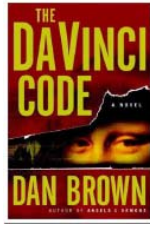


# *THE DA VINCI CODE*, BY DAN BROWN REFLECTIONS • JIM KENNEY\*

## GENERAL REFLECTIONS

### THE BOOK

I should begin by saying that I thoroughly enjoyed earlier *Angels and Demons* a bit more, but both plot structures and isn't overly bothered by stilted have never listened to the way human beings the marketing step taken by Brown and his major foundational assertions made in the book. The novel would have been rather unnecessary but for his repeated claim, on the novel's first page, on the airwaves, and elsewhere in print, that it's all based on careful and lengthy research and that the Priory of Sion and its parchments, known as *Le Dossiers Secrets* are historically authentic, and that "all descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate." As we'll see, that's not the case. I should add at this point that what follows is my own opinion, based on some years of close acquaintance with the general outlines of western esoteric tradition and some rather more intensive recent research.



Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (*DVC*). I actually liked his were entertaining reads, particularly if one enjoys complex dialogue and forced exposition. (Some authors, it would seem, actually speak to one another.) I am concerned, however, with publishers: their decision to claim historical veracity for all the critique offered here of specific points raised by Brown in the

A big part of the pleasure of *DVC* has to do with the fascinating world of cryptography. As Sophie Neveu says of her father Jacques Saunière: "He loved anything with multiple layers of meaning. Codes within codes" (p. 187). The fascination with encryption, keys, and secret messages is a hallmark of western occult studies. The real secret societies (see below) and individuals who sought a deeper level of understanding of spiritual truths were often persecuted; as a consequence, they resorted to cryptic transmission and preservation of their lore and learning. It should almost go without saying (but not quite) that this phenomenon opened up countless opportunities for abuse, fraud, and pseudo-scholarship. Today, as scholars in esoteric studies largely agree, the bogus so far outweighs the genuine as to make the task of discernment enormously difficult.

The protagonist Langdon, the Harvard University "symbologist" (no, there is no such department at HU), seems to believe every grail-related theory he's ever encountered, and that actually sets the tone for the book:

Langdon was feeling anything but fortunate, and coincidence was a concept he did not entirely trust. As someone who had spent his life exploring the hidden interconnectivity of disparate emblems and ideologies, Langdon viewed the world as a web of profoundly intertwined histories and events. *The connections may be invisible*, he often preached to his symbology classes at Harvard, *but they are always there beneath the surface*. (15-16)

On the other hand, the same narrator later presents a different view of Langdon's attitude, almost as if Dan Brown were offering a subconscious warning to the reader:

Langdon had lectured often enough on the Knights Templar to know that almost everyone on earth had heard of them, at least abstractedly. For academics, the Templars' history was a precarious world where fact, lore, and misinformation had become so intertwined that extracting a pristine truth was almost impossible. Nowadays, Langdon hesitated even to mention the Knights Templar while lecturing because it invariably led to a barrage of convoluted inquiries into assorted conspiracy theories. (158)

### WHY NOW?

It's worth asking why the book has enjoyed such a huge popular response. Book clubs and Internet chat rooms are buzzing with it. Why now? What follows is an attempt to make sense of the current fascination.

Brown is right when he claims that the feminine dimension of human experience has been accorded secondary status throughout most of recorded history. He's on far shakier ground when he resurrects the familiar claims that there was a time when the feminine absolutely dominated culture and religion – here the evidence is very insubstantial – but he makes a point. Christianity, like virtually all of the world's major religious traditions has until recently systematically excluded the feminine from considerations of the divine and barred women from positions of significant authority in the churches. In the Roman Catholic Church that gender-exclusivist stance still dominates.

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We're living in a cultural moment preoccupied by war and beset with a stunning and disquieting variety of forms of male posturing. If ever there was a time that might subconsciously yearn for a reawakening of the feminine, it's ours. *DVC* offers a provocative bit of intuitively appealing remedy for a culture suffering symptoms of testosterone poisoning. It's welcome on that score alone.

What's more, the book is crafted to appeal to a very broad audience. It's perfect for book clubs: it's got romance-novel style, with only a touch of actual sexual description; it has lots of intrigue; and flirts a bit with a stylish 21<sup>st</sup>-century blasphemy (at a time when religion and religious institutions are undergoing unparalleled scrutiny). While the "lost feminine" motif *might* perhaps appeal more to women, the plot is complicated enough to bring along thriller fans of both sexes. Who cares that the characters are (as one critique noted) "thin as plastic wrap" and the dialogue is reminiscent of taped dictation for a thesis? It is an unputdownable book for our moment in time.

### MYTHOS V. LOGOS

As we begin to try to sort "what's true" from "what's just made up," it would be useful to consider the "fundamentalist" mistake so well described by Karen Armstrong in her classic work, *Battle for God*. When one blurs the boundaries between the mythological dimension and the historical/scientific, one does significant damage to both modes of understanding. As is the case in the current discussion, the problem often emerges when an enthusiast for the richly suggestive and spiritually potent *mythos* (the body of symbol, lore, allegory, metaphor, and allusion) takes its content out of the mythic realm and into that of *logos* (scientific and historical fact). The modern fundamentalist denial of evolutionary theory affords a prime example of the *mythos* – *logos* error. The "grail as quest for the historical bloodline of Jesus" is another.

### CONSPIRACY THEORIES

The general pattern is simple enough: the truth is too terrible, damaging, or (alternatively) uplifting to be revealed. Religion, government, invisible cartels, "star chambers", and clubs of plutocrats conspire to silence the knowing and halt the search for truth. While such conspiracies have certainly existed, they are probably more noteworthy for their spectacular failures to maintain the silence or general ignorance they desire. Conspiracy buffs are, however, notoriously difficult to dissuade; they seem always to have great facility in finding vindication in the very fact of rejection of their arguments by scholars and other experts. ("Of course they deny it! What would you expect?") And, as we see in *DVC*, there are usually at least two counter-conspiracies at work: one trying to hide the truth, the other intent on safeguarding it and providing the occasional hint to those "in the know." It's also important to realize that when one is certain a conspiracy is at work, everything becomes a "code." Whenever a particular mythic element (say, a "rose") surfaces, a secret message has become available. Making cogent-sounding "connections" is amazingly easy when one has a receptive audience. (Remember that any two points can be connected by a line, even an imaginary one.)

### LANGDON AND THE "HISTORIANS"

One of the most annoying dimensions of the (actually rather uni-dimensional) character of Robert Langdon is his constant reference to what the scholarly community knows about the whole matter. He gives the impression that historians, art historians, scholars of religion and "symbology" were all breathlessly awaiting the revelation of the Grail truth by the alleged guardians of the great secret, the shadowy Priory of Sion around the turn of the millennium (2000 or 2001). In point of fact, there's very little professional academic support for the more arcane claims on which the *Code* rests.

There are some key exceptions that should be noted at this point and developed later. There is significant support in the community of theologians and historians of religion for the notion of the active religious-institutional suppression of the feminine dimension. A significant number of Christian thinkers are sympathetic to the notion that Jesus might have had a sexual relationship or even been married. Many more believe that the role of Mary Magdalene was much more important than tradition has acknowledged. In addition, it's quite accurate to say that the Dead Sea Scrolls and the "gnostic gospels" found at Nag Hammadi and elsewhere have excited tremendous new interest in dimensions of Judaism and Christianity in the centuries around the time of Jesus.

However, Langdon's and Teabing's repeated references to general agreement in the community of "historians" and "grail academics" about matters concerning the Priory and the Grail (particularly the "bloodline" Grail) are utterly specious.

### DISCERNMENT

What we're talking about here, of course, is the faculty of discernment, which demands in the present case at least some acquaintance with history, theology, and mythology; awareness of conspiracy theories and theorists; and a sense of historical methodology. How likely is it that the entire community of historians, art experts, theologians, students of religions, and *critics of religion* has been duped by a fact-suppressing Church? Compare the controversial but respected scholarship of Elaine Pagels (*The Gnostic Gospels*; *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*; and *Beyond Belief*) with the unprofessional, sloppy, and generally dismissed work of Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh (*Holy Blood, Holy Grail* [with Henry Lincoln]; and *The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception*). Baigent and Leigh are Brown's principal sources for *The Da Vinci Code*.

## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Give Dan Brown credit for some real skill with cryptography (as he's demonstrated in several previous books). I haven't figured out all the names yet (Marie Chauvel, Sophie's grandmother, still eludes), but here's what I have come up with so far. Any further insights will be welcome).

Robert Langdon (bright fame / long don); Sophie Neveu (wisdom / new Eve); Bishop Aringarosa (red herring [Italian]); Silas (man of the forest; missionary companion of Paul and Timothy); Bezu Fache (Le Bezu [village near Rennes-le-Chateau – see below, an important site named by adherents of the “Priory of Sion” theory] also an anagram of zebu [ox] / angry [French]), Leigh Teabing (Richard Leigh / Michael Baigent); Jacques Saunière (named for Berenger Saunière, the priest who allegedly discovered the Priory of Sion documents in the village of Rennes le Château)

## MISCELLANEOUS BOTHERSOME DETAILS

The following trivial bits just didn't fit anywhere else but needed to be mentioned. Drop an email if you're curious about my objections. Consider this just a sampler of intriguing little errors.

- The “V” shape that Dan Brown insists is a universal ancient symbol of the feminine is nothing of the kind. The chalice is, as Riane Eisler and others have pointed out, a frequently reoccurring symbol of the feminine; but Brown's leap to the “universal” significance of the “V” and its inversion as a symbol of the masculine is unfounded.
- There are *not* 666 panes of glass in the Louvre pyramid. There are 675 diamond-shaped and 118 rectangular panes.
- There are *not* 80 non-canonical gospels (the number sounds good but there is no basis in fact); a recent scholarly study put the number of gospels (including the canonical four) at 34.
- Jesus did *not* lead “millions to better lives” in his time.
- The Star of David (*Magen David*) probably makes its first appearance in 16<sup>th</sup>–century Prague, *not* in ancient times.
- Many of Brown's key references to the Vatican and popes in Rome ignore the fact that there was no “Vatican” at the time of Constantine, and that the popes were not resident in Rome throughout most of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (when the papacy was in Avignon, France.)
- The Merovingians didn't found Paris, although they chose it as their capital in the 6<sup>th</sup> century.
- Venus doesn't trace a “perfect” pentacle, but a very rough one, against the celestial horizon. It is *not* associated with the games of the ancient Olympiad, which were celebrated every four years in honor of Zeus Olympia, not Aphrodite.
- For an albino, Silas the killer monk has awfully good eyesight.
- Gothic cathedrals were not designed by Knights Templars; and Templar churches were not round in shape to honor the goddess, but to emulate the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.
- The marriage of Jesus and Magdalene is *not* a “matter of historical record.”
- Rome's official religion was *not* sun worship (the cult of *Sol Invicta*, as Brown has it). The cult of the god Mithras (who *was* in fact believed to have been born of a virgin, to have died and been resurrected, and who *was* celebrated on December 25 – Note: he get this fascinating part right!) was far more widespread, as was the cult of the emperor.
- Paganism was *not* the unified phenomenon that Brown presents, but a myriad of local, largely nature-centered folk practices.
- It's extremely unlikely that the Inquisition burned 5 million women as witches. The most reasonable modern estimates suggest around 100,000 trials between 1450 and 1750 with perhaps 40,000-50,000 executions. Horrible to be sure, but Brown's claims are wrong again.

## WHO'S IDEA? — THE LEWIS PERDUE CONNECTION

Recently, Lewis Perdue, the author of *Daughter of God* (St. Martin's Press/Forge, January 2000), has alleged that *The Da Vinci Code* indulges in fairly blatant plagiarism of his book (as well as of an two earlier volumes: *The Linz Testament* and *The DaVinci Legacy*). A close look at the two books suggests that Perdue might have a fairly strong case; there are quite a few rather amazing parallels: plot, protagonist, antagonist, love interest, back story, secret organizations, plot elements, and any number of small details (down to providing a physical key to a Zurich bank safe holding clues to the unfolding plot).

## THE PLOT OF *THE DA VINCI CODE*

Paris' Louvre is a fantastic setting for the opening scenes of a murder mystery deeply laced with cryptology, symbol, art, and the feminine. Here's the synopsis: Museum curator Jacques Saunière is murdered. We soon learn that he is the Grand Master of a very secret society, the Priory of Sion. His assailant, a very large and rather deranged but purposeful albino monk, is the agent of another secretive religious order, Opus Dei. The two represent opposing sides in a battle for the heart and soul of Christianity and the Catholic Church, a battle that has been waged for two millennia. At issue is the long sought Holy Grail, the Sangraal or Sangreal; but the sacred treasure turns out not to be the cup from the last supper but a trove of documents and a sarcophagus. We discover that *San Greal*, "Holy Grail," should actually be read *Sang Real*, "royal blood."

The bones are those of Mary Magdalene and the documents prove that Mary and Jesus were not only married, but also that they conceived a child, Sarah, and that through her the royal bloodline continues to this day. Mary, the story goes, was actually a princess of Saul's tribe of Benjamin, and Jesus was the heir of David. The joining of these two tribal lines produces a claim to sacred kingship that will take root in the Merovingian dynasty in what will become France. Eventually, the line comes down to a handful of family names, among them Plantard (remember this one), Stuart, and St. Clair (Sinclair). The Church, of course, can't let the secret out, for to do so would not only undo centuries of active suppression of the sacred feminine but also reveal a darker truth, that Jesus was never divine but only a man of remarkable vision and quality. The 4<sup>th</sup>-century emperor Constantine forced Jesus' divinity on the Church at the Council of Nicaea in 325.

The Priory of Sion and its more famous daughter organization, the Knights Templar, are dedicated to protecting the Grail (the chalice symbol actually represents the sacred feminine, or Mary, or her bones in the cherished sarcophagus) and the probative documents until such time as they can appropriately be released to a deceived world. The Priory is undisturbed by the divinity question since its members are committed to a *gnostic* interpretation of Christianity, stressing the universality of divinity and its availability to all who discover the secrets of the inner life. Along the way, a distinguished succession of Grand Masters of the Priory of Sion are in on the plot. They include Sandro Botticelli, Robert Boyle, Isaac Newton, and many others. Interestingly enough, the secret keepers seem bent on scattering clues to the mystery on every side: in art, architecture, literature, geography, song, story, and even animated films. But the most illustrious of all the initiated, and the one who left the most clues to the truth of the bloodline was none other than Leonardo, father of cryptography and clue-planter extraordinaire. That's it in its nutshell.

If you like intricately woven plots, you'll enjoy it. Dan Brown is himself a cryptology buff and quite expert in crafting puzzles within puzzles that are actually quite delightful. Visit his website for a particularly enjoyable related clue quest ([www.danbrown.com](http://www.danbrown.com); or, for the code game, go directly to <http://www.randomhouse.com/doubleday/davinci/>). Recently, Doubleday has announced a new contest, based on the interpretation of clues on the book's cover. Trips and fabulous prizes to the winners. Check Dan's web site.

## BACKGROUNDS: REAL HISTORY, GROUPS AND CHARACTERS

The following section deals with key themes and storyline elements in *DVC* that are based at least in part on historical fact or involve real groups or characters. Where the facts have been distorted or misrepresented, it will be noted.

### THE FEMININE DIMENSION

The best part of *DVC* for me is its unabashed celebration of the feminine dimension of human existence. Brown is absolutely right in suggesting that Christianity has played a significant role in the suppression of the feminine and the maintenance of the ascendancy of males and the masculine. The "sacred bloodline" theme gives the book its punch but actually, as I'll argue below ("Conclusion: So What?"), drastically weakens the core message: *the recovery of the lost feminine*.

Intriguingly, after all the cryptic and cryptological byplay is done and the mystery is all but solved, Brown has the character Marie Chauvel, Sophie's grandmother (an intimate of the Priory of Sion) say:

"...There is nothing in Priory doctrine that identifies a date at which the Grail should be unveiled. In fact the Priory has always maintained that the Grail should never be unveiled."

"Never?" Langdon was stunned.

"It is the mystery and wonderment that serve our souls, not the Grail itself. The beauty of the Grail lies in her ethereal nature.... For some, the Grail is a Chalice that will bring them everlasting life. For others, it is the quest for lost documents and secret history. And for most, I suspect the Holy Grail is simply a grand idea...a glorious unattainable treasure that somehow, even in today's world of chaos, inspires us."

"But if the Sangreal documents remain hidden, the story of Mary Magdalene will be lost forever," Langdon said.

“Will it? Look around you. Her story is being told in art, music, and books. More so every day. The pendulum is swinging. We are beginning to sense the dangers of our history...and of our destructive paths. We are beginning to sense the need to restore the sacred feminine.” She paused. “You mentioned you are writing a manuscript about the symbols of the sacred feminine, are you not?”

“I am.”

She smiled. “Finish it, Mr. Langdon. Sing her song. The world needs modern troubadours.” (p. 444)

### **Reclaiming the Feminine**

One of the most salient features of modern Christian theology, Christology, and ecclesiology is the complex controversy over the feminine: the feminine character of the divine, the role of women in the first Christian community and the continuing Christian tradition, and the ordination of women – to name but a few of the more critical elements of the debate. The controversy is, of course, not limited to Christian circles. Authors like Riane Eisler (*The Chalice and the Blade; The Partnership Way*) have argued that the suppression of the feminine in human societies is evident in the long ascendancy of the “dominator” model over the earlier “partnership” models of interpersonal and cross-cultural relations. The modern (and post-modern) challenge to patriarchal assumptions, social structures, and religious dynamics is energized in part by overwhelming evidence that the genders do not substantially differ in intellect, ability, or emotional stability. It is also animated by an increasingly powerful felt sense that human culture has a missing dimension: that the long suppression of the feminine dimension of spirituality, culture, and social order has exacted a tremendous cost, from men as well as women. That a change is underway is apparent to most thoughtful people. Theologian Walter Wink talks about the rediscovery of the feminine and links it to the shift from the long dominant “myth of redemptive violence” to the resurgent “myth of restorative justice.” As noted above (“Why Now?”), it’s easy to understand the appeal of any message that seems to add energy to the reclaiming of the feminine.

### **Mary Magdalene**

Mary of Magdala is a character in the Bible described as a follower of Jesus Christ and a central figure in a range of alternate theoretical and speculative histories of Christianity. Controversy has surrounded her since the days of the early Church. In the gospels, there are three characters that are often conflated: Mary Magdalene, a follower of Jesus, from whom “seven demons had gone out” (Luke 8:2); the anonymous penitent woman, with the alabaster jar who anoints the feet of Jesus (Luke 7:36-50); and Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus (Luke 10:38-42), of whom Jesus said, “Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her.” In the West, particularly since the time of Pope Gregory the Great, the three characters have all been identified as St. Mary Magdalene. However, in the East, the three characters have remained separate, with St. Mary Magdalene and St. Mary of Bethany” having separate feast days. Pope Gregory also is credited with identifying Mary as a repentant prostitute, a biblically unsupported but very widely held notion today.

QuickTime™ and a  
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

George La Tour,  
*The Penitent Magdalene*

Rev. Richard McBrien of the University of Notre Dame, dismisses the Gregorian notion, and calls Mary Magdalene, “one of the greatest saints of the Christian tradition.”

There are at least two theories about the “Magdalene” part of Mary’s familiar name. Is it Mary’s place name (Magdala in the Galilee) or echo of Micah’s verse (Micah 4:8): “oh, you *Magdal-eder*” (“tower of the flock”)? Originally a reference to Jerusalem, the term has been taken up by many enthusiasts as a Hebrew Bible prefiguring of Mary Magdalene.

There does exist a strong tradition in southern France that Mary fled there, as a political refugee from the aftermath of the crucifixion of Jesus, with her brother Lazarus and the child Sarah. In some versions, “three Marys” (not clearly identified) fled together. Most accounts tell of the child as the servant of the household. Enthusiasts of the idea of a marriage between Jesus and Mary – the “bloodline” conspiracy crowd – see her as the child of the famous pair. In any event, the legend of the flight of the “holy family” through Egypt (a variation on the more familiar flight story) has made Mary Magdalene one of the most beloved saints in French tradition, with many churches in her honor. Sarah has also come into her own. Probably because she was believed to have been born in Egypt, Sarah is usually depicted as dark-skinned. Today she is regarded as a patron saint of the Gypsies and honored as Black Sarah. A strong tradition of Black Madonnas in this region (and elsewhere in Europe) has also often been linked to Magdalene (perhaps as a result of fusion of mythic elements and stories). Needless to say, the flight to France and the child Sarah fueled the later claim that the Merovingian dynasty was directly descended from Jesus and Magdalene.

Modern feminist scholars, almost all discounting the bloodline claims, have nevertheless advanced a very strong case that Mary Magdalene was a very important leader in the early Church, perhaps a significant rival to Peter. They maintain that the Church deliberately excised this salient fact from the traditional record. See the discussion of the Gnostic texts and the Gospel of Mary below.

Sources to consider: Karen King's new *The Gospel of Mary Magdala*; and Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza's classic *In Memory of Her*. Both are first-rate scholarly accounts that present the feminist perspective on Magdalene.

Also well worth reading is Margaret Starbird's, *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar* and *Magdalene's Lost Legacy: Sacred Numbers and the Sacred Union in Christianity*, although her uncritical acceptance of the dubious research that underlies the *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* argument (that Mary was a Benjaminite heiress whose marriage to Jesus united the two lines) is a major problem for many readers (this one included), Starbird's sweeping tours through numerology, art, symbolism, and myth are moving and often persuasive. She does a wonderful job of documenting the remarkable persistence of the Madgalene theme and leaves the reader convinced that at least there was a strong medieval persuasion about the central importance of this remarkable Mary. (Just a note: the famous La Tour painting in the text above really is depicted, as Starbird points out, hanging on the wall in the room of Ariel, the Little Mermaid, in the Disney film. And the name "Ariel" – she's nameless in the original story – is another name for Jerusalem, echoing the "Magdal-eder" tradition. See Starbird's account, pp. 174-76, *Woman with the Alabaster Jar*. It's excellent.)

### **Were Jesus and Magdalene Married?**

The controversial Jesus Seminar, bringing together over 70 Fellows (most of them bible scholars) to explore questions of the authenticity of various scriptural passages, takes a fairly strong position on this matter. Robert Funk, the group's convener, says:

The Fellows of the Seminar were overwhelmingly of the opinion that Jesus did not advocate celibacy. A majority of the Fellows doubted, in fact, that Jesus himself was celibate. They regard it as probable that he had a special relationship with at least one woman, Mary of Magdala.

It has often been pointed out that the Judaic tradition has a deep aversion to celibacy (since marriage is one of 613 *mitzvot* or commandments of the law). Many scholars (both Jewish and Christian) have pointed out that it would have been most unusual for a rabbi or teacher such as Jesus to have been unmarried. Margaret Starbird (see above) in her *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar*," brings together some of the most intriguing evidence for the widespread *medieval* belief that Mary was in fact the intimate companion or wife of Jesus.

Many (probably *most*) Christian theologians and historians are unpersuaded by the arguments, however. They argue that the New Testament notes that the apostles, Peter, and the brothers of the Lord all had wives (1 Corinthians 9:5), and would have certainly acknowledged it had Jesus married. In addition, Jesus' call "to be eunuchs for the kingdom" (Matthew 19:10-12) was arguably rooted in his own commitment. Celibacy was not, many point out, unknown among the Jews of Jesus' time. The (Essene?) community at Qumran (cf., the Dead Sea Scrolls) likely was largely celibate.

Rev. McBrien, although he's not convinced by arguments that the two were married, says: "Jesus and Mary could have been married without in any way compromising his divinity." Jesus, Christianity maintains, was fully divine, but fully human as well.

Paul Knitter, the renowned Christian theologian put it this way in conversation we had a few days ago about *The Da Vinci Code* and the Magdalene and Jesus story.

It comes down to this: How human do you believe Jesus was? What is your attitude toward human sexuality? If it turned out to be true that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married or had a sexual relationship, would it make a difference to your understanding, your faith, your spirituality? If it would, can we think about that together?

### ***Hieros Gamos***

The beautiful and evocative mythic-symbolic tradition of the "Sacred Marriage" is found in many cultures. It represents the union (or reunion) of the divine or cosmic feminine and masculine. Often symbolic, the *Hieros Gamos* was sometimes acted out by human participants in a sacred sexual rite. It is *not correct*, however to claim that the practice was universal in "pagan tradition." It's important to remember that "pagan" was simply a Christian dismissive term for rural "country dwellers" (cf., the later term "heathen") who didn't know the truth of the Christian message. The notion of a united or monolithic Middle Eastern and/or European pagan tradition is simply not supported by scholarly study. Certainly, certain generic themes were common, including celebration of the divine feminine (and masculine), fertility, sacred nature, healing, and the like; but no core of shared ritual practice or belief has been demonstrated. Much that is claimed about the medieval and earlier pagan rites

of Europe is based on the unfounded claims from two chief sources: a) medieval Christian inquisitors, charged with the persecution of pagans and heretics and b) 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century romantics claiming to have rediscovered the secrets of the vanished pagan past. This fanciful body of work is not taken seriously by any but cultic practitioners. For more information on the powerful *Hieros Gamos* tradition, see the works of Joseph Campbell.

Note that Langdon's and Teabing's characterization of the sacred marriage practice is wildly exaggerated and unreliable. There is also a good deal of confusion (among the "Holy Blood" theorists) of the sacred marriage story with the dying and reborn god mythos. The two occasionally are found together, but this is by no means the universal pattern claimed by these authors (or by Dan Brown). In other words, the ritual marriage most certainly did not usually end with a black-widowesque ritual murder of the male partner.

### **Pentacles**

*The planet Venus* does indeed trace a very rough (not precise, as Brown claims) pentacle-pattern against the ecliptic (the cosmic horizon) every eight years (not four, as Langdon says). It is strongly associated with the feminine in ancient mythology and astrology.

*The pentacle* is often associated with the feminine. Of the four suits of the Tarot deck – pentacles, wands, cups, and swords – (later to become diamonds, clubs, hearts, and spades), pentacles and cups were regarded as feminine, while wands and swords were masculine. However, once again, Brown has oversimplified a much more complex symbolic tradition. The claim that the Tarot symbolism is bound up with the bloodline claim is rejected by the overwhelming majority of interpreters. Once again, we encounter the *mythos-logos* mistake. The Tarot tradition, as part of the larger western esoteric or occult tradition (see below) is certainly involved with mythic elements representing the sacred feminine, the sacred masculine and their interplay. Kings, queens, princes, and princesses abound in this lore. And there are roses. The "bloodline" error, a rather common one among occult conspiracy enthusiasts, is simply to assume that "a rose is *the* rose is Magdalene."

### **The Symbolism of the Rose**

The notion that the rose has always or even often represented Mary Magdalene is simply unsupported in esoteric literature. Manley Palmer Hall, one of the greatest of western occult authorities offers a standard esoteric account of the rose as symbol in the following passage:

The rose is a *yonis* (Indian: feminine generative) symbol associated with fertility, fecundity, and purity. The fact that flowers blossom by unfolding has caused them to be chosen as symbolic of spiritual unfoldment. The red color of the rose refers to the blood of Christ, and the golden heart concealed within the midst of the flower corresponds to the spiritual gold concealed within the human nature. The number of its petals being ten is also a subtle reminder of the perfect Pythagorean number. The rose symbolizes the heart, and the heart has often been embraced by Christians as a symbolic representation of the virtues of love and compassion, as well as of the nature of Christ – the personification of these virtues." (MPH, *The Secret Teachings of All Ages*)

One Christian source on symbolism offers another fairly typical interpretation:

The rose represents the perfected, fully realised human being. It is the result of the process of moving from acknowledgement of the supremacy of Christ within, through the opening of the spiritual centres, to the point where the real self is revealed like a rose.

The symbol of the famed Rosicrucian secret Hermetic society, the cross twined with the rose (the "rosy cross") is one of the oldest symbols in the Western esoteric tradition.

Sleeping Beauty is the princess Aurora, known as Briar Rose. While the *rose* is indeed an important symbolic and mythic element that does appear from time to time in the company of the *briar*, the leap to the conclusion that Walt Disney is "in on it all" is rather astonishing. (If you are persuaded by Langdon and Teabing when they argue that Snow White and Sleeping Beauty are Magdalenes in disguise, just check the Internet for the amazing range of much more common interpretations – mostly Freudian – of the two stories. You'll notice along the way that the Magdalene version surfaces only in connection with *Holy Blood*, *Holy Grail* and *The Da Vinci Code*.) As noted above, however, Disney's *Little Mermaid* does feature La Tour's "The Penitent Magdalene" hanging on the wall in Ariel's room. Who knows? Remember, though, even cartoon animators read esoteric books.

## **GNOSTICISM**

A religious, spiritual, and philosophical movement that was prominent in the Greco-Roman world of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, Gnosticism influenced Judaism but had a particularly strong influence on developing Christianity. The Gnostics generally taught that the real nature of the human is divine, but that this divine essence is trapped in the world of matter, which is the creation of a lesser "god",

called the Demiurge, after Plato. The Demiurge was the head of the Archons, "petty rulers" and craftsmen of the physical world. But human bodies, although their matter is evil, contain within them a divine spark or *pneuma* that fell from the good, true God. Knowledge (*gnosis*) allows the divine spark to return to the true God from whence it came. Elaine Pagels (*The Gnostic Gospel*; and *Beyond Belief: the Secret Gospel of Thomas*) writes:

It's hard to characterize these texts in one simple way, because there's a whole library of different things. But most of them are about the premise of finding access to God for oneself. That's why the monks who hid them liked them, and that's why the bishops didn't like them, because if you can find God for yourself you might not need a church or bishops or the whole ecclesiastical apparatus.

A common theme in Gnostic literature is the centrality of *Sophia*, Wisdom, sometimes identified with the Holy Spirit. The separation and reunion of Christ and Sophia is recurrent motif in the literature.

It is worth noting in this discussion that most Gnostics had a strongly dualistic outlook: simply put, spirit was good, matter evil. This led in turn to a deep aversion to human sexuality; this in part accounts for the gender-balanced attitudes found in the movement. If sexuality was largely to be set aside, gender prejudices would have to go as well. But those modern "neo-gnostics" who imagine that they have found in this early Christian movement not only a reclaiming of the sacred feminine but also of sexuality are mistaken.

### **Nag Hammadi**

Nag (Naj') Hammadi is mostly known for being the site where thirteen buried codices (not scrolls, as Brown says), containing mostly Gnostic works, but including a copy of Plato's *Republic*, were found. The codices are believed to be a library, hidden by monks from a monastery in the area when these writings were banned by the Church. Discovered in Egypt in 1945 (not in the 1950s as Brown says), the Nag Hammadi library contained some 50 different works, most previously unknown. Taken together these texts suggest that the early Christian conversation was far more complex and variegated than had previously been thought. As Elaine Pagels puts it (in response to an interviewer's question on the kind of Christianity that would have resulted had the Gnostic "seeker Christians" prevailed over the more inflexible Fathers of the Church who eventually suppressed the Gnostic point of view):

We *could* have had a richer kind of Christianity, one open to a wider range of understanding. On the other hand, Christianity could have been more like a swamp – a muddy religious current mixed up with all the other traditions that flow into it. It's a hard question to answer, but I think we might have had something more like what one sees in say, Eastern Orthodox churches, which have greater openness to the interpretation of many passages.

Throughout the Gnostic materials, it's clear that this alternative Christian movement accorded a much higher place to women than did developing Christian orthodoxy. Two texts in particular stand out in connection to the Mary Magdalene question: *The Gospel of Philip* and *The Gospel of Mary*. In the *Gospel of Philip*, we read the following:

There were three who always walked with the Lord: Mary, his mother, and her sister, and Magdalene, the one who was called his companion. His sister and his mother and his companion were each a Mary.

And a bit later (note that brackets indicate a place where the manuscript is unreadable):

As for the Wisdom who is called "the barren," she is the mother of the angels. And the companion of the [...] Mary Magdalene. [...] loved her more than all the disciples, and used to kiss her often on her [...]. The rest of the disciples [...]. They said to him "Why do you love her more than all of us?" The Savior answered and said to them, "Why do I not love you like her? When a blind man and one who sees are both together in darkness, they are no different from one another. When the light comes, then he who sees will see the light, and he who is blind will remain in darkness."

### **The Gospel of Mary**

A fragment *Gospel of Mary*, which was probably written early in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, was originally discovered, in the 1896 Cairo antiquities market, in a papyrus book from the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. Additional fragments have come to light, but in all fewer than eight pages (probably about half of the text) are known. Still, the *Gospel* provides an intriguing picture of an alternative interpretation in circulation in the living community of early Christianity. Although not part of the Nag Hammadi library trove, the text is included in the classic volume *The Nag Hammadi Library*, edited by James M. Robinson, which is regarded as the definitive translation of the Gnostic scriptures.

The discovery of Gnostic texts such as the *Gospel of Mary* sheds new light on a controversial biblical figure and offers an alternative to the familiar Christian understanding based on 1 *Timothy* (which many scholars believe to be falsely attributed to Paul): "But I permit not a woman to teach, nor to have dominion over a man, but to be in quietness." In this Gnostic text,

Mary is portrayed as comforting and teaching the other apostles, with even Peter asking her to reveal what Jesus has taught her but withheld from them. As theologian Karen King writes:

Meanwhile, placing the figure of Mary Magdalene in this new context helps us understand how the erroneous portrait of her as a prostitute could have been invented and how it could have flourished in the West for well over a millennium without any evidence to support it. Several of the newly-discovered works portray her as a favored disciple of Jesus and apostle after the resurrection... But in these...books, Mary is the apostolic guarantor of a theological position that lost out in the battle for orthodoxy. *The Gospel of Mary*, for example, presents a radical interpretation of Jesus' teachings as a path to inner spiritual knowledge, not apocalyptic revelation; it acknowledges the reality of Jesus' death and his resurrection, but it rejects his suffering and death as the path to eternal life; it also rejects the immortality of the physical body, asserting that only the soul will be saved; it presents the most straightforward and convincing argument in any early Christian writing for the legitimacy of women's leadership; it offers a sharp critique of illegitimate power and a utopian vision of spiritual perfection; it challenges our romantic views about the harmony of the first Christians; and it asks us to rethink the basis for church authority. All written in the name of a woman.

*The Gospel of Mary* lets us see that by making Mary Magdalene into a repentant prostitute, the leaders of the Church could achieve two aims at once. They succeeded both in undermining appeals to Mary Magdalene to support women's leadership, and at the same time they were able to undermine the kind of theology being promoted in her name – theology the Church Fathers condemned as heresy.

### **Note on The Dead Sea Scrolls**

In *The Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown repeatedly conflates the Dead Sea Scrolls with the Gnostic library discovered at Nag Hammadi. This is a major error. The hidden library found at Qumran in 1947 does *not* contain *gnostic* materials. Instead, the scrolls – among the major archaeological finds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – shed new light on the emergence of a stabilized Hebrew Bible (not later than 70 CE) and help us to gain a better understanding of the religious dynamics of the period in which Christianity and rabbinic Judaism emerged. The scrolls also tell us more about possible relationships between the two developing traditions. Whether or not the scrolls reveal anything at all about very early practices within the Christian community or relate entirely to a strictly Jewish sect (the Essenes, perhaps) remains very controversial. So too is the hypothesis that the “Teacher of Righteousness” mentioned in the scrolls might have been Jesus.

Baigent and Leigh published an earlier book, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception* claiming that the Catholic Church, which controlled much of the first research on the scrolls, had deliberately suppressed contents directly relating to the early church that contradicted main lines of Catholic teaching. This claim and the book itself were completely discredited when the contents of the scrolls became widely available to scholars in 1991. Their supposed expertise in the matter of the Dead Sea Scrolls makes it all the more puzzling that they (and Dan Brown) so clearly confuse the Scrolls and the Egyptian library at Nag Hammadi.

### **CONSTANTINE AND THE DIVINITY OF JESUS**

The claim that the emperor Constantine changed church teaching by adding the teaching on the divinity of Jesus Christ is a significant distortion. The Council of Nicaea (325) was charged with responding to controversies that had arisen in the various communities. E.g., was Jesus human or divine? Both were taught widely. The Council did affirm the divinity of Jesus but not to the exclusion of his humanity. The full humanity and full divinity of Jesus were proclaimed at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The notion that the day after the Council closed, all of Christendom awakened to find that the divinity of Christ had been newly proclaimed is ludicrous. “A relatively close vote at that,” Langdon observes. Hardly. Actually only 3 out of over 300 bishops present declined to sign the creed.

### **THE QUEST FOR THE HOLY GRAIL**

The original legend of the quest for the Holy Grail is actually one of the saner and mythically sounder foundations of the current conspiracy web. The Quest for the Grail (*Graal*, *Sangraal*, *Saint Graal*, *Sangreal*, etc.) was traditionally, the search for a vessel of great significance, usually the cup used at the Last Supper, supposedly brought out of Palestine by Joseph of Arimathea or (occasionally) Mary Magdalene. The term *graal* (usually taken as from the Latin *gradales*, “dish” or “platter”) appears long before the compound *Santgraal* or *Sangreal*, which makes the suggestion (in Dan Brown's chief source text, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*) that the real translation should be “holy blood” rather unlikely. The first source to use the oddly spelled term “*sangreal*” was Thomas Mallory in *Morte d'Arthur* (15<sup>th</sup> century). What's more, Langdon says: “Knights who claimed to be ‘searching for the chalice’ were speaking in code as a way to protect themselves from a Church that had subjugated women, banished the Goddess, burned non-believers, and forbidden the pagan reverence for the sacred feminine” (p. 238-39). Brown seems to have forgotten that the “knights” of whom he speaks quested for the grail only in the pages of Arthurian romance, written 6-10 centuries after the time when an Arthur *might* have lived, though certainly not as King of Britain and master of the Round Table.

In the most familiar versions of the story, Joseph is entrusted with the cup from the Last Supper, which he uses to collect the last drops of blood from the wound in Jesus' side at the crucifixion. Joseph then leaves Palestine and takes the cup...to where? France? England? Glastonbury Abbey? After the 11<sup>th</sup> century the tale gets well mixed in with the developing corpus of Arthurian tales, by authors including Chretien de Troyes, Wolfram von Eschenbach, Joseph de Borron, and Thomas Mallory. Details vary, but some common themes exist. Often a character identified as the Fisher King (Joseph of Arimathea?) is suffering from a worsening wound. He is connected in one way or another with a vast and spreading wasteland. If the Grail is not found, the wasteland will cover all and the king will die. Only the purest of the knights can hope to discover the Grail; eventually, in some versions, it will be Galahad that succeeds. And the knight that finds the Grail must still answer an enigmatic question: "Whom does the Grail serve?"

The 4<sup>th</sup>-century British heresy advanced by Pelagius, who insisted on the inner freedom of the human spirit in the matter of spiritual growth, challenging Augustine's notion of the primacy of divine grace, found a place in the tales of the heroic questing knights. As Joseph Campbell and others have suggested, the Grail tales are significant not for clues they might provide to the possible location of an actual cup or treasure but for their profound symbolic content and rich spiritual legacy. The knight, master of his steed (the horse as a symbol of the soul that is so powerful yet so difficult to tame), the missing cup of blessing, the guidance and encouragement of lovely ladies and mysterious enchantresses, the wasting king and his kingdom – all make up one of the most beautiful and evocative spiritual traditions in literature. To reduce it all to a treasure map is to miss the point entirely.



Of course many feminine symbolic elements are to be found in the tales. Wise women, enchantresses, the Lady of the Lake, Morgain (witch or holy woman?), and many others. Taken together, they seem to symbolize the dimension of the spiritual and the powers of the unconscious. Carl Jung and countless others were fascinated with this rich trove of symbol and lore. Riane Eisler's notion of the paired symbols of the feminine and masculine, set forth in her *The Chalice and the Blade*, abound in the Grail legend. The Grail story has thus often been understood as an allegory for the rediscovery of the feminine component of spirituality, particularly Christian spirituality. Gnostic and other esoteric elements are frequently present in the texts.

It is very likely that the various esoteric schools (see below, "Secret Societies") also contributed to the growing body of Grail lore.

Finally, it's extremely important to understand that the 12<sup>th</sup> century in Europe (a critical period for the development of the Grail legends) was a time of powerful resurgence of the concept of the sacred feminine. It was the age of chivalry, the courteous and honorable conduct expected of a knight in all circumstances, but particularly in the presence of the noblewomen of the court. Platonic romance seemed to exalt the feminine. Troubadours writing in the *langue d'oc* of Provence flourished in France, Spain, and Italy, creating a new aura of mystery and refinement around the ladies of the court and changing the nature of western lyric poetry forever. It is often ignored, however, that a major theme underlying the chivalric romantic poetry and songs of the troubadours was the divine virgin, the "other Mary," the mother of Jesus. At the same time, Christian cultic devotion to the Virgin Mary reached new heights in prayer, the practices of religious orders, and religious architecture, prompting the dour St. Bernard to complain, "I find no warrant in Scripture for this unseemly veneration of the Virgin." It's noteworthy and a bit odd that Dan Brown's hymn of praise to the feminine makes virtually no mention of the Mary that was *not* forgotten. In this period, the Virgin Mother of Christ was very much on the minds of those who read the Grail stories and tried to emulate their spiritual and courtly styles. This was the world of the Arthurian Grail literature; and it was indeed focused strongly on the mysterious and transformative feminine dimension of spirit and of all existence.

Once again, however, it's a major reductionist error to ignore the obvious evidence for a set of recurrent mythic archetypes and assume that every reference to sacred love, the redeeming feminine, a chalice, or the quest is a cryptic clue in the hunt for a 1<sup>st</sup>-century bloodline.

## THE KNIGHTS TEMPLARS

Originally, the Order of Poor Knights of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon, the Templars were founded in 1118 to help to protect pilgrims to the Holy Land. Originally housed near the supposed site of Solomon's Temple (on the Temple Mount), the Templars may have believed that the Muslim structure known as the Dome of the Rock to be a vestige of the original Temple of Solomon. In time, the Dome and the nearby Church of the Holy Sepulchre became the models for Templar sponsored churches in Europe, including the Temple Church in London (*DVC*, p. 343 ff). The Templars adopted a formal Cistercian monastic rule in 1128. Endowed with several extraordinary papal grants of authority (including permission to levy taxes in areas under their control), the Templars saw their wealth and property grow rapidly, in part through bequests from grateful Christians, until they were in a position to serve as bankers to titled nobles and European royal houses. This occasioned resentment that led to their ruin after the loss of the Holy Land to the Muslims. On Friday, October 13, 1307, most or all of the Templars in France were arrested by agents of Philip the Fair. Under torture, they admitted to all sorts of heretical and even satanic practices. The order was effectively destroyed. Perhaps.

In occult and esoteric tradition one encounters many forms of the legend of the survival of the Templars and their eventual resurfacing (including, famously, a sudden charges from the woods that saved the day for Robert the Bruce at the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314).

Links to the Rosicrucian and Freemasonic orders have long been alleged by occult enthusiasts. A persistent legend links the Knights to the founding of Switzerland and its banking system. The Swiss national flag is reminiscent of the Templar equilateral-armed cross.

## SECRET SOCIETIES

The period of the Grail stories, in particular the 12<sup>th</sup> century, was a time of transformation for Christian Europe. Contact with the world of Islam had reconnected somewhat arrested western learning with the rich sources of the classical world, and with Aristotle in particular. The wisdom of Alexandria, one of the greatest centers of learning the world had ever known, contributed to the heady brew. Finally, the crusades and the encounter with Jerusalem had produced the chivalric orders and the rediscovery of eastern esoteric lore. Finally, the misfortunes of the great Byzantine city of Constantinople – sacked and misruled by crusaders, conquered by Muslims, reconquered by Christians, and finally, in 1453, taken by the Ottomans – added significantly to what would become the tradition of the western occult. Scholars, texts, and esoteric lore from the “Orient” (which in those days meant the Near East), long a focus of attention in Constantinople, now made their way to the great centers of the Italian and later European Renaissance. The materials included the famed *Corpus Hermeticum*, attributed to the legendary Egyptian god-sage Thoth, known in the Greek-speaking world as Hermes Trismegistus (“Thrice-great Hermes”). The content of “Hermetic” lore – probably developed originally not in Egypt but in the Greek world of the first three centuries of the common era (“AD”) – included theology, philosophy, astrology, and the occult sciences, including medicine and alchemy. Like Gnosticism, Hermeticism sought human deification or rebirth through *gnosis* or secret inner knowledge.

The growing western fascination with the lore of esoteric or “occult” (hidden) spiritual practices and power, from alchemy to magic, led to the creation of countless largely secret societies dedicated to the pursuit of “the secret teachings of all ages.” Rosicrucians, Freemasons, Kabbalists and other esoteric groups in western culture often drew on common sources of material, much of it drawn from the *Corpus Hermeticum*. As the esoteric Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah developed from the 12<sup>th</sup> century on, its approaches to direct experience and understanding of the divine were often incorporated in the developing western occult tradition. A guiding principle of hermetic, esoteric, or occult teaching was the concept, also common to the Gnostics, “As above, so below,” the belief that realities and patterns on earth and in the human realm reflected divine structures in the cosmos. Numerology was an important tool for discovering these resonances; the numbers of things – including the numeric equivalents of key words (in Scripture, for example) – were rarely accidental or without meaning. During the period of the Inquisition (from the 13<sup>th</sup> century on), the persecution of heretics intensified the secrecy in which occult practices were already enfolded. Cryptology and arcane symbolism came to play a critical role in the transmission of “secret teachings.” Some of the greatest scholars of the medieval and early modern period were certainly involved in the quest for hidden spiritual knowledge (including, of course, most of the supposed “Grand Masters” named by Pierre Plantard in his famous [and forged] Priory of Sion documents – on which more follows below).

## LEONARDO

Never known as “Da Vinci,” Leonardo (1452-1519) was certainly one of the greatest artists of western tradition and no lover of orthodoxy, but the claim that he was a “Grand Master” of a mysterious secret society dedicated to the preservation of the secret of Magdalene and Jesus is simply unfounded. For a self-proclaimed student of art who began his years of study “at Seville,” Brown has surprisingly patchy understanding of “Da Vinci.” In passing: the “Madonna of the Rocks,” which Sophie tears from the Louvre wall to use as a shield, bending the canvas with her knee as she does so, is painted on wood. And despite a charge leveled against him in his youth, there is no compelling evidence that Leonardo was homosexual (or heterosexual, for that matter).

His “The Last Supper,” as many experts, including New York Times critic Bruce Boucher, have pointed out is not the unequivocal Magdalenean clue that the author claims. The famous “extra hand,” clutching the knife” at the viewer’s right, is not disembodied but clearly belongs to Peter, a typical Florentine style prefigurement of the events of the next day when Peter would strike the Roman soldier with his sword. Peter, by the way is not making a threatening gesture with his other hand, but seems rather to be in close conversation with the person on his left, who is most likely not Magdalene but John, the Beloved Disciple. Leonardo’s rendering of John is also consistent with the style of the period: the disciple is usually portrayed as a beautiful, beardless, and occasionally effeminate youth. Jesus and “Mary” are not, as Langdon claims, at the center of the painting. Jesus alone centers the work, framed by four clusters of three apostles each. The imagined “M” that frames Jesus and “Mary” would only work if you remove Peter and Judas from the right of the Beloved Apostle. The “V” Langdon draws between them is a matter of typical Florentine composition and the style of Leonardo. Nothing cryptic here. The absence of a chalice cup (only stemless glasses are present) is also not a clue to an alternate interpretation grail, but another common Florentine convention. Leonardo, like other painters of his period, emphasized the version of events found in John’s gospel, where the focus is on betrayal. The other gospels are where we find what theologians call the “Institution Narrative,” that provides the scriptural foundation for the Eucharist. Leonardo is painting another dimension of the evening. Jesus has presumably just announced that “one of you will betray me.” That’s the context of the painting.

And one more irresistible nitpicking note: Langdon (and Brown) are wrong again: “The Last Supper” is not a fresco; it’s tempera on plaster.

Leonardo’s “Mona Lisa,” better known as La Gioconda, is probably Mona Lisa Gherardini, the wife or mistress of the wealthy merchant Francesco Bartolomeo di Zanobi del Giocondo. Contemporary documents, as the

*Times*' Bruce Boucher points out, also support the view that the sitter was a woman. As regards the hoary old notion that Leonardo's joke was to paint himself as the smiling young woman (Brown claims this is backed by computer studies of images of the painter), there are, as Boucher attests, "no definitively documented images of Leonardo." As for the AMON L'ISA claim (that "Mona Lisa" is actually a clever anagram of the Egyptian male and female deities Amon and Isis [L'isa is the Italian name of the goddess]), I could find absolutely no echo of this claim in any source other than Brown (although the Internet conspiracy chat rooms are filled with the notion, all lifted directly from *DVC*). Several mainstream and enthusiastically esoteric Freemasonic web sites do, however, vehemently deny the AMON L'ISA notion as, in the words of one, "of course completely unfounded."

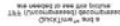
A final note: it's intriguing that one of the questionable sources employed by Brown in his "extensive research," *The Templar Revelation* by Pickett and Prince, actually suggests that the Shroud of Turin was created by Leonardo and bears his own image, not that of Christ. Why *DVC* didn't pick up on this one is anybody's guess.

### **Cryptology**

One of the best things about *DVC* is its brilliant play with cryptology and in particular with the methods of encoding created by Leonardo himself. This dimension has some real basis in fact. Leonardo is regarded by some as the "father of cryptology." It is certainly true that he delighted in codes, mirror writing, that he developed many methods of cryptography. That Leonardo ever developed a device like the cryptex built by Jacques Saunière (supposedly on Leonardo's model) seems unsupported by anything other than Brown's claim.

### **FIBONACCI, PHI ( $\Phi$ ), AND THE GOLDEN MEAN**

Leonardo Pisano, better known as Fibonacci (1170-1250) was a great mathematician, credited with the introduction of the decimal system to Europe. He also described what came to be known as "Fibonacci sequences." An example of a Fibonacci sequence is 1,1,2,3,5,8,13,21,34,55, ..., where each term after the second one is the sum of the two preceding terms. The ratio of each term to the previous one gradually converges to a limit of approximately 1.618 (which, incidentally, is also known as the Golden Mean). Patterns related to Fibonacci sequences appear in many spiral forms in nature, including the nautilus shell and the sunflower. The Fibonacci Numbers, provide the easiest manner to obtain the values of the Golden Series with another.



The Golden Mean (or Golden Section), mysterious natural numbers, like  $e$  or  $\pi$ , that Unlike those abstract numbers, however,  $\phi$  and unfold in steps, including *living* things. The Greeks understood that the proportion represented by  $\phi$ , the "Golden Mean," or the "Golden Ratio" was pleasing to the eye; the proportion appears regularly in classical architecture, e.g., in the Parthenon.

represented by the Greek letter  $\phi$  ( $\Phi$ ), is one of those seem to arise out of the basic structure of our cosmos. appears clearly and regularly in the realm of things that grow and the sunflower. The Fibonacci Numbers, provide the Mean by simply dividing one member of the Fibonacci

In fact, Golden Mean mathematics is a wonderland of intriguing phenomena. Suffice it to say that the Golden Mean is: 1) intimately tied to the number 5 (and in particular to regular pentagons and five-pointed stars), 2) relates directly to the ideal human body (i.e. the Golden Mean raised to various powers is reflected in the body's proportions), 3) appears often in natural forms, and 4) has been used extensively in ancient (and modern) architecture. Leonardo's famous "Vitruvian Man," (after Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, the 1<sup>st</sup>-century BCE student of human proportions) displays the same  $\phi$  or Fibonacci proportionality.

### **OPUS DEI**

This group certainly exists, though its leaders and members were not pleased with the characterization Brown presents. Opus Dei is a "personal prelature" of the Pope (this is a canonical term meaning that the collective worldwide membership of Opus Dei constitutes something like a regional diocese of the church – it's the only such prelature of its kind in the world). Opus Dei is certainly the most controversial organization in the Roman Catholic world. Its Spanish founder, Monsignor Jose Maria Escrivá de Balaguer, was recently canonized by Pope John Paul II. The canonization process was regarded by many experts as astonishingly accelerated. The extreme ascetic practices alluded to in the book are in fact embraced by some members and have been highly criticized by outsiders and disaffected former members, as have the recruitment methods of the group. The greatest controversy, however, has to do with Opus Dei's extreme conservative (anti-Vatican II) posture on a range of issues from women in the church and relations with other religions to papal authority. The practice of corporal mortification (the wearing of the *cilice* or spiked chain around the thigh and the use of the *discipline* or cord whip) are said to be required of "numeraries," celibate members. By the way, such practices were hardly uncommon among Roman Catholic religious orders prior to the Second Vatican Council.

It has repeatedly been alleged that Opus Dei has connections to the sinister Italian right-wing organization P2 and links to the Vatican Bank scandal. Rumors also abound suggesting an Opus Dei connection to the mysterious death of Pope John Paul I, after only one month on the papal throne. While Opus Dei certainly represents an extremely conservative and authoritarian interpretation of Roman Catholic doctrine, the darker rumors are no perhaps more reliable than the rest of the assertions and allegations that make up the "bloodline" web.

For an excellent article on Opus Dei in the United States, published in *America* magazine in 1995, see the following web site. <http://www.americamagazine.org/martin-opusdei.cfm>. The article is followed by a reply from an Opus Dei official and a further response by the author of the article, Fr. James Martin, S.J.

## THE CONSPIRACY: QUESTIONABLE ELEMENTS

### ***HOLY BLOOD, HOLY GRAIL* (Henry Lincoln, Richard Leigh, Michael Baigent)**

The source of most of the major claims set forth by Dan Brown in *The Da Vinci Code*. Published in 1982, the book claims to be a work of careful historical scholarship. On the contrary, it employs a highly questionable methodology and is replete with errors and filled with countless unfounded (or at least undocumented) assertions.

The book's animating claim (which is also that of Brown) has some real merit, however: the notion that the feminine dimension of reality, of the divine, and of religion and spirituality has been ignored and, often, actively suppressed by tradition and religious authority.

Here's the gist of the story as the authors weave it together (often untroubled by lack of sources, pesky contradictory details, or scholarly consensus). Jesus, it seems, is actually the rightful heir to the throne of David, and believed to be the *messiah*, the long-awaited fighting king who will lead the people out of their Roman bondage. He is intimately linked with right-wing Zionist Zealots, including the disappointed Judas, whose betrayal of Jesus comes when he realizes that this king will not fight. The inscription on the cross of Jesus ("Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews") is not an irony but a simple fact. His crucifixion was elaborately staged (Jesus and his followers expected that he could survive the ordeal) but the plot was ruined by the unplanned spear thrust of the Roman soldier Longinus. Jesus was in fact killed. It then became critical that his wife Mary Magdalene (pregnant with the daughter, Sarah, to be born in Egypt) must escape the authorities who will certainly try to hunt down the family of a crucified seditious. They fled to France, protected by a royalist core group, and the great secret was, for the moment, safe. The Jesus-Magdalene line continued into the great Merovingian dynasty of early France and lives on to this day, protected, as is the secret, by the ultra-secret Priory of Sion.

Baigent and Leigh also authored *The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception*, an equally speculative, sensational, and largely unsupported account of a Vatican conspiracy to suppress documents from the Qumran library (discovered in 1945) that might be inconsistent with Christian beliefs. When the scrolls were finally made available to scholars and the public after 1991, their argument was thoroughly discredited.

What follows are some of the more interesting and relevant details of the "holy grail as holy bloodline" conspiracy theory, the foundation of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.

### **LA PRIEURE DU SION (PRIORY OF SION / ZION)**

The Priory is basically a right-wing French political hoax perpetrated by a group headed Pierre Plantard, a former Vichy French organizer of anti-Semitic and anti-Masonic groups. Plantard founded the Priory of Sion in the 1950s and was likely responsible for the creation of voluminous materials describing the order, its mission, its organizational structure, and the succession of Grand Masters who supposedly led the group. The line of Masters was alleged to include Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, Jean Cocteau, and many other notable and/or notorious figures.

Pierre Plantard was a shadowy character who was involved with several of the esoteric organizations that were so common in France and Germany in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hitler and Himmler were notoriously fascinated with the world of the occult and wove many of its symbols and claims into the elaborate cultic fabric of National Socialism and the secret order that became the SS. Plantard, like many occultists of the period, was strongly anti-Semitic and, curiously, anti-masonic (as were the Nazis). It's most probable that he assembled and doctored the hoard of documents that was planted (in the 1960s) and later "discovered" in France's Bibliothèque Nationale as *Les Dossiers Secrets*. The trove consisted of materials allegedly relating to the Merovingian descent and supporting claims that the line had not been all but wiped out, as historians believe, with the death of Dagobert II in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. According to the *Dossiers*, the line had continued to modern times and still lived on in several royal families: the Stuarts, the Sinclairs (St. Clairs), and *Plantards*.

It is plausibly alleged that Plantard, a Nazi sympathizer and publisher of a notoriously anti-Semitic magazine, *Vaincre* (Conquer), saw himself as the legitimate heir to the throne of France.

In any case, the important thing to realize is that the Priory, the epicenter of the *DVC* conspiracy, was an ultra-nationalist, fascist, anti-semitic organization with a very few members (and no history of illustrious Grand Masters) founded not in 1099 by Godfrey de Boullion, King of Jerusalem, but in 1956 by the seriously deranged Pierre Plantard. For a brief, but accurate summary of the hoax, see Robert Richardson's account: [http://www.alpheus.org/html/articles/esoteric\\_history/richardson1.html](http://www.alpheus.org/html/articles/esoteric_history/richardson1.html).

### **BERENGER SAUNIÈRE**

The real Saunière was a 19<sup>th</sup>-century French parish priest in the village of Rennes-le-Château who is supposed to have discovered the trove of documents attesting to the royal line of descent from the marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. A great controversy swirls around Saunière's "find." Baigent and Leigh (*Holy Blood, Holy Grail*) base a great deal on his alleged discovery of documents relating to the Merovingian dynasty of early medieval France. Dan Brown's naming the murdered curator after the village priest

places *DVC* squarely in the spurious Priory of Sion tradition. The story of the real Saunière – his alleged “mysterious wealth,” and the discovery of the document trove in a supposedly hollowed out stone pillar in the village church – simply doesn’t stand up to careful scrutiny.

### **RENNES LE CHÂTEAU**

The southern French village where a treasure trove of documents relating to the Grail (in the “Holy Blood” sense) was supposedly discovered by Berenger Saunière.

### **ROSSLYN CHAPEL**

In 1446, the cornerstone for Rosslyn Chapel was laid in Midlothian, Scotland. The Sinclairs, lords of Rosslyn, are claimed by some buffs to have been the family patrons of Scottish Freemasonry. The documents of the Priory of Sion supposedly claim that the Sinclairs provide the last missing piece to the dynastic puzzle. It has long been alleged that Rosslyn Chapel lies on one of England’s famed mystical geomantic “ley lines,” hence its name (from “rose line”). The ley lines (mysterious meridians of natural or divine “energy”) supposedly link ancient centers of power and mystical connection to the universe. Stonehenge, Avebury, and many of the stone circles that mark the landscape are believed by some to be linked by this network of arcane geometric figures and lines. Rosslyn fits right in. In the older Grail quest context, Rosslyn, along with Glastonbury Abbey has long been thought a possible resting place for the Grail cup. The Priory of Sion documents gave special prominence to Rosslyn. The place is justly famous for its unusual carvings and rich Masonic symbolism. Legends of encrypted messages are part of the charm of the place. It makes a fitting location for the penultimate revelations of the novel and the significance or insignificance of the great struggle between the secret keepers and the secret destroyers.

### **MEROVINGIANS**

The line of Frankish kings (486-750) that preceded Charlemagne’s Carolingian succession. The “first race” of the kings of France, they were noted for their long hair and occasionally reputed to have been possessed of supernatural powers. According to the “*Sang Real*” proponents, the Merovingian line is directly descended from Jesus and Magdalene, through their child, Sarah.

Actually, the whole Merovingian – Jesus connection was advanced by the enigmatic young Frenchman Pierre Plantard who, in the late thirties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century passed himself off as the last of the royal line. He expected the Nazis to enthrone him as King of France. They paid little attention and his plans were never, of course, fulfilled. Later, he would create the mythology of the Priory of Sion, become embroiled in a series of French right-wing schemes, and, finally, give a series of foundational interviews to the authors of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*.

#### **Stuarts, Sinclairs, and St. Clairs**

“Bloodline” enthusiasts insist that the Merovingian line comes down in modern times to the Stuarts, the Plantards, and the St. Clairs or Sinclairs. One self-styled bloodline heir is Prince Michael of Albany who bases himself in Belgium and claims to be the last of the male Stuart line (which actually became extinct with the death of Henry (IX) Stuart, Duke of York and Cardinal of the Church). Prince Michael was a major (the only?) backer of Lawrence Gardner’s largely second-hand conspiracy potboiler, *Bloodline of the Holy Grail*, on which Brown has also drawn. The Sinclairs also find their way into the family tree, opening up an American connection that gets a good deal of play these days. Henry Sinclair supposedly sailed to America in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, bearing the Grail treasure. This often discredited tale (never even told until 500 years after the supposed voyage) is the source of rumors that the Grail actually resides in North America, perhaps in the famed Nova Scotian “Oak Island Money Pit,” site of a reported buried treasure that seems to have been elaborately booby-trapped in its initial construction. The scene of constant excavations since 1795, the “money pit” has consumed millions of dollars and the lives of at least ten treasure hunters. While many believe pirate treasure is buried here, some claim it is really the Grail treasure (the cup or the document trove).

### **DIVINE KINGSHIP AND RIGHT WING POLITICS**

Since the notion of a royal bloodline is the animating idea of the *Code*, it’s worth noting that the ancient notion of divine and/or “divine right” kingship has always found favor on what we would today term “the far right” of the political spectrum. One of the most curious aspects of the current fascination with the alleged Grail conspiracy is that people rightly concerned about the missing or diminished feminine dimension of religion, spirituality, and culture find themselves cheering on the notion of a kingly line descended from Jesus and Magdalene through the Merovingians and on to the Stuarts and Sinclairs. One of the most fascinating possibilities of all is that Pierre Plantard, the grand master of the hoax (who came eventually to claim that the line led straight to him) may have approached the Nazis in the hope that they would install him as legitimate King of France.

### **AND THEN IT REALLY GETS SILLY**

Note: each of the following interpretations is offered by one or more of the various “schools” of modern revisionist grail lore. Obviously, no one theory could encompass them all, as they represent some very different views of the human condition and hopes for

the world. One thing they have in common is a remarkable ability to ignore inconvenient details and cram other “facts” into their respective procrustean beds. What follows is a list of just a few of the stranger variations on an already strange theme.

### **THE SHROUD OF TURIN**

It is claimed by some enthusiasts of the Priory of Sion that Leonardo da Vinci actually put his own face on the Shroud of Turin. Still others claim it was the martyred last Grand Master of the Templars, Jacques de Molay.

### **TEMPLARS, MEROVINGIANS, AND THE TEMPLE MOUNT**

A related conspiracy theory describes a Templar-Masonic plot to seize the Holy Land, rebuild the Temple on the Temple Mount and recreate Jerusalem as a Masonic city from which to rule the world. The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin was, in this amazing tale actually carried out by one Alisdair Rosslyn Sinclair, “a blue blood Knight Templar who had been a frontrunner in the Merovingian campaign for election as King of Jerusalem.”

### **PRINCESS DIANA**

Diana was, of course a Stuart. Some conspiracy theories link her suspicious death to the Priory of Sion mystery. Her marriage to Charles linked the truly *royal* House of Stuart to the pretenders of the House of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha-Windsor, thus strengthening the eventual claim of an heir to the throne. Diana’s divorce and relationship with a Muslim was, of course, unacceptable and something had to be done.

### **THE DOG STAR**

I have to say that I love this part. One doesn’t have to dig to far into the Sion web before one encounters one of the most persistent weird claims in the whole of occult literature: the notion that Earth has been repeatedly and significantly visited by beings from the system of Sirius, the Dog Star. Both Gerard de Sede (one of the original sources for the Priory of Sion legend, and the *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* plotline) and Elizabeth van Buren, a later advocate, claim that the founder of the Merovingian dynasty carries not only the blood of Jesus and Mary, but more than a little from Sirius side. Enough said.

### **THE FUNDAMENTALIST RESPONSE**

Don’t think that Christian fundamentalists have missed out on the fun. But their spin on things is precisely the reverse of that of the enthusiasts. For many fundamentalists, it’s all consistent with “end-time” expectation: the whole Merovingian bloodline claim – with the hope/search for a one true descendant to pull the world together at a critical time – fits very nicely with the anticipated coming of the Anti-Christ who will appear promising peace, justice and a new world order. Of course, they deny any significance to Magdalene and are horrified by the notion of a married Jesus who might even have staged his crucifixion.

For this reason, many Christians of the far right are fascinated with the Priory of Sion mystery. They believe it all, with the natural exception of the part about Jesus and Magdalene. They view the Priory, however, as one of the principle evil agencies charged with preparing for the coming of the Anti-Christ.

### **THE CHICAGO CONNECTION**

In his conversations with Baigent and Leigh, Pierre Plantard claimed that there was an American branch of the Grail conspiracy, strongly linked to the First National Bank of Chicago; and he named some familiar Chicago names like Abboud, Drick, and Freeman. This claim has been taken up very strongly and widely circulated by fundamentalist groups who see Sion and its members as the advance team for the Anti-Christ. Check the Web if you don’t believe it.

### **“THE MATRIX”**

The acclaimed film trilogy (the final installment released in November 2003) also has some curious links to the Sion matter. The world of the film is dominated by machines. Although they are unaware of it, almost all humans actually live their lives in bio-tanks connected to a vast computer program (“the Matrix”) that weaves them all into a fabricated conscious life of humdrum order and relative satisfaction. A few rebels, however, know the truth and are dedicated to ending the numbing rule of the machines. Several times their long awaited “One” has appeared and almost achieved victory only to be defeated and to be folded back into the cyber mix as the Matrix program “reboots.” This time it may be different. Our hero (Keanu Reeves) is “Neo” (the One, we hope), endowed with superhuman consciousness and abilities. Intriguingly, in film two, “The Matrix Reloaded,” we meet a classic villain, the Merovingian, who suggests that he was perhaps an earlier candidate for the role of the One and that he and Neo are related. Holy bloodlines, anyone? Neo, the the One, the New One, the Christ figure? And to top it all, the rebel stronghold is the hidden fortress of Zion/Sion. What’s more, it turns out that that “The Matrix” is replete with arcane references to Gnosticism.

## **CONCLUSION: SO WHAT?**

I’ve spent a fair amount of time so far describing which of the various claims put forth in *The Da Vinci Code* are and are not reliable; but let’s take a moment and entertain the notion that what we’ve just read is not an implausible novel but a carefully researched and

entirely authentic account of the real truth about the foundations of Christianity and the institutional realities of the Church. What would it all mean? What would we have learned? What could we conclude?

First, we would now know that the divinity of Jesus is neither a reality nor a tradition rich with symbolic and transformative spiritual portent but merely a politically convenient fiction that served some now obscure 4<sup>th</sup>-century imperial purpose. We would have learned that Jesus himself was a pretender to an obscure Jewish throne that meant little if anything against the backdrop of 1<sup>st</sup>-century imperial power. We'd realize that Jesus had probably been complicit in the staging of his own crucifixion, which went badly wrong when the Roman soldier Longinus thrust his spear into Jesus' side and ended his life. We'd understand, of course, that Mary Magdalene was the wife of Jesus, and that she was spirited away by royalist supporters who knew that she and the child she was carrying were in great danger, as the intimate family of the heir to the throne of the kingdom of the Jews. And we'd now be in on the greatest secret of all: that the bloodline of Jesus and Mary continued down through the ages, through the Merovingian dynasty and, presumably, into our own time. We'd be able to nod with satisfaction and confirm that the institutional Church (and, really, the entire western establishment) had been complicit in suppressing the central fact that a remarkable woman had been a part of it all.

But a part of what? A part of a dynastic power play or of the imparting of one of the most profound spiritual messages of human history? Dan Brown (and the pseudo-esoteric sources on which he largely draws – *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* and the others) has opted for the former. For all the talk of the suppression of the feminine, the path they trace hardly leads in a spiritual direction. It's all about politics, power, manipulation, and murder in defense of a secret that has no resonance at all with human spirituality or the search for meaning.

But what about the rediscovered feminine? What about Mary of Magdala, the wife of Jesus, the “apostle to the apostles” (as she came to be known in certain circles in the Church – although *DVC* never mentions it)? Sadly, she gets lost in the cipher-tangle. What's rediscovered is not the feminine dimension of the divine, for divinity is dispensed with by mid-book. Instead, what's found is interesting but hardly life-changing. A resourceful and remarkable woman, a survivor, who managed against the usual patriarchal odds to inspire a centuries-long devotion in members of a cult dedicated to the preservation of a divine order of throneless kings (rarely queens, it will be noted). And herein lies what I find the most astonishing feature of the acclaim for *The Da Vinci Code* and its pseudo-scholarly predecessors: to embrace the thesis of *DVC* is to attempt to reconcile the rediscovered feminine and all that it represents with two distinctly contradictory elements: a rejection of the delicate symbolic human-divine mystery that lies at the heart of the Christian tradition (and many other spiritual traditions as well) and a divine-rightist, monarchist, often fascist vision of the world order that ought to be.

Why is the secret of a de-divinized bloodline of Magdalene and Jesus so appealing? To me, it's not.

## FINAL WORDS

OK, so I've gotten way too serious. I do know it's just a novel; and it's a novel I enjoyed, have read four times, and will no doubt read again. I've recommended it to lots of friends and, most importantly, to my mother. I know I need to relax about it. But, here's the thing: this book has touched a chord with hundreds of thousands of people who have found some resonance with its claims. *DVC*'s deepest theme – the sacred feminine – has great merit. And that is, I believe, the wellspring of the tremendous response it has received. My own concern is that this gem not be lost in the murky and reactionary Priory of Sion tangle and the unfortunate (and widely believed) claim that this part of the narrative is historically sound.

I'll close this rant with some remarkable words from *The Da Vinci Code*. Langdon is speaking to Sophie about whether or not the “Grail documents” should be presented to the world as “scientific evidence that the New Testament is false testimony.” He seems, as she says, to be arguing both sides of the question, wanting scholarly access to the documents, but reluctant to see the faith of millions put at risk. Finally he offers the following intriguing and very ironic summation:

The Bible represents a fundamental guidepost for millions of people on the planet, in much the same way the Koran, Torah, and Pali Canon offer guidance to people of other religions. If you and I could dig up documentation that contradicted the holy stories of Islamic belief, Judaic belief, Buddhist belief, pagan belief, should we do that? Should we wave a flag and tell the Buddhists that we have proof the Buddha did not come from a lotus blossom? Or that Jesus was not born of a *literal* virgin birth? *Those who truly understand their faiths understand the stories are metaphorical.* (Italics added.)

What then about the story of Jesus and Magdalene's relationship, rich with symbolic import and echoed perhaps in some of the wonderful *original* grail stories of the search for the lost feminine dimension of spirituality? It has all the elements: the humanity and divinity of Jesus, the union of the sacred feminine and masculine, the *hieros gamos*, the chalice and the blade, and the quest for the inner divine *gnosis*. Why deny this most evocative story its metaphorical, mythical, symbolic essence? Why turn it into a roadmap to a dynastic power play? Because that's exactly what happens when the *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* crowd is finished with it. The magic is gone and in its place is a fairly sordid and fairly standard conspiracy cult, revolving around dynastic power and worldly authority and having in the end very little to do with spirit.

**Jim Kenney**  
Tel.: 847-234-8047 • [jim@seachanges.net](mailto:jim@seachanges.net)

Jim Kenney is the Executive Director of the Interreligious Engagement Project (IEP21), working with global religious communities to address the world's critical problems through cooperative partnerships with government, business, education, media, intergovernmental organizations, and civil society.

He is also the Executive Director of Common Ground, an adult study center focusing on the world's great religious, philosophical and spiritual traditions and their implications for every dimension of human endeavor and experience (<http://www.cg.org>).

He serves as Co-Editor of *Interreligious Insight: a Journal of Dialogue and Engagement*, published internationally four times each year in the US and the UK by the World Congress of Faiths, the Interreligious Engagement Project, and Common Ground (<http://www.interreligiousinsight.org>).

Jim is former Global Director of the Parliament of the World's Religions (one of the world's major interfaith organizations), a trustee of the International Interreligious Peace Council, and a trustee of the International Interfaith Centre, in Oxford England.

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