

The DaVinci Code - The Con of Man

**a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

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Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
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I have to admit I'm a little behind the curve today. Way behind the curve, in fact. You see, I'm probably one of the few ministers left in country – Unitarian Universalist or otherwise – who hasn't done one, or even more, sermons on "The DaVinci Code."

Well, this morning, I'm going to rectify that situation.

Now don't get me wrong – a few years back when I read it, I loved "The DaVinci Code." As far as I'm concerned, you can't get much better than a good old-fashioned, heart-pounding, cloak-and-dagger, murder mystery. Throw in a dash of conspiracy here and bit of secret-society there, add a few riddles and anagrams and a little numerology – and you have the recipe for a really great read. And in my book, that's what Dan Brown's novel is – a really great read...

But that's not what people want to hear, in a minister's sermon about "The DaVinci Code." They're more interested in the stuff about Jesus and Mary Magdalene. About the Roman church selling out and joining forces with Constantine, so that he might extend the reach of his empire. About centuries of Catholic conspiracies and cover-ups. About other, "secret" gospels that were suppressed, and left out of the Bible.

So why have I not, before today, preached about such things? The truth is – to me, these apparently juicy morsels are simply not that titillating. Indeed, all the controversy surrounding Dan Brown's novel has left me scratching my head and wondering, "What's the big deal?"

I was taught in graduate school – at a Disciples of Christ seminary in Oklahoma, no less – that Jesus and Mary Magdalene appear to have had what was, at best, a very special relationship. And we UU's have been complaining for centuries about the rigged election at the Council of Nicaea, where the Trinitarians cast the Unitarians out of orthodoxy forever. The book-burning, and the people-burning, began in earnest soon thereafter.

And then there's the matter of those other gospels. The Gospel of Mary. The Gospel of Thomas. The Secret Gospel of James. Gnosticism. The fact is, long before Dan Brown came along, all you had to do to was go to any good bookstore to learn about the highly selective nature of the Biblical canon, and to read for yourself those supposedly earth-shaking, omitted gospels.

So again, I return to the question: What's the big deal about "The DaVinci Code"? The apologists for Dan Brown – reacting to the renewed hysteria around the release of the movie version last month – rightly reply that "it's only a work of fiction." True enough, I suppose, but by now everyone knows, too, that it's a speculative work of fiction that's based on a good deal of reality. The Gnostic gospels, the Council of Nicaea, the existence within the Catholic Church of highly secretive, closed cabals and a highly trained and efficient police arm – these things are all facts. "The DaVinci Code" is fiction based on certain matters of truth.

Ah, there's the key word – "truth." For a large percentage of modern humanity, truth is a relative concept. But for another, very vocal, chunk of the human race, truth is a word best spelled with a capital "T." It is something Absolute. Something unchanging and eternal. Something that supercedes all things else.

And, perhaps more to the point, for many, ultimate truth is something that has already been revealed – to and by certain specific historical figures, who themselves have propagated it, down to this very day – so that we, who now live, have only to accept that capital-T "Truth," and use it as the yardstick by which we measure every aspect of our daily lives.

The people who hold the former worldview – the one of relativism, the one in which "truth" is a subjective, personal experience, often very different for different people, in different cultures, in different times – those people are the kind of folks who tend to find themselves sitting in a Unitarian

Universalist church, some Sunday – perhaps as the preacher asks, about “The DaVinci Code,” “What’s the big deal?”

The people who hold the latter worldview, on the other hand – the one that holds Truth to be an immutable, objective reality, the outlook that sees life and the universe in all-or-nothing, black-and-white terms rather than in shades of gray – well, they are much more likely to find themselves in a fundamentalist church on a Sunday morning, I would suspect, listening to a preacher rail about how “The DaVinci Code” is the work of Satan.

Last week, while you were here enjoying what I understand was an absolutely excellent worship service on “Beauty,” I had the opportunity to hear several such preachers. As was once my custom when I used to drive, each Sunday, from Columbus to Cleveland, to preach – on the way up to Yellow Springs last week to lead a worship service there, I amused myself by randomly flipping around on my car’s AM dial, and listening to what my more fundamentalist fellow preachers had to say, to their flocks of radio listeners.

What I found disturbing – and again, hard to fathom – was that almost every one of these Sunday-morning AM-radio ministers found some way, in the course of their 15 minutes of fame, to rip into Dan Brown, as if he were Osama Bin Laden himself. The latter man, we all know, is responsible for countless deaths, acts of terror, and mayhem, not to mention the complete reshaping of American history and foreign policy – yet Mr. Brown, apparently, is far more destructive, having single-handedly led millions and millions of souls into the eternal flames of Hell.

The way Dan Brown is doing this, if you would believe the radio preachers, is by calling into question the divinity of Jesus. Or rather, by opening the door for his readers to question that divinity – by speculating, in a well-crafted work of fiction, that Jesus might actually have had human feelings and desires; that the claim of his divinity might, in fact, not be fact – but instead the creation of men who stood to gain a great deal from the widespread adoption of such a belief system.

In the following famous passage from the book, Brown’s character Lea Teabing – whose last name is an anagram for “Baigent,” a reference to author Michael Baigent, author of “Holy Blood, Holy Grail” – is speaking to

a character named Sophie (whose name is based on the Greek word for “wisdom”):

“Fortunately for historians,” says Teabing, “...the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in the 1950s, hidden in a cave near Qumran in the Judean desert. And, of course, the Coptic Scrolls [were discovered] in 1945 at Nag Hammadi... [All] these documents speak of Christ’s ministry in very human terms. Of course, the Vatican, in keeping with their tradition of misinformation, tried hard to suppress the release of these scrolls. And why wouldn’t they? The scrolls highlight glaring historical discrepancies and fabrications, clearly confirming that the modern Bible was compiled and edited by men who possessed a political agenda – to promote the divinity of the man Jesus.”

Again, what I have just read for you is a paragraph from a work of fiction. The characters involved are the creation of an author. But what is recounted in that paragraph is quite factual.

It is, of course, passages like this that have led to worldwide book burnings, to demonstrations and prayer vigils outside movie theaters, cover stories in Time and Newsweek, heated debates on network television, sputtering diatribes from Pat Robertson and James Dobson, millions of hits on various internet sites – in short, to an international uproar that included, just last Wednesday (following a highly successful, record-breaking three-week run), the sudden banning of the film from every movie theater in China.

Pardon me, but don’t you get a sense of déjà vu here? I seem to recall a similar reaction to “The Last Temptation of Christ.” Only this time, the scale is different, because that particular tempest in a teapot occurred before 9-11.

But in both cases, the question for the UU audience remains: “What’s the big deal?” The answer may lie in this headline from a recent editorial page of the Cincinnati Enquirer: “Relax, It’s Just a Religion – Or Is It?” The writer, a self-described agnostic, is responding to an earlier editorial that appeared under the heading “Relax, It’s Just a Movie.” And his point is well-taken.

For those of us with a relativistic mindset – most of the people in this sanctuary, I dare say – the whole thing is, indeed, a no-brainer – a non-issue. To us, “The DaVinci Code” is, when all is said and done, just a movie, or just a book. In either case, a human creation. So, too, the Bible.

Similarly, we tend to take the stance that Christianity is “just a religion” – one among many, many religious paths people choose in this world.

And there’s the rub. For the fundamentalist, it is simply unacceptable that his or her belief system is one among many. The mere existence of other, differing religious outlooks, is a threat to the very foundation on which the fundamentalist’s world is built. And so, all those other beliefs – and the people who espouse them – must either be eradicated, or at the least, denounced as “the work of the Devil.”

Now I think it would be prudent, at this juncture, to re-emphasize an important point I have often made in the past. People sometimes misconstrue the bone I have to pick with the fundamentalist attitude, as a criticism of Christianity itself. Nothing could be further from the truth. It’s sort of like telling me that if I dislike pit bulls, or rottweilers, that I’m a dog-hater.

So make no mistake: I have no problem with the Christian religion, or its’ adherents – those who follow the teachings of Christ. In fact, more and more, I find myself agreeing with Davidson Loehr, the minister of the First UU Church in Austin, Texas, who recently wrote, “A religion of empowerment like the religion of Jesus may be the spiritual voice most desperately needed now, as a corrective to the spirit of our times – to the strident religious voices that want to disempower women [and] gays ... and to a government declaring unending war [and] removing civil liberties.”

No, friends, the problem is not Christianity. Nor is it Islam. The problem is the fundamentalist reaction to the modern world, and specifically to the freedoms and civil liberties humanity has struggled for so long to achieve.

Here in North America, fundamentalist Trinitarians are up in arms about a movie. In Europe, Africa and Asia recently, there were riots – and deaths – as a result of a cartoon depicting Mohammed. Radical fundamentalism is radical fundamentalism, wherever, and under whatever guise, it rears its ugly head.

I titled my remarks this morning “The Con of Man.” That phrase, of course, comes from Dan Brown’s book, from one of the most ingenious clues (fictionally) hidden amid the artwork of Leonardo DaVinci. When revealed, this clue furthers the claim that, for nearly two thousand years, a significant

portion of humanity has been “conned” into accepting, as fact, the mythology that the radical rabbi and preacher named Jesus of Nazareth was actually God incarnate – that Jesus, unlike you, or me, or any other human being who ever lived – was uniquely divine.

This, according to Dan Brown, is “The Con of Man” – this, and the social, financial, and political power that has been amassed over the centuries as a result of such brainwashing.

Again I am inclined to ask – “What’s the big deal?” I, for one, have agreed with this line of thinking for as long as I can remember – and would have continued to do so, whether or not Dan Brown had ever written a single word. Perhaps it is no wonder, then, that I became a Unitarian Universalist, and eventually, a UU minister.

But today, I would like you to consider a somewhat broader meaning for this important phrase, “The Con of Man.” Put aside for a moment the fact that it constitutes yet another of Brown’s wonderful bits of wordplay – a veiled reference to the fact that throughout the New Testament gospels, Jesus never calls himself God, or even the Son of God – but instead repeatedly refers to himself as the “Son of Man”. Note the subtle difference: By simply changing the “S” in “son” to a “C,” you have “The Con of Man” – but as I say, let’s look beyond the cool wordplay.

For me, the “Con of Man” is not so much the notion of Jesus’ divinity – but the whole fundamentalist worldview. For me, the true “Con of Man” (and woman) is the way in which – in our time, in an otherwise modern era – so many otherwise intelligent folks have been duped into believing there can only be one right way to religious truth, one – and only one – true spiritual path. One, and only one, sacred scripture.

If it’s written in the Bible, it’s absolute truth. If it’s written in the Koran, it’s absolute truth. Fundamentalists on either side, in fact, will tell you with a straight face that the words you’ll find in their scripture were written, not by human beings, but by God!

I can think of no more insidious con job. And none with more dangerous consequences. Don’t take my word for it; just look around you. Just read the papers, or listen to the news. Despite the fact that it is, after all, the year 2006; despite the fact that we’ve known for generations the earth is not flat,

and is not the center of the universe; despite the undeniable fact that there have been many different ways, in many different societies and cultures, throughout history, of understanding the place of humanity in the overall scheme of things – in spite of all this, somehow, we've allowed things to come to this:

We now live in a nation where radical Christian fundamentalists are in control of the government, and making our domestic and international policy decisions. Meanwhile, overseas, radical Islamic fundamentalists are in control of governments, and domestic and international policies, in several key areas of the Middle East, all the while being abetted by small militias of wide-ranging terrorists.

The result is that we – all of us, even we who sit safely in this sanctuary today – find ourselves caught in the crossfire of what amounts to an outright religious war – with each side of the battle believing, I am sure, deep in their hearts, that they are the chosen agents of God; with each seeking to vanquish what they see as the chosen agents of Satan.

And so ... it is a big deal, this whole "DaVinci Code" controversy. It is a big deal, because so much is at stake. I couldn't agree more with Bob George and Patrick Ashcraft – two local men who organized prayer vigils at Cincinnati-area movie theaters last month when the movie opened here – who said this is all part "of the raging cultural war that is devastating the soul of America." At the same time, I couldn't disagree more, with what they are doing.

We don't need people praying outside a movie theater that those who go there for entertainment won't lose their faith, and turn away from Christ. What we need is people praying outside the halls of government, not only in Washington, but in Baghdad, and Tehran, and Jerusalem – praying that their respective leaders stop the senseless killing, before it's too late. Praying that their followers find it in their hearts to grant others the right to believe as they see fit.

Maybe I'm just old-fashioned – it seems sad to think of it as an old-fashioned idea – but I was raised to live and let live. Imagine this world of ours, if more people could do just that.

But until such a time arrives, I urge you – don't take this culture-war business lightly. It truly is a battle for the heart and soul of America – a battle for what America once stood for, and can stand for, again. Because as Sophia Fahs said, all those years ago – there will always be beliefs that encourage exclusiveness, and the feeling of being especially privileged, clouding our children's days and nights with fear. And so, there must also always be beliefs that "are expansive, and lead to wider and deeper sympathies," helping to form "bonds of community, where sincere differences beautify the pattern."

Let us each, then, choose our beliefs wisely. Let us be the ones who build the bonds of community, and show others how to celebrate the inevitable differences among us. Just as we need not seek afar for beauty, we need not seek afar for holy work to do. It is right here among us.

May we live our lives, so that we might be examples to a world so desperately in need of the Love that is the spirit of our church.

May it be so. Namaste. And amen.