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FILM**Romancing the 'Code'**

By TIMOTHY K. BEAL

I first realized that *The Da Vinci Code* had become a pop-culture phenomenon in the religious-studies classroom when a bright sophomore slipped into my office, closed the door behind him, and explained to me, in hushed tones, that he wanted to leave his bioengineering major and pursue the study of "religious symbology."

"I take it you've been reading Dan Brown's novel?" His countenance fell as I told him that the only professor of "religious symbology" I'd ever heard of, at Harvard or anyplace else, was Brown's hero, Robert Langdon. Always the evangelist for the major if not for the novel, I hastened to highlight the drama inherent in the academic study of religion — exotic ideas, unfamiliar rites, lies my youth minister told me. His eyes began to glaze. It was clear that Professor Langdon wouldn't be caught dead in our department.

A year later, I decided to include *The Da Vinci Code* in my course on "Christian Origins and the New Testament," an entry-level historical introduction to the New Testament, other early Christian literature, and the social world of the early Jesus movement. The idea was to treat the novel as a cultural influence that might reveal something about popular interest these days in the history and literature of early Christianity — especially in relation to conspiracy theories — and alternative forms of familiar religious tradition. But that's not what most of the 90 students (double the usual number) expected when they saw *The Da Vinci Code* on my list in the bookstore and decided to enroll. In discussions in and out of class, I was surprised to learn that more of them had read the novel than had read the New Testament itself. And many were believers — in the novel, I mean.

In fact, except for a minority of students who were part of conservative Christian communities in which the book was being discredited, most were inclined to accept the main tenets of the novel's alternative history of early Christianity: that the divinity of Jesus was invented in 325 CE at the Council of Nicea by Constantine, a dyed-in-the-wool pagan who used the doctrine to unify his empire; that up till then Jesus' followers believed him to be a great but altogether human leader and prophet; that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene; that they had a baby, beginning a bloodline that continues to this day; that Constantine also established the canon of the New Testament, excluding those early Christian texts that emphasized Jesus' humanity and Mary's pre-eminence; and that a secret battle rages to this day between the Priory of Sion, sworn to protect the bloodline, and those in the Roman Catholic Church who are dead set on destroying it in order to preserve institutional patriarchal power. My students are not alone, of course. Many readers take the novel as a revelation of heretofore hidden truths about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Christianity, and the church.

The Da Vinci Code is nothing short of a modern-day apocryphal Gospel. Apocryphal in the sense that its alternative history of Jesus and early Christianity is spurious and disingenuous, yes. But also, and more significant for religion and popular culture, apocryphal in the sense that it has emerged as the latest addition to the New Testament apocrypha, that extracanonical body of literature about Jesus and early Christianity that is excluded from the New Testament. It is an alter-Gospel. Having sold more than 40 million copies in hardcover (its first print run in paperback was six million), many of which are being passed along to second and third readers, it is bearing tremendous influence on popular understandings of Christian history and doctrine.

The word "apocrypha" comes from the Greek *apo-kruptein*, meaning "hide" or "encrypt." And like many other early Christian apocryphal texts, the Gospel according to *The Da Vinci Code* has a certain cryptic quality. It presents its message as a revelation from the crypt, a decryption. As the clues given to its heroes, Sophie Neveu and Robert Langdon, by the murdered Grand Master of the Priory of Sion are unlocked, one after another, in their pursuit of the Holy Grail, so Brown's alternative history of Christianity is progressively revealed from hiding. Indeed, the Grail itself turns out to be not only material — that is, the body of Mary Magdalene; her living descendants, Sophie and her brother; and an archive of supporting documents. The Grail is also, and more important, the secret knowledge revealed. *The Da Vinci Code* is a book of revelation in thriller form.

But whereas the unfolding of the thriller narrative takes place through action, the unfolding of Brown's alter-Christian history is primarily discursive, revealed during breaks in the action through a series of impromptu lectures to Neveu by Langdon and his old colleague Sir Leigh Teabing. The longest and most substantial of these lectures is delivered over tea in Teabing's study. Here Neveu and her fellow seminarians, the readers, get the secret version of the history of the canonization of the Bible, the story of Constantine, the story of Mary Magdalene, her marriage to Jesus, their bloodline, and the Priory of Sion.

Part of what makes this alter-history of Christianity believable to so many readers is not only Brown's prefatory claim (reiterated in interviews) to historical accuracy, but also the fact that all this material is placed in the mouths of scholars who, though fictional, are identified with actual institutions of higher education and research. Moreover, the good professors often begin with actual names, dates, texts, and kernels of scholarly historical consensus before their tales spin off into wild speculation and outright *fabula*. Teabing is correct, for example, that there were many gospels other than the four included in the New Testament canon, but not that Constantine single-handedly decided which to include and burned the rest. The canonization process was extremely complicated, running from the first century into the late fourth century and involving numerous religious leaders and communities with myriad practical, theological, and political concerns.

Teabing is right, too, that Constantine called the Council of Nicea in 325, but not that he proposed and established the divinity of Jesus as the Son of God and thereby hijacked him from his original followers. That council's central issue, which had been a growing point of controversy among many Christian leaders for some time, was not whether Jesus was divine but the nature of his divinity, as Son of God, in relation to God the Father. Was he the first of all creation, or was he present before creation's "In the beginning"? Likewise, most scholars would agree with Teabing that Mary Magdalene was a prominent figure in the early Jesus movement. She is the only one attested by all four canonical Gospels as a firsthand witness to the Resurrection; she has a personal revelation from Jesus in the Gospel of John; the apocryphal Gospel of Mary presents her as having special knowledge over and above even Peter; and, as Teabing shows Neveu, the apocryphal Gospel of Philip suggests that Jesus favored her as his "companion" over the other disciples, and that the others were jealous. But there is no evidence that she and Jesus were married. Contrary to

Teabing and Langdon, the Greek word for "companion" (*koinonos*) does not necessarily or even usually mean "spouse." The Apostle Paul calls Philemon his "companion."

The Sony Pictures release of the film adaptation, directed by Ron Howard and written by Akiva Goldsman, has raised serious concerns, especially among conservative Protestant and Roman Catholic leaders, that the popularity of Brown's apocryphal Gospel will reach new peaks of influence in the months to come. The film's opening weekend take of \$77-million in the United States and \$244-million worldwide suggests that their concerns might be justified.

Lessons learned by evangelicals from previous cinematic Jesus-and-Mary controversies (*The Last Temptation of Christ*, in 1988, and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, in 1973) are leading to a very different strategy this time around. Rather than engaging in protest, publicly condemning the film, and discouraging Christians from seeing it, many leaders of churches and national Christian organizations are encouraging study and dialogue, embracing the *Da Vinci* phenomenon as an evangelical opportunity, trusting that the orthodox Gospel truth will ultimately triumph.

But how will the movie play vis-à-vis the book when it comes to religious popularity and influence? In many respects, the novel seems ready-made for movie adaptation. Its 105 very short chapters read like movie scenes, cutting back and forth between our questing fugitives; the no-nonsense Captain Bezu Fache, who is convinced that Langdon is the murderer; the pale, ascetic murderer Silas; and the backroom-conspiring high priests. Yet, as we have seen, what makes this book so much more than just another best-selling thriller is its pairing of the suspenseful unfolding of action with the gradual unfolding of a counter-history of Christianity, presented in large discursive chunks of lecture. Not the stuff of Hollywood blockbusters.

So what is the stuff of Hollywood? How about a story of personal transformation, even conversion? How about a story of finding faith? Now that works. And that's what the cinematic *Da Vinci Code* is all about. Dan Brown's literary narrative of apocryphal religious revelation becomes Ron Howard's cinematic narrative of personal transformation and coming to faith, starring Tom Hanks as the Harvard religious symbologist Robert Langdon, a scholarly skeptic who, in the end, remembers how to pray.

The cinematic Langdon is a scholar who knows what *others* believe about Jesus, Mary, and the Grail, but who is personally dubious. After telling Neveu (Audrey Tautou) an abridged story of the Priory of Sion, the keepers of the Grail, and the continuing struggle against their Catholic nemeses, he explains to her, "We've been dragged into a world of people who think this stuff is real!"

In the film as in the novel, the seminar over tea with Teabing (Ian McKellen) is a key scene. But in the film, it is used less to reveal the truth of Brown's counter-Gospel and more to highlight Langdon's skepticism. As Teabing lectures Neveu on the multiple Gospels, the pagan Constantine's role in inventing Jesus' divinity, the marriage of Jesus and Mary, and their continuing bloodline, the camera repeatedly cuts to Langdon, slouching back in his chair, furrowing his eyebrows incredulously and interrupting with qualifications, such as that the Priory was a 1967 hoax and that many of the earliest Christians did in fact believe in the divinity of Christ. As Teabing's excitement grows, so does Langdon's doubt, leading to a shouting match in which Langdon alleges that Teabing has "no empirical proof" for his "old wives' tale." Multiple camera angles and quick cuts are used throughout the scene, adding to the sense of multiple perspectives and dissonance.

The effect is to transform this scene from a univocal revelation of the Gospel truth to a conflicted revelation of doubt. Rather than being the key scene for divulging the story's apocryphal version of Christian history, it

is the key scene for depicting Langdon's personal skepticism and lack of faith concerning a controversial "old wives' tale" presented by someone whose enthusiasm is enough to give one pause.

By the end of the film, however, Langdon has found faith. But it is first and foremost a faith in Sophie Neveu. His transformation, indeed his conversion, comes as the result of his relationship with her. She makes him a believer through her actions and wise words as she comes to realize that she is the last living descendant of Jesus and Mary. She silences the argument with Teabing, for example, when she asks, Jesus-like, how many have been murdered over this debate. And in another scene, she heals Langdon from a claustrophobic anxiety attack with the laying on of hands. More than any historical evidence, these Jesus-like words and actions lead him to declare, in the climactic moment, "You are the Grail." In the novel, the truth of her identity is a religious revelation. In the film, it's a profession of newfound faith.

The final scene in the film, as in the novel, finds Langdon returning to the Louvre and dropping to his knees at the pyramid, having finally cracked the last riddle and realized that Mary Magdalene is entombed beneath it. In the novel, this is the denouement when the last piece of the mystery (the missing corpse) is solved and the revelation is complete. In the film, as he leans forward and prayerfully closes his teary eyes, it is the climactic moment of redemption and grace. It's "come to Mary" time. Well done, good and faithful servant.

Along his way to this moment of prayer, Langdon finds, in religious experience, new viability for the divinity of Christ, unequivocally denied in the novel as a Constantinian fiat. In his last conversation with Neveu, he recalls the childhood trauma that led to his claustrophobia (none of this is in the novel): He fell into a well. While struggling to survive, waiting for someone to notice that he was missing, he tells Neveu, he prayed to Jesus. And he felt that he wasn't alone. He wonders whether Jesus was there with him in the well.

As he reflects aloud on that moment in light of recent events, he offers a less theologically controversial proposal, which seems addressed less to Neveu than to those audiences concerned about the influence of *The Da Vinci Code* on popular understandings of Christian doctrine: Perhaps, he proposes, Jesus can be both a father and a miracle worker? And what about Jesus' offspring, if that's really who she is? What would Sophie do? "Would she destroy faith," he asks her, "or would she renew it?"

How will the film play as a religious text, a cinematic apocryphal Gospel? Given its early box-office success, some defenders of orthodoxy have reason to be concerned. Yet its recasting as a story of personal transformation and finding faith, highlighting contradictions in the novel's apocryphal account of early Christianity along the way, leads me to doubt that it will bear the same kind of religious influence. Most audience members will find that seeing is not believing.

Still, as the popularity of Brown's novel continues to grow, accompanied by a spawn of other books in the burgeoning market of "alternative Christianities," I wouldn't be surprised to find more aspiring religious symbolologists in my introductory classes this fall. And who can blame them? Most have very few critical tools for assessing religious ideas or interpreting religious texts, and most know little or nothing about Christian history or theology. Perhaps, as scholars and teachers, we should borrow a leaf from the evangelical Christian leaders: Treat the *Da Vinci Code* phenomenon as an opportunity to encourage further study and dialogue.

Just as those religious leaders recognize a potential spiritual hunger in *Da Vinci* fans, so we may recognize a potential passion for research. The religious histories we study may not be quite so full of mystery, murder, and intrigue as Brown imagines in his novel. But you don't have to be a member of the Priory to believe

that they have their share.

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