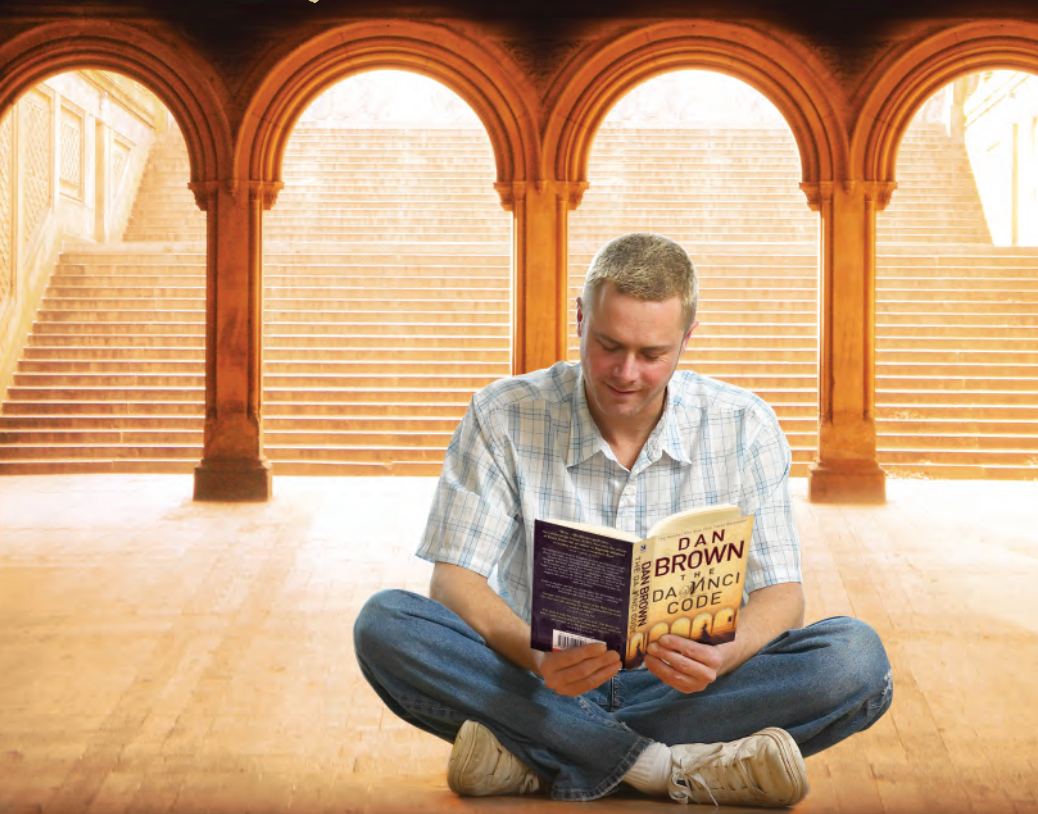


IS IT WORTH BELIEVING?

THE SPIRITUAL CHALLENGE OF THE

DA VINCI CODE



GREG CLARKE

Is it worth believing? The spiritual challenge of The Da Vinci Code

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1 | FOR CAVE DWELLERS

 FLUSH-FACED STUDENT BARGED into my office at New College and rammed his copy of *The Da Vinci Code* into my hands. “Read this!” he urged. “You’ll be out of a job!”

Since there aren’t that many openings for people running Christian apologetics centres on university campuses, I took him seriously and read the novel that weekend.

I know I’m in the minority, but it didn’t do much for me.

To be honest, I thought it was fairly run-of-the-mill murder mystery writing. It had some good pacing, especially early on, but I was put off immediately by the albino assassin. If he hadn’t been an albino, I might have been more on board. But the cliché of the albino killer did nothing for my enjoyment of the story. Surely this was just another airport page-turner destined for the bargain bin within a month or two.

But I was intrigued that the novel contained so much reli-

gious history. There are pages and pages of ‘teaching’ from one character to another on the history of Christianity, the early Christian church, how we got the Bible, and discussions of medieval pseudo-Christian sects. Why all of these history lessons padding out a murder mystery?

Meeting with my eager friend the following week, I suggested to him that the novel was built on some well-known speculations about Jesus and the history of Christianity, that it had misused some historical documents that were found in 1945 (*The Nag Hammadi Library*), and that there was no way it would become very popular. No way—it contained too much discussion of ancient religion. And no-one is interested in that!

That was a couple of years ago. I have never been more wrong. The novel has crashed through publishing record after publishing record, spreading wildly across the world of readers, until as I write it is being made into a Ron Howard film starring Tom Hanks. It has topped bestseller lists for longer than most other novels in history.

My friend was wrong, too. My job was not in jeopardy. In fact, thanks to *The Da Vinci Code*, the opportunities to write and speak about ancient Christianity are bigger and better than ever. We Christians have a lot to thank Dan Brown for (NB my tongue is stabbing my cheek).

The Da Vinci Code has put Christian history back squarely on the agenda in popular culture. It isn’t alone: Mel Gibson’s film, *The Passion of the Christ*, similarly revived public interest in the Gospel accounts of Jesus and

no doubt introduced some people to the story of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection for the very first time. As I write, the film of C.S. Lewis's children's fantasy, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is due for release, with its central story of making 'atonement' for the sins of another (in this case, the lion Aslan dying in the place of the rebellious boy, Edmund). Again, the message of Christianity (that Jesus died for our sins) is up in lights, even if they are sometimes the spotlights of interrogation.

But *The Da Vinci Code* casts its own peculiar shadow over traditional Christianity. Throughout this book, we will explore some of the details of its claims. Since the novel was published, an industry has developed in either defending or attacking its claims. There are already many books that do this well (see the 'Further reading' list at the end of this book). What this book sets out to do is a bit different.

My aim is to examine *why* we come to believe one view of Christianity over another. How do we form those beliefs? What factors contribute to our belief in one thing and our rejection of another? Is it all to do with our family backgrounds or what we were taught at school? Or is it something that we feel deep in our hearts and have little control over? Do reason and logic guide our beliefs, or are we more influenced by what we have experienced or by what the 'authorities' have told us is true?

Is it even possible to change your beliefs, or are you stuck with the ones you happen to find yourself with?

Since this is so important to our assessment of *The Da*

Vinci Code, let's summarize here the various different teachings on Christianity that the characters Leigh Teabing and Robert Langdon proclaim:

- Jesus was not divine. It wasn't until a church council in the fourth century that the Roman Emperor Constantine, motivated by politics, declared that Christians would now believe Jesus to be divine.
- The Bible, in particular the New Testament, was stitched together by another politically driven committee of church figures, once again manipulated into doing it by Constantine.
- There were many alternative accounts of the life of Jesus, which tell a very different story of him than the ones we have preserved as Holy Scripture in the Gospels (those Gospels known to us as 'The Gospel according to Matthew', 'Mark', 'Luke' and 'John'). These alternative accounts were destroyed by Constantine.
- But a few of these alternative 'gospels' survived. Documents found in 1945 in the sands of Egypt tell the true story of Christianity. They are known as *The Nag Hammadi Library*.
- Jesus and Mary Magdalene, one of the women whom the Bible records as followers of Jesus, were in fact married. Mary was carrying Jesus' child, later born in France and called Sarah, when Jesus was crucified (the fact of Jesus' crucifixion is not disputed in *The Da Vinci Code*).

- Jesus did not rise from the grave. There was no resurrection, as Christians believe. There is not a lot of specific discussion of the resurrection in the novel, but the implication is that Jesus died on the cross, and that his line continued through the child Mary Magdalene bore. The story of Jesus' resurrection is derived from the pagan myth of Mithras, the bull-god who was born on December 25 and rose from his tomb after three days—so claim Langdon and Teabing, at least.
- The claims of the Gospels that Jesus did miracles, such as turning water into wine and walking on water, are symbolic, not historical. That is, they provide metaphors and stories which people use to live their lives, but did not really happen.
- Sex is the means by which men and women commune with God. In particular, a man is spiritually incomplete until he has intercourse with a woman. The Church recast sex as sinful and disgusting, in order that it might wrest away for itself the power to act as a conduit to God.

Such material comprises a heavy load for something that fits the unofficial genre of 'airport thriller'!

When you read a novel in an airport lounge, you don't have many study aids around you. You are after diversion and entertainment, not a history or theology lesson. In fact, the point of fiction is to entertain, to pull together facts and fiction

into an intriguing story, and to satisfy you by the end, according to the rules of the genre. People differ on whether or not they think Dan Brown has done a good job in the genre, but his efforts have certainly been gargantuan. As we will see, Brown has covered most of the major Christian beliefs, some radical views of sex and human nature, and a vast reworking of the history of groups such as the Knights Templar.

But what happens when you *do* have study aids at hand—when you can check the kinds of claims made by Brown’s characters? Does the novel deserve to survive beyond the customs check at airport security? Should it be allowed to influence life in the ‘real world’?

In other words, do the views about Christianity that come out of the mouths of the novel’s characters provide a fair, truthful, accurate or believable alternative version of Christianity?

Is it worth believing?

Questions like these gave me reason to write this book. But first, we need to introduce the novel.

FOR CAVE DWELLERS

There may be a few of you. People for whom Leonardo Da Vinci is still merely a Renaissance painter, or perhaps a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle, and not a member of the secret society that holds the key to a true understanding of spirituality, Christian history and the person of Jesus. There may be