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Decoding *The Da Vinci Code*

The Challenge of Historic Christianity to Post-Modern Fantasy

Let me say at once what a pleasure it is to be here in Seattle and how grateful my wife and I are for your welcome and hospitality and for those who have worked hard to set this event up. I am excited at the high profile given here to the question which seems to me a major priority for the Christian church in our day — that of engaging with contemporary culture and so changing the world — hopefully in the energy of the Holy Spirit and for the glory of God and the benefit of all human beings everywhere.

That might seem a grandiose project, but it actually corresponds well to the apostolic task as set out in the New Testament. And it is precisely one of the problems with Dan Brown's runaway bestseller *The Da Vinci Code* that it distracts attention from that larger task, and by conniving with certain negative aspects of contemporary culture it has no real interest in changing the world, but simply in reordering people's apparent spiritual priorities. More of that presently.

The task of engaging the culture with the Christian gospel and so working to transform the world always includes three elements. First, we must speak truthfully about Jesus of Nazareth, and explain how it is what we discover who God is by looking at him. Second, we must do so in full engagement with the world of our own day, understanding its ebbs and flows, its fashions and follies, the places where it has got things gloriously right and the places where it has got things gloriously wrong. Third, we must be prepared to refute — that is, to give a reasoned rebuttal of, not simply to say we disagree with — popular misconceptions which leave people with muddled and misguided ideas about Jesus and the nature of Christian faith. And the point about *The Da Vinci Code* is that it raises all these issues simultaneously. One of the fascinating questions about the book is, why is it so popular? It can't just be because it's a page-turner; there are plenty of those around. Where does it fit in to our culture? In what way is it saying things that so many people are so eager to hear? Granted that many readers can see how fantastic its conspiracy theories are, why do they still want to believe, or at least be open to, some of the more extreme and bizarre of its claims? I believe the book does indeed represent a quintessential statement of where a significant part of our culture, not least here in North America but also in the UK, passionately wants to be. It is for this reason, not simply because the book is well known or because it perpetuates some currently popular but ultimately silly ideas about Jesus, that I want in this evening's presentation to work down through some of the surface noise of the book to the issues at the heart of it all.

1. Telling Fact from Fiction

It is a well-known feature of today's culture that some people can't tell fact from fiction. Stories abound of people who believe the characters in soap operas to be real, including tales of thousands of baby clothes being sent to radio stations after one of the fictitious characters has given birth, and of actors being attacked in the street by people angry about the bad behavior of their screen character. Within a would-be Christian subculture the same thing becomes sinister, as when millions who read the *Left Behind* series really do believe not only in the "rapture" as a central element of their theology but in the sociopolitical ideologies powerfully reinforced by that series. In a sense, Dan Brown represents the mirror image of LaHaye and Jenkins, reproducing in fictionalized form some of the myths of the postmodern world as LaHaye and Jenkins reproduce in fictionalized form some of the myths of the fundamentalist right.

Brown's achievement, in fact, is so spectacular that it is hard to begrudge him his newfound millions. He has taken a set of ideas and speculative historical reconstructions, each of which is highly implausible in itself, and by weaving them together has not only created an exciting if ultra-fanciful plot, despite his wooden and stereotyped characterizations, but has also made the several implausible elements appear for a moment as though they just might be true. It is important therefore to begin with some comments on where he belongs within the long history of this kind of speculation, and with some obvious remarks about the fact/fiction divide, before getting to the heart of the matter.

Brown's book is in fact simply the latest in a long line. He is overtly dependent on — and rumor has it he is being sued by — Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, the authors of *Holy Blood and Holy Grail*, a fantasy book published in the 1970s. They picked up the ancient legend of the Holy Grail, replete with tales of mysterious mediaeval secrets, of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, of secret gospels and hidden scrolls, of the Knights Templar and the Rosicrucians, and gave the whole thing a fresh twist: that the "Holy Grail" was

not, after all, the chalice used by Jesus at the Last Supper, but was instead the receptacle into which, not Jesus' blood in the form of wine, but Jesus' bloodline in the form of a family, of descendants, had been placed and could still be found. In other words, Jesus had a child; and the child had children; and the family was still in existence, carrying the secret that would blow apart the world of traditional Christianity, not least traditional Catholicism. (All the works in this genre have as their subtext the belief that mainstream Christianity is based on a mistake and protects itself by hushing up the evidence to the contrary.)

There have been other similar blockbusters in the last couple of decades. The Australian Barbara Thiering attained brief notoriety with her book *Jesus the Man*, based on an extraordinary supposed decoding of the Dead Sea Scrolls and showing that, once more, Jesus had been married to Mary Magdalene. Thiering adds the twist that they divorced and that Jesus married again. Nobody takes Thiering seriously except occasional radio and TV chat shows and, presumably, her publisher and bank manager. Then there was a book called *The Tomb of God*, by Richard Andrews and Paul Schellenberger, published in 1997, proposing that the body of Jesus is buried under a hill in southern France. They trot out the usual suspects, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Gnostic gospels, the Rosicrucians, the Knights Templar, hidden codes and symbols in mediaeval paintings, and above all the Great Catholic Conspiracy to hush it all up in case it should blow the gaffe on the system of power and control which the church has built up. (Of course, all these conspiracy theories gain extra momentum from the now notorious fashion in which the Roman Catholic Church has indeed covered up all kinds of scandals in recent years.)

We might note a couple of things at this point: that all the books of this type I've mentioned so far seem to be convinced that mainstream Christianity thinks of Jesus as a basically divine being, sustaining the church's political power, whereas the secret traditions see him as simply a human figure; but at the same time that they fail to notice the problem, namely that if they are right it is hard to explain the rise of Christianity in the first place. If Jesus' body is buried under a hill in France, why should anyone think he was divine in the first place? If he was a teacher who married, had children, then got divorced and remarried, what's so special about him? I have a sense with a lot of this material that what is really going on is a reaction against a very low-grade and popular-level version of Roman Catholicism, in which certain things have been taught about the essentially not-quite-human nature of Jesus and about the church's absolute authority which serious Catholic theologians would quickly repudiate. To that extent the books belong in the context of a subculture which continues to base its identity on the small-town religion from which it has broken away, producing elaborate fantasies to make sure its escape will be permanent.

But fantasies they are. Brown claims, in a note at the start of his book, first that the architectural details of the places mentioned are correct and second that there really is a secret society called "The Priory of Sion" to which people like Da Vinci himself, Isaac Newton, Victor Hugo, and others belonged. Both of these claims can be shown very easily to be false. On the first: I only know well one of the buildings which features in the book, namely Westminster Abbey. All right, Brown knows where the Isaac Newton monument is. But he still makes gaffe after gaffe which could have been corrected by 10 minutes of walking around with his eyes open. The Abbey has towers, not spires. You cannot see Parliament from St James's Park. College Garden is an extremely private place, not "a very public place" outside the Abbey's walls (527). You cannot look out into it from the Chapter House; nor is there a "long hallway" leading to the latter, with a "heavy wooden door" at the end (529 ff.). Ten minutes' observation by a junior research assistant could have put all this right. If Brown is so careless, and carelessly inventive, in details as easy to check as those, why should we trust him in anything else? And when it comes, second, to the Priory of Sion, the documents which Brown, following Baigent and Leigh, cite as evidence were forgeries cooked up by three zany Frenchmen in the 1950s. They cheerfully confessed to this in a devastating television program shown on British television in February this year. And as for Brown's theory about Da Vinci's "Last Supper," according to which the Beloved Disciple next to Jesus is actually a woman, that he/she and Jesus are joined at the hip, that they are sitting in such a way as to display the letter V, apparently a sign of femininity, and also the letter M, for Mary, or Magdalene, or marriage, or something else, this is pure fantasy. You can take any great painting and play this kind of game with it. That's not to say that some painters may not have implanted coded messages in their work. It would be surprising if they didn't. But you won't find too many serious art critics giving Brown's reading of the painting more than a passing smile.

Other details abound which make the first-century historian snort and want to throw the book into the fire. Apparently not only Judah but also Benjamin founded a royal dynasty, and Mary Magdalene was part of it (334 ff.). The Christian innovation of Sunday as the day to meet for worship was apparently part of Constantine's reforms — despite 1 Corinthians 16:1 and other early texts.

Nothing in Christianity is original, according to Brown; it's all a syncretistic pastiche of ancient pagan cults. The Grail treasures might contain the document known as Q, which even the Vatican believes exists; "Allegedly, it's a book of Jesus' teachings, possibly written in his own hand" (343). All this is expounded, in the book, by a mad Englishman; it did occur to me that maybe, by making him so obviously two scrolls short of a library, and showing him up in the end as a villain, Brown was trying to distance himself from what he says, but this, I fear, is too subtle by half. When challenged on the point about Jesus' own diary, the mad Englishman says, "Why wouldn't Jesus have kept a chronicle of His ministry? Most people did in those days." Any attempt by the reader to stifle giggles at this point is overcome by the next sentence: "Another explosive document believed to be in the treasure is a manuscript called *The Magdalene Diaries* — Mary Magdalene's personal account of her relationship with Christ, His crucifixion and her time in France." What is perhaps most touching about all this is Brown's insistence on keeping the capital H for the word His in all these sentences — though it is precisely at this point that we want to press the question: If Jesus had been as Brown says he was, why would anyone, then or since, suppose that Jesus was divine? Why follow him rather than any other new teacher?

We may safely conclude, then, that *The Da Vinci Code* is fiction not just in its characters and plot but in most of its other details as well. But its real importance lies elsewhere: in its statement, albeit partial and in some ways self-contradictory, of the mainstream liberal-American "myth of Christian origins" which is widely believed, and indeed taught, in many churches and seminaries, and which seems to be gaining popularity in Britain as well. This myth needs to be seen for what it is. I shall devote the central section of this lecture to expounding it and showing that it is flawed at every point.

2. The New Myth of Christian Origins

The myth that I am about to describe and critique is well known and widespread. I have met it at Harvard; I have met it in Baptist churches in the South; I have seen bits of it all over the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature, which is the more ironic since those societies used to be devoted, in theory at least, to the supposedly scientific historical study of religions and ancient texts, and this myth is anything but scientific or historical. There are five elements in the myth, and *The Da Vinci Code* offers a sketchy but clear enough account of all of them.

This is the myth: First, there were dozens if not hundreds of other documents about Jesus. Some of these have now come to light, not least in the books discovered at Nag Hammadi in Egypt 60 years ago. These focus on Jesus more as a human being, a great religious teacher, than as a divine being. And it is these books which give us the real truth about Jesus.

Second, the four Gospels in the New Testament were later products aimed at divinizing Jesus and claiming power and prestige for the church. They were selected, for these reasons, at the time of Constantine in the fourth century, and the multiple alternative voices were ruthlessly suppressed.

Third, therefore, Jesus himself wasn't at all like the four canonical Gospels describe him. He didn't think he was God's son, or that we would die for the sins of the world; he didn't come to found a new religion. He was a human being pure and simple, who gave some wonderful moral and spiritual teaching, that's all. Oh, and he may well have been married, perhaps even with a child on the way, when his career was cut short by death.

Fourth, therefore: Christianity as we know it is based on a mistake. Mainstream Christianity is sexist, especially anti-women and anti-sex itself. It has aimed at, and in some places achieved, considerable social power and prestige, enabling it to be politically quietist and conformist. This, I find, goes down especially well with those who are escaping from either fundamentalism or certain types of Roman Catholicism.

Fifth, the real pay-off: It is time to give up, as historically unwarranted, theologically unjustified, and spiritually and socially damaging, the picture of Jesus and Christian origins which the church has put about for so long, and to return to the supposedly original vision of Jesus himself, not least in terms of getting in touch with a different form of spirituality based on metaphor rather than literal truth, of feeling rather than structure, of discovering whatever faith you find you can believe in. This will revive the truth for which Jesus lived, and perhaps for which he died.

Dan Brown adds his own touches to this fivefold myth; for instance, in line with some other recent writers, the suggestion that this genuine spirituality, which Jesus would have taught us had his message not been hushed up, may well involve reconnecting with the sacred feminine. (How that actually works out in

terms of his own plot isn't clear, and the ending of the book is a major anticlimax. Is the Holy Grail itself after all just another metaphor for boy-meets-girl romantic love?)

As I say, I had met this myth in various forms all over the place, long before Dan Brown wrote his book. Brown has, however, given it wings, and I fear that it is now flying all over the place and confusing many people as to what they can and can't believe. The deepest irony about it is that it portrays itself as historically rooted, when it is a tissue of fantasy; as going back to Jesus himself, when he would not have recognized anything like it; as embodying the really creative new voice of Jesus, when it is simply offering a variation on a well-known pattern of postmodern spirituality.

One small point to clear up before we proceed. Brown, like some other popular writers, includes the Dead Sea Scrolls as documents about Jesus. They are nothing of the sort. Neither Jesus nor early Christianity is mentioned anywhere in the scrolls. But the question of the Nag Hammadi codices is far more significant. What can be said about them? Are they serious alternative sources for Christian origins? Are they "the earliest Christian records," as Brown's mad Englishman declares?

Like most of those who have written recently about Jesus in his historical context, I have looked carefully at the codices from Nag Hammadi alongside everything else. They, and similar material found elsewhere (the so-called "Gospel of Mary" is not from Nag Hammadi), represent what is loosely called "Gnosticism," a many-headed spiritual movement known particularly, not least through the writings of its opponents, from the late second century on into at least the fourth. Central to the Gnostic system, which has many bewildering varieties and many internal contradictions, is the belief that the present world of space, time, and matter is essentially evil, the creation of a secondary deity, and that salvation will consist of escaping from it into a different sphere altogether both here and hereafter. Gnosticism teaches that some humans at least have within them a divine spark which needs to be uncovered or revealed, giving its initiates a secret "knowledge," which in Greek is *gnosis*, hence "Gnosticism." This enables the initiate to effect his escape (it's normally a "he") into a spiritual world.

The Nag Hammadi books include the now well known so-called "Gospel of Thomas," and other similar collections of sayings such as the "Gospel of Philip." Despite the current fashion for preferring and even privileging them as giving us access to Jesus himself, I believe they are (a) demonstrably late (late second century at the earliest), though they may contain traces of earlier material; (b) demonstrably derived from the earlier, and now canonical, material; and (c) demonstrably different in theology from that earlier material.

The first two of these points are hotly contested, but my judgment here is shared by many in the field. In particular, "Thomas" has been touted in some parts of North America — not really anywhere else so far as I know — as a major key for getting behind the canonical gospels and in touch with the real Jesus, who it turns out (according to some writers who take this line) is a figure much more like Buddha, a teacher of a spiritual path, than one would have thought from the canonical gospels. But there are many reasons for drawing back from this conclusion. In particular, as quite a strong index of where things stand, we note the language of the book. "Thomas" as we have it is written in Coptic, an Egyptian language of the time. It is simply a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus; and, in the Coptic version, they are in no particular order. But if we translate the Coptic back into Syriac, the likely original language of the collection, we discover that in Syriac the sayings of Jesus have been collected into a careful pattern, with connecting words linking the different sayings each to the next. And the Syriac in question, and the method of this linking of sayings, is closely cognate with the language and style of writers known to us from the late second century church, not least Tatian. The strong probability is that the collection we call "Thomas" was put together nearly 200 years after the time of Jesus and not earlier.

The argument that the Nag Hammadi collection is demonstrably derived from the earlier, and now canonical, material, is more technical again and I shall not attempt to make it here. Suffice it to say that where there are similar sayings in "Thomas" to the sayings in the canonical gospels, the differences can be shown to be consistent with "Thomas" having modified the material in a manner which demonstrates a large step away from the world of first-century Judaism, where we must locate Jesus himself, and towards the world of second- and third-century syncretism. That pushes us on to the third point, which is of course vital, namely my contention that Nag Hammadi and the related texts are demonstrably different in theology from anything we can reliably ascribe to Jesus. Here the myth-makers insist that the difference is this: Nag Hammadi preserves the original theology, while the canonical gospels represent a shift towards the

divinizing of Jesus and, with that, a move towards socially acceptable orthodoxy over against the exciting, dynamic, semi-Gnostic religion of the codices.

But the differences all indicate that it is the Nag Hammadi codices, not the canonical gospels, which have succumbed to a shift away from an early to a later viewpoint. Again, three points to be made.

First, they involve a massive step away from the *Jewish* context of Jesus' ministry and towards some kind of Platonic viewpoint. Jesus' idea of the Kingdom of God coming on earth as in heaven is transformed into a kingdom-teaching which is all about a private and detached spirituality. Whereas in the canonical gospels Jesus seems at several points to be calling his fellow Jews back to a genuine following of Israel's God and the inner meaning of the Jewish law, in the Nag Hammadi codices Judaism, where it occurs at all, has become simply part of the problem. A particularly telling sentence in "Thomas" has Jesus declare, not that if the temple is destroyed it will be rebuilt, but that he will destroy the temple and no-one will be able to rebuild it. The Jesus of "Thomas" is at best non-Jewish, at worst anti-Jewish. This fits very neatly with the largely non-Jewish Jesus invented by Rudolf Bultmann and his followers, and reinvented by the now defunct "Jesus Seminar," but not at all with any picture of Jesus which can be produced by serious and sober historical scholarship.

Second, the Nag Hammadi codices have taken a large step away from a *narrative* world and into detached aphorisms and isolated teachings. There is no attempt to tell the *story* of Jesus or even stories *about* him, or to see that story and those stories within the context of the larger story of God and the world, of God and Israel. They show all the signs of having been abstracted from that setting, as though someone were to go through Shakespeare's plays and extract all the great one-liners without any attempt to show where they belong within the dramas of which they form part.

In particular, third, they have seen Jesus not as the one who, climactically and decisively, died on the cross and rose again, but simply as a teacher. This is the heart of it all. They have made the message about Jesus not good *news* about something that has happened, but good *advice* as to how one might re-order one's life. Actually, of course, the advice is not in fact that good. What then about the place of Mary Magdalene, who, according to Dan Brown and some other writers, features strongly in the Gnostic writings, representing a goddess-figure, the embodiment of the "sacred feminine," the Holy Grail, the Rose, the Divine Mother? It is all pure imagination. (Well, it is at least imagination, certainly.) Mary Magdalene is mentioned in precisely three of the Nag Hammadi scrolls (as against "the countless references to Jesus' and Mary Magdalene's union" (333)). The "Gospel of Mary" is the report of a vision which sets the material world against the nonmaterial, seeing Mind as the intermediary of Soul and Spirit. This is fairly standard Platonic idealism; it is hard to see what it's got to do with the sacred feminine, but it's easy to see that it has nothing to do with a first-century Jewish prophetic movement such as that of Jesus. The "Gospel of Philip" is the one where Jesus kisses Mary — but the idea that a kiss was a key gesture of romantic attachment won't survive two minutes when we move away from Hollywood and into the real world of late antiquity. There is not the slightest sign, in Nag Hammadi any more than in the Dead Sea Scrolls, of Jesus being married to Mary and having a child by her. The "Gospel of Thomas" has one saying about Mary (51:19), in which "Jesus" states that "Mary will be saved if she makes herself male, because every female who makes herself male will become fit for the kingdom of God." That is hardly a ringing endorsement for the sacred feminine. If it's sacred femininity you want, you must look elsewhere, to various forms of paganism ancient and modern. These have become enormously popular in some strands of New Age and postmodern thinking. They have found their way into some revisionist versions of western Christianity. But they have nothing to do with Nag Hammadi and nothing whatever to do with early Christianity.

By contrast, the canonical gospels — despite every effort to prove the contrary — are still regarded by the great majority of scholars as early, written within at the outside 50 years of Jesus' lifetime, quite possibly much sooner. The New Testament documents are solidly rooted in the first century. The gospels are dependent in turn on traditions that are very early indeed. Professor Richard Bauckham of St Andrews, who knows more about early Christian traditions than most other scholars put together, is about to publish a book arguing for a much stronger eye-witness content in the canonical gospels than has normally been supposed. The Christian writers of the early second century know and revere the four canonical Gospels, but show no knowledge of traditions like the Gnostic writings. When the canon of the New Testament was finally decided upon, it was not a matter of selecting four books arbitrarily from a list of several dozen. It was a matter of noting that these four Gospels had been known from very early onto have been the core testimony to Jesus.

More especially, the divinity of Jesus is already firmly established by Paul, within 20 or 30 years of Jesus' death. John and Hebrews — and indeed Luke and Matthew, who are almost as explicit — are written by [A.D.] 90 or so at the latest, quite possibly much earlier. The idea that, in the words of one of Dan Brown's characters, Jesus was "just a good man" who "walked the earth and inspired millions to live better lives" is a modern trivialization that, to do them justice, even the Nag Hammadi documents do not perpetrate. And the suggestion, which you meet constantly and not only in *The Da Vinci Code*, that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John omitted Jesus' human characteristics and wrote the story up to make him divine, is a complete travesty of what they are about. The Gospel stories are of course very strange. But they cannot be reduced to a simple clash between, or indeed a simple combination of, something we might call "divinity" and something we might call "humanity." The Jesus we meet in the four canonical Gospels is a flesh-and-blood human being who makes real decisions, who struggles in prayer to know his Father's will and follow it to the end, who weeps at the tomb of his friend — and who, shockingly, embraces a vocation which, in terms of the Old Testament Scriptures he knew so well, meant that he was to do and be what, in Scripture, only Israel's God gets to do and be. This represents a coming together of divine and human which makes no sense except as an account of the real life and mind of a first-century Jew called Jesus.

I have argued elsewhere in detail that this portrait of Jesus is indeed thoroughly credible as a portrait of a prophetic figure of the Palestinian Judaism of the '20s of the first century. We do not have to jettison the canonical Gospels to make historical sense of the figure of Jesus. Yes, it is shocking to find him discovering his messianic vocation in the call to suffer and die for Israel and the world, taking on to himself the fate he had predicted for the nation that had refused God's call to be the light of the world. It is not so much shocking but depressing to discover how that historical perspective has been first misrepresented within the church, then rejected by some for theological reasons, and then simply sidelined. You would not know, either from the Nag Hammadi texts or from the propagators of the modern myth, that Jesus' death was regarded from within the earliest Christianity we know, that of Paul (who is conspicuous by his absence from the myth in most of its forms), as part of the very centre of everything, part of the key reason to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus, at all.

In particular, the resurrection of Jesus was central to early Christianity, though you'd never know that, either, from Dan Brown or from the many other writers who perpetrate the modern myth in its various forms. And Jesus' death was consequently interpreted, from extremely early in the Christian movement, as (a) the fulfillment of the Jewish scriptures, (b) the defeat of all rival spiritual powers, and (c) the means of forgiveness of sins. Early Christianity was not primarily a movement which showed, or taught, how one might live a better life; that came as the corollary of the main emphasis, which was that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had fulfilled his age-old purposes, had dealt with the powers of evil, and had launched his project of new creation upon the world. The early Christian gospel, which was then written up in the four canonical Gospels, was the good news, not that a new teaching about hidden wisdom had appeared, enabling those who tapped into it to improve the quality of their lives here or even hereafter, but that something had *happened* through which the evil which had infected the world had been overthrown and a new creation launched, and that all human beings were invited to become part of that project by becoming renewed themselves.

In particular, this included from the start a strong political critique. Not the tired old left-wing harangue in Christian dress, of course, but a more subtle, more Jewish, more devastating critique: Jesus is Lord, therefore Caesar isn't. That is there in Paul. It is there in Matthew, in John, in Revelation. If the canon was written, or read, to curry political favor, it was dramatically unsuccessful. Those who were thrown to the lions were not reading "Thomas" or Q or the "Gospel of Mary." They were reading Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and the rest, and being sustained thereby in a subversive mode of faith and life which, growing out of apocalyptic Judaism, posed a far greater threat to Roman empire and pagan worldviews than Cynic philosophy or Gnostic spirituality ever could. Why would Caesar worry about people rearranging their private spiritualities? And when Constantine, faced with half his empire turning Christian, decided to go with the tide, what was the church supposed to do? Protest that it would be more authentic to remain a beleaguered and persecuted minority? Let comfortable Western Christians think about what the church had suffered under Diocletian in the years immediately before Constantine — and what the church is suffering in many parts of the world today — and ask themselves who has compromised, and with what.

In fact, the contemporary myth gets things exactly the wrong way round. It isn't the case that the canonical New Testament is politically and socially quiescent, colluding with empire, while the Jesus whom we meet in the Nag Hammadi texts

and similar documents is politically and socially subversive, so dangerous that he had to be suppressed. It's the other way round, and this may be among the most telling points we have to recognize for today. You may salve your own conscience by embracing Gnosticism, by telling yourself how very wicked the world is and how you are going to escape it once and for all by following the path of spiritual self-discovery and enlightenment. But if Caesar takes any notice at all, all he will do is sneer at you and go on his way to yet more triumphs of sheer power. And if that happened in the second century, we can be sure it's precisely what's happening today. Heidegger and Bultmann couldn't prevent Hitler; Derrida and Foucault and their numerous disciples can't do anything to stop the new empires of today. Certainly those who are advocating a new kind of do-it-yourself spirituality, and claiming that Jesus is somehow in or behind it all, cut no ice on the political front.

The challenge comes, therefore, at the level of *worldview*. Yes, of course the church has often got it wrong, including in its views of women (where it has, basically, failed to see what was there in the New Testament itself). Yes, the Constantinian settlement was deeply ambiguous; but they knew it at the time, and it was only with the high Middle Ages that things went so badly wrong. Yes, Christianity has — especially in the 20th century — pretended that it's a "faith," unrelated to history. But its historical roots are rock solid, and the faith that is based on them is not a loose, "whatever-works-for-you" postmodern construct. This faith, and the worldview which it generates, are the heart of the challenge with which I want now to conclude.


3. Conclusion


Let me sum up this lecture in the following way. *The Da Vinci Code* is a symptom of something much bigger, a lightning rod which has throbbled with the electricity of the postmodern western world.

One of the basic fault lines in the contemporary Western world is the line between neo-Gnosticism on the one hand and the challenge of Jesus on the other. Please note that, despite strenuous attempts to make this line coincide with the current sharp left-right polarization of American culture and politics, it simply doesn't. Nor, for that matter, does it coincide with the polarizations of British or European culture either. So what is this real, deep polarization which runs through our world?

Neo-Gnosticism is the philosophy that invites you to search deep inside yourself and discover some exciting things by which you must then live. It is the philosophy which declares that the only real moral imperative is that you should then be true to what you find when you engage in that deep inward search. But this is not a religion of redemption. It is not at all a Jewish vision of the covenant God who sets free the helpless slaves. It appeals, on the contrary, to the pride that says "I'm really quite an exciting person, deep down, whatever I may look like outwardly" — the theme of half the cheap movies and novels in today's world. It appeals to the stimulus of that ever-deeper navel-gazing ("finding out who I *really* am") which is the subject of a million self-help books, and the home-made validation of a thousand ethical confusions. It corresponds, in other words, to what a great many people in our world want to believe and want to do, rather than to the hard and bracing challenge of the very Jewish gospel of Jesus. It appears to legitimate precisely that sort of religion which a large swathe of America and a fair chunk of Europe yearns for: a free-for-all, do-it-yourself spirituality, with a strong though ineffective agenda of social protest against the powers that be, and an I'm-OK-you're-OK attitude on all matters religious and ethical. At least, with one exception: You can have any sort of spirituality you like (Zen, labyrinths, Tai Chi) *as long as it isn't orthodox Christianity*.

By contrast, the challenge of Jesus, in the 21st century as in the first, is that we should look away from ourselves and get on board with the project the one true God launched at creation and re-launched with Jesus himself. The authentic Christian gospel, which is good *news* about something that has *happened* as a result of which the world is a different place — this gospel demands that we submit to Jesus as Lord and allow all other allegiances, loves and self-discoveries to be realigned in that light. God's project, and God's gospel, are rooted in solid history as opposed to Gnostic fantasy and its modern equivalents. Genuine Christianity is to be expressed in self-giving love and radical holiness, not self-cosseting self-discovery. And it lives by, and looks for the completion of, the new world in which God will put all things to rights and wipe away all tears from all eyes; in which all knees will bow at the name of Jesus, not because he had a secret love-child, not because he was a teacher of recondite wisdom, not because he showed us how we could get in touch with the hidden feminine, but because he died as the fulfillment of the Scriptural story of God's people and rose as the fulfillment of the world-redeeming purposes of the same creator God; and because, in that death and resurrection, we discover him to be the one at whose name every knee shall indeed bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, confessing Jesus Christ as Lord to the glory of God the Father.

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