

Discussion Starters

Preface

The Da Vinci Code is a work of fiction. Why are people taking its claims so seriously? [The author asks readers to take its claims seriously. Also, the author has indicated that he believes the conspiracy theory about which he is writing is credible. In short, the novel purports to be based on history.]

What is the harm in a fiction book like *The Da Vinci Code*? [Since the author claims that his story is based on fact, some people come away with doubts about whether the New Testament version of Christianity is true. Without some knowledge of church history and how the books of the canon were collected, it is difficult to discern fact from fiction in the novel.]

Do you believe that the author, Dan Brown, has an agenda in writing this novel? If so, what is it? [Yes, he appears to have an agenda; namely, to attack historic Christianity by appealing to the Gnostic Gospels and thus promoting a feminist and esoteric view of Jesus.]

What might be some clues that the author has crossed the line between a purely fictional story and a propaganda piece? [He claims that some things, like the marriage of Mary Magdalene to Jesus, are a matter of historical fact, which, needless to say, is not the case.]

How likely is it that orthodox Christian theology is merely a sinister hoax perpetrated on innocent people? [It's not likely, since the historical basis of orthodox Christianity is credible and can be independently verified. Conspiracy theories like *The Da Vinci Code* have come and gone over the centuries.]

Why do you think some people are attracted to conspiracy theories? [Some possibilities are: They are intriguing; people love a mystery; and such theories promote agendas that support what some would like to believe.]

Chapter 1: Christianity, a Politician, and a Creed

Before Constantine's conversion to Christianity, what was life in Rome like for Christians? [They were often persecuted for not worshipping Caesar as well as Christ.]

Constantine is credited with making Rome safe for Christians as a result of converting to Christianity himself. What were the circumstances of his conversion? [On the eve of battle, Constantine apparently saw a vision of Christ. The battle was successful, and Constantine became ruler of the empire. He issued the Edict of Milan to halt the persecution of Christians.]

Why did Constantine convene the Council of Nicaea? *[He wanted to resolve doctrinal disputes about the person of Christ.]*

What effect were various doctrinal disputes having on Constantinople in Constantine's day? *[Discussions about the nature of Christ were divisive and threatening the unity of the empire. Heresies were also developing, and bishops were concerned.]*

What heresies did the Council of Nicaea address? *[The Council considered—and rejected—claims that Jesus was not divine and that he was not of the same substance as God the Father.]*

What arguments were made against these theories? *[If Christ is not God, then he could not redeem mankind. Also, he created all things and therefore could not have been created by someone else.]*

Why is it unlikely that Christ's divinity was "invented" at the Council of Nicaea? *[It was claimed by Jesus himself, by the apostles, and by early church leaders centuries before the council took place.]*

How did the biblical canon come to be chosen? Was it a function of the Council of Nicaea? *[The canon was chosen through careful study and consensus that books met certain criteria and were the result of God's revelation. The process was not a function of the Council of Nicaea.]*

According to *The Da Vinci Code*, what philosophies were the official church leaders supposedly promoting? *[They allegedly advocated male dominance and the suppression of women.]*

Erwin Lutzer states that the Romans were "tolerant of everyone except those who were intolerant." Do you find this attitude to be in evidence today? How so? *[Political correctness, intolerance toward Christians, the insistence that religion be privatized, etc., are examples.]*

Chapter 2: That Other Bible

What is *The Gnostic Bible*, and what is its attraction for readers? *[The Gnostic Bible contains writings discovered in 1945 that were not part of the official canon. It appeals to modern readers because it promotes tolerance, do-it-yourself religion, and a profeminist viewpoint.]*

How does the Gnostic version of Christianity differ from the Christianity of the Bible? *[It portrays a profeminist, androgynous God; the divine can supposedly be experienced through sexual rituals; and, according to Dan Brown, it teaches that Jesus intended to build the church on Mary Magdalene, whom he is said to have married.]*

Is *The Gnostic Bible* as reliable as the Bible? [No. The Gnostic Bible is not supported by history (sequential events) or archaeology (actual locations, etc.). In contrast to the four Gospels of the New Testament, the Gnostic Gospels were not written by eyewitnesses who knew Jesus. The Bible stands up to scrutiny, while The Gnostic Bible does not.]

What did the Gnostics believe? [They believed that there was hidden knowledge available only to those who had certain esoteric experiences; that God was both male and female; that salvation was a matter of self-knowledge; and that the original church was matriarchal and feminine.]

Why are those beliefs so popular today? [Our modern culture supports doctrinal diversity, “tolerance,” feminism, and experiencing God in ways other than through Christ.]

Chapter 3: Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and the Search for the Holy Grail

What is the Priory of Sion, of which Leonardo Da Vinci was purported to be a member? [Supposedly, the Priory of Sion was “a small band of conspirators who knew the truth about the marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, but because of opposition from the church, the explosive truth had to be hidden.”]

According to *The Da Vinci Code*, how did Da Vinci carry out the work of the Priory? [He worked secret coded images into his paintings. For example, Dan Brown claims that in Da Vinci’s painting *The Last Supper*, it is actually Mary Magdalene who is seated to the right of Jesus and not John the apostle.]

What is the biblical evidence that Mary Magdalene was a harlot? [There is none. This theory came about because the story of the harlot and a reference to Mary Magdalene occur closely together in Luke (see chapter 7:36-50; 8:1-3). However, there is no reason to believe that Mary is the harlot, and thus in 1969 the Vatican issued an apology and acknowledged that this characterization was a misrepresentation.]

Was Jesus a feminist? [Jesus “broke with tradition in allowing women to travel with him and help support his ministry.” He was far ahead of his culture by treating women with respect and dignity. But he was not a feminist as the word is used today.]

What evidence does *The Da Vinci Code* use to support a marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene? Is this evidence credible? Why or why not? [Some say that because Mary Magdalene touched Jesus after his resurrection, which only a married woman would do, they must have been married. However, other women also touched Jesus: “And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped him” (Matthew 28:9, NASB). (See page 47.)] Also, the Gnostic Gospels say that Mary was the companion of Jesus. However, even if this were true, it does not lend credibility to the notion that they were married.)

What reasons are there that Jesus could not have been married? *[Since he had a holy, divine nature, he would have needed to marry someone as sinless as himself, which was impossible. It is also reasonable to assume he needed to remain pure for his eventual marriage to his bride, the church.]*

Chapter 4: Banned from the Bible: Why?

Why were some books included in the biblical canon and others rejected? *[The books in the canon were collected, agreed upon, and accepted as the Word of God by the early church. Most were written to local churches or individuals in the first century after Christ's death; others were written for broader audiences. Some clues to authenticity: Was the author known or did he at least show acquaintance with apostolic thought? Was he an eyewitness or did he hear directly from eyewitnesses? Was the book's content consistent with other Scripture?]*

How is it possible that a fallible church could choose an infallible set of books for the New Testament? *[While theoretically the church could have erred in the books that were finally agreed upon as canonical, it is clear that they were led of God to choose the right ones. The unity of the New Testament shows that the books that were included belong there; those that were not fall beneath the high standard of canonicity that the accepted books enjoy.]*

Chapter 5: A Successful Search for Jesus

How can we respond to people who tell us that the New Testament is unreliable? *[It has stood the test of time and rigorous scholarship.]*

What is the purpose of the Jesus Seminar? *[The group aims to change the way people think about Jesus and give a new view of Jesus, one that appeals to modern concerns like feminism, ecology, multiculturalism, and political correctness).]*

Why do the Jesus Seminar scholars have such a hard time believing that Jesus is divine? *[They have a strong bias against the supernatural.]*

Augustine wrote, "If you believe what you like in the gospels and reject what you don't like, it's not the gospel you believe, but yourself." Is this statement valid in our culture as well as in Augustine's time? *[Yes. Many moderns strongly believe in a religion of the self; they would argue that whatever they accept as truth is truth—at least for themselves.]*

What are three tests that can be applied to verify the historical accuracy of the New Testament? *[The first test is biographical—do we have a good manuscript tradition? Thankfully, we do, and we can also examine internal and external evidence.]*

Chapter 6: Divergent Paths: The Church and Its Competitors

What can we say to someone who thinks that all religions are the same? *[Christianity is different from other religions in many respects. All religions cannot be correct, because they contradict each other.]*

Why is our culture so attracted to Gnosticism and its teaching? *[Many people want to connect with the metaphysical world, yet they are committed to diversity and a cafeteria-style religion where they can pick and choose what to believe. So Gnosticism appeals to those who believe that no one religion is “right.” Also, it is attractive to those who believe that personal salvation is in the hands of the individual rather than God.]*

What are some ways that Christian beliefs are different from other religions? *[Christianity acknowledges the doctrine of sin, the inability to redeem ourselves, the holiness of God, and the reality of a Redeemer who can rescue us.]*

What can we say to someone who says, “I’m into God, but not Jesus”? *[Such an approach discredits Christ, who claimed to be the only way to God; also it is contrary to the teaching of the Old Testament that teaches that God must be approached with a sacrifice that he accepts. We are not to remake God according to our own liking.]*

What advice would you have for someone who is considering reading *The Da Vinci Code*? *[We must read the novel with great care, fully aware that its teachings cannot be defended on the basis of sober historical investigation. When we compare its version of events with historic Christianity, we are struck with the radical differences between the two approaches. A bit of study and reflection confirms the superiority of the New Testament documents over against esoteric fabrications.]*