

DA VINCI CODE : RESOURCES ARTICLE

Welcome to this web-site and its various features on the *Da Vinci Code*. They are written for anyone (not just Christians) who could use some objective fact-based comment on Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* and the issues it raises.

A Christian web-site – even if it is not your scene – is a good place to come because Brown is writing about Christian things, and there is a need to sort out fact from fiction, especially since it is Brown's method to present fiction as facts.

Here are my **Contents** so you can see what's what, and find everything quickly.

CONTENTS

- Part I. First I have provided a **Main Points of Plot**. This should be read by anyone who has not read the book, and by those (quite a number I suspect!) who find it difficult to get the main themes into focus.
- Part II. I follow that by my own impressions of the '**Code**' as **Novel** (without assessing any of its claims).
- Part III. I then turn to Dan **Brown's Introductory Facts Page** upon which his story is based and then examine the truth about -
- Part IV. **The Priory of Sion & Les Dossiers Secrets**
- Part V. I have a detailed section on **Mary Magdalene** that deals with **sources**, and **Jesus's marriage**.
Then comes...
- Part VI. A closely-related section on **Leonardo's Last Supper**. This provides a detailed look at Leonardo's sources, aims and understanding of the picture. It deals with the important '**V/M**' of the composition, and the identification of **John** as **Mary Magdalene**.
- Part VII. The all-important **Fact-Fiction Issue** comes next.
- Part VIII. **Book of our Time** explains the *Code's* phenomenon, and its significance.
- Part IX. **So What?** begins to answer the question it asks.

Part I - MAIN POINTS OF DAN BROWN'S PLOT

This is how Dan Brown's story goes:

The real truth about **Jesus** and **Mary Magdalene** was known to a brotherhood called **The Priory of Sion** way back in 1099, when the **Knights Templar** uncovered evidence in Jerusalem during the First Crusade. The Priory of Sion decided to keep it secret until a 'propitious moment' (not yet reached).

Sometime after the year 2000, a mysterious, and seemingly all-knowing figure called the '**Teacher**' is plotting and working through an ultra-traditionalist Roman Catholic organisation called '**Opus Dei**' to seize this evidence and destroy it.

The Teacher gets his dirty work done for him by **Silas** – a crazed albino monk who believes that 'pain is good'. (He was named 'Silas' by his mentor, **Bishop Aringarozza**, because, like a Silas in the New Testament, he escaped from prison during an earthquake.)

Only four present-day members of The Priory of Zion know the dreaded Secret (*the key to 2000 years of history*) but as the novel opens Silas has just murdered all four of them! The story might have ended there – but no!

One of them, is the 'Grand Master' of the Priory of Zion **Jacques Sauniere** (Curator of the Louvre Museum in Paris). Silas shoots him in the stomach and tells him that 'pain is good!' – small comfort that! Sauniere then spends his somewhat over-long dying moments leaving clues for Brown's two intrepid heroes. Sauniere's clues relate to **Leonardo da Vinci's** works because Leonardo was in his day (as by now you may have guessed) a 'Grand Master' of the Priory of Sion.

The two heroes of the tale are **Sophie Neveu** and **Robert Langdon**. Sophie is the dead Sauniere's grand-daughter with long experience and understanding of grandpa's code-mindedness. Sophie is a cryptanalyst, i.e. a person who cracks codes (although Brown calls her a 'cryptographer' – one who *invents* them). Langdon is a symbolist Professor at Harvard (Brown calls him a 'symbologist'.)

The action of the book springs mainly from the fact that the **French Police** are chasing Langdon because they think he murdered Sauniere (whose dead body he had examined on site). Sophie, of course, knows Langdon to be innocent. The two sleuths – pursued by the albino monk acting on the 'Teacher's' orders, but under the patronage of Bishop Aringarozza – seek shelter in **Sir Leigh Teabing's** home near Paris.

Teabing, an eccentric Englishman was their obvious choice because he is the proverbial 'leading expert' on the **Holy Grail**.

Additional Note:

The '**Holy Grail**' story was begun in the twelfth-century by a French poet Chrétien de Troyes, and refers to the cup used by Jesus Christ at the Last Supper.

The story evolved so that Joseph of Arimathea is later said to have used it to catch the blood of the crucified Christ. The yarn became very popular and powerful in the Middle Ages and became the culmination of Arthurian Romance.

Teabing tells Sophie and Langdon that the 'Holy Grail' does *not* refer to the cup of the Last Supper: what it is, is revealed in *Les Dossiers Secrets!*

These documents, Teabing explains, show that **Jesus** married **St. Mary Magdalene**, that she, not Peter, was the leading Apostle, and that through their daughter, **Sarah**, there is a '**Blood Line**' that runs through the very early French monarchy down to the present day.

The plot then follows a succession of riddles, codes and anagrams which lead the couple through the cathedrals and castles of **Europe**. Their task is to 'save' the documents from sinister forces before the **Roman Catholic Church** finds them and destroys them.

*

The book for the duo ends thus: 'Sophie leaned forward and kissed him again, now on the lips. Their bodies came together, slowly at first, and then completely.' Langdon has the hint of fuller carnal delight by meeting up again with Sophie in Florence and no doubt taking her very wise advice: 'No museums, no churches, no tombs, no art, no relics.'

Langdon ends up in Paris where he has a semi-mystical experience that echoes Teabing's words:

*'The quest for the Holy Grail is the quest
to kneel before the bones of Mary Magdalene.
A journey to pray at the feet of the outcast one.'*

Langdon has a '*sudden up-welling of reverence*' and drops to his knees:

*'For a moment, he [Langdon] thought he heard a woman's voice
...the wisdom of the ages...
whispering up from the chasms of the earth.'*

*

So the book's tale ends. (The published film-script ends even more vaguely.)

Part II - THE 'CODE' AS NOVEL

Entertainment

The general purpose of a novel is not to teach or preach but to entertain.

Before reading the book I was aware how much I enjoyed, for instance, Olivier's film of Shakespeare's *Richard III*. That it was probably not accurate history did not bother me. There is a long line of writers of fact-based-fiction who succeed in so blurring the edges between fact and fiction that it is difficult to know exactly where one stops and the other begins.

Their job is to entertain, and that skill can be part of it.

I assumed that I would allow Brown similar liberties with historical facts that I give other fiction writers – unless, of course, his treatment of them made it impossible for me to do so.

Over fifty million are reading the book and seeing the film, but I simply do not know what percentage are finding them good entertainment, because so much response is simply following marketing trends and fashion.

Uneven

I enjoy reading fact-based novels, but I read slowly. That may account for the fact that I found it long, but not the reason that I did not find it particularly pleasant. I'll be honest: had I not intended to write about it I would not have bothered to finish it!

Brown's pace is very uneven.

At his best, his extremely short chapters with cliff-hanger endings bowl his tale along nicely. But there is, as Sir Ian McKellen has said: '... an awful lot of conversation in the novel...' When the characters talk, they do tend to go on so! For me, they grind the momentum to a halt! – in spite of the well-publicised claim that the book is a 'page turner'.

I have open before me the four pages at the beginning of the Corgi edition of the book consisting of selected sentences from the critics. Clearly not everyone thinks as I do – at least not those the publishers choose to quote!

The Leonardo Code

I was irked by Brown's sloppy title: *The Da Vinci Code*, which indicates that the Code has to do with Vinci (a town near Florence). It does not even feature in the book!

Brown obviously thought that *Da Vinci* was a surname! It isn't. Folk added their birth-place or work-place to distinguish themselves from namesakes. It was a common enough practice of Italian artists: Antonello *da Messina* and Piero *de Cosimo*. And it was used much more widely: Francis *of Assisi*, Rembrandt *van Rijn*, not to mention Jesus *of Nazareth*!

Humour

It is a mainly humourless tale, so I was grateful for any humour that appeared.

I enjoyed Teabing's preliminary questions to Langdon before he would open his gate. The questions of the eccentric Englishman were based on tea and Oxford!

I enjoyed this also:

'These books cannot possibly compete with centuries of established history, especially when that history is endorsed by the ultimate best seller of all time.'
Faukman's eyes went wide. 'Don't tell me Harry Potter is about the Holy Grail.'
'I was actually referring to the Bible.'
Faukman cringed, 'I knew that.'

In a book with 'red-herrings' it was a neat pun to have a Bishop called one: 'Aringarozza', i.e. a roza-coloured 'aring! (Every herring I eat from now on will be an 'aring!)

It was a neat move, too, to have the Swiss bank displaying the equal-armed Cross!

Perhaps it was the general lack of humour that forced me to see it where it was unintended. As an English reader used to the British use of hyphens, I initially thought that 'coworkers' was perhaps a Politically Correct version of 'cowboys'!

Some schoolboy howlers – like placing the Dead Sea Scrolls '*among the earliest Gospels*' – are hilarious to those who know, but any joy soon fades in the knowledge of the vast number of readers being misled.

Commercial

Dan Brown's book reads like an advert -

- every claim is exaggerated
- everything is total
- everything is dogmatic
- there is no room for questions
- there is no room for doubt

Here's an example.

I deal with the identity of one of the figures in Leonardo's *Last Supper* in Part VI. If you ignore the event that Leonardo is depicting in great detail and look simply at the head of one of the Apostles, there is some visual ambiguity about whether the figure is male or female.

Brown is so into commercial-speak that he cannot cope with ambiguity or doubt, so he has Teabing assert that the Apostle is '*without doubt*' female! That is simply untrue. Unable to

face honest doubt, Brown has to turn it into lying certainty, because the language of advertising is about certainty.

Brown's exaggerated dogmatism pervades the book:

'...key to 2000 years of history'
'the demise of the entire church'
'capable of altering history forever'
'devastate the very foundation of Christianity'

and I found his endless commercial-speak simply tiresome – and for me, at any rate – self defeating. By the end of the book I found it difficult to believe anything he stated.

I do not think that any reviewer speaks of Brown's literary merit, or beautiful writing. Since intent is inextricably bound-up with style, I suspect that Brown's incessant dogmatism prevents it.

Goal?

I have already quoted the ending (see Part I), and was mightily disappointed.

Whether one is of a religious persuasion or not, to kneel at the bones of St. Mary Magdalene and experience a hint of a woman's voice whispering the wisdom of the ages seems to me to fall unhealthily, unimaginatively and drearily short of anyone's life's goal!

I cannot imagine anyone joyously facing martyrdom to bring such an experience closer!

Indeed as a goal in life – even if it is described in terms of semi-Christian sentimentalism – I find it hard to imagine anyone setting their sights much lower!

If I had to summarise the book in three words: long climb, anti-climax!

Part III - BROWN'S 'FACTS' PAGE

Brown prefaces his book with a single page headed 'FACTS', so he obviously felt that it was very important for the reader to believe them before they embarked on the book proper. As he took such pains to promote them, I will give them the attention they deserve.

Dan Brown makes four claims (a) to (d) below, which, in summary, are as follows:

(a) Priory of Sion

The Priory of Sion is a real European secret society founded in 1099.

(b) *Les Dossiers Secrets*

That in the Paris National Library in 1975 were discovered 'parchments' called *Les Dossiers Secrets*. These revealed that various famous people, including Sir Isaac Newton, Leonardo da Vinci, Victor Hugo and others had been members of the Priory of Sion (see above).

(c) Opus Dei

His third claim is that there is a deeply devout Roman Catholic group which the Pope supports called **Opus Dei** ['Work of God']. It has massive American Headquarters in New York, and has *'been the topic of recent controversy due to reports of brain washing, coercion and the dangerous practice of 'corporal mortification' [i.e. inflicting pain].*

(d) Four areas of accuracy

Brown's final claim on his FACTS page is that:

**'All descriptions of
artwork,
architecture,
documents,
and secret rituals
in this novel are accurate.'**

(This claim was dropped for the film.)

Let's look briefly at these four claims on Dan Brown's 'FACTS' page.

I shall deal with the last two (c) and (d) now, but tackle (a) and (b) together in Part IV.

Opus Dei - Fact (c)

Brown's claim about the Roman Catholic Group **Opus Dei** is the closest he comes to real fact – albeit distorted. They have their own web-site (www.opusdei.org) and are capable of rebutting any unfair charges brought against them.

In general the organisation consists of traditionalist, devout Roman Catholics whose aim is that their Christian faith should show itself in their lives. It's alleged transfer in 1982 of nearly a

billion dollars to the Vatican Bank may have saved the Bank from bankruptcy. Their massive New York Headquarters is fact. Only members are allowed in. Their power is often questioned, and it does nothing to allay public suspicion about its activities by having separate entrances – and even separate parking – for men and women to keep them completely apart.

An Opus Dei Awareness Network (www.odan.org) exists to help those who, they allege, have been harmed by Opus Dei.

To add additional gore to his story, Dan Brown has the crazed monk, Silas, wearing a spiked *cilice* (pronounced: *silliss*). The word is simply that for a rough cloth or, thence, for a garment made from it – the proverbial 'hair shirt' in fact.

Brown being Brown, his monk Silas's version of a cilice was a spiked thong around his thigh capable of drawing blood!

This is a way over-the-top application of a basic spiritual principle that is sound, and is as follows:

The big forces in our lives and society – money, possessions, sex, status, etc. can dictate to us – in which case we lose our status, dignity and freedom as human beings, and become enslaved to them. To be free to be enriched by such good things they need to be in *our* control, not us in *theirs*!

Certain religious disciplines, rightly understood and used, can help us to exercise control over them. Fasting from food (or anything else) for instance, can break its hold over one, enabling one to enjoy it with greater freedom and appreciation.

The 'hair shirt' principle is essentially the same: to break our easily-held assumption that we are always entitled to comfort; to help us identify with (and pray for) others less fortunate than ourselves; and to increase our appreciation (and thanks to God) for our 'normal' comforts.

That is balanced, healthy and good. The bloody version of Brown's crazed albino monk's masochism is none of these things.

Four Accuracy Claims: Fact (d)

Brown's fourth claim is as follows:

'All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.'

Artwork –

Brown uses the word 'description' in which case his claim probably stands. It is one thing to describe a work of art it is quite another thing to interpret it. Brown gives no indication that he ever bothered to find out that Leonardo was not painting Jesus Christ's institution of the Last Supper – but something that happened afterwards.

I have explained these in Leonardo's *Last Supper* in Part VI below.
(This is available as a separate article entitled DA VINCI CODE : LAST SUPPER .)

Architecture -

Tom Wright, who until recently was on the staff of Westminster Abbey points out some of Brown's errors:

- the abbey has towers, not 'spires'
- you cannot see Parliament from St. James's Park
- College Gardens is not a public place
- There is no long hallway leading to the Chapter House with a 'heavy wooden door' at its end.

The Bishop then comments:

'Ten minutes observation by a junior researcher could have put all this right. If Brown is so careless, and carelessly inventive, in details as easy to check as those, why should we trust him in anything else?'

Documents -

Here is an example of Brown's claim to be accurate with documents.

As I have mentioned above, Brown has Leigh Teabing inform us that the **Dead Sea Scrolls** are among:

'the earliest Christian records...'

When I worked as a School Chaplain, I was used to setting and marking exam papers in Religious Studies (they covered other faiths). Had a pupil in answer to a question about the Dead Sea Scrolls begun by saying that they were among the *'the earliest Christian records...'*, I would have immediately awarded him/her nil! The Dead Sea Scrolls are not Christian Documents at all! (They are Jewish, and include a very early translation of their Hebrew Bible. They make no mention of Christ – indeed some probably predate him.) Incidentally, Brown confuses scrolls and codices (singular codex). Both consist of written pages: in a scroll they are on a continuous roll; in a codex they are separated and bound in 'book' form.

Secret Rituals

I have no knowledge, nor am I much inclined to acquire any, of secret rituals, so I cannot comment on Brown's use of them.

Let's turn now to Dan Brown's first two claims on his FACTS page.

Part IV - THE PRIORY of SION and *LES DOSSIERS SECRETS*

(a) The Priory of Sion

Is the Priory of Sion the secret society that holds the knowledge of

*'...true Christianity' that has been hidden
from the Christian Church for 2000 years'?*

That is an important question: and it has a surprising but simple answer.

In 1956, a French Fascist named Pierre Platarad with three friends founded a social organisation for the improvement of housing. He had been anti-Church and pro-Nazi during World War Two, and in 1953 he was imprisoned for fraud and embezzlement.

According to French law, Platarad had to register his new organisation and name it. As he lived in Arnasses, Hautes-des-Savoies, he named it '**The Priory of Sion**' after 'Mont Sion', a local hill.

This 'Priory', therefore, was founded less than sixty years ago. Brown, typically, described it as

'one of the oldest surviving secret societies on earth' [!]

(Brown, as I have mentioned above, is addicted to the exaggerations of commercial-speak!)

(b) *Les Dossiers Secrets*

Pierre Platarad was a con-man who believed that he had French royal blood in his veins and had a rightful claim to the French throne. Platarad and his mates fabricated a cache of documents that would 'prove' that there existed a bloodline from the union of Jesus Christ with Mary Magdalene through the early French Merovingian kings down to a certain Frenchman named (– how *did* you guess?) Pierre Platarad!

One author says that it would be difficult to find a worse advertisement for Jesus's blood-line than the Merovingian Kings (c.500-700), who were incestuous nincompoops who ruled chaotically and murderously!

Anyway, Platarad and his cronies deposited copies in various French libraries including the National Library in Paris to support Platarad's claim to the throne. They cleverly called their pages *Les Dossiers Secrets*.

Platarad then suggested to three British journalists, Richard Leigh, Michael Baigent and Henry Lincoln, that they might uncover the 'real truth'(!) of Christianity by going to Paris's Bibliothèque Nationale.

Les Dossiers Secrets were **typed**, so Dan Brown deliberately and misleadingly calls them 'parchments' (on his notorious 'FACTS' page!) in an attempt to give a little 'weight' to their factual weightlessness!

Part of Dan Brown's technique to sell fantasy as fact is his constant and shameless lying about academic authority. So he cannot resist making the claim these very same *Les Dossiers Secrets* –

'have been authenticated by many specialists',

and that the hoax list of 'Grand Masters', including Leonardo da Vinci, has been –

'incontrovertibly confirmed'. Sheer make-believe!

The hoax was exposed by the French journalist Jean-Luc Chaumeil, who published books on the subject, and in 1996 the B.B.C. put out a documentary exposing it. The actual forger, Philippe de Chérisey, admitted that they were fakes.

The exposure of this hoax demolishes Brown's alternative history from 1099 to the present with the importance he places on the Priory of Sion, *Les Dossiers Secrets*, on Leonardo da Vinci, and on the alleged blood-line from Jesus Christ.

The timing of the exposure of the hoax gave Dan Brown ample opportunity to revise his plot and stick to historical facts had it been in his interest, or his intention, to do so. But it was not in his interest – certainly not his financial interest – to do so.

Lincoln, Leigh and Baigent wrote 'at times we nearly dismissed the whole affair as an elaborate joke', but, sadly, they changed their minds and eventually swallowed the hoax hook, line and sinker.

Henry Lincoln, a T.V. journalist, made a trio of documentaries for the B.B.C. Then, with his credulous colleagues Leigh & Baigent, produced a book in 1982 called, in its British version, *The Holy Blood & the Holy Grail*. They presented both the non-historical Priory of Sion and Pierre Platarad's hoax of a royal bloodline from Jesus and Mary Magdalene as *facts!*

When confronted with Leigh & Baigent's novel *The Holy Blood & the Holy Grail*, Dan Brown treated it all as HISTORY! He was so impressed and taken-in by the main authors that in tribute he used their names Leigh and Baigent for his Holy Grail expert – Sir *Leigh Teabing!* (Spot the inevitable anagram?)

In spite of Brown's flattering tribute to the authors of *Holy Blood: Holy Grail* (its American title), in 2004 Leigh & Baigent issued a writ against Dan Brown's publishers because of Brown's 'intellectual theft' of the 'whole jigsaw puzzle' of their book for his *Da Vinci Code*. They lost, and the case cost them £1.8 million.

The writ is extremely odd. There is no copyright to historical truth; only of created fiction. The author's of *Holy Blood: Holy Grail* assert that their book is non-fiction and based on sound research. But if Leigh and Baigent's book was genuine history they could not issue a writ against Brown for using it!

In 1993, Platard admitted under oath before a French judge that he had fabricated 'all the documents related to the Priory of Sion'.

Like Chaumeil's exposure of *Les Dossiers Secrets*, the exposure of the **Priory of Sion** hoax also gave Dan Brown almost a decade in which to discover it.

So this leaves us with

no 'Priory of Sion' before 1956,

and

no Grand Masters of the Priory,

therefore

no link of Leonardo Da Vinci with it,

and

no historical *Les Dossiers Secrets* containing new 'real truth',

so

no basis for bloodline from Jesus & Mary Magdelene to M. Platard.

The above shows (as every objective book on the *Da Vinci Code* must do) that of Dan Brown's impressive introductory FACTS page –

1. The **Priory of Sion** did *not* exist in 1099, but was founded in 1956.
2. The 'parchments' of *Les Dossiers Secrets* were a typed-up hoax, so there is no evidence whatever of a blood-line from Jesus Christ to M. Platard.
3. On the other hand, the organization **Opus Dei** certainly exists, but it would perhaps be wise not to think of Brown's mad masochistic monk as a typical member! (It has no monk members anyway.)
4. As for Brown's four claims to accuracy:
 - his ignorance of **artwork** will be shown, later, in Part VI on the *Last Supper*;
 - Brown's appalling ignorance of the Dead Sea Scrolls demolishes any claim to accuracy regarding **documents**,
 - his easily provable errors about Westminster Abbey suggest that Brown is no more diligent with regard to **buildings**.
 - (I 'pass' on **secret rituals**.)

So much for Brown's FACTS page. Brown has said that were he to write the book as a history book he would need to change nothing! I pursue this theme in Part VII – **The Fact/Fiction Issue**.

Part V - MARY MAGDALENE: SOURCES & MARRIAGE

1. INTRODUCTION

Dan Brown has extended the fame of Mary Magdalene in his book/film *The Da Vinci Code*. Many folk have heard about her for the first time, while others will be more familiar with her name, but perhaps a little rusty on her history.

St. Mary Magdalene has a crucial role in Dan Brown’s novel.

He makes a claim that Mary Magdalene was ‘*a woman who carried a secret so powerful that, if revealed, it threatened to devastate the very foundation of Christianity.*’ [!] (chap. 56)

The novel’s climax (or is it anti-climax?) is apparently,

‘*...to kneel before the bones of Mary Magdalene.
A journey to pray at the feet of the outcast one.*’

What do we know about this ‘outcast one’?

2. HOW DO WE KNOW MARY MAGDALENE ?

a) The Scene

Various writers in the first, second and third centuries after Jesus Christ wrote about Mary Magdalene.

Christianity spread quickly through the Roman Empire, but then – as now – folk wanted their own, more congenial, version of it.

They wanted a Jesus-flavoured religion, but on their own terms.

The belief that Jesus Christ was *divine*, God himself, visiting us to save us, was the most difficult thing of all. They did not feel in need of ‘rescue’, because they did not want to face the ‘sin’ that made such ‘rescue’ (‘salvation’) necessary. If Jesus was really God, he couldn’t be ignored. But if he was only a man then there was no obligation to ‘follow’ him.

They preferred a Jesus prophet-figure who was just human without all the implications of his being God. So there was an alternative movement to reduce Jesus, as there is today. The idea that by his life and work Jesus actually *revealed* God could enable *anyone* to enjoy fellowship with him. This struck against the strong self-satisfaction of having a religion that enabled a member to be one-up on his/her neighbours. They, like so many today, preferred the smug pride of something exclusive and secret, to the unsettling wonder of something open to all.

So there was a move against acknowledging that God had revealed himself in Jesus in preference for turning his world-wide fellowship into specialist in-groups, with a secret-society attitude in which only those who gained the right ‘knowledge’ could approach God. Far from enjoying what was revealed they focused on hidden meanings and codes.

Gnosticism

The name of this diluted and diverted Christianity was **Gnosticism**.

The word *Gnosticism* has a silent ‘g’, just as its related word ‘knowledge’ has a silent ‘k’.

Gnosticism borrowed Jesus and refashioned him. The end-product was a person who was only semi-divine. He was not a real human at all, his human appearance was that of a spook, or he simply got-dressed in human form by putting it on like an overcoat as and when he wished.

Gnosticism has the ‘real’ Jesus laughing as he looks down on the body suffering on the Cross!

Gnostics separated God from his world and denied the Christmas reality of God becoming flesh because, in their revised religion, matter was regarded as evil, and only the spiritual was good. A good God couldn’t (in Gnostic thought) become matter. The Cross of Christ was thereby robbed of meaning because hanging on it could not possibly be the Son of God.

The Gnostics had their own writings and interpretation of things and thought themselves ‘Christian’, but it was the religious version of the mint-with-a-hole! It was, at best, what I call Polo-Christianity: Jesus had a place, but the Good News at the centre had been removed. It was anaemic Christianity: Christ’s blood was not shed in sacrifice. It was not Christianity reduced to its bare bones (which could have been no bad thing), but filleted Christianity – its very bones had been removed!

Women: Promoted and Demoted

The contrast between Christianity and Gnosticism was enormous, but each was vast and varied.

Jesus Christ had a much higher view of women than the society around him.

[See: Jesus’ new interpretation of marriage - Mark 10:7,
Jesus & Woman of Samaria - John 4:27,
Little Children - Mark 10:14,
Woman-who-had-sinned – Luke 7:36-50.]

Christ replaced its casual divorce (whereby a wife could be divorced for providing a poor meal!) with something infinitely higher. Jesus’s famous affirmation that *the two should become one flesh* placed the wife at once on a level with her husband.

St. John’s Gospel records how Jesus not only broke with Jewish convention by speaking to a Samaritan, but he talked in public to a Samaritan woman! He spoke to her with both strength and tenderness. Of the disciples we read *they were astonished that he was speaking with a woman.*

The disciples also didn’t much like it when Jesus took mothers’ toddlers into his arms and blessed them.

Jesus was ready to bring God’s forgiveness to the woman-who-had-sinned – which the religious leader thought very suspect!

(See Section 6: Mary Magdalene and the Prostitute.)

In Gnostic circles women could also be treated well, but the following (from a Gnostic Gospel) shows the movement at its worst. It is an important reminder that the mere mention of Jesus in the text is no guarantee whatever that it is in tune with the historic Jesus. Here is an alleged account of a disagreement between Peter and Mary Magdalene in which Jesus features:

Peter says to the disciples.

‘Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of Life,’

to which Jesus adds,

*‘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.’*

One would not have to be pro-Christian or a believer to sense that Gnostic religion could be a ‘different world’ entirely from that of the New Testament. Its contrast is such that it would usually – to my mind – be misleading and dishonest to call it ‘Christian’ with a capital ‘C’.

Just as you cannot start with a filleted fish and have it develop into a whole fish, so the filleted version of Christianity (Gnosticism) had to *come later* than the whole version of Christianity depicted in the first-century documents of the New Testament.

b) The Sources

The sources for our knowing anything about Mary Magdalene come, therefore, either from the first-century Christian documents or the second and third century Gnostic ones.

Written: between AD 50 – 95	Gospel of Mark
	Gospel of Matthew
	Gospel of Luke
	Gospel of John

Written: 2nd Century	Gospel of Mary Magdalene
3rd Century	Gospel of Philip

In the next section is a summary of what we learn about Mary Magdalene from these sources.

3. THE MARY MAGDALENE STORY

a) The Earliest Accounts

Outline

The main facts they record are as follows: (Quotes in *bold italic*.)

- Called ‘Magdalene’ because she came from Magdala.
- Being designated by the name of her town not her husband meant that she was probably not married.
- Jesus delivered her from severe demonic possession.
[Because of the six ‘days’ of Creation and the completion on the seventh, the Jews often used ‘seven’ as a number of completeness. Mary Magdalene’s deliverance from ‘**seven demons**’ could indicate something akin to ‘complete’ possession, but whether it does or not, it certainly indicated the seriousness of her condition. See also Matthew 12:43-45]
- She and other women followed Jesus with his disciples in Galilee and *provided for them out of their own resources*, during the second year of Jesus’s public ministry.
- The women consisted of two groups; those whom Jesus had healed and those who were mothers of the Apostles.
Among the healed were Susanna and Joanna (Joanna’s husband had a position at the royal court).
Among the mothers was another Mary.
- Mary Magdalene was among the women who stayed near the Cross when Jesus was crucified.
Other women included Mary the Mother of Jesus, Salome & another Mary. (All the men, except John, fled.)
- When Jesus was laid in a tomb (within a sepulchre, or burial-cave) on Good Friday evening, Mary Magdalene & another Mary watched as Joseph of Arimathea had a huge stone rolled across the entrance.

The rest of Mary Magdalene’s story concerns Easter Day.

- The moment the restrictive regulations of the Jewish Sabbath (Saturday) were over, Mary, with two other women, went to the Sepulchre at dawn on Sunday to anoint Jesus’s body.
- She found the stone of the sepulchre had been rolled away and the tomb was empty. She stayed by it weeping, and the Risen Jesus appeared to her first.
- Jesus told her to go and tell the Apostles that he had been raised from the dead! *Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples ‘I have seen the Lord’....*
This is the gist of what happened. There is some variation between the accounts of the different Gospels, but not in the essentials. [The relevant references regarding Mary and the Resurrection are: Mark 16:1-8 and 16:9-11, Matthew 28:1-10, Luke 24:1-12, John 20:1-10. For the appearance of the Risen Christ to her: John 20:11-18, see also Matthew 28:9-10.]

b) Dan Brown’s Version

Dan Brown’s account of Mary Magdalene in *The Da Vinci Code* bears little resemblance to the account above for two reasons.

Gnostic

First, because he used the later Gnostic writings rather than the much earlier Christian Gospels. As a fiction-writer he is quite entitled to do that.

However, he claims that what he writes is factual and takes pains to stress its alleged ‘truth’ and the apparent support of scholars.

What Brown does – with deliberate dishonesty – is to turn history upside down!

He tries to lead his readers to believe that:

- The Gospels were deliberate lies written in the *fourth* century to give power to the Church by promoting a new idea – that Jesus Christ was divine!

and that -

- The Gnostic writings were written *earlier* than the Gospels and give the ‘true’ picture of Christ as merely human.

This is the opposite of the truth, which is that:

- Christians were very quickly convinced of Christ’s divinity, which was confirmed for them by the Resurrection. They worshipped Christ. It was his divinity that prompted the worship and created the worshipping community (i.e.the Church).
- The Gospels do *not* give Christ’s divinity a hard-sell as political propaganda, they present the humanity of Christ quite clearly. He is not the spook of the Gnostics, nor does he wear his human body like an overcoat.

In the Gospels Jesus:

Had a human body – he grew, he could be tired or hungry, he wept and bled.

He had human emotions – he loved, could be angry or sad.

He had human experiences – he obeyed his parents, was tempted, he learned, and worked.

[For Jesus’s humanity see, e.g. Matthew 4:2, Mark 1:13, 10:21, 11:15-17, Luke 2:51-52, John 4:6, 11:35.]

Bad Friday

The second reason why Brown’s account of Mary Magdalene bears so little resemblance to the Gospels’ account is because Brown wants to convince his readers that Christ is not divine, so he has, of course, to **omit Christ’s Resurrection!**

As far as the story of St. Mary Magdalene goes that is like blasting a five-foot hole in a five-foot wall! Little remains that is of any use or value. Judge for yourself from this outline of Brown’s story of Mary Magdalene.

Outline

- There is a 3rd Century manuscript, the *Gospel of Philip*, which describes Mary Magdalene as the *companion* of Jesus, and mentions him kissing her. This led to the disciples complaining that Jesus loved her more than them.
- Brown uses his character Teabing to make three claims:
 1. **Jesus must have married.**
 2. **‘Companion’ means ‘spouse’.**
 3. **Therefore Mary Magdalene married Jesus.**Each of these topics will be discussed in the next section.
- Since, according to Brown, Jesus was not divine he intended the future Church to worship the ‘sacred feminine’.
- Mary Magdalene fled to France where her daughter **Sarah** was born.
- The Church launched a campaign to ‘demonize’ Mary, and Brown implies that this was done when the Emperor Constantine, in AD 325, declared her to be the same person as the woman-who-sinned in Luke’s Gospel chapter 7.
- Brown alleges that since the 4th Century the Church has deliberately hidden the truth about Jesus and Mary.
- In 1969 the Roman Catholic Church withdrew its identification of Mary Magdalene with the woman-who-sinned in Luke’s Gospel.
- Mary is the ‘the outcast one’.

4. THE ‘CODE’ AND ITS CLAIMS

Teabing’s claim No. 1 : Jesus Must Have Married.

Teabing asserts that Jewish custom forbade celibacy, *therefore* Jesus must have married.

The Jews did *not* forbid celibacy: it is as simple as that!

St. Paul before his conversion had trained as a strict Jew and Jewish teacher, he claimed that he *advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors...*[Galatians 1:14]

When writing to the Church in Corinth about men and women, he mentioned in passing that he himself was not married [1 Corinthians 7:7].

He makes no great thing of it one way or the other. He does not regard celibacy as odd, but acknowledges celibate states, and actually commends them to those for whom they are suitable.

John the Baptizer was set aside before birth to be a prophet of God, and part of that special calling involved him avoiding strong drink and the usual comforts of clothes and food by living in the wilderness on a diet of locusts and honey. He may well *not* have married, but the point is that the foregoing of some of the ‘usual’ pleasures of life could be regarded by Jews as

a symbol of religious commitment and earn respect, not, as Teabing claims, condemnation. There were Jews of Jesus’s day who admired the celibacy practiced among the Essenes.

In the rich range of Jesus’s teaching there is an emphasis on the freedom to let go of things and the need for full commitment. He does not mention celibacy as such but the principle is in line with it.

Among Jesus’s recorded sayings is this one (when he deliberately used exaggeration to create a verbal ‘bombshell’ to make people sit up and think!)

This teaching trick is called ‘hyperbole’ from the Greek to ‘throw too far’!

‘Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple’. [Luke 14:26]

Of one thing we can be certain.

If Jesus did not marry it was not because he had a casual view of it. He viewed marriage in the highest possible terms, since, unlike the Gnostics, he did not view the body as evil. His tough line against divorce was a positive stance to safeguard marriage.

This view is still largely held among Christians today – and for the same reason.

Teabing’s claim No. 2: ‘Companion’ means ‘Spouse’

The companion of the Saviour is Mary Magdalene. Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on the mouth.

The above is the translation that Brown used from the *Gospel of Philip*. Unfortunately ants used the page for lunch one day and what actually survives is disappointingly:

*And the companion of the...
Mary Magdalene...
her more than...
the disciples...
kiss her...*

(It is a good job the ants didn’t return for supper, or there’d be nothing at all!)

Brown’s Teabing asserts that ‘companion’ means ‘spouse’, and then tries to give this assertion an aura of academic credibility by adding ‘*as any Aramaic scholar will tell you*’. Brown had not done his homework, so his addition earns him nothing but ridicule!

The *Gospel of Philip* was *not written in Aramaic* (the language Jesus used) but in Coptic (what we would term today as Egyptian).

The word used for ‘*companion*’ was a Greek import, so while it *can* mean ‘spouse’, it is not the normal word for a wife. In the New Testament (which was written in Greek) the word *never* refers to a marital or close relation.

The word translation ‘companion’ in the *Gospel of Philip* means ‘sharing’. It is used by St. Luke to describe the fishermen James and John’s as being Simon’s *partners*. St. Paul used it of Titus when describing him as his *fellow-worker*, and it is the word used by the author of Hebrews to indicate our *share* of the Holy Spirit.

[Luke 5:10, 1 Corinthians 1:7, & Hebrews 6:4.]

Teabing’s claim No.3 : Therefore Mary Magdalene married Jesus.

I have shown you (above) how Teabing’s formula

‘companion’ = ‘spouse’, therefore Christ = married

falls at its first hurdle. Nevertheless I shall press on and comment about the kiss.

If the phrase – even fragmentary – had appeared in the historic Christian Gospels it would have warranted attention.

The kiss in Jesus’s day was a widely used act of greeting, but that is not the answer because there appears to have been no social kissing between the sexes.

The junior kissed the hands of a senior. Judas opted to identify Jesus to the soldiers and police with a kiss – which he knew would not draw anyone’s attention. Judas probably kissed Jesus’s hands (though artists have always assumed otherwise) as it would have been presumptuous had he kissed Jesus anywhere on the head.

The social kiss between the sexes was rare. St. Paul encouraged the social kiss to be used as a greeting within the Christian family: ***Greet one another with a holy kiss***. But Biblical Commentators, I found, believe that it was only male-to-male or female-to-female.

This was the forerunner of the ‘Kiss of Peace’ used among Christians in worship today by which they symbolise God’s acceptance of the other person, and, ideally, also their own.

But with the Gnostic *Gospel of Philip* there is no need to treat it as history, since Gnostic writing is not meant to be conventional narrative. It was all symbolic, and operated on the level of allegory, i.e. item A is a symbol for item B.

In the Gnostic context, Jesus’s kiss of Mary Magdalene will have symbolised the imparting to her of divine *gnosis*/knowledge, and have no sexual connotation.

In this section, I have outlined Dan Brown’s version of Mary Magdalene, and have shown how Teabing’s assumptions which ‘prove’ Jesus’s marriage simply cannot stand.

Brown typically has Teabing claim that there are –

'countless references to Jesus and Magdalene's union'.

Countless indeed! There are none to be counted! In the Gnostic books there is not a single statement that Jesus and Mary were married.

Iraeneus (Bishop of Lyons from AD 178) said of the Gnostics of his day:

'Every one of them generates something new, day by day, according to his ability, for no one is deemed perfect who does not develop some mighty fiction!'

Dan Brown would have met the Gnostics' expectations well!

5. THE 'CODE' AND THE CHRIST

a) But What if Jesus *had* married?

I can almost hear this question being asked! It is one thing to say that Jesus did not marry – but what if he *had* done?

According to Brown, Mary's secret, i.e. her marriage to Jesus – if exposed – *would devastate the very foundation of Christianity.*

Well, that's just hype, and typical of the outrageous claims that Brown makes. The truth is that if Jesus had married, or if it were now discovered that he had, it wouldn't *devastate the very foundation of Christianity* at all!

Work it out for yourself.

God had a task, and Jesus was the tool. This is neatly summarised in John's Gospel chapter 3, verse 16 –

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him should not perish but may have eternal life.

If Jesus was found to have been married, would it alter the 'Gospel' message of John's summary quote above?

No!

Would his marriage alter the Christmas message of God born among us?

No!

Would his marriage alter the Good Friday message, of God dying to save us?

No!

Would his marriage alter the Easter Message that God raised him from the dead and that he lives?

No!

Would his marriage alter the Pentecost message that he breathes his living Spirit to guide and empower his Church?

No!

Would his marriage alter the authority of the Holy Scriptures (which are silent on the matter)?

No!

Would his marriage alter any of the traditional statements of Christian belief, e.g.

That ... *for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven,*

Was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary

And was made man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;

He suffered death and was buried.

In the third day he rose again...etc.

No!

Would his marriage undermine the efficacy of the sacraments today?

No!

Would the existence of descendents alter in any way the full and finished work of Christ, or diminish his divinity?

No!

The above answers – which I expect you agree with - indicate that had Christ married it would neither

i) have devastated ‘*the foundation of Christianity*’,

nor

ii) have been such a threat to the Church that it would need to slaughter all who knew about it!

Essentials v. Non-essentials

Christians must distinguish between what is ‘doctrine’ and what is optional opinion.

I am sure there are many Christians who hold a very strong opinion indeed that Jesus never married, but they must beware of upgrading their opinion into a doctrine. Treating any *non-essential* as if it were *essential* – is heresy (as is also the opposite error of treating an essential as a non-essential).

There is a doctrine that Christ was raised from the dead and is alive.

There is a wide-spread opinion that he had long fair hair.

Doctrine differs from opinion!

My Christian faith is grounded on the truth of his Resurrection, but I can remain a Christian minister even if I think that Christ was as bald as a coot!

When Brown states that the knowledge of Jesus marrying Mary Magdalene would ‘devastate the foundation of Christianity’, he is failing to distinguish between doctrine and opinion, and placing centrally what does not belong there.

In stating the Christian position in contrast to Brown’s claims, Christians must be careful not to be tricked into also putting fringe items at the centre – and thereby distorting the truth still further.

The marital status of Jesus is not a doctrine requiring belief – it is a question on which Scripture says nothing specific. It had no need to, because it has no bearing on the saving work of Christ who ‘*died that we might be forgiven.*’

Jesus is the ‘foundation’ of Christianity. No opinion about his marital status – least of all the fictional fantasies of Dan Brown(!) – will devastate Him, or the salvation which he offers, or the world-wide worshipping community who love and serve him as their living Lord.

There are further items of Brown’s life of Mary that deserve comment, before I turn to Mary Magdalene’s being identified with the prostitute in Luke’s Gospel.

b) Constantine and the ‘Close’ Vote

Brown is correct in stating that the Roman Emperor Constantine presided at a grand Council of all the Church leaders at Nicaea in the year AD 325. But Brown’s ‘cheerful sloppiness’ (to borrow one critic’s phrase) leads to his interchanging words like ‘Rome’, ‘Roman Empire’, ‘Vatican’, ‘Pope’, ‘Catholic Church’, ‘Roman Catholic Church’ regardless of date or place!

There was no *Roman* Catholic Church until 1054 when the Catholic Church split into the Roman Catholic Church in the West and the Eastern Orthodox Church. There was no Vatican until over 300 years later.

In Brown’s story of Mary Magdalene it is implied that it was at this great Council that Constantine ‘demonized’ Mary; this was not so. It was not Constantine but the Pope, 250 years later, who did that what Brown describes – though whether it was her ‘demonization’ I rather doubt.

According to Brown, Teabing tells us that the purpose of the Council was to vote on the divinity of Christ.

There was a vote, true; but it was to confirm the belief in Christ’s divinity that had been held since the first century against the Gnostics and others around the Empire who wanted to dilute it or deny it.

All the Bishops from as far afield as Spain and Egypt gathered. On the matter of the divinity of Jesus Christ – the voting was as follows:

For – 218

Against – 2

Brown excels even himself by calling that ‘relatively close’!

Still, Brown seems never much concerned with actual facts; despite his diligence and determination to convince his readers that he is dealing with nothing else!

c) ‘My Lord and my God’

Jews – foremost among all nations – worshipped only the one God, and their Sabbath Day (Saturday) was set aside for his worship.

The earliest Christians were Jews, but when they worshipped they wanted to celebrate the Sunday-Resurrection of their Risen Lord. It was so important to them that they took a very radical step – they switched their worship from the Jewish Sabbath – the last day of the week – to the ‘*first day of the week*’, because they wanted to celebrate Easter morning every week.

That could not have happened in the *first* century if Jesus’s ‘divinity’ was only a political label promoted in the *fourth*!

St. Paul was martyred in about AD 64. Around AD 55 – less than twenty-five years after Christ’s Death and Resurrection – Paul was writing to the church in Corinth about collecting for the needy and tells them to save up and bring their offering *on the first day of the week*, i.e. when they worship together.

No more than two years later, on Paul’s third Missionary Journey, it was in Troas, in Asia Minor, that Luke recorded *On the first day of the week we came together to break bread.*

[Acts 20:7. The author was Luke and he appears to have been using his diary at this point because of his use of ‘*we*’.]

In AD 61 at the latest, Paul was composing, or using, a hymn about Christ, which concludes:

*... therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

[Philippians 2:9-11, the hymn begins earlier at v.6.]

‘Doubting Thomas’ as he is usually called, when he finally encountered the Risen Christ said simply: *My Lord and my God* – which is as convenient a summary of first-century belief in Jesus Christ as one could find. [John 20:28.] He did not have to live until he was 400 years old to have it told him by the Emperor Constantine at Nicaea!

[There are endless other references, directly or indirectly, to Christ’s divinity. e.g. 1 Corinthians 8:6 and 1 Colossians 1:15-16 speak of him as the creator.

Mark, the earliest Gospel begins: ... **the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God**, and is soon telling of Jesus’s healing the sick, cleansing a leper, and

declaring the forgiveness of sins. ‘Who can forgive sins but God alone’ exclaimed those present. (Mark 2:1-12). Jesus states that he *does* have **authority on earth to forgive sins.**]

6. MARY MAGDALENE AND The Prostitute

There is an historical basis to Brown’s assertion that the Church ‘demonized’ Mary Magdalene, but is his interpretation correct? It is, I believe, nothing like as negative as it seems.

a) The Inverted Kingdom

The following story from Luke’s Gospel is of *immense* significance not simply in regards to Mary Magdalene but for an understanding of the Christian Gospel. As you may deduce from my title ‘The Inverted Kingdom’ the Christian understanding of God’s priorities as revealed in Jesus Christ can at times be the very opposite of what we assume is ‘normal’.

The incident and its parable come from St. Luke’s Gospel, chapter 7.

As you read it, note Jesus’s contrasting attitude to the Pharisee (religious teacher) and the woman who had been the sinner. See how Jesus turns upside-down the established order.

Before his birth his Mother has praised God for the very same ‘inversion’:

*‘he puts down the mighty from their seats
and exalts the humble and meek’*

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house and took his place at the table.

And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.

The custom was to eat reclining and propped-up on one’s left elbow. There was access, therefore, to a person’s feet ‘tucked-up’ from *behind*.

Now when the Pharisee who had invited Jesus saw it, he said to himself, ‘If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him – that she is a sinner.’

Jesus spoke up and said to him, ‘Simon, I have something to say to you.’ ‘Teacher’, he replied, ‘speak’.

‘A certain money-lender had two debtors, one owed five hundred silver pieces, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?’

Simon answered, ‘I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.’

And Jesus said to him, ‘You have judged rightly’. Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon,

‘Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair.

‘You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet.

‘You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.

‘Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven: hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.’ Then he said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’

But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, ‘Who is this who even forgives sins?’

And Jesus said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’

[Luke 7:36-50. For greater clarity I have made the following changes in the New Revised Standard Version. ‘Creditor’ to ‘money-lender’; ‘denarii’ to ‘silver-pieces’; ‘he’ to ‘Jesus’.]

b) The Sinner’s Salvation

Jesus’s estimate of the upright moral religious leader and the sinful woman is almost the opposite of social expectation and propriety.

The woman is the ‘star’ of the story, and Simon the villain!

Who is the educational ‘star’ pupil at a school – the genius, or the one who manages to ‘travel’ from very poor to very good? In a similar way the ‘star’ at a Weight Watchers is not the lightest person, but the one who has changed most.

In Christ’s view of things (and so in the Christian view of things) the Good News of the Gospel shows itself most fully among those who most need it!

In the Old Testament prostitution has been described as ‘a dark background against which God’s gracious forgiveness and restoration shine bright.’ In the Old Testament three prophets (Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Hosea) each likened the nation to a prostitute for its unfaithfulness to God, but all three offered the promise that God will take the nation back, forgive ‘her’, and establish a new and loving relationship with ‘her’.

[Jeremiah 3:11-18, Ezekiel 16:53-63, Hosea 2:14 – 3:5.]

Matthew’s Gospel records a remark of Jesus to the Chief Priests and Elders no less -

‘Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you.’ (!) [Matthew 21:31, but see 28-32.]

The woman in the Pharisee’s house wanted to be close to Jesus – who was given the name Jesus because he would ***save his people from their sins***. She is the object of God’s love, and being open to God, he was free to work within her.

The Good News of the Gospel cannot touch Simon because of his pride. The only thing Jesus can do is to begin to break his pride so that he can be remade, hence Jesus’s harsh attitude to him. For growth/healing/salvation pride cannot be blessed, it can only be broken.

It was in a sermon, in the sixth century, that the Pope said that Mary Magdalene was the woman in the story above. My suggestion – made in all seriousness, and with considerable experience of preaching – was that he was probably carried away by his excitement at the story you have just read!

Luke has only one reference to St. Mary Magdalene in his first twenty-three chapters, and that single reference occurs in the next-but-one sentence from the end of the account of the woman-who-was-a-sinner.

She is also a woman whose life has been dramatically changed by Jesus, for she is described as ***Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out.***

Some scholars think that the town of Magdala was notorious for its prostitution, and that to be called ***Magdalene*** might have said more about her source of income than the locality of her home, just as the term ‘Sodomite’ has not always carried its purely geographical meaning. But be that as it may.

c) The Gospel Symbol

If the Pope was not historically right in assuming that St. Mary Magdalene and the woman-who-was-a-sinner were one and the same, it was an easy devotional and pastoral move to want to see in the wonderful story of Mary Magdalene not just deliverance from evil, but also that distinctive heart of God’s rescue-work – the forgiveness of sin.

The Pope’s message that day will most likely have been that no member of his Christian congregation was too ‘bad’ to be forgiven. That is the great appeal of the woman-who-was-a-sinner story.

The Pope may well have wished – and taught – that his congregation should (like the woman) repent, encounter Jesus, receive God’s forgiveness, and then (like Mary Magdalene) go and tell others the Good News of the Gospel.

In aligning Mary with the woman, the Pope almost certainly did not set out to ‘demonize’ Mary Magdalene, but to expound the Gospel message enshrined in the story of the woman.

Anyway, later events do not give the impression that Mary Magdalene was ‘demonized’ by the Church. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* begins its article on her:

‘...one of Jesus’s most celebrated disciples, famous, according to Mark 16:9-10 and John 20:14-17 for being the first person to see the resurrected Christ.’

My impression from the number of churches dedicated to her just in England is that if there was any programme of ‘demonization’ then it was not very effective.

The list of places with churches in honour of St. Mary Magdalene begins – Abingdon, Accrington, Addiscombe, Adlestrop, Alfick, Alsager, Altofts, Arundel, Ashton, Ashton-on-Mersey, etc.

Perhaps the main pictorial logo for Oxford University is the Great Tower completed in 1507 and soaring 144 feet above one of Oxford’s earliest colleges: Magdalen (usually pronounced ‘Mawdlin’)

[The word ‘Maudlin’ reflects the joint-identity of the woman-who-sinned with Mary Magdalene since it means ‘emotionally tearful’ and hence sentimental.]

Statues of St. John the Baptizer and St. Mary Magdalene alternate around the pinnacles of the Great Tower: symbolising the one who first declared that the Christ had arrived, and the one who first declared that he had been raised from the dead!

*

An impressive memorial for Dan Brown’s ‘outcast one’!

*

7. WHAT DOES ST. MARY MAGDALENE TEACH US?

Negatively

1. The failure of a male-dominated structure adequately to give full recognition to the women, and the pitiful failure of the Christian Church down the ages – and now – to affirm adequately Jesus Christ’s view of women.
2. The failure of Christians generally to declare by their lives, their words and their actions the revolutionary character of God’s ‘Inverted Kingdom’ which they are commissioned to implement as God’s programme for the saving of his world and its societies.

3. The tendency of Christians, under society’s influence, to ‘go soft’ on sin and thereby to make God’s ‘Good News’ – which they exist to proclaim – seemingly irrelevant to those who need it most.

Positively

4. That deliverance from evil was, and is still, God’s most relevant work to make-free for the abundant life that God promises for those ‘in’ Jesus Christ.

5. That the foundation of the Christian faith, and its community, is nothing less than the reality of the Risen and Living Christ encountered personally and corporately.

6. That God-ward love and proclamation to others belong hand in hand.

‘Do not keep clinging to me, but go and tell...’

[The Greek suggests that Mary kept clinging to Jesus. John 20:17]

The calling of every Christian is also to be, in an important sense, an ‘Apostle’, i.e. – a royal messenger of God’s salvation.

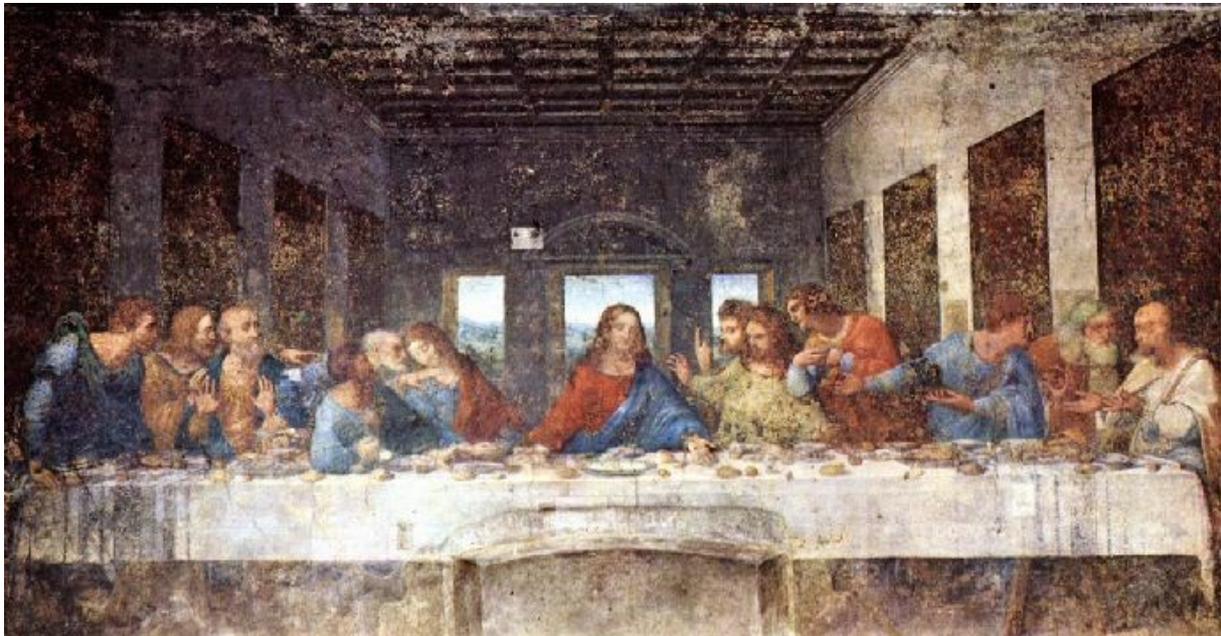
Part VI – LEONARDO'S *LAST SUPPER*

Author's note:

I can write with authority about the *Last Supper* because of my training in art, and because Christian art has interested me since my teens.

Just as fiction has to be assessed first as fiction, and history as history, so a work of art has first and foremost to be seen in artistic terms. What were the artist's aims? What was he up to? The answers to such questions regarding Leonardo da Vinci's painting called '*The Last Supper*' are crystal clear and unambiguous.

I hope you find my analysis interesting.



Not a Sacred Moment

The painting is not in a church or chapel, but in the dining room of a Christian community. Had it been behind the High Altar in a church Leonardo would probably have depicted the moment when Christ took the bread and wine and declared them to be his 'Body' and 'Blood' – a specially sacred and religious theme. But Leonardo apparently took a considerable time to decide which moment he would depict, and then opted for another.

Probably because the room was for ordinary meals, and not for worshipping, Leonardo opted for an incident when Jesus was *not* doing anything specially 'sacred' or 'religious'. It is likely that for this reason the standard symbols of Jesus's status and holiness, e.g. his halo, are absent.

Leonardo chose the moment described in St. John's Gospel when the sacred meal is over, and Jesus astounds his Apostles by declaring that one of them would *betray* him.

Dan Brown, typically, took no pains to find this out, so in chapter 57 of the *Da Vinci Code* he has Sir Leigh Teabing gloating over the fact that there is no Chalice! (Really!) Teabing then accuses scholars of not noticing or ignoring the fact of the missing chalice(!), and claims that the fresco is the 'entire key to the Holy Grail mystery'. All of Brown's theories rest on the assumption that Leonardo was painting Jesus instituting the Eucharist/ Mass/ Holy Communion – but he *wasn't!* It is a pity that Dan Brown never noticed.

The Great Illusion

Have you ever been in a restaurant where a huge mirror on a wall has tricked you into thinking that the dining area was twice the size? Leonardo was up to a similar, but far greater, trick. His mural completely covered the 29' wide wall. First, he made the room seem twice its size - and through its three far windows the friars could glimpse their familiar Tuscan countryside. Second, as they looked between the heads of their fellow-diners, they could glimpse Jesus and his Apostles seated at an extra table in the room – at their own level and alongside them.

Sadly, Leonardo's masterly illusion has now been completely shattered because no one can sit at table in front of it, view it as Leonardo intended, or glimpse the Apostles between the heads of fellow-diners. The reason is that the floor of the dining room ('refectory') has long since caved-in.

This means that we now can only view a mural that is up on the first storey from downstairs on the ground floor!

This is a visual and psychological disaster! Leonardo's visual illusion is shattered, and the viewer finds him/herself looking up to Jesus elevated to a position far above. This is the exact *opposite* of Leonardo's visual message to the resident friars; that the Lord Jesus Christ was right among them in the routine of their Christian corporate life, and not just in 'worship'.

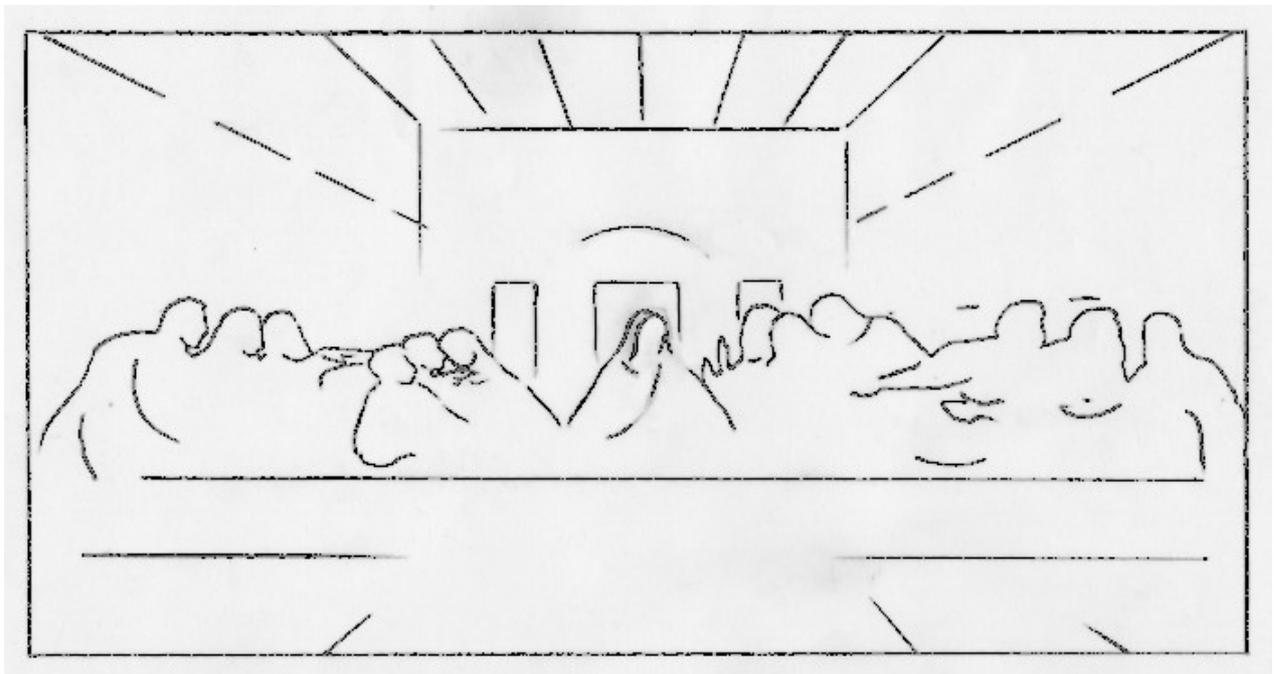
Reproductions at least have the advantage of being able to be viewed straight-on, but should be hung from the ceiling if you want to get the 'feel' of seeing the real thing in Milan.

Leonardo used every visual trick to extend the room, and the four dark tapestries on each side wall and the chequered ceiling enabled him to stress the receding perspective lines and to push back the windows – whose brightness would otherwise appear to bring them nearer. (The receding lines had another, and much more important, function – see item 4 in the list below.) The austere walls, plain square-topped windows, flat ceiling and lack of pictures, images, candlesticks and ornament tell us clearly that Leonardo is deliberately wanting to avoid being 'sacred' or 'churchy'.

The Centrality of Christ

On the other hand the person and position of Jesus as Lord, not only of the disciples past but of those present having their meal, needed to be made clear. Crowns, regalia and religious symbols were inappropriate for depicting Jesus present at an ordinary meal, so Leonardo used at least ten visual devices to affirm Christ's supreme status above all. Here they are:

1. Jesus Christ is the exact centre of the composition.
2. Behind him is the largest of three windows, so Christ is silhouetted in a way that no one else is. Only the central window is wide enough to create light right around the head.
3. The light of the window acts somewhat as a spotlight and also as a halo, and the latter is gently emphasised by the large window having a curved stone decoration above it.



4. All the receding perspective lines, on the side walls, the ceiling and the floor, meet at one point (that artists call the 'vanishing point'). Leonardo places Christ's head exactly at that very point so that all perspective-lines lead to it – to Christ's right eye to be precise, as his head is slightly turned and off-centre.
5. In addition, Leonardo aligns Christ's outstretched arms so that they also back-up the lines of perspective and similarly point to his head.
6. Eight, perhaps nine, of the Twelve Apostles are looking towards Jesus, and as viewers mentally tend to 'follow the eyes' of people in paintings to see what they are looking at, so the eight or nine pairs of eyes also all point to Jesus.
7. Leonardo did not want the visual boredom of having all twelve Apostles looking at Jesus, so he has three who do not: Apostle number 6 on the left side and Apostles numbers 10 and 11 on the right. But having done this, Leonardo takes *considerable* pains to make sure that the viewer does not look away from Jesus also and follow the eyes of these three. He does this by having in front of each of them very strong visual pointer(s) going in the proper direction – i.e. towards Christ.

On the left hand side, Apostle number 6 has in front of him a hand and finger literally pointing to Jesus.

Apostles numbers 10 and 11, on the far right hand side, have in front of them no less than *three* hands all pointing to Jesus. In addition, the natural 'movement' away from Jesus of their eye-direction-line has a visual barrier dropped right across it to slow it down. Leonardo creates this by positioning the last two Apostles (11 & 12) in such a way that the wall-tapestry is visible between them, and creates a strong dark vertical line right across the direction-line of their looking away from Jesus.

8. Red is the colour we experience most 'immediately' because of its short wave-length, hence its use for stop lights, warnings, etc.

Leonardo has Jesus's garment of the brightest red (on the left as we view him). It is a much brighter red than the outer garment of John. (Dan Brown sees both only as 'red'.)

9. Moreover, the scarlet shape of Jesus's garment is designed also to point straight to Jesus's head.

On the left side (as we look at it) of the garment is the straight line up Christ's right arm that points to his head.

Because we read left-to-right our eyes use the same pattern when looking at other things. This is probably why the red is on the left, not the right, as we view Jesus. As we 'read' Christ our eyes travel left-to-right, so the right hand edge of the large patch of bright red sweeps up in a firm but gentle curve so that it *also* leads our eyes to the face of Christ.

10. Finally, Jesus is set aside by his attitude. While all the Apostles twist and turn and gesticulate in shock/anger/panic at Jesus's prediction of betrayal, Jesus is still. Visually he is triangular: a favourite shape throughout the history of Western Art to depict dignity, poise and stillness. Given a mighty gust of wind that caught the Apostles unawares some look as if they could keel over. Not so Jesus.

(This stillness is deeply Biblical because as the days of Jesus's death approached, he switched from being active and taking the initiative to a passive mode. As he offered himself for death in obedience to his heavenly Father, he submitted with no reaction to all those who had a role in it: Judas, the guards, the High Priest, the Jewish Council, Pontius Pilate, Herod the King, and the Roman soldiers.)

So much for Leonardo's visual techniques to establish the complete centrality of Jesus Christ. If you look at a reproduction it is not by chance that you keep looking at Christ – it is, in the most literal sense, 'by design' – and a very complex and clever design at that!

Let's turn to the Apostles.

The Twelve Apostles

A painting of thirteen people is an enormous challenge for an artist, if they are not to look like a row of playing cards (to use a traditional analogy).

To avoid having thirteen faces in a line, like a queue along the side of a doctor's waiting room, Leonardo not only split the twelve Apostles into two distinct halves, but then divided them again so that he had four manageable groups of three.

Leonardo first established the picture's perfect poise and balance by the strong level white of the gigantic table-cloth. He makes the table-legs visible at each end to underline its solidity and to counteract any impression that it might see-saw. At its exact centre he places the immovable triangle of the Christ-figure.

Once that solidity is established Leonardo then lets-rip by causing as much visual movement and action as is possible within a line-up of supposedly-seated figures!

In avoiding the solemn moment of the Institution of the Lord's Supper, and opting for the moment when Jesus predicts his betrayal, Leonardo was free to paint all the Twelve reacting in shock and surprise, and in different ways according to temperament. (To Judas it comes as no surprise or shock so he does not react at all, as we shall see.)

The painting is not unlike a massive pair of scales – utterly still because of a perfect balance of 'weight' in each of its containers, but full of lively movement because in each hanging container are six puppies! That is an odd image I know, but I can think of none better for a painting that is a phenomenal mixture of peace and tension, of stillness and movement, and of rest and restlessness.

Leonardo begins by turning the figures at each end (Apostles numbers 1 and 12) so that they act a little like bookends and prevent the 'movement' of the strong white horizontal design from spreading outwards like spilt milk. The vertical patterns of the cloth at either end serve the same purpose.

A quick impression as we 'read' the Apostles from left to right would run like this:

No.1 is perhaps leaping to his feet.

No.2 is reaching behind No.3 to get the attention of the middle Apostle (No.5) in the next group.

No.3 has his hands up in horror.

No.4 (head in shadow leaning on the table) seems not to be moving.

No.5 is leaning right over from the fourth seat to speak to No.6 and pointing to Jesus.

No.6 is listening closely to No.5.

Jesus Christ. Having just spoken, he speaks to no one. His left hand (on the right as we look at him) is relaxed and open and nowadays might be accompanied by a remark like 'Well, there you have it!' Resigned and offering himself.

Christ's right hand, in contrast, is active and arched and seemingly about to grab something. (See later).

No.7 (who has been pushed back by the vigorous arm movement of No.8) is using his right hand, clearly seen between the central and right hand windows,...perhaps to ask a question (see below).

No.8 is thrusting himself forward and flings wide his arms right across Nos.7 and 9.

No.9 in contrast, is adopting the quiet attitude of a penitent with hands on heart, although he has to stand to make himself seen around No.8's obtrusive display!

No.10 is pointing both arms to Jesus and talking animatedly about him to No.12.

No.11 (Self-portrait?) is also talking to No.12, but his hand seems to be grappling with a question.

No.12 is responding to the other two in his group with hands that manage to point to Jesus but also are in the almost universal gesture indicating - 'I don't know!'

The above is nothing more than an immediate impression – but it does indicate that there is a lot going on! For visual dynamic reasons and for interest Leonardo made each of the four groups of three Apostles as different as possible from the others!

Having established the strong level table, Leonardo composes the four groups to make two waves: first group *up*, second group *down*, third group *up*, fourth group *down*. Importantly they do *not* mirror one another. This means that the group to the left of Christ (as we view them) is the lowest so does not block the window behind. The group to the right of Christ (as we view them) is, in contrast, the highest group and manages to block the view of the landscape behind.

Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*, having wrongly claimed that Leonardo was a Grand Master of the Priory of Sion, –

- attaches great symbolic importance to the 'V-shaped' gap between the second Group and Jesus,
- and
- claims that Apostle number 6 is not St. John but St. Mary Magdelene.

Peter, Judas, John or Mary Magdalene.



This group is where something quite specific is happening.

Since Leonardo was using the New Testament account as the basis for the picture, it is not surprising that the text makes everything perfectly clear. St. John's Gospel [Chapter 13, verses 21 to 26] describes the event in these words:

Jesus said:

'Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.'

The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking.

One of his disciples – the one whom Jesus loved [John] – was reclining next to him;

Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking.

So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, 'Lord, who is it?'

Jesus answered, 'It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.'

So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas...

The other Gospel accounts are very similar to one another and will have been familiar to the friars as they ate, and to Leonardo. They add the detail -

Then they began to ask one another which one of them it could be who would do this.

[Luke 22:23]

In addition, both Mark and Matthew record the question *'Surely, not I?'*

Leonardo naturally incorporates this detail which dovetails so neatly with St. John's account, and such questioning is most apparent in the Apostles on the right, numbers 7, 9 and 11.

The Key Group

The three in the second and visually 'lowest' group are:

Judas the Treasurer and Traitor

Simon Peter the Leader

John ('the disciple whom Jesus loved') or, according to the *Da Vinci Code*, **St. Mary Magdalene**.

They are a fascinating bunch, and are worth close attention.

a) Judas, the Treasurer and Traitor

Judas, was the '*keeper of the purse*', i.e. the Apostles' treasurer. He is the odd one out in the company, but at this stage he is not yet known to be the traitor by the other Apostles.

Leonardo had a complex set of requirements to meet.

- i) He had to identify Judas for the viewer.
- ii) He had to make Judas's position close enough to Jesus so that Jesus, moments later, can give him the piece of dipped bread as St. John's Gospel records.
- iii) He had somehow to set Judas apart, but without jumping-the-gun and depicting him as the Traitor.

Leonardo accomplishes this in six ways:

- Judas is the only Apostle identified by his traditional symbol. In his case it is always a leather money-purse: he holds it in his right hand as he rests his arm on the table.
- As Judas has to be able to receive the dipped bread from Jesus, his other arm is stretched out along the table towards Jesus's hand.
- With his hands and arms clearly well onto the table, this position enables Judas to be nearer us than the other Apostles are. Visually Judas is on a different plane from the rest, and views Jesus differently – this is theologically true also.
- Judas is able to look *back* at Jesus. While the other Apostles are in the light, Judas's face is in comparative darkness because of his very different position. His face in shadow acts as a camouflage, and Leonardo does his best to merge Judas into his background (which happens to be Simon Peter).
- Judas's head is lower than all the others. He is given a green outer robe (in contrast to Jesus's red garment), and his hair is darker than most.
- Leonardo depicts Judas's face in even *less* than full profile.

These factors combine with considerable effect. Anyone who was asked quickly to count the number of Apostles' might easily see only eleven at first glance.

b) Simon Peter, the Leader

The next Apostle in the irregular row of heads is Peter. He is primarily identified by what he is doing – although he is also portrayed with his traditional short beard and receding hair. He is visually emphasised by Leonardo's placing of him so that the line of the rear corner of the room 'points' down to him.

In St. John's account '*Peter motioned to him* [John] *to ask Jesus.*' Peter, being the leader, acts as spokesman for them all.

Peter's left hand is visible just below John's face and points to Jesus. This is what is being said at the moment that Leonardo chose to depict, and so is of the utmost importance.

Apostles 10, 11 and 12 seem also to be talking, but it is what Jesus has just said (made clear by the shock of the Apostles) and what Peter is saying to John that constitute the event.

To make this clear to the viewer Leonardo places Peter's and John's heads *extremely* close and visually uses Peter's pointing hand to link them even tighter. Ask the casual observer 'Who is obviously speaking?' and 'Who is obviously listening?' and they cannot but point to Peter and John in the second group, because Leonardo's visual signals are so strong.

Having had to place Peter and John so close, Leonardo was faced with the problem of the composition of this group. Judas's position made his head much lower than anyone else's. To unite this second group of Apostles, Leonardo has to get Peter's, John's and Judas's heads more closely related.

Leonardo accomplishes this with an amazing visual trick. He paints the bodies of Peter and Judas in such a way that Peter, who occupies the fourth seat, ends up as head number 5, and Judas in the fifth seat ends up as head number 4!

Leonardo *crosses* the two bodies of Peter and Judas; two so 'diametrically opposed' followers as we might say. One is craning forward towards Jesus while the other is leaning away from him and not reacting at all.

This results in lowering Peter's head, so John in turn has to lean down towards Peter to listen to him.

In addition, John's leaning to hear Peter above the hubbub caused by Jesus's prediction, stops John blocking the viewer's sight of the first window. This serves Leonardo well because he did not want a mirror image of the two outside windows, and he intended to block the right hand one. The leaning of John clears the view to see the Tuscan countryside 'beyond', and this stops the extended room from becoming claustrophobic.

The 'V' of the composition that Dan Brown claims is so important is caused simply by Leonardo's solutions to these many demands.

Basically it is John's leaning to listen to the leaning Peter that creates the 'V' gap between Jesus and the second trio of Apostles. (There is a notable, but flatter, 'V-gap' between the third and fourth groups of Apostles.)

While Brown emphasises the 'V-space' of what is *not* there, I expect Leonardo would stress the importance of what *is* there in the two side-by-side triangles that create the empty 'V': Jesus on the right, and the figures of Judas, Peter and John on the left. The meaning of the painting, what is happening and why, is almost all indicated by Jesus and the Judas-Peter-John group.

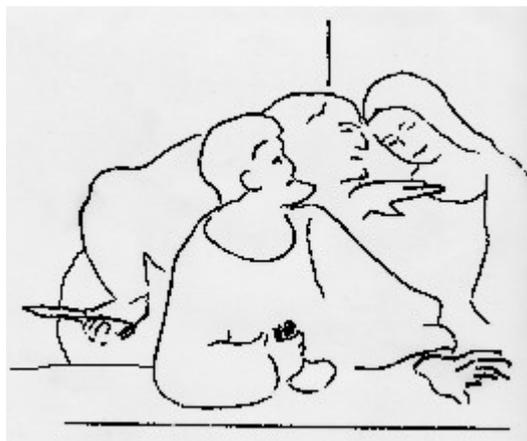
On the right side of the mural there is less happening, but just as Leonardo used the line of the left-hand far corner of the room to point us to Peter, so he uses the right hand corner to point us to Philip. Leonardo uses other means to draw our attention to him. He is the only one in bright red on the right hand side, and he is the highest figure in the composition - the most 'up' member of the most 'up' group.

His impressive stance, with both hands on his heart, is the traditional - and obvious - one to indicate penitence and sorrow. Philip is the focus of the question that struck the hearts of all present (except Judas): ***'Is it I?'*** (To use the old and more familiar translation).

Leonardo goes well towards capturing the sheer anguish that must have laid behind the terrible question. It is well to be reminded that Judas committed suicide after his betrayal of Jesus - such was the weight of the dreadful deed. When Jesus declared that someone would betray him - that potential weight fell on all of them. This is the moment that Leonardo depicts - immediately before the answer is given - and why there is such consternation portrayed among the Apostles.

Is this a dagger...?

There is a further detail regarding Peter.



In the same Gospel account we read how Jesus and the disciples left and went to the Garden they knew well (Gethsemane). There Judas arrived with armed soldiers and police. Jesus, with Judas by him, steps forward three times to declare that he is the one they are looking for.

Finally he says:

'I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go.'...

*Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it,
struck the high priest's slave,
and cut off his right ear.
The slave's name was Malchus.*

*Jesus said to Peter,
'Put your sword back into its sheath...'*

It is probably Peter's impetuosity and eagerness to fight for Jesus that led Leonardo to place a knife in Peter's right hand. In size it is ambiguously both a large knife and a short sword. It would also, perhaps, strengthen Peter's identity for the regular monastic diners for whom the picture was painted, and who would know – almost by heart – the Gospel accounts. The friars' greater familiarity with the Gospel text would enable them to make links instantly that most of us Christians nowadays would only manage to make more slowly!

Readers must realise that the painting is now in a safe but terrible condition. The patchiness of the surviving paint-work makes it look nowadays as if the knife might not be held by Peter but by a disembodied arm! – as Dan Brown believes. In fact Peter's right wrist is doubled-back on his hip. Leonardo's preparatory drawing for the arm is in Windsor and shows the sharply bent wrist clearly. I have just replicated Peter's arm in front of a mirror while holding a bread-knife! Leonardo is accurate as always. There's no need for any 'third arm' theory!

The knife is apparent just behind Judas's back, but it is safely pointing *away* from him. Although not a very 'natural' position it is difficult to see in what other way Peter could plausibly have held it and have made it visible to the viewers.

(However, the knife inadvertently points rather threateningly to Apostle number 3 in the adjoining group! At first sight his two hands may be raised in horror at Jesus's prediction of his betrayal. However his lowered eyelids suggest to me that he may have just looked down and reacted in horror at the knife – the blade of which appears all-too-close to his stomach as Peter suddenly lurches forward to speak to John. It is only a possibility, and is of no importance.)

Dan Brown sees Peter thrusting the edge of his hand blade-like across St. Mary Magdalene's neck as an expression of his jealousy that Mary would become the leader of the Church, as described in the Apocryphal *Gospel of Mary Magdalene*.

John and Mary - Identity Crisis?

Virtually everything that I have described, not least the Scriptural account that Leonardo was using, points to the third figure being the Apostle John. These factors should outweigh any casual 'impressions' of the figure divorced from Leonardo's intentions, divorced from the Scriptural account or divorced from the style of painting at the time.

Any theorist who wished to replace the Apostle John by St. Mary Magdalene would have first to prove that Leonardo was not using the New Testament basis that I have outlined.

Secondly, if he wished St. John's figure to be St. Mary Magdalene – where is St. John? There are not thirteen Apostles, only twelve. Any credible removal of St. John from Leonardo's intentions and from the scene altogether would (in the light of what I have written) be a near-impossible task.

St. John is usually depicted beardless because he traditionally lived to a ripe old age towards the close of the first century, when he wrote the New Testament book 'The Revelation of St. John'. St. John has always, therefore, been viewed as one of Jesus's younger followers. His long hair is no sign of being effeminate in a period when most men wore their hair long. Leonardo's famous etched self-portrait shows him rugged and aged, but with long flowing hair. (Apostle number 11 may be a self-portrait of the artist.)

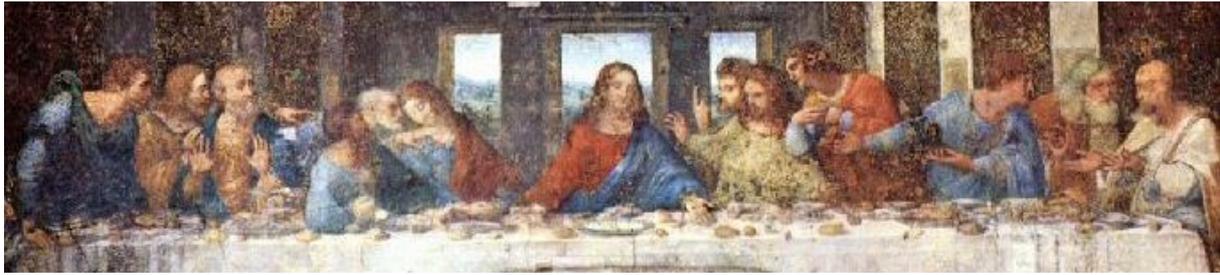
Leonardo painted a picture of John the Baptist with a head of long curly hair and, by 21st century standards, somewhat effeminate features. But we can be certain that he did not believe that the eater of locusts and wild honey who lived and survived in the desert was a woman!

Perhaps the most relevant thing that can be said about the face of the Apostle John whom Jesus loved, is that Leonardo made him most like Jesus.

Dan Brown has Teabing say of the Apostle number 6 that the figure is "without doubt" female! This illustrates a number of things. Perhaps the most worrying is that it shows Dan Brown's compulsive need to state anything and everything as a proven certainty.

If some wish to believe that Apostle number 6 is St. Mary Magdalene, they may. What they cannot do is to claim – as Brown/Teabing does – that the figure is '*without doubt* female'.

There is very *considerable doubt* that the figure is female, and it is blatant dishonesty – even in a work of fiction – to claim that there is not.



The Meaning in Focus

To draw together in summary the main points, here are the eight items of the Scriptural account and an indication of where and how Leonardo contrived directly or indirectly to include them.

1. Jesus says ***One of you will betray me.***
 - Judas (Apostle 4) is unmoved.
 - Jesus's left arm indicates that he has just spoken.
 - The apostles' chaotic reaction indicates the horror of Jesus's comment.

2. The disciples ***look at one another uncertain of whom he is speaking.***
 - Group 4 on the far right.

3. ***One of the disciples who Jesus loved [John] was reclining next to him.***
 - Apostle 6, who was sitting close to Jesus but who has swung across to hear Peter. [Note: The habit of eating reclining in the 1st century is modified by Leonardo to have them sitting so that they eat their meal in the same style as those present are eating.]

4. ***Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking.***
 - Peter (Apostle 5) has got John's attention,
 - is speaking to him, and
 - points to Jesus.

5. ***So while reclining next to Jesus, he [John] asks him. 'Lord who is it?'***
 - John cannot be depicted both as listening to Peter and asking Jesus, so Leonardo incorporates details from the other Gospels (6 & 7 below).

6. ***They began to ask one another which of them it would be who would do this.***
 - Group 4 on the far right in particular.

7. *Is it I?*

- The first Apostle on the right (number 7) and his raised finger.
- Especially Philip (Apostle 9 - the focus of the right hand side) with his anguished expression and poise.

8. *Jesus answered [John] 'It is the one to whom I shall give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.'*

- Jesus's right arm is about to grab hold of the bread.
- Judas's left arm is already outstretched to receive it.

Leonardo was utterly Scripture-based in what he painted; any explanation of the picture that is itself not first and foremost utterly Scripture-based cannot be sound.

Part VII - THE FACT/FICTION ISSUE

(a) Code-Breaker Brown

In assessing the *Da Vinci Code*, the most important Code of all is:

the Code that Dan Brown breaks in writing it.

Up until now there has generally existed between writers of fact-based fiction and their readers a Code in regard to the basic facts –an 'implicit deal' in Amy Welborn's phrase.

In the past these 'basic facts' of history have always been respected and readers have generally 'known where they are' in relation to what is true and what is not true. For example, there are fictional accounts, by such masters as Len Deighton, of Hitler winning the second world war. But such stories have never purported to be the truth, because a Hitler-victory is way beyond the 'basic facts' of history, and these have been universally *known*.

Brown cleverly uses a wide mix of different historical and religious areas where the 'basic facts' are *not* widely known, so by and large the 'ordinary public' assumes Brown's 'facts' are true. (I think this ignorance also contributes to the number of uncritical reviews he gets, e.g. the *New York Times's* claim that Brown's research is 'impeccable'!)

Here is an example.

(b) The Constantine Code

Brown's character, Teabing, states:

*The fundamental irony of Christianity!
The Bible as we know it today
was collated by the pagan Roman Emperor Constantine the Great.*

The 'Bible' Brown is referring to consists of two parts.

Part I is the Jewish (Hebrew) Scriptures which were the Scriptures of the nation in which Christ lived. He based his teaching on the Jewish Scriptures, and expounded them in the Jewish synagogue. (The Jews understood – and rightly – that the one God had a special Covenant-relationship with them and task for them.)

Part II. After his Resurrection, Jesus's mainly-Jewish followers continued to use the Jewish Scriptures. During the first sixty-five years after the Resurrection writings related to Christ himself, the earliest Christians, and Christian living were naturally doing the rounds among the Christian churches.

The truest writings took on the standing of further 'Scripture'. Even these 'standard' writings (or 'Canon') reflected slightly different emphases, as their documents were prompted by different

situations and written by different authors with various aims. But there was an overall unity about them.

The mediocre and extreme documents dropped out of use. Much of the dropped-out literature is self-evidently second- or third-rate. I recall the fable of the young Jesus making sparrows out of clay and then their flying away, and I can recall (but cannot remember the exact source) the story of Jesus's Mother being so pure that her feet didn't touch the ground until her teens!

Jesus had taught his disciples that his death would create a *new* Covenant (or 'Testament') between God and his People, so the Christians called their new body of Christian Scripture the *New Testament*. (The earlier Hebrew/Jewish Scripture that pointed forward to the Messiah's coming they then called the *Old Testament*.)

The day before writing this paragraph my son and I visited a war veteran and listened enthralled as he told us in the most detailed precision of the events that he experienced in Thanet during 1940 – a time-span of sixty-five years, yet we were able to learn what happened at first hand. I mention this since all the New Testament documents were written within exactly the same time-span, i.e. between the Resurrection and AD 95. In words, 'sixty-five years' can give the impression of being a very long time, but we have only to ask our older relations to learn that it is not that long a span for human memory.

Ignatius was born around the time of Christ's Resurrection and became the second, or third, Bishop of Antioch. He was martyred in Rome as early as AD 112. He wrote epistles to many churches and they are already steeped in 'New Testament' writings. His witness – among many others – completely undermines Brown's claims that the Gospels were written much later.

When Dan Brown writes:

The Bible as we know it today was collated by the pagan Roman Emperor...

he is not only rewriting history but he seems to think that 'The Bible' consists simply of the four Christian Gospels!

Brown claims:

- that a fourth-century Emperor arranged the writing of the first-century Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John for political ends.
- that the above Gospels are not, therefore, accounts by eye-witnesses and others close to Jesus.
- that Constantine in the fourth century destroyed about eighty of the 'original' Gospels which spoke of Jesus only in human terms, and replaced them with his own that stressed Christ's divinity.

(This last point is particularly odd as the later writings about Christ - which Brown calls 'original' - do not 'speak of Jesus purely in human terms', but tend to go way over-the-top in relating his supernatural powers, e.g. his boyish hobby of making sparrows!)

Teabing claims that *nothing in Christianity is original*.

Had Teabing been talking about **Brown's filleted Christianity**, then I completely agree with him. For it is Brown who has removed everything that is distinctive about it, and leaves only a human teacher who died;

- no God made flesh come to save us;
- no atoning and sacrificial death for us on the Cross;
- no Risen Christ – living and ruling;
- no divine empowering given to serve him and the world.

There is nothing in Brown's Christianity that is original – because in the interest of sales, he has quietly removed

- Christ's divinity
- and
- Christ's Resurrection
- and reduced it to a dead man's teaching.

(c) No Sex Code?

Another of Brown's departures from fact is Langdon's claim about modern religion:

'Our ancient heritage and our very physiologies tell us sex is natural – a cherished route to our spiritual fulfilment – and yet modern religion decries it as shameful, teaching us to fear our sexual desires at the hand of the devil.'

Brown displays no more knowledge of 'modern religion' than he shows of early Christianity!

On what planet does Brown live where the 'modern religion' (I assume he means Christianity) decries sex as 'shameful'?

If Brown ever entered a Christian bookshop he would never find any Christian author saying that sex is shameful. In fact the opposite: authors and teachers would be likely to have so high a view of it as to term it semi-sacred rather than shameful.

I was furious when I read Brown's malicious comments about 'modern religion'. I felt that Brown was dredging-up from the darkest murk and muck of the collective unconscious the unthinking assumptions that feed intolerance, violence and hatred.

If you or I made a similar accusation against an individual would we end up in court?

Why do the vast army of faithful Christians worldwide, who witness by teaching and example that sex is wonderful and God-given, have to be maligned by someone whose deliberately false accusations against them as a group are helping to earn him over £40 million a year?

(d) The Commercial Code

What is wrong with Brown and his book is not that he makes a near record-breaking number of errors of fact,

but **that he has no regard for Truth.**

There is a very considerable difference between the two.

To expose his errors is something that writers like myself do to help readers be more aware that most of Brown's claims are groundless.

But no writing that points out his errors will alter anything that Brown claims, because he is playing a totally different ball-game – and one which is foreign to most of us and our ways of thinking.

The real crunch is this:

- Brown's impact is because he *claims* to write the 'truth', not falsehood, and that is a distinction that the overwhelming majority of his readers know and use.
- BUT -
- Brown's commercial method of writing and sales promotion makes him disregard completely the distinction between truth and falsehood.

When Brown makes an historical error it is only relevant to him for its positive or negative effect on his sales. If sales climb it was the 'right' thing to say: this is identical to the complete lack of truth in some advertising.

Since Jesus's divinity and his Resurrection do nothing for sales, Brown dismisses them – while adopting a scholarly-sounding and 'historical' style. There is more money to be had if Brown 'reveals' that Jesus married Mary Magdalene and had a child, that she ousted Peter, and that the Church has always been wrong. As sales, not truth, dictate the agenda of Brown and his publishers, so Brown's story can claim anything!

Brown is the unrivalled King of fiction-based fiction disguised as fact-based fiction.

I don't view Brown as a careless scholar (he is far too careless to be a real scholar!), I view him simply as a writer and successful salesman. After nearly two months' work on the *Da Vinci Code* this seems to me the only assessment of him that makes sense of his complete disregard for history and facts.

I do not mind Brown being a successful salesman.

What I DO mind is that he deliberately misleads his readers into believing that he is a scholar writing what appears to be fact-based fiction. Most of what he writes does not belong in the 'facts' category, but that of 'sales promotion', with a policy of 'anything-goes'.

G.B.H.?

There was a recent case of a 'biography' (written and marketed as such) which was found to be a complete fiction. This led to a customer's money being refunded!

I seriously believe that a strong case could be made for all who bought *The Da Vinci Code* believing it to be **fact-based fiction** having their money refunded now that it is proven to be so largely **fiction-based fiction**! On the day I wrote the previous line I was in a shop that was selling *twelve* different books countering Brown's fake claims!

Brown is guilty of G.B.H., not Grievous Bodily Harm, but Grievous Breach of History – which is worse!

It is Brown's non-ethical commercialism that alone can account for his extraordinary claim that were he to write the book as *history* he would change nothing!! As a salesman he would just change the label to 'history' and hope to double his sales by selling the same lies in two different packagings.

Before shooting began on the *Da Vinci Code* film, the President of the (Roman) Catholic League wrote to Sony, the film's distributors, insisting that they say that it is 'purely fictional'. He expressed the issues well:

'As long as you say that it is purely fictional,
you can say Christ had three heads.
I don't give a damn.
But you can't play both sides of the street'.

Sony sent him a polite but non-committal reply. Sadly, it seems they *are* playing 'both sides of the street'. But it has not been plain sailing for them.

When in India the film censors demanded that the film carried a disclaimer that it was a 'work of pure fiction', Sony 'postponed its release indefinitely'.

My guess is that they:

balanced the anticipated income they would gain from the East
if they acknowledged the film as *fiction*,
against the anticipated income they would lose in the West
if they confessed it was not *fact* –
and decided accordingly!

(e) The Code of Ethics

What do I mean by 'ethics'?

'Ethics' is grappling with the distinctions between right and wrong, truth and falsehood. Being 'ethical' is allowing your understanding of right and wrong, truth and falsehood to influence your decisions and behaviour.

Being 'non-ethical' is *not* allowing your decisions and behaviour to be influenced by issues of right and wrong, truth and falsehood. (Money, power, drugs or military expediency are some of the strongest forces which tend to discard ethics.)

Dan Brown, like most of us, lives in a commercial climate where profits and success are put before truth and integrity. In commercial enterprises there is a widespread by-passing of considerations of right and wrong: they are not assessed according to morals (i.e. good or bad) but according to financial success or failure.

The book and film industries are about making money through entertainment – and this is the main aim of Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*.

In our commercial climate, where human greed is increasingly placed before human good, it is hardly surprising that the author of a money-making entertainment feels happy to ignore the earlier codes of honesty and integrity in the pursuit of sales and success. Such ventures can allow little room for ethics.

(f) The Brown Code

There are three reasons why Brown's misleading 'facts' matter:

1. The unreliable history matters in the *Da Vinci Code* because it alleges to be the 'true' history (not just an alternative opinion) of Jesus Christ and of the Christian Church, with its corollary that today's accepted view is wrong.
2. Brown takes very considerable pains to imply that the history his characters relate is presented as the truth. He hammers this home so much that readers who do not know the details of early Christian history have little alternative but to believe Brown to be true!

One of Brown's deliberate deceits is to sprinkle the text with a generous helping of factual-sounding phrases like -

- 'religious historians'
- 'art historians'
- 'real historians'
- 'scores of historians'
- 'well-documented history'
- 'all academics'
- 'well documented evidence'

and so on and so on, allegedly giving academic support to what is just make-believe.

Here is just one example:

'Many historians questioned why the Priory [of Sion] was still keeping the Sangaël documents hidden.'

In Part III we exposed the Priory of Sion as a recent hoax. So where have the 'many historians' who questioned the Priory appeared from? It is impossible to imagine: they must be as fictional as Harry Potter!

3. Readers of fact-based fiction are not yet sufficiently used to writers completely dispensing with their customary ethical Code, and so they will treat Brown's versions 'as Gospel' (to use a painfully apt phrase). This is particularly true for those who are reading one of the forty-four translations of the book and whose culture has little or no Christian tradition.

One scholar has written:

So error-laden is The Da Vinci Code that the educated reader actually applauds those rare occasions where Brown stumbles (despite himself) into the truth.

To provide an amusing contrast to the last quotation I shall conclude this Part on Fact and Fiction by quoting Brown at his most unintentionally humorous:

*'One of the many qualities
that make The Da Vinci Code unique
is the factual nature of the story.'*

If you believe that...

Part VIII - BOOK OF OUR TIMES

There's much to learn in asking why the *Da Vinci Code* is so popular.

Here are some of the reasons:

(a) Distrust of Authority

Whenever the individual is placed above society, and not in partnership with it, there is distrust of any groups that might erode his/her position. Authority-groups are easily seen as enemies, and the Roman Catholic Church is an obvious target. Distrust is becoming increasingly normal, and the *Da Vinci Code* cashes-in on this.

It is typical of our times that the *Da Vinci Code* is itself quite untrustworthy in its claims, while dishonestly asserting their 'truth'!

(b) Distances God

Many feel uneasy that they allow God (if he exists) no place in their lives. Anything that can distance him can begin to allay this.

The faults of others is a most frequently-used device mentally to pass-the-buck: 'I don't go to Church because they are unfriendly/hypocrites/snobs/etc.'

One appeal of Brown's book – should anyone take it at its face value – is that the Church has been wrong and dishonest. This appears to shift religious things a bit further away, and lessen the obligation to take them seriously.

(c) Inside Information

When people do not find meaning in life and are fearful, then any escape from reality helps them cope. If that escape can appear to furnish them with insider secrets, then the apparent gaining of 'inside information' can give them a nice feeling of status and superiority over others.

Conspiracy theories have their own attraction and neatly reinforce feelings of mistrust.

(d) Modern Myth

Dan Brown's empty but Jesus-flavoured religion is not his invention, but reflects quite a widespread Jesus-myth that Bishop Wright sees as characterised by the following five things:

- There were dozens/hundreds of other documents about Jesus Christ.
- The four Gospels were written in the fourth century to make Jesus 'divine' for political reasons.
- Jesus was not, therefore, as the Gospels present him.
- Christianity is based on a mistake.
- It is time to give-up the picture of Jesus and Christian origins that we have inherited.

Where there is a religious vacuum almost anything that is vaguely 'religious' will fill it.

(This is a state which the Christian can only admit with sorrow and penitence for the failure of the Christian family worldwide to offer God's Good News that Jesus's coming was that folk should '*...have life, and have it abundantly*'. There is no room for a vacuum within 'abundance'!)

(e) Dishonesty Pays

The non-ethical commercialism of the *Da Vinci Code* makes it a book of our times, and is related to the enormous programme of promotion (10,000 free copies!) which by its sheer size makes the book and the film an event regardless of merit or genuine appreciation.

The film's director has said, 'This is supposed to be entertainment. It is not theology. It should not be misunderstood as such.'

He thereby hoped to switch any blame from the promoters to the viewers! A neat but nasty trick!

His claim that it is 'not theology' simply does not stand. You cannot make comments about God (in Greek, *theos*) that are not *theo*-logical!

There are over two billion believers for whom the following statement from the film is about *God incarnate*.

'Until that moment [i.e. AD 325] Jesus was viewed by [many of] his followers as a mighty prophet, a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless. A mortal man.'

It is not a 'misunderstanding' by viewers to take such a comment about God theologically! It would be a misunderstanding to take it in any other way!

A recent poll suggests Dan Brown is the sixth best-paid celebrity. With the coming of the film another five million copies of the book were published in America. The film grossed £135 million in its first weekend.

Dishonesty pays, but those responsible for earning so much should take responsibility for what they produce - not pass the buck to their readers and audiences.

(f) The Role of Ignorance

I recall an advert when I was young (c.1945-55) that urged readers to smoke a particular cigarette brand, *Craven 'A'* I think. I quote its claim:

For Your Throat's Sake

It seems unbelievable to us now, but *then* folk had so little knowledge of the dangers of nicotine, that it helped to commend the brand! In marketing, ignorance is bliss – especially among customers!

A similar situation exists with the *Da Vinci Code*. Dan Brown has a market which consists largely of folk who have so little knowledge of the details of the Christian faith, its foundations and its history, that they will accept the first thing they hear about it.

The film's director says that:

'Audiences are very intelligent and often underestimated.

They can arrive at their own conclusions.'

That sounds flattering, but its application is false.

If you have no knowledge of the *Gospel of John* nor of the *Gospel of Philip*, intelligence will not tell you which came first. Neither can intelligence, by itself, tell you whether the Priory of Sion was founded in the twentieth century or the twelfth, or whether it is fact or fiction.

It is the readers'/viewers' education in the subjects concerned which enable them to arrive at appropriate conclusions.

Of course, for those for whom truth does not matter any conclusions are acceptable, and erroneous ones reached just by intelligence are of no more value than sound ones based on knowledge.

Part IX - SO WHAT?

To what does Brown alert us? and what may we learn from the *Da Vinci Code*?

(a) The Power of Fiction

This must not be under-estimated. Because something is not true, it still has considerable power to convince people that it is real.

If characters in a well-loved 'soap opera' on T.V. have a baby or die, the fictitious event will be 'real' enough to cause 'reality-reactions' among many - who will respond by sending baby-clothes or wreathes.

Fiction is extremely powerful, and the emptier people feel their lives are, the more ready they are to allow them to be filled with false-realities.

Christians must not hug to themselves the true reality of God that they know and enjoy. No life need be empty with the loving Presence of God himself there for the asking!

(b) The Power of the Media

Why are people buying so many copies of Dan Brown's book? Primarily because a fortune has been spent in promoting it – and because of the film. Controversy greatly increases publicity, so that sales are enhanced, because in commercial terms any publicity – even bad publicity – is good!

A number of folk I know are 'wading through' the book, because they feel under a social pressure to do so. The media creates fads and fashions, and these can exert great power. It is not simply those who promote the book and the film that can make themselves money – such money-making enterprises create money-making opportunities for those who want to 'leap on the bandwagon'. For every copy of Brown's original book in the bookshops there are now a couple of dozen related items – most of them critical – but they also make money.

(I had considerable misgivings about writing on the *Da Vinci Code* since I knew that in doing so my efforts might inadvertently promote it!)

(c) The Discarding of Distinction

I have mentioned that 'ethics' is basically our response to the distinction between right and wrong, truth and falsehood.

The importance of Dan Brown's book and film is that they demonstrate where truth and falsehood are not distinguished, and that their profit-process is unchecked by any ethical considerations. Brown, as I have said earlier, is not a person who is mistaken about truth: he is an advertising-style-creature for whom truth no longer matters.

It is Brown's dropping of ethics that is earning him millions. He would not be a multi-multi-millionaire had he kept to the truth.

If 'ethics' are increasingly optional in big business, the vast sums that can be earned by ditching ethical considerations altogether is a powerful factor in the process, and will demand courage and conviction by Christians and others who strive to retain them.

The retention of ethics is not optional because democracies need trust and honesty to survive, and will self-destruct without them.

(d) The Manipulation of History

The future can teach us nothing.

If humankind needs to find out how to live well and at peace there is only the present and past that it can turn to.

The constant fine-tuning of our understanding of history is essential, so that we can learn from the truest facts available. This is totally different from the deliberate re-writing of history to promote a cause or ideology.

The true sequence of history matters. This is neatly illustrated by magazine adverts for hair restorer. Take a photo of a man with a full head of hair, and a later one when he is bald. Ignore ethics and reverse their order and their message becomes immediately false.

History must be clarified, but never deliberately distorted to serve personal, religious or political ends.

(e) The Christian Failure

Brown's tale touches a number of weak spots in the Christian Church of the West.

Among them I would list:

- a failure to sustain Jesus's mould-breaking attitude to women.
- a too-easy identification with society.
- a too-easy acceptance of power, wealth and status as 'normal'.
- a failure to acknowledge its own corporate sin.
- a failure to be penitent and express it to society.
- a tendency to retreat into dogmatism when under pressure.
- a hesitancy by individuals to be articulate about their faith and its foundations.
- a widespread failure to distinguish between the essentials and non-essentials of the Christian faith.
- a failure for the average person to distinguish between doctrine and mere opinion.

Having acknowledged some of the Church's weaknesses, it is fair to warn readers that Brown's descriptions of historical weaknesses are, like everything else, prone to exaggeration. To

support his anti-church message Brown multiplied the deaths caused during the Inquisition a hundredfold!

(f) The Need for Teaching?

One school chaplain has said recently that pupils are now asking him the questions that he has always been paid to answer – thanks to the *Da Vinci Code* raising some great Christian issues –

- the divinity of Jesus
- the reliability of the Gospels
- the historical basis for the Christian faith, and so on.

I have stated above that intelligence is not necessarily enough to distinguish lies from falsehood.

You need reliable *facts* before you can decide whether *Les Dossiers Secrets* are genuine or are a hoax.

An obvious suggestion might be that Christians need more teaching, but I am not fully convinced. What concerns me is the 'T.V.–attitude' which so many adopt to Christian teaching. By 'T.V.–attitude' I mean the detachment that recognises that it is going on in one corner of the room while not disturbing anyone who might be trying to learn by it!

I think the problem lies first in an unwillingness to absorb and apply teaching as an essential task for the pilgrim Christian. Second, I think that a phenomenon like the *Da Vinci Code* shows that the Christian curriculum may need to be updated to avoid the age-old criticism of 'answering questions that no one is asking.'

There are pressures upon Christian communities to move away from essentials in attempts to become more user-friendly. The dropping of Christian summaries of belief is a pity: the regular repetition of credal formulas anchors them deeply and firmly in the heart and mind of a worshipper.

How little effect the *Da Vinci Code* would have made if believers were thoroughly grounded in the truth that:

*Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven, etc.*

(Brown appears to believe only that Jesus *suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried!*)

Such statements of belief were composed *precisely* to protect Christians from having their faith diluted or undermined by fringe beliefs. Creeds give a yardstick against which other theories and religious fads and fashions can be tested.

Credal statements helpfully display the Christian priorities of belief. When I wrote about the possibility of Jesus's marriage one of the first things I did was to relate the possibility to the Creed. Did it, could it, would it, alter anything? (My answer was 'no', see Part V on Mary Madgalene.)

(g) Essentials and non-essentials

I have dealt in Part V with Mary Madgalene, and with the total lack of evidence for Christ being married, but I have also answered the question 'What if he had?' The topic of Jesus's marriage highlights how easy it is to group essentials and non-essentials together!

It is interesting to see that Brown's bland dismissal both of Christ's divinity and his Resurrection are not given either by him – or his critics – anything like the same attention as Christ's possible marriage! Perhaps *both* sides are failing to distinguish between areas of essential belief and those of mere personal opinion.

One thing the *Da Vinci Code* may yet do is to make Christians look at their overall Christian 'package', and to assess the relative value of each item. Some Christians seem to be over-reacting and elevating Christ's marital status in a way quite contrary to Scripture, creeds and reason – which is exactly what Dan Brown is doing!

As I have stated, had Christ married it would not have reduced or nullified his saving work. The messages of

Christmas,
Good Friday, and
Easter

would not be changed.

His task would still have been 'finished' on the Cross; his Spirit still imparted at Pentecost. His promised Presence among his followers who gather in his name would still be maintained, and he would still make himself known to us in the Breaking of the Bread. It would not have lessened the authority of Scripture nor threatened the claims of any Christian Creed. Salvation, healings and deliverance in his Name would not cease were Christ to have married.

In short, the Good News of the Gospel would not suffer in any way whatever if someone unearthed Christ's marriage certificate! Christ's marital status, one way or the other, seems not to have been important enough to be part of God's revelation to us.

We must not distort Christian doctrine or the Christian Gospel either to affirm it or to deny it. We must proclaim what God has revealed, and not waste energy over what he has seen fit to withhold from us. In the phrase that heads this Part - So What?

If, in Brown's words, the 'revelation' that Jesus married Mary would *devastate the foundation of the Church*, that Church (if 'Church' it could be) would have a foundation that most Christians would not recognise!

The true Church could not be devastated. Christ's marriage could not alter the Christian belief and doctrine of its members, although it would undoubtedly upset some widely-held opinions and assumptions! But that's a different thing altogether – as I have explained.

(h) The Role of Women

In troubled times – and ours are certainly that – the grass readily appears greener on the other side of the BC/AD divide.

Most thoughtful readers will be unhappy at the 'state of the world', and there is attraction in the theory that before Christ the pagan world was 'matriarchal', i.e. women-led, and that it enjoyed peace. In the context of war-and-peace the description 'the gentler sex' is a most-welcome tribute, in contrast to what might be termed 'the fighter sex'.

However, any contrast between an alleged peaceful matriarchal paganism supplanted by a warring patriarchal Christianity is too simple by far. Would that so simple an analysis were true, and that harmony could be just around the corner.

But having said that, it is easy enough to find fault with the male dominance of both secular and religious society.

The feminist movement began as right reformation against its male distortions, but like almost all reforming movements, its passion can drive it beyond balance and correction into simply an opposite distortion.

To give an example: the practice of Christians using the word 'Father' for God is not 'reformed' by abolishing 'Father' and substituting 'Mother'! It is reformed by reminding Christians that words can only point us *towards* God: they cannot describe him.

A look at the first fifty of the Psalms (the hymnbook Jesus used) shows that God is usually described doing things rather than given titles, although he is likened to many things.

Sometimes God is likened to a shield, stronghold, rock, fortress, support, help, light, or salvation. At other times the analogy is a personal one, God is – lord, king, sovereign, judge, deliverer, and – of course – shepherd.

'Shepherd' is a popular picture precisely because the Shepherd's role is akin to that of a single parent, and the roles range from midwife, home provider, comforter and friend, to leader, protector, doctor and undertaker!

Christians need to maintain for themselves the richness of the Biblical images of God since they are truest when many are used to balance and counter-balance each another. A lazy

vocabulary about God can lead Christians into lazy thinking about him, and towards the error of using them too literally. A hymn-writer over two millennia later than the Psalmists wrote:

Jesus!, my shepherd, brother, friend,
my prophet, priest and king,
my Lord, my life, my way, my end,
accept the praise I bring.

If Christians keep the images flowing, then they will be gentler and truer in their talk about God.

God is my Shepherd – though not a bearded nomad who stands 5'11" in his sandals.

God is my rock – though not stone.

God is my Father – though not male.

In his theory about the Church '*demonizing the feminine*' Brown has, of course, avoided any mention of the extremely high standing that the Blessed Virgin Mary can have within Christian communities – a standing which at times can be sufficient to move veneration towards worship.

The Christian churches have a great deal to learn in implementing the New Testament claim that in Christ *there is neither male nor female, bond or free*. How should that *spiritual* equality 'in Christ' express itself in the 'in Christ' structure we call the Church? – and in the secular structures which make no claim to be 'in Christ' at all?

(i) The Blood Line

I have dealt fully with Jesus's possible marriage in Part V on Mary Magdalene. But as Jesus himself had important things to say about his relations the last word on it should come from Jesus himself. We read:

*Then his mother and his brothers came; standing outside they sent to him and called him.
A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him,
'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside asking for you.'
And Jesus replied,
'Who are my mother and my brothers?'*

*And looking at those who sat around him, he said,
'Here are my mother and my brothers!
Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'*

Christ's meaning is clear: his *real* family is not indicated by blood ties, but by their spiritual relationship to him in obedience to his Father.

St. Paul spelled-out the relationship, speaking first of
adoption as his children through Jesus Christ,
and then

if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. [Ephesians 1:5ff, and Romans 8:17.]

Jesus's true family is not entered by putting one's name at the end of a forged family-tree, but usually by Baptism into Christ's Family, and receiving a second family name, the 'Christian' name.

This generally is put before the name of your blood line. (The 'surname' being the human-family's name that 'sired' you.)

We can belong to two families, our living membership of our blood line ends in the grave. Our living membership of Christ's Family never ends, and the grave unites us forever with the Christian family that has gone before, and with its head: Jesus Christ.

(j) The Invisible Element

It is notoriously difficult for non-religious people to make assessments about religious things – and even religious folk often get it wrong!

Since the Christian Church is based on the historical person of Jesus Christ, it is all too easy to assume that all you would have to do to demolish the Church is to convince people that the biographical accounts of Christ are misleading. This assumes that the Church is a kind of historical Appreciation Society such as you might have for Julius Caesar or Christopher Columbus, and which gets its meaning solely from the past. Radically change what is believed to be the past and such an Appreciation Society could dissolve overnight.

Non-Christians assume that the Church is like that, so that tinkering around with the past can wreck it. Not so! Destroy every ancient Christian document, banish the New Testament, and the Church would live on!

Unlike the Julius Caesar Appreciation Society, the person at the centre of the Church is not dead – but alive. Although Christ's Resurrection is supported by early witnesses and historical accounts, the truth of the Resurrection remains true even if such things were removed – because of the worldwide Christian experience of encountering Jesus Christ alive.

These simple lines express it well:

*He lives! He lives! Christ Jesus lives today!
He walks with me, and talks with me
along life's narrow way.
He lives! He lives! Salvation to impart.
You ask me how I know he lives?
- He lives within my heart.*

If one combines the experience to which that song points, with the experience of the forgiveness of sins, with strength received and guidance given for day-to-day living, with

Jesus's promised Presence when his followers meet together and the gift of his Holy Spirit – one is dealing with a body of people who have an absolutely **massive but invisible component** to their group/community, that no Appreciation Society of a dead person could ever have – or begin to comprehend.

Dan Brown 'reads' the Church in purely secular terms, and – like so many – misses the fact that whatever else it is, it is always a *religious* group. This indicates not simply that members have a tendency to be 'religious', but that the Church has these invisible, or 'spiritual', components.

The Church cannot be understood while ignoring its invisible components, its dynamic and its purpose.

Worshipping and praying are two of the most invisibly-laden activities there are! They depend on the reality of the invisible God to happen, to make sense, and to be worthwhile. (That's why most worship makes poor television, because watching merely what is visible only provides half the picture!)

In short: the Church exists because God is real, because Christ is alive, and because he pours out his Spirit on his followers to guide and lead them.

No assessment of the Christian Church –and I include all denominations within that – can begin to understand it unless it first acknowledges it as something created by God and sustained by God to do his work and make his love tangible in the world.

Having said that, however, the Christian community can be absolutely dreadful – and at times even evil! It will always be a mix of God's divine grace working within human weakness. Unfortunately (yet gloriously!) God has little else but human weakness to work with!

The invisible components of the Christian religion are difficult to convey to those who are unfamiliar with them. They sometimes pop clearly into focus, but often are not so.

One 'in-focus' occasion in my own life took place when I was eighteen. My mother had been for my entire childhood what was then described as 'a cripple' (so I shall retain the term). She could hardly move and her paralysis was increasing.

Jesus taught his disciples to anoint with oil those who were sick, ('Christ' means the Anointed One), as a symbol of repairing/renewing their allegiance to him.

My mother was anointed;
she stood up and walked instantly.

Such a story (which happens from time to time, though most Christian healing is gradual) highlights the mighty, but *invisible*, relationship between the 'then' and the 'now'.

Her anointing was an occasion of invisible things: it brought together as one the living Jesus and his acts of the 1st century and the Risen Jesus and his acts of the (then) 20th century –

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever as the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews teaches us [13:8].

It showed me that while the Church's first-century historic foundation is of *immense* importance, there is a regular miracle within the worldwide Christian communities - daily, weekly - when Christians meet to worship Christ and ask for God's forgiveness and guidance or healing, when the God of **then** – is experienced as the God of **now**.

When that happens Christians join Thomas and proclaim:

My Lord and my God –
and
no rewriting of first-century history,
no dishonest juggling with ancient documents,
no denials of Christ's divinity and death for us,
no theories of Christ's marriage,
and
no denials of his Resurrection

- can ever change it.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

As so many good books are available I did not think it necessary to litter the text with references.

The most useful book I found was not a Christian riposte to Brown's writing but a very well-researched, utterly fair, wide-ranging and user-friendly 'Rough Guide' published by Penguin. *A Rough Guide to the Da Vinci Code* ('totally unauthorized') by Michael and Veronica Haag. It is crammed full of accurate information on the author, the book, the history, the film and its locations. It contains a Glossary, a Bibliography – even a list of web-sites. My only criticism of it is that it calls itself a 'Rough' Guide. It is never 'rough', but is an example of scholarly precision at its most readable. Absolutely excellent!

When quoting the film-script I used the published version. It is the script that was shot, but takes no account of later editing.

NOTE: Part V on **Mary Magdalene** and
Part VI on **Leonardo's *Last Supper***
are available as separate articles on this website.

There is also a short article **DA VINCI CODE: HANDY NOTES** which is written in the form of a dialogue, and could be used by two readers as a short presentation.