

The Code Considered
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Every so often people will speak of paradigm shifts. A paradigm shift is, simply put, a radical change in human thought and with it, the direction of civilization. Several famous examples include the change in consciousness that accompanied the Copernican Revolution, the Einstein Revolution, and the Darwinian Revolution. These changes influenced not only secular mindsets, but religious ones as well. They posed extraordinary challenges to the people of past eras, in that women and men were forced to question their understanding of the universe and to the divine – and their relationship with each. In our own day, we too seem to be living in the age of a new paradigm shift. Perhaps this process has been unfolding for 30 years or more. Some people will look to the discovery of ancient texts in the years following WWII, in Egypt as the moment of germination. For it was at that moment in history that fifty-two texts, previously known only via ancient church fathers (in their various literary attacks) came to light and began to be translated and disseminated. Now, these formerly lost gospels are readily available to read, to discuss, to weigh. What we discover is that two thousand years ago, there were many groups who called themselves Christians but who have wildly different understandings of who Jesus was as a person, what the role of women might be in the church and in society, what the “proper” canon of scriptures ought to consist of, and so forth and so on.

One of the books which taps into this steam of consciousness is *The Da Vinci Code*, a novel written by Dan Brown. In this book, he addressed a lot of information that I, as a student of history and as a student of theology, have encountered in the academy. As I encountered it during my ministerial preparation, these texts were very dry and boring. It took a lot of coffee to get through it.

In this particular book, much of this information is presented, but in the context of a thriller. So, it’s now available to people at a much broader level than simply the academy. So now, a larger segment of people are wrestling with questions that are raised in this book, asking is it true? Did things really happen like that? They are looking at their faiths and saying, “This is what I was taught. Is that true? How do I know it’s true?” So there’s a great debate going on, both internally and within members of society. In some cases debating civilly and in other cases, squabbling over what do we know really?

Because of this book and because of the debates within the academies for the last 50 years, there’s a whole cottage industry now of books related to *The Da Vinci Code*. You can buy, as I did, *Secrets of the Code*, which contains a number of essays by people from different walks of life, including the academy, who will flesh out the ideas which are mentioned in *The Da Vinci Code*. There are also a series of rebuttals, two of which I bought, *The Truth Behind the Da Vinci Code*, which is actually very antagonist to this book, but it’s done in a thoughtful way. There’s *Fact & Fiction in the Da Vinci Code*, which is an unbridled attack on the ideas of this book, basically along

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the lines that “I was taught to believe in one thing. This contradicts it. Therefore, it must be wrong,” That is the summation of the arguments in this latter book. Needless to say, I didn’t find it very helpful!

I don’t have a lot of time today to get into the real meat of some of the arguments, but I do want to lift up some of the more intriguing hypotheses which are present. The first is related to the search for truth. In the words of welcome to our new members, we emphasize, several times, that we are seekers of truth. We believe there is something such as truth. That is an act of faith. This is complemented by the notion that we can get a handle on that truth and understand the truth and digest that truth. These are all acts of faith.

In *The Da Vinci Code*, the reader encounters various people who likewise believe that they are committed to seeking after truth. There are the protagonists. There are the police. There is the teacher. There is the albino monk. Each person believes that he or she knows something about the truth. They are driven to pursue the truth by whatever means necessary. We look at how they live their lives, how they react to situations. As a logical step, we are invited next to consider the history of the development of our civilization over these past 2,000 years. We realize that people who seek the truth already believe in something. They believe that they understand how the world works. In short, that they (and we ourselves) do have their own particular paradigms. When you begin to grasp this insight, more often than not, you do not set aside all your biases, but you run these facts through your own filter. In many instances, as is shown by these characters, one bends the truth to fit one’s own preconceived notions of what ought to be true, regardless of what that information may be. That is perhaps one of the failings of human nature. We’re lazy. We stop at a certain point from asking ourselves what is true and why do we believe that to be so.

In this book, then, certain questions are raised - not for the first time and certainly not for the last - about who was Jesus? You can look at tradition, the legends, the folklore. If you revisit the scriptures, what you discover is that we in fact know precious little about who he was. There are people today who will make a case that Jesus never existed. There are others who will swear, generally based on their own personal revelation, that Jesus of course did and does exist. Or they will vouch for the sacredness of the scriptures, as if in the very beginning it says, “These are the words, dictated to humanity, by God.” But in fact such words do not exist – nor is there anything scientific nor historical to vouch for the Jesus of history. The accuracy of the gospel narratives is vouched for by the dominant church tradition only. However, once you begin to appreciate the depth and diversity of the once lost early gospels, and their startling different views, one must ask, can we, ought we, trust the tradition that we have inherited?

Earlier I mentioned that there are some traditions that believe all scripture and revelation is closed. There are people in this world today who believe that which was written 2,000 - 3,000 years ago stated the case and nothing more may be added.

People who subscribe to that point of view tend to be very fundamentalist and resist innovation, change, new interpretations. The clearest example of a religious movement focused on revelation in that way is Islam, where it is believed that scripture, as they have it in the Qu'ran, is a faithful rendition of the holy word in heaven, that it must be spoken in the language in which it was revealed, and that nothing new may be added, nothing may be taken away. But that particular attitude also pervades contemporary Christianity, in particular in the fundamentalist approach toward religion. This runs counter to the religious liberal point of view, where we are much more likely to be open to the possibility that we don't know everything and that we can still learn something. For people like us, the assumptions and abuses of the orthodox have been a source of incessant distress throughout the centuries.

As the book points out, there have been many symbols used throughout human history by different people, such as the pentagram. There are many rituals, such as the sharing of bread, which the majority might associate with only one tradition, but if you study different religious traditions, especially ancient ones, you discover these predated Christianity by hundreds and thousands of years. As the ancient Greeks said, "There is nothing new under the sun." So it begs the question: if there are all these symbols - if there are all these rituals, do they have any inherent value? Can any one tradition really claim them as its own? Or do they belong to humanity to use as best they see fit?

We who grapple with the truth will have to grapple with that issue. You see, here behind me on this banner, various symbols. Some would say it is rather profane for us to incorporate symbols from other traditions in our worship. Others would say there is truth filtered through our humanness, that each tradition has digested and has offered back to the world. Therefore, I, among others, would say we are within our rights to list various symbols and to use various rituals that some people associate exclusively with one tradition or the other.

A good example: in the book, references are made to DaVinci's very familiar drawing, Vitruvian Man, which is a human figure encased by a circle. Those who are practicing pagans will look at that and say, "It's the symbol of the pentagram, which goes back thousands of years before Da Vinci, before Christianity." There is a case for that. There is a case for others who will counter-assert, "Well, Christians have used the pentagram through history." What the neutral observer will see that the symbol itself has five points. Christians will talk about the five wounds of Jesus. Pagans will talk about the different elements.

In my hand, I hold a book, *The Gothic Cathedral*, which I picked up years ago. Inside is a drawing from around 1200 - which basically predates Da Vinci by about 350 years. It represents Jesus as the Vitruvian Man centuries before Da Vinci put forth his version. This is but one example of a complex symbol that is very ancient. The Greeks, of course, used the pentagram. Now today, many people, because of its usage in popular culture, might associate it with devil worship. But those who study symbols realize such popular notions are misinformed. We as seekers of the truth

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have to reach a point where we ourselves are comfortable with the knowledge that we have learned, but also be willing to boldly put it back forth into the marketplace of ideas, and say, "There are certain traditions. We respect much within them, but in certain respects, they are wrong. They have misconstrued information. They have debased certain traditions. They have, in some instances, misled."

There is in the book, among other themes, the role of pain in a religious life. Those of you who have read the book, perhaps when you read the accounts of Silas the monk, how he used to beat himself or wear certain garments that would draw blood, for, in his words, "Because pain is good," or, "Pain is for the glory of god." Some authors will say that never happened. They will say that people in Christianity never preached that one should hurt oneself as a part of the divine plan. But if you read history, if you read information from the dark ages, you discover, oh yes, in fact, people did believe that pain was an important part of religion; pain, that they would inflict on themselves, and pain, that, unfortunately, they would inflict on other people.

There is of course the theme of who/what was the Holy Grail? Now we live in a culture, which has for centuries, passed around this story about a holy grail. There are the Arthurian legends which many of us have encountered either through literature or the media. So it's a familiar subject and we have a particular notion of what that grail might mean. Yet, people in the academy, and the author, Dan Brown, suggest that the grail was something quite different. Brown proposes it was Mary Magdalene. People who are going to wrestle with that - first they have to set aside their preconceived notions or their educated notions, and entertain the possibility that they don't know everything, that there are new vistas to information and new insights into symbolism. They need to be willing to be converted. It's a very, very difficult thing for any person to do. It requires, as I mentioned, what we refer to as a paradigm shift. Usually when such a shift in consciousness occurs, it's because it's forced upon the human population. It's not something that people readily embrace. People, I'm told, will readily embrace that which is familiar, even if it's painful, over something which is new. People are frightened of the new because they fall back on what they think they know.

Was Mary Magdalene the lover and/or the wife of Jesus? Did they have children? As mentioned earlier, we know precious little about Jesus. The scriptures themselves, which were written at the earliest, 30 to 40 years after his death, reveal next to nothing about who he was, what he looked like. He wrote nothing himself which has survived. Even less is known about Mary Magdalene. You can make a case that Jesus was human. I am very comfortable with that notion. You can make a case that Jesus was fully divine and fully human, as so many of our Christian brothers and sisters will, and still say, "Well, he was fully human. That aspect opens the door that he might have been a husband, a mate, to Mary Magdalene or someone else."

You take your chances. You throw the dice. You hope for the best. These are all educated guesses, though in truth, some of our guesses would seem much more educated than others. We who are seekers after truth and believe that there is such a

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thing as truth, tend to discern between knowledge, wisdom and enlightenment. Knowledge involves knowing how things appear and work in the real world. Then, there is wisdom to be cultivated. What is wisdom? Wisdom is knowledge of other people. And then there is enlightenment, which is knowledge about oneself. So there are three paths which are discussed in this book, three paths which are alluded to in most sermons, in most sacred literature. We have to hazard our guesses according to what we believe is possible in this world.

What we discover is based on our lack of direct knowledge, based on the fact there were many versions and visions of who Jesus was in the 1st, 2nd and 3rd centuries. We must choose, based upon our own experience, what we believe to be true. I for one believe that Jesus was very human, entirely human. I'm not concerned that as a human being he might have been married. On the other hand, I'm far from convinced that he was. As some of the literature points out, the Essenes, who were contemporaries of Jesus, not to mention John the Baptist, were unmarried. For a person who lived the lifestyle attributed to Jesus, it's difficult to imagine how a spouse would have put up with that! But I suppose that such is within the realm of possibility.

If Jesus was married, if he had had children with Mary Magdalene, could they have survived until the present day? Entirely possible. I'm willing to wager that everyone in this room had ancestors alive 2,000 years ago, in one form or another, and in spite of all the famines, the wars, the twists and turns of fate, somehow, they passed on their genetic codes until it was enfolded in the present - you and I. So that's not necessarily extraordinary.

I don't believe that you need to rely on miracles to explain what Jesus accomplished. Like Emerson, I believe if your faith relies entirely upon miraculous stories about his birth, his resurrection - allegedly - it is a monster. There is no reason to believe those particular miracles any more than it is to believe the miracles attributed Jupiter or Zeus - pick your favorite god or goddess.

Some people might say, "Ah! But in Jesus and in the God of the Christian/Hebrew scriptures, there's a difference: the code of conduct observed by that God and by Jesus." So that draws me to the consideration of: what about the human code - the code of ethics - the code of conduct? Is there any doubt that certain institutions in the ancient past or even in our present political climate, will resort to lies, to deceit, to subterfuge to get whatever end they desire?

The Christian Church -- whether we're talking about the Greek Orthodox Church, or the Catholic Church or one of its myriad offshoots, Protestant churches -- is the oldest entrenched institution in Western history. Like any other institution in existence, it has a stake in surviving from one generation to the next. Is it possible that certain things were hidden, certain scriptures destroyed? Absolutely! Did certain people in the church, overzealously, perhaps on their own, perhaps in accordance with directions from above, kill other people, torture other people, put them on the rack, cut out their tongues, gouge out their eyes? We know that happened. People will do

horrible things if they believe that God is behind it. You will recall that the Crusades were launched with the cry, "Deus Vult! - God wills it!" In ancient days and in our own era, if you can promote your own agenda and say that God is behind it, the most horrible things will occur, whether it was the Inquisition of 500 years ago, or suicide bombers today. People who believe in a fixed, closed scripture, will do the most awful things to their fellow brothers and sisters and bless themselves as they do it.

Is that the kind of God that ought to have been? Did something go horribly wrong with the choice of scripture and with their interpretation? Can anyone imagine Jesus standing up and saying, "Blessed are you poor. Oh and by the way, don't forget to crucify others just like I am going to be crucified." Or as he was being crucified, instead of saying, "Forgive them," but, "Take note, Peter. Learn how the Romans did this. Do it to people who don't believe." You cannot reconcile the message of Jesus with the practices of the institution of the churches nor with the actions of many of our contemporaries..

Was Jesus perfect? No. If the scriptures accurately record his predictions, he made mistakes – proving that he was human, after all. Did he rise from the dead? I don't think so. Have people concocted the most incredible stories and led people based upon their version of the truth, their visions, never having encountered this Jesus of Nazareth? The academics have known that for centuries. Now, thanks to this book, it's free to circulate within the popular imagination.

We are going to have to wrestle with what is and what was the truth, what is worthy to pass on to the next generation. We, like our forebears, must continue to ask, "What do we know? How do we know it? What has value? What is worthwhile to pass on to the next generation?" We, like our forebears, will have to reconsider the Christian tradition, and these other traditions that we honor. We will have to look at our own shortcomings as human beings, the limits to our knowledge. As new information becomes available, we will have to wrestle with it. We will have to reconcile what we think we know with what is actually true.

Symbols are important. History is essential. There is no question that many horrible things have been done to individuals and to the whole, well, to all of women in this west, because of interpretations and biases. The moment of truth is upon us, as the policeman says in *The DaVinci Code*. We do not know all the answers yet, but we are charged as religious liberals to come to terms with that truth.

We are called also to recognize that we are living in a very divided society. There are films that will cater to either side. Liberals might flock to see *Fahrenheit 911*. (I invite you to do so here tonight!) Conservatives will flock to see *The Passion*. Liberals will read *The Da Vinci Code*. Neo-cons will read the *Left Behind* series. The networks we watch, the newspapers we read, all point to the fact that we are living in a divided culture. Can it be reconciled peacefully? I hope so. I look at human history and I get very distressed and depressed thinking about our prospects. I do believe that whatever happens, we are committed to seeking after truth. It is something that we

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are not charged with keeping to ourselves and to our own edification, our own enlightenment. Like the bodhisattvas, we are charged with carrying forward the truth and sharing it with others. To the extent that we succeed, I think it will be a saner world. To the extent that we accept this responsibility, both for educating ourselves, educating our neighbors, I think we will further the blessings of creation. I hope that we are all up to the task.