

# DAN BROWN: WHAT CAN THE CHURCH LEARN FROM THE PIED PIPER OF POSTMODERNITY?

*David Couchman*

*'... inventors of wild tales . . . who cheat with chains and dupe dull minds, who turn rubbish into gold for children.'*<sup>1</sup>

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According to the Daily Telegraph, Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code* – published in 2003 – is the biggest-selling adult fiction title of all time.<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, it has sold more than forty million copies.<sup>3</sup> It has been translated into forty languages, and spent over two years in one of the top five positions on the New York Times hardback fiction list. The film of the book was released on 19th May 2006, starring Tom Hanks, Sir Ian McKellen, and Audrey Tatou. Clearly, *The Da Vinci Code* has become a major cultural icon of our times.

The book itself is a lightweight adventure / melodrama, strong on action, plot, and suspense, and weaker on characterisation and scene-setting. However, it is not the story that matters, but the 'back story' behind it. According to this back story:

- Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene, and they started a royal blood-line.<sup>4</sup>
- Jesus was 'the original feminist,' and wanted Mary to lead his movement.<sup>5</sup>
- Peter and the male disciples hijacked Jesus' movement, shunned Mary Magdalene, and portrayed her as a prostitute.<sup>6</sup>
- Jesus' earliest followers saw him as merely a mortal prophet or teacher. He was made divine by a vote at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. This took place at the insistence of the Emperor Constantine, for his own political reasons.<sup>7</sup>
- Some eighty gospels were vying for inclusion in the New Testament. Constantine chose the four he wanted, and had the rest burned.<sup>8</sup>
- Earlier Gospels have now come to light, which clearly portray Jesus as merely a mortal teacher, rather than the Son of God. Dan Brown particularly mentions the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Gnostic Gospels.<sup>9</sup>

In this article I am not seeking to engage in an apologetic way with Dan Brown's claims – many writers have done this

elsewhere, and the organization I work with, Focus Radio, has also developed some resources to help Christians respond to the claims of *The Da Vinci Code*, including a DVD and a Study Guide. Details of these can be found on our web site, [www.focus.org.uk](http://www.focus.org.uk). Here, however, I am seeking to explore why *The Da Vinci Code* has become such a major cultural icon, and what the Christian church can learn from Dan Brown's success.

Why has this book become so popular? Lisa Rogak's biography notes that Brown's three earlier novels, *Digital Fortress* (1998), *Angels & Demons* (2000) and *Deception Point* (2001) had had only mediocre sales.<sup>10</sup> We may identify three interacting reasons why *The Da Vinci Code* has been so much more successful:

1. There has been a massive marketing exercise by the publishers, Doubleday. They sent out ten thousand advance copies – most similar works might expect a few hundred advance copies to be distributed.<sup>11</sup>
2. Brown devised a story that he knew would be controversial. Rogak says that:

He deliberately chose a controversial topic that would be so shocking to millions of people around the world that it was bound to gain media attention. Publishers know that controversy sells books, and they pray for an outraged national figure to call for a boycott of a book. Of course, this usually backfires, sending sales through the roof and making both publishers and authors very happy.<sup>12</sup>

Rogak describes how Brown, his wife/publicist Blythe, and his literary agent, sat down together to figure out what worked and what did not:

What could he dig up from his research that would generate instant publicity simply because it offended a particular group of people – the larger the better? Sex combined with religion in any form was always a safe bet for generating controversy.<sup>13</sup>

3. A third element in the success of *The Da Vinci Code* is that it has clearly resonated with some central aspects of contemporary culture. Several writers have recognized this postmodern appeal. For example, N. T. Wright says: '*The Da Vinci Code* is a symptom of something much bigger, a lightning rod which has throbbed with the electricity of the postmodern western world.'<sup>14</sup>

In this article, I would like to explore this element of resonance with contemporary culture. In what follows, I will

reflect on three areas in which *The Da Vinci Code* is an example of the spirit of our age: the relativising of truth claims, the suspicion of institutions, and the promotion of interests that are seen as marginalized, especially feminism.

## 1. Relativising of truth claims

One of the hallmarks of postmodernity is a suspicion of large scale truth claims. This is what Jean-François Lyotard famously terms an 'incredulity towards metanarratives'.<sup>15</sup> It is not simply a doubt about the plausibility of such claims; it is also a suspicion about the motives of those making them: As Zygmunt Bauman says: 'Those who say they know the truth always go on to say in one way or another, therefore I must be obeyed.'<sup>16</sup> In his very helpful book, *Preaching to a Postmodern Generation*, Graham Johnston comments that in postmodernity truth is seen as 'a tool, perpetuated by those in control as a means of oppression and maintaining control of the underclasses; the most dangerous creatures are those claiming to know.'<sup>17</sup>

In *The Da Vinci Code*, this suspicion comes out particularly in Dan Brown's attitude to history. So, for example, he says: 'By its very nature, history is always a one-sided account.'<sup>18</sup> And: '[H]istory is always written by the winners.'<sup>19</sup> This is more than just part of *The Da Vinci Code*'s fiction: in a speech to the New Hampshire Writers' Project, Brown said:

Many historians now believe that in engaging the historical accuracy of concepts, we should first ask ourselves a far deeper question: How historically accurate is history itself? In most cases we will never know the answer. But that should not stop us from asking the questions.<sup>20</sup>

James Garlow and Peter Jones point out that this question, 'how accurate is history?' ' . . . is a pivotal recurring question in our postmodern society.'<sup>21</sup> It is certainly one of the points where *The Da Vinci Code* resonates with the spirit of our age.

However, this postmodern suspicion of historical truth-claims is selective. While Brown claims that other people's history is fraudulent because it has been 'written by the winners', he also claims that his own history is absolutely true. So he has one of his characters say: ' . . . almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false'.<sup>22</sup>

This 'selective suspicion' is characteristic of a great deal of postmodern scholarship. In a different context, N. T. Wright remarks that 'a hermeneutic of suspicion in one area is routinely balanced by a hermeneutic of credulity in another'.<sup>23</sup> For example, writers who accept at face value things that are written in the Gnostic Gospels, yet apply a hermeneutic of radical suspicion to the canonical Gospels.

Because history cannot be trusted, we also seem to have a certain amount of freedom to re-write it as we choose, in the service of our own contemporary agendas. Garlow and Jones comment: 'To the contemporary audience, any method of recording or re-writing history is just fine. Brown discounts much of accepted history because it was written by the church. And winners write history. Yet, he says everything he presents in *The Da Vinci Code* is 'historical fact'. So who are the new 'winners' that Brown relies on for his historical facts?'<sup>24</sup>

So the relativising of truth claims in postmodernity is a complex and subtle business: it is applied selectively to some truth claims, but not all; it is also used to justify revising history in the service of contemporary agendas.

## Implications for the Church

How should the church respond to the kind of relativising of historical truth claims found in *The Da Vinci Code*?

1. One possibility is an increased focus on spirituality and the mystical elements of the Christian Faith. This may be seen as a move to avoid the problems raised by truth claims.
2. Another move to avoid the problems is a renewed use of narrative in preaching and teaching (for example, both biblical narrative and personal testimony). In postmodernity, small scale local narratives are seen as less threatening than over-arching metanarratives. Because of this, they are not subject to the same degree of suspicion.
3. A third possibility is a renewed focus on apologetics. This approach involves *confronting* the issue of truth claims.

This list is intended to be suggestive rather than exhaustive.

## 2. Distrust of Institutions

In pre-modernity and modernity, people put considerable confidence in the institutions of society. In pre-modern times, this meant the king and the church; in modern times, it meant the government, the legal system, the education system, the health service and so on. However, in postmodernity, we often regard powerful institutions with distrust. As the Archbishop of Canterbury said in his Sermon for Easter Sunday:

We don't trust power; and because the church has historically been part of one or another sort of establishment and has often stood very close to political power, perhaps we can hardly expect to be exempt.<sup>25</sup>

One of the places where this distrust can be seen most clearly is in the remarkable rise of conspiracy theories of all kinds – and whatever else it is, *The Da Vinci Code* is certainly a conspiracy theory. Dan Brown's suspicion of history does not exist in a vacuum: rather, it is closely linked to a distrust of the church as an institution. So he says:

Nobody could deny the enormous good the modern Church did in today's troubled world, and yet the Church had a deceitful and violent history. Their brutal crusade to 're-educate' the pagan and feminine-worshipping religions spanned three centuries, employing methods as inspired as they were horrific.<sup>26</sup>

And later:

. . . the Church has two thousand years of experience pressuring those who threaten to unveil its lies. Since the days of Constantine, the Church has successfully hidden the truth about Mary Magdalene and Jesus . . . The Church may no longer employ crusaders to slaughter nonbelievers, but their influence is no less

persuasive. No less insidious.<sup>27</sup>

Clearly, one of the main reasons for the massive popularity of *The Da Vinci Code* is that it resonates with the postmodern distrust of institutions, and with a desire to see the church as an ancient and powerful conspiracy. As Ben Witherington says:

Today, those who promise to reveal secrets about Jesus – secrets long suppressed by the Church and other religious institutions, secrets that may be scandalous or at least that debunk traditional views of Jesus and early Christianity – have an instant audience. Throw in a conspiracy theory and take an anti-establishment approach, and the audience is hooked.<sup>28</sup>

Again, however, the situation is more complex than this suggests: related to this contemporary distrust of the church as an institution, postmodern people prefer spirituality (however this is defined) rather than institutional religion, and prefer alternative spirituality to traditional Christian spirituality. This contemporary desire for spirituality seeks out whatever ‘works for me’. So Dan Brown says, ‘We’re each following our own path of enlightenment. I consider myself a student of many religions.’<sup>29</sup>

### *Implications for the Church*

How can the church respond to this postmodern suspicion of institutions? Positively, it might respond by seeking to identify with the contemporary interest in spirituality in various ways. Negatively, it might seek to distance itself from the institutional trappings of Christianity as far as possible, for example by:

- meeting on a weekday rather than on a Sunday
- meeting on neutral ground (in a school, a cinema, a lecture theatre or a home) rather than a church building.
- avoiding liturgical elements, prayers, hymns and readings.
- making the style of communication as interactive as possible, opening it up for questions, dialogue and debate.

It is also important in postmodernity that the church is seen not to be trying to defend the indefensible, for example the Crusades, the Inquisition, the witch-hunts, and the abuse of children by priests. It would be foolish to deny that our record has not always been exemplary.

### **3. Sacred Feminism**

A key aspect of today’s culture is the desire to hear from those whose voices have been marginalized in the past – from those of other races or social groups, and especially from women. Postmodern people distrust the church not only because it is a hierarchical bureaucracy, but also because it is male dominated.

In *The Da Vinci Code*, this takes the form of what Dan Brown calls the ‘Sacred Feminine.’ This is a not-very-clearly-defined shorthand for pagan sexuality. Brown argues that before the rise of Christianity, there was a religious balance between male and female:

The ancients envisioned their world in two halves –

masculine and feminine. Their gods and goddesses worked to keep a balance of power. Yin and yang. When male and female were balanced, there was harmony in the world. When they were unbalanced, there was chaos.<sup>30</sup>

He also says that ‘Jesus was the original feminist. He intended for the future of His Church to be in the hands of Mary Magdalene.’<sup>31</sup> However, the subsequent history of the church has been a political battle to exclude the sacred feminine:

Constantine and his male successors successfully converted the world from matriarchal paganism to patriarchal Christianity by waging a campaign of propaganda that demonised the sacred feminine, obliterating the goddess from modern religion for ever.<sup>32</sup>

This theme comes out again and again throughout *The Da Vinci Code*, eventually becoming rather tedious. In Dan Brown’s enthusiasm for paganism and the sacred feminine, he has once again identified a major theme of postmodern culture, and incorporated it into his novel. One aspect of this – which we might regard as eccentric if it had not become such a major strand in today’s culture – is the special position given to Mary Magdalene. She is represented as the wife of Christ, and hence as a goddess. Her role was suppressed by the early church, and must be restored if there is to be harmony. Brown’s ideas bring together strands of paganism, Gnosticism, and mediaeval folk-lore about Mary Magdalene and the Holy Grail. So, for example, he says that:

The Grail is literally the ancient symbol for womanhood, and the *Holy* Grail represents the sacred feminine and the goddess, which of course has now been lost, virtually eliminated by the Church.<sup>33</sup>

And:

The quest for the Holy Grail is literally the quest to kneel before the bones of Mary Magdalene. A journey to pray at the feet of the outcast one, the lost sacred feminine.<sup>34</sup>

Once again, Brown is doing something more here than just telling a story, and more than simply finding a point of resonance with today’s culture. There is an agenda underlying his telling of the story. Rogak reports that:

As the controversy swirled, Brown returned to one theme again and again: At one point in time, every major world religion had both gods and goddesses as part of its theology, but today most brands of mainstream Christianity celebrate only the male side of the equation, with one God. He believes this imbalance is both a symptom and a cause of society’s ills today.<sup>35</sup>

Michael Green comments that Brown ‘... wants to make the case for a revival of paganism, which embraces the “sacred feminine” and is superior to Christianity, seen as male-dominated and hierarchical’.<sup>36</sup>

Here Brown has popularised some ideas that have been put forward at a more academic level by professors Elaine Pagels and Karen King. These writers have used recent discoveries about Gnosticism – especially the Nag Hammadi library – as the basis for suggestions that the earliest Christians were a kind of proto-feminist movement. So, for

example, Pagels says:

The Nag Hammadi sources, discovered at a time of contemporary social crises concerning sexual roles, challenge us to re-interpret history – and to re-evaluate the present situation.<sup>37</sup>

In a similar vein, Karen King comments:

[T]he apostles were considered to be guarantors of the true teaching of the church, and male bishops continued to be their sole legitimate successors. This male model of discipleship also provided (and continues to provide) a rationale for the exclusion of women from leadership roles, ignoring the presence of women disciples through Jesus' ministry, at the crucifixion, and as the first witnesses of the resurrection.<sup>38</sup>

It is not my purpose to engage with the positions advanced by these scholars, but rather to highlight the way Brown has brought them into the centre of popular culture.

However, once again, the situation is more complex than it seems: a valuable aspect of postmodernism has been the recognition that there is no such thing as an objective 'view from nowhere', or 'God's-eye view' of history. Everyone who writes history comes to the task with an agenda. As mentioned earlier, one effect of this is that it has become increasingly acceptable to re-write history for the purpose of an agenda, without regard for scholarly integrity. The divinization of Mary Magdalene is surely an example of this. So Darrell Bock comments that:

The role of Mary Magdalene continues her meteoric rise in our culture. Yet the exaltation of Mary Magdalene and the morphing of her into a politically correct symbol have no solid root in early church history.<sup>39</sup>

Frederica Matthewes-Green, in an article wryly titled 'What Heresy?' adds that: 'Early Christians rejected Gnosticism, all right. But what Pagels presents is not the part they rejected. What they rejected, Pagels does not present.'<sup>40</sup> In an ironic turn, Brown – and Pagels and King – appear to be doing exactly what they accuse the early church of doing: re-writing history to advance their own agenda.

### *Implications for the Church*

Dan Brown's interest in the 'Sacred Feminine' clearly resonates with postmodern culture. Some possible implications of this for the church are:

1. A greater role for women in the ministry of the church. (I recognize that in some traditions, this proposal remains theologically controversial, and it is not my purpose here to engage with this controversy. However, in a culture where the church is seen as male-dominated and hierarchical, it is important for us to reflect on how we are perceived, and what we could do within the constraints of our theology to improve this perception.)
2. A greater role for female perspectives in the content of the church's ministry.<sup>41</sup>
3. Clarity about biblical attitudes to sexuality. In a culture where the church is often perceived as being against human sexuality, it is important that we convey a thoroughly biblical view of sex.

## **So what can we learn from Dan Brown and *The Da Vinci Code*?**

Popular films and television programmes form one of the major shared experiences of people today. So Douglas Rushkoff can speak of us inhabiting a 'mediascape' rather than a landscape – an artificial environment formed by the media.<sup>42</sup> The critic Kenneth Myers says that television is: '... the single most significant shared reality of our entire society. In television we live and move and have our being.'<sup>43</sup> Because of this, they can be fruitful sources of illustrations for preaching and teaching. (Compare this with the description in Acts 17 of Paul's famous sermon on Mars Hill, in which he quotes from, and alludes to, contemporary non-Christian writers who would have been familiar to his Greek audience.) At this basic level, we could use *The Da Vinci Code* to illustrate the contemporary relativising of history and suspicion of truth claims, distrust of the church as an institution, or interest in 'Sacred Feminism'.

However, we can also learn from *The Da Vinci Code* in more creative ways. Because of this book and film, many people are discussing issues about the historic origins of the Christian faith – people who would not normally connect with the church in any way. Rather than see the book as a threat, we should see it as an opportunity to engage such people in conversation. One writer even suggests that churches should book entire showings of the film as evangelistic events, as many did with 'The Passion of the Christ'.<sup>44</sup>

Insights gained from the success of *The Da Vinci Code* may also help to shape the church's wider communication to become more effective in today's culture. Christian events that learn from the success of *The Da Vinci Code* will look rather unconventional. For example, they will be as non-institutional as possible. They may be held in secular venues, on weekday evenings, without any of the normal 'religious' trappings of church services. They will need to be as interactive as possible – with dialogue, questions, and discussion, rather than monologue sermons. (This would probably limit the number of people who can be involved, since larger numbers make this kind of interactivity more difficult.) They will ensure that female perspectives are adequately heard, for example by having women preach or lead (or share the preaching and leading) to whatever extent this is possible.

This is not to suggest that all the church's preaching and teaching should take this form. There must be many faithful churchgoers who would find this approach disturbing or distressing, and who will continue to appreciate traditional approaches to church. However, in our variegated postmodern culture, there should be scope for a range of different approaches, including some that are experimental. In time, these may come to be more widely accepted.

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## The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller (1754-1815)

### Volume 1: The Diary of Andrew Fuller (1754-1815)

Michael M. McMullen

Series Editor: Michael A. G. Haykin

Charles Haddon Spurgeon once described Andrew Fuller as 'the greatest theologian' of his century and John Ryland, Jr. (1753-1825) described him as 'perhaps the most judicious and able theological writer that ever belonged to [the Calvinistic Baptist] denomination.' From a merely human perspective, if Fuller's theological works had not been written, the Baptist Missionary Society would not have been formed, William Carey would not have gone to India, and the Western missionary movement would have looked quite different. The aim of this project is to publish, over the next few years, a modern critical edition of the entire corpus of Andrew Fuller's published and unpublished works. The controlling objective of The Works of Andrew Fuller Project is to preserve and accurately transmit the text of Fuller's writings. The editors are committed to the finest scholarly standards for textual transcription, editing, and annotation. The project launches this year with Fuller's diary. Future volumes will cover Fuller's sermons, his apologetic work, his letters, his commentaries, his work on missions and his biography of Samuel Pearce.

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