

## Debunking *The Da Vinci Code* (revised January 2006)

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This essay complements my slide lecture “Beyond *The Da Vinci Code*: The Historical Leonardo”. While the latter focuses on Leonardo’s artistic innovations, these remarks address Brown’s historical and art historical misrepresentations including his fanciful ideas about Leonardo. For an extended discussion of Leonardo’s art, see my Connecticut College website at <http://oak.conncoll.edu/rwbal> or email me at [rwbal@conncoll.edu](mailto:rwbal@conncoll.edu).

### **The Broad Appeal of Dan Brown’s Book**

Though the success of Dan Brown’s murder mystery depends primarily on its qualities as a suspenseful, well-constructed page turner, many readers find its extensive historical discussion compelling. Almost all of this “history” is lifted from an earlier bestseller, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln (1983). Unlike Brown’s work of fiction, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* claims historical validity while succumbing to a hoax about Christ’s supposed marriage and a medieval society guarding this secret. Both books reduce history to a farfetched set of interlocked conspiracies. The primary secret is that Christ married Mary Magdalen and had children whose descendants married into the Merovingian kings of medieval France. A descendant of these kings will someday rule a united Europe. At that time, the truth about Christ will be revealed by the Priory of Sion, a secret society supposedly founded in the middle ages. In fact, the Priory of Sion was founded in France in 1958 by, among others, Pierre Plantard, a royalist and a convicted forger. Plantard smuggled false documents about the medieval pedigree of the Priory into the Bibliothèque Nationale in the 1970s, documents naively cited in *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, *The Da Vinci Code*, and a BBC documentary. Since Brown’s book, French investigators and journalists have exposed the hoax and Plantard himself has confessed to fabricating these documents.<sup>1</sup>

Though little of Brown’s “history” is substantiated or accurate, much of it rings true by affirming myths dear to a broad spectrum of the modern reading public.<sup>2</sup> For secularists and atheists, Brown makes Christ’s divinity a fraud perpetuated by a church eager to expand its own power while suppressing the “true” history of Christ, a wise man who married and had children. For American Protestants long suspicious of Catholics and still willing to tolerate Catholic bashing in the media, Brown depicts the Roman church as secretive, treacherous, dishonest, murderous, and profoundly out of step with modern life. For modern Americans generally distrustful of institutions, especially the Roman church in the wake of recent child abuse scandals (mentioned on p. 266), the novel shows the corruption of large institutions. For those who grew up after the sexual revolution, Brown offers an appealing idea of a lost pagan age of sexual innocence and freedom destroyed by a supposedly misanthropic Christianity. For supporters of gay rights, Leonardo emerges as a gay crusader, a “flamboyant homosexual” (p. 45) at odds with Christian authority. For those fascinated by astrology, numerology, and symbols, the novel offers a window into a hidden world of secret societies, codes, and artistic symbols ranging from ancient history and Egypt to *The Little Mermaid*. For tourists and art lovers, the novel visits major

architectural sites (the Louvre, Temple Church, Westminster Abbey, Rosslyn Chapel) while decoding secret meaning in three works of Leonardo (*Last Supper*, *Vitruvian Man*, and *Madonna of the Rocks*). Brown's novel also flatters less educated readers by dropping the names of other artists, scientists, and writers including Botticelli, Bernini, Newton, Hugo, Debussy, and Cocteau, without saying anything about their work. In short, *The Da Vinci Code* has a little something for everyone.

### **Elements of Truth in Brown's Book**

Brown's historical discussion also appeals because some of its history is indeed "true" while much of the rest contains elements of truth. Thanks to modern secularism and Biblical scholarship, we see the Bible not as God's infallible Word revealed to mankind but as a set of canonical books written by men and carefully selected by the male theologians and officials who presided over the early Christian church.<sup>3</sup> It is also true that the Catholic church is somewhat secretive, hostile to some aspects of modern life (feminism, gay rights, birth control, abortion), hierarchical, and at times, corrupt, as seen in its handling of the sex abuse scandal. Protestant secrecy, corruption, and scandal are also easy to find. Nor can anyone easily deny that Christian institutions contributed to a larger Western misogyny over the ages, to the violent persecution of women accused of witchcraft, and to the persecution of Jews, "heretics," and Muslim "infidels". With respect to art, no knowledgeable person could deny that Western art and literature contains much esoteric symbolism and allegory or that Leonardo was interested in androgynous figures, female beauty, and fertility.

Brown's history is also true in other areas. Christianity changed significantly in the early centuries, especially after it became the official religion of the Roman empire. The transformation of Christianity from a persecuted, underground religion whose images were confined to the catacombs to an imperial state religion lavishly patronized by Constantine and later emperors remade Christianity for political and institutional purposes, though not by suppressing certain Gospels, as Brown suggests. (These official books of scripture were codified 100-150 years before Constantine.) Brown would have done better by noting how Roman imperial culture helped remake Christ from a humble carpenter, born in a shed, mingling with lowly artisans and sinners, and crucified like a common criminal, into a victorious king, his entry into Jerusalem on an ass transformed into an imperial triumph, his shameful cross reinterpreted as a glorious trophy of Roman military victory, cosmic power, and ecclesiastical authority, and so on.)<sup>4</sup> Brown is also correct when he says the early Christian church focused on Christ's divinity, though not for the sinister motives he suggests whereby the church made Christ into a deity for political reasons. A divine Christ was more intelligible and acceptable to a pagan world which distinguished sharply between sacred and human. For pagan philosophers like Celsus, the biggest stumbling block to Christianity was its God born into the lowly, mortal flesh.<sup>5</sup> Well before Constantine, early Christian culture stressed Christ the God. Early Christian art avoided the Crucifixion altogether until the late fourth century. And even after the crucified Christ appeared in art, he was shown for the next three centuries as triumphantly alive on the cross, ruling like a god from on high. Images of the dead Christ in his full humanity were simply unacceptable to official Christian culture until the late seventh century. It wasn't until the twelfth century that Christ's humanity became truly important in the Western church. And it began to assume primary only in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

In other areas, Brown offers a history which is “true” in its plausibility. Mary Magdalen may well have played a more important role than that described in the Gospels, especially since the New Testament was written 50-75 years after the life of Christ. How many important women in history have ever received their due from male writers? And Brown’s stress on Christ’s humanity and ethical-spiritual wisdom is the Christ esteemed by a more secular modern world since the early nineteenth century. The awesome, remote Christ presiding as a terrifying judge over the Last Judgement has largely vanished with the middle ages.

### **Brown’s False or Distorted History**

Despite the elements of truth in *The Da Vinci Code*, most of Brown’s history is either 1) beyond any possible historical record, 2) unsubstantiated conjecture, 3) distorted, or 4) demonstrably false. This applies to almost everything of the greatest popular interest in *The Da Vinci Code* including paganism as goddess worship, Christ’s secret marriage to Mary Magdalen, their French descendants, the historical existence of the Priory of Sion, Leonardo’s supposed conflicts with religious authorities, and the interpretation of his *Last Supper*.

### Beyond the Historical Record

Brown’s most radical claim is that Christ was a wise human being, not the divinity which the church later made him out to be for corrupt political purposes (p. 257). Unfortunately, this claim is outside the realm of history. Like the existence of God, it cannot be proved or disproved. What can be disproved is Brown’s claim that Christ’s lack of divinity is a well-documented historical fact.

### Unsubstantiated Conjecture

It is pure conjecture to claim that Christ was married. While Brown notes marriage was expected for Jewish men, some Jewish men never married. What is factual historically is that no document from the early Christian period says Christ was married – nothing in Scripture, or in the suppressed Gospels, or in any other text. Professor Teabing quotes the apochryphal *Gospel of Mary Magdalen* but the passage says only that Christ loved the Magdalen more than the other disciples. Brown also uses the apochryphal *Gospel of Philip* which describes Christ’s special affection for the Magdalen and the resulting anger of the other disciples toward Christ (p. 246). But this passage undercuts the idea of marriage since the disciples would not have faulted Christ for showing affection to his wife. Brown claims the Magdalen is described in this Gospel as Christ’s “spouse” but the word used means “friend or “companion” and it’s a Greek word, not Aramaic.<sup>6</sup>

Brown’s solution to the lack of real historical evidence is the one favored by conspiracy theorists everywhere, a solution which places the argument beyond historical discussion. He simply states the marriage was secret. Unfortunately, this secret is completely implausible in being suppressed for two thousand years by the Church (and hidden for no reason by the Priory) while remaining well known to numerous artists, writers, scientists, composers, and historians throughout the ages, even to Walt Disney (pp. 261-262). Professor Teabing tells Sophie,

“I won’t bore you with the countless references to Jesus and Mary Magdalen’s union. This has been explored ad nauseam by modern historians”. (p. 247)

In fact, Christ's marriage has not been explored *ad nauseam* by modern historians nor has it been documented by anyone. There are *no* references to this union before the "new age" theological speculation of the 1980s. At best, some serious historians like Elaine Pagels have recently argued that Christ *could* have been married. And the Magdalen may well have been considerably more important than the historical record shows. But until new evidence comes to light, all such thinking about Christ and the Magdalen must remain speculation.

Despite Brown's claim that "countless scholars of that era chronicled Mary Magdalen's days in France" (p. 253) there is no evidence Mary Magdalen went to France after Christ's death. This is a later medieval legend, like the conventional identity of the Magdalen itself, which fused three distinct characters in the Bible.<sup>7</sup> In the Bible, the penitent harlot was a different person from the noble woman who washed Christ's feet at the Feast in the House of Levi. The story of her resting place in France had more to do with the ambition of French clerics to claim important relics, burial grounds, and lucrative pilgrimage sites. Competing French churches claimed Mary's true relics. Other biographies placed the Magdalen's life elsewhere. In the Eastern church, Mary Magdalen lived out her life in the Holy Lands and her "true" relics were also preserved there as well.

#### Distortions and Exaggerations

Contrary to Brown, Christianity did not replace a goddess-worshipping pagan spirituality centered on the sacred feminine with a misogynistic ethos determined to stamp out the true place of women in Christ's life.<sup>8</sup>

*"The ancients believed that the male was spiritually incomplete until he had carnal knowledge of the sacred feminine. Physical union with the female remained the sole means through which man could become spiritually complete and ultimately achieve gnosis – knowledge of the divine. Since the days of Isis, sex rites had been considered man's only bridge from earth to heaven. By communing with woman,' Langdon said, 'man could achieve a climactic instant when his mind went totally blank and he could see God.'" (pp. 308-9; also see p. 238.)*

While sex rites and temple prostitution were part of some ancient cults, most Greek and Roman religion and laws stressed moderation in all things sexual. The Romans were particularly sober in this regard and worried about the "effeminate" pleasure ethos which they perceived in some areas of Greek society. Every important school of classical philosophy (Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, and Epicurean) preached moderation and the orderly control of bodily impulses through divine mind. Reason was the primary path to the sacred, not the body with its lower, animal passions. It is hard to imagine an idea further from classical religion and philosophy than Brown's claim that pagan men saw God for an instant when the mind went blank during orgasm. For classical writers, the blank mind was the mind furthest from God, especially during moments of extreme pleasure.

Brown also invents a balance between masculine and feminine which is simply not found in antiquity.

*“The ancients envisioned their world in two halves – masculine and feminine. The gods and goddesses worked to keep a balance of power. Yin and yang. When male and female were balanced, there was harmony in the world. When they were unbalanced, there was chaos.”* (p. 36)

The real story is that most classical philosophy gendered the cosmos into a patriarchal hierarchy not a balance. Order depended on “masculine” mind ruling over a “feminine” subservient body in all aspects of nature just as husbands were supposed to ruler over their wives.<sup>9</sup> The harmonious cosmos in classical culture was almost always a patriarchal order as described in book one of Aristotle’s *Politics*.

*And it is clear that the rule of the soul over the body, and of the mind and the rational element over the passionate, is natural and expedient; whereas as the equality of the two or the rule of the inferior is always hurtful. The same holds good of animals in relation to men; ... and all tame animals are better off when ruled by man .... . Again, the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior, and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind. Where there is such a difference as that between soul and body, ... the lower sort are by nature slaves, and it is better for them as for all inferiors that they should be under the rule of a master.*<sup>10</sup>

While pagan religions did sanctify human sexuality and female fertility in contrast to Judaeo-Christian notions of the sinful body or early Christian ideals of chastity and virginity, the classical religious world was emphatically patriarchal. Zeus (Jupiter), and his two brothers, Poseidon (Neptune) and Hades (Pluto) ruled the universe. Goddesses like Venus, Flora, Ceres, Diana and Isis had much smaller domains tied to nature’s fertility, human sexuality, love, beauty, and childbirth. Cosmic government was reserved for male authority and “masculine” reason. For all the goddess worship in the cult of Demeter, Diana, Venus, and Isis, the predominant focus of pagan religion was on male figures such as Jupiter, Sol, Dionysius, Mithras, Orpheus, and Dionysius.<sup>11</sup>

The patriarchal nature of classical religion is particularly clear in the many “glorious” rapes committed by most of the gods including Zeus, Neptune, Pluto, Apollo, Bacchus, Mars, Mercury Zephyr, Boreas, Pan, and Priapus. The semi-divine kings and heroes who descended from these rapes went on to repeat this “heroic” act by raping more women. Hercules, Perseus, Achilles, Paris, Castor and Pollux, and Romulus all descended from the gods by rape and they all went on to rape mortal women in turn. In classical literature from Homer on, rape is usually described as divine love which greatly honors the woman in question and usually brings heroic offspring whose god-like feats ring out through the ages. The most important founding myth of Rome was the rape of the Sabines planned by Romulus, son of Mars by rape.

Brown’s idea of Christianity as a woman-hating religion is also distorted even if it holds some truth. The New (and Old) Testaments are full of patriarchal thinking. The Old Testament opens by blaming Eve more for the Fall and by having God punish her and all women after her with obedience to their husbands. Jewish scholars like Philo of Alexandria elaborated allegorized Adam as divine mind and Eve as earthly body created when mind abandoned itself to sleep. The Fall became the decent of “masculine” mind into “feminine” body.

*“For just as the man shows himself in activity and the woman in passivity, so the province of the mind is activity, and that of the perceptive sense passivity, as in woman. . . For the sake of sense-perception the Mind, when it has become her slave, abandons both God and the Father of the universe, and God's excellence and wisdom ... and cleaves to and becomes one with sense-perception ... For when that which is superior, namely Mind, becomes one with that which is inferior, namely Sense-perception, it resolves itself into the order of flesh . . . the moving cause of the passions. . . . Exceeding well did God the Framer of living beings contrive the order in which they were created. First He made mind, the man, for mind is most venerable in a human being, then bodily sense, the woman ...”<sup>12</sup>*

New Testament patriarchy appears frequently in Paul’s epistles, especially his many commands for female obedience to husbands (*Ephesians* 5:22-24; *Corinthians* 11:3-10; 14:34-35; *Collossians* 3:18; 1 *Peter* 3:1-6) or 1 *Timothy* 2:11-14 used frequently to forbid women any public voice in or outside the church.

*Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection.  
But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.  
For Adam was first formed, then Eve.  
And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.*

And there is no shortage of extreme misogynists in the Christian middle ages following the example set by Tertullian, an important theologian of the late second century who blamed all women as modern Eves responsible for Christ’s death.

*“And do you not know that you are an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil's gateway: ... you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert-that is, death-even the Son of God had to die.”<sup>13</sup>*

In extolling chastity as the only pure or sanctified state, Early Christian thinking devalued and in many cases demonized the “feminine” bodily realm and female sexuality in particular. In this, Christianity reinterpreted and extended the universal patriarchy of the day.

Unfortunately, Brown’s focus on Christian misogyny misses the fact that early Christianity appealed much more to women and spread so rapidly among them that “women were a clear majority in the churches of the third century”.<sup>14</sup> Two factors deserve special mention. The early Christian cult of chastity actually empowered women by allowing many to escape marriage altogether, or to remain single after widowhood (in contrast to their Jewish counterparts).<sup>15</sup> Early Christianity also appealed to women (and to slaves and the lower classes) for its radically egalitarian world where all souls were equal in the eyes of God. As Paul wrote (probably thinking more about the next world), “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus*” (Galatians 3:28). For

the first two centuries, Christianity was dominated by Paul's Apocalyptic outlook wherein the faithful expected an imminent Second Coming and the end of all social injustice.<sup>16</sup>

We might also note the woman-friendly nature of Christ himself. Although he displayed traditional "masculine" qualities in his preaching, wisdom, and miraculous power, he also embodied almost every "feminine" virtue. In contrast to most classical deities who waged war, conquered, ruled, and raped, Christ was chaste, mild, humble, passive, peaceful, self-sacrificing, forgiving, loving, a compassionate healer, and a friend to children. No wonder pagan critics of Christianity like the philosopher, Celsus, mocked the new cult as "feminine" superstition appealing to women and children.<sup>17</sup>

Among the many lesser distortions is Brown's claim that the Church burned five million witches over three centuries (p. 125). This number is thirty times higher than most historical estimates. In any case, witches often fell victim not to the church per se but to the secular grievances of neighbors. Many accusations stemmed from animosities tied to local political, economic, and personal conflicts. Henry VIII accused his second wife, Anne Boleyn, of witchcraft, for purely secular reasons. The inflated figure of five million allows Brown to blame Christianity for a holocaust. Brown also blames the Church for the mass murder of Muslims by crusaders. Even if this holds some truth, it obscures the secular, economic motives of the crusaders and oversimplifies centuries of more peaceful interactions and trade with the Muslim east. It also overlooks centuries of violent Muslim expansion after 1375 as the Ottoman Turkish empire moved aggressively into Christian Europe and Northern Africa. Brown also brings in other examples of church violence, including the persecution of the Knights Templars, a group which many historians have seen as no less corrupt and violent than Brown's demonized Catholic church.

In Brown's narrative, history becomes reduced to a Hollywood struggle between good and evil. The Church is flattened out into a single monolithic entity whose treachery, deception, violence, and murder appears throughout history all the way to the character of Silas, an albino monk-assassin. Because Brown's Church is unchanging and monolithic, it ends up removed from history altogether as a timeless force of evil. Professor Teabing describes it thus.

*"Shall the world be ignorant forever? Shall the Church be allowed to cement its lies into our history books for all eternity? Shall the Church be permitted to influence indefinitely with murder and extortion?" (pp. 408-409)*

### Major Historical Errors

The knights searching for the Holy Grail in later medieval romances were not speaking in code for Christ's descendants (pp. 238-239). They were looking for an important relic in an age which saw miraculous powers in all objects tied to the life of Christ and the saints. The Knights of Templar was not the military arm of the Priory of Sion.

Mary Magdalen was never associated with the sacred feminine or goddess worship or the chalice. While well known in the early Christian period, she emerged as a major figure only in the later middle ages as the chief example of the Christian virtue of penitence and the increasingly important sacrament of penance.<sup>18</sup> With a legendary biography beginning with

harlotry and ending with thirty years of penitential solitude in a cave outside Marseilles, the Magdalen embodied the medieval Christian extremes of the whore and the virgin. Brown's discussion would have been more accurate if he had used the Magdalen not as a figure of the sacred feminine but rather as a primary example of medieval monastic Christian contempt for the bodily realm in general and the female body in particular. It would be hard to imagine a medieval Christian figure who was more remote than Mary Magdalen from the joyous celebration of female sexuality and nature worship found in classical culture. Even Mary, the mother of Christ, was celebrated for her miraculous fertility, especially in the late middle ages and Renaissance when she appeared frequently in fertile, albeit chaste gardens and pastoral landscapes by Botticelli, Bellini, Titian, and others.

Although Mary was occasionally shown healing, converting, and spreading the new of the Resurrection to the apostles, she was most frequently pictured in a submissive role, especially after 1250 when she became the quintessential example of penance with its confession and submission to male spiritual authority. In later medieval and Renaissance art, she is usually shown at Christ's feet in scenes of the Feast at the House of Levi, Christ with Mary and Martha, the Crucifixion, the Lamentation, and Noli Me Tangere. More generally, she represented the pious, "feminine" virtue of obedience to clerical power expected of all good Christians, male and female. Although powerful men sometimes had themselves depicted kneeling at her feet (as in Giotto's Chapel of the Magdalen at San Francesco in Assisi), the masculine imitation of "feminine" submission and obedience did not work to empower women nor were any of these men interested in overturning the "universal" hierarchy of gender.

#### *The Vatican as a Vanguard of Goddess Worship and Pagan Imagery*

The Magdalen was eroticized in art only after 1530, as seen in Titian's painting, a development which allowed male Christians to have their cake and eat it too. Made for a cardinal, Titian's painting turns Brown's idea of a puritanical Vatican upside down. In fact, Renaissance church officials led the way in eroticizing sacred subjects and in reviving goddess worship and erotic pagan imagery. Pope Julius II had no problem with the many erotic nudes in Michelangelo's frescoes on the Sistine Ceiling (1508-12) even when five smaller scenes of Genesis were all but overrun by framing quartets of homoerotic male nudes (enlarging the pagan tradition of ornamental cupids). No one complained about the implied fellatio in Michelangelo's *Temptation of Adam and Eve* or the inexplicable genital nudity of Noah's sons in the *Drunkenness of Noah* where the sons piously cover their father's shameful nudity even as their own carefully painted penises dance in beautiful contrapposto. Around 1514, Cardinal Giuliano de' Medici commissioned Leonardo's *Rape of Leda*. Rather than displaying the misogynistic values Brown sees in the Catholic Church throughout history, the *Leda* offered a glowing tribute to female sexuality and nature's cosmic fecundity and beauty (albeit in the Renaissance patriarchal terms of a classical mythological rape). Around the same time, Cardinal Bibiema had Raphael's pupils fresco his Vatican bathroom with erotic mythologies including satyrs creeping up on bathing nymphs. Pope Paul III used the Rape of Ganymede on the back of his portrait medallion to allegorize divine love and papal charity. And he hired Michelangelo to paint the *Last Judgement* in the Sistine Chapel (1536-41) knowing full well this would produce an avalanche of naked figures. It was only public outcry which forced Paul III to have the many genitals and bare bottoms painted over and to have two saints reworked to avoid the impression of intercourse.

In private works, church officials were even freer to indulge their worldly tastes. In the 1540s, Paul III had his private quarters in the Castel St. Angelo frescoed with hundreds of ornamental pagan nudes along with more decorous historical subjects from classical antiquity. The papal bedroom boasted a fresco cycle of the Cupid and Psyche where the heterosexual love story acquired distinctly homoerotic overtones with the naked Cupid displayed as a pagan, sleeping beauty. To decorate the main reception room of his new palace in Rome, Cardinal Giovanni Ricci had Salviati paint a large fresco of *David and Bathsheba* (1554). Drawing on the pagan image of *Diana and Her Nymphs Bathing* which Renaissance artists were painting for courtly patrons, Salviati added seven half-naked handmaidens and added lesbian embraces borrowed from Diana's nymphs. In the 1560s, Cardinal Ippolito d'Este built a lavish villa in Tivoli whose garden sculptures and frescoes celebrated a series of pagan fertility goddesses including Venus and Mother Earth. The centerpiece of the garden was a huge triumphal arch fountain framing a large statue of Diana of Ephesus from whose body emerged animals of every kind and multiple breasts spouting water. (The statue was later relocated in the garden.)

While the Counter-Reformation (1560-) ushered in a backlash against eroticism in Catholic art – Titian covered the Magdalen's breasts in a later version of his *Penitent Magdalen* and added a book and a skull – eroticism continued in the private, secular commissions of church officials as seen in Bernini's two life-size mythological rape sculptures – *Pluto and Persephone* and *Apollo and Daphne* commissioned by Cardinal Scipione Borghese in the early seventeenth century. Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, commissioned by another cardinal, showed how even decorously clothed figures could break new grounds in sacred eroticism. And what could be more typical of Catholic Baroque art after 1620 than ecstasy for male and female figures?

### **Brown's Art Historical Errors**

As others have noted, Brown fails to get the simplest thing right about Leonardo – his name. It was not “da Vinci”, the town in which he was born. Other mistakes are more serious. Leonardo was never at odds with religious authorities (or for that matter, secular ones). He was wooed his whole life by popes, cardinals, kings, and high nobles and he boasted of his ability to serve them by designing invincible weapons and impregnable fortresses. As a court artist, Leonardo entertained and glorified his patrons with (unfinished) projects like the equestrian statue of Francesco Sforza, Duke of Milan, commissioned by his son. Between 1513-1516, Leonardo's primary patron was Cardinal Giuliano de' Medici who arranged an apartment and studio in the Vatican. Contrary to Brown, Leonardo did not receive “hundreds of lucrative Vatican commissions” (p. 45). He received just one that survives, the *Leda and the Swan*. Nor did Leonardo produce “an enormous output of breathtaking Christian art” (p. 45). He made some twenty-three works which survive in some form, fewer than any important artist ever. These include twelve Christian paintings (six Madonnas, an Annunciation, a Penitent St Jerome, a Last Supper, an Adoration of the Magi, a John the Baptist, and a Gabriel), six portraits, a Leda, a Bacchus, a cartoon for a battle fresco; a plaster cast of a horse for the statue of Francesco Sforza, and an ornamental ceiling fresco in Mantua. Only sixteen of these works were finished, in part because Leonardo's energies were dissipated by dozens of non-artistic projects and interests and because he spent so much time on preparatory studies.

Equally silly is the title of Professor Langdon's lecture at the National Gallery in London, “The Secret Life of Leonardo: Pagan Symbolism in Christian Art” (p. 46). There is nothing secret

about the presence of pagan symbolism in Renaissance Christian art. First used as an historical term in the nineteenth-century, the French word, *renaissance*, refers to the rebirth of classical antiquity. Seventy-five years before Leonardo, Italian writers, artists, educators, and patrons began reviving classical culture and reconciling it with Christian values. It is hard to imagine anything more commonplace or less secret than the exploration of pagan symbolism in Renaissance Christian art and literature (not to mention secular art).<sup>19</sup> Here the Renaissance drew on a medieval Christian tradition which interpreted almost every pagan myth as a Christian allegory.

### Leonardo's Last Supper

Brown's most serious art historical errors depends on a cluster of historically linked fantasies: that Christ was secretly married to Mary Magdalen, that Leonardo was Grand Master of the Priory of Sion during his years in France, and that he painted Mary Magdalen to Christ's right in the *Last Supper*. In his 2004 book, Leonardo, Martin Kemp, professor of Art History at Oxford and one of the world's two most foremost authorities on Leonardo, writes, "*In the service of fiction, such unfounded facts are fine. As history, they perpetuate nonsense. The problem with Brown's Code is not its invention of 'truth' but that it has been taken seriously by those who cannot recognize fiction as fiction.*" (p. 243).

Mary Magdalen is not the figure to Christ's right in Leonardo's *Last Supper*. Since Leonardo's time, this disciple has been understood as John and was labeled "Johannes" in an early sixteenth-century copy.<sup>20</sup> The absence of a chalice in Leonardo's painting means nothing. This more historically accurate rendering of a meal which had cups but no chalice is found in about one in three Italian renderings between 1300 and 1500 and is consistent with Leonardo's naturalism. Unmentioned at the Last Supper in Scripture (or in any of the Apochryphal gospels), the Magdalen is almost never included in depictions of that event. Only two images including her are presently known to me. Both add her as a fourteenth figure, placed submissively at Christ's feet in front of the table.<sup>21</sup> Leonardo could have added the Magdalen to his *Last Supper* but he would not have removed one of the disciples. No unattached hand appears in the *Last Supper* nor does Peter brandish a knife at anyone. (Peter's knife refers to the coming episode during Christ's arrest when Peter defended Jesus by cutting off the ear of the Roman soldier, Malchus, a familiar subject in Italian since the thirteenth century.

The feminine qualities of Leonardo's John stems in part from the artist's strong interest in androgynous, beautiful men, a subject frequently explored in his drawings and other paintings such as *Bacchus*, *John the Baptist*, and the Christ figure in the *Last Supper*. Leonardo may also have feminized John because he was understood after 1300 as Christ's "mystical spouse," sleeping against the Lord's heart and even "nursing" from his breast at the Last Supper in a "mystical marriage". In his popular devotional handbook, *A Treatise on the Love of God*, (1616), St. Francis of Sales summed up this late medieval tradition.

*The well-beloved S. John is ordinarily painted, in the Last Supper, not only lying but even sleeping in his Master's bosom ... so that his head was towards his dear lover's breast; and as he slept no corporal sleep there, - what likelihood of that? - so I make no question but that, finding himself so near the breasts of the eternal sweetness, he took a profound*

*mystical sleep, like a child of love which locked to its mother's breast sucks while sleeping.*<sup>22</sup>

Artists since the thirteenth century had feminized John to bring out his role as Christ's mystical bride. Leonardo's teacher, Verrocchio, had already applied a similar feminine beauty to another disciple reinterpreted after 1200 as seen as one of Christ's mystical brides. This was the doubting Thomas who reached into the wound of the Mystical Bridegroom, toward the wounded heart of divine love.

The interest in feminized ideals of male beauty was also common in other Italian Renaissance artists at this time including Perugino, Botticelli, Verrocchio, Michelangelo, Bronzino, Cellini, and Giambologna. Brown correctly notes Leonardo's interest in a feminine, sacred nature but leaves out all the other Italian Renaissance artists who explored the same theme (Botticelli, Giorgione, Titian, Correggio, Tintoretto, Veronese), often for Vatican patrons. While profoundly rooted in Renaissance humanism and the revival of pagan values, these cultural changes were part of a larger "feminization" of Christianity between 1150 and 1700 seen most notably in the rise of the cult of the Virgin, the proliferation of female saints, the new stress on religious emotion, the rise of nuptial piety making Christ the bridegroom of the bridal soul, and the devotional idea of Christ the good mother. Many Italian Crucifixions between 1300 and 1500 introduce a mother pelican biting its breast to feed its young to allegorize Christ's "feminine" self-sacrifice and nurturing. One can see a similar feminizing of secular culture in the same period as the rise of courtly love transformed the nobleman from a rugged warrior into an elegant, refined, beautiful courtier devoted to music, dance, conversation, poetry, and love. Late Medieval and early Renaissance court art is full of androgynous men. Even warrior saints like George or the Archangel Michael became sweet, "feminized" creatures with long, blonde hair and delicate, refined features tied to a courtly beauty aesthetic.

Although Leonardo shared the Renaissance interesting in a "feminine" world of nature, fertility, and human sexuality, he never painted or drew any pagan goddesses. The only fertility gods he painted or drew were an androgynous Bacchus and a Zeus in the guise of a swan raping Leda. He also drew a naked Gabriel approaching an unseen Virgin in an eroticized Annunciation. Gabriel's raised hand echoes his large erection as he advances like a pagan satyr or Bacchus approaching a sleeping nymph. Here we can see another flaw in Brown's idea that pagan values on sexuality gave women real status. For the pagan world, like its Renaissance counterpart, sexuality was inseparable from patriarchy and was governed from on high by a masculine, phallic fertility. The phallic universe is particularly clear in Leonardo's Vitruvian Man where the perfect microcosm – always masculine in Renaissance art – centers on the penis but frames the male body in a larger vertical hierarchy governed by "masculine" mind.

### **Brown's History as Fable**

Although Brown's protagonist is a serious scholar, he nonetheless dismisses history as the fables written by those in power (p. 256). This cynical and glib view of scholarship suits a work of fiction which distorts and fabricates history to serve modern myths and enhance the book's commercial appeal.

Readers should enjoy the *Da Vinci Code* for what it is, a work of fiction which uses plausible-sounding but imaginary history to deepen the reader's interest. Real knowledge about the past will not come from murder mysteries.

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- <sup>1</sup> For more on these facts, see *Secrets of the Da Vinci Code* (special issue of *US News and World Report*, 2004, pp. 78-81 and Dan Burstein, ed., *Secrets of the Da Vinci Code*, 2004.
- <sup>2</sup> See Laura Miller, "The Da Vinci Con," *New York Times Book Review*, Feb. 22, 2004, p. 23. For the many inaccuracies in Brown's Christian history, see Bart Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction in the Da Vinci Code*, Oxford University Press, 2004. Ehrman is chairman of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
- <sup>3</sup> See Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to Early Christian Writing*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Oxford University Press, 2004. In *Truth and Fiction*, op. cit., Ehrman notes that women had some real importance in the early church but only in the first century.
- <sup>4</sup> While none of these specifics are discussed in Brown, they all fall under his general assertion that Christ was remade for political purposes by Christian Roman emperors beginning with Constantine. For more on the imperial remaking of early Christianity, see my article "I slaughter barbarians" on my website ([www.conncoll.edu](http://www.conncoll.edu)) under Publications, and Thomas Matthews, *The Clash of Gods, A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, 1993.
- <sup>5</sup> See Celsus, *On the True Doctrine*, trans. R. Joseph Hoffmann, Oxford University Press, 1987, pp. 77-78, 103-104. Also see Eugene Gallagher, *Divine Man or Magician? Celsus and Origen on Jesus*, Chico: Scholars Press, 1982; Molly Whittaker, *Jews and Christians. Graeco-Roman Views*, Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 183.
- <sup>6</sup> Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction in the Da Vinci Code*, op. cit. Brown is also incorrect in stating this Gospel is in Aramaic. It was written in Coptic with a few words in Greek. He is also wrong in citing the Dead Sea Scrolls as a source of new truth about Christ. As Ehrman notes, the Dead Sea Scrolls never mention Christ or Christianity.
- <sup>7</sup> See Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen*, New York, 1993, the best general account of Mary.
- <sup>8</sup> See Cynthia Eller, *The Myth of the Matriarchal Prehistory*, 19XX. Thanks to my colleague Gary Green for this reference. For women in the pagan, Jewish, and early Christian world, see Ross Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings. Women's Religions Among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Graeco-Roman World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002; and Ross Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo, *Women and Christian Origins*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- <sup>9</sup> Only the Epicureans and Cynics argued for gender equality and both schools of philosophy were of lesser importance compared to Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics.
- <sup>10</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, I.5, ed. Stephen Everson, Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 6-7.
- <sup>11</sup> For a Christian version of this idea, see Augustine, *City of God*, XII.26, where he subordinates the world of female fertility to the universal creativity of God the father.
- <sup>12</sup> Philo of Alexandria, *Allegorical Interpretation*, II.7-20; Loeb Classical Library, pp. 249, 255, 271. Philo's hierarchies derive in part from his Neoplatonic philosophical background.
- <sup>13</sup> Cited in many texts, including Susan Groag Bell, *Women from the Greeks to the French Revolution*, Stanford, 1973, p. 85, and Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction*, op. cit., who also cited the well-known passage from Paul.
- <sup>14</sup> Robin Lane, *Pagans and Christians*, New York, 1987, pp. 308-311.
- <sup>15</sup> For medieval chastity, see Peter Brown, *The Body and Society. Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988; Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, Harvard University Press, 1996 and the chapter in chastity in Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace, *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing*, Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- <sup>16</sup> Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction*, says Paul was probably referring to equality in the next world. The early church maintained all traditional social inequalities, including those rooted in slavery, class, and gender. For the latter, see Eleanor McLaughlin, "Equality of Souls, Inequality of Sexes. Women in Medieval Theology," in Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Tradition, ed. Rosemary Ruether, New York, 1974, 213-266.
- <sup>17</sup> See Gallagher, op. cit., and Whittaker, op. cit.,
- <sup>18</sup> See Haskins, op. cit.
- <sup>19</sup> Bellini painted Bacchic scenes to allegorize Christ's eucharistic blood and divine ecstasy. Perugino paired pagan deities and heroes with Christian subjects in his frescoes for the Moneychanger's Guild in Siena as did Raphael in his Vatican frescoes in the Stanza della Segnatura. Inspired by Dante, Michelangelo inserted the ancient Greek

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ferryman of the dead, Chiron, in his Last Judgment. And so on. Pinturicchio painted Pluto and Proserpina on the ceiling of the papal library in the Siena Cathedral around 1500 while Paul III used Ganymede on the back of his medallion portrait to allegorize divine love. See the books on Ganymede in Renaissance culture by James Saslow and Leonard Barkan.

<sup>20</sup> See reproduction in Leo Steinberg's *Leonardo's Last Supper*, 199X, fig. XX.

<sup>21</sup> One is a thirteenth-century English illumination mentioned in Haskins, *op. cit.*, p. 218 and reproduced in XX. The other is a sixteenth-century painting in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

<sup>22</sup> St. Francis of Sales, *A Treatise on the Love of God*, (originally pub. 1616); trans. Henry Benedict Mackey, London, 1884; reprinted, Rockford: Tan Books, p. 292.