

CRACKING *THE DA VINCI CODE*

Truth, Faith & Knowledge: Can They Get Along with Each Other?

Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road

Plymouth, Michigan 48170

Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 10.03.2004

Western culture is a Jesus-saturated culture—it is difficult to imagine that there is anyone who has not heard of Jesus. At the same time, Western culture is largely biblically illiterate. Almost anything can pass for knowledge of Jesus and early Christianity in such a culture. Today, those who promise to reveal secrets about Jesus—secrets long suppressed by the church and other religious institutions, secrets that may be scandalous and that may shatter traditional views of Jesus and early Christianity—such revealers have an instant audience. Throw in a conspiracy theory and take an anti-establishment approach, and the audience is hooked. It is no wonder that Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* has camped atop the *New York Times* bestseller list, and now there are more than eight million copies in print. A follow-up movie, directed by Ron Howard and with a world-class cast, is coming soon.

For me, the book was an esoteric thriller, an unputdownable read. *The Da Vinci Code* is one long chase scene in which the main characters flee from a sinister Parisian policeman and an albino monk assassin. Along the way, the fast and furious plot comes to a screeching halt, and here the book unloads startling information about secrets and conspiracies concerning the roots of Christianity. It is this seemingly “nonfiction” material that gives *The Da Vinci Code* an aura of authenticity. This material, for the most part, is lifted from the 1982 book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, one of the all-time great works of pop pseudo-history.

Robert Langdon, the famous professor of religious symbols from Harvard—who bears an uncanny resemblance to actor Harrison Ford—is the hero of the book. Near the end of the novel Langdon is told, “It is the mystery and wonderment that serve our souls, not the Grail itself” (p. 444). In other words, we should be content with the thrill of the chase, not the thrill of finding the truth. This is a strange remark in a book that repeatedly

insists the world deserves the “truth” about the church’s “lies” about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and the Holy Grail.

Earlier in the book, Langdon makes this statement:

Every faith in the world is based on fabrication. That is the definition of faith—acceptance of that which we imagine to be true, that which we cannot prove. Every religion describes God through metaphor, allegory, and exaggeration, from the early Egyptians through modern Sunday school. Metaphors are a way to help our minds process the unprocessable. The problems arise when we begin to believe literally in our own metaphors. . . . Those who truly understand their faith understand the stories are metaphorical (pp. 341-342).

Philosophical claims like this undergird much of what is found in *The Da Vinci Code*. It is no surprise, then, that such a view leads to some obvious errors of fact and some odd interpretations of history. Brown apparently fails to understand that early Christianity, like early Judaism, is not primarily about symbols and metaphors but is deeply rooted in history, including events like the Exodus from Egypt; the reign of King David; and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Of course, truth sometimes is expressed through symbol and metaphor, as is the case with the parables of Jesus. But the New Testament Gospels cannot be dismissed as mere allegories or symbolic myths—they are ancient biographies written according to the historical and literary conventions of their time. The Gospels are based, as the opening verses of Luke say, on the reports of eyewitnesses to these historical events. Christian faith, like Jewish faith, is not fostered by clever fables or wishful fantasy. No, Christianity is based on certain irreducible and irreplaceable historical events that are the foundation of the faith.

The Da Vinci Code is enthralling as mystery but is appalling as history and theology. Perhaps more than anything else, it is the philosophical claims of Dan Brown about history, truth, knowledge, and faith that most bother me. These are not new claims. In the 1990s, we heard time and time again about the revelations of the *Jesus Seminar*. This group of scholars dismembered Jesus’ teachings and then divided them into authentic and inauthentic parts. Well-known figures like Bishop Spong or Marcus Borg are proclaiming a New Christianity for a New Age. They are John the Baptists heralding the gospel of New Age religion—a religion part pagan, part Gnostic, and part Christian. It is no accident that a mainline denomination has now ordained a gay bishop, and gay

marriage is already being legalized in various places. It is no accident that a judge in the Bible Belt was censured for putting up a monument to the Ten Commandments in a public place, commandments that were part of the basis of every Western law code, including America's. Our culture is experiencing a serious revolution regarding some of the long-held truths about Jesus, early Christianity, and the Bible. The old Judeo-Christian ways of thinking about things are being challenged at their very foundation.

To illustrate, allow me—if you would please—to play the role of Robert Langdon. In order to make explicit some of his implicit assumptions, I will be a bit more bold than Langdon likely would be. Let us suppose that one of you in the audience has asked me to “explain” the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Pretending to be Langdon, here is my answer:

The fabric of faith is often interwoven with stories of the supernatural. Such stories speak of things we know to be literally impossible, and so problems arise when we begin to believe literally what is actually the language of symbols and metaphors. Religious allegory enables us to accept as real that which we imagine to be true, and this reality helps millions of people cope and be better people.

Now, the question raised spoke in particular about early Christianity's story of a resurrected Jesus. The followers of Jesus used the metaphor of resurrection to express their experience of a living Jesus. Jesus' followers in some sense experienced Jesus as a living reality after his death, and it was this experience that led to their belief that God had exalted Jesus to be both Messiah and Lord.

Resurrection is a symbol of life. A living Jesus became reality for the early church, and so they came to believe that which they imagined to be true. They came to believe that which is not only impossible to prove, but is simply impossible.

Let me hasten to add, however, this does not imply that the early Christian faith was false. Such a dilemma arises only when we try to understand the story literally. Understood metaphorically, the story of Jesus' resurrection is an abiding testimony to the early church's experience of Jesus as a living reality.

Ok, enough of Robert Langdon (and to some degree Marcus Borg)—I want to be myself! What I want us to see is the not so subtle way in which experience replaces history, so that feelings create the facts rather than facts creating the feelings. Faith, then, is founded on subjective feelings and not on objective facts.

This simply will not do. The fact is it is a matter of historical record that the early Christians experienced a resurrected Jesus. A resurrected Jesus best explains both the feelings and the faith of the early church. The tomb of Jesus was not metaphorically empty; it was literally empty. Faith in the resurrection of Jesus is not rooted in what early Christians imagined to be true; it is rooted in an actual historical event that the first

disciples never imagined would happen. In the New Testament, it is clear that the early followers of Jesus did not think of the resurrection as an internal, subjective experience but claimed that objective witnesses had seen an empty tomb and had seen, touched, and even fed the resurrected Christ. A resurrected Jesus best explains both the feelings and the faith of the early church.

One thing we have learned from postmodernism is that we all come at the search for truth from a particular perspective. No human perspective is value free, and no mortal is completely unbiased. That includes me. This is why it is so important that we really do have a Bible that is not merely the words of human beings but is also the Word of God. Only God can dispel our ignorance and deliver us from our subjectivity.

The Bible declares that history matters, that God works through historical events, that salvation was brought about by God in space and time. God rescued a real, historical Israel and sent his Son into history to redeem those who sin and fall short of the glory of God. As the song says, “my hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.” My hope is not based on some New Age mumbo jumbo.

Our culture has a hard time distinguishing between honesty and truth. An individual can be completely honest and yet be dead wrong. A person can fall in love with a fascinating subject, giving his or her life to its study, and end up like Leigh Teabing in *The Da Vinci Code*—a deluded seeker after a Grail that is not only elusive but is an illusion. Don Quixote is not the only person who has tilted at windmills. There is an old adage that warns, “Don’t be so open-minded that your brains fall out.”

If there is no ultimate authority when it comes to truth, then people are free to make their own truth. That is what the ancient Gnostics did long ago, and history is repeating itself. Seeking the truth is good, but finding it is better. Being found by the Truth is best of all. In the person of Jesus, truth has broken into space and time, and we find truth nowhere else. The truth is that God has provided a record of his will and his way for humankind—it is called the Bible.

John 3:16 says it all: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” This is a message—the truth once given—worth shouting from the mountain tops. This is good news. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever

believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” It is true not because I believe it; I believe it because it is true.

* * * * *