

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian
Students

Presented by the
President of

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Theological
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American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season,
out of season;
reprove, rebuke, exhort
with all longsuffering
and doctrine.”

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The Da Vinci Code

Part Three

“Many Christianities?”

Kevin T. Bauder

One of the claims that Dan Brown makes in *The Da Vinci Code* is that the original followers of Jesus believed something quite different from the body of teaching that eventually became Christian orthodoxy. According to Brown, the original Christians knew that Jesus was married, and they saw Him as essentially human. They recognized Mary Magdalene as an apostle. They acknowledged the divine feminine as an aspect of their faith. Brown suggests that all of this began to change as the result of an ongoing power struggle among Jesus' followers—a struggle that focused particularly upon male domination. This struggle came to a head at the time of Constantine, who for political reasons chose to promote the views of one faction. Led by Constantine, the Council of Nicea (325 CE) elevated Jesus to the level of deity, denied His marriage, diminished the stature of women, eradicated the divine feminine from Christianity, and invented a New Testament that would support these views. Though this combination of views had been relatively rare before Constantine, it rapidly became “orthodoxy” when it was backed by the power of the Roman government.

There is a grain of truth in Brown's theory. As a matter of fact, the First Century CE was a time of religious ferment. As word about Jesus reached the various Jewish sects and mystery religions, different sorts of combinations arose out of the mix. Groups like Mandeans, Sabians, Ebionites, Cerinthians, and Docetists combined elements of Christian teachings with elements from other religious traditions.

One of the earliest and most powerful revisions of Christianity was the religious philosophy called *Gnosticism*. Gnosticism borrowed a good bit of its system from Middle Platonism, fitting in other categories from Zoroastrianism, and, in some versions, elements from Christianity (not all forms of Gnosticism attempted to absorb Christian elements). Paul wrote a refutation of an early form of Gnosticism in his letter to the church at Colosse, and John's letters attempted to refute a more developed type of the Gnostic system.

Gnosticism existed in many varieties, but all sorts held certain principles in common. They all taught that the true God is ultimately unknowable, but that this God gives rise to other, lesser gods (called Eons), who in turn give rise to still others. The entire system of gods was called the Pleroma. All Gnostics held that the division between matter and spirit corresponds exactly to the division between evil and good, so that matter is always evil, and spirit is always good. Therefore, they all believed that the body is always evil. Only the spirit is good. This philosophy left them with three questions to answer.

The first question was, How could a good (spiritual) God create an evil (material) world? Their answer was that the true God did not create the world. Rather, God gave rise to Eons, and they to other Eons, until eventually one of the lowest members of the Pleroma gave rise to an ignorant, obtuse being called the Demiurge. This Demiurge is the God of the Old Testament, and He created the material world as part of His malevolence.

The second question was, Who was Christ and how was He related to the man named Jesus? Gnostics agreed that Christ was not a human, but that He was a powerful member of the Pleroma. They disagreed about His relation to the human Jesus. Some of them (called Docetists) taught that there never was a human Jesus, but that the Christ merely projected the appearance of a human body. Others of them (called Cerinthians) taught that the Christ Spirit came upon the human Jesus at His baptism, and then abandoned Him shortly before the crucifixion. Both of these theories denied the true humanity of the Christ, insisting that a good Christ could only be pure spirit and could not have a material body.

The third question was, How are people supposed to live if Gnosticism is true? Gnostics answered this question in two different ways. Most of them said that since the material body is evil, it must be disciplined and its desires denied. Therefore, the majority of Gnostics had a very low view of pleasurable activities such as eating, drinking, and sexual relations.

A small minority of Gnostics, however, gave the opposite answer. They argued that the body is so evil that it is completely irredeemable. Whatever is done with the body makes no difference, and therefore bodily desires may be freely indulged. The worship of these minority Gnostic cults came to be characterized by bizarre sexual rituals.

This minority movement among Gnostics is the historical group that most closely resembles Dan Brown's descriptions of the early followers of Jesus in *The Da Vinci Code*. Besides adopting sex rituals, these Gnostics sometimes focused upon feminine members of the Pleroma

such as Sophia, which focus could arguably approximate Brown's view of the goddess principle. But these people were never a majority even among Gnostics. They represented only a splinter of those groups and individuals who claimed to be followers of Jesus.

All Gnostics, even the non-Christianized ones, claimed to possess secret knowledge or "gnosis" that had been delivered to them by some member of the Pleroma. Christianized Gnostics recognized Christ as the Eon who had imparted this gnosis. They taught that He had delivered it through some of His lesser-known disciples such as Thomas, Philip, and Mary Magdalene. These disciples had passed it along through secret oral tradition or had written it down in documents that were kept as closely guarded secrets. Thus, Gnosticism developed its own set of scriptures that included documents such as the Apocryphon of John, the Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles, the Gospel of Philip, and the Gospel of Mary Magdala. A collection of about fifty Gnostic texts was discovered at the Egyptian town of Nag Hammadi in 1945.

Biblical writers knew about Gnostic influences. The apostle Paul was aware of spurious writings bearing his name as early as late 50 or early 51 CE (2 Thess. 2:2). By about 60 CE he had become aware of an early amalgam of Gnostic and Jewish categories, and wrote his epistle to the Colossians to refute it. Before the end of the First Century, the apostle John was writing epistles to refute fully-developed versions of Gnosticism.

To summarize, during the last half of the First Century, a conflict developed among those who claimed to be followers of Jesus. On one side were the Gnostics, who asserted that they had a secret oral tradition that went back to Jesus Himself. Later on they also claimed to possess documents that had been committed to them secretly by such persons as Thomas, Philip, and Mary Magdalene. On the other side of the conflict were writers such as Paul and John, who declared that they possessed personal teaching directly from Jesus. These teachers were sharply anti-Gnostic, insisting that allegiance to Gnostic doctrines separated one from God and consisted of empty deceit and humanly-invented traditions (2 Jn. 7-9; Col. 2:8-9).

Everyone who has studied early Christianity knows that this conflict occurred. Everyone also knows that the conflict grew even more intense during the Second Century. What does this mean for *The Da Vinci Code*? Does it support Brown's thesis?

In the first place, Gnosticism only partially resembles the early "Jesus religion" that Dan Brown depicts. For example, most Gnostics condemned marriage and did not engage in sexual activity, let alone sex rites. Also, Gnostics uniformly held a very low view of women, much lower than the Christianity that is presented in the New Testament. Gnosticism was *not* a liberating religion for women.

More than that, the appearance of Gnosticism raises two related problems: first, whether it is possible to tell what Jesus and His early followers actually taught, and, second, which (putatively apostolic) documents are to be accepted as authentic and authoritative. These are the very questions that must also be answered in evaluating Dan Brown's proposal in *The Da Vinci Code*. What is Christianity, and how do we know?

These are not new questions. They have been asked since the First Century. They were addressed explicitly during the Second Century, at which time they received answers that have been accepted as adequate by most Christians for the past 1,800 years. Our next task will be to review those answers. ✖

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

What would I give?

Christina Rossetti (1830-1894)

What would I give for a heart of flesh to warm
me through,
Instead of this heart of stone ice-cold whatever I do;
Hard and cold and small, of all hearts the worst of all.

What would I give for words, if only words would
come;
But now in its misery my spirit has fallen dumb:
Oh, merry friends, go your way, I have never a word
to say.

What would I give for tears, not smiles but scalding
tears,
To wash the black mark clean, and to thaw the frost
of years,
To wash the stain ingrain, and to make me clean again. ✕

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