

UN-CODING ESUS CHRIST

Published by the *Istitut ta' Formazzjoni Pastorali*
pfi@maltachurch.org.mt

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PREFACE

The Church recognizes that the release of the film *The Da Vinci Code* is a golden opportunity for it to enter into dialogue and deal with important questions relating to its message. For, both the book and the film do raise questions which deserve serious reflection.

Hence, in a spirit of dialogue and service, and through the *Istitut ta' Formazzjoni Pastorali* (IFP), the Church in Malta is offering this manual. It is an attempt to go beyond the often fictitious answers given by Dan Brown's work. It deals with such questions as the meaning of Leonardo's paintings, the development of the New Testament writings, the varieties of interpretations of Jesus in the early centuries of the Church, the place of Mary Magdalene and the feminine in the Church, and the relation of the Knights Templar to the Holy See.

This manual has been prepared by the *Istitut ta' Formazzjoni Pastorali* with the material support of the *Kummissjoni Djoċesana Żgħażaġħ* (KDŽ). We hope that it will lead you to reflect more deeply on God's initiative of infinite mercy reaching out to humankind.

WHAT IS *THE DA VINCI CODE*?

The Da Vinci Code is a work of fiction written by Dan Brown. It was published by Doubleday in March 2003 and sold millions of copies. *The Da Vinci Code* has created a marketing boom for books related to the novel, and it has become the subject of a major motion picture which will premiere on the 17th May at the Cannes Film Festival before being released world-wide on the 19th May 2006.

Brown's novel has caused such a stir because it hurts the religious sentiments of Christians in a clever way. It casts doubt on fundamental tenets that Christians hold dear, such as, the origins of the New Testament and the divinity of the man Jesus Christ. What is surprising about all this *The Da Vinci Code* hype is that Dan Brown boldly labels as "fact" what has been so totally refuted by the evidence and by clear-headed scholars. When a fan of *The Da Vinci Code* is confronted with the sheer quantity of historical mistakes and illogical conclusions, he or she will reply that it is a matter of opinion or a matter of personal belief. What is even more surprising is that our culture is so ill-equipped so as not to be able to discern fact from fiction. It is misinformed about Christianity, sadly ignorant of history, and clueless about the New Testament – its source, composition, preservation, and translation.

The story commences with the murder of the Louvre's curator in the museum. This curator is also the Grand Master of a secret society, known as the Priory of Sion, which guards an ancient secret. If this secret were to be revealed, biblical Christianity would be undermined and consequently the authority of the Church would be shaken. Before dying, the curator attempts to pass on the secret to his granddaughter Sophie, a cryptographer, and to the Harvard

professor Robert Langdon, by leaving a number of clues that he hopes will guide them to the truth.

Basically this secret involves the location, and true identity, of the much-sought-after Holy Grail. However in Brown's novel, the Grail is not the cup supposedly used by Christ at the Last Supper. Rather, it is the person of Mary Magdalene. She would be the wife of Jesus, who carried on the royal bloodline of Christ by giving birth to His child! The mission of the Priory of Sion is to guard the secret location of Mary's tomb and protect the bloodline of Jesus up to this very day!

The ability of Brown lies in his way of making the novel's theories about Jesus and the early history of Christianity appear credible. The theories are promoted by the novel's most educated characters: a British royal historian, Leigh Teabing, and a Harvard professor of Religious Symbology, Robert Langdon. When put in the mouths of these characters, the unsuspecting reader comes away with the impression that the theories are actually true. But they are false!

Important points to remember:

- *Historical fact is not a matter of opinion or belief. Fiction is not history!*
- *What is surprising about all this The Da Vinci Code hype is that Dan Brown is boldly labelling "fact" what has been so totally refuted by the evidence and clear-headed scholars. What is even more surprising is that our culture is so ill-equipped so as not to be able to discern fact from fiction.*

WHO WAS LEONARDO DA VINCI?

Leonardo di ser Piero da Vinci, meaning “Leonardo, son of [Mes]ser Piero from Vinci”, was one of the greatest minds of the Renaissance. He was born at Vinci near Florence in 1452 and died at Cloux, France in 1519. Leonardo is famous for his paintings, such as the Mona Lisa and The Last Supper as well as for drawings such as the Vitruvian Man. He conceived of ideas vastly ahead of his time, such as the helicopter and the use of solar power.

Dan Brown has made astonishing claims about Leonardo and Renaissance art that are an obvious contradiction with what is so evident about the life and works of Leonardo. Brown’s false suppositions become a springboard from which he leaps to the conclusion that the painter had “contempt for the Church.” This premise then becomes the basis of Brown’s further fanciful artistic interpretations.

The Da Vinci Code ignores Leonardo da Vinci’s evident personal commitment when working for ecclesiastical patrons and painting Christian subjects. By dismissing the Christian nature of some of Leonardo’s work, Brown reinterprets the images, inserting them into a tale of his own making.

The erroneous allegations Dan Brown makes about Leonardo are so numerous that it is difficult to decide where to start. He says that Leonardo was a member of a secret society called the Priory of Sion – whose existence only commenced in 1956! Dan Brown also makes the claim that Leonardo had “hundreds of lucrative Vatican commissions.” In fact he had only one, which he never completed (this was a painting of *St John the Baptist* [1513-16]). These examples may suffice to indicate the free rein that Dan Brown allows his fancy while pretending to report historical facts.

Leonardo's works and writings certainly show that he held deep sympathy with the Neo-Platonist forms of thought emerging during his lifetime and that he had a tendency towards mystical interpretations and, especially towards the end of his life, he was obsessed by visions of the end of the world through a massive purifying flood.

Nevertheless his intellectual belief in the basic dogmas of Christianity, such as the belief in the person of Christ as Son of God and the new Adam, can scarcely be doubted and, in fact, has not been generally doubted by the large number of scholars who have studied his works both visual and literary.

Some important points to remember:

- *The Da Vinci Code ignores Leonardo da Vinci's evident personal commitment when working for ecclesiastical patrons and painting Christian subjects.*
- *Leonardo's intellectual belief in the basic dogmas of Christianity, such as the belief in the person of Christ as Son of God and the new Adam, can scarcely be doubted.*

WHAT ABOUT *THE MONA LISA*?

The usual account given by art historians of *The Mona Lisa*, commissioned by Francesco del Giocondo and perhaps the one painting about which the most ink has been spilt, runs along the following broad lines:

The art of portraiture flourished with the rise of Florence. During that time princes commissioned their images similar to the imperial coins of ancient Rome. However, the wealthy Florentine bourgeois wanted more realistic-looking portrayals and the Renaissance artists responded by turning the figure three-quarters towards the viewer. They also included the hands and some landscape in order to provide insight into the sitter's personality. Thus Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* expresses the painter's attempt to reveal the character of the model as well as her likeness. Leonardo uses the *sfumato* technique (by blurring the corners of the eyes and mouth), in order to render her expression mobile and mysterious. He painted the panel dark in order to draw out the light where he chose to. Moreover, the somewhat androgynous look would have seemed quite natural in those days because of the fifteenth-century style among women: they shaved their hairlines back and plucked out their eyebrows so as to achieve a highbrowed intellectual look.

Brown overlooks all these accounts given by art historians and chooses an esoteric explanation like for example the male/female principle! For Brown the *Mona Lisa* is actually a self-portrait by Leonardo as a woman and its androgyny reflects the union of male and female which is implied in the holy union of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. While Leonardo certainly entertained androgyny as an ideal, sexual union is the very opposite of Leonardo's ideal, and certainly not the way in which he thought the ideal was to be achieved. According to Brown, the name *Mona Lisa* is actually an

anagram for “Amon L’Isa”, referring to the father and mother gods of Ancient Egypt (Amon and Isis).

However such a hypothesis was entirely unknown even in the most experimental intellectual circles of the Renaissance. Also, while there might be elements of self-projection in the portrait – also known as *La Gioconda* – the painting certainly does not represent Leonardo dressed as a woman, as Brown asserts.

An important point to remember:

- *The slightly androgynous look of the Mona Lisa would have seemed natural to fifteenth-century society since women used to shave their hairlines back and pluck out their eyebrows so as to achieve a highbrowed intellectual look.*

WHAT CAN YOU SAY ABOUT LEONARDO'S *THE LAST SUPPER?*

The Last Supper is perhaps the most famous of Leonardo's masterpieces. In it, Leonardo chooses to depict, not the institution of the Eucharist – and this helps explain the absence of a chalice –, but rather the scene of the betrayal of Judas: Jesus is announcing, “One of you will betray me” (Mt 26,21; Mk 14,18; Jn 13,21). Leonardo magnificently captures this most dramatic moment of the Last Supper. Just like a stone dropped in still water, this announcement sends shock waves around the table.

The work is structured so that there is a very clear convergence of lines on the face of Jesus which is, moreover, framed within a window from which light streams. The apostles are very visibly placed in groups of three. The four groups correspond to the four types of human being into which both the ancient Greeks and Romans, and the Mediaeval and Renaissance thinkers thought humanity was divided, namely the melancholic, choleric, phlegmatic and sanguine temperaments. It was thought that this categorization of human dispositions corresponded to the predominant element within the physical constitution of each individual – it was held that a preponderance of black bile produced a melancholic constitution, one of yellow bile shaped a choleric character, a predominance of phlegm meant a phlegmatic disposition, and a prevalence of blood led to one's having a sanguine character. Within each apostolic group the maximum and minimum corresponding to each temperament are shown in the two figures on either side of the central figure, who represents the mean.

The four types are synthesised in the face of Christ. Jesus' face is expressionless, indicating that he transcends all differences in

temperament: he is the second Adam. In this masterpiece, Leonardo was depicting Christ's constitution of the mystical body in which he would continue to be present after the Resurrection. Leonardo is attempting to show Jesus as forming the unity of humanity that had been sundered by sin.

At the same time, Leonardo highlights a terrible paradox: at the very moment that Christ is projecting the most sublime communion between human beings in love, this unity is being rejected by a member of humanity. It is this, above all, that gives the impression of tension among the apostles, which is strangely combined with the peace that rests on the face of Christ.

This painting was never meant to focus on anyone but Christ. Jesus' face was Leonardo's greatest exercise in sfumato, and he left it undefined, feeling unworthy to represent the Saviour, while wanting to point out that Christ transcends all differences among human beings. Jesus' eyes are downcast because he is meditating the terrible trials to come. With one hand he reaches for the bread that he will share with his betrayer, and the other he extends open in acceptance of the Father's will.

Dan Brown's analysis completely ignores all this and he badly reinterprets this masterpiece of art. One rather obvious mistake arises from Brown's theory that the figure of the Apostle John is really that of Mary Magdalene. Even if one were to concede this assertion for a moment, there immediately arises a problem. *The Last Supper* depicts thirteen people. So if Mary Magdalene is supposed to be at Jesus' right hand that leaves only 11 Apostles. The only Apostle who eventually left was Judas and yet Judas is clearly pictured in Leonardo's painting: the scene portrayed involves Judas himself asking: "Surely not I, Rabbi?" (Mt 26,25). A Dan

Brown fan may argue that depicting 14 people (the 12 apostles including Judas, plus Jesus, plus Mary Magdalene) would surely have aroused suspicion. However, Leonardo could simply have avoided this problem by capturing a different scene of the last supper when Judas was not there.

This brings us to the most fantastic claim that Brown makes about Leonardo's soft-featured, beardless depiction of John: he maintains that we are dealing with a woman. Once again this conjecture merely shows Brown's lack of familiarity with "types" in the artistic conventions of the day. Perhaps Brown does not know of the existence of the *Treatise on Painting* where Leonardo himself explains that each figure should be painted according to his age and station. A wise man has certain characteristics, a young man others, and woman and children others still. Now, a classic type, very common to Renaissance paintings, is that of the "student." A favoured follower, or disciple, is always portrayed as very youthful, handsome, long-haired and clean-shaven lacking the hard, determined physiognomy of more weathered men. This is done in order to show that he has not yet matured to the point where he will question his teacher. Throughout the Renaissance, artists habitually portray St John in this manner because John is the trusting student who reclines next to Jesus (Jn 13,23). A comparison with the *Last Supper* of Andrea del Castagno and Ghirlandaio shows a John who is similarly soft-featured, handsome and young.

Some important points to remember:

- *Leonardo meant to depict Christ as gathering humanity into his mystical body, while suffering betrayal.*
- *The Apostle John is depicted as a young, handsome, long-haired youth because of the artistic style of the time and not because Leonardo intended to paint a woman.*

DO THE SACRED SCRIPTURES HAVE A SUPERNATURAL ORIGIN?

In *The Da Vinci Code*, we find Teabing arguing that: "...the Bible did not arrive by fax from heaven... The Bible is the product of man, my dear. Not of God. The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds. Man created it as a historical record of tumultuous times, and it has evolved through countless translations, additions, and revisions. History has never had a definitive version of the book."

This statement shows that Dan Brown does not understand much about the concept of biblical inspiration and formation. The Catholic Church never claimed that Sacred Scripture dropped out of the clouds or fell like a meteorite from the heavens. Why? Simply because the Word of God is not forced upon the human person – the human being is not a robot. The Church has always taught that the Sacred Scriptures were written by human beings under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit where such persons were free to accept or reject these promptings of the Spirit in their hearts. Thus, the Bible is indeed God's Word in human language. Therefore, ironically Brown's statement reveals that he, perhaps unknowingly, is very pessimistic about one's capability of freely opening oneself to God in a loving relationship.

A comparison to how non-Christian religions revere their sacred writings may help us to understand this point better. In the Muslim understanding, the Qu'ran comes directly from God, in unmediated fashion. Muhammad simply wrote down God's eternal and immutable words as they were *dictated* to him by the Archangel Gabriel. Muslims believe that the Qu'ran cannot be changed and that, to make the Qu'ran the subject of critical

analysis and reflection, is either to assert human authority over divine revelation (a blasphemy), or to question its divine character. In a similar way Hindu tradition regards the Vedas as uncreated, eternal and being revealed to sages.

The Bible, in contrast, is a product of human co-operation with divine inspiration. It arises from the encounter between God and human beings, an encounter characterised by reciprocity which, in Christianity, is underscored by a Trinitarian understanding of God (an understanding the majority of Muslims regard as polytheistic). This gives Christianity a logic or dynamic which not only favours the development of doctrine within strict limits, but also summons Christians to carry out critical analyses and to embark on judicious applications of Christian principles within diverse circumstances. It also requires a teaching authority.

Some important points to remember:

- *The Church never said that Sacred Scripture “fell from the clouds” because it does not believe in esoteric magic or that the human being is a robot.*
- *The concept of inspiration in the making of Sacred Scripture respects the freedom of the human person to accept or reject God’s loving interventions in history, thus making it Salvation History.*

CAN WE TRUST THE CHURCH'S TRANSMISSION OF SACRED SCRIPTURE DOWN THE AGES?

As we have seen above, Dan Brown apparently dismisses the supernatural origin of Christian Sacred Scriptures simply because “The Bible is the product of man”. The next step is to show how the Catholic Church allegedly tampered with, and corrupted scripture thereby losing the original message of Jesus. Dan Brown puts these words on the lips of the fictional historian of *The Da Vinci Code*: “Almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is *false*”. Hence, for the character Teabing, the earliest biographies of Jesus, the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, would be unreliable. It is all a grand conspiracy of mainstream Christianity that tampered with the gospels to twist their original meaning.

Again Brown shows his misunderstanding, not only of the concept of inspiration but also of the bonds between the Church, Sacred Scripture, and consequently belief in Jesus Christ. Without the believing Christian community that gathered to worship and that believed in the oral and written testimonies of the Apostles, the transmission of the New Testament down the ages would not have been possible! One cannot revere the Sacred Scriptures and simultaneously distrust the Church. The Bible is also the fruit of believing communities.

Christians believe that Sacred Scripture is the truth of God expressed in human writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit. The Word of God was entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit. It is transmitted to the successors of the apostles so that, enlightened by the Spirit of truth, they might faithfully preserve and spread it through their preaching. As a result, the

believing community does not derive its certainty about all revealed truths from the Holy Scriptures alone. Believers accept Scripture also because they trust the Church!

The science of textual criticism and the analysis of the literary genres of the New Testament help a lot. Biblical scholars would show us that each of these gospels was written in the first century. As Jews, the first Christians held in reverence “the Law and the Prophets” (the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament) as God’s inspired word. The Christian Gospel was first transmitted orally. Gradually, the events of Jesus’ life and his saving deeds and words were written down. Some of these writings, such as the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and the letters of St. Paul, received the same reverence as the Hebrew Scriptures and became part of Christian worship at a very early date after the actual events.

Nearly all New Testament writings were composed during the first century, when the memory of Christ was recent and fresh. The events recorded in these gospels are based on either direct or indirect eyewitness testimony. Over time, the bishops of the early Church identified 27 books as canonical, that is, as belonging in the list of books considered to be inspired by the Holy Spirit and, hence, to be God’s own word. The development of the New Testament canon i.e., the list of Books accepted as inspired by the Community/Church, was a Spirit-guided process, as shown by the fact that not every ancient document was accepted as inspired. For example, the *Protoevangelium of James* is the source of the feast of the Presentation of Our Lady in the Temple. Nevertheless it was not accepted as God’s inspired word.

The early Church had very definite criteria that had to be met for a book to be included in the New Testament. A book had to be ancient and written close to the time of Jesus. It had to be written

either by an apostle, or a companion or community of an apostle. It had to be consistent with the orthodox understanding of the faith. And it had to be widely recognized and accepted by the church, especially through its wide use in the liturgical celebrations. Books that did not meet these criteria were not included in the New Testament.

The disciplines of history and archaeology are also of great help in corroborating the general reliability of the gospel writers. Where these authors mention people, places and events that can be checked against other ancient sources, they are consistently shown to be quite reliable. Thus, we have good grounds for trusting the New Testament gospels. Faith, trust and reason do not contradict one another. Through his novel Dan Brown invites to mistrust and not have faith in the Catholic Church's claim of being the reliable source about the historical Jesus. But what does Dan Brown propose instead? Brown proposes that his reader trust the Gnostic sectarian Gospels to learn the truth (as he defines it) about Jesus.

Some important points to remember:

- *The early Church had very definite criteria that had to be met for a book to be included in the New Testament. A book had to be ancient and written close to the time of Jesus.*
- *The disciplines of history, archaeology, palaeography and textual criticism are of great help in corroborating the reliability of the gospel writers.*

DID EMPEROR CONSTANTINE THE GREAT MEDDLE IN THE FORMATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT?

In the early centuries of Christianity, many different books circulated about the teachings of Jesus and his apostles. Most of these books never made it into the New Testament. These include such titles as *The Gospel of Philip*, *The Acts of John*, *Third Corinthians*, and *The Apocalypse of Peter*. How did the early Church decide which books to include in the New Testament and which to reject? When were these decisions made, and by whom? According to the fictional historian Teabing, “The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by . . . Constantine the Great”. Sadly, he is wrong.

There was a rather rapidly growing consensus among the Church that the Canon should include the four gospels, Acts, the thirteen Pauline epistles, epistles by other apostolic men and the Revelation of John. For example, the Muratorian Canon, which dates toward the end of the second century, recognized every New Testament book except the Letter to the Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, and 3 John. Similar, though not identical, books were recognized by Irenaeus in the late second century and Origen in the early third century. Thus, while the earliest listing of all the books in our New Testament comes from Athanasius in 367 AD, there was widespread agreement on most of these books (including the four gospels) by the end of the second century. The New Testament Canon was not the product of a decision by Constantine, who flourished in the fourth century.

Dan Brown ignores theology, reason and logic and argues that the sole motive behind the selection of the New Testament books was power politics. Thus he invents the story about Constantine’s

embellishment of Scripture and therefore sows mistrust in the version of the New Testament as handed to us by the Church. Leigh Teabing, the fictional historian in *The Da Vinci Code*, suggests that the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, which were later to be officially recognized as part of the New Testament Canon were intentionally altered and embellished in the fourth century at the command of Emperor Constantine. At one point he states, “Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ’s *human* traits and embellished those gospels that made him godlike”.

Constantine did indeed order the preparation of “fifty copies of the sacred Scriptures.” and this is found in a letter to Eusebius, a Church historian of the time. But nowhere in the letter does the Emperor order that any of the gospels be embellished with the aim of making Jesus appear more godlike. Even if he had, it would have been virtually impossible to get faithful Christians to accept such accounts. Before the reign of Constantine, Christians had faced fierce persecution under Emperor Diocletian. It’s difficult to believe that the same Christians that had withstood such persecutions would suddenly abandon their cherished gospels and embrace embellished accounts of Jesus’ life! Furthermore, it’s quite certain that had Constantine tried such a thing, we would have plenty of evidence for it in the writings of the Church fathers. But such evidence is completely lacking. Not one of them mentions an attempt by Constantine to alter any of our gospels. And finally, to claim that the leaders of the fourth century Church, many of whom had suffered persecution for their faith in Christ, would agree to join Constantine in a grand conspiracy of this kind is completely unrealistic.

Perhaps the most obvious argument against this invention is that we have copies of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John that are

significantly earlier than Constantine and the Council of Nicaea (or Nicea). Although none of the copies are complete, we do have nearly complete copies of both Luke and John in a codex dated between 175 and 225 AD – at least one hundred years before Nicaea. Another manuscript, dating from about 200 AD or earlier, contains most of John’s Gospel.

Consequently it is easy to compare these pre-Nicene manuscripts with those that followed Nicaea to see if any change occurred. Furthermore, the pre-Nicene versions of John’s Gospel include some of the strongest declarations of Jesus’ deity on record (1,1-3; 8,58; 10,30-33; etc.). That is, the most explicit declarations of Jesus’ divinity in any of our gospels are already found in manuscripts that pre-date Constantine by more than a hundred years!

Some important points to remember:

- *There are copies of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John that are significantly earlier than Constantine and the Council of Nicaea.*
- *If Constantine had tried to interfere with the formation of the Gospels (which he did not) the Christians themselves would have opposed him and we would have evidence of this from the Fathers of the Church.*

WHAT ARE THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS?

It is worth noting that Brown's supposed historian commits two enormous mistakes that would be an embarrassment to any scholar. These mistakes are so obvious that probably the cinematographic version will either omit them or correct them: "Fortunately for historians...some of the gospels that Constantine attempted to eradicate managed to survive. The Dead Sea Scrolls were found in the 1950s hidden in a cave near Qumran in the Judean desert."

First, the Dead Sea Scrolls were first discovered in the spring of 1947 (when Bedouin goat-herds, searching the cliffs along the Dead Sea for a lost goat – or for treasure, depending on who is telling the story – came upon a cave containing jars filled with manuscripts) and not in the 1950s. Secondly, they did not contain any "gospels" or anything mentioning Jesus. They overwhelmingly predate the New Testament and are mostly copies of Old Testament books and internal documents for the Qumran community. Brown also has his character allege that the Vatican "tried very hard to suppress the release of these Scrolls" because they contained damaging information. This is merely a conspiracy theory found in popular writers, with no basis in fact. Again, the evidence concerning the Dead Sea Scrolls has been written about in so many books, journals, and articles that Brown can only make his erroneous statements with a complete disregard for the facts.

There is nothing in the Dead Sea Scrolls that promotes either traditional or deviant Christianity. The community at Qumran responsible for the Scrolls was not Christian, but Jewish. While the Dead Sea Scrolls say nothing directly about Christianity, they do provide two important substantiations of traditional Christianity. First, the texts of copies and commentaries of the Old Testament preserved among the Dead Sea Scrolls provide us with verification

that the Old Testament preserved by Jews and Christians throughout the centuries after Christ was an accurate rendition of what was known to Jews of Jesus' day. Second, the community at Qumran reflects a first century Judaism much more like that depicted by the New Testament writers than does the Judaism that developed after the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70 AD. Those who speculated in the past that the Judaism presented in the New Testament was a later invention by Christian opposers to Judaism were refuted by what we have learned from the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Some important points to remember:

- *The Dead Sea Scrolls contain no gospels and overwhelmingly predate the New Testament. They are mostly copies of Old Testament books and internal documents for the Qumran community.*
- *There is nothing in the Dead Sea Scrolls that promotes either traditional or deviant Christianity. The community at Qumran responsible for the Scrolls was not Christian, but Jewish.*
- *Those who in the past speculated that Christians (because of anti-Judaism) presented a distorted vision of Judaism are wrong. The Dead Sea Scrolls show that the New Testament description of Judaism is correct.*

WHY ARE THE NAG HAMMADI GOSPELS NOT PART OF THE NEW TESTAMENT?

The next strategy that Dan Brown uses to discredit the New Testament canon as handed down the ages by the Catholic Church is to give equal importance to Gnostic writings. Gnostic literature existed long before the 1945-1946 discovery of interesting ancient texts in Nag Hammadi (the ancient Chenoboskion in Upper Egypt). These writings should not be confused with the “Dead Sea Scrolls”; texts belonging to a Jewish sect. According to Teabing, the fictional historian in *The Da Vinci Code*, the Nag Hammadi texts represent “the earliest Christian records.” These “unaltered gospels,” he claims, tell the real story about Jesus and early Christianity and, therefore, the New Testament gospels are allegedly a later and corrupted version of these events.

This theory is completely off track for two reasons. First, the Nag Hammadi documents are definitely not the earliest Christian records because every book in the New Testament is earlier. While some of the sayings may be similar to those found in the New Testament and ancient in origin, most scholars agree that these “gospels” were, on the whole, written significantly later than the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and may even depend on one or more of them. Some of these writings may have been intended to challenge the authority of the New Testament writings. The diehard fans of *The Da Vinci Code* would reply that the Nag Hammadi texts are copies of earlier texts. Again they are wrong. In the first place, one cannot jump to a conclusion when there is no evidence. Secondly, the science of textual criticism and a close look at their literary genre prove otherwise. Biblical scholars, whether they are believers or not, agree that the New Testament documents, including the four gospels, were all written in the first century after

Christ. In contrast, the dates for the Nag Hammadi texts range from the second to the third century.

An important point to remember:

- *The Nag Hammadi “gospels” are not the earliest Christian records. Even if they are copies of earlier documents, their literary genre shows that they were written much later than any of the New Testament gospels.*

WAS GNOSTICISM A MOVEMENT THAT VALUED THE HUMANITY OF JESUS?

The historian of *The Da Vinci Code* Teabing says that the Nag Hammadi texts “speak of Christ’s ministry in very human terms.” Unfortunately, it appears evident that Dan Brown is unaware of the philosophy and anthropology of this kind of literature. These Gnostic writings actually present the complete opposite. In Gnostic texts Jesus Christ is many times presented as a divine being in a completely different manner from that of the New Testament which presents Jesus in human terms and yet as God at the same time!

Not all of the apocryphal gospels are of Gnostic origins. Nevertheless they are, for the most part, unanimous in giving an out of this world picture of the man Jesus. The Gnostic Nag Hammadi texts and indeed all other apocryphal gospels such as the *Protoevangelium of James* and the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* are fantasy ridden narratives of Jesus. For example the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* contains stories of wonders supposedly worked by Jesus as a young boy. These stories are fantastic and even unbecoming to Jesus – in one of them, a child dies after the boy Jesus rebukes him for accidentally bumping into him. This is one of the reasons why this “gospel” was rejected as an unfaithful account of Jesus’ early life.

Let us focus on the Nag Hammadi Gnostic theology because it is to these documents that *The Da Vinci Code* appeals most. These texts have similarities to Christian teaching. Nevertheless, they also reflect the beliefs of Gnosticism, a religious movement that derives its name from “gnosis,” the Greek word for “knowledge.” Jews and Christians hold that the soul attains its proper end by trusting in God. On the other hand, in Gnosticism, the salvation of the soul

is achieved by the possession of knowledge of the mysteries of the universe and of magic formulae indicative of that knowledge. Gnostics were the “people who knew”, and their knowledge at once set them apart as a superior class of beings, whose present and future status was essentially different from that of those who, for whatever reason, did not know. Needless to say, these doctrines are incompatible with the New Testament teaching about Christ and salvation (Rom 3,21-26; 5,1-11; 1 Cor 15,3-11; Tit 2,11-14).

Gnosticism was originally thought to be a Christian heresy but now scholars consider it as a religious movement of its own, having a number of sources in the restless religious environment of the ancient world. Gnostics viewed the created world with utter pessimism, lamenting the existence of the whole universe as a corruption and a calamity. The Gnostics desired to be freed from the body and had a mad hope that, if one only knew how, one could, through some mystic words, undo the cursed spell of this existence. Some Gnostic sects absorbed elements of Christian belief that were treated very freely. As a result, early Church leaders opposed these “Christian” Gnostics.

The Gnostic “Saviour” does not save. Gnosticism lacks the idea of atonement. Indeed, Gnostics admit of no sin save that of ignorance. Nor does the Saviour in any sense benefit the human race by vicarious sufferings. Gnosticism knows nothing of a real Saviour who, with human and divine love, seeks out sinners to save them. The Gnostic Saviour has no human nature because he is an aeon (in Gnostic systems an aeon means an emanation of God). Gnostic Christology had a tendency to separate the human Jesus from the Divine Christ, seeing them as two distinct beings. For some Gnostics it was not the Divine Christ who suffered and died; it was merely the human Jesus – or perhaps even Simon of Cyrene.

This is why the “Gnostic gospels” contain collections of sayings that are very different from the New Testament gospels in that they have little or no narratives about Jesus’ life or about his passion, death, and resurrection. Despite the similarities, the way to view these texts is neither as “alternatives” nor as supplements to the Christian gospels. They are writings in which Christian persons and beliefs are filtered through the lens of a religious philosophy that differs from the Christianity of the New Testament in many important ways.

It is interesting to note that the first heresies denied not so much Christ’s divinity as his true humanity. Since apostolic times the Christian faith has insisted on the true Incarnation of God’s Son “come in the flesh” (1 Jn 4,2-3; 2 Jn 7). Conversely, the Gnostics saw Jesus as some sort of demi-god (not fully divine but neither fully human). Later on, the Church again had to defend the humanity of Christ. This time, the challenge derived from the Monophysites who affirmed that the human nature had ceased to exist as such in Jesus Christ when the divine person of God’s Son assumed it. Faced with this heresy, the fourth Ecumenical Council, at Chalcedon in 451, confessed that the Lord Jesus Christ is perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity. He is consubstantial with the Father as to his divinity and consubstantial with us as to his humanity. Jesus is like us in all things but sin. The Church thus confesses that Jesus is inseparably truly God and truly human. He is truly the Son of God who, without ceasing to be God and Lord, became our brother.

Some important points to remember:

- *Gnosticism was pessimistic in its outlook and believed in the salvation of the few. In opposition to this is the Christian view of salvation – everyone is saved by Jesus and offered salvation through Jesus.*
- *Gnostic texts avoid the Passion narrative (which is central in the New Testament Gospels) because Gnostics hold it to be irrelevant. Moreover, they do not present Jesus in human terms because they believed that the world and flesh were created by an evil and cruel god in order to imprison souls.*
- *The first heresies denied not so much Christ's divinity as his true humanity.*

WHO WAS MARY MAGDALENE?

In the imaginary world of *The Da Vinci Code* the Holy Grail is not the name of the sacred vessel, variously identified with the chalice used by Christ in the Last Supper, and the theme of a famous medieval cycle of romance. Dan Brown gives an entirely new interpretation. The Holy Grail would not be the physical vessel but a woman, namely Mary Magdalene who carried the bloodline of Christ. For Brown the Old French expression for the Holy Grail, *San gréal*, actually is a play of words on *Sang réal*, which in old French literally means royal blood. Mary Magdalene is alleged to be Jesus' wife and is supposed to have been pregnant with his child during Jesus' crucifixion. According to Leigh Teabing, *The Da Vinci Code's* fictional historian, the popular understanding of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute "is the legacy of a smear campaign . . . by the early Church." In Teabing's view, "The Church needed to defame Mary . . . in order to cover up her dangerous secret – her role as the Holy Grail".

Dan Brown attempts to show that Mary Magdalene's prominence was erased by an evil, male-dominated, patriarchal Church. Teabing appeals to a second document entitled *The Gospel of Mary [Magdalene]*. Claiming that modern historians have already explored the issue, he points out that this gospel also shows Jesus treating Mary as a companion, and depicts Peter's jealousy after Jesus gives Mary special instructions to run the Church after his crucifixion. Leading up to the idea of Mary Magdalene as the "female womb that carried Jesus' royal bloodline," Brown's historian comments, "Jesus was the original feminist. He intended for the future of his Church to be in the hands of Mary Magdalene."

Surprisingly, Teabing makes no mention of the most famous alternative "gospel" found in the Nag Hammadi collection, *The*

Gospel of Thomas. The reason is simply because *The Gospel of Thomas* ends with an admonition by Jesus that women must “become male” in order to find salvation! Needless to say, this would not fit in with Brown’s tale of seekers after a feminine divine! Of course, nor would it be consonant with any Gospel affirmation!

The assertion that “the sacred feminine” has been suppressed by Christianity cannot really be taken seriously. In Roman Catholicism, for example, Mary of Nazareth, the mother of Jesus, is specially venerated as the *Theotokos*, the Mother of God and the spiritual mother of all humankind. She is believed to have had an Immaculate Conception – a unique privilege in the history of humanity. Another unique privilege granted solely to the Virgin Mary is her Assumption into Heaven body and soul. Her body never saw any corruption! Also, women disciples are presented in really high consideration in the Gospel narratives, especially in the resurrection narratives. Women leaders are mentioned most positively by Paul in several of his letters. The Catholic Church even celebrates the feast of Mary Magdalene on the 22nd July! Considering all this it is hard to believe that “the sacred feminine” was suppressed by Christianity.

Now, the first recorded instance of Mary Magdalene being misidentified as a prostitute occurred in a sermon by Pope Gregory the Great in 591 AD. This was not a deliberate attempt to slander Mary’s character but a misinterpretation of some passages in the gospels. He could have identified the unnamed sinful woman in Luke 7, who anointed Jesus’ feet, with Mary of Bethany in John 12, who also anointed Jesus’ feet shortly before his death and burial. This would have been easy to do because there are some similarities between the two separate incidents. If Gregory thought the sinful woman of Luke 7 was the Mary of John 12, he may then have mistakenly linked this woman with Mary Magdalene. Since the

unnamed woman in Luke 7 (who was probably guilty of some kind of sexual sin) is described by the Pharisee host as a great sinner, and Mary Magdalene was described as having been freed from seven demons (Mk 16,9; Lk 8,2), had Gregory come to believe that this woman was Mary Magdalene, then it would not have been too great a leap to conclude that she was a prostitute.

It is unfortunate that this mistake was committed but one can never conclude that it was a deliberate part of a smear campaign by the early Church when Gregory reigned almost 600 years after the birth of Christ! Moreover, if the early Church supposedly wanted to smear Mary Magdalene, it is rather strange that no Christian writer did so before the year 591.

According to Teabing, Mary was the wife of Jesus, the mother of his child, and the one on whom he intended to establish the church after his death. In support of these theories, Teabing appeals to two of the Gnostic gospels: *The Gospel of Philip* and *The Gospel of Mary [Magdalene]*. A section quoted in Brown's novel pictures a sceptical apostle Peter, who simply cannot believe that the risen Christ has secretly revealed information to Mary and not to the male disciples. Levi rebukes Peter: "If the Saviour made her worthy, who are you . . . to reject her? Surely the Saviour knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us."

Now, in the first place, nowhere in the Gnostic gospels is it said that Mary was Jesus' wife or the mother of his child. Secondly, many scholars think that this text should probably be read symbolically, with Peter representing early Christian orthodoxy and Mary representing a form of Gnosticism. Consequently, this gospel is probably claiming that Mary (that is, the Gnostics) has received Divine Revelation, even if Peter (that is, the orthodox community) cannot believe it. Finally, even if this text should be read literally,

we have little reason to believe it is historically reliable. It was likely composed sometime in the late second century, about a hundred years after the canonical gospels. Definitely, it was not written by Mary Magdalene or by any of Jesus' other original followers.

The most reliable information about Mary comes from the canonical gospels that tell us that Mary was a follower of Jesus from the town of Magdala. After Jesus cast seven demons out of her, she – along with other women – helped support his ministry (Luke 8,1-3). She was a witness to Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, and the first to see the risen Christ (Mt 27,55-61; Jn 20,11-18). Jesus even told her to proclaim his resurrection to the male disciples (John 20,17-18). There is nothing to suggest that she was Jesus' wife (surely the disciples would have mentioned her as Jesus' wife along with his mother, and his "brothers and sisters" in Mt 13,55; Mk 3,32; 6,3; Jn 6,42) or that Jesus intended her to lead the Church.

There are other arguments that show the defects of Dan Brown's theory about the smear campaign supposedly spearheaded by the Catholic Church. If early Christian leaders were really determined to suppress Mary Magdalene's role in their history how on earth could they have forgotten to cut out the part in every Gospel in which Mary Magdalene none other than the *first* witness to the Empty Tomb?! If the Church, throughout its history, was determined to silence and demonize Mary Magdalene why did it establish her feast day already by the 8th century? Indeed after the Blessed Virgin, Mary Magdalene was the most widely-revered saint of the Middle Ages and, in Eastern Christianity, she has been called the "Apostle to the Apostles," among other honorific titles.

Some important points to remember:

- *The confusion of Mary Magdalene with the sinful woman occurred almost 600 years after the birth of Christ and was not the making of the early Christians.*
- *If early Christian leaders were really determined to suppress Mary Magdalene's role in their history they would have erased every section in the New Testament where Mary Magdalene is the first witness to the Empty Tomb.*
- *If Christians wanted to eradicate the "sacred feminine", they would not have given the Virgin Mary such a privileged place.*

WHAT WAS THE RELATION BETWEEN JESUS AND MARY MAGDALENE?

The only textual evidence that could point to Jesus' marriage to Mary Magdalene comes from the gnostic *Gospel of Philip*. The section of this gospel quoted in the novel reads as follows: "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?'"

The first line refers to Mary as the companion of the Saviour. In the novel, Teabing bases his argument that Jesus and Mary were married by stating, "As any Aramaic scholar will tell you, the word companion, in those days, literally meant spouse".

This conclusion is totally off track! It is important to note that this gospel was originally written in Greek and thus what the term "companion" meant in Aramaic is absolutely irrelevant. Even in the Coptic translation found at Nag Hammadi, a Greek loan word (i.e. *koinonos*) lies behind the term translated "companion" and this word can mean "wife", or "sister" in a spiritual sense. However, it is not the typical or common term for "wife" in Greek. The word *koinonos* is most often used in the New Testament and Luke uses this term to describe James and John as Peter's business "partners" (Luke 5,10). Thus, contrary to the claim found in *The Da Vinci Code* the statement that Mary was Jesus' "companion" does not at all prove that she was his wife.

The statement: "Christ loved her . . . and used to kiss her often on the mouth" is not that clear because the manuscript is damaged and therefore it is not entirely known where Christ is said to have

kissed Mary. It could well be the cheek or forehead since either term fits in well in the break. Nevertheless, even if the text said that Christ kissed Mary on the mouth, it would not necessarily mean that some sexual gesture is implied. Most scholars agree that Gnostic texts contain a great deal of symbolism. This “kissing on the mouth” was a metaphor for imparting wisdom (or transmitting divine knowledge). To read such texts literally, therefore, is to misread them. Finally, regardless of the author’s intention, *The Gospel of Philip* is not a reliable or contemporary source for the life of Jesus. Its literary composition shows that it is not a first century document at all. Scholars date *The Gospel of Philip* to the third century, about 200 years after Jesus lived. Consequently it cannot be a product of the disciple named Philip in Acts, unless he lived for more than 200 years. *The Gospel of Philip* is a Gnostic text and Gnostic thought would have no place in first century Palestinian Judaism. A Jesus teaching Gnosticism in this setting is historically impossible. Critical analysis shows that this Gnostic document reflects no reality found among Palestinian Jews of the first century. What Brown actually does is to uncritically accept as valid specific fringe views that sober scholars reject completely.

Some important points to remember:

- *The Gospel of Philip was not written in Aramaic! It is only in the Aramaic context that the word “companion” could imply marriage!*
- *Gnostic texts contain a great deal of symbolism and to read them literally is to misread them.*
- *The Gospel of Philip is a Gnostic text written some two hundred years after Jesus lived.*

WAS JESUS CELIBATE?

The Da Vinci Code claims that an unmarried Jesus is quite improbable. Leigh Teabing, the fictional historian, says: “Jesus as a married man makes infinitely more sense than our standard biblical view of Jesus as a bachelor.” Robert Langdon, the Harvard professor of Religious Symbolology, adds that “Jesus was a Jew, and the social decorum during that time virtually forbid a Jewish man to be unmarried. According to Jewish custom, celibacy was condemned... If Jesus were not married, at least one of the Bible’s gospels would have mentioned it and offered some explanation for his unnatural state of bachelorhood.”

Obviously it is correct to say that most Jewish men of Jesus’ day did marry because marriage was viewed as a fundamental human obligation in the light of God’s command to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (Gen 1,28). Nevertheless, by the first century there were recognized, and even praised, exceptions to this general rule. The first century Jewish writer, Philo of Alexandria, described the Essenes as those who “reject marriage... for no one of the Essenes ever marries a wife.” Although celibacy was uncommon, it was not disapproved of by the rabbis. Postponement of marriage was permitted for students of the Law that they might concentrate on their studies and remain free from the cares of supporting a wife. A good example is Rabbi Simeon be ‘Azzai who never married. The 2nd century AD Hasidic miracle-worker, the Galilean rabbi Pinhas ben Yair, taught that sexual abstinence was essential for the reception of prophetic wisdom.

The Essenes (and the somehow-related Qumran community) were described by Josephus, Philo, and Pliny as being celibate. Philo describes another Jewish group of both men and women (the Therapeutae) who were celibate in their pursuit of wisdom

and the holy life. The Essenes not only escaped condemnation for their celibacy but were often admired. Philo also wrote, “This now is the enviable system of life of these Essenes, so that not only private individuals but even mighty kings, admiring the men, venerate their sect, and increase . . . the honours which they confer on them.” These quotations clearly reveal that not all Jews of Jesus’ day considered marriage compulsory. In fact, those who sought to avoid marriage for religious reasons were often admired rather than condemned.

So, although it would have been “normal” and expected for a young Jewish man to be married, we have examples of cases where celibacy was accepted, encouraged, or required. Once again, if Jesus were married, his contemporaries would have surely mentioned his wife together with his mother, and “brothers and sisters”. Therefore, it is false to say that Jesus as a married man “makes infinitely more sense;” it is simply false to claim that the “social decorum” (or anything else) “virtually forbid a Jewish man to be unmarried;” it is false that “celibacy was condemned,” and the silence on the subject in the Gospels is not room for a positive proof whatsoever.

Some important points to remember:

- *Not all Jews of the day considered marriage compulsory. Those who sought to avoid marriage for religious reasons were sometimes more admired than condemned.*
- *The Essenes were one of the groups that practised celibacy. They not only escaped condemnation for their celibacy but were often praised.*

WHAT ABOUT JESUS' DIVINITY?

Christ is true God and true man. Faith in Christ's divinity is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. The mystery that the man Jesus is truly God challenges human understanding. The teaching of the Church helps us gain insight into this mystery. The doctrine on Christ explains how the Divine Person of the Son of God subsists in two natures, divine and human, both of which remain unaltered and undiminished in the hypostatic union, that is the union of the divine and of the human nature in the Person of the Son of God.

The ultimate cause for the split between the Church and the Synagogue is to be found in the former's belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ. The Church was born within Judaism. Jesus and his disciples were Jews and maintained Jewish practices. They read the law, practised circumcision and worshipped in the Temple as well as in the upper room at Jerusalem. Nevertheless, the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul already demonstrate the frictions between the followers of Jesus and Jewish leaders. From a very early date, Jewish leaders sensed that there was something revolutionary in the preaching of the Apostles. This element is precisely the belief that Jesus is Lord!

This title, "Lord", indicates divine sovereignty. To confess or invoke Jesus as Lord is to believe in his divinity. "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 12,3). From the beginning of Christian history, the assertion of Christ's Lordship over the world and over history has implicitly recognized that human beings should not submit their personal freedom in an absolute manner to any earthly power, but only to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

It was Jesus' claim to have the power to forgive sins, his divine work par excellence, which was the true stumbling-block for the Jews (Lk 2,34; 20,17-18). It was most especially by forgiving sins that Jesus placed the religious authorities of Israel on the horns of a dilemma. Were they not entitled to demand in consternation: "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mk 2,7)? By forgiving sins Jesus either is blaspheming as a man who made himself God's equal, or is speaking the truth and his person really does make present and reveal God's name (Jn 5,18; 10,33).

Only the divine identity of Jesus' person can justify so absolute a claim as "he who is not with me is against me" (Mt 12,30); and his saying that there was in him "something greater than Jonah, . . . greater than Solomon" (Mt 6,41-42), something "greater than the Temple" (Mt 12,6); his reminder that David had called the Messiah his Lord, and his affirmations, "Before Abraham was, I AM", and even "the Father and I are one" (Jn 8,58; 10,30).

Dan Brown ignores all this and forwards the claim that the earliest followers of Jesus never believed he was divine! According to Teabing, the doctrine of Christ's divinity originally resulted from a vote at the Council of Nicaea. He asserts that "until that moment in history, Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet . . . a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless."

The truth is that by 325 AD the Christians had already been proclaiming Jesus' divinity for nearly three centuries. The earliest written sources about the life and teachings of Jesus are found in the New Testament and these first century documents repeatedly affirm the divinity of Christ. For instance, in his letter to the Colossians, the apostle Paul declared, "For in Christ all the fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col 2,9; see also Rom 9,5; Phil 2,5-11; Tit 2,13). The Gospel of John says of Jesus: "In the beginning was the Word,

and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (1,1.14).

In addition to the New Testament, there are also affirmations of Jesus' divinity in the writings of the pre-Nicene Church fathers. For example, in the early second century Ignatius of Antioch wrote of "our God, Jesus the Christ." Similar affirmations can be found throughout these writings.

There is also non-Christian evidence from the second century that Christians believed in Christ's divinity. In a letter from Pliny the Younger to Emperor Trajan, dated around 112 AD, Pliny said the early Christians "were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day... when they sang... a hymn to Christ, as to a god."

Dan Brown's assessment of the influence of Constantine the Great in the Council of Nicaea is superficial because he completely overlooks the fact that, despite the approval and support of Constantine for the Council of Nicaea in its condemnation of Arius (Arius and his followers had proposed that Jesus was not God and hence was not eternal), the emperor eventually changed his mind! After the Council, Arius himself was rehabilitated and Constantine was baptized at his deathbed by an Arian bishop! Until the reign of Emperor Theodosius, most of the powerful emperors were actually Arians. Those who did not believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ had all the resources and power available to win the power struggle and impose the heresy of Arianism. Keeping this in mind, it is difficult to believe that Nicene theology survived in the hearts and minds of Christians just because a male dominated church collaborated with the State!

After the Council of Constantinople, (381) Arianism lost its place within the Empire but it survived among the barbarians.

Ulphilas (311-388), who translated the Scriptures into Maeso-Gothic, taught the Goths across the Danube a theology based on Arianism. Consequently Arian kingdoms arose in Spain, Africa, and Italy. The Burgundians, the Vandals, the Visigoths and Lombards were all Arians! Indeed, the only barbarian tribe that converted directly from paganism to Catholic Christianity and therefore believed in the divinity of Christ were the Franks! This happened during the reign of Clovis I (481-511). This is an important point when one considers the hypothesis found in the *The Da Vinci Code* that the Frankish kings of the Merovingian dynasty were the descendants of Mary Magdalene and Jesus.

Some important points to remember:

- *Christians believed in the divinity of the man Jesus much before the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD.*
- *There is also non-Christian evidence from the second century that Christians believed in Christ's divinity. In a letter from Pliny the Younger to Emperor Trajan, dated around 112 AD, Pliny reported that the early Christians "were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day... when they sang... a hymn to Christ, as to a god."*
- *The Franks, whose Merovingian kings Dan Brown says inherited the bloodline of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, are unique among all barbarians in that they converted directly to orthodox Christianity (thus accepting fully the divinity of Jesus).*

WHAT ABOUT THE KNIGHTS TEMPLAR?

The Knights Templar are the oldest of the military-religious orders. They were founded in 1118 to protect pilgrims in the Holy Land. Their rule, attributed to St. Bernard of Clairvaux, was approved in 1128 and generous donors granted them numerous properties in Europe for support. Rendered redundant after the last Crusader stronghold fell in 1291, the Templars' pride and wealth – they were also good bankers! – earned them keen hostility.

Dan Brown's misinterpretations of the history of the Knights Templar are so obvious and numerous that the average historian finds himself at a loss where to start. Brown maliciously ascribes the suppression of the Templars to the "Machiavellian" Pope Clement V, whom they were blackmailing with the Grail secret. His alleged "ingeniously planned sting operation" had his soldiers suddenly arrest all Templars. "Charged with satanism, sodomy, and blasphemy, they were tortured into confessing and burned as heretics, their ashes tossed unceremoniously into the Tiber."

But in reality, all historians know that the initiative for crushing the Templars came from King Philip the Fair of France and not from the Pope! Clement V is reported by the St Albans annalist, William Rishanger, as saying that the Knights Templar were of good repute, which was why they had been enriched and privileged by the Church, and why he had found the allegations against them doubtful. Also, Brown's allegation that the superstition of Friday the 13th started with the arrest of the Templars is not correct. Though it is true that this event occurred on October the 13th which was a Friday, this superstition started in the 19th century! The king's royal officials did the arresting in 1307 and about 120 Templars were burned by local Inquisitorial courts in France manipulated by the French court for not confessing or for retracting a confession.

Few Templars suffered death elsewhere although their order was abolished in 1312. Far from being a devious Pope, Clement V was a weak, sickly Frenchman manipulated by his king. Nevertheless, the Pope burned no one in Rome inasmuch as he was the first Pope to reign from Avignon (the Tiber flows through Rome and not Avignon!). The ashes of Geoffrey de Charney and the last Grand Master of the Order, Jacques de Molay were thrown in the river Seine in France.

Brown's claim that the Templars were formed by the Priory of Sion, is entirely false. The order was formed by the French nobleman Hughes de Payens who was a veteran of the First Crusade. Another false statement is that the Templars' first headquarters was a "stable under the ruins". The historical truth is that King Baldwin II of Jerusalem gave them quarters in a wing of the royal palace. The claim that the Knights Templar worshipped a fertility god (Baphomet) arises from one of the fabrications leveled against the Templars by the King of France in his effort to destroy the Templars. But this does not mean that the Templars actually adored this pagan god.

The claim that the Rosslyn Chapel was built by the Templars is wrong because it was actually founded by Sir William St Clair, third Earl of Orkney and Lord of Rosslyn. The theory that Gothic architecture was designed by the Templars is plainly stupid! Moreover, the Templars did not themselves engage in building projects or founding guilds for masons. The claim that the Templars gained power because of something they excavated in Jerusalem is also false. They gained power because one of the most powerful churchmen of the time, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, was also a nephew of one of the original nine knights and supported them. This saint wrote a powerful letter called "In Praise of the New Knighthood", and spoke on their behalf at the Council of Troyes in

1128 (nine years after the Order's founding). It was at that council that the Order was officially recognized and confirmed, which is what triggered the support and donations that started pouring in from around Europe.

Some important points to remember:

- *The extermination of the Knights Templar was the work of the jealous French monarch Philip the Fair. The Pope was too weak to oppose this powerful king.*
- *The Templars did not gain power because they knew secrets! They owed their rule to Saint Bernard of Clairvaux. In addition to this, they achieved importance because they were good bankers.*
- *The Tiber is in Italy and not in France! Moreover the ashes of some of the Templars were thrown in the river Seine (so that they would not become relics). This river is in France.*

WHAT IS THE PRIORY OF SION?

According to Dan Brown the Priory of Sion is a European secret society founded in 1099. He also claims that in 1975, Paris's *Bibliothèque Nationale* discovered parchments known as *Les Dossiers Secretes*, identifying numerous members of the Priory of Sion, including Sir Isaac Newton, Botticelli, Victor Hugo, and Leonardo da Vinci. The novel then depicts the Priory of Sion as a secret society defending the bloodline of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene. Because it allegedly holds the secret of this bloodline, it is persecuted by the Catholic Church. The organization also is devoted to worshipping "the sacred feminine" and holds orgies as a form of ritual worship.

Les Dossiers Secretes are indeed a group of documents found in the *Bibliothèque Nationale* and they supposedly established the historical lineage of the Priory of Sion secret society. These documents were popularized in the 1970s and formed the basis of the books *The Messianic Legacy*, *Holy Blood*, *Holy Grail* and, later, *The Da Vinci Code*. There is nothing ancient in these documents. These were created by a group headed by a convicted confidence trickster named Pierre Plantard.

Though *The Da Vinci Code* continues to regard the documents as authentic, many other writers of esoteric history have acknowledged that they are fakes. Even the authors of *Holy Blood*, *Holy Grail* and *The Messianic Legacy* later came to question them. In reality, the Priory of Sion was an organization founded in 1956 by four young Frenchmen. Two of its members were André Bonhomme (who was president of the club when it was founded) and Pierre Plantard (who previously had been sentenced to six months in prison for fraud and embezzlement). The group's name is based on a local mountain in France (Col du Mont Sion), not Mount Zion in Jerusalem. It

has no connection with the Crusaders, the Templars, or previous movements incorporating “Sion” into their names.

The organization broke up after a short time, but in later years Pierre Plantard revived it, claimed he was the “grand master” or leader of the organization, and began making outrageous claims regarding its antiquity, prior membership, and true purposes. It was he who claimed that the organization stemmed from the Crusades, he (in conjunction with later associates) who composed and smuggled *Les Dossiers Secretes* into the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, and he who created the story that the organization was guarding a secret royal bloodline that could one day return to political power.

Some important points to remember:

- *The Priory of Sion did not exist before 1956.*
- *The parchments of this priory smuggled into the Bibliothèque Nationale of France were all frauds confected by the members of this group.*
- *The group’s name refers to a place in France and not to Mount Zion in Jerusalem.*

SOME FINAL COMMENTS

In Chapter 82 of *The Da Vinci Code*. Brown's hero remarks that "every faith in the world is based on fabrication. That is the definition of faith – acceptance of that which we imagine to be true, that which we cannot prove."

This definition of faith is misleading. Indeed, a study of how the word "faith" (*pistis*) is used in the New Testament and its contemporary literature does not bear this definition out. There, the term is used not just to refer to one's convictions. The meaning intended includes that of faithfulness, trust or fidelity. In the New Testament, the bond between the believer and God is framed in terms of a client-patron relationship. In this context, God shows unmerited favour (grace) to his "clients". Their response is one of gratitude towards the one to whom they are indebted (God), and of responsibility within the group in which they are rooted (the Church, the body of Christ).

Faith is therefore the conscious expression of one's faithfulness and loyalty. It is the overcoming of one's existential loneliness by trusting the One who has proven himself! Faith is not mere "acceptance of that which we cannot prove" but includes the effort of engaging in dialogue. This is what the disciples did in the New Testament. In so doing they pointed to historical events surrounding the life of Jesus: the resurrection and the empty tomb; his miracles; his fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. Believers are not restricted to the unrewarding efforts of attempting to reach God through their own efforts alone. Now each person is invited to respond to God's initiative of infinite mercy reaching out to humankind by answering: "Lord Jesus, I do trust in you! Help my unbelief!"

FURTHER READING:

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