

Debunking The Da Vinci Code, May 2006; Robert Baldwin, Assoc. Prof of Art History, Connecticut College

### **Debunking *The Da Vinci Code* (May, 2006)**

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These remarks complement my slide lecture focusing on Leonardo. For a longer version, please email me.

Dan Brown's book appeals as a suspenseful page turner but also for its extensive historical discussion. Though little of this "history" is accurate, much rings true by affirming contemporary values. For secularists, Brown makes Christ's divinity a fraud perpetuated by a church eager to expand its power while suppressing the "true" history of Christ (supposedly an ordinary human who married and had children). For American Protestants long suspicious of Catholics, Brown depicts the Roman church as secretive, treacherous, dishonest, murderous, and out of step with modern life. For modern Americans generally distrustful of institutions, especially the Roman church in the wake of recent 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 myth of a lost pagan age of sexual innocence and freedom destroyed by a misanthropic Christianity. For feminists, the novel posits a spiritual golden age of pagan nature and goddess-worship supposedly crushed by a misogynist Christianity. For supporters of gay rights, Leonardo becomes a modern hero, 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 symbols from ancient history and Egypt to *The Little Mermaid*. For tourists and art lovers, the novel visits major sites around the world while decoding secret meanings in Leonardo. In short, *The Da Vinci Code* has a little something for almost everyone.

Brown's historical discussion also appeals because some of it is indeed "true" while much of the rest contains elements of truth. Thanks to modern secularism and Biblical scholarship, many now see the Bible as a text written by men with the selection of canonical books made by male church officials in the early Christian period. It is also true that the Catholic church is secretive, hostile to some aspects of modern life (feminism, gay rights, birth control, abortion), hierarchically structured, and at times corrupt as seen in its handling of the recent 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 misogyny over the ages and to the violent persecution of women accused of witchcraft (as well as Jews, "heretics," and Muslim "infidels"). And what scholar could deny that Western culture contains much esoteric symbolism or that Leonardo explored androgynous figures and female beauty?

Brown's history is also true in other areas. The transformation of Christianity from a persecuted, underground religion whose images were confined to the catacombs to the state religion of the Roman empire patronized by Constantine did indeed remake Christianity, in part for political and institutional purposes. Jesus was transformed from a humble carpenter mingling with artisans and sinners and eventually crucified like a common criminal into a victorious monarch, his entry into Jerusalem on an ass remade into an imperial triumph, his shameful cross reinterpreted as a glorious trophy of Roman military victory and ecclesiastical power, and so on. Brown is also correct when he says the early Christian church focused on Christ's divinity, though not for the sinister, political motives he suggests. A divine Christ was more intelligible and acceptable to a pagan world which distinguished sharply between sacred and human. While Christ's humanity was certainly familiar before 1100, his humanity was stressed only in the later middle ages and Renaissance (1300-1600).

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. How many important women in history have received their due from male writers? There is also a fundamental truth for modern Christians in Brown's stress on Christ's humanity and ethical-spiritual wisdom. This has been the "true" Christ since the early nineteenth century.

### **A More Critical Look**

Despite these areas of historical accuracy and plausibility, much of Brown's history is either speculation outside history (Christ was only human), pure conjecture unsupported by evidence (Christ was definitely married and had children), a serious distortion of the facts (pagan religion was oriented toward goddess worship; Christianity was anti-female) or is historically false (Constantine suppressed the "true" Gospels). By flattening the Church into a single monolithic entity marked by treachery, deception, violence, sex abuse, and murder, Brown reduces history to a Hollywood struggle between good and evil while bashing Christianity and Catholicism.

Most of this pseudo-history is taken from the 1983 bestseller, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* by Michael Baigent. No historical evidence shows that Christ was married to the Magdalen and that she bore him a child or that his descendants married into the Merovingian kings of medieval France. The Magdalen's later life in France is itself a medieval legend. Rather than a medieval secret society protecting the "truth" about Christ, the Priory of Sion was founded in France in 1958 by a number of men including 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*, in the prologue to Brown's novel, and in 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>

Other historical distortions appear in *The Da Vinci Code*. Contrary to Brown, classical culture, religion, and society were profoundly patriarchal. Though pagans worshipped some goddesses presiding over nature's fertility, sexuality, love, beauty and childbirth, far greater power was reserved for male deities. Power itself was gendered as masculine in ancient culture and tied to "male" reason, not the body, which was gendered as feminine and inferior. Classical patriarchy is particularly vivid in the many "glorious" rapes committed by most of the major gods (Zeus, Neptune, Pluto, Apollo, Mars, Bacchus) and heroes (Perseus, Hercules, Castor and Pollux, Romulus, etc.) While pagan religion 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, Brown's version of a misogynistic early Christianity is a caricature. Despite strong patriarchal tendencies, early Christianity was sufficiently women-friendly to spread much more rapidly among women who constituted the clear majority of believers by the third century. It did this by stressing the equality of all souls before God, male and female, freemen and slaves, and by promising an imminent Second Coming when all social injustice would vanish. The cult of chastity also allowed many women to escape the harsh confines of marriage altogether and find a relative autonomy unavailable to Jewish and pagan women. Although Christ displayed traditional masculine qualities (preaching, wisdom, miraculous powers), he also embodied many "feminine" virtues. In contrast to the rapist-warrior-ruler deities of the pagan world, he was chaste, mild, humble, forgiving, loving, a compassionate healer, and a friend to children.

Mary Magdalen was never associated with the sacred feminine or goddess worship or the chalice. She emerged as a major figure only in the later middle ages as the chief example of Christian penitence (based on her legendary thirty years of solitary life in a cave outside Marseilles). With her life history moving from harlotry to extreme monastic retreat, the Magdalen embodied the medieval monastic Christian extremes of the whore and the chaste virgin. Rather than exemplifying the sacred feminine, she became the primary example of medieval Christian contempt for the sinful, "feminine" bodily realm. Commonly pictured at Christ's feet, she also became, after 1250, the quintessential figure of Christian submission to spiritual authority, a submission which her example gendered as "feminine". The Magdalen was eroticized in art only after 1530 (as in Titian's painting for a cardinal) to allow male viewers to have their cake and eat it too.

### **Brown's Distorted Art History**

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In contrast to Brown's fictional professors, Martin Kemp is a real professor at Oxford and one of the world's two most distinguished authorities on Leonardo. In his book *Leonardo*, (Oxford Un. Press, 2004, p. 243), Kemp sums up the scholarly view of Brown's art history. "*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.*"

Despite's Brown's vivid imagination, the real Leonardo was not at odds with the authorities of the day. As a court artist, his primary role was to entertain and glorify despotic patrons as he did with (unfinished) projects like the large equestrian statue of the Duke of Milan. For three years, he lived in the Vatican, courtesy of his patron, Cardinal Giuliano de' Medici (1513-16). Leonardo did not receive "hundreds of lucrative Vatican commissions" (p. 45). He received only one which survives, a *Leda and the Swan*. Instead of Brown's Vatican misogyny, it offered a glowing tribute to female sexuality and nature's cosmic fecundity and beauty, albeit in the pagan patriarchal terms of rape. (The Vatican was a vanguard of Renaissance paganism and erotic art.) Nor did Leonardo produce "an enormous output of breathtaking Christian art" (p. 45). He made approximately twenty-three works which survive in some form including twelve Christian paintings, six portraits, two Ledas, a Bacchus, an unfinished battle fresco, a plaster cast of a horse for the equestrian monument (known in drawings), and an ornamental ceiling fresco in Mantua. No great artist in the history of art produced *fewer* works than Leonardo largely because his energies were absorbed in dozens of other projects.

Paganism in Renaissance Christian art is not some secret known to a few professors. Nothing is more commonplace or less secret than the exploration of pagan symbolism in Renaissance art, whether Christian or secular. Even in the middle ages, Christian writers extensively allegorized pagan subjects with Christian meaning so that mythological rapes expressed God's love for the soul or salvation.

Mary Magdalen is not the figure to Christ's right in Leonardo's *Last Supper*. This disciple has always been understood as John and was even labeled "Johannes" in an early sixteenth-century copy when Leonardo's fresco was in good condition. 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 which do so are known to me. Both add her as a fourteenth figure, placed submissively at Christ's feet in front of the table. 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. Nor does Leonardo's painting have an unattached hand or a menacing St. Peter.

The feminine qualities of John in the *Last Supper* stem from the artist's strong interest in androgynous men as seen in numerous drawings and in 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 at the Last Supper in a "mystical marriage". Leonardo's interest in feminized ideals of male beauty was shared by many Italian Renaissance artists including 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 artists who explored the same theme (Botticelli, Giorgione, Titian, Correggio, Tintoretto, Veronese). While rooted in Renaissance humanism and the revival of pagan values, these cultural changes were part of a larger "feminization" of Christianity (and of secular court culture) between 1150 and 1700 seen most notably in the rise of the cult of the Virgin, the new stress on religious emotion, the rise of nuptial piety making Christ the bridegroom of the loving, bridal soul, and the transformation of the knightly warrior into the refined courtier.

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

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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.

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>i</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.