

Four Reasons Why *The Da Vinci Code* has nothing of substance to say about the faith of Christians

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There is a general perception abroad that Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* somehow calls into question the very foundations of Christian belief and practice. It is widely believed, even by many who take the name of 'Christian' to themselves, that *The Da Vinci Code* provides good reasons – both historical and religious – for calling the essential nature of Christian faith into question. In this short talk I should like to show, albeit briefly, that this is not the case. I shall do this in two ways. First (in three points) by showing that Dan Brown simply does not comprehend, either intellectually or spiritually, the faith that he wants to contest, the faith of the Western churches who 'believe in Jesus Christ with the apostles' (D. Tracy). Second (in a final point) by characterising the religion of *The Da Vinci Code* as a modern form of Gnosticism which functions as the spiritual heart of global capitalism, I will show that *The Da Vinci Code* represents nothing more than the latest form of a pre-Christian paganism that Christianity has always sought, from its very inception, to demythologise.

So, here are my four reasons why *The Da Vinci Code* has nothing of substance to say about the faith of Christians.

1. *The Da Vinci Code* does not understand that the primary theological code of Christian faith is already in place before either the communities that produced the 'Gnostic gospels' or the imperial will of Constantine start to exert their influence.

That this is the case is clear from the perseverance in authority of that collection of books that came to be known as the New Testament. The pre-eminent authority of those texts derives from two properties which neither the Gnostic communities nor the imperial court were finally able to subvert. First, they clearly derive from the first generation of Christian believers, the generation that knew Jesus of Nazareth. I am not claiming, of course, that every book in the NT was written by someone who knew Jesus personally. What I *am* claiming is that these texts were promulgated amongst communities that were founded and maintained in faith by people who knew Jesus personally. So that while they

each give a particular interpretation of Jesus – particular, that is, to the issues and questions of the communities in which they arise - they nevertheless recognise that there is a limit to interpretation, and that limit is the history of Jesus himself. Any text that sought to interpret that history in a way that seemed to do violence to the memory of the first witnesses was quickly consigned to oblivion.

That fact implies a second property in the New Testament texts, the importance of historical particularity to the early Christian communities. Unlike the pagan religious traditions all about them, the early Christians believed that there was an intimate relationship between divinity and real, historical, happenings. God, they believed, had revealed Godself not in the visionary utterances of oracles or the transcendental speculations of popular myths, but in the flesh and blood history of a particular man, Jesus of Nazareth. The importance to Christians of God's action in historical rather than mythopoetic happenings, is something they inherited from the Jews. And it is exactly this importance that is finally able to resist the encroaching counter-claims of both gnostic and pagan-imperial incursions into their communities. The real reason why the so-called 'gnostic gospels' were never finally accepted as Christian revelation has nothing to do with the machinations of an imperial authority at the Council of Nicaea, as Dan Brown claims. No, the Gnostic gospels were rejected because they read too much like the myths of the non-Jewish, and (now) non-Christian pagan groups. Their Jesus was not a real, human, Jesus whose divinity is revealed precisely in and through the gritty history of a Galilean rabbi. The gnostic Jesus is like the divine beings of the Greco-Roman myths, who only *seems* to be human but is 'really' a god. The Jesus of the 'gnostic gospels' seems to barely be there, in the sense that you and I are here. Their Jesus floats above the ground in mystical otherness, like a spectral visitor from another dimension who visits not to share the limitations of human life, but to relegate human life to a real that does not matter. Which leads to the second of my critical remarks.

2. *The Da Vinci Code* does not understand the importance of the humanity of Jesus to Christian faith.

According to Dan Brown, the church that is formalized at the Council of Nicaea, the 'Constantinian church' as he calls it, turns the human Jesus into a divine being, thus

repressing his true identity as a human being who would have done human things like get married and have children. Dan Brown is clearly all at sea here.

First, because he has not actually read the ‘gnostic’ gospels with the aid of historians of religion who could have helped him understand what they were saying, Brown does not see that their Jesus is not – in any way – the ‘human’ Jesus he would like him to be. He is a divine visitor from another realm who comes to ‘rescue’ people from their fleshly humanity by giving them a secret teaching about the *unreality* of their human circumstances.

Second, because he has not actually read the New Testament with the aid of scholars who could have helped him understand what they are saying, Brown does not encounter the New Testament’s insistence that Jesus is a real human being, a human being in many way just like you and I. He does not notice that the Jesus of the gospels is born of a woman, grows up to learn a trade, struggles with the roles with which his society and community would confine him, gets tired and sleepy, weeps, cries out in despair, tells jokes, gets into serious political trouble, is arrested, is tortured, really dies and is buried. To the writers of the New Testament, it is essential that Jesus is a human being. Why? Because only a human being can know what it is like to struggle under the conditions of being a human being. Only a human being can show other human beings that their humanity is not yet the humanity that it could be. Only a human being can give the divine a truly human face, and therefore communicate the divine love in a way that finally overcomes the perceived distance between the human and the divine. Which brings me to my third critique.

3. *The Da Vinci Code* does not understand the Christian approach to divinity.

One of Dan Brown’s most erroneous assumptions is this: that the God of Christianity is exactly the same as the various gods of the ancient pagan world. A distant creator who creates the cosmos and sets it on its way but is no longer particularly involved. A stern judge who expects human beings to obey his rules, without any sense of how hard it is to do so. Or, alternatively, a puppet-master who manipulates human history in a way that favours men over women, the aristocratic over the humble, and the European peoples over everyone else. That he believes that the God of Christianity *is* such a god is clear from the way he represents the church. The church is, according to Dan Brown, a deeply

patriarchal, aristocratic, and euro-centric reality that only *pretends*—usually for political reasons—to care for women, the poor, and the people of the non-European world.

Although his representation of the church is itself deeply problematic, it is the representation of *God* implied in this portrait that I should like to contest here today. I should like to say, as simply as a theologian can, that the God of Christianity is *not* such a God. Far from it. And the contrast will perhaps present itself most clearly if I summarise the teaching about God presented by the New Testament.

First, there is a recognition in the New Testament that the God of Jesus Christ is not a different God than that of the Jews. The first Christians were, as you now know, Jews. They therefore inherit from the Jewish people an understanding of God as the powerful creator of the world who is nevertheless deeply involved in the fortunes of the people with whom he had made a binding covenant. There are, of course, two parties to a covenant. But, unlike a contract, a covenant is not so easily broken or done away with if either party fails to meet their obligations under the covenant. The reason for this is that covenants encode the strong bonds of a persevering *relationship*, while contracts encode the mutual interests of *individuals*. In Jewish understanding, God is a God who has promised to be with and for God's people always – down amongst it, in the nitty-gritty of their lives - even if they often fail to do the same for God. What Christians then add is this: that the clearest embodiment of the covenanting God is the particular life of Jesus of Nazareth. Here the often mysterious God of the Hebrews comes to dwell in human form and flesh. What Christians learned, in Jesus, was that God was not only with and for us *in spirit*, as it were, but that God was also with us *in the flesh*, living the very life that we live, respecting its limitations and yet showing us how those limitations may be transcended. What Christians learned from Jesus was that the God of the Jews has a human face, that this God does not abandon us to the tragic consequences of our greed, our pride, or our lust for power over others, but comes to remonstrate with us, passionately, in the form of a very human life that is able to encounter and experience exactly how powerful these forces can be.

Second, the God of Christians is a God of *love*. Perhaps you have heard that before. But let me pause for a moment to reflect something of what a *Christian* means by love, for love in its modern and post-modern incarnations is seldom the same as Christian love. In the Christian lexicon, love is first an imitation of Christ's radical form of friendship, the

willingness to lay aside one's own life in order that another's life may flourish. It is, in the words of Paul Ricoeur, the apprehension that the other person has a claim on me, and that I am no longer responsible only for myself, but that I share in the responsibility to insure that the life of my brother or sister is able to flourish as well, to become what God intends that it may become. The language of laying down one's life refers, of course, to a particular history: the real event of Christ's crucifixion. It should be remembered, however – and this is my second point - that the crucifixion represents not just the love of a singular man at a particular time, for a particular community. The crucifixion is a sign in the world of the love of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit for every single creature, in every time and place. The cross enacts in human history what God has been like, and will be like for eternity: love. A third point is this, that Christian love is not ideal, hanging in the heaven like the 'platonic love' of the Greeks. It has form and shape and a particular history in the world. And that is really what the language of 'commandment' is about, in the New Testament. Christians are commanded to love not because God is a bully and they are his slaves. On the contrary, as the Jesus of John's gospel says, Christians are no longer slaves of God, but friends; but this is only the case insofar as they are willing to love. The command to love, you see, is also (and somewhat paradoxically) the means by which God frees us from our bondage to self. If Christians did not love, they would still be slaves to all that our selves are apart from Christ—a series of basic, and seemingly irresistible, drives derived from DNA, from family, from our peer environment, or where-ever. In love, however, we learn to listen for another voice. The voice of God, who alone knows how it is that human beings may flourish. The command to love is therefore, in its most basic form, an apprehension of the *pressure* God exerts towards our freedom, our liberation towards life not only for ourselves, but for the people around us as well. The command to love reminds Christians that love cannot be what human beings would like it to be. Love can only be what God is. A costly pressure within the world toward justice, peace and reconciliation.

Third, the God of Christians is a *human* God. This is implied in what I have said already about the identity of Jesus. Karl Barth put it something like this: in Jesus we learn that God has chosen to *become Godself* in, with and as a human being. What this means is that the very great distance between the creator and the creature has been overcome, not ontologically (not, at least, in the static sense in which ontology was understood before Heidegger), but relationally. In Jesus we learn that God freely chooses to embrace

humanity, even to the point of becoming human, and therefore submitting to the very worst that human beings can do to one another. Yet, this is done not for the sake of some kind of powerless solidarity that is not able to do anything about our situation. God does this, rather, because God is love. God traverses the very great distance in order that we may know this, and therefore realise the power of this love to transcend our limitations and embody the divine love in a way that repeats and prolongs the transformation of human life that took place in Jesus of Nazareth. Would Jesus being married have threatened his divinity under this model? Not at all. The Benedictine monk, Bede Griffiths, often said that there were two ways to encounter the divine in a face-to-face way. By remaining celibate and looking for God in the face of all people. Or by becoming married and looking for God in the face of a particular human being. Either will do, said Griffiths, as long as it is God we are looking for (and not simply ourselves).

4. *The Da Vinci Code* promotes and encodes yet another example of religion as ‘gnosis’, which turns out to be the spiritual heart of global capitalism.

You will recall the work that we did in this course on the religious character of ‘gnosticism’. You will recall that the Gnostics, in various ways, were essentially pessimistic about the world we actually inhabit. They saw the fleshly life of human beings as not only fallen and flawed, but also irredeemable, incapable of transformation. They therefore dreamed of ways in which human beings might ‘take flight’, departing the historical world of flesh and suffering, for a world of pure spirit in which the terrible gravity of flesh could be done away with forever. At the centre of the gnostic spirit, then, is a particular kind of desire: a desire for a real that never actually presents itself within the nitty-gritty of the lives we actually live.

Slavoj Žižek has written about the soul of global capitalism as a contemporary form of the ‘gnostic heresy’. Unlike the essentially materialist spirituality of the New Testament—which understands that spirituality should not be dissociated from the lives we actually live in human communities, so that spiritual desire is properly directed at material, embodied outcomes—global capitalism inscribes a form of desire which actually brackets out our real lives by producing a desire that is directed at nothing that is real, except perhaps desire itself. For what capitalism produces is the desire for desire. We are induced to desire something, and to realise that desire by going out to buy it. But at the

moment we buy it, we realise, instead, that we do not really possess what we really desired. All that we have is desire itself, which will then drive us to go and buy something else, which will again turn out to be nothing else but a chimera and shadow of the Real Thing. Desire itself then becomes the substance of a post-modern kind of spirituality: the experience of passing from one object of desire to another without ever really finding what you are looking for. Of course, if the object of desire is not real, not flesh and blood but a disembodied sense of nothingness in which desire finally ceases to produce itself, then the only way to achieve that is to disappear into nothingness through self-medication or the mantra-like repetitions of dance clubs or neo-Buddhist meditation practises. But of course, in the spiritualities of capitalism, New Age or Western Buddhist as they usually are, these respites from desire are actually ways of keeping the desire for desire alive. They are carefully designed illusions by which a person can be 'refreshed' for a renewed engagement with capitalism. They are the religious practices that you have when you don't have a religion that can actually release you from the never-ending production of desire.

How does this relate to *The Da Vinci Code*? Like this. What *The Da Vinci Code* gives its readers is an experience of being religious without being religious. It pretends to let the reader in on a 'secret' about the real nature of Christianity. Our desire for a spirituality that can help us escape from the banality of our lives is aroused. But of course, in the end, the 'secret' is nothing that makes any real difference to the way we live. It is not an alternative way of life that is *really* able to save us from our addiction to desire itself. Instead, we are left with the tantalising sense that we have glimpsed something important, that we could perhaps find out more about by going to see the movie or buying more books, or perhaps consuming other pastiche of religious goods. What *The Da Vinci Code* promises is exactly what the gnostics promised: salvation through the discovery of a secret. But of course, as with the gnostics, the 'secret' is just an experience that you have to produce for yourself, over and over again and in ever-more novel ways because, in fact, there *is* no secret that has any real, flesh and blood, reality. The secret is nothing other than an insubstantial nothing, so alien that it can have no real impact or gravity in the real world of flesh and blood.

Christians claim that the Real has come to visit us in Jesus of Nazareth. They also claim that the Real continues to be with us in the flesh and blood reality of the Christian

community, which is the body of Christ in which his Spirit continues to dwell. Desire, for Christians, is not about the discovery of a secret. The secret is already out. Nor is it about the production of the desire for desire, as in the spirit of capitalism. No, Christianity has always provided the moral foundation for our most trenchant critiques of capitalism. Nor is Christian desire directed towards an alien reality that is somehow beyond this world. No, Christian desire is directed very much at the transformation of *this* world of flesh and blood after the flesh-and-blood model of human love that was revealed in Jesus and in the early Christian communities. For Christians, there is no escaping this world though some kind of secret knowledge. There is only the possibility of transformation, a possibility inscribed in the resurrection of Jesus.

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