

The Myth of the Da Vinci Code

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Today on Palm Sunday Christians celebrate Jesus's entry into Jerusalem, the day when he brought his revolutionary views to the capital of the Jewish religion. According to the Gospels, after entering Jerusalem, he taught for several days, criticizing the temple priests. Late Thursday night after a Passover meal the authorities arrested him. Friday morning Roman soldiers nailed him to the cross and by mid-afternoon he died.

Jesus is the central figure in the religion of more than one billion people on this earth. Because he is so important to so many people and because the information about him is limited, every generation debates who Jesus was. Over the past year in the United States a new book, *The Da Vinci Code*, by Dan Brown, has stimulated discussion about the identity of Jesus.

I read *The Da Vinci Code* last summer. It is fiction interspersed with facts. Like many readers I had difficulty trying to figure out what was true and what was fictional. Dan Brown's wife is an art historian and his father is a mathematician, so we get details about art and math in the book. Unfortunately not all the art or math details are correct.

The book copies a familiar formula. For example, the hero is a single man who is a professor at a university. Those of you familiar with the Indiana Jones stories remember that Harrison Ford was a professor of archaeology at a Midwestern university. Those of you who have read Tom Clancy's novels remember that Jack Ryan, Clancy's hero, is a faculty member at the Naval Academy in Annapolis. Following this successful formula, *The Da Vinci Code's* hero, Robert Langdon, is a professor of symbols at Harvard University. The fictional character is based on a real person named John Langdon who writes about symbols and art.

These types of stories often have attractive young single females who develop a relationship with our hero. In *The Da Vinci Code* our heroine is a 30-year-old Frenchwoman. An ongoing sexual tension exists between the two throughout the book. Part of the reason I kept reading was to see if the two would finally consummate their relationship.

These types of stories often have a giant evil organization against which our heroes are fighting. For example, in the Indiana Jones stories Harrison Ford fights against the Nazis. Tom Clancy's hero fights against the Communists, or the Irish Republican Army, or a drug cartel in South America. In *the Da Vinci Code* the evil enemy is a subdivision of the Roman Catholic Church called Opus Dei.

Opus Dei is a real, theologically conservative Roman Catholic organization. Founded in Spain in

1928, Opus Dei has been accused of excessive secrecy, of promoting a right-wing political agenda, of aggressive recruiting practices, of the brainwashing of new recruits, and of isolating members from their families. It has 84,000 members in 80 countries.

The problem with selecting a real organization as the evil force in a novel is that the actual real people associated with that organization may not like how they appear in fiction. Italian gangster stories encourage negative stereotypes about Italians. Stories about Nazis encourage negative stereotypes about Germans. The movie "The Passion of the Christ" supports damaging views of Jews. In the same way *The Da Vinci Code's* portrays the Catholic members of Opus Dei as cruel murders dedicated to destroying the truth about Jesus. I agree with Catholics who complain that the book encourages negative stereotypes about Roman Catholics.

WAS JESUS MARRIED TO MARY MAGDALENE?

These thrillers also have what Alfred Hitchcock called a McGuffin. A McGuffin is whatever it is that everybody in the story wants. In the movie *Casablanca* for example, the McGuffin was letters of transit. In Tom Clancy's story *the Hunt for Red October*, the McGuffin was a submarine. In *The Lord of the Rings* the McGuffin was a magical gold ring. In *The Da Vinci Code* the McGuffin it is the Holy Grail, the thing that everyone in the story wants. However, in a plot twist, *The Da Vinci Code* defines the Holy Grail not as the cup used at the Last Supper but as the body of Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene is the Holy Grail, the holy vessel, because, according to the book, she was married to Jesus. After Jesus died, she moved to southern France where she gave birth to Jesus's child, Sarah. According to *The Da Vinci Code* the Catholic Church wants to hide the fact that Jesus was married to preserve male dominance in the Catholic Church. The other disciples did not want anyone to know that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene because they were uncomfortable about human sexuality. They wanted a celibate priesthood made up only of men, who could dominate women and destroy the goddess religions of ancient times.

In this novel a secret society made up of people who knew the truth about Jesus over the past 1000 years has the proof of Jesus's marriage and the bones of Mary Magdalene hidden from the Catholic Church. This secret society wants to preserve the true story of Jesus but, for reasons that are not clear to me, the secret society does not want to tell the world about Jesus and his marriage, except in code. One member of the secret society, according to the book, is Leonardo da Vinci and, again according to the book, he has left code in his paintings that tell us about Jesus's marriage.

So our hero Robert Langdon and his female companion, Sophie, who it turns out is a descendant of Jesus, travel to France and England trying to find the bones of Mary Magdalene before the evil murderous agents of the Roman Catholic Church find the bones first and destroy them thereby hiding the truth about who Jesus was.

Was Jesus really married? An expert in this is Karen King, a history professor at Harvard Divinity School. She has written a book called *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*. She states no text identifying Mary Magdalene and Jesus as husband and wife.

The novel's claim that Jesus and Mary Magdalene married and had a daughter named Sarah is a myth that began in France about 900 years after the birth of Jesus. It makes an interesting story, but no evidence supports it.

Still, Professor King says that Mary was an apostle and she may have played an important role in the development of early Christianity. About half the Gospel of Mary is in a fifth-century papyrus book, written in the Coptic language, that appeared on the Cairo antiquities market in 1896. A German scholar purchased it and it was first published in 1955. Other fragments of the Gospel of Mary, written in Greek, were found in 1945 in Egypt. Professor King estimates that someone wrote the original gospel of Mary between 125 and 175 years after the birth of Jesus.

Karen King says the text does not describe any physical resurrection. Instead the gospel of Mary describes a resurrection of the soul, in which the body is dissolved back into matter or into nothingness. The Gospel argues against a second coming of Christ. It rejects Jesus's suffering and death as a path to eternal life. And in the gospel Jesus says there is no such thing as sin.

The Gospel of Mary gives us one view of theology in the early Christian community, and part of it suggests that the community was supportive of women. However, a passage in the Gospel of Thomas does not support the suggestion that the early church was pro-women. Found in Egypt in 1945, the Thomas Gospel has Jesus saying about Mary "I will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the domain of Heaven." The writer of the Gospel of Thomas is not suggesting a sex change operation, but using male and female to refer to the higher and lower aspects of human nature.

These books as they are discovered are published and poured over by Bible scholars. A grand conspiracy by the Catholic Church to keep the truth about Jesus from us does not exist. No evidence exists that says Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene or that they had a child named Sarah. The documents from the early Christian community suggest that some in the community were pro-women and that others were hostile to women.

THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA

The Da Vinci Code is particularly interesting to Unitarians because one chapter of the book, Chapter 55, gives a description of the Council of Nicaea held in 325 c.e.

Nicaea is in Turkey, and in 325 it was the summer home of the Roman Emperor Constantine. In 325 no central authority existed in the Christian church. Instead each community had a bishop, and the bishops argued about whether Jesus was a human being or God. Constantine called the 250 bishops to Nicaea to end the argument about the nature of Jesus.

The book *The Da Vinci Code* says that until the Council "Jesus was viewed by his followers as a mortal prophet . . . a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless." Professor Richard Rubenstein of George Mason University writes in his book *When Jesus Became God* that popular

opinion was evenly divided. Jesus was viewed by half his followers as a great and powerful human being. The other half thought he was God.

Today what we know about the Council of Nicaea is based on fragmentary comments by a few bishops who attended meetings and on several documents copied and preserved which included the Nicæan creed. The documents do not clearly establish the order of events, but at some point a draft of what was to become the Nicæan Creed was presented. Constantine pronounced it acceptable. After two weeks of discussion the vast majority of bishops were clearly willing to subscribe to the new Creed. According to *The Da Vinci Code* the decision that Jesus was divine was the result of “a relatively close vote.” Actually Professor Dennis Groh in his book *Early-Arianism—A View of Salvation*, reported that when the vote was taken Constantine supported the creed, and knowing that, only seventeen of the 250 bishops had the courage to vote against it. Next Constantine sent court officials to each bishop’s seat with copies of the Creed for them to sign. Everyone signed except two bishops whom the emperor immediately sent into exile.

Of course the debate over the identity of Jesus has continued over the centuries. Today about half a million people in the United States say they are Unitarian. Obviously, Christians who believe that Jesus is God are the overwhelming majority.

Although it has never been a secret, most people do not know the history of the Nicæan Creed. Most of the scholarship on the topic is available only in Seminary libraries. Now in the middle of a fictional mystery, is an imperfect account of how Jesus became God at the Council of Nicaea. Six million people have bought the book and have read a description of a key meeting in the history of Christianity. If the producers include this chapter in next year’s movie version of the book, they will expose millions more to the fact that Constantine and his Bishops decided Jesus was God at the Council of Nicaea in 325.

Some Christians insist that no serious debate about the identity of Jesus ever occurred in 325. An article in the conservative *Christianity Today* says “the first thing you notice when you read the early ‘church fathers’ is that they are completely convinced that Jesus is God himself.” The article listed as the early church fathers only those persons who supported the view that Jesus was God, leaving out those who believed Jesus was a human being. Another article in *Christianity Today* says that “early Christians overwhelmingly worshiped Jesus Christ as their risen Savior and Lord.” This contradicts Professor Rubenstein, who wrote that the division was even between those who thought he was God and those who thought he was human. Rubenstein backs up his claim with many examples of supporters who believed that Jesus was human. The *Christianity Today* article goes on to say that the “United testimony of the apostles . . . have always attested that Jesus Christ was and remains God himself. It didn’t take an ancient council to make this true.”

This view goes against today’s respected Bible scholars. For example, a Baptist, Dr. Norman Perrin of the University of Chicago, wrote in the 1970s:

It is a striking feature of modern historical research that there is general agreement that the Messianic claims put on the lips of Jesus of the gospels are exactly that:

claims put on the lips of the Jesus of the gospels. So far as we can tell, Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God but made no explicit claims for himself.

I am delighted that *The Da Vinci Code* has made people aware of the Council of Nicaea and stimulated more people to reexamine traditional claims about the identity of Jesus. With this one novel Dan Brown has reached more people than any university or seminary course on the Council of Nicaea could hope to do.

However, my feelings about the book are ambivalent. I do not like the book's simplistic, negative portrayal of the Roman Catholic church. Also, I do not like the way Dan Brown filled the book with accurate historical truths placed right along side falsehoods and misleading statements. It is hard to know what to believe. Books are now being published that claim to tell the reader what in the novel is factual and what is not.

Still, I am pleased that because of the book people are interested in finding out more about Christian history. Perhaps they will learn how at the Council Nicaea Jesus became God. Perhaps they will notice that in the gospels Jesus encouraged people to learn how to love each other and that in the Nicene Creed the word love does not appear.

I have always preferred the gospels to any creed. According to Mark's Gospel, when he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus did not say "I am God, worship me." Instead when someone asked him "of all the commandments, which is the most important," Jesus said:

"First love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your energy. Second, love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these." This message of love is the message that speaks to me on Palm Sunday.