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The Da Vinci Delusion

Then

"Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.

"Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.

"Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12).

Now

Is this the day? Will Christ return today?

Almost immediately after Christ's death, burial and resurrection, speculation began about when He would return and the nature of that return. It is clear that many of His followers expected a quick return, and there have been periodic predictions ever since. None of those predictions has been correct, for Jesus said, "concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only" (Matthew 24:36). The day of His return is described as being like a thief in the night by Jesus Himself (Matthew 24:33; Luke 12:39; Revelation 3:3, 16:15), Paul (1 Thessalonians 5:2), and Peter (2 Peter 3:10).

But if His return is to be preceded by a "strong delusion," could this day--the day [The Da Vinci Code](#) movie is released, be such a sign? Are Dan Brown's novel and Ron Howard's movie merely trivial entertainment, or are they part of the larger tapestry that perhaps began in December of 1945, when Egyptian Bedouin field workers digging, appropriately enough, for fertilizer uncovered an earthen jar containing a trove of fourth century copies of early Gnostic Christian documents. The *Gospel of*

Philip was one of the works contained in these bound volumes, and one ambiguous passage in it serves as the linchpin for Brown's fiction.

Welcome to the past, brothers and sisters. At a time when many in the church are seeking a return to her ancient truths, perhaps it is appropriate that what is now the best-selling novel of all time should dredge up the self-serving fantasies of second century Gnostics.

In its lead article of the May 20 issue, [World](#) magazine commented that "twisted theology is not what makes Mr. Brown's novel so popular. What sells *The Da Vinci Code*--and fuels expectations ahead of this month's movie premiere--is its quintessential "good read," full of thrilling action, page-turning suspense, and a plot that twists and turns and surprises."

With all due respect to *World*, I beg to differ. *The Da Vinci Code* is far from the most entertaining thriller ever written. At the risk of being accused of writer's envy (with some justification--would that Peculiar People had 1% Brown's sales) and even putting Brown's ludicrously-fractured history (see note) aside, I found the novel filled with preposterous situations and amazingly inconsistent characters--unbelievably clever at one moment, inexplicably obtuse the next. At least, however, it was better than *Digital Fortress*, Brown's earlier effort that was resurrected after the success of *Da Vinci*, and which also centered on conspiracies within a major institution. Even if one admits that America's appetite for trivial entertainment, simply being a "good read" cannot explain the *Da Vinci Code* phenomenon.

I want to suggest two alternate reasons for its success, one as old as the Resurrection, the other more recent.

Denying Jesus' Divinity

Accepting Jesus' divinity demands a response that many humans would rather avoid. It proves unequivocally that absolute truth exists, anathema to our politically-correct, relativistic, "tolerant" culture. If absolute truth exists, we can no longer claim that everyone's opinions are equally valid. Other faiths can no longer be viewed as equally valid. Lifestyles contradictory to biblical truth can no longer be considered acceptable choices. All these facts are diametrically opposed to the prevailing cultural and political trends in this country. Jesus' divinity changes everything.

Denial of Jesus' divinity is nothing new. It began as soon as the claim was first made, and it has never stopped. While Dan Brown uses ancient Gnostic texts in his novel, he completely misrepresents them, claiming that they claimed Christ Jesus was a mere mortal. In reality, the Gnostic gospels emphasize Jesus' divinity even more than the canonical gospels. Some claimed that Jesus only appeared to be human (docetism, from the Greek work **dokeo**, *to seem*). Others claimed that Jesus was merely the human shell in which the purely spiritual Christ resided temporarily (from Jesus' baptism until the crucifixion). In many Gnostic texts, Jesus performs supernatural acts far more bizarre than anything in the New Testament.

Radical Feminism

The Da Vinci Code appeals to modern radical feminism that views men as the root of all evil. Brown's characters claim that the church denigrated women and kidnapped from their ordained leadership role. It is certainly true that the post-apostolic church is guilty as charged. Women's roles, prominent in the New Testament, were

subjugated under in the hierarchical church that emerged in the second century, but the New Testament is a radical call to egalitarianism in the church, while retaining the God-given differences between men and women.

It is ironic that Gnosticism, particularly Brown's revisionist Gnosticism, appeals to feminists because ancient Gnosticism values the feminine not for the God-given qualities, but for what it offers to men. There is some evidence that second and third century women in the Gnostic movement continued to hold some positions of authority, but the worship of the "sacred feminine" has nothing to do with human females. Before Christ (and Paul), women were generally viewed as lesser creatures than men. They must rise above their sex before they can attain salvation, as evidenced by an alleged saying of Jesus from the *Gospel of Thomas*, the best known Gnostic text: "Simon Peter said to him, 'Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life [*the common view*].' Jesus said, 'I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven'" (114, Thomas O. Lambdin translation).

Parenthetically, how many of you who read *The Da Vinci Code* noted the blatant sexism in Brown's "Priory of Sion"? All four leaders of the Priory, guarding the secret, are men. In fact, the only notable female role in the Priory was a woman having ritualistic sex with the Grand Master so that **he** could "experience God!"

Christianity, on the other hand, celebrates women as co-heirs of God's grace in their own right. As Paul wrote to the churches in Galatia, "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*" (Galatians 3:28). Greeks did not have to become Jews to be part of God's family; slaves did not have to become free; and, contrary to the *Gospel of Thomas*, women did not have to become men.

Furthermore, most Gnostic groups condemned human sexuality and particularly women's unique function as child-bearers. Only the mythical life-givers--Artemis, Diana, Isis, and the like--were valued.

While Paul expressed his personal preference for remaining unmarried, he nonetheless valued marriage and wrote of the essentially equal (but different) responsibilities of men and women in family relationships. While he called for women to submit to their husbands, he called for men to love wives "as Christ loves the church." Given Christ's example, and particularly his ultimate sacrifice, which is the more demanding requirement?

Gnosticism emerged before the end of the apostolic period, particularly in cities like Ephesus, where the cult of the mother goddess (Artemis) was a powerful influence. Gnostic attitudes toward women and child-bearing may help explain one of the most difficult verses in the Pauline corpus: "*Yet she will be saved through childbearing--it they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control*" (1 Timothy 2:15). I believe Paul is saying, "No! Women don't have to become men. They will be saved *as they are!*" This interpretation is further bolstered by Paul's closing comment to his protégé: "*O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called 'knowledge,' (gnosis) for by professing it some have swerved from the faith. Grace be with you*" (1 Timothy 6:20-21).

Which view more values women?

Selfishness

The foundation that ultimately fuels *The Da Vinci Code* is selfishness. In Gnosticism, salvation comes not through submitting one's life and everything one does to the example Jesus set, but to self-knowledge. Whereas biblical Christianity calls people to serve others, Gnosticism insists that nothing we do in this life has any bearing on our ultimate fate. Gnosticism makes no claim on our behavior because salvation comes through unlocking the wisdom goddess (Sophia) within us.

I believe it is this selfishness, manifested in the relativistic denial of Jesus' divinity and in radical feminism that has made *The Da Vinci Code* so popular. It is a classic example of forcing current culture back onto the ancient story. It appeals to so many people because its premise, "that everything our fathers taught us about Christianity is a lie," frees us from the truth that demands a response. Without God, we can justify just about any behavior. This is the real delusion in *The Da Vinci Code*.

Conclusion

It is easy to accuse Dan Brown of blasphemy and prevarication. Certainly, he failed miserably in his responsibility, even in a work of fiction, to get his facts right. There will always be the Leigh Teabings and Robert Langdons of the world, eager to embrace conspiracy theories and anti-establishment ideas, but how many readers and viewers will be no more discerning than Sophie Neveu? How many will let Brown's fantasies appeal to their distrust of institutions and particularly of the modern church with its dizzyingly sectarian divisions, gaudy buildings, ostentatious television studio sets, charlatan healers, homosexual-haters, and pedophilic priests?

If the percentage of Americans apparently believing that *The Da Vinci Code* holds more truth than the Bible grows substantially, it will not be Dan Brown at fault. It will be a church that focuses on petty differences of beliefs and practices and has become a country club for unrepentant hypocrites who have forgotten the simple message of God's divine Son:

"By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

Once again, it seems that Pogo was right: "We have met the enemy and he is us." I have heard a number of so-called Christian leaders proclaim that the church has always faced opposition and has always survived. They confidently announce the church will survive *The Da Vinci Code*. But too often in the past, the church survived only by becoming something God never intended--a politically powerful, unaccountable, rigidly authoritarian hierarchical human institution. We frequently employ the Christian-speak of a "broken world," but we should focus first on a broken church.

Perhaps Dan Brown has done Christianity an unwitting favor. By his off-target highlighting of the errors of the poor substitute Man has created, perhaps the ground has been furrowed for the regermination of the real thing. Only by reverting to the living organism Christ created--one in which every member is equal before God, in which every member contributes his or her gifts to the work, in which every member displays genuinely submissive love for one another, and in which every member place his or her hope solely in the grace of God--only then can we begin to offer anything to those who do not yet know Christ..

I'll be going to a theater sometime in the next couple of weeks to see *The Da Vinci Code*, if only to see how this delusion plays out on the big screen. My only real hesitation is that I won't be able to watch *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy again without seeing the nefarious Sir Leigh Teabing instead of the noble Gandalf (both played by Sir Ian McKellen. I don't really believe that *The Da Vinci Code* is the harbinger of the Second Coming, but on the other hand, I wouldn't be terribly surprised to see the sun darken and hear a trumpet sound (cf Matthew 24:29-31) sometime in the near future.

Note: This is not my first pass at a response to *The Da Vinci Code*. The first version of this issue focused on the most serious errors in the novel, but I decided those have been sufficiently chronicled by others.

Discussion

Surprisingly (to me), only one person commented on this issue. Perhaps because she questioned the "furor" churches are making over the book, others were dissuaded from adding to it. Or perhaps we just all over-saturated with *The Da Vinci Code*!

This note came in today from Jeff in Colorado:

Hi Dick:

I enjoyed both of your versions of the Da Vinci Delusion. But, I believe I enjoyed your original one the best. Having read all of Dan Brown's works (for the most part they've been out on the Internet as e-books) I found your quote by quote factual rebuttal an excellent counterpoint to the fiction superimposed on history.

By the way, I tried to purchase your Aspen's book but Pay Pal wouldn't let me pay for it. I'll keep trying.

[DS] The PayPal purchase links were quite old, so I've updated them and they all seem to be working now. At my website, you can purchase electronic copies of both *Peculiar People* and *Aspen Leaves on New-Fallen Snow*, as well as signed hard copies of *Peculiar People*.



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, respond so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: Pastoral Leadership (May 30)

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