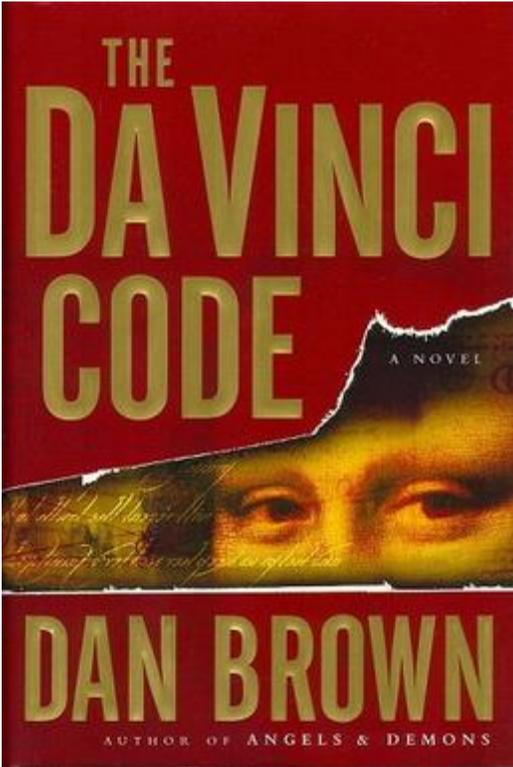


The Da Vinci Code: Fact vs. Fiction

by Fr. Steven Tschlis

The Da Vinci Code is a murder mystery shrouded in a conspiracy theory, a novelistic thriller, an airplane book, the kind of book you read when you want to waste time, an easy read that combines a fast narrative pace with short chapters.



WHAT'S WRONG WITH *THE DA VINCI CODE*?

Many people are reading author Dan Brown's 2003 **novel**, a work of **fiction**, as if it accurately portrayed the facts about Christ, the New Testament, the Church and Christian history. This delusion has unfortunately been encouraged by Brown himself in promotional interviews and appearances. When asked what parts of the history in his novel actually happened, he replied, "Absolutely all of it." Sadly, like one of my son's roommates at Boston College, many people reading *The Da Vinci Code* come away from the book with their faith in Christ and the Church shaken.

The definition of **fiction** according to the *American Heritage Dictionary*: 1. An imaginative pretense. 2. A lie. 3. A literary work, such as a novel, whose content is produced by the imagination

and is not necessarily based on fact.

The confusion about this book begins on the opening page where the author, prior to actually beginning his story, states that: "All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate." Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, there is so much that is historically false in this book that it's hard to know where to begin. One of the main characters in the book is an Englishman named Sir Leigh Teabing who is actually the bad guy, the mysterious "Teacher" responsible for ordering the murder of the curator of the Louvre with which the book opens. But Mr. Brown never lets the fast paced action of the book stand in the way of a good lecture and beginning with chapter 55, that's exactly what the Teabing character delivers. Let's begin by looking at some of the things that are said there about the Bible and the 1st Ecumenical Council.

THE LORD JESUS, THE BIBLE & THE FIRST ECUMENICAL COUNCIL

FICTION: "The Bible did not arrive by fax from heaven" declares Teabing. "The Bible is a product of man, my dear. Not of God. The Bible did not magically fall from the clouds. The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great. In 325 AD, he decided to unify Rome under a single religion: Christianity. Constantine needed to strengthen the new Christian tradition and held a famous gathering known as the Council of Nicea. Until that moment in history, Jesus was viewed by his followers as a mortal prophet....a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless. A mortal. Jesus' establishment as the Son of God was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicea. A relatively close vote at that. Nonetheless, establishing Christ's divinity was critical to the further unification of the Roman Empire and to the new Vatican power base. 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. The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up and burned."

There is so much silliness, misinformation and disinformation in that single paragraph that it's hard to know where to begin. Here are the facts:

FACT #1: Although there was a great deal of consensus among the Churches as to what constituted the New Testament well before the Council of Nicea, the first person to list the 27 books that all Christians today accept as the New Testament was not Constantine the Great but Athanasius the Great, the bishop and patriarch of Alexandria in Egypt, in a circular letter to all the Churches in Egypt written in 367AD, 42 years after the 1st Ecumenical Council. It was not Constantine who determined the canon of the New Testament as part of a political power play, but the Church, in the persons of its bishops and teachers.

FACT #2: We would agree that the New Testament "did not arrive by fax from heaven." The books of the New Testament were written by the apostles in order to get the story about Jesus straight. This is made clear, for example, in the opening verses of the Gospel of Luke 1: 1-4, where Luke, a friend and disciple of the apostle Paul, states that he wrote his gospel as "an orderly account" of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus after having "carefully studied" and consulting "eyewitnesses." Virtually all scholars agree that Luke's gospel was written sometime between 80 and 90 AD *at the latest*. Some scholars theorize that his gospel was written even earlier. Mark's gospel was certainly written earlier, no later than 65AD, probably in Rome, within only a few years of the execution of Peter and Paul during the persecution of Christians under Nero.

All of the Gospels proclaim that Jesus was *not* "a mortal prophet" and the disciples understood that Jesus was far more than just a man. When the disciples are asked by Jesus, "Who do you say that I am?" the apostle Peter responds: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" (Matthew 16:16). Nathaniel, another one of the 12 apostles, declares to Jesus, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (John 1:49). After Jesus calms a storm and walks on water, the Gospel of Matthew records that the disciples "exclaimed: Truly you are the Son of God!" (Matthew 14:33). In fact, Jesus is called "the Son of God" more than fifty times in the books of the New Testament! It would certainly be a surprise to the apostles (including Paul) to learn that they did not proclaim Jesus to be the Son of God and that this had to wait until the 1st Ecumenical Council.

It is therefore utterly false to assert that "Jesus was viewed by his followers as a mortal prophet....a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless" prior to the Council of Nicea. Just the opposite is true: the 1st Ecumenical Council was held in Nicea to uphold the New Testament teaching that Jesus is the Word and Son of God against the false teaching of an Egyptian man named Arius, a priest who taught that Jesus was more than a man but less than God - a kind of super angel. Athanasius, the future patriarch of Alexandria, attended the 1st Ecumenical Council as a young deacon. And, by the way, the vote was not "relatively close" at all. Of the 318 bishops who attended, all but 2 sided with the New Testament and the apostles and not Arius.

FACT #3: In the 4th century, during the reign of Constantine, there was no such thing as "the new Vatican power base." This is little more than an anti-Roman Catholic slur, one of many contained throughout the book. In fact, there was no such thing as the Vatican as we understand it today. For Mr. Brown, the author of *The Da Vinci Code*, the only Church is the Roman Catholic Church and he reads back into the 4th century the medieval rise and development of the papacy in the West. This is anachronistic. The Vatican, as we understand it today, is the result of the fall of the Roman Empire in

Western Europe in the 5th and 6th centuries, the increasing civil responsibilities of the papacy during the early Middle Ages, the emergence of the papal states and a number of other historical processes stretching over many centuries, long after Constantine's death. And finally, the modern Vatican state is a creation of the 19th century and the rise of Italian nationalism.

JESUS & MARY MAGDELENE: MARRIED?

FICTION: Perhaps the most outrageous and ludicrous assertion made in this novel is the character of Sir Leigh Teabing's statement that "the marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene is part of the historical record." Two reasons are then given for this amazing assertion. First, according to Robert Langdon, the novel's main character, "Because 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."



Teabing insists that the marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene is mentioned specifically in two ancient documents, *The Gospel of Philip* and *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, which he calls, together with the Dead Sea Scrolls, "the earliest Christian records."

FACT #1: There is not one shred of evidence accepted by any credible historian stating that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene. First, while it is true that "Jewish custom" encouraged marriage, it was not at all unheard of for Jews to practice celibacy. Perhaps the two most famous cases are Jeremiah, the Old Testament prophet of the 7th century B.C. who abstained from marriage as a sign to the Jewish people that the end of the kingdom of Judah was near (*Jeremiah 16:1-9*); and the Qumran community, a proto-monastic sect within Judaism at the time of Jesus responsible for producing and probably preserving the Dead Sea Scrolls so often mentioned in *The Da Vinci Code* as part of the "earliest Christian records." Actually, the Dead Sea Scrolls, initially discovered in 1947, contain no "Christian records" whatsoever because they are the products of an ancient Jewish community. Rather, they contain –

among other things – some of the oldest known manuscripts of the Old Testament. Ironically, the Dead Sea Scrolls were produced by a community of male Jewish celibates, precisely the kind of people Langdon asserts couldn't have existed within Judaism at the time of Jesus.

FACT #2: Both *The Gospel of Philip* and *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* are commonly called "gnostic" gospels by New Testament scholars and historians today. They are pseudonymous works notoriously unreliable as historical documents and in fact contain no historical outline of events in the life of Christ whatsoever, in stark contrast to the canonical New Testament Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John that clearly speak in historical terms of the birth, baptism, ministry, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ.

FACT #3: Gnosticism is an umbrella term that modern scholars use to describe a number of religious movements in the ancient Roman world, many of which were not at all related to Christianity, all of which had several common themes: that members of the various gnostic sects had a secret knowledge not available to others; that there were a series of lesser mediating divinities sometimes called Archons, sometimes called Aeons; and a dualistic outlook, an antithesis between matter and spirit, body and soul and a hatred of the physical world that was often believed to have been created not by God but by a lesser, evil demigod to imprison the souls of human beings. None of these beliefs are Christian.

To take only one example from *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Gospel of Philip* cited by Teabing as proof that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married was produced at the end of the 3rd century AD, almost two hundred years *after* the Gospel of John, the last of the four New Testament gospels to be written. It is hardly part of "the earliest Christian records." Scholars today agree that it was produced within circles faithful to the teaching of a man named Valentinus, an Egyptian gnostic teacher who taught in Rome between 135 and 168AD and who is one of the few gnostic teachers whose subsequent disciples - Ptolemaeus and Markus - and theological views we know anything about. Their Christian contemporaries in the ancient world, like St. Irenaeus, the bishop of the city of Lyons in what was then the Roman province of Gaul but is today France, wrote a series of books refuting the teachings of Valentinus, his disciples and other gnostic teachers, as well. These books, like *The Gospel of Philip*, have survived to this day and I, as a seminarian, had to read both these Gnostic documents and the response to these documents by various bishops and teachers of the Church like Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria.

THE DAYS OF THE WEEK

FICTION: "Even Christianity's weekly holy day was stolen from the pagans," the Teabing character declares. "Originally," Langdon adds, "Christianity honored the Jewish Sabbath of Saturday, but Constantine shifted it to coincide with the pagan's veneration of the sun. To this day, most churchgoers attend services on Sunday morning with no idea that they are there on account of the pagan sun god's weekly tribute - *Sunday*."

FACT: Nothing could be further from the truth. As a matter of pure and simple fact, the New Testament records quite clearly that Christians gathered for worship on the day of Christ's resurrection from the dead, the day *after* the Sabbath (Mark 16:2) or the Lord's Day ("Kyriake" in the original Greek) as it is described in Revelation 1:10. This ancient practice is also referred to in Acts 20:7 and 1 Corinthians 16:2. Furthermore, a number of post-New Testament writers like St. Ignatius of Antioch (executed in 115AD) and St. Justin the Martyr (executed in 155AD) to name only two, confirm the practice of Christians gathering for worship on Sunday. Constantine "shifted" nothing. All that Constantine did in the year 321AD was grant legal status as a holiday within the Empire to a centuries-old apostolic practice of the Church.

But we also need to look at the question of language. It is true, as the Langdon character asserts, that Sunday is indeed the "Day of the Sun" in English. And Saturday, by the way, is "Saturn's Day" and *not* the Jewish Sabbath. Thursday is "Thor's Day." It is true that the names for the days of the week in modern English have all been adapted from ancient mythologies. But in Greek, things are very different. Only three days have names in Greek: *Paraskeve*, the Day of Preparation for the Sabbath; *Savvato*, the Sabbath day; and *Kyriake*, the Lord's Day. After the Lord's Day, the days of the week are merely numbered: *Deutera*, the Second Day (Monday); *Trete*, the Third Day (Tuesday) and so on. In the Greek of

the New Testament, as well as in modern Greek to this day, there is no confusion regarding the Judeo-Christian origins of the names for the days of the week.

THE NAME OF GOD: YHWH

FICTION: "The Jewish tetragramaton YHWH – the sacred name of God – derived from Jehovah, an androgynous physical union between the masculine Jah and the pre-Hebraic name for Havah."

FACT: This is completely false! As any first year seminary student can tell you, Jehovah is actually a 16th century English rendering for the King James Version Bible of the Hebrew YHWH using the vowels for the word "Adonai" or "Lord," the word which was read by devout Jews whenever they came across God's name in the text of the Old Testament because they felt the actual name of God was too awesome to be pronounced by human lips.

WITCH HUNTS

FICTION: "During 300 years of witch hunts the Church burned at the stake an astounding 5,000,000 women" Langdon, the Harvard professor, says to his French love interest, Sophie.

FACT: Even non-Christian historians now agree that the number of people – both men and women – executed between 1400-1800 for suspected witchcraft was somewhere between 30,000 to 50,000. Modern scholars suggest that perhaps 100,000 such trials were held between 1450 and 1750, with somewhere between 30,000 to 50,000 executions, of which 25% - 7,500 to 12,500 – were men. It is also clear that despite the involvement of Church authorities, the vast majority of those condemned as witches were in fact condemned by local secular courts. Of course, here, as throughout the book, whenever Mr. Brown uses the word "church" he is always referring to the Roman Catholic Church and this book contains a clear anti-Roman Catholic bias. But it is a simple fact that many witch-hunts took place in Protestant countries like England and her colonies (for example, one need only recall the infamous witch trials in Salem, MA). Interestingly enough, in the Orthodox Church, there never developed an Office of the Inquisition as in the Roman Catholic Church; nor were there ever any witch-hunts or trials.

A CONSPIRACY?

"Everyone loves a conspiracy," thinks Langdon and indeed, this is perhaps one reason why *The Da Vinci Code* fascinates so many people and still dominates *The New York Times* bestseller list. Brown's conspirators in this two millennia long cover-up include the Roman Catholic Church, the Knights Templar, Opus Dei (a Roman Catholic organization that in fact does *not* have monks nor do its members wear a monastic habit of any kind, much less go around murdering people) the Masons, Interpol and a secret society known as the Priory of Sion, (that is an actual organization officially registered with the French government in 1956 that most likely originated after WW II and first came to public notice in 1962). So much for being a "secret" society! With the exception of French film maker Jean Cocteau, its illustrious list of Grand Masters as presented in the novel – Leonardo, Isaac Newton and Victor Hugo – is simply not credible and no historian takes such claims seriously.

THE RELICS OF MARY MAGDALENE

But perhaps the most fantastic claim of all is that the Holy Grail of Arthurian legend and popular movies like *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* is not the chalice that Christ drank from at the Last Supper

but Mary Magdalene herself and a tomb that contains her remains. The main character in the novel, Robert Langdon, cracks the mysterious code left behind by Sauniere, the murdered curator of the Louvre and discovers that the bones of Mary Magdalene are buried in the Louvre. Where are the relics of Mary Magdalene today? Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians know that they are certainly not buried in the Louvre! According to the historical tradition of the Church, Mary Magdalene died in the city of Ephesus and was buried there. Her body, an object of veneration by Christians, was transferred to Constantinople in the 9th century by the Byzantine emperor Leo the Wise, an event that is still commemorated on our liturgical calendar each year on May 4th. Following the sack of Constantinople by the Crusaders in 1204, most of her relics were carried back to Rome and placed under the altar in the Lateran Palace (the papal chapel). Some of her relics are located in Vezelay, a small town near Marseilles in France, and are housed in St. Maximin's Basilica. Her arm is kept at the Monastery of Simonos Petra on Mt. Athos.

The Da Vinci Code is a fast paced but poorly written murder mystery full of ridiculous errors of fact. It is, after all, a work of fiction. Whatever the claims concerning his research in preparation for writing this novel, the simple fact is that author Dan Brown knows little about Leonardo, little about art and virtually nothing about Jesus, the Bible and Christian history.