizing these claims, and the third section will focus on the impact of the novel and explore what can be rightfully called the "*Da Vinci Code* Phenomenon."

Part 1: The *Holy* Matrimony?

After reading the *Da Vinci Code*, it is only natural for one to harbor a great many of questions about the validity of the historical picture of Jesus painted by Dan Brown through Robert Langdon, Leigh Teabing, and—of course—Leonardo da Vinci. The supposed implications of such things as stated within the book, if true, would be shattering to the orthodox view of Jesus, or so the story goes. In this section I am not only exploring what exactly the “scholarly” characters of Robert Langdon and Leigh Teabing from the *Da Vinci Code* say, but I am going to engage in a grail quest of my own and determine the history and origins of these claims. Yet before I dive into the complex, sometimes vague or even fragmented, web of historical evidence, I must first elicit which of the claims are most vital and shocking, for logically these will be areas in which I will focus research.

As we have discussed above, it must be acknowledged that the *Da Vinci Code* is a work of fiction. Still, there are elements of the novel that seem to be presented as so logical and credible that we must look at its claims with a critical eye. This is not to mention the many other “non-fiction” books which claim similar things. Even in the beginning, the novel is prefaced with a page of text that greatly adds to the appearance of historical credibility.

Fact:

The Priory of Sion—a European secret society founded in 1099—is a real organization. In 1975 Paris’s *Bibliothèque Nationale* discovered parchments known as *Les Dossiers Secrets*, identifying numerous members of the Priory of Sion, including Sir Isaac Newton, Botticelli, Victor Hugo, and Leonardo da Vinci.

The Vatican prelature known as *Opus Dei* is a deeply devout Catholic sect that has been the topic of recent controversy due to reports of brain-washing, coercion, and a dangerous practice known as “corporal

mortification.” Opus Dei has just completed construction of a \$47 million National Headquarters at 243 Lexington Avenue in New York City.

All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.

Although this statement says very little about the topics of great importance to this study, it creates a frame of viable truth for readers to accept anything else said subsequently as accurate. Furthermore, some of these “facts” by implication suggest that once many of these descriptions can be placed within factual bounds, that the relating information about history can be assumed to be more likely than not.

The Code’s Claims

The most shocking and perhaps most controversial claim, involves Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Her character has enjoyed a revival of sorts in past years, in the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* she plays the role of companion to Jesus. Furthermore, in Martin Scorsese’s controversial 1988 film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Jesus is portrayed as having sex with the Mary Magdalene in a dream sequence. But in the *Da Vinci Code*, it becomes clear through the reasoning of Robert Langdon and Leigh Teabing that Mary Magdalene was in fact the *wife* of Jesus.

On page 244 of the *Da Vinci Code*, the fictitious royal British historian, Leigh Teabing sums up his hypothesis, “‘As I mentioned,’ Teabing clarified, ‘the early Church needed to convince the world that the mortal prophet Jesus was a *divine* being.’³ Therefore, any gospels that described the *earthly* aspects of Jesus’ life had to be omitted from the Bible. Unfortunately for the early editors, one particularly troubling earthly theme kept recurring in the gospels. Mary Magdalene.’ He paused. ‘More specifically,

³ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003) Continuing from this point until page 10, a page number listed in the text may be recognized as a citation of *The Da Vinci Code*.

her marriage to Jesus Christ.’’ Not only does Teabing purport that Mary was in fact married to Jesus, but that the New Testament as we know it, was selected in a way that promoted Christ’s divinity. On page 231, Teabing further explains the process of gospel selection, “The fundamental irony of Christianity! The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great.”

This relationship between Jesus and Mary also incarnated the theme within the novel that a goddess was formerly worshipped alongside Yahweh in ancient Hebrew culture. The sacred feminine of the Old Testament was a reverence for the mystical quality of childbirth, creation of life, and fertility. Sex was held as a sacred rite and was seen as a holy sacrament. It is described on page 309, “Early Jews believed that the Holy of Holies in Solomon’s Temple housed not only God but also His powerful female equal, Shekinah. Men seeking spiritual wholeness came to the Temple to visit priestesses—or *hierodules*—with whom they made love and experienced the divine through physical union.” This view of sexuality was later demonized along with the sacred feminine by the early church. Jesus understood this relationship and even intended Mary Magdalene to be his successor. As Langdon describes on page 248, “According to these unaltered gospels, it was not *Peter* to whom Christ gave directions with which to establish the Christian Church. It was *Mary Magdalene*.”

Teabing continues to prove his version of history by finding symbolic clues within the work of Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper*. He also states that it made more sense for Jesus to be married because he was a Jew, and it would be unthinkable for him to remain single and celibate. On page 246, he then turned to his library of historical

documents including the Nag Hammadi and Dead Sea scrolls, where he quoted the Gospel of Phillip as:

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?”

This reasoning is questioned by Sophie, “It says nothing of marriage.” Teabing’s response is, “*Au contraire*. As any Aramaic scholar will tell you, the word *companion*, in those days, literally meant *spouse*.”

Teabing continues with his discourse by explaining that Mary was also important because of her family lineage. According to the novel, she was of the House of Benjamin and that her marriage to Jesus who was descended from the Davidic line created a very potent alliance and further legitimized a claim to the throne of Israel by Jesus himself. Apparently this marriage was dangerous to the early Church and, according to Teabing on page 249, the Church recast the Magdalene as a whore to minimize her role in the life and ministry of Jesus.

In addition to being married, the *Da Vinci Code* claims that Jesus fathered a child, and that this child was heir to the Jewish throne. That is why the truth of his earthly family had to go ‘underground’ and become a carefully hidden secret.

Langdon and Teabing continued to tell Sophie that the secret of Mary Magdalene has been lost to history, but has become known as the myth of the Holy Grail. According to legend, the Grail is a chalice that held the blood of Christ, but this ‘chalice’ is really a secret allegorical reference to the vessel of Mary Magdalen which carried the ‘blood’ of Jesus. Mary was the chalice that carried the bloodline of Jesus in her womb. Mary *was*

the Holy Grail. Serving as the sacred vessel, she traveled with Joseph of Arimathea to the Mediterranean coast of Gaul (ancient France). There Mary found a safe haven in a Jewish community where she gave birth to the child of Jesus, Sarah.⁴

Even the legend of the Holy Grail attests to this truth according to Teabing. He explains that the word Sangreal was originally thought to be derived from San and Greal, meaning *Holy Grail*. He continued to exemplify that the word could also be divided as Sang Real meaning literally (according to the novel) *Royal Blood*. Dan Brown uses the term Sangreal in the context of the “Sangreal documents” which contain the secret genealogy of Christ’s bloodline. On page 254 of the novel, Teabing explains why this truth was so dangerous, “They (the Church) could never have survived public knowledge of a bloodline. A child of Jesus would undermine the critical notion of Christ’s divinity and therefore the Christian Church.”

On page 256, Teabing explains that the Sangreal documents include the genealogy of the descendants of Jesus, other pre-Constantine Christian documents, the “Q source” (an early written document about Jesus’ teaching that has since been lost), as well as the Magdalene Diaries of Mary’s relationship with Jesus and her time in France. These Sangreal documents were buried in the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, and were recovered by the Knights Templar during the crusades, now thought to be buried along with the sarcophagus of Mary Magdalene herself. He explains, “At its heart, the quest for the Holy Grail has always been a quest for the Magdalene—the wronged Queen, entombed with proof of her family’s rightful claim to power.”

According to Leigh Teabing, in the fifth century the royal bloodline of Christ intermarried with French royalty creating what came to be known as the Merovingian

⁴ Brown, 255.

line. One such Merovingian king, Dagobert, was assassinated by the Vatican in cooperation with a rival of the throne. As Langdon explained earlier in the novel, The Merovingian lineage survived and included Godefroi de Bouillon who created the Priory of Sion when he conquered Jerusalem in 1099. This secret order was meant to carry on and protect his family's secret after his own death. The Priory came to know about a stash of buried documents in the ruins of the Temple of Solomon. The Priory then created an order of knights known as the Knights Templar. Under the false front of protecting the pilgrimage routes to the holy land, the Templars took up lodgings in the temple itself and immediately began searching for the buried documents. Nine years later the Templars seemed to have found what they were looking for, and upon their return to Europe they became very wealthy and influential. The Pope Innocent II even declared them "a law unto themselves" and they soon became very powerful, and even began a very successful banking system. By 1307, Langdon explains, the Templars became so powerful that the Vatican joined with the French King Philippe IV to destroy all the Templars. The Pope used the charges of heresy and devil worship to legitimize the sudden overthrow of the Templars. Some of the Templars escaped along with the Sangreal documents that were taken by the Priory of Sion into safe keeping.

According to the *Da Vinci Code*, to this day the Priory continues to successfully conceal the location of the Grail, passing its secret down from generation to generation of Priory members. In the novel, the top Priory members—including Sophie's grandfather, Jaques Saunière, the curator of the Louvre—have been murdered and the secret is in danger of being lost forever. It is up to Langdon, Sophie, and Teabing to successfully

crack the cryptic messages left behind by Saunière and Da Vinci alike, and follow the clues to the secret location of the Holy Grail.

Now it seems that I am also left with that task. I have identified the claims in the *Da Vinci Code* and now must begin my own quest to uncover the truth about the “Holy Grail” that Dan Brown has laid, and now I will intend to trace his steps and understand the origins of the themes that many have found to be so intriguing within this fictional piece of literature.

In order to find out the truth for myself about this “Grail” mystery and these claims not only about Jesus and Mary Magdalene, but the very origins of modern Christianity, I will first look at the sources that Dan Brown built his own story upon. One of the most apparent and comprehensive sources for Brown’s theories is *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln. This is considered to be a non-fiction piece of work and was written in 1982. The book makes almost identical claims as to those found in the *Da Vinci Code* over 20 years earlier. Dan Brown not only mentions their book by name, but also pays homage to the writers of the book with the character Leigh Teabing; the first name clearly mimicking Richard Leigh, and Teabing which is a scrambled name from the combination of letters found in Baigent.⁵

Holy Blood, Holy Grail

After a reading of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* it becomes evident that Dan Brown borrows much of the authors’ theories to incorporate into his thriller. At times this synchronicity appears to be nearly verbatim. The important themes that occur within both texts are: the marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, the conception of a child, the

⁵ Darrel L. Bock, Ph.D., *Breaking the Da Vinci code* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), xviii.

creation of a royal bloodline which would eventually intermarry to create the Merovingian lineage, and the subsequent keeping of this secret by both the Knights Templar and the Priory of Sion. Each of these theories is explored in greater historical detail as well as some additional, rather shocking claims.

The authors of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* claim long before Brown's novel that the myth of the Holy Grail was a metaphor for the literal bloodline of Christ in Mary Magdalene. They state that in early traditions of legend the Grail was brought to southern France by Joseph of Arimathea, and that it was the same cup he had used to catch the blood spilling from the spear-wound of Christ on the cross.⁶

Dan Brown's description of the Grail as the "Sangreal" was also borrowed from the work of Leigh, Baigent, and Lincoln. They explain that in early manuscripts of the Grail legend, it was called Sangraal, and later Sangreal.⁷ They argue that perhaps in early traditions it was separated in the "wrong" place as "San Graal" or "San Greal" meaning *Holy Grail*, but that its true meaning was elicited when separated in the correct place; as Sang Raal or Sang Real. They say by modern spelling this would be "Sang Royal" or *Royal Blood*.

Eventually they use this interpretation of the *Blood Royal* to suggest their hypothesis that Mary was the wife of Jesus and that they had a child together.⁸ They continue to explain that after the crucifixion Mary fled to Gaul (modern-day France) and found asylum in a local Jewish community. This bloodline was continued underground and eventually intermarried with the Franks to form the Merovingian order in the fifth

⁶ Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1983), 286.

⁷ Ibid., 306.

⁸ Ibid., 313.

century. Godfroi of the Merovingians would eventually conquer Jerusalem in 1099 during the Crusades and reclaim the rightful throne of his family.

In their analysis and defense of this hypothesis, the authors of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* explore to a greater extent the possibility of Jesus as being married. Prefacing their analysis it is written, “Such attestations, needless to say, would not be explicit. In order to find them, we realized, we would be obliged to read between lines, fill in certain gaps, account for caesuras and ellipses.”⁹ They continue to point out that nowhere in the biblical sources does it say Jesus was married, yet on the other hand it did not say he wasn’t married and Jesus himself did not preach celibacy. In fact, they state, “According to Judaic custom at the time it was not only usual, but almost mandatory, that a man be married... During the late first century one Jewish writer even compared deliberate celibacy with murder, and he does not seem to have been alone in this attitude.”¹⁰

In addition to this reasoning, they point to the fact that Jesus was often called “Rabbi” by his apostles. This could be taken in the broad sense of meaning self-appointed leader or as they seem to prefer, it could be indication that he actually went through rabbinic training.¹¹ If this were the case, it would explain his command of the scriptures in conversation with the elders of the temple.¹² They make their point, “But if Jesus was a rabbi in the strict sense of the word, a marriage would not only have been likely, but virtually certain.” They quote Mishnaic Law as saying, “An unmarried man may not be a teacher.”¹³

⁹ Ibid., 330.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 331

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

They use the Gospels themselves to further support their claims of Jesus' marriage. They look to the wedding of Cana narrative found in the book of John. Not only was Jesus present, but also his mother. When the wedding party is out of wine, the servants come to Mary, who in turn tells Jesus. This behavior suggests that Mary enjoys a hostess-like role at this wedding. The authors say this gives light to the notion that this wedding may have been Jesus' *own* wedding!¹⁴ It is written in John 2:9-10, "The governor of the feast called the bridegroom, and saith unto him, Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine; and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse: but thou hast kept the good wine until now." *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* claims that this statement is clearly said to Jesus, yet refers to the bridegroom in the verse. The two must be one and the same!

If that seems shockingly disparate from conventional views of the gospel, they take it one step further, hoping to prove that Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany (sister of Lazarus) were actually the same person, and that this same Mary was the woman from the account of the anointing of Jesus.¹⁵ According to the authors, the Medieval Catholic Church had also considered them to be the same person. They use a number of reasons found within the Gospels, to support their point as well. For example, if Mary of Bethany were such a devout follower of Jesus, why is she not mentioned as present at the crucifixion scene in any of the Gospels? Mary Magdalene is definitely described as being present. In John 2:1-2, the Mary described as anointing Jesus is clearly the Mary of Bethany, "Now a certain man was sick, named Lazarus, of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha. (It was that Mary which anointed the Lord with

¹⁴ Ibid., 332.

¹⁵ Ibid., 336

ointment, and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick.).” Sure enough, later in John, it is Mary who anoints Jesus in Bethany in the company of Lazarus and Martha.

The story is threaded along by a commentary upon the significance of this marriage. As it says in the Gospels, Jesus was a descendant of the House of David, the royal line of Jewish kings. Basing their research upon references in the “Prieuré documents” the authors determined that the city of Jerusalem had originally been the property of the tribe of Benjamin.¹⁶ If Jesus *were* to marry someone, it would most likely be someone of his own ‘status.’ As the authors explain, in some legends Mary was thought to be of royal blood, and in some to be specifically of the Benjamites.¹⁷ This marriage would signal a powerful alliance and create a strong political claim to the throne.

The next strange turn that is taken in *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* is an attempt to identify the offspring of Jesus based on the Gospels; namely Jesus Barabbas. They came to this conclusion that Barabbas may be a corruption of the term “bar Rabbi” in early spoken traditions.¹⁸ Therefore Jesus (inheriting the first name of his father) bar Rabbi would mean, Jesus son of the Rabbi. They then surmise that this son of Jesus was also ‘blackened’ by the Church to try and conceal his identity. In the Gospels of Mark and Luke he is described as a political prisoner. In Matthew the word used to describe Barabbas was *lestai* which in Latin meant “robber” or “bandit,” but during those times the same name was ascribed to zealots or revolutionaries.¹⁹

¹⁶ Ibid., 346.

¹⁷ Ibid., 347.

¹⁸ Ibid., 350.

¹⁹ Ibid., 351.

Furthering their own brand of history, the authors of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* take this scenario one step further and say that Jesus may have not died on the cross, but that it was a mock execution to carefully slip away from his Roman enemies.²⁰ This is of course a direct challenge to the divinity of Christ, and is also where the book departs from clarifying the theories that I had set out to explore, so now my attention turns to yet another work.

The Woman with the Alabaster Jar

The Woman with the Alabaster Jar was written by Margaret Starbird in 1993, still ten years before the *Da Vinci Code* and eleven years after *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*. I found this book to share a great deal with the theories of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* as well, but in a more spiritual frame. Starbird uses the same translation of Sangraal into *royal blood*, as well as criticizing “Orthodox Christianity” as having been written by the early Church in a way that excluded other traditions and texts. Also in accordance with her predecessors, she attests that both Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany were the same person. And of course the major tenet of the book is the existence of a royal lineage descending from Christ through the Mary Magdalene. I will not further analyze any of this overlapping material unless I deem it to contribute something new to my inquiry.

Where Starbird’s work figures into Dan Brown’s novel is in the emphasis of the divine feminine. As I have above mentioned, it seems as though Starbird were much more spiritual in her analysis than the authors of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*. In fact, she prefaces her book with the story of her own faith and how reading *Holy Blood, Holy*

²⁰ Ibid., 358.

Grail had greatly upset her until she uncovered the truth for herself, and now believes in its claims.

According to Starbird, Mary Magdalene was most likely a priestess in the temple of a Greco-Roman goddess of love, and was later misinterpreted as a prostitute.²¹ She continues by stating that there is archaeological evidence that the ancient Israelites themselves practiced goddess worship alongside Yahweh in the temple. Here Starbird uses the word *hierodulae* to describe this priestess, which explains the origins for Brown's claims on page 309 that "men seeking spiritual wholeness came to the Temple to visit priestesses—or *hierodules*—with whom they made love and experienced the divine through physical union." She also proposes that this goddess was locally called "Ashera" but may also be identified as the Sumerian or Canaanite love goddess Inanna or Astarte.²² The anointing of Jesus by Mary may then have been connected with the union rite of a god and goddess, in ancient Israel. This act was also representative of the *hieros gamos*, or the ancient practice of the anointing of a new king by a priestess. The priestess was representative of the goddess that consummated the king's reign.

The Templar Revelation

In 1997, *The Templar Revelation* continued to build upon the claims of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*. In this work Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince add a startling new twist to the secrets of the Grail. Six years before the publication of the *Da Vinci Code*, Picknett and Prince link the works of the great Renaissance artist, Leonardo da Vinci, to the secret society (Priory of Sion) that preserves the secret of the holy bloodline. Once again, we find the authors often referring back to *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* and its history about the

²¹ Margaret Starbird, *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar*, (Rochester: Bear & Company, 1993), 29.

²² *Ibid.*, 30.

Grail conspiracy. In *The Templar Revelation*, Picknett and Prince are merely adding a new piece to the puzzle: Leonardo da Vinci. One can readily see the importance of this work upon that of Brown, and is listed along with *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar* and *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, by Teabing as reputable sources for historical Grail research on page 253 of the *Da Vinci Code*.

According to the *Dossiers secrets* or “secret documents” deposited in the French National Library between 1964 and 1967, Leonardo himself presided as Grand Master over the Priory for the last nine years of his life.²³ Da Vinci’s heretical beliefs, explain Picknett and Prince, can even be seen in many of his artworks. Which is the most prominent example of this? But of course, the *Last Supper*!²⁴ Little is left for Brown to contribute, as Picknett and Prince lay out the significance of the “secret” messages encoded within Leonardo’s work which is later adopted to near facsimile in the *Da Vinci Code*. From the “effeminate” St. John which mirrors the attire of Jesus, to the mysterious “M” shape created by Jesus and St. John (supposedly signaling: Mary Magdalene)²⁵, to extra hand that holds a knife²⁶, to the disciple in the likeness of Leonardo that looks away, to the gesture pointing upwards in Jesus’ face, to the obvious absence of a chalice on the table, Brown’s description of this piece has already been neatly presented for him to use.²⁷

²³ Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince, *The Templar Revelation*, (New York: Touchstone, 1998), 41, 44 and Brown, 243.

²⁴ See Appendix, Figure a.

²⁵ See Appendix, Figure b.

²⁶ See Appendix, Figure c.

²⁷ Picknett, Clive, 20, 21.

Conclusions

In this first part of this analysis, we have discussed the historical themes of the *Da Vinci Code* as well as the sources that contribute to this view. We see that Brown proposes an alternate history of the life of Jesus, and that the early Church had actively tried to cover up this history. We have learned that Jesus was in fact married to and fathered a child with Mary Magdalene, and that this child represented a royal bloodline that had to be preserved. He tells us that this truth was protected through the ages by powerful secret societies lurking in the shadows of history, the Priory of Sion, and their Knights Templar. The story of Jesus' earthly bloodline had become known as the Grail legends of the Middle Ages. Yet Leonardo da Vinci not only knew the true nature of the Grail, but he himself was at one time the grand master of the Priory of Sion. Evidence of this can be found in his artwork, and in his secret diaries.

We have also learned in this first section the origins of Brown's ideas. We first find the Grail conspiracy as the royal lineage of Christ in the work of Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln in *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*. Based on this work, is Starbird's *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar* which provides the divine feminine worship aspect for his novel. Still six years before the *Da Vinci Code*, we learn about Leonardo's role in the Grail Mystery with Picknett and Prince in *The Templar Revelation*.

Now that we've identified the things we have "learned" from the *Da Vinci Code* and its predecessors, we must ask ourselves, if we already have not: how reliable is this information? Can we truly believe the claims of a fictional novel or the literature it's based upon whose authors describe themselves as "writers like us from outside the

mainstream of historical or religious research?”²⁸ Should we take the historical commentary on the life of Jesus by a fictitious religious “symbolologist” (which we are to assume is the study of symbols) over that of a historian or a religion scholar? Whether one receives these ideas as nonsensical conspiracy delusions, as obscure historical possibilities, or even as completely plausible scenarios, we must first quit the suspension of disbelief and look at these claims critically. Of these claims we cannot be certain. But now one may at last begin to understand the allure of this work of fiction and its weighty cargo of historical implications. In the next section, we will ask the critical questions and uncover the truth of this “Grail Quest” for ourselves.

²⁸ Ibid., 19.

Part 2: Deciphering the Code

This is the analysis section of my investigation into the *Da Vinci Code*, in which I will test the historic plausibility of the claims which I have enumerated above. I will structure my research after the narrative and chronological layout of the novel and its proposed history. This means I will start with discussion of sacred feminine worship in the Old Testament, Mary and her relationship to Jesus, Jesus' divinity, and early Christian Origins.

Sacred Feminine

Dan Brown claims that ancient Israelites worshiped a goddess, the bride of Yahweh, known as Shekhina. This goddess is said to have resided with Yahweh in the Holy of Holies in the Temple of Solomon. I did not need to dig very deep to find this statement to be false. Brown here nicely displays his method for creating his own version of history by piecing together disparate pieces of information and reframing it in another context to create something different from what it originally was. He draws on evidence for ancient goddess worship within Old Testament Hebrew culture, and a more obscure Aramaic term for the physical presence of Yahweh and combines them as a new thing all together.

There is, however, reliable if not concrete evidence that the ancient Hebrews did worship some sort of goddess figure alongside Yahweh. This may seem shocking, yet not only have archaeologists found numerous artifacts that attest to this, but even the prophetic writings of the Old Testament contribute to this truth. In 2 Kings 21:3 it is written a "statue of Asherah" was erected in the Temple. Asherah was a goddess of the Canaanites, who were conquered by the Israelites. Asherah (or Astarte) was often

represented by an ornately carved wood pillar of a woman, originally worshiped next to an altar of the Canaanite god Baal. Eventually the Israelites incorporated these Canaanite practices to such an extent as to place an “Ashera” within the temple itself. It is only natural that the two cultures mixed as they coexisted in the same land. This is most likely then, the result of the Israelites importing a goddess from another culture and not an original Hebrew goddess. This practice was vehemently condemned by many of the Old Testament prophets, and was often cited as the reason for foreign invasions, but the practice never totally disappeared. It would often subside temporarily during the reign of certain kings who were sympathetic to the Yahwist prophets, and would order the destruction of all idols. Usually these kings were followed by another that would once again establish the foreign goddess worship, and the process would begin anew.²⁹

The name Dan Brown ascribes to his ancient Israelite goddess is Shekhina, which was definitely not associated with a goddess in Old Testament Israel. The name itself is derived from the Hebrew verb, *shakhan* which means the “act of dwelling.” Shekhina as a noun is in the feminine form, which describes the presence of Yahweh among the people. It was first used in an Aramaic translation of the Torah known as *Targum Onkelos*. There is not an exact date for its composition, although some have dated it as early as the first 1st century A.D. In this translation of the Bible, the feminine form of Shekhina did not signal an actual physical feminine description, but was merely used as the “aspect of the deity which can be apprehended by the senses.”³⁰ Instead of saying God dwelt there, the author(s) of the *Targum Onkelos* opted to say that His Shekhina

²⁹ Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 50.

³⁰ Ibid, 99

dwelt there.³¹ The first time Shekhina is used as a separate and distinct deity is in the 13th century movement of Jewish mysticism: Kabbalism.³² But this is a far cry from the ancient goddess that shared the Temple with Yahweh described by Brown. So we can see here how Brown takes two different, yet remotely related things and combines them to make a unique fictional description that nonetheless sounds very plausible to the reader.

Jesus: a history of Divinity

According to Leigh Teabing in the *Da Vinci Code*, the truth about Jesus was that he was regarded as a mortal prophet until the 4th century when Constantine the Great made Christianity the official religion of the empire and rewrote the history of Christianity.³³ In this “new” version of Christianity, Jesus is the divine son of God and therefore the Roman Catholic Church holds a monopoly on the path to heaven. We are now going to explore the origins of Christ’s divinity and see if the controversial story of Leigh Teabing holds up to the test of history.

The earliest writings in the New Testament are the letters of Paul which were written between 50 and 68 A.D.³⁴ Paul often wrote to Christian communities about the salvation one could receive through Jesus, the Son of God. These letters written by Paul prove that Jesus’ Divinity was not a fabrication by the Church at a later date, but was at least prominent in many early Christian communities. Paul’s theological ideas about the divinity of Jesus can not be mistaken, yet his comment on the historical sayings and deeds of Jesus are few and far between.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 32.

³³ Brown, 233.

³⁴ Bock, 104.

The next set of sources that can be referenced are the four Gospels of the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Matthew and Luke only make sense if they were written after Mark, so Mark is considered to be the earliest written: circa 50 A.D.³⁵ Respectively Matthew was written circa 80 A.D., John in c.90 A.D., and Luke in the early 2nd century.³⁶ Yet Matthew and Luke also share a substantial amount of correlating material not found within Mark. There must then be another, pre-80 A.D. source that the gospel writers worked from.³⁷ This mystery text has come to be known as the Q source after the German word for source, *quelle*.³⁸ Q did not contain the theological implications about the divinity of Christ, but was rather a collection of Jesus' sayings.³⁹ The first examples of High Christology⁴⁰ are found in the letters of Paul and later in the canonical gospels. Within the gospels themselves, the synoptic gospels⁴¹ focus more upon the life and ministry of Jesus, while John emphasizes Christ's divinity, identifying Jesus as the "Word" in this passage: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."⁴² All of these canonical examples which point to the Divinity of Christ are written at least two hundred years before the Council of Nicea of 325 A.D., when, according to Brown's Teabing it was decided that Jesus was to be known as divine. Additionally the authorship of Q cannot be attributed to Jesus as is proposed by Teabing in the *Da Vinci Code*.⁴³ In *The Lost Gospel*, Burton L. Mack

³⁵ Burton L. Mack, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins*, (New York: HarperCollins, 194), 2.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid. p.4

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ High Christology emphasizes the divine and salvific aspects of Jesus.

⁴¹ Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

⁴² John 1:1.

⁴³ Brown, 258.

clearly explains the process by which early Christian *communities*, not Jesus, compiled and attributed the sayings found in Q.⁴⁴

In the *Da Vinci Code*, Teabing promotes the Gnostic Gospels⁴⁵ over those of the canon as he describes that there were, in fact, many more Gospels that were repressed by the early church fathers.⁴⁶ The Gnostic Christians are first mentioned in writings by Irenaeus (ca. 130-200), Hippolytus (ca. 170-236), and Tertullian (ca. 160-220).⁴⁷ These early church fathers wrote to warn others against the “heresies” of the Gnostics, and thus acknowledge their existence by the second century, at least one hundred years after the life of Jesus. For many years these writings criticizing the Gnostics were all that scholars had to define the mysterious branch of early Christianity known as Gnosticism. All this changed in 1935 when a buried cache of large jars were discovered near Nag Hammadi, Egypt. Inside the jars were preserved the ancient texts of the Nag Hammadi library, which contained actual examples of Gnostic Gospels. These texts were dated from 350-400 A.D. but being they are mentioned in the writings of Irenaeus around 180 A.D. we know that earlier copies existed.⁴⁸ The earliest date given for their composure is 50-100 A.D.⁴⁹

The Secret Marriage

As we have discussed, Dan Brown tells us that one of the biggest cover-ups in history is that of the suppression of the marriage between Mary Magdalene and Jesus

⁴⁴ Patai, 7.

⁴⁵ “Gnostics: a ‘Christian’ sect of the second and third centuries that believed in dualism, namely, a distinction between the purity of the immaterial world and the corruptibility of the material world... revelation provided them with access to *gnosis*, or knowledge about God.” Bock, 178,179.

⁴⁶ Brown, 234.

⁴⁷ Bock, 62.

⁴⁸ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, (New York: Random House, 1979), xvi.

⁴⁹ Ibid.,xvii.

Christ. We have also discussed the origins of these claims in Brown's predecessors. Now we must look with a historically-attuned eye to this idea and find its merit and/or folly. We will turn our attention to the various ancient sources at our disposal which serve as evidence for or against the claim of a romantically linked Mary and Jesus.

It is clear that the canonical Gospels do not come out and tell us that Jesus was married, but it must be noted that neither do they deny that Jesus had a wife. So, either the writers of the Gospels did not tell us about Jesus' wife because they saw it as being normal and not worth mentioning, or he really wasn't married, in which case it wouldn't make much sense to bring up that fact either.

Yet in the *Da Vinci Code*, Leigh Teabing argues that it would make more sense for Jesus to be married because he was a Jew and it was necessary for Jewish men to marry.⁵⁰ In *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, it is postulated that Jesus may have been an actual Rabbi.⁵¹ They say this is important quoting Mishnaic Law as saying, "An unmarried man may not be a teacher." If this is true, one must realize that Jewish Mishnah test was written in the late second century—almost 200 years after Christ! Additionally it is almost certain that the Essenes and the Qumran community⁵²—responsible for writing of the Dead Sea scrolls—practiced what one would contemporarily call celibacy. It is also glaringly clear that Paul, the early first century apostle abstained from marriage. In Ephesians 5:1 Paul encourages believers to "Be imitators of God" which he clearly identifies as including Jesus, yet he never suggests that Christians should marry as would

⁵⁰ Brown, 245.

⁵¹ Baigent, Leigh, Lincoln, 331.

⁵² The Qumran community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls was a peripheral religious movement in Judaism around the time of Jesus. They have often been associated with the coinciding Essene movement. James Vanderkam and Peter Flint, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 239, 240.

seem logical if Jesus truly were married. In fact he writes in 1 Corinthians 7: 1, 8: “It is good for a man not to marry.” “Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am.” It may be that the motivation for his voluntary celibacy was largely eschatological (waiting in anticipation of Christ’s return) in concern, yet it must be noted that Paul himself was Jewish and was a former Pharisee. Clearly, marriage was not as stringently enforced within Judaism at this time as Brown would have one believe.

Most scholars agree that Jesus was probably too committed in his ministry to participate in marriage.⁵³ In Matthew 8: 20 Jesus describes this in his own words: “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” Like many things in history, perhaps one could never *prove* anything about Jesus’ marriage or celibacy, but one must look at the available evidence and come up with the best answer possible. Do we have any surviving texts, including the Gnostic gospels that explicitly mention Jesus as married? The answer is no. We have seen that in the *Da Vinci Code*, Teabing uses an example from the Gnostic Gospel of Phillip to support his theory. The passage says that “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.”⁵⁴ Teabing explains that *companion* literally meant *spouse* in Aramaic. A more accurate translation of this passage from the *Gospel of Phillip* 63, 32-64, 9, is:

*And the companion (kionōnos) of the [...] Mary Magdalene
[...loved] her more than [all] the disciples [and used to] kiss her [often]
on her [...] The rest of [the disciples...]. They said to him, ‘Why do you*

⁵³ Bock, 53.

⁵⁴ Brown, 246.

*love her more than all of us?’ The Savior answered and said to them,
‘Why do I not love you like her?’’⁵⁵*

The term *kionōnos* is a Greek (not Aramaic) word used within the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) for a great degree of differing roles that include marriage partner, participant, evangelist partner, companion in faith, business partner, and friend.⁵⁶ Within the Gospel of Phillip itself, a form of the word *kionōnos*, meaning to join, hire, or to be harmonious, is used in three different ways. The first is referring to an adulterous sexual relationship, which is not a likely use of the word in this context. The second is the pairing of a man and woman in a marital/sexual relationship and alludes to a deep spiritual connection. The third way it is used is in reference to the emotional/religious experience of undergoing the sacrament of the bridal chamber.⁵⁷ The last two of the three uses could be seen as evidence that there was at least some understanding of Jesus and Mary being romantically linked within some part of the many Gnostic Communities.

The reason, according to the *Da Vinci Code*, that the truth about Jesus marriage was concealed was to downplay the fact that Jesus was a mortal man and to promote his divinity. This reasoning however may be flawed; is it not an intrinsic part of Christian theology that Jesus was completely human at the same time as being the embodiment of God? Why would a marriage undermine that? There is no reason to exclude a marriage for theological reasons because they did not exclude the fact that Jesus ate, drank, slept and even died like a normal human.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Jane Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2002), 151,152.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 152.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Bock, 33.

The Gnostics

This reference of Mary as the *companion* of Christ in the Gnostic *Gospel of Phillip* is the earliest recorded example of Mary Magdalene as possible consort or wife of Jesus. Therefore it is important to understand a little bit more about this gospel, the Gnostic community which created it, and the theological ideology of this community. First of all, the classification of Gnosticism cannot be neatly packed together as a coherent movement. What is *referred* to as Gnosticism is a generalization for any number of second and third century “heresies” in and around the Mediterranean, claiming to possess a secret knowledge about Jesus.⁵⁹ The term Gnostic comes from the Greek word *gnosis* which means knowledge. These ‘Gnostic’ communities may have very little in common with each other, but held a commonality in that they all held differing theologies than those of the ‘orthodox’ church fathers. The Gnostics claimed salvation through a secret *gnosis* or knowledge that was unlocked within oneself and framed within a deep mystic ideology. There was a dualism between the natural world/body and the spiritual realm, some communities even believed the God of the Old Testament to be a wicked god who created the earth.⁶⁰ This transcendent view of the body and salvation from the wicked world has even been linked by some scholars to Buddhist Philosophy and perhaps Hindu or Buddhist traditions from India had at some point cross-pollinated with those of Christianity.

Conclusions

⁵⁹ Bock, 178.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 122.

In the first setion of analysis we had reviewed what was “learned” from the *Da Vinci Code* and its predecessors. In this section we have *actually* learned the truth about these claims. It is almost certain that the ancient Israelites participated in forms of Goddess worship, but the context was very different from that presented by Dan Brown. The religious diaspora of goddess worship—detested by the Old Testament prophets—that occurred as a result of cultural blending of two regional groups, cannot be identified as Brown proposes, as an original aspect of Israelite religion. We have also learned that it is more likely that Jesus remained unmarried. Besides the fact that it is not mentioned within the canonical scriptures, there is substantial evidence from both historical (Essenes, Qumran, the later writing of Mishnaic law) and scriptural sources (Pauline High Christology, Paul was a Jew and unmarried, Jesus’ commitment to his mission) that contradicts the possibility of such a marriage. We have also seen that ideas of Christ’s divinity have been around far longer than the *Da Vinci Code* allows (nearly 300 years)! Additionally we have looked at the Gnostic movement of antiquity and their texts; we have seen that these texts cannot be viewed as more preferable or accurate than the canonical gospels.

Now that we have most-nearly distinguished the fact from fragily-supported bold claims, we must try to understand the affect that this novel has upon its readership and society at large. Once the misconceptions promoted in the *Da Vinci Code* are clearly exposed, it can be understood the importance of setting the record straight. The implications of such conspiracy theories, if taken as fact by the reader, could incite serious faith issues. In the next section we will discuss the ways in which this discussion of the *Da Vinci Code* has current relevance

Part 3: Neo-Gnosticism: Revival or Reversal of Faith?

With over 36 million copies in print,⁶¹ it seems as though Dan Brown has created a literary juggernaut of the sales charts with his *Da Vinci Code*. In turn, a monstrous reaction to his work has occurred. Much of this reaction is positive, much of it is negative, yet following the dictum of “any publicity is good publicity,” Brown’s novel has become a best seller. The upcoming film featuring Tom Hanks as Robert Langdon is bound to only multiply the popularity of the *Da Vinci Code* story and generate more interest in its alternative view of Christianity. We have examined the ways in which Dan Brown has weaved together an intriguing hybrid of historical speculation and sensational fiction, but now we must ask the questions of why and how? I have chosen three questions of importance to address: Why has a novel about art history and the origins of Christianity become so incredibly enthralling to so many people? How has it affected these people personally and religiously? Does the *Da Vinci Code* promote healthy dialogue about faith or does it foster a menacing distrust of organized religion and even history? In this section, I will attempt to answer these questions in a way that provides personal insight yet room for interpretation.

In my research of those critiquing the novel, I was hard-pressed to find an author willing to praise the historical merit of Dan Brown’s work, but there were many differing views as to the cause, affect, and consequences of its popularity. Despite its popular acclaim, it is clear that the *Da Vinci Code* has its detractors as well.

⁶¹ Wikipedia.com

Continuing in that theme, the author of *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*, Darrell L. Bock, concedes that the *Da Vinci Code* is a “very entertaining novel.”⁶² Yet as the title implies, he is not exactly the biggest fan. In explaining the explosion of interest in the *Da Vinci Code*, Bock favors to assign the role to readers’ love of good fiction, exciting conspiracy theories, and alternative ways of seeing historical figures.⁶³ It is also of little doubt that Bock sees the novel as being at least potentially injurious to the faith of people who may read it. He alludes to these fears of deception as he writes, “Knowing the difference between fiction and reality is important, especially when it comes to claims related to God, gender, and the history of faith.”⁶⁴

In *The Real History behind the Da Vinci Code*, Sharan Newman assigns the book’s popularity to humanity’s propensity towards mythology. As she explains, the mythology is especially strong within the *Da Vinci Code* as it contains already well established lore of near history: the Holy Grail, the Knights Templar, and the Crusades.⁶⁵ Her concern on the effects of the book on its readership is that it is human nature to read fiction and come away with factual memories about the things that are said, even if we know these things to be untrue.⁶⁶ Newman however does not seem to be as concerned with issues of faith, but rather setting the record straight from a historical perspective. She describes her work as a “companion” to the *Da Vinci Code*.⁶⁷

Another perspective is provided by Jason Cowley in “The Author of the Best Selling *Da Vinci Code* Has Tapped Into Our Post-9/11 Anxieties and Fear of

⁶² Bock, 2.

⁶³ Ibid., 1.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁶⁵ Sharan Newman, *The Real History Behind the Da Vinci Code*, (New York: Berkley, 2005), ix.

⁶⁶ Ibid., x.

⁶⁷ Ibid., xi.

Fundamentalism.” Cowley describes Brown as a literary opportunist, playing on the fears of people motivated by such secular occurrences as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the growing ideas of a corrupt Catholic Church. This fear of fundamentalism is rooted in the extremist militant religious al-Queda, and paranoia about powerful underground societies pulling the strings behind the scenes.⁶⁸

On the official Dan Brown website, some similar questions are answered by Brown himself.⁶⁹ Answering a question about the popularity of his book, Dan Brown replies that he just wrote on topics of personal interest and that “these same themes obviously resonate with a great many people.” In reference to how his novel affects its readers, Brown seems to hope that it will initiate conversation and thought about faith. He does not appear to be interested in changing anyone’s mind to a specific belief and speaks of controversy over his work. On his website Brown is quoted:

The debate that is being generated is a positive powerful force. The more vigorously we debate these topics, the better our understanding of our own spirituality. Controversy and dialogue are healthy for religion as a whole. Religion has only one true enemy—apathy—and passionate debate is a superb antidote.

As we have seen, there are at least a few different theories as to the success of Dan Brown’s most recent work, but perhaps that is something that one cannot truly answer with any amount of certainty. Speculation can be freely given (which I later intend to do) but in order to establish my own evaluation of the cause, affect, and consequence of the popularity of Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code* I had to gather some sort of unique knowledge of the phenomenon for myself. I thus composed a rather detailed survey, not to discern a quantitative socio-cultural statistic, but rather to enrich and

⁶⁸ Cowley.

⁶⁹ www.danbrown.com

support the reading and speculation on this topic. I have included an example of the survey below:

*1. Have you read Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*? (If yes, answer all the questions. If no, only answer the questions with an asterisk *)

2. How would you rate the quality of the novel as a source of entertainment? Circle one.

Poorly written/Uninteresting										Great Book
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	

3. If you mostly enjoyed the novel, why? If you did not enjoy the novel, why were you turned off?

*4. Before (without) reading the *Da Vinci Code*, how did (do) you think the Gospels of the New Testament were selected?

*5. Before (without) reading the *Da Vinci Code*, how would you describe Constantine's (Emperor of 4th century Rome) role in deciding the divinity of Christ? i.e. Did the idea of Christ's divinity appear before Constantine/Council of Nicea (Nicene Creed) in 325 AD?

*6. Before (without) reading the *Da Vinci Code*, what did (do) you know about the Council of Nicea in 325? What was decided / accomplished there?

*7. Before (without) reading the *Da Vinci Code*, had (have) you ever heard of the Gnostic Gospels? If so, give a brief explanation of what you knew (know).

*8. Before (without) reading the *Da Vinci Code*, did (do) you consider it possible that Jesus was married? Why or why not?

9. After reading the *Da Vinci Code*, how do you think the Gospels of the New Testament were selected?

10. After reading the *Da Vinci Code*, how would you describe Constantine's (Emperor of 4th century Rome) role in deciding the divinity of Christ? i.e. Did the idea of Christ's divinity appear before Constantine/Council of Nicea (Nicene Creed) in 325 AD?

11. After reading the *Da Vinci Code*, what do you think was accomplished or decided at the Council of Nicea in 325?

12. After reading the *Da Vinci Code*, what do you think about the Gnostic Gospels?

13. After reading the *Da Vinci Code*, do you consider it possible that Jesus was married? Why or why not?

*14. What is the relationship of the historical accuracy of the Gnostic Gospels in comparison to the Canonical Gospels of the New Testament; are the Gnostic Gospels...

far less accurate?			equal in accuracy?				far more accurate?		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

*15. In one or two sentences describe your experience or familiarity with the religion of Christianity and its history. (ex. "I am a Christian, raised in the Lutheran Church." "I don't really know much about Christianity." "I study religion as my major and am very familiar with its history.")

*16. To the best of your knowledge, what is the general historical accuracy or merit as a whole of the religious claims found within the *Da Vinci Code*? (Christ's marriage to Mary Magdalene, the selection of the Christian Gospels and the exclusion of other Gospels, Constantine's role in this process, the existence of a bloodline descending from Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and ancient Hebrews worshipping the Sacred Feminine along with Yahweh) Circle one.

Complete Fabrication			Possible, not certain				Historically Accurate		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

17. How, if at all, did the *Da Vinci Code* affect your personal beliefs about religion or history in general? What important lessons does it bring to light? What concerns does it expose? Was its message a welcome message or a troubling one?

*18. For what reasons has the *Da Vinci Code* become such an international hit? What do you think is attractive or intriguing about it? Is it just a controversial and well written thriller, or does it appeal to something more?

I have separated the general results of this survey into two main groups: those who have indeed read the *Da Vinci Code* and those that have not. Each of these groups have been divided into two subgroups: those that had shown some basic knowledge about the historical questions I asked (questions 4-7) and those that did not. I classified those that seemed to have some sort of grasp on at least two of these historical questions as being in the group of having some knowledge. People that knew maybe one or none of the

questions, I classified as not having much knowledge on the subjects prior to reading the novel. Before continuing into what I have presented here as my “results” of this survey, I must reiterate that this was not a formal scientific style of survey; it was used to further my insight into the minds of those people who had perhaps not researched the themes of the *Da Vinci Code* as deeply as I.

I issued 60 copies of this survey to a random selection of willing students passing by in the student union building one weeknight (I also realize that my study is comprised mostly of college students, which lacks the broadness of a more inclusive study, yet I do not believe this renders my information irrelevant). Of the 60 surveys I handed out, 57 were satisfactorily completed. Of these 57, 21 had read the *Da Vinci Code* and 36 had not. Of the 37% of my participants that read the novel, 7 had displayed some sort of previous knowledge about the history behind the book, whereas 14 had not. Of the 36 who had not read the book, 5 displayed some knowledge about the history of the themes contained within the book. These results alone serve to show the popularity of this novel.

When reviewing the results of my survey, I realized that everyone that had read the book answered that they enjoyed the novel as a good read. I knew that many people like the book, but 100% of its readership was at the least, unexpected. They cited reasons such as: “It was exciting,” “great mystery, action novel,” “lots of twists,” “it was an ‘edge of your seat’ book,” and “It kept me hooked!” All these seem like perfectly good book critiques in the traditional sense, but when it came to the issues, however, it becomes a bit more complicated. Many enjoyed the novel as a story, but found the claims to be very disconcerting as one such participant described, “Messed me up, forced me to ask critical questions of my faith that were tough to wrestle with.” Another

student wrote, “I enjoyed it as entertainment, but it claimed too much factual authority.” Some responded that the novel affected them positively because it made them question their beliefs and therefore grow stronger in their faith. Still others described the experience as “opening” their eyes and changing their way of thinking for the better. Whatever the reaction of the reader was, we can now see the impact the *Da Vinci Code* has and continues to make within the ranks of popular culture... but why?

Why so popular?

Why has a novel about art history and the origins of Christianity become so incredibly enthralling to so many people? In answering my questions about the popularity of the *Da Vinci Code*, participants gave me a wide variety of answers. The majority gave rather cursory answers analogous to... Dan Brown had played upon the simple facts that many readers like to entertain mysterious and scandalous notions, especially about important history. Others chose to add further speculation. One student speculates, “It is based upon real history, and this makes the fiction very interesting.”

Everyone loves suspense. Everyone enjoys following clues to unlock mysteries. Suspense and controversy—can the *Da Vinci Code*’s success be attributed to these things alone? I would argue no. These things add excitement and popular appeal to other more deep-rooted attractions of readers to the themes of the *Da Vinci Code*. The fictional elements are the metaphorical cherry atop the sundae of popular intrigue in issues of religious concern. I agree with almost every mode of reasoning above, yet I think the most potent motivator in the growing interest for the novel’s alternative history is rooted in faith-based doubt in traditional views of Christianity.

One way this is manifested is in individuals that feel out of place in the church they grew up in. Perhaps they felt rejected at some point or had a bad experience or maybe their worldview no longer coincides with orthodox belief. Perhaps it is a result of growing distrust in organized religion and the recent sex scandals of the Catholic Church. One survey participant said that the *Da Vinci Code* “perhaps also gave a more tolerant and open picture of Jesus; that always sells.” This immediately reminds me of Cowley’s article on the recent fear of religious fundamentalism, and that the novel presents more liberal view of Christianity. Another reader explained, “I think a lot of people want to prove that ‘the church’ isn’t completely accurate.” I would theorize that these same people who no longer accept the conventional beliefs of their traditional church find the ideas in the *Da Vinci Code* to be different, yet comforting. It is different in that they downplay the importance of the church and claim a new understanding of the life of Jesus. It is comforting because it still teaches the importance of Jesus as a great prophet, and even places him as an earthly king.

The *Da Vinci Code* provides just enough divergence from what they are accustomed to that it affords them to be religious without going back to the establishment that they had become estranged from. They feel that they are privy to the *actual* truth of Christianity, and this *truth* is only reinforced by the feelings of apprehension they previously experienced in their former religious affiliation. Through the *Da Vinci Code* they are lead to feel as though they had *personally* uncovered a secret alongside Robert Langdon. This reaction is described by a survey participant: “I think people enjoy the book because it makes them feel intelligent. They feel that by considering the ideas in the book they are thinking outside the box and going against the accepted ideology.” The

Da Vinci Code creates an illusion that they themselves possess a treasure, a *secret gnosis*, regardless of the fact that millions are taking the very same journey by reading the same story.

This response can be paralleled with the ancient Gnostic movement, in that it seems people still gravitate towards secret truths and personal beliefs. Those who find an appeal in the alternative claims of Christianity in the *Da Vinci Code* can be aligned with the Gnostics of the first centuries, while the authors writing criticism of Brown can take the place of Irenaeus or Tertullian and the other Church fathers, trying to dissuade others from joining the ranks of the “heretics.” Therefore, one can come to the conclusion that perhaps an apt name for the *Da Vinci Code* phenomenon is Neo-Gnosticism. This term accurately encompasses all of the motivations and impulses that push modern individuals towards private beliefs and secret conspiracy theories. Through works like the *Da Vinci Code*, readers can receive a secret knowledge about their faith that is different and sometimes forbidden by orthodox views. Neo-Gnosticism is perhaps perpetuated by the American tendency that religion is a deeply private matter, and should not be discussed publicly. By decentralizing the role of traditional churches in the “true history” of Christianity, the *Da Vinci Code* offers a way for Neo-Gnostics to feel good about having their own personal beliefs which ideally are completely separated from the influence of organized religion.

This Neo-Gnostic theory applies not only those who feel separated from a religious tradition, but to just about anyone who reads the book. One survey participant proposed that the novel may be so popular because it appeals to both Christians and non-Christians alike. I agree with this because a devout Catholic and a self-confessed atheist can just as

easily be drawn into the appeal of Neo-Gnosticism. A Catholic nun for example, may find the ideas of feminine empowerment to resonate deeply with their own concerns about the role of women in church and raise doubts about the Catholic practice of exclusive male priesthood. An atheist may appreciate this “secret gnosis” because it allows one to appreciate the life of Jesus as a great man without the implications of his divinity and the dogmatic beliefs of Christianity. Still, many other practicing and participating Christians may be simply very amused and intrigued by thoughts of secrets within their religion, whether or not it ultimately affects their beliefs or not. One reader seems to agree: “Dan Brown touched on an underlying belief within humanity that maybe there is more going on in Christianity than we can see.”

Just fiction? The affect of the Da Vinci Code

We have seen the popularity and questions raised by the *Da Vinci Code*, but what is the *impact*? Is it as a few survey participants have said, “a work of fiction, I treated it as such”? Or would a more accurate description of the affect be something closer to that of Newman in *The Real History behind the Da Vinci Code*? One reader seems to agree with the later: “Even if someone is completely against the ideas it proposes they are still intrigued by it.” Perhaps one can unwittingly be caressed into accepting fiction as fact when reading a work with such historical implications.

Another way the novel preys upon the weakness of the reader is through the common base of knowledge of the average reader. Some survey answers reflected that reasoning:

I think the book plants seeds of ideas that the average person hasn't thought of before... Also because the ideas are supported with

[seemingly] valid⁷⁰ reasons it makes them seem more likely to be true... It gives light to some subjects that people don't know a lot about.

This aspect of the book became glaringly obvious when reviewing the survey data. Many people that had read the *Da Vinci Code* answered that, prior to reading the book, they knew that the Council of Nicea chose the books of the New Testament. I believe this shows how deeply some ideas can plant themselves in one's mind. Either the novel had changed their conceptions about history, or there is a wide-spread rumor about the Council of Nicea circulating of which I am not aware. According to my survey results, less than 22% of all the participants had displayed any knowledge of the historical themes found within the *Da Vinci Code* prior to reading the novel. With survey answers such as this one by a self-described religion major, it is not difficult to imagine the impressionability of the common reader: "I'm in a class about Martin Luther right now and I've heard it [the Council of Nicea] mentioned, so I know he was there but I'm not clear on what happened."

The Consequence of "Good Fiction"

We have discussed how the *Da Vinci Code* serves as a fresh *gnosis* that fulfills many readers' need for "personal" and heterodox beliefs. A Neo-Gnostic-friendly history such as the one presented by Brown provides an attractive remedy that substitutes a new "secret" knowledge for that of orthodox teachings offered by the establishment. Such issues as feminist empowerment and sexual liberty create a more lenient understanding of the teachings of Christ and combat fears of religious fundamentalism and apprehensions

⁷⁰ I find it important to mention that based upon the responses given by this participant in the rest of the survey, that the participant did not believe the reasons to actually be *valid*, but *seemingly valid* to the reader.

of organized religion. But, does the *Da Vinci Code* promote healthy dialogue about faith or does it foster a menacing distrust of organized religion and even history?

I would argue that the issues raised in the novel are important to discuss and that the process of questioning is as important to spiritual growth as faith itself, but in the instance of the *Da Vinci Code* the misleading information outweighs the stimulation of discussion. I found the novel to be wildly interesting myself, but also troubling in that it so effectively alters the very truth of historical fact with such ease and gloss. Issues of sexuality, feminism, and religious corruption are all important to discuss, but it seems to me that Brown's "altruistic" intentions are only to be dirtied by the dissemination of false historical detail.

What is the *Da Vinci Code* Phenomenon?

In my own experiences while doing research for this writing, I have had a great deal of pertinent conversations about the *Da Vinci Code*. I have heard a wide range of differing views and reactions to the novel. More than one religion major, while taking the survey has conceded to feeling embarrassed at not knowing “anything” about many of the questions. Another religion major seemed confused if not troubled after a recent reading of the *Da Vinci Code*, and was eager to hear what I thought about it. I have experienced people that have loved the novel and people who have said that they have not read it and do not plan to; that “it’s just a bunch of rubbish.” I have even run into one female student who said, “I know it’s not true... but I wish it were!” The impact of the *Da Vinci Code* is evident.

In this work, I have not only attempted to discern fact from fiction but I have also looked at the reasons for the novel’s profound impact upon readers, faith, and society. The term Neo-Gnosticism was developed to help explain and unify the great many reasons that so many people continue to find the *Da Vinci Code* fascinating. Clearly some narrative constructions such as a driving plot contribute to this, but as I have reasoned: there is some greater impetus at work here. Neo-Gnosticism is not a clearly-defined movement in our society; it is an underlying trend moving towards the uncovering of secret truths and away from the traditional teachings of organized religion. This desire for secret gnosis is fueled by: distrust, if not disgust, of orthodoxy; the recent American ideal of religion being a personal/private matter, a reaction against fundamentalist or extremist religious groups, and a belief that there is a definitive,

historical, and yet secretive story of Jesus' life and ministry that differs from what one hears on a Sunday morning.

Still, after all the analysis and discussion regarding the novel's history and impact there may be some who still want to believe in the claims supported by Dan Brown. This further elicits the presence of Neo-Gnosticism in contemporary society. Whatever one ultimately decides in matters of faith, it must be concluded that the *Da Vinci Code* is a work of fiction and should be treated as such to the greatest extent. Brown's historical evidence is faulty at best and even his claims about da Vinci's role in a heretical movement can be easily dissuaded as we look to Leonardo da Vinci's own words: "The man becomes happy who follows Christ."⁷¹

This study is important in contemporary religious study because through my dissection of the "*Da Vinci Code* Phenomenon," I have identified an emerging trend in today's faith-landscape: Neo-Gnosticism. After coming to this conclusion while specifically researching the *Da Vinci Code*, I would like to develop this idea of Neo-Gnosticism further. More involved research of the new Gnostic trend would be endlessly valuable for contemporary theological study of the emerging 21st century, as the desire for secret gnosis is not soon showing any signs of subsiding.

⁷¹ Edward McCurdy, *The mind of Leonardo Da Vinci*, (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1940), 229.

Appendix



Figure a. Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*, from danbrown.com



Figure b. detail of the effeminate John (supposedly Mary Magdalene), danbrown.com



Figure c. detail of "extra" hand with knife, danbrown.com

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