“Deciphering Da Vinci”

Scott R. Paeth, DePaul University
'The Da Vinci Code' popularity says more about our time than the one in which Jesus lived

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By Scott Paeth

To the uninitiated, the furor over Dan Brown's "The Da Vinci Code" must seem somewhat mystifying. On the one hand, the book has sold millions of copies, and it seems that there is not a Barnes & Noble in Christendom that lacks the requisite massive table display of Da Vinci-related books, commentaries, stationary, and board games. For a man who has been dead since 1519, Leonardo da Vinci has managed to spawn an impressive franchise industry that covers the landscape of contemporary American literature.

On the other hand, the book's claims have sparked outrage among millions more, mostly Christians, who believe that Brown has played fast and loose with theology and history in order to provide a distorted and misleading portrait of Jesus Christ. Add to that its none-too-flattering portrayals of the Roman Catholic Church and it is evident why "The Da Vinci Code" is among the most discussed works of contemporary fiction. A much-anticipated movie adaptation that was released last week figures to further that discussion.

Among Brown's controversial claims is that Jesus Christ was not divine, but an ordinary human being who was married to Mary Magdalene. After his death, his male followers seized control of his legacy, expunging the record of all mention of his marriage and his children. The council of Nicaea in 325 AD, engineered by the Emperor Constantine in order to consolidate power, invented the idea of Christ's divinity, crushing those who sought to remain loyal to the real Jesus Christ and his decedents. These decedents went into hiding, eventually settling in France and establishing the Merovingian dynasty.

If some of these references are lost on you, don't be surprised. Brown's narrative is credible, in part, because of the obscurity of the history on which he bases it. If his readers don't know what the Council of Nicaea actually proclaimed, or who the Merovingian kings were, it becomes much easier to pass it all off as the genuine article.
When challenged on the details of his history, however, Brown commonly falls back on the claim that he's writing a work of fiction. Yet, much of the novel's appeal rests precisely in the presumption that Brown's fictional murder in the Louvre hangs upon scaffolding of a genuine conspiracy. Thus, as readers, we are being initiated into an ancient secret, exposed by Brown, and itself encoded in a putatively "fictional" murder mystery. Without that presumption, we are left with what amounts to a fairly feeble piece of pulp fiction.

Much of the popularity of "The Da Vinci Code" can be traced to this illusion of complicity. But it should be said that, if the Christian Church had been a better steward of its own traditions, it would be much harder for Dan Brown's unique combination of bad history, bad theology, and bad literature to make the inroads that it has.

How much easier is it to believe in the idea that a corrupt Church would conceal a dark and destructive truth about itself in the wake of pedophilia scandals? How much simpler is it to believe in a human Jesus with human relationships and human urges than to believe in the abstract and distant Jesus of much Christian theology? Having so fervently defended Christ's divinity, Christianity has often lost sight of his humanity. It should be no surprise then to find many disillusioned would-be followers of Jesus drawn to the all-too-human portrait painted by Dan Brown. And yet at its most profound, Christianity always has professed that Christ was both truly and fully human and truly and fully divine.

In the final analysis, though, Brown's Jesus is much more credible to us precisely because he doesn't demand anything of us. If this is the real Jesus, then he's comfortably dead, and we can begin the process of forgetting all about him. The Jesus of "The Da Vinci Code" is the perfect cipher for a society that believes that God is whatever we want God to be. When we want Jesus to suffer for us, we can go out and rent "The Passion of the Christ." When we want him to destroy our enemies in a fury of divine wrath, we have the Left Behind novels. And when we want a Jesus who reconfirms in us our own hedonism and self-satisfaction, we can find him in the pages of "The Da Vinci Code." Such a Jesus embodies what the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "Cheap Grace" - the worship of a God who asks nothing of us and who reinforces our own self-delusion.

The Jesus of "The Da Vinci Code" is the mirror image of the culture in which he was formed - our culture. And because he is dead, he demands nothing more of us. And because he demands nothing of us, he can be safely ignored.
And where is Leonardo da Vinci in all of this? Perhaps, with Dan Brown, he's laughing all the way to the bank.

Scott Paeth is assistant professor of religious studies at DePaul University. He teaches on issues of religion and public life.