

The Da Vinci code, History, Films and Neo-Gnosticism

by David Holloway

On the 17 May *The Da Vinci Code*, a £56 million film, will open this year's Cannes film festival. That is two days before it is released world-wide. The film is, of course, based on Dan Brown's thriller that has sold more than 30 million copies and in about 40 languages. The film is controversial because of the claim in the book that "almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is *false*" (my 2004 Gorgi edition, p 318).

The Da Vinci Code

To make the plot of the thriller work Jesus is made out to be married to Mary Magdalene who he intended should lead the church after his death, but "Peter had a problem with that" (p 334). We are then told that a child, born from this union, led to European royalty from whom came the "Holy Grail"! To support this thesis, Brown has his main characters deny the authority and historical value of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Instead appeal is made to later heretical Gnostic texts that the church fathers rejected in the early centuries as spurious fictions. Their plausibility is suggested because in 1945 some Gnostic texts were discovered in the sands of Egypt at Nag Hammadi. However, all that this discovery proved was how right were the early fathers (such as Irenaeus and Tertullian) to reject such documents in the first place.

In addition Brown rewrites the history of the 325AD Council of Nicea (in modern Turkey). This council confirmed the apostolic and biblical teaching on the divinity of Christ. But the book makes it out that at Nicea you had the leaders of the Church simply wanting to consolidate their power base. So to achieve their goal, it is argued, they imposed on the church (as something new) a divine Christ and an infallible Bible.

Historically speaking all this is quite "rubbish" (to quote the current Master of the Temple church in London, one of the churches that features in the novel and the film). It is also dishonest. At one point Teabing (one of the characters) argues for the Gnostic gospels and produces a book of photocopies. He then refers to "these ... photocopies of the Nag Hammadi and Dead Sea Scrolls [as] the earliest Christian records" (p 331). But that is simply not true. On the one hand the Dead Sea Scrolls were not Christian records at all but Jewish, and on the other hand the Nag Hammadi documents themselves are two to three hundred years later than the time of Christ. They were certainly not "the earliest Christian records." My edition of *The Da Vinci Code* has an author's note before the novel begins. It is headed "Fact" and then says: "all descriptions of artwork, architecture, *documents* and secret rituals in this novel are accurate." As I have shown, this is simply not true.

Help for confusions

Because of the flaws in the book's "theology", because of the world-wide success of the novel, and because there is the fear that the film will confuse many more people, a number of articles, booklets and books have been written to help people sort out fact from fiction in *The Da Vinci Code*. At Jesmond Parish Church we are recommending that people look at (from the shortest to the longest) either i) my *Coloured Supplement* for October 2004 *Fantasy Faith* (4 pp folded-over - this can be downloaded free at www.church.org.uk; or ii) Nicky Gumbel's *The Da Vinci Code - a response* (25 pp tract); or iii) Brian Edwards, *Da Vinci - a broken code* (31 pp booklet); or iv) Michael Green's, *The Books the Church Suppressed - fiction and truth in the Da Vinci Code* (190 pp book). These can all be obtained from the church bookstall.

Nicky Gumbel reports the following comments on the book. One person "not sympathetic to Christianity" said, "It shows the Bible can't possibly be accurate and that the text was changed;" a Christian said, "It nearly made me lose my faith;" another said, "It made me think I don't have any real facts to back up my faith." Someone else has said: "honestly [reading the book] shook my whole faith. I realize that the book is fiction, but much of what he [Dan Brown] wrote about seemed like it was based on historical facts aside from the characters. Since I am not a Christian scholar, I don't even know where to begin to refute these claims."

The reflection of Carl Olson and Sandra Miesel, authors of *The Da Vinci Hoax*, on these confusions is worth noting:

"It's not surprising that a work of fiction has produced confusion among some Christians about Church history and doctrine at a time when ... basic knowledge of the faith [is] so poor. It is even less surprising that non-Christian readers would be taken in by Brown's revisionist history of the Church. After all, it's a demonstrated fact that most ... are illiterate about major events in the history of their own country ... so why should we expect them to be able to discern fact from fiction when it comes to early Church history and the complex debates over the divinity and person of Jesus Christ that took place in the first four centuries of the Church."

A root problem is that today there are those who accept the rewriting of history. This relates to the crisis in the population at large over historical knowledge. There is a post-modern argument that history is no longer a record of objective facts, but "a series of metaphors which cannot be detached from the institutionally produced languages which we bring to bear on it." As a result, it is argued, the distinction between "truth" and "fiction" is blurred.

The retreat from history

According to one writer, what you then have is "history [as] a network of agonistic language games where the criterion for success is performance not truth." This means that history can be rewritten according to the needs of any particular group. Gene Veith is surely right: "if history is nothing more than 'a network of agonistic [i.e. fighting, contending] language games,' then any alternative 'language game' that advances a particular agenda, that meets 'success' in countering institutional power,

can pass as legitimate history. 'Performance, not truth' is the only criterion. Scholarship becomes rhetorical manipulation. Truth does not have to get in the way." That is so serious. It is a rejection of historical objectivity. In its place there is advocacy scholarship. So you get history rewritten in accordance with, for example, Marxist, radical feminist, homosexual or (in Dan Brown's case) neo-Gnostic agendas.

This may all sound rather academic. But it is what is being taught in some of our colleges and universities. In her *History in Practice* (2000), Ludmilla Jordanova writes that the "pursuit of history is, whether practitioners choose to acknowledge it or not, a political occupation." Trevor Pinch of Cornell University says, "what makes a belief true is not its correspondence with an element of reality, but its adoption and authentication by the relevant community."

Of course interpretation is involved in history writing, but it must be interpretation of facts or what happened. There is now, however, in some quarters a suspicion of *all* facts as simply the reports of prejudiced writers. So what used to be called "primary sources" for writing history are being downgraded and dismissed as mere "texts". Yes, much of what we know of the past involves "texts" such as published books, diaries, Acts of Parliament, treaties, inscriptions, etc. But the postmodernist Paul de Man then argues: "the bases for historical knowledge are not empirical facts but written texts, even if these masquerade in the guise of wars or revolutions." So the "rhetoric" in these accounts "allows for two incompatible, mutually self-destructive points of view, and therefore puts an insurmountable obstacle in the way of any reading or understanding." The result, says the historian Professor Marwick, is that arguing for "primary sources [like actually reading in detail the Gnostic gospels and comparing them in detail with the biblical Gospels] is a cause for merriment among history's critics, most of whom ... prefer inventing their history to doing the intensely hard work among both secondary and primary sources which is essential for the production of a new contribution to historical knowledge." That may be exaggerated. But certainly other historians are now talking of the "fetishism of documents" and "the cult of the archive".

Social consequences

Sooner or later, of course, such academic thinking seeps down through departments of education to teachers and then to pupils in our schools and so to the population at large. No doubt it is only half understood. And no doubt few believe all of what they think they hear. But because tax payers fund these historians and because revisionist historians are invited onto mainstream TV and Radio discussion programmes, they are given national legitimacy. The result is a chilling effect on what people feel free to say who are not "experts". It subtly affects their own beliefs about the past and thus generates a culture of doubt. Of course, it is "rubbish". Of course we can know the truth about the past. True, we cannot know about the past *in the same way* as we know about the present. But we can know sufficiently. You can know what I wrote in last month's *Coloured Supplement* without any doubt and so can someone else - by looking at a "primary source", the church website. There are, indeed, all sorts of agreed criteria for being confident about the past. But unfortunately, to quote Veith: "Our new teachers, journalists, lawyers, judges and political leaders [and we could add, film and TV producers] have been indoctrinated. Many of them are coming out

convinced that there is no objective meaning and that truth is nothing more than an act of power. Those who do not believe in truth are more likely, I believe, to lie. Those who believe that moral values are nothing more than the imposition of power may be more likely to use power to suppress their opposition, whether in enforcing politically correct postures in academia or, when they have political power, in acts of tyranny." (Veith could have added that Paul de Man (1919-1983), whom I have already quoted, was a Belgian Nazi sympathizer and anti-semitic; also Nazi sympathizers, like the British writer David Irving, are famous for their historical revisionism, especially the denials of the Holocaust.)

The power of films

Because of the power of the film, such post modernist beliefs and attitudes are particularly dangerous. This is because films - in the cinema and on TV - are now a major means of "educating" vast numbers of people around the world; and that education may be responsible or irresponsible. As any programme schedule will reveal, documentaries or docudramas are on a varied number of topics. There is a high proportion, however, that are on issues that are controversial and can be sensationalized. To achieve audience ratings (and so income) the temptation to irresponsible revisionism is exceedingly great. Irresponsible revisionism is, of course, where there is virtually no basis whatsoever for the "revision". Sadly it seems that Sony Pictures have fallen for this temptation. They have produced a film that (unless it bears no relation to the book) is based on the false view that Jesus Christ was married to Mary Magdalene, had children and was not divine. It will, for a range of reasons, get the attention of millions and earn millions.

To see this merging of fact with fiction in a less emotive way than in *The Da Vinci Code* we can take Oliver Stone's film on the assassination of President Kennedy, *JFK*. The content of that film was described by *Time* magazine (23 Dec 1991) as follows: "So you want to know, who killed the President and connived in the cover-up? Everybody! High officials in the CIA, the FBI, the Dallas constabulary, all three armed services, Big Business and the White House. Everybody done it - everybody but Lee Harvey Oswald." And this was in spite of both the Warren Commission of 1964 and the House Select Committee on Assassinations of 1976 to 1979 concluding that Oswald *was* the killer. The hero of the film was the New Orleans District Attorney, Jim Garrison (portrayed by Kevin Costner); and Garrison believed that the Kennedy assassination had been the work of CIA personnel, anti-Castro Cuban exiles, homosexuals, and ultra right-wing activists. "My staff and I solved the case weeks ago," Garrison announced in February 1967. "I wouldn't say this if we didn't have evidence beyond a shadow of a doubt." However, when Garrison brought Clay Shaw a businessman to trial, no such evidence materialized. Today it seems that most people, even those who still believe in some conspiracy, have denounced Garrison as a complete fraud along with the film. But no matter who is right - the point at issue is the power of the film. For apparently in the United States many of those who weren't alive in 1963 when Kennedy was shot - a significant percentage of the population - now have Oliver Stone's film, *JFK*, as their main source of information about the assassination! Hence the seriousness of *The Da Vinci Code* film if it becomes a main source of information about early Christian origins.

Bias

One problem with the media used to be that the truth, if it contradicted what a producer personally believed, was simply never broadcast or filmed. This was called the *Pinsky Principle*, after an American journalist, Walter Pinsky, who once described his approach to his work like this: "If my research and journalistic instincts tell me one thing, my political instincts another ... I won't fudge it, I won't bend it, but I won't write it." Another problem was and is bias. Film makers and producers of TV documentaries have their minds made up before they start filming over their editorial position, certainly when filming a documentary. One veteran producer of documentaries, Martin Carr, confessed that the producer's first step was to "arrive at a point of view". Balance has to be maintained but maintained carefully - otherwise you upset the "emotional impact" of the programme. He explained how you might first interview someone as an opponent to your position. But if their personality would charm the viewers, you have to go for someone else who would alienate. Referring to a specific programme, Carr reports, "One could only feel a particular way at the end of the film ... the way I felt about it!"

These realities have been with us for a long time. It is only relatively recently, however, that we have film makers (and also writers of historical fiction) who not only have bias but serve up what is quite false. This is no longer taking artistic licence to "tell a story" based on fact. This is making facts irrelevant and making history itself fiction. In some things this is less important. But when dealing with God truth's this has eternal consequences; yet it is happening with impunity and a level of passivity on the part of Christian believers. As Archbishop Amato has recently said with regard to *The Da Vinci Code* film, if "such lies and errors had been directed at the Koran or the Holocaust they would have justly provoked a world uprising. Instead if they are directed against the Church and Christians, they remain unpunished."

A new Gnosticism

The plausibility of *The Da Vinci Code* is not only because a fog of post modernism means less instinctive questioning about facts and truth. Nor is it, in addition, just because of the power of films and TV to alter consciousness. Probably the greatest plausibility comes from the fact that the Gnosticism the book and the film buys into is very congenial to today's world. For two hundred years the main attack on Christianity in the West came from the rationalism of the so called Enlightenment. People claimed, in spite of the evidence to the contrary, that the Christian faith was supplying myths as life crutches for gullible people. The choice was, therefore, between a sterile secular rationalism or Christianity. But in the second half of the 20th century "spirituality" was rediscovered - a non doctrinal "spirituality", And this new spirituality, which can be seen as Gnosticism in modern dress, is even fashionable in business circles and some areas of medicine. But it was anti- Christian. James Hitchcock highlights the issue:

"The historical forms of Christianity stand in the way of this new spirituality. Creeds require individuals to rise above themselves, to submit to a truth much greater than themselves, to become real disciples. By contrast, contemporary New Age religion

[neo-Gnosticism] is simply the worship of the self, or at best the worship of deities which the self has created ... The moral implications of this are also obvious. The 'sexual revolution' is the single most formidable dividing line ... But if religion is a human invention, there cannot be an objective moral law, and all things are permitted ... [And] Christianity makes fundamental historical claims about itself - that, if Jesus did not live, die and rise again as the Gospels announce, our faith is in vain. This is a daring claim that makes Christianity vulnerable to attack precisely through its history ... Brown [in *The Da Vinci Code*] invites the reader to see Christianity as nothing less than a gigantic fraud perpetrated over 2000 years, a conspiracy of power which long held a monopoly on the things of the soul and is now being exposed. Shallow though the book is, it is a major weapon in the campaign to discredit the Christian faith once and for all."

Paul writes about people who "gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear" (2 Tim 4.3). This is certainly happening today.

Conclusion

We must be clear about the evils of Gnosticism - this religion, that in its modern form of a new spirituality is so congenial to many in the 21st century. The Gnostics believed many and different things. But generally it was elitist. It was not for everyone. Salvation was only open to those who could transcend matter and this material world which was considered evil. They saw Jesus as only one among the deities and he was not fully human. A number believed that he did not really die on the cross. He only seemed to suffer. The great loss that results from the Gnosticism as you have it in the Gnostic gospels; as reported by Irenaeus and Tertullian; and that is now resurfacing, is the following according to Bishop FitzSimons Alison:

"It leads us to believe that we need no redemption for our sinful wills, only freedom from our material bodies. What is lost in the Gnostic gospels is: the trust in and knowledge of God, whom we call 'Father'; that the material world and our bodies are good; that we sinners have been shown mercy, not just given secret knowledge; that the suffering of Christ gives hope and fellowship in our suffering; and that as Christ was raised from the dead, so our deaths are not the last word."

There is undoubtedly a spiritual battle going on. We read about spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6. There we are told: "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but ... against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." We are also told about the spiritual armour we need: truth, righteousness, the gospel, faith, salvation and the word of God. Finally we are to pray. We are "to be alert and *always keep on praying* for all the saints" (Eph 6.10,13-18). May we use that armour and keep on praying.