

## **Everybody Loves a Conspiracy: Dan Brown's *DaVinci Code***

**By**

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Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code* has become a runaway bestseller. His novel (and I stress the book is a *novel*) is a clever, well-orchestrated thriller; his formula is straightforward:

- sex (e.g., the alleged life-affirming sacred marriage [*hieros gamos*] of some ancient fertility cults, and the alleged marriage between Mary Magdalene and Jesus Christ);
- sensationalism (e.g., a spectacular murder in the heart of the Louvre);
- feminism (e.g., the alleged denigration of Mary Magdalene and the suppression of the eternal feminine to assure male dominance);
- anti-Catholicism (e.g., the demonization of *Opus Dei*, the involvement of the nefarious Vatican in every sort of historical mischief, including the destruction of the Knights Templar, and the burning of witches);
- the context of the occult (e.g., the Priory of Sion as the faithful guardians of secrets that could completely overthrow historical Christianity, and the secret celebration of the sacred marriage in torchlight by masked participants) .

As one of Brown's characters says: "Everyone loves a conspiracy." Another character says, "Misunderstanding breeds distrust." It is in the bowl of conspiracy and misunderstanding that Brown mixes the elements of his novel: The twelve apostles, led by Peter, and then the Vatican, aided and abetted by

the Emperor Constantine conspired to suppress the true origins of Christianity--- specifically the marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene and, after their deaths (there being no resurrection) their “sacred” bloodline---all in order to maintain male dominance of the Christian movement.

Emperor Constantine insured the continuance of this fraud by officially declaring Jesus “divine,” thereby discrediting his marriage. The apostles had already taken care of Mary Magdalene by marginalizing her as a prostitute; she could not possibly be the symbol and carrier of the “eternal feminine,” which the apostles were determined to suppress, since it would completely subvert their authority.

Dan Brown builds his fantasy on some documents called the “Gnostic Gospels.” These are, in fact, real documents, which Brown reads through the filter of some selected elements of the “Grail Legend,” elements well attested in Grail-lore. The vast majority of the “Gnostic Gospels,” including the *Gospel of Mary (Magdalene)*, were written in the course of the second and early third centuries. Some of these were simply devotional literature of the kind we have today. Some of them, in fact the ones that Brown cites, were produced by Gnostic groups, claiming to have some secret knowledge, that would reverse/replace the selection of writings that are part of what we call the “Canon” of the New Testament.

What about the Gnostic *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* and Dan Brown’s theme

of Mary Magdalene as the symbol of the “eternal feminine,” in fact, the goddess, the source of all life? The word, *gnosticism*, built up from the Greek word, *gnosis* (knowledge) is a catch-all kind of word. It is used to describe a large number of esoteric groups claiming to possess a secret knowledge into the true state of reality. Some of these groups pre-date Christianity and were present within pagan cults; some were present within Judaism; some were present within various Christian communities; some were independent. The adherents of these groups are called “gnostics,” that is, “knowing ones.” What ties these diverse groups together is a common belief in what is called an “ontological dualism.” This means that the whole cosmos is composed of two irreconcilable principles, spirit/light and darkness/matter. These two principles are in eternal opposition and combat with one another.

This might make more sense if I give a brief summary of the major differences between Gnosticism and Christianity. Gnosticism was deeply scandalized by humanity. Our bodies, the gnostics maintained, were the creation of the evil god, imprisoning a divine spark which could only be freed by secret knowledge. A gnostic would never allow that the “God of Light” would ever involve himself in any materiality whatsoever. In the form of Gnosticism infecting Christianity, the gnostics maintained that in Jesus, God only *seemed* to become a human being, but, in fact, did not.

Christianity, on the other hand, proclaims a true incarnation of the Son of God; the Son becomes a full human being. His human, moral act of redemption

is also a divine gift and an historical action, objectively establishing redemption.

The attitude of Gnosticism towards history is indifferent or hostile, neither hopeful nor confident in history as a means or carrier of salvation and revelation. For Christianity, it is just the opposite; God's purpose and His incarnate life have entered human history.

This difference is crucial. This is why it was possible for the Gnostics to write new "gospels"; in no way did they find themselves bound by what may or may not have happened to Jesus while He was on earth. Mary Magdalene could become Jesus' wife; the rest of the New Testament could be dismissed as essentially false. What actually happened when Jesus was on earth, if He ever was, was simply irrelevant. Since the evil powers would distort the real truth, it must be kept secret and only shared with those who were initiated into the privileged circle.

It should also be mentioned that any honest reading of the "Gnostic Gospels" should give pause to anyone who thinks they support the cause of contemporary feminism. Dan Brown makes much of the *Gospel of Mary (Magdalene)*. In the *Gospel of Mary (Magdalene)*, an early 3rd century document written in Greek, Mary Magdalene says this of Jesus: "Let us praise his greatness, for he has made us ready, and made us to be males" (p. 342).

The word used here is *andres*, "males," not *anthropoi*, "men," in the sense of "human beings."

So, too, the so-called *Gospel of Thomas*, which Dan Brown also mentions as one of the suppressed secret documents:

“Simon Peter said to them: ‘Let Mary (Magdalene) go out from among us, because women are not worthy of the Life.’ Jesus said: ‘See, I shall lead her, so that I will make her male, that she too may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who makes herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven’” (Logion 114).

The assumption by women of various leadership roles in some Gnostic groups was to assist and further this process of becoming male. Remember, Gnosticism is scandalized by our humanity. According to the Gnostics, the New Testament fact that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully a human being simply cannot be true. God would never become so involved with human beings. (It might be worth noticing that contemporary, *secular* feminism is deeply *Gnostic*. The common political badge of “liberation” is the capacity to kill one’s unborn child, an implicit and explicit denial of motherhood, both potential and actual. Too many secular feminists are deeply scandalized by the “humanity” of motherhood, and so it is systematically devalued and denied. In its place is celebrated women’s access to the traditional *male* structures of power and accomplishment.) Anyone interested in an authentic Christian feminism will find no support in the “Gnostic Gospels”; the only secure, truly historical foundation is the New Testament as we have always known it.

Something very curious is going on here. For the last 150 years, skeptics have been denying the historical reliability of the New Testament. Today, the “Gnostic Gospels,” all of which were written after the New Testament and were never taken as historical documents even by the Gnostics themselves, are treated as if, at last, we are being given the true picture of the early Church. Dan Brown’s novel, grounded in Gnostic stories and fragments of the Grail Legend, clearly has had an impact among many Christians. I have actually heard otherwise sensible Christian people say they never realized that Brown’s story is the true story. I am not sure that those who think this way realize what is being asked of them. Dan Brown’s novel claims that Christianity has been a cynical and deliberate fraud right from the very beginning; the true story of Jesus was suppressed; and only now, is the truth being told. In actual fact, the book has as much connection to Jesus of Nazareth and early Christian origins as does “Raiders of the Lost Ark” to Old Testament archeology, or “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade” to Medieval studies---in fact, less.

According to Dan Brown’s novel, the Church marginalized Mary Magdalene by declaring her a prostitute, because admitting that she was Jesus’ wife would destroy the foundations of the Christian faith. In fact, the early Church called Mary Magdalene “the Apostle to the Apostles”; she was the one who brought the others the good news of the Lord’s resurrection. In the 7th century, Pope Gregory the Great conflated the stories of four women: Mary Magdalene, the woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee, Mary the sister of Lazarus, and Mary of Egypt (who was, in fact, a repentant prostitute, and who became a

veritable “icon” of repentance for both men and women in early Christian monasticism). This mistake is actually rather easy to make. Pope Gregory’s reason was not to discredit Mary Magdalene; it was to offer women, who were in fact prostitutes, a hope that they were not outside the reach of God’s love. Contemporary biblical scholarship has been able to “un-sort” this ancient conflation.

Another point that can be mentioned here. The New Testament teaches that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully a human being (a fact reaffirmed at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, in the face of those who tried to deny the Lord’s full humanity). Although we have no evidence at all, just suppose, for the sake of argument, that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene. How would it undermine the foundations of the Christian faith if He was? Only someone deeply scandalized by his/her own humanity would have trouble with someone fully divine and fully human being married. Marriage, after all, is a sacrament---an explicit sign of Christ’s closeness to us. This means in every sacramental marriage, Christ is there at the heart of things. If, in fact, the incarnate Son of God were married, why would a sacramental Church try to keep it a secret?

And again, if Jesus were not fully divine, why would we pay any attention to him in the first place? All he would be is some obscure married rabbi, with no particular or compelling claim on our attention. In fact, he would probably be long since lost to history.

As a Catholic Christian, I find Dan Brown's portrayal of the Church's alleged suppression of the "eternal feminine" (primarily, he says, by marginalizing Mary Magdalene as a prostitute) to be absurd. It is precisely Catholicism and Orthodoxy that placed the "eternal feminine" next to the heart of our faith. Catholics cannot understand themselves apart from Mary of Nazareth, the Mother of Jesus Christ. Listen to this:

God, then, is the Father of the created world, and Mary the mother of the re-created world. God is the Father by whom all things were given life, and Mary the mother through whom all things were given new life. For God begot the Son, through whom all things were made, and Mary gave birth to him as the Savior of the world. Without God's Son, nothing could exist; without Mary's Son, nothing could be redeemed.

Truly the Lord is with you, Mary, to whom the Lord granted that all nature should owe as much to you as to himself (St. Anselm, *Oratio*, 52).

The quotation is from a prayer of St. Anselm, read across the Catholic world on Dec. 8th, the feast of Mary's Immaculate Conception. There are literally tens of thousands of such texts written throughout the long history of the Catholic Church---a church alleged to have suppressed the "eternal feminine."

Finally, what is that makes this novel so popular right now, especially among women? Whether Dan Brown sincerely hates Christianity (and the Catholic Church in particular), and is engaged in a kind of "anti-crusade," as some allege, is a question I'll set to the side. I can see why some allege this is so, but I honestly don't know his true intentions. What I think Dan Brown has done, despite all his Gnostic flim-flam and distortion of the Grail Legend, is portray an intimate relationship between Jesus Christ and a woman; and I think

that portrait has struck a deeply affective chord in the lives of many women.

In the years after the Second Vatican Council, despite so many wonderful and lasting accomplishments, I think in many places we failed to hand on the faith by poor catechesis and the neglect of on-going education. Many people simply don't know even the rudiments of our history. In certain places, churches were stripped of statues and stained glass, symbols that are themselves catechetical. The cult of Mary and the saints was downplayed and diminished; in many places, devotional life all but disappeared. The net effect of this appears, in too many places, to be an *affective* vacuum. It becomes increasingly difficult for people to *imagine* a real, affective relationship with Jesus Christ.

In what we know of religious psychology, it is not unfair to say that our present-day liturgy is deeply masculine; so, too, is the new catechism. It is also true that an affective vacuum hurts men and well as women; but I suspect that women will notice it first, especially on the level of their own religious and affective response. I wonder whether the popularity of Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code* and its portrait of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, especially among so many women, is not a clear signal (and warning), arising from their religious and affective response, for us Catholics to tap more deeply into our own great Tradition and recover more of the rich beauty of its affective resources.

Nevertheless, an authentic response is not going to be found in old documents from esoteric groups deeply scandalized by the human condition to

the point of wanting literally to turn women into men. (By the way, as Cardinal George recently observed: “Interestingly, much of the antagonism toward the Church today stems from opposition to her teachings about sexuality, marriage and celibacy, and the nature of ordained priesthood, all beliefs that take flesh seriously” [*Catholic New World*, Dec. 7, 2003].) The authentic response is only going to be found among those who believe in the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ, born in time of Mary of Nazareth, and present to us still, not just in words and documents, but in liturgy and sacrament and at the very heart of each of our lives.

Fr. Hennessey offered this Appendix to clarify in more detail certain terms:

1.     **Canonicity:** The canonical writings are those the churches across the Christian world agreed were rooted in the apostolic experience of earliest Christianity and bore authentic, historical witness to the Christ event. The process that led to this selection was not secret; in fact, it was quite open. Never did the early Church place credence in any alleged secret “tradition” that was unknown to everyone else. There were simply too many eyewitnesses of the events to be able to perpetrate such a fraud. The New Testament, in the form that we know it, was pretty much in place by the turn of the first century (100 AD).
  
2.     To allege that the Gnostic documents were destroyed by order of the Emperor Constantine after the Council of Nicaea in 325 is a fiction. The Gnosticism that produced the *Gospel of Mary (Magdalene)* had already run its course long before Constantine became sole emperor in 324.
  
3.     The “Discovery” of the Gnostic Texts by the Priory of Sion: Another fiction is the idea that these texts were preserved and kept secret by a secret society called the Priory of Sion---a group said in the novel to have discovered them in the foundations of Herod’s temple during the Crusader occupation of Jerusalem. The substance of these texts have been known throughout the history of

Christianity. Every one of them has been published in a scholarly edition and translated into the major European languages. My own English translation of this body of documents was published in 1965.

4. The Priory of Sion and the Knights Templar: As for the “Priory of Sion,” Dan Brown provides an alleged “fact” sheet, immediately preceding his novel. The only “fact” in what he says about this group is that it “is a real organization.”

This organization was first registered with the French government in 1952, as a fraternal organization. It was not founded in 1099; it is not the same thing as the Knights Templar. The Knights Templar were founded c. 1119 for the protection of pilgrims traveling to the Holy Land. Their Rule was apparently written by St. Bernard of Clairvaux. They were attacked, not by Pope Clement V, but by the French king, Philip the Fair, who coveted their great wealth for his foreign adventures, including his war against Pope Boniface VIII. In 1312, King Philip coerced Clement to suppress the order as a canonical entity; he did so without judging or condemning the order. Clement was a Frenchman, living in France in the county of Comtat, which belonged to the papacy. The Pope never ordered the execution of any Templar.