

# Re-doing Da Vinci: Appropriation and Misappropriation of Religious History in Conspiracy Fiction

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As I am sure many reviews of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* have observed, it is a book which has, for better or worse, been the subject of much, often heated, discussion and debate. It has created a veritable industry of supposedly serious works that purport to debunk or affirm the various claims made within its pages: *Secrets of the Da Vinci Code*, *Cracking the Da Vinci Code*, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*, or even *The Da Vinci Deception* and *The Da Vinci Con.*<sup>1</sup> Brown's claims have evidently been something of a revelation for the majority of his readers, and clearly they have been left wanting more. Its well-established place at the top of bestseller lists around the world is testament to its popularity, and few would question the influence it has had on its readers. But what exactly is it that has struck such a chord with readers?

To briefly summarise, *The Da Vinci Code* claims: that Jesus was fully mortal; that he married Mary Magdalene and had children by her (as represented by the allegory of the Holy Grail: chalice = womb; blood = bloodline); that his descendents survived in France, that the Catholic Church has suppressed this information since its inception and that Jesus' divinity was 'decided by a vote,' with motivations that were **purely** political. These claims, while no doubt sensational for many, are hardly new. Strangely enough, this is something Brown seems to want to reiterate again and again. For his part, however, this is due to the fact that he wants to paint the picture of a conspiracy on the part of the Catholic Church to cover up information held – continuously since the death of Jesus – by an unorthodox underground, one that he no doubt includes himself in. The **real** reason that these ideas are in no way new is that they were all claimed in the monumental pseudo-history of 1982, *The Holy Blood and The Holy Grail*, by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln.

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the present author had a difficult time conceiving of an original title.

I define this piece as pseudo-history due to its place in a genre that is characterised by such titles as *Fingerprints of the Gods*, in which we are informed that the Egyptians had access to alien technology; or *From the Ashes of Angels*, which claims that the angels of Judaeo-Christian lore were in fact (you guessed it) aliens, and that the Garden of Eden was located in Kurdistan which should thus be declared an independent state. The sort of books that always seem to have photographs with captions ending in a question mark (along the lines of 'Does knowledge of this deity go back 11 500 years to a time when the constellation of Leo governed the precessional cycle?'); or artist's renderings of things they dreamt about that are included as valid because of an unspoken acceptance of the Jungian theory of the Collective Unconscious. Sometimes these books have vaguely sensible premises, but their lack of scholarly discipline and unwarranted leaps of logic let them down. More often they are mere flights of fancy.

*Holy Blood* is, admittedly, one of the better examples of the genre, and represents something of a *tour de force* on the parts of the authors (perhaps it should be mentioned that Baigent and Leigh are prolific authors in the field) weighing in at some 500 pages. Unfortunately, like the rest of genre's pseudo-historical brethren, *Holy Blood* is written by self-styled historians who have some idea of what a history book should **look** like, but only a vague idea of how it is to be constructed:

Unremarkable legends (that the Merovingian kings were thought to have a healing touch, for example) are characterized as suggestive clues or puzzles demanding solution. Highly contested interpretations (that, say, an early Grail romance depicts the sacred object as being guarded by the Templars) are presented as established truth. Sources – such as the New Testament – are qualified as 'questionable' and derivative when they contradict the conspiracy theory, then microscopically scrutinized for inconsistencies that might support it.<sup>2</sup>

The Magdalene legend as it is here, while indeed fairly old, is rather peculiar to the Languedoc region of southern France. Why exactly they chose to validate this particular local myth is perhaps the real

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<sup>2</sup> L Miller: 'The Last Word: The Da Vinci Con', *New York Times*, February 22, 2004, [http://www.cesnur.org/2004/davinci\\_nyt.htm](http://www.cesnur.org/2004/davinci_nyt.htm), accessed 03 August 2004.

mystery, when there are similar local myths throughout the rest of Christendom with equal interest, for instance the myth that the body of Jesus is in fact in a Thomist church in Kashmir.

They go on to compare themselves to the reporters who uncovered Watergate,<sup>3</sup> and, in the Introduction to the second edition (1996) claim their book as the original inspiration for Umberto Eco's masterful *Foucault's Pendulum*:

In reviewing our book when it first appeared, the late Anthony Burgess said he could not help seeing the story as containing ideal components for a novel. So, too, obviously, did Umberto Eco, whom Burgess extolled in another review as having signposted the direction in which the novel of the future must move. Professor Eco clearly discerned the extent to which our research had constituted a species of 'semiotic exercise'. In *Foucault's Pendulum*, he ingeniously adapted aspects of it to a fictitious 'semiotic exercise' of his own.<sup>4</sup>

Not content to assume the reflected glory of Burgess' good review of Eco, Lincoln also wants to lay claim to his terminology. The term 'semiotic exercise' is (ab)used four times in the introduction,<sup>5</sup> and Lincoln defines it by explaining that during the writing of the book they:

were confronted by a multitude of fragments from a number of different jigsaw puzzles, a multitude of 'indicators', 'signs', 'clues', 'vectors', all of which seemed to reflect an apparently meaningful pattern. Were they ultimately mere random coincidences? Or did they indeed reflect a pattern? And, if so, was the pattern meaningful? Was the meaning inherent in the pattern – 'out there', so to speak, in history<sup>6</sup> – or were we assembling the pattern ourselves and projecting our own meaning onto it?<sup>7</sup>

Somewhat ironically, Eco was no doubt inspired by *Holy Blood*, but perhaps not in the way the authors might have hoped. The

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<sup>3</sup> Cited in *ibid*.

<sup>4</sup> M Baigent, R Leigh and H Lincoln: 'Introduction, 1996', *The Holy Blood and The Holy Grail*, London, [1982] 1996, 18.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 15, 18 (twice in one paragraph), and 22.

<sup>6</sup> A fitting description, perhaps, for *Holy Blood* itself.

<sup>7</sup> Baigent, et al, *op cit*, 15.

protagonists of *Foucault's Pendulum* are three editors for a publisher of pseudo-histories who, having propagated some false documents, all meet untimely ends; mostly at the hands of fanatical conspiracy theory adepts.<sup>8</sup>

Untrained in historical methodology, they see nothing wrong with combining sources from wildly divergent backgrounds, usually without even lip service to the original context. They maintain that 'only by such synthesis can one discern the underlying continuity, the unified and coherent fabric, which lies at the core of any historical problem.'<sup>9</sup> In the process they come to the convenient realisation that 'it is not sufficient to confine oneself exclusively to facts.'<sup>10</sup> This startling conclusion has led one commentator to rather charitably describe them as 'not so much factual as fact-ish.'<sup>11</sup> Apparently the provision of fiction as history is a 'semiotic exercise'.

Coming back to Burgess' comment that the stuff of *Holy Blood* would make a great novel, I must admit that I was initially excited when I heard the synopsis of *The Da Vinci Code*. Most pseudo-history books should probably only be published on the proviso that they first be reworked into fiction. My first encounter with a fictionalised version of *Holy Blood* had been a positive one and was (strangely enough) in the form of a video game of all things – albeit an adult one – that concerned a modern witch-hunter chasing vampires. Now while this may hardly sound in any way better than *Holy Blood* or *The Da Vinci Code*, just bear with me a moment. Entitled *Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned*,<sup>12</sup> and self-confessedly based on Baigent *et al's* *magnum opus*, it concerns a rakish New Orleansian mystery writer who, having reached the age of thirty, discovered that he was last in a long line of *Schattenjäger*s (German 'Shadow Hunters'); an ancient clan who have a long history of dealing with all manner of things that go bump in the night. In his previous adventures having dealt with Voodoo murders in the Louisiana Bayou and werewolves in the Schwarzwald, our protagonist Gabriel Knight this time heads to the

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<sup>8</sup> See especially C M Cusack: 'Esotericism, Irony and Paranoia in Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*', *Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge* Sydney Studies in Religion 5, 2004 (63-85).

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Miller, op cit.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> J Jensen: *Gabriel Knight 3: Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned*, Sierra Studios, 1999.

Languedoc, hot on the trail of kidnappers who have just nabbed Prince James Stuart's son and heir.

In style it has all the hallmarks of an old-fashioned cozy mystery: set in the town of Rennes-les-Chateau, the location of *Holy Blood's* mysteries, much of the action takes place in a hotel peopled by suspicious Grail seekers. Why did the Italian Signore Bucchelli lie about not coming from Rome? Why does vampy French tour guide Madeline Buthane sport a pistol and high-tech equipment? Exactly what special information makes the Australian John Wilkes so sure about finding the treasure? In all of this, his History major sidekick, Grace Nakimura, assists Gabriel. It is through Grace that the mystery of Rennes-les-Chateau, and indeed the mystery of the Grail, is played out. Adopting the conclusion of *Holy Blood*, that the Merovingians were the heirs of Christ, the game positions Prince James of Albany (the current Stuart heir) as Jesus' most direct descendent. Rather than making him the possible emperor of a resurrected Holy Roman Empire, the game places him, rather implausibly, as a potential king for the European Union(!)

Presuming those playing the game not to have read *Holy Blood*, the game's writer Jane Jensen (herself an author in the Conspiracy Fiction genre)<sup>13</sup> leads the player through the mystery in a way similar to the experiences of Baigent *et al.* Grace reads a book called *Secrets of the Holy Grail*, undoubtedly inspired by *Holy Blood*, and then comes across a document called *Le Serpent Rouge*, which acts as a cipher to the mystery. With a little help from the convenient database on her laptop – and a mysterious stranger who turns out to be the Wandering Jew – Grace solves the mystery, the child is rescued from the clutches of the vampires, and everyone is home in time for tea.

In some ways, the game makes for a more interesting fictionalisation of *Holy Blood* than *The Da Vinci Code*. As mentioned earlier, in the novel Brown wants the Magdalene mystery to be common knowledge for anyone in the know, so the 'code' the two main characters (American academic Robert Langdon, described only as a 'lecturer in Religious Symbolology' - presumably from the 'Symbolology' Department) and French cryptographer Sophie Neveu – are required

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<sup>13</sup> J Jensen *Dante's Equation*, Orbit, London, 2004: a title suspiciously similar to *The Da Vinci Code*, and equally irrelevant to the subject matter.

to decipher is simply clues left by the cryptographer's just-murdered grandfather; little more than intellectual games left by the old man. In the game, however, while there is also a fictitious cipher (the aforementioned *Le Serpent Rouge*) to be solved, the player is allowed to feel as if the characters are effectively discovering the secrets, known only to a handful of secret society members (as opposed to Brown's strange majority of historians and conspirators) for the first time. This difference has the effect of making *Da Vinci* less interesting than if Brown had so manipulated the mystery as to have his characters unearth the secret themselves, rather than simply having it feature as a long exposition in the middle of the book by one of the characters, Leigh Teabing, who happens to be an **amateur** historian. Brown, however, much like Baigent *et al*, seems to have trouble distinguishing between amateur (in other words, pseudo-) historians and serious historians. For Brown, the divide is instead between 'rational' academics (represented for him by characters such as Langdon and Teabing: how else can one accept such incontrovertible evidence but with utter credulity?) and the unreasonably conservative orthodoxy (or, anyone who disagrees with the Magdalene theory). This all comes back to Brown's agenda of portraying this mystery as a big secret that far too many people seem to already know about.

Very few reviewers have made the comment that, whatever the historicity of *Da Vinci Code*, it can hardly matter, seeing as it is only a work of fiction. Why is it the subject of so much debate when it is nothing more than a thriller? Perhaps the most glaring reason is the frontispiece to the book, which is headed 'Fact,' followed by three of what Brown seems to actually believe **are** facts. The first of these regards the Priory of Sion, a secret society that is the key to Baigent *et al*'s book. Brown states that the Priory:

a European secret society founded in 1099 – is a real organization. In 1975 Paris's Biobliothèque Nationale discovered parchments known as Les Dossiers Secrets, identifying numerous members of the Priory of Sion, including Sir Isaac Newton, Sandro Botticelli, Victor Hugo and Leonardo da Vinci.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> D Brown: *The Da Vinci Code*, London, [2003] 2004, 15.

If Brown had done any of the research that he claims took him so long, he would have realised that this particular document has, since the publication of *Holy Blood* (the reading of which seems to be the extent of research that he has done), been proven as a forgery. The document positioned a certain Pierre Plantard as the current Grand Master of the Priory, along with naming various other illustrious but somewhat impossible past leaders. Brown seems to be saying that the document was suddenly discovered by library staff, but it was in fact found by people later linked to Plantard himself; no doubt those who had planted it in the library in the first place. Plantard involved one Gérard de Sède who proceeded to write a pseudo-historical book on the subject. Lincoln recounts this book as the inspiration for his own research into the mystery in the introduction to *Holy Blood*:

In 1969, en route for a summer holiday in the Cévennes, I made the casual purchase of a paperback. *Le Trésor Maudit* by Gérard de Sède was a mystery story – a light-weight, entertaining blend of historical fact, genuine mystery and conjecture. It might have remained consigned to the post-holiday oblivion of all such misreading had I not stumbled upon a curious and glaring omission in its pages.

The 'accursed treasure' of the title had apparently been found in the 1890s by a village priest through the decipherment of certain cryptic documents unearthed in his church. Although the purported texts of the two of these documents were reproduced, the 'secret messages' said to be encoded in them were not. The implication was that the deciphered messages had again been lost. And yet, as I found, a cursory study of the documents reproduced in the book reveals at least one concealed message. Surely the author had found it. In working on his book he must have given the documents more than fleeting attention. He was bound, therefore, to have found what I had found. Moreover the message was exactly the kind of titillating snippet of 'proof' that helps to sell a 'pop' paperback.<sup>15</sup>

Lincoln also mentions that 'The appeal was that of a rather more than usually intriguing crossword puzzle ...'.<sup>16</sup> He then goes on to relate how he struck up correspondence with de Sède, who gradually fed

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<sup>15</sup> Baigent, et al, op cit, xvi.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

him pieces of 'evidence' which went on to make up much of the grounds for the thesis of *Holy Blood* in general. While we cannot be sure exactly how much de Sède knew concerning the veracity of Plantard's claim, it is possible that he was well aware of its spuriousness, and was having something of a joke at the expense of Lincoln. If this is the case, he must be laughing rather hard now.

Brown also claims on his 'Fact' page that 'All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.' How can this be so? Aside from his description of a secret ritual (how can it be secret if he knows what happens?) That ritual is so obviously lifted from the orgy scene in Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* that he later admits it in what can only be described as an attempt at postmodern referencing; he presents *Les Dossiers Secrets* as fact, when they are patently false.<sup>17</sup> Also, his inaccurate descriptions of certain ancient texts show a distinct lack of familiarity with them. The character Teabing owns a copy of a book called *The Gnostic Gospels*, which contains not only the Nag Hammadi Codices – all right so far, there **is** in fact such a collection of texts – but also the Dead Sea Scrolls! He describes these two literary bodies as 'The earliest Christian records.' Ahem. Aside from the fact that the Nag Hammadi texts represent what can **hardly** be described as Christian records, let alone Teabing's reference to them as 'unaltered gospels,'<sup>18</sup> the actual manuscripts date from the fourth century AD, and there are Christian documents from **well** before then. He also refers to the *Gospel of Philip* as existing in Aramaic (Aramaic being a Semitic language like Hebrew, and Coptic Egyptian) and not the Coptic it actually exists in.<sup>19</sup> While there is an argument for the Nag Hammadi texts as having been from Aramaic originals, the evidence is inconclusive. Either way, they were certainly translated into Coptic from Greek, a point on which everyone is in agreement. The other peculiarity is Brown's inclusion of the Dead Sea Scrolls in his *Gnostic Gospels*, representing as they do Aramaic texts from a pre-Christian Jewish sect which have no direct link to Christianity at all. Any linking of the Dead Sea community with Gnosticism is highly speculative to say the least.

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<sup>17</sup> Debunked in a series of publications. See further in Miller, op cit.

<sup>18</sup> Brown, op cit, 334.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 331.

Brown tries to make the history of the early Church a power struggle between Peter and Mary Magdalene based solely on these texts which, while certainly important for this history, are taken completely out of context and used to regard issues which they have little to do with. Most scholars agree that there was something of a power play among the apostles, but that it was instead between Peter and Paul. Brown also describes the Council of Nicaea as the place at which Jesus' divinity was fabricated:

'My dear,' Teabing declared, 'until *that* moment in history, Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet ... a great and powerful man, but a *man* nonetheless. A mortal.'  
'Not the Son of God?'  
'Right,' Teabing said. 'Jesus' establishment as 'the Son of God' was officially proposed and voted on by the council of Nicaea.'  
'Hold on. You're saying Jesus' divinity was the result of a *vote*?'  
'A relatively close vote at that.'<sup>20</sup>

While no doubt this is all very compelling for the reader, it is utter bunkum. Jesus' divinity was something that even the Apostles seemed to believe in although, curiously enough, at no time does Jesus ever explicitly declare his own divinity, something which Brown fails to mention. While there were a few groups on the far fringes who believed in Jesus as mortal, these sects were essentially still Jews, who practiced circumcision and still observed the Jewish Sabbath. The Council of Nicaea was established to stop the clerical bickering over the implications of Jesus' divinity, as there were many different theories as to just **how** divine he was: whether he eternally coexisted with God (the Father) or his existence was finite, preceded by the Father. Brown, in stating that the Council opposed Jesus' mortality, seems almost to be identifying the council with the faction known as Docetists, later deemed heretical, who believed that Jesus only seemed to be in the flesh, but was in fact pure spirit.

Brown's rather *laissez faire* approach to history is perhaps best summed up by Teabing, who seems to do so in an attempt to make Brown look like he knows, well, *anything* about how history works: '... history is always written by the winners. When two cultures clash, the loser is obliterated, and the winner writes the history books – books which glorify their own cause and disparage the conquered foe... By

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 315.

its very nature, history is always a one-sided account.<sup>21</sup> Indeed. In fact, while Brown asks his readers to question conventional Christian history as being unsupported by conclusive evidence, he seems to expect us to accept what **he** throws up as absolute Gospel.

Brown's claims are supported at the best of times by references to a parade of either pseudo-historical or else completely fictional works, and the majority of the time by nothing at all. The characters make leaps of logic that the reader is supposed to blindly accept; their scepticism apparently assuaged by the fact that they are being sceptical in the first place. This is perhaps the most interesting thing to come out of *The Da Vinci Code* (not Brown's claims, which are in no way, shape, or form original) but instead the worldwide phenomenon that it has spawned. 'The only thing more powerful than a worldwide conspiracy, it seems, is our desire to believe in one.'<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 343. This phrase about 'history' being 'written by the winners' is one used at least 3 times on Brown's website: <http://www.danbrown.com> accessed 1 October 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Miller, op cit.