

A Brief Response to Some Claims of *The Da Vinci Code*

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This short review is based on a longer talk given at the Newman Centre of McGill University (Montreal). It is intended to correct some of the more fundamental misconceptions and errors popularized by Dan Brown's bestselling novel *The Da Vinci Code* (London: Corgi Books, 2003). Most of the radical ideas it promotes are not original, inspired by a handful of recent sensationalizing works that lack any scholarly foundation (see *Bibliography* below for more details). The novel as such is only an issue because a) it opens with the apparently serious claim, on a page titled "FACT" that "all descriptions of artworks, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate" (p. 15); and b) the novel's author does add some colourful errors of his own.

In this review I concentrate on a survey of issues pertaining to the Gospels and the early Church; I leave out a discussion of three other major areas of concern in the novel, viz. its claims about mediaeval history (notably the Templars¹), its claims about the lay Catholic movement *Opus Dei*, and its claims about the significance of certain works of art, especially by Leonardo. I omit these issues because I am not especially competent to address them, and the issues surrounding the Gospels and the early Church seem to me to be the most crucial. However, in virtually every domain, the author's claim of factual accuracy completely breaks down. The reader is invited to consult the *Bibliography* for further resources. I can be contacted at richard.bernier@mcgill.ca.

At the time of this writing, Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* has been on the *New York Times* bestseller list for almost three years, for much of that time in first place, with no signs of abating anytime soon. The novel has spawned a cottage industry of companion books, responses, museum tours, and numerous other, often lucrative projects. Surfing the Web one can catch glimpses of desperate folks determined to believe that the novel has revealed some great truth to them.

¹ Two useful sources on the Templar question: Peter PARTNER, *Murdered Magicians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) and Malcolm BARBER *et al.* (eds.), *The Templars: Selected sources translated and annotated* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002). In brief, the Templars were a military order founded in 1118 by French knights pledged to defend pilgrims and holy sites in the Holy Land. They acquired a good deal of wealth and influence and eventually were seen with suspicion by other elements in Church and State, notably the French court. The charges on which the Templars were rounded up and arrested on October 13th, 1307 were astounding: spitting on the Cross, renouncing Christ, ritual sodomy, and the worship of an idol (often identified as "Baphomet"). Examples of such idols have never been found in even a single instance. Confessions of these crimes were extracted from Templars following isolation, humiliation and torture; those who insisted on their innocence were burnt alive, while those who confessed to these deeds were released. Thus no man went to the stake for acknowledging these charges, while more than fifty did so while protesting their orthodoxy and faith. As Partner writes, "*That there were no Templar martyrs suggests that there was no unorthodox Templar religion*" (p. 84). Partner's general verdict: "*It can be said with approximate truth that most professional historians in this century [accept] that the denial of Christ, the dishonouring of the Cross, the incitement to sodomy, and the worship of an idol were not normally practiced in the reception of a Templar, nor in their chapters. To accept Templar innocence in this sense is not to assert that the Templars were as pure as snow...Almost certainly the Templars were orthodox Catholics within the limits which their ignorance allowed. Some contemporaries, including some of the Church fathers at the Council of Vienne, thought that they were, as an order, innocent. It seems, however, probable that the normal initiation ceremonies for Templar candidates included some unusual practices which lent themselves to the idea of a renunciation of the faith. There may have been a custom of fooling about with the candidate, or of bullying him. There may also have been a custom of venerating, in some chapters, a reliquary or image whose meaning was not properly understood by the brothers*" (pp. 83-84). "*[...]Medieval people were less credulous than is often supposed, and many were sceptical about the truth of the bizarre allegations made against the Order*" (p. 89).

The most problematical claims of the novel are concentrated in and around Chapter 55. It is there that we find the substance of the conspiracy theory in its details. The novel, drawing on a variety of dubious sources, would have us believe that:

Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married and had kids (or at least one child), that Jesus was considered just a mortal prophet by his followers, and that Emperor Constantine in effect created Christian orthodoxy for political reasons in AD325 when he held the Council of Nicaea and created the New Testament as we know it. The REAL truth about Jesus was fortunately preserved (the novel goes on) in the buried documents of Qumran and Nag Hammadi. There we find a radically different portrait of Jesus, as he was really known by the adherents of Gnosticism. The Church has sought to suppress this true portrait throughout history by means of persecution and slander.

This review will address these claims under the following questions:

- 1) What is the origin of the Catholic view of Jesus?
- 2) Who were the gnostics?
- 3) Who was Mary Magdalene?

1) What is the origin of the Catholic view of Jesus?

This view may be summarised briefly as the belief that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah promised to the Jews, God's Chosen People. Jesus was born to a virgin named Mary probably around the year 4BC², in Bethlehem, and grew up in Nazareth. His words and deeds, including his founding of a church to carry on his teachings and do his work in the world, are reliably reported by the four "canonical" (i.e., officially recognized) gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. From these sources and the testimony of the Church he founded, we have come to realize that Jesus was truly a man and also truly God; he is divine in the same way that God the Father is divine. This set of beliefs, which I call for convenience the "Catholic" view, is also held by Orthodox, by Evangelicals, and by Anglicans and members of other mainstream Christian churches who are faithful to their church's tradition.

If the claims of the Catholic Church about Jesus and the Gospels are correct, we would expect to find evidence that the **four canonical gospels** are relatively **close to the time of Jesus**, that they are **basically reliable historical sources**, and that *rival* accounts of Jesus' life and teachings are proportionately late and unreliable.

We would also expect to find evidence from an **early date** of the outlines at least of **belief in Jesus' dual nature** (divine and human).

In fact, it is widely acknowledged by scholars (not necessarily men and women of faith) that the four canonical gospels are close to the time of Jesus, and certainly closer than any other sources. Matthew is generally dated to about AD70 (in Greek; an Aramaic version may be earlier); Mark to about AD60 or 70; Luke to about AD80 and John to about AD90 or 100. These datings are relatively

² It may seem paradoxical to say that Christ was born around 4 years "before Christ". In reality, because of a calculation error by the monk Dionysius Exiguus ('Dennis the Short') who crafted the system of BC and AD in the sixth century, Jesus was most likely born within the six or so years before the year we call AD1.

uncontroversial. (Some scholars, usually personally sympathetic to Christianity but employing objective arguments, have proposed even earlier dates).

It is possible to arrive at a fairly certain version of the original texts of these Gospels by means of the thousands of early manuscripts and manuscript fragments, in multiple translations, of these Gospels. A fragment of John's Gospel exists that has been uncontroversially dated to AD125, which is extremely close³. These resources mean that we have far greater certainty about the authentic text of the Gospels than about any other ancient human document⁴.

The content of these Gospels has what has been called the "**ring of truth**". Consider some of their striking features: They include occasional outright claims to be **eyewitness reports**. They are **sober**, relating the terrible events of Jesus' passion and death without the smallest editorial comment or reflection, and passing over the nearly thirty years of Jesus' life prior to his ministry, without comment. They basically **corroborate** each other; such discrepancies as do exist are minor, and because they are minor they actually confirm the authenticity of the texts and the multitude of sources - after all, it would have been so easy for the Church to tidy up these discrepancies over the centuries, but instead she has reverently conserved even the perplexing and troublesome bits. They relate historical and geographical details that can be corroborated from **archaeological and textual evidence** outside the New Testament. They are **honest**, reporting Jesus' obscure sayings and deeds and describing with painful candour how silly and dull-witted the Apostles sometimes were. A historian writing strictly as a historian may not see *every detail* of the gospels as historical (which is understandable, since a historian writing to-day, even if a believer, cannot *as a historian* discuss miracles and God's intervention and so on). Nonetheless, *even writing strictly for the historian as a historian*, there is a great deal in the four canonical gospels worthy of his or her acceptance.

Our present-day "canon" or list of New Testament documents was basically settled fairly early on. The documents themselves (27 of them) were in existence by the end of the first century; they were in wide circulation and collated as a canon (with one or two minor exceptions, e.g. II Peter) by the end of the second century.

Compare with this the dating and content of the two dozen or so other texts outside the New Testament that purport to be about Jesus. They are late in date (the one that is probably the earliest of these non-canonical 'gospels', the *Gospel of Thomas*, is likely from about AD140; it isn't a continuous narrative but a collection of 114 sayings). They tend to avoid historical and geographical detail and include often fabulous stories and sayings that bear no resemblance to the Jesus we meet in the canonical gospels.

What happened in **AD325**? The Christian Church, previously outlawed, had finally become legal a few years earlier. It was wracked in the early fourth century by a dispute between three factions. Some Christians of Alexandria (led by a priest named Arius) taught that Jesus was divine but still a

³ A much-disputed claim has been made that three existing papyrus fragments of Matthew's Gospel can be dated to about AD60, and that a fragment found among the Dead Sea Scrolls dating from about AD40 is actually a piece of Mark's Gospel. These claims have been supported by a few but rejected by most scholars.

⁴ It is important to note that here I am arguing only in terms of what is scientifically verifiable. Of course Christians have a further confidence in the value of these texts because of our belief that God has guided their composition, but this consideration does not enter into these reflections.

created being; they said he was of 'similar' substance to the Father. Against them were the Catholics (led by Athanasius but including the Bishop of Rome and other luminaries), who taught that Jesus was divine and of the **same uncreated substance** as the Father. A third faction sided doctrinally with the Catholics but didn't like the non-biblical terms they were using. The Emperor Constantine convoked a Council at **Nicaea** (modern-day Turkey) in AD325 to settle the dispute, though he did not intervene in the debate. The bishops in council finally agreed on the Catholic position; the final vote was about **230 to 2**. Though the **language** of their decision used some new expressions (we use the same words in translation every time we pray the Nicene Creed), evidence of this **belief in Jesus' divinity** can be found consistently back through the pre-Nicene Christian writers (or "**Antenicene Fathers**" as they are known) right into the very **pages of the New Testament**. Here are a few references to places where the Ante-Nicene Fathers affirm the literal divinity of Christ⁵. (These are simply a selection of a few; many more could be given. See, for instance, the work by Jurgens in the Bibliography).

St Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 110 AD), *Letter to the Ephesians* (several places)

Epistle to Diognetus (ca. 125 AD), *Diognetus* 7:2,4

Melito of Sardis (d. ca. 190) *On the Pasch (Peri Pascha)*.

Translation in Lucien Deiss, ed., *Springtime of the Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1979), 97-110.

St Justin Martyr (c. 155 AD) *I Apology* 6, 10, and 63

St Irenaeus (ca. 185) *Adversus Haereses* III, 19, 2; IV, 6, 7.

Tertullian (ca. 200) *Adv. Praxean* 27; *Apology* 21; *On the Flesh of Christ* 5

Clement of Alexandria on Christ's Divinity (ca. 210 AD) *Exhortation to the Heathen*, 1

2) Who were the gnostics?

Gnosticism is not a **religion or a coherent set of beliefs but rather an attitude**. It predates Christianity, developed new forms upon contact with Christianity and has continued shifting and changing since that contact. Gnosticism sees salvation in the attaining of certain **hidden truths** that are inaccessible to people in general. These truths are reached not through rational enquiry or trustworthy authority but through a kind of interior **illumination of the spiritually advanced**.

As a result, Gnosticism shuns any kind of definite statement of belief or institutional structure that would define, correct or fetter the enlightenment of the individual soul. The gnostic writings concerning Jesus reflect this preoccupation; they make **no claim to be historical accounts** of what actually happened. Indeed, the gnostic tends to scorn historical detail as irrelevant and crude when compared with interior spiritual experience.

⁵ I am much indebted to Dr Marcellino D'Ambrosiano, who has compiled this selection of patristic evidence on his useful website: http://www.crossroadsinitiative.com/library_article/64/

Gnosticism accommodates a variety of modes of thought and insights, from the most mysterious and profound to the most magical and bizarre. It cannot be compressed into a neat or simple definition. *Gnosis* is 'insight' into reality that is beyond the reach of normal intellectual understanding.⁶

The Church encountered gnosticism almost immediately upon being called together by Jesus Christ. In the **second century**, the Fathers of the Church (especially St Irenaeus of Lyons) were already concerned with gnostic beliefs that were at odds with orthodoxy.

Among the gnostic writings were five that were called 'gospels'. The earliest of these was *Thomas*, from about AD140. The others are of later date, including *Philip* (ca. AD200-AD300). Only *Philip* provides any grounds for a claim of a romantic link between Jesus and Mary Magdalene (it calls her Jesus' 'companion', an ambiguous word that equally means 'colleague' or even 'business associate'); as a *gnostic* writing – uninterested in history – written at least 150 to 250 years after Jesus, without any foundation in earlier and reliable sources, *Philip* is nothing more than a strange fantasy cloaked in familiar names.

It is essential to note that the gnostics were not concerned with the historical details of what Jesus actually said and did.

The gnostic authors were only marginally concerned with the historical details of the life of Jesus.⁷

Gnosticism made the news again in the early spring of 2006 when – just in time for Holy Week – the National Geographic Society claimed to have authenticated a fragment of the long-lost *Gospel of Judas*. While there were predictable attempts to make the admittedly interesting discovery out to be an earth-shaking revelation, in reality it was just one more Gnostic writing; uninterested in historical fact and using Jesus as a spokesman for doctrines strange indeed in his mouth. He speaks to the apostles about "their god", in terms provocative enough for them to start "getting angry and infuriated" and "blaspheming;" he pulls Judas aside to reveal to him the information that "I have explained to you the mysteries of the kingdom and I have taught you about the error of the stars; and ...send it...on the twelve aeons."⁸

3) Who was Mary Magdalene?

Part of the challenge of sorting out biographical details about the Magdalene is that there are seven 'Marys' named in the New Testament⁹. This wide array explains some of the mistakes of identification that have been made over time.

⁶ Cf. John Glyndwr Harris, *Gnosticism* (Sussex Academic Press: Brighton, 1999), *seriatim*, pp. 1-4.

⁷ John Glyndwr Harris, *Gnosticism*, pp. 152-153.

⁸ *The Gospel of Judas*, translated by Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer and Gregor Wurst, in collaboration with Francois Gaudard. Published by the National Geographic Society and retrieved from <http://www9.nationalgeographic.com/lostgospel/pdf/GospelofJudas.pdf> on April 20th 2006.

⁹ 1. Mary, the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:30-31); 2. Mary of Bethany (John 11:1); 3. Mary, the mother of James who was not the Lord's brother (Matthew 27:56); 4. Mary, the wife of Clopas (John 19:25); 5. Mary, the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12); 6. Mary, otherwise unidentified (Romans 16:6); 7. Mary of Magdala = Mary Magdalene (Luke 8:2). (Thanks to *St John in the Wilderness Anglican Church*, White Bear Lake MN, for compiling this list).

What we know about Mary Magdalene is that she was a **devoted friend and disciple** of Jesus. She was **unmarried**, for she is identified by her hometown (Magdala), whereas a married woman would be identified by connection with a husband or son. Jesus **freed her from 'seven demons'** (it is not certain what this refers to). She stood **faithfully by His cross** along with Mary His Mother, and was among those faithful women who went to **anoint His dead body** with myrrh. She was the first person mentioned to be a **witness of the Risen Lord**.

The Christian tradition has always revered her as a **great** saint and disciple. The Eastern Christian tradition calls her "Holy Myrrh-Bearer and Equal to the Apostles". Sometimes in the West she has been mistakenly identified with an otherwise unidentified sinner who bathed our Lord's feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair; since the fifth century, Western Christians have sometimes erroneously made the leap from this to the conclusion that she was a **repentant woman of the streets**. Even then, it was **never intended as a slander**.

The gnostic writings have nothing of interest to add to this portrait; their writings are late, non-historical and tendentious. The only Mary Magdalene known to the second-century anti-Christian polemicist Celsus seems to have been the Mary of the canonical Gospels, for he dismisses her witness simply as the ravings of a "half-frantic woman"¹⁰. He knows Mary, the friend and witness to Jesus; not the supposed Gnostic guru.

Brown's claim that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had a daughter whose name was Sarah is not even traceable to any ancient source; it is a fictional detail created by a present-day writer:

My own story of Mary Magdalene and little Sarah, published as a prologue in "The Woman with the Alabaster Jar," is fiction. [...]I have no hard evidence about the existence of "Sarah" --only a strong intuition[...].¹¹

The elements of gnostic literature that are alleged to support *Da Vinci Code's* 'alternative' view of Jesus and the Magdalene are not very impressive. The most relevant passages are the following:

There were three who always walked with the Lord: Mary, his mother, and her sister, and Magdalene, the one who was called his companion. His sister and his mother and his companion were each a Mary.¹²

The word translated as "companion", as mentioned above, is a general word that can mean partner, colleague, business associate, friend, etc. In the New Testament it is used sometimes to designate partners in evangelization. (There is a very distinct word in Greek that means "spouse"; so any attempt to find grounds in this passage for the claim of a marriage between Jesus and the Magdalene is unfounded). The next relevant quote also comes from *Gospel of Philip*, which as we saw above on the most optimistic dating is no earlier than AD200 (ie 100-150 years later than the canonical gospels)

¹⁰ See ORIGEN, *Against Celsus*, Book II, chapters 59 and 60.

¹¹ Margaret Starbird, 'Mary Magdalene: The Beloved' (1999); retrieved from http://www.magdalone.org/beloved_essay.htm.

¹² *The Gospel of Philip* (ca. AD250). Most references to Gnostic writings refer to texts found at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945. Some writings were known prior to the Nag Hammadi discoveries. The Nag Hammadi writings are easily available in translation in *The Nag Hammadi Library* (ed. James Robinson).

although it is often dated to as late as AD300. The *italicized* material in square brackets is conjectural as the manuscript is damaged and the exact wording is not certain:

And the companion of the [*Saviour is*] Mary Magdalene. [*But Christ loved*] her more than [*all*] the disciples, and [*used to*] kiss her [*often*] on her [*mouth*]. The rest of the disciples [...]. They said to him "Why do you love her more than all of us?" The Savior answered and said to them, "Why do I not love you like her? When a blind man and one who sees are both together in darkness, they are no different from one another. When the light comes, then he who sees will see the light, and he who is blind will remain in darkness."¹³

In *Philip*, a "kiss" symbolizes the sharing of spiritual grace; it does not have a romantic significance.

The next relevant passage concerning the Magdalene is from the *Gospel of Thomas* (ca. AD140?):

Simon Peter said to them, "Make Mary leave us, for females don't deserve life." Jesus said, "Look, 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 kingdom of Heaven."¹⁴

Finally, a passage from the fragmentary *Gospel of Mary*, for which no date can be assigned with any certainty:

Peter said to Mary, Sister we know that the Savior loved you more than the rest of woman. Tell us the words of the Savior which you remember which you know, but we do not, nor have we heard them.¹⁵

Note that in this gospel it is not obvious that the Mary in question is Mary Magdalene.

In all likelihood, gnostic pretensions of Mary Magdalene's exalted role were simply a late literary device to try to support the gnostic preference for individual, interior enlightenment over Church authority.

The classic Catholic understanding of the Lord Jesus and of St Mary Magdalene has nothing to fear from historical research and from the fascinating discoveries at Qumran and Nag Hammadi. It continue to stand firm and will easily outlive the tendentious silliness promoted by *Da Vinci Code*.

Selected Bibliography

Baigent, Michael *et al.* *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (New York: Dell, 1983). This work has no scholarly foundations but provides a major part of the framework for the conspiracy sketched by Brown in his novel. Baigent and his co-author Richard Leigh recently (April 2006) unsuccessfully sued Brown in the UK for plagiarism. Baigent has recently rehashed his conspiracy theory in *The Jesus Papers* (2006).

¹³ *Gospel of Philip*.

¹⁴ *The Gospel of Thomas*, #114.

¹⁵ *The Gospel of Mary*.

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Partner, Peter *Murdered Magicians* (Oxford University Press, 1981). A concise history of the Templars, with a fair, honest appraisal of the controversies.

Robinson, James (editor), *The Nag Hammadi Library*. English translations of all the gnostic texts found at Nag Hammadi in 1945. Whenever someone begins speaking about the deep and hidden wisdom possessed by the gnostics, I invite them enthusiastically actually to read the Nag Hammadi writings. This effectively cools their ardour.

Robinson, J A T *Redating the New Testament*. The author, an Anglican bishop and theologian, proposes earlier dates for the composition of the four gospels than are generally accepted by scholars. Though controversial, his argument seems to me worthy of serious consideration.

Sanders, E P *The Historical Figure of Jesus*. Currently being used as a textbook in a McGill course introducing 'historical Jesus research', Dr Sanders strives to be moderate and rigorously historical in his claims. Even with this constraint, he finds much of historical worth in the gospels.

Stanton, Graham *Gospel Truth?*. A fine introduction to issues surrounding the dating and authenticity of the Gospels. Dr Stanton addresses particularly Dr Thiede's controversial claims (see below) but in the process deals with many interesting questions.

Thiede, Carsten Peter *Eyewitness to Jesus*. Dr Thiede suggests a very early date for three small fragments of a copy of Matthew's Gospel, in the mid- to late-first century. His conclusions are disputed by most scholars. Dr Thiede also wrote an earlier work claiming that a small fragment found at Qumran (see next entry) is actually from Mark's gospel. The value of this work isn't so much these more controversial claims as the general information it provides about the Gospels,

Wise, Michael *et al.* (editors), *The Dead Sea Scrolls*. English translation of the scrolls found at Qumran in 1947-1948. They consist of the writings of a Jewish sect known as the Essenes. They contain no affirmations about Jesus.

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