

# RECONSIDERATIONS

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EXPLORING A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF LIFE AND CULTURE

MARCH 2003

VOLUME 3, NUMBER 3

## AN HISTORIAN DE-CODES *THE DA VINCI CODE* *C. John Sommerville*

*Editor's note: The lead essays of Reconsiderations usually are based upon talks, classes, or discussions that have recently taken place at the Christian Study Center. In this issue, we are reversing that order and offering an essay that will lead to a talk by Professor Sommerville on the same topic scheduled for Thursday, April 1 at 7:00 p.m. (location to be determined - see [www.christianstudycenter.org](http://www.christianstudycenter.org) or call 352-379-7375).*

You have probably heard of *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown. It is more than a book. It is an event, a phenomenon - part of a larger cultural movement in this country. I want to do three things in this essay. First, I need to describe the book very briefly. Next, I want to talk about how it relates to what historians know about history. Finally, I want to explore what it says about American society these days.

Briefly, *The Da Vinci Code* is a mystery or thriller about how this cool Harvard professor and this cool French female cryptographer blunder onto a secret that the Catholic Church has known for millennia and for which it is prepared to kill. The secret is that the Holy Grail (which has been thought to be the cup used at the Last Supper to institute communion) was actually - get this - Mary Magdalene. Her body was the vessel for the blood of Christ, in the sense that it contained the

children they had together. Whoa! Shock!

The book is a fast read. It is a movie script, of course, with chapters (scenes) of a page and a half. How much you enjoy it might depend on whether it seems plausible or true, or whether its casual treatment of historical facts puts you off. Popular authors tend not to worry much about historical accuracy. But Dan Brown starts out by making a big deal of his scholarly credentials, listing a bunch of archives he says he visited. And he has long professorial discussions on the history of the Church. It looks like sober history, but it is sure different from what you may have read before.

The heart of his argument, for those who take history seriously, is around pages 230-234 where one character explains that the Emperor Constantine imposed a whole new interpretation of Christianity at the Council of Nicea in 325. That is, he imposed belief in Jesus' divinity and suppressed all the evidence of his humanity. And Brown indicates that the Catholic Church has been making up things to carry forth this story ever since, with nobody

to check them until recently.

The novel is all about Truth (which is usually capitalized), falsehood, deception, proof, and disproof. This radical interpretation - the imposition of Jesus' divinity and the suppression of his humanity - is pushed pretty hard. Brown claims to

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have the main scholars behind him, although they are not being given a hearing by the public. In short, there is nothing to suggest that the book is all made up.

Readers who are entirely ignorant of history may get upset about it all, or they may like hearing it. It will depend on whether they are inclined for or against the Church or Christianity. And women readers may be attracted by Brown's playing up something he calls Venus-worship. "Goddess religion" has gotten a lot of attention recently, and that is a big part of his story.

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There is one big problem with the historical re-interpretation in *The Da Vinci Code*. Almost none of it is true. There would not be time to disprove it point by point. Brown mentions hundreds of facts, or maybe I should say he mentions hundreds of names. The names are connected with actual facts. But few of the facts are quite as he makes them out to be. The names and the facts are interpreted in bizarre ways to support his giant conspiracy. For instance, he says that the Church executed five million witches in the Middle Ages – this is 150 times larger than scholarly estimates.

There are some indications that Brown is signaling that this is a spoof. The names of all the characters are actually plays on words. The professor is said to be a Professor of Religious Symbology at Harvard. The word should actually be *semeiology* and if there were such a field it would not be limited to religious symbols. And Harvard might be the last place for such a professor. I suspect he is winking at his more sophisticated readers to let them know that he knows better.

But he may not. On the first page, titled "Fact," he declares, "All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate." The most famous documents he mentions are the Dead Sea Scrolls. On page 234 he says "these documents speak of Christ's ministry in very human terms." He repeats that on page 245. Actually, none of them speak of Christ at all. They are Old Testament documents for the most part, and

pre-Christian. Everybody knows this, even non-scholars. Is he trying to signal his lack of seriousness to more educated readers, or is he really that ignorant?

There is also the fact that the big revision of Church history I mentioned earlier is stated by the guy who turns out to be the villain of the story. Brown may be leaving himself some deniability this way. But it is not clear that he is the villain until much later, and so the impression may stick in the reader's mind while Brown does nothing to disabuse the reader of this error.

Brown obviously does not think the Church deserves fair treatment. And this brings up what is, for me, the main point about the book. It is a huge falsification of history, whose main point is that the Church has falsified history. There is a terrific irony here. A lot of readers are going to hear that

there are some errors in the book, but they may still think that its general drift could not be entirely wrong. But as I say, it tells quite unnecessary lies in order to make the Church out to be a liar. For instance, it concocts a history of the Templar order which is no more interesting than the real history of that order, just different, to fit his themes.

Maybe Brown thought nobody would take the book seriously. After all, he did not write a best-seller, he just wrote a book. The *public* made it a best-seller. So it is their fault if they mistake

entertainment for truth. Yet he claims to have done all this research and has appeared on ABC's *Primetime* to reassert the plausibility of his interpretations. Reviewers have raved about his historical expertise. They may not know that his story of Pope Clement V dumping the ashes of heretics into the Tiber is spoiled by the fact that Clement lived in Avignon, not Rome.

Christians and others who take history seriously will object to his central assertion that the early Church just taught Jesus' humanity, until Constantine decreed his divinity. Actually, some of the early heretics concentrated on Jesus' humanity, like the Ebionites. But there were other early heretics who concentrated only on Jesus' divinity,

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like the Docetists and Gnostics. And contrary to Brown's claims, these heresies lost out to the Church before it had the power to crush them, being under persecution itself.

He gets the history of the Bible wrong, too, thinking it was the Church that was eager to exclude books from the canon of scripture. Actually, it was heretics like Marcion who wanted to reject books. Marcion's canon only included one Gospel and ten of Paul's epistles. The Church was inclusive, wanting to bring in everything apostolic, even though they noticed different tendencies in different books. It only rejected books from different religions, like Gnosticism, that were pretending to be Christian in order to highjack the Church.

This brings us to the Gospel of Thomas, about which we hear so much these days. Actually, there is more than one thing called the Gospel of Thomas, and there are bogus gospels with all the other disciples' names, which were attached so the books would get a hearing. The early Church knew which of these early books were authentic, knowing for a fact a lot of things about which the famous Jesus Seminar can only speculate. The one real scholar who Brown uses as a source, Elaine Pagels of Princeton, might have been more helpful to him. But she, too, has moved from real scholarship into speculation, as in her new book, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (2003). In fact, there is nothing secret about the Gospel of Thomas. Scholars have always known about it from early refutations of it. Now that they have found a version of Thomas, the Church should distribute free copies so that people will see how empty Gnosticism was. Gnosticism started the current idea that religion is about secrets. It was trying to make salvation as hard as possible instead of as easy as possible like the Church was preaching. For it was a matter of solving certain riddles, which is deadly serious business.

Brown's treatment of what he calls goddess worship or the sacred feminine is sort of funny. He has got to explain that it was not *really* all about reproductive fertility, because he knows that pro-life religion does not sound very sexy to feminists. So he

twists it into line with what you find in some Greek philosophers. Everything pre-Christian is called "pagan" as if that meant an alternative theology, and not animal sacrifices and so forth. Much is made of the well-known fact that the Church used earlier symbols when it could. This might be taken as a sign of the Church's broad-mindedness, but Brown makes it seem discreditable. In the end, the religious Truth that is threatening Christianity amounts to finding Mary Magdalene's bones to venerate (p.454).

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So we have to ask ourselves, why would the public want a giant falsehood to support the accusation that the Church has promoted a giant falsehood? What explains this cultural movement? For one thing, the public is entirely ignorant of the history involved. History courses are not required as much as they used to be. But for another, the public is indifferent to history.

It is ironic that Brown makes so much of the idea that there could be some historical proof that would topple the Church – as if anybody was the least bit persuaded by historical proofs! Who cares if I or anybody else disproves Brown's book? People do not seem to want to read what historians can tell us about the Gnostic gospels or why the Church kept them out of the Bible. They think they can all be taken at face value, and that all we need to do is read them for ourselves.

Brown's conspiracy theory is patched together from the wildest speculations of conspiracy buffs. But the public's reaction is likely to be, "Well, he *might* be right. How could you *prove* him wrong?" This sort of reasoning would, of course, make it impossible for that secret society of his to prove anything against the Church. But the story acts as if nothing is easier than to produce some document that will settle everything.

British commentators make fun of the book because it is so like the conspiracy theories Americans are fond of. And we do seem to be having a harder and harder time keeping our entertainment separate from hard-won knowledge. We see this also in the recent paganism fad, with Marion Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* (1982), which was also about goddess worship being crushed by the

*Continued on Page 7*

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# NEWS FROM THE STUDY CENTER

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## SPRING EVENTS AT THE CENTER

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### “SOLOMON SPEAKS TO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY”

Solomon never had to worry about a book contract or haggle with the publisher over whether his ideas would be marketable. As a result, he was free to write what he had to say, and since he also happened to be about the wisest man who ever lived, his books have turned out to be rather enduring. As we approach the tri-millennial celebration of his birth, he continues to have a lot to offer that is both profound and practical. Over the course of this twelve-week class taught by Dr. Horner, we will consider some of the ways the ancient wisdom of Solomon serves as a mirror into ourselves in modern times. The class, already underway, meets on Mondays at 7:30 p.m. through March 22 and on Tuesdays at 10:30 a.m. through March 23. The class meets in the Study Center classroom.

### “TALES FROM THE MADHOUSE”

This fascinating film series speculates in creative and imaginative ways on the fate of several characters who met Jesus. Set in a Victorian asylum, these fifteen-minute, one-person dramas feature the stories of people who encountered Jesus and found their lives were changed – not always for the better. Led by Dr. Jay Lynch, these discussions are currently meeting on Tuesday evenings at 7:30 p.m.

### CULTURE SEMINAR READING GROUP: LESZEK KOLAKOWSKI

Having begun his career as an anti-Catholic Socialist in Poland several decades ago, Leszek Kolakowski has traveled far, and in the process he has written in a way that challenges Socialists and Communists, Western democrats and capitalists, moderns and postmoderns, and secularists and people of faith. He has also reflected deeply on the place of Christianity in the modern world and on the possible contributions it might have to offer. Kolakowski attracted our attention several years ago with a book entitled, *God Owes Us Nothing*. This is not the sort of title one expects from the major philosophical publishing houses, and like his other work, it is extremely rewarding. We will be reading a portion from this work as well as several essays from his well-known *Modernity on Endless Trial*. Our reading groups will meet monthly on Mondays at 9:00 p.m. and on Wednesdays at noon. Books will be available at both Goerings Books locations.

### *THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST* DISCUSSIONS

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* has created a national discussion, not without controversy, about the significance of Christ's suffering and death. We will be holding three open discussions on this film and its subject on Thursdays in March at 7:30 p.m. at the Center:

- March 4: Open Discussion on *The Passion of the Christ* – Pastor Steve Gregg
- March 18: “Mel Gibson's Bible: Myth or History?” – Dr. John Sommerville
- March 25: “Why Did Jesus Die?” – Pastor Rob Pendley

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## UPCOMING EVENTS

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### “BEARING THE IMAGE OF GOD IN THE ACADEMY”: COLLOQUIUM ON FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

How can a Christian be fully engaged in university life and live out his or her faith? “Bearing the Image of God in the Academy” is for graduate students and faculty interested in exploring and better understanding the relationship between faith and scholarship. Dr. Amy Black, a political scientist, will survey central, trans-disciplinary themes concerning the integration of faith and scholarship. Panelists will then reflect on and develop these themes and interact with attendees in an open discussion. Interdisciplinary discussion groups will explore the biblical foundations and implications of our theme. For information on the Colloquium, please visit the Study Center website or call (850) 575-9395 or (352) 375-6144.

### THE SUMMER INSTITUTE ON FAITH AND THE UNIVERSITY

On May 23-26 the Study Center will be hosting our second annual institute for undergraduate and graduate students. In addition to welcoming Felicia Song from the University of Virginia, and several speakers from the University of Florida, we are very pleased to have Dr. J. Budziszewski, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Texas, as our keynote speaker. Dr. Budziszewski is the author of *How to Stay Christian in College* as well as numerous, scholarly books, articles, and papers. The institute will run for three days from Sunday evening through Wednesday lunch, and students from across the country are welcome. Information and registrations will be available at the Study Center and on our web site at christianstudycenter.org.

### “DECODING *THE DA VINCI CODE*”

A lecture by Dr. John Sommerville examining Dan Brown's best-seller  
April 1 at 7:30 p.m. Location to be announced

**A Note From the Director:** This past weekend I enjoyed a "road trip" to Lakeland, Florida, where I enjoyed a wonderful time with old friends and new. On Saturday morning, at the invitation of the Cambridge Study Center, I gave a talk entitled, "Tattoos, Piercings, and More: Locating Meaning in Modifying Our Bodies." In the evening I enjoyed a special time with friends who date back to my high school days when I lived in Lakeland, and on Sunday morning I was privileged to participate in the missions conference of Covenant Presbyterian Church.

I will resist going on at length about this special weekend, but I do want to say that it was a wonderful encouragement to experience the reality of the community of Christians who share a vision for loving the Lord not only with a whole heart but with a whole mind as well. The Cambridge Study Center of Lakeland is doing a fine job of equipping and encouraging people in bringing every thought captive to Christ, and it was a privilege to be a part of their ministry. It was also very affirming to be included in the missions conference of a local church. We do all stand shoulder to shoulder in offering a Christian understanding of life to this needy world, and it was a great privilege and encouragement to have a weekend of fellowship with a community that shares these concerns.

Thanks to every one of you, in Lakeland and in many other parts of the country and the world, who are giving yourselves to meeting the intellectual challenges of a life that is centered in Christ. We are delighted to be a part of your life, and if we can be of any help to you, it would be our privilege to put our resources at your disposal.

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

### **Taking Ideas and Culture Seriously: *Books & Culture***

Todd A. Best

American Christianity can include a plurality of voices that do not talk easily across boundary lines, whether within or outside the Church. These voices especially struggle with how, if at all, to relate to the broader culture. For Christians who chose to become intentionally involved in culture, the results can range from mimicking the latest cultural trends to imposing a distinctive sub-culture on the broader society to promoting genuine interaction that seeks to open itself up to cultural dialogue. This latter approach could be called cultural engagement, and it would be good to see more of it. *Books & Culture* is a publication that not only participates in such engagement, but also raises engagement to a level of Christian analysis, opening the way for interaction with the broad stream of ideas that populate the literature and media of the day.

Published bi-monthly, *Books & Culture* is a review of contemporary thought as it emerges in the literature, both academic and popular, as well as in the various media sources. It also tracks with theological and sociological trends within Christianity. With this analytical and editorial emphasis, *Books & Culture* serves as a beneficial resource for information and as an aid toward Christian thought as a means of cultural engagement. It does this in a number of ways.

First, this is a publication whose theological identity is most aligned with historical evangelicalism, yet it is ecumenically minded. With an open ear, *Books & Culture* seeks to give attention to the viewpoints of what C. S. Lewis refers to as “mere Christianity” – those who are committed to historical Christianity in the essentials. Therefore, as the ideas of the day are considered, a variety of Christian lenses are used in their analysis, from evangelical to Catholic to Episcopalian to Presbyterian to the unlabeled. This is helpful in an age where Christianity becomes more and more difficult to define and yet where genuinely Christian understanding is needed.

Second, *Books & Culture* is deeply engaged with the ideas that are getting attention at the highest levels of thought in our culture. Specifically note-

worthy in the context of the work of the Study Center is that the university is taken seriously. Not only is there a regular column called “The Groves of Academe” where academic trends are examined, but also there is sincere analysis and dialogue where Christian thought intersects texts and themes that emerge in the various academic disciplines. Themes that are covered in the January/February 2004 issue include: sacred music in American culture, the ever-changing face of evangelicalism, a Russian orthodox philosopher’s views on modernity, the euthanasia movement, the early literary work of John Updike, environmental concern rooted in the doctrine of creation, and a curiously titled essay by former Study Center speaker Andy Crouch called “Eating the Supper of the Lamb in a Cool Whip Society.”

*Books & Culture* also helps to foster cultural engagement in the way that it creates space for dialogue. A common approach of the publication is to offer a review of a number of books on a particular topic – something like the bioethical issues of stemcell research – using each book as an avenue for exploring that topic. Essentially, this type of analysis brings several authors into conversation with each other. This can also happen as multiple writers are asked to weigh in on one important book. Just last year, the Study Center benefited from a four-part series of *Books & Culture* reviews of Brian McLaren’s *A New Kind of Christian*, a book that was used in a reading group on the Church and postmodernism. So the conversation that was put forth on the pages of *Books & Culture* was carried forward into a semester-long conversation in our own space at the Center.

In short, *Books & Culture* is a rare place for the open exchange of ideas where the lens of analysis is thoughtfully Christian. Additionally, this space is a place where those of us who share a commitment to think deeply about how our faith intersects with the ideas and events that shape our culture can become informed and drawn into conversation with others. We recommend looking into a subscription of *Books & Culture* as a step toward a more thoughtful interaction with our culture. For subscription information, call *Books & Culture* at 1-800-523-7964 or visit them on the web at [www.booksandculture.com](http://www.booksandculture.com).

*Todd A. Best is Editor of Reconsiderations.*

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Church. How sad to have to give up Celtic head-hunting and human sacrifice! Additionally, the Gospel of Thomas is getting a big play in movies like *Stigmata* (1999), sometimes seen on the SciFi channel, with its bogus claim that most scholars think Thomas is the most authentic record of Jesus' actual words. A gullible public takes that home as gospel truth. And soon they will be repeating Brown's nonsense about the hypothetical source document (Q), containing some of the sayings common to the various real Gospels, being by Jesus and in *his own hand* (256). How would they possibly know that, since we have no grocery lists that Jesus wrote to compare it with?

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Secularists used to think that in arguing against religion, truth was their ally. Now they seem to think they need to falsify in order to win. By contrast, Biblical scholarship is the oldest form of scholarship there is, and it has been going on for centuries, meeting challenges from all sides. The facts, for the most part, have been accounted for, though people will have their own interpretations. However, people like Brown act like there are no facts, but that there are a lot of truths out there from which to chose. Actually, there are a lot of

falsehoods from which to chose – about church history, about the scriptural documents, about secular history.

This phenomenon would be an interesting topic for graduate students in American social and cultural history. I am no expert on this culture, but it seems to me that its essential feature is a lack of seriousness. One of the defining characteristics of religion is seriousness. Religion is something that makes demands. Modern Gnosticism, modern paganism, and modern goddess worship do not produce lasting communities, philanthropies, ethical systems, world-class art, colleges, let alone salvation, like we expect from real religions. They may provide strange doctrines and a sense of superiority, but they do not call one to humility and service. So they do make a striking contrast with Christianity, when Christianity is minding its business.

*C. John Sommerville is Professor of History at the University of Florida*

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**The Christian Study Center of Gainesville exists in order to encourage the university community in the exploration of a biblical understanding of life and culture.**

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