

# Dismantling The Da Vinci Code

by Sandra Miesel

"The Grail," Langdon said, "is symbolic of the lost goddess. When Christianity came along, the old pagan religions did not die easily. Legends of chivalric quests for the Holy Grail were in fact stories of forbidden quests to find the lost sacred feminine. Knights who claimed to be "searching for the chalice" were speaking in code as a way to protect themselves from a Church that had subjugated women, banished the Goddess, burned non-believers, and forbidden the pagan reverence for the sacred feminine." (*The Da Vinci Code*, pages 238-239)

The Holy Grail is a favorite metaphor for a desirable but difficult-to-attain goal, from the map of the human genome to Lord Stanley's Cup. While the original Grail — the cup Jesus allegedly used at the Last Supper — normally inhabits the pages of Arthurian romance, Dan Brown's recent mega-best-seller, *The Da Vinci Code*, rips it away to the realm of esoteric history. But his book is more than just the story of a quest for the Grail — he wholly reinterprets the Grail legend. In doing so, Brown inverts the insight that a woman's body is symbolically a container and makes a container symbolically a woman's body. And that container has a name every Christian will recognize, for Brown claims that the Holy Grail was actually Mary Magdalene. She was the vessel that held the blood of Jesus Christ in her womb while bearing his children.

Over the centuries, the Grail-keepers have been guarding the true (and continuing) bloodline of Christ and the relics of the Magdalen, not a material vessel. Therefore Brown claims that "the quest for the Holy Grail is the quest to kneel before the bones of Mary Magdalene," a conclusion that would surely have surprised Sir Galahad and the other Grail knights who thought they were searching for the Chalice of the Last Supper.

*The Da Vinci Code* opens with the grisly murder of the Louvre's curator inside the museum. The crime enmeshes hero Robert Langdon, a tweedy professor of symbolism from Harvard, and the victim's granddaughter, burgundy-haired cryptologist Sophie Neveu. Together with crippled millionaire historian Leigh Teabing, they flee Paris for London one step ahead of the police and a mad albino Opus Dei "monk" named Silas who will stop at nothing to prevent them from finding the "Grail." But despite the frenetic pacing, at no point is action allowed to interfere with a good lecture. Before the story comes full circle back to the Louvre, readers face a barrage of codes, puzzles, mysteries, and conspiracies.

With his twice-stated principle, "Everybody loves a conspiracy," Brown is reminiscent of the famous author who crafted her product by studying the features of ten earlier best-sellers. It would be too easy to criticize him for characters thin as plastic wrap, undistinguished prose, and improbable action. But Brown isn't so much writing badly as writing in a particular way best calculated to attract a female audience. (Women, after all, buy most of the nation's books.) He has married a thriller plot to a romance-novel technique. Notice how each character is an extreme type...effortlessly brilliant, smarmy, sinister, or psychotic as needed, moving against luxurious but curiously flat backdrops. Avoiding gore and bedroom gymnastics, he shows only one brief kiss and a sexual ritual performed by a married couple. The risqué allusions are fleeting although the text lingers over some bloody Opus Dei mortifications. In short, Brown has fabricated a novel perfect for a ladies' book club.

Brown's lack of seriousness shows in the games he plays with his character names — Robert Langdon, "bright fame long don" (distinguished and virile); Sophie Neveu, "wisdom New Eve"; the irascible taurine detective Bezu Fache, "zebu anger." The servant who leads the police to them is Legaludec, "legal duce." The murdered curator takes his surname, Saunière, from a real Catholic priest whose occult antics sparked interest in the Grail secret. As an inside joke, Brown even writes in his real-life editor (Faukman is Kaufman).

While his extensive use of fictional formulas may be the secret to Brown's stardom, his anti-Christian message can't have hurt him in publishing circles: *The Da Vinci Code* debuted atop the New York Times best-seller list. By manipulating his audience through the conventions of romance-writing, Brown invites readers to identify with his smart, glamorous characters who've seen through the impostures of the clerics who hide the "truth" about Jesus and his wife. Blasphemy is delivered in a soft voice with a knowing chuckle: "[E]very faith in the world is based on fabrication."

But even Brown has his limits. To dodge charges of outright bigotry, he includes a climactic twist in the story that absolves the Church of assassination. And although he presents Christianity as a false root and branch, he's willing to tolerate it for its charitable works. (Of course, Catholic Christianity will become even more tolerable once the new

liberal pope elected in Brown's previous Langdon novel, *Angels & Demons*, abandons outmoded teachings. "Third-century laws cannot be applied to the modern followers of Christ," says one of the book's progressive cardinals.)

### Where Is He Getting All of This?

Brown actually cites his principal sources within the text of his novel. One is a specimen of academic feminist scholarship: *The Gnostic Gospels* by Elaine Pagels. The others are popular esoteric histories: *The Templar Revelation: Secret Guardians of the True Identity of Christ* by Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince; *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln; *The Goddess in the Gospels: Reclaiming the Sacred Feminine* and *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar: Mary Magdalen and the Holy Grail*, both by Margaret Starbird. (Starbird, a self-identified Catholic, has her books published by Matthew Fox's outfit, Bear & Co.) Another influence, at least at second remove, is *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* by Barbara G. Walker. The use of such unreliable sources belies Brown's pretensions to intellectuality. But the act has apparently fooled at least some of his readers — the *New York Daily News* book reviewer trumpeted, "His research is impeccable."

But despite Brown's scholarly airs, a writer who thinks the Merovingians founded Paris and forgets that the popes once lived in Avignon is hardly a model researcher. And for him to state that the Church burned five million women as witches shows a willful — and malicious — ignorance of the historical record. The latest figures for deaths during the European witch craze are between 30,000 to 50,000 victims. Not all were executed by the Church, not all were women, and not all were burned. Brown's claim that educated women, priestesses, and midwives were singled out by witch-hunters is not only false, it betrays his goddess-friendly sources.

### A Multitude of Errors

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. A few examples of his "impeccable" research: He claims that the motions of the planet Venus trace a pentacle (the so-called Ishtar pentagram) symbolizing the goddess. But it isn't a perfect figure and has nothing to do with the length of the Olympiad. The ancient Olympic games were celebrated in honor of Zeus Olympias, not Aphrodite, and occurred every four years.

Brown's contention that the five linked rings of the modern Olympic Games are a secret tribute to the goddess is also wrong — each set of games was supposed to add a ring to the design but the organizers stopped at five. And his efforts to read goddess propaganda into art, literature, and even Disney cartoons are simply ridiculous. No datum is too dubious for inclusion, and reality falls quickly by the wayside. For instance, the Opus Dei bishop encourages his albino assassin by telling him that Noah was also an albino (a notion drawn from the non-canonical 1 Enoch 106:2). Yet albinism somehow fails to interfere with the man's eyesight as it physiologically would.

But a far more important example is Brown's treatment of Gothic architecture as a style full of goddess-worshipping symbols and coded messages to confound the uninitiated. Building on Barbara Walker's claim that "like a pagan temple, the Gothic cathedral represented the body of the Goddess," *The Templar Revelation* asserts: "Sexual symbolism is found in the great Gothic cathedrals which were masterminded by the Knights Templar...both of which represent intimate female anatomy: the arch, which draws the worshipper into the body of Mother Church, evokes the vulva." In *The Da Vinci Code*, these sentiments are transformed into a character's description of "a cathedral's long hollow nave as a secret tribute to a woman's womb...complete with receding labial ridges and a nice little cinquefoil clitoris above the doorway." These remarks cannot be brushed aside as opinions of the villain; Langdon, the book's hero, refers to his own lectures about goddess-symbolism at Chartres.

These bizarre interpretations betray no acquaintance with the actual development or construction of Gothic architecture, and correcting the countless errors becomes a tiresome exercise: The Templars had nothing to do with the cathedrals of their time, which were commissioned by bishops and their canons throughout Europe. They were unlettered men with no arcane knowledge of "sacred geometry" passed down from the pyramid builders. They did not wield tools themselves on their own projects, nor did they found masons' guilds to build for others. Not all their churches were round, nor was roundness a defiant insult to the Church. Rather than being a tribute to the divine feminine, their round churches honored the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Actually looking at Gothic churches and their predecessors deflates the idea of female symbolism. Large medieval churches typically had three front doors on the west plus triple entrances to their transepts on the north and south. (What part of a woman's anatomy does a transept represent? Or the kink in Chartres's main aisle?) Romanesque churches — including ones that predate the founding of the Templars — have similar bands of decoration arching

over their entrances. Both Gothic and Romanesque churches have the long, rectangular nave inherited from Late Antique basilicas, ultimately derived from Roman public buildings. Neither Brown nor his sources consider what symbolism medieval churchmen such as Suger of St.-Denis or William Durandus read in church design. It certainly wasn't goddess-worship.

### False Claims

If the above seems like a pile driver applied to a gnat, the blows are necessary to demonstrate the utter falseness of Brown's material. His willful distortions of documented history are more than matched by his outlandish claims about controversial subjects. But to a postmodernist, one construct of reality is as good as any other. Brown's approach seems to consist of grabbing large chunks of his stated sources and tossing them together in a salad of a story. From *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, Brown lifts the concept of the Grail as a metaphor for a sacred lineage by arbitrarily breaking a medieval French term, *Sangraal* (Holy Grail), into *sang* (blood) and *raal* (royal). This holy blood, according to Brown, descended from Jesus and his wife, Mary Magdalene, to the Merovingian dynasty in Dark Ages France, surviving its fall to persist in several modern French families, including that of Pierre Plantard, a leader of the mysterious Priory of Sion. The Priory — an actual organization officially registered with the French government in 1956 — makes extraordinary claims of antiquity as the "real" power behind the Knights Templar. It most likely originated after World War II and was first brought to public notice in 1962. With the exception of filmmaker Jean Cocteau, its illustrious list of Grand Masters — which include Leonardo da Vinci, Issac Newton, and Victor Hugo — is not credible, although it's presented as true by Brown.

Brown doesn't accept a political motivation for the Priory's activities. Instead he picks up *The Templar Revelation's* view of the organization as a cult of secret goddess-worshippers who have preserved ancient Gnostic wisdom and records of Christ's true mission, which would completely overturn Christianity if released. Significantly, Brown omits the rest of the book's thesis that makes Christ and Mary Magdalene unmarried sex partners performing the erotic mysteries of Isis. Perhaps even a gullible mass-market audience has its limits.

From both *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* and *The Templar Revelation*, Brown takes a negative view of the Bible and a grossly distorted image of Jesus. He's neither the Messiah nor a humble carpenter but a wealthy, trained religious teacher bent on regaining the throne of David. His credentials are amplified by his relationship with the rich Magdalen who carries the royal blood of Benjamin: "Almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false," laments one of Brown's characters.

Yet it's Brown's Christology that's false — and blindingly so. He requires the present New Testament to be a post-Constantinian fabrication that displaced true accounts now represented only by surviving Gnostic texts. He claims that Christ wasn't considered divine until the Council of Nicea voted him so in 325 at the behest of the emperor. Then Constantine — a lifelong sun worshipper — ordered all older scriptural texts destroyed, which is why no complete set of Gospels predates the fourth century. Christians somehow failed to notice the sudden and drastic change in their doctrine.

But by Brown's specious reasoning, the Old Testament can't be authentic either because complete Hebrew Scriptures are no more than a thousand years old. And yet the texts were transmitted so accurately that they do match well with the Dead Sea Scrolls from a thousand years earlier. Analysis of textual families, comparison with fragments and quotations, plus historical correlations securely date the orthodox Gospels to the first century and indicate that they're earlier than the Gnostic forgeries. (The Epistles of St. Paul are, of course, even earlier than the Gospels.)

Primitive Church documents and the testimony of the ante-Nicean Fathers confirm that Christians have always believed Jesus to be Lord, God, and Savior — even when that faith meant death. The earliest partial canon of Scripture dates from the late second century and already rejected Gnostic writings. For Brown, it isn't enough to credit Constantine with the divinization of Jesus. The emperor's old adherence to the cult of the Invincible Sun also meant repackaging sun worship as the new faith. Brown drags out old (and long-discredited) charges by virulent anti-Catholics like Alexander Hislop who accused the Church of perpetuating Babylonian mysteries, as well as 19th-century rationalists who regarded Christ as just another dying savior-god.

Unsurprisingly, Brown misses no opportunity to criticize Christianity and its pitiable adherents. (The church in question is always the Catholic Church, though his villain does sneer once at Anglicans — for their grimness, of all things.) He routinely and anachronistically refers to the Church as "the Vatican," even when popes weren't in

residence there. He systematically portrays it throughout history as deceitful, power-crazed, crafty, and murderous: "The Church may no longer employ crusades to slaughter, but their influence is no less persuasive. No less insidious."

### **Goddess Worship and the Magdalen**

Worst of all, in Brown's eyes, is the fact that the pleasure-hating, sex-hating, woman-hating Church suppressed goddess worship and eliminated the divine feminine. He claims that goddess worship universally dominated pre-Christian paganism with the hieros gamos (sacred marriage) as its central rite. His enthusiasm for fertility rites is enthusiasm for sexuality, not procreation. What else would one expect of a Cathar sympathizer?

Astonishingly, Brown claims that Jews in Solomon's Temple adored Yahweh and his feminine counterpart, the Shekinah, via the services of sacred prostitutes — possibly a twisted version of the Temple's corruption after Solomon (1 Kings 14:24 and 2 Kings 23:4-15). Moreover, he says that the tetragrammaton YHWH derives from "Jehovah, an androgynous physical union between the masculine Jah and the pre-Hebraic name for Eve, Havah." But as any first-year Scripture student could tell you, Jehovah is actually a 16th-century rendering of Yahweh using the vowels of Adonai ("Lord"). In fact, goddesses did not dominate the pre-Christian world — not in the religions of Rome, her barbarian subjects, Egypt, or even Semitic lands where the hieros gamos was an ancient practice. Nor did the Hellenized cult of Isis appear to have included sex in its secret rites.

Contrary to yet another of Brown's claims, Tarot cards do not teach goddess doctrine. They were invented for innocent gaming purposes in the 15th century and didn't acquire occult associations until the late 18th. Playing-card suites carry no Grail symbolism. The notion of diamonds symbolizing pentacles is a deliberate misrepresentation by British occultist A. E. Waite. And the number five — so crucial to Brown's puzzles — has some connections with the protective goddess but myriad others besides, including human life, the five senses, and the Five Wounds of Christ.

Brown's treatment of Mary Magdalene is sheer delusion. In *The Da Vinci Code*, she's no penitent whore but Christ's royal consort and the intended head of His Church, supplanted by Peter and defamed by churchmen. She fled west with her offspring to Provence, where medieval Cathars would keep the original teachings of Jesus alive. The Priory of Sion still guards her relics and records, excavated by the Templars from the subterranean Holy of Holies. It also protects her descendants — including Brown's heroine.

Although many people still picture the Magdalen as a sinful woman who anointed Jesus and equate her with Mary of Bethany, that conflation is actually the later work of Pope St. Gregory the Great. The East has always kept them separate and said that the Magdalen, "apostle to the apostles," died in Ephesus. The legend of her voyage to Provence is no earlier than the ninth century, and her relics weren't reported there until the 13th. Catholic critics, including the Bollandists, have been debunking the legend and distinguishing the three ladies since the 17th century.

Brown uses two Gnostic documents, the *Gospel of Philip* and the *Gospel of Mary*, to prove that the Magdalen was Christ's "companion," meaning sexual partner. The apostles were jealous that Jesus used to "kiss her on the mouth" and favored her over them. He cites exactly the same passages quoted in *Holy Blood*, *Holy Grail* and *The Templar Revelation* and even picks up the latter's reference to *The Last Temptation of Christ*. What these books neglect to mention is the infamous final verse of the *Gospel of Thomas*. When Peter sneers that "women are not worthy of Life," Jesus responds, "I myself shall lead her in order to make her male.... For every woman who will make herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven." That's certainly an odd way to "honor" one's spouse or exalt the status of women.

### **The Knights Templar**

Brown likewise misrepresents the history of the Knights Templar. The oldest of the military-religious orders, the Knights were founded in 1118 to protect pilgrims in the Holy Land. Their rule, attributed to St. Bernard of Clairvaux, was approved in 1128 and generous donors granted them numerous properties in Europe for support. Rendered redundant after the last Crusader stronghold fell in 1291, the Templars' pride and wealth — they were also bankers — earned them keen hostility.

Brown maliciously ascribes the suppression of the Templars to "Machiavellian" Pope Clement V, whom they were blackmailing with the Grail secret. His "ingeniously planned sting operation" had his soldiers suddenly arrest all

Templars. Charged with Satanism, sodomy, and blasphemy, they were tortured into confessing and burned as heretics, their ashes "tossed unceremoniously into the Tiber."

But in reality, the initiative for crushing the Templars came from King Philip the Fair of France, whose royal officials did the arresting in 1307. About 120 Templars were burned by local Inquisitorial courts in France for not confessing or retracting a confession, as happened with Grand Master Jacques de Molay. Few Templars suffered death elsewhere although their order was abolished in 1312. Clement, a weak, sickly Frenchman manipulated by his king, burned no one in Rome inasmuch as he was the first pope to reign from Avignon (so much for the ashes in the Tiber).

Moreover, the mysterious stone idol that the Templars were accused of worshiping is associated with fertility in only one of more than a hundred confessions. Sodomy was the scandalous — and possibly true — charge against the order, not ritual fornication. The Templars have been darlings of occultism since their myth as masters of secret wisdom and fabulous treasure began to coalesce in the late 18th century. Freemasons and even Nazis have hailed them as brothers. Now it's the turn of neo-Gnostics.

### **Twisting Da Vinci**

Brown's revisionist interpretations of da Vinci are as distorted as the rest of his information. He claims to have first run across these views "while I was studying art history in Seville," but they correspond point for point to material in *The Templar Revelation*. A writer who sees a pointed finger as a throat-cutting gesture, who says the Madonna of the Rocks was painted for nuns instead of a lay confraternity of men, who claims that da Vinci received "hundreds of lucrative Vatican commissions" (actually, it was just one...and it was never executed) is simply unreliable.

Brown's analysis of da Vinci's work is just as ridiculous. He presents the Mona Lisa as an androgynous self-portrait when it's widely known to portray a real woman, Madonna Lisa, wife of Francesco di Bartolomeo del Giocondo. The name is certainly not — as Brown claims — a mocking anagram of two Egyptian fertility deities Amon and L'Isa (Italian for Isis). How did he miss the theory, propounded by the authors of *The Templar Revelation*, that the Shroud of Turin is a photographed self-portrait of da Vinci?

Much of Brown's argument centers around da Vinci's Last Supper, a painting the author considers a coded message that reveals the truth about Jesus and the Grail. Brown points to the lack of a central chalice on the table as proof that the Grail isn't a material vessel. But da Vinci's painting specifically dramatizes the moment when Jesus warns, "One of you will betray me" (John 13:21). There is no Institution Narrative in St. John's Gospel. The Eucharist is not shown there. And the person sitting next to Jesus is not Mary Magdalene (as Brown claims) but St. John, portrayed as the usual effeminate da Vinci youth, comparable to his St. John the Baptist. Jesus is in the exact center of the painting, with two pyramidal groups of three apostles on each side. Although da Vinci was a spiritually troubled homosexual, Brown's contention that he coded his paintings with anti-Christian messages simply can't be sustained.

### **Brown's Mess**

In the end, Dan Brown has penned a poorly written, atrociously researched mess. So, why bother with such a close reading of a worthless novel? The answer is simple: *The Da Vinci Code* takes esoterica mainstream. It may well do for Gnosticism what *The Mists of Avalon* did for paganism — gain it popular acceptance. After all, how many lay readers will see the blazing inaccuracies put forward as buried truths?

What's more, in making phony claims of scholarship, Brown's book infects readers with a virulent hostility toward Catholicism. Dozens of occult history books, conveniently cross-linked by Amazon.com, are following in its wake. And booksellers' shelves now bulge with falsehoods few would be buying without *The Da Vinci Code* connection. While Brown's assault on the Catholic Church may be a backhanded compliment, it's one we would have happily done without.

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