

Book Review

The DaVinci Code

Dan Brown, New York: Doubleday, 2003. 454 pages. (ISBN: 0385504209)

A Study in Duality: Rosicrucian Mysticism And *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown

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Dan Brown's blockbuster novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, is a tour de force in modern literature. Vilified by many, yet celebrated by many others, this novel speaks to us on many levels. In this short sketch, I touch on several aspects of the book that have resonated with me personally. Whether you agree or disagree with the points I raise is not immediately important, although, indeed, directly on the mark; what is more germane by far is what you choose to do with any issues that the book may have raised in your own mind.

The plot is straightforward. An American historian and symbologist, Robert Langdon, visits Paris, France, and immediately emerges as the prime suspect in the murder of the Curator of the Louvre Museum in Paris. The entire novel is an elaborate chase scene that follows near-captures and narrow escapes of Langdon and his companions from Paris, to Versailles, and finally into Britain. Along the way we are treated to a series of subplots that involve both people and large organizations, such as the Roman Catholic Church and shadowy secret societies that are said to exist for various purposes.

What we find in the novel is duality that is obvious in some places and, in other places, more subtle. Certainly, the apparent framing of the main character, Robert Langdon, as the prime murder suspect is an obvious duality, as are the development of his companion character, Sophia Neveu, and the Museum Curator (who is also the clandestine leader of a secret society). Other main characters in the book—whether individuals or organizations—are developed as sinister and then revealed ultimately as kind, or for others, the opposite. Plot twists that accompany and build on these changes in polarity provide the novel with its page-turning appeal, since the reader is not entirely sure who is really whom and what will actually occur.

SYMBOLISM

The book contains a wide array of interesting symbolism, as might be expected from the author's choice of main character, Robert Langdon. Although a full discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this short book review, a few examples are noteworthy. Certainly, the author's choice of the Rose is inherently intriguing to the Rosicrucian, but its prominent use in a book designed and written for the lay public reveals a wonderful intent by the author. Another pervasive theme is the struggle between opposites, such as good and evil, with good prevailing in sometimes unexpected ways. Examples of this

struggle abound in the book, including Langdon vs. the French police; the Priory of Sion vs. the Roman Catholic Church; Opus Dei vs. public perception of it; and Sophie Neveu's limited interpretation of events, such as the ritual she witnessed, vs. their reality as assessed by the larger context. In each of these cases, the perception was evil, while the actual people, organizations, or events were good; this is in accord with the notion that evil is only a vaporous construct of the human mind that can be eradicated by replacing it with good and positive thoughts. The triumph of good over evil in the book is a subtle yet optimistic theme that, one would hope, should eventually burst into the reader's consciousness as a scintillating insight.

To me, the author's development of the six-pointed star—the Star of David,¹ or the Seal of Solomon²—as a Christian symbol represents an astounding, and inherently confusing, gift to the public. How can the symbol of the Jewish faith be used as a symbol for Jesus³ and Christianity? Is there a deeper meaning that relates the two? What does this symbol say about whether history is reality or illusion? What does it suggest to the mystic about humanity's relationship to God? For the Rosicrucian and the Martinist, answers to these and related questions about this symbol are obvious and worthy of contemplation. But for the public, especially those raised in an orthodox religion or who may not have given such abstractions much thought, exploration of this symbol may reveal a discord within ideas that one had been taught and may still hold dear. In my opinion, Dan Brown's prominent use of symbols such as these in this book was intended to gently jar the reader into rethinking the context and key assumptions of his or her life's philosophy, especially in its religious perspective, without rendering a judgment as to whether the reader's beliefs were good, bad, correct, or incorrect.

HISTORY AS A NOVEL

The concept of a novel has evolved through the millennia, as has the idea of historical accuracy, which may be considered as a relatively recent phenomenon. A fictional novel can be defined as “storytelling of imagined events, often to entertain or educate the reader, and which may be partly based on factual occurrences but always containing some imaginary content,” whereas non-fiction represents “making factual claims about reality.”⁴ History, then, is the representation of available facts and their interpretations by the person or persons who compose the tale. Ideally, history should be non-fiction. However, history changes with the ages, since it is rewritten as the authorship of events changes. History is replete with stories of Egyptian pharaohs, for example, attempting to rewrite the family tree to erase previous rulers who have fallen into disfavor (e.g., by defacing or deconstructing the monuments and records of earlier rulers),⁵ as well as examples of individuals manufacturing a fictitious family tree to justify their claims as a usurper of a throne.⁶ Book burnings were common tools in Europe during the Middle Ages as a way to suppress ideas that ran counter to mainstream or orthodox thought.⁷ Even today, control of sectors of national news media by small groups of politically influential people accomplishes a corresponding ostracism or intended negation of opposing thought.⁸

Dan Brown's statement that "history is written by the winners"⁹ has aroused much criticism; yet which label for the armed conflict in North America between 1861 and 1865 is correct: "The Civil War" or the "War Between the States"? The answer is, of course, both: the former for a resident and story teller in the northern states¹⁰ and the latter for one in the South;¹¹ the resulting histories generally betray the philosophy and fact selection of the winning side that wrote and continues to teach them. As a result, history is not a perfect record of events, but a malleable story that, for better or worse, presents an edited version for distribution. Which facts should be included, and which excluded? What is a fact, and how can such tangible points be subject to varying interpretations if they are absolutely true?

HISTORICAL INERTIA

Inertia is defined as the resistance to change.¹² The power of an idea, for example, lies in the difficulty we would have in discarding it, especially if the idea is accompanied by an emotional attachment. In today's world, for example, people or groups who use hit-and-run tactics and sabotage against an occupying force are labeled as terrorists. The historical record documents, in considerable detail, how American separatists during the 1770s employed these same tactics against the British forces, including the famous Boston Tea Party. It would be a small step indeed to state that terrorism is therefore at the core of American beliefs and ideals. Would Americans today agree with this statement, even if presented with a set of facts (such as those routinely taught in American schools) that would demonstrate it beyond doubt? The answer reveals how difficult it can be to change one's opinions in the face of even substantial arguments. Another example is the subtle retraction in 1969 by the Roman Catholic Church of a longstanding official depiction of Mary Magdalene as an evil woman by Pope Gregory around 600 CE. Dan Brown's book takes the modern view (post-1969) of Mary Magdalene as a beautiful and important person,¹³ as popularized since about 1945 in several newly available Gnostic texts such as the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Dialogue of the Savior*.¹⁴ Religious inertia is demonstrated by the struggle within the contemporary Roman Catholic Church to come to terms with this revised interpretation of Biblical people and events.¹⁵

On the other hand, it can be absurdly easy to change history. The list of Grand Masters of the Priory of Sion in Brown's book was deposited in the French library system by Pierre Plantard and his associates. Analysis of the records suggests, however, that these documents are forgeries, with the list of Grand Masters taken directly from earlier Rosicrucian documents.¹⁶ Similarly, the Priory of Sion was indeed an actual organization, as stated in Brown's book, but the history and activities of Plantard's organization reveal its modern nature. In both of these cases, the documents and organization certainly do exist, but their authenticity may be questionable.

As Brown states in a published interview,¹⁷ "... we still measure the historical accuracy of a given concept by examining how well it concurs with our existing historical record. Many historians believe (as I do) that in gauging the 'historical accuracy' of a given concept, we should first ask ourselves a far deeper question: How historically accurate is history itself?"

One could easily argue for a more rigorous and explicitly defined set of rules, such as those routinely used in contemporary scientific research, for assessing the reliability of historical facts or accounts, as done for example by John Dominic Crossan in his monumental tome on the historical Jesus.¹⁸ How many current thinkers, however—such as historians, religious evangelists, marketers of commercial products, and politicians—would permit, much less celebrate, peer-review and modification of their words, writings, and websites by an independent, neutral, third party? Imagine how much better, and less contentious, our world would be if such a system were in place and respected by those in a position to make policy or influence others.

A WALKING QUESTION MARK?

The key to understanding Dan Brown's novel and the controversy surrounding it is the Rosicrucian maxim: "Be a walking question mark." Again quoting Mr. Brown, "My hope in writing this novel was that the story would serve as a catalyst and a springboard for people to discuss the important topics of faith, religion, and history."¹⁴ Mr. Brown's approach is in accord with the Rosicrucian philosophy to thoughtfully investigate material that is presented to us.

Additionally, however, his book admonishes us to avoid the mistake of being content with a superficial understanding, which further reflection or deeper study may reveal to be incorrect. According to Bart Ehrman in his critical essay on the book, "...it seems important for us to know the truth about what happened in the past. As it turns out, this is a view of history that is shared by the characters of *The Da Vinci Code*. All the more reason to know whether their version of the past is historically accurate or not, whether their historical claims are true or flights of literary fancy."¹⁹

Quoting a section from *The Da Vinci Code* itself, "Teabing replied, 'It would not be the first time in history the Church has killed to protect itself...' Langdon was having trouble buying Teabing's premise that the Church would blatantly murder people to obtain these documents. Having met the new Pope and many of the cardinals, Langdon knew they were deeply spiritual men who would never condone assassination."²⁰ Most if not all of the book's main characters are seen to question both the new material being presented to them as well as their basic assumptions that provide the conceptual filter for interpreting their world.

Before writing this book review, I began reading *The Da Vinci Code* about a year before, during a brief stay in Paris. I was immediately taken by the intriguing correspondence between the background of the Priory of Sion and the Rosicrucian Order. Over the next year I began to investigate, verify, or otherwise understand the historical and mystical scenarios suggested in the book. This constituted a reasonably large amount of work, especially in navigating the well meaning, and often well researched and argued, critiques of Brown's novel from many sources, including historians and a suite of Roman Catholic and evangelical Christian writers. About a year later I re-read the book, but this time with a different result: I was able to see the plot elements such as Priory of Sion and

others as enjoyable entertainment, and I focused instead on the subtle and many-layered meanings contained in Brown's words. His book is very carefully written, as suggested by the short quotation given above; I suspect that many readers may in fact miss the high degree of craft on a first or rapid reading of it. A superficial reading of the book will likely prove both entertaining and thought provoking, whereas a deeper reading should still entertain while simultaneously affecting the reader on a variety of different levels.

WHAT IS REALITY?

Dan Brown's book raises two main points that may be of interest to Rosicrucian readers. The first is straightforward: what is history, and how reliable is the account we have of it today? This point has been discussed above. The second point is more overtly mystical: the world in which we live today is inherently unreal, since it is constructed from ever-changing notions of science, history, and culture that are created from time to time in people's minds. By implication, everything we see and think we know is considered to be unreliable, subject to change today or tomorrow. Further, each of us sees the world through our own individual filter—created by our society, educational system, religion, family upbringing, and our own choices in how to synthesize and interpret these stimuli. *The Da Vinci Code* reminds us how fragile our perceptions of even fundamental cornerstones of religion and society actually can be.

In addition, the book and its many vocal critiques since the original publication sharply remind us about the need to subjugate the ego. The human ego, because of its emotional basis, contributes substantially to our own inertia, or resistance to changing our ideas. When the ego is removed or deemphasized, as through meditation, then the mind and the Inner Self can consider what is real and unchangeable, such as the fundamental kindness and earnestness of the main characters in *The Da Vinci Code* and of the author himself. Truth is close to God and the Cosmic Mind,²¹ and Dan Brown's vigorous plot elements and clever character development in the book show us a path, based on objective soul searching within ourselves, to finding the truth.²²

CONCLUSION

This book is a feast for the mystical mind—rich in exciting symbolism and rapidly changing plot twists. It provides a wonderful example of Rosicrucian principles in action, with benefits for both Rosicrucian and the public alike. Read it; think about it; research it; and discuss it. Whether you agree with the book or not, your thoughts and actions in this activity will be contributing to the collective uplifting of humanity at a time when it is greatly needed.

¹ See http://www.aish.com/literacy/concepts/Star_of_David.asp for a concise explanation of this symbol from the Jewish perspective.

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- ² Several traditions and religions, including Islam, have used the six-pointed star as an esoteric symbol, as discussed by <http://baheyeldin.com/culture/star-of-david-solomons-seal.html> .
- ³ The connection between the Star of David and Jesus is laid out in <http://www.cynet.com/jesus/PROPHECY/Star.htm> .
- ⁴ See definitions and discussion at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fiction> .
- ⁵ This practice is well documented and described by Nicholas Grimal, *A History of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).
- ⁶ R. Richardson, in “The Priory of Sion Hoax” (www.alpheus.org/html/articles/esoteric_history/richardson1.html), describes how Pierre Plantard attached his lineage to an independent historical family tree to give his writings and activities credibility.
- ⁷ An illustration and justification of book censorship and destruction is given in the Catholic Encyclopedia (www.newadvent.org/cathen/03519d.htm).
- ⁸ An example is the Sinclair Broadcasting Company which holds a significant share of the television market in the eastern United States and which is a political contributor and fundraiser to an American political party. A viewpoint on their activities is given by www.sinclairwatch.net/ .
- ⁹ Read the interview posted at www.danbrown.com/novels/davinci_code/faqs.html and his frank responses to many of the critical arguments made against his book.
- ¹⁰ A Union (Northern) viewpoint is given by <http://sunsite.utk.edu/civil-war/warweb.html> .
- ¹¹ A Confederate (Southern) viewpoint is given by <http://www.civilwarpoetry.org/> .
- ¹² See <http://www.answers.com/topic/inertia> for several types of inertia, including physical, social, and personal (such as habits).
- ¹³ Interesting and supportive articles on the “new” Mary Magdalene are found in D. Tresemer and L.-L. Cannon, “Who is Mary Magdalene?” at <http://www.thestarhouse.org/MMWho.html>, in J. Lampman, “Who was Mary Magdalene? The Buzz goes Mainstream” at www.csmonitor.com/2003/1114/p01s02-ussc.html, and in S. Kumar, “Who’s Afraid of Dan Brown,” published in the *Times of India* (timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/1064428.cms).
- ¹⁴ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1989).
- ¹⁵ See C.E. Olson and S. Miesel, “Study Guide Questions to use with *The Da Vinci Hoax: Exposing the Errors in The Da Vinci Code*,” especially their question 2: The Magdalene: Saint, Sinner, or Goddess? at www.ignatius.com, an official publishing organ of the Roman Catholic Church.
- ¹⁶ See ref. 6 along with text and opinions at www.priory-of-sion.com/ and www.fiu.edu/~mizrachs/poseur3.html .
- ¹⁷ See ref. 6.
- ¹⁸ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).
- ¹⁹ Bart D. Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
- ²⁰ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code, Special Illustrated Edition* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 276.

²¹ Ralph M. Lewis, *Mental Alchemy*, (San Jose: English Language Jurisdiction of AMORC, 1979).

²² I wish to thank several officers of the English Grand Lodge, Rosicrucian Order, AMORC, for their patience and encouragement during my voyage with *The Da Vinci Code*.