

DECODING THE DA VINCI CODE

Finding its Errors and Deceptions

By

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Introduction

Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code* is a publishing sensation. It has been on the best seller lists since 2003, and has sold more than 40 million copies worldwide. It's now been released as a film that has also been a great financial success in spite of bad reviews. I'm sure many of you will have read the book or seen the film. As thrillers go, I think the book is nothing special, not as well written as many others and the film is quite poor.

As I just said, the novel is a runaway best seller. It has probably outsold any book ever published – with the exception of the Bible. Perhaps that is the clue. *The Da Vinci Code* could be seen as a kind of anti-bible, a bringing together of New-Agers, Feminists and conspiracy theorists within its covers. Thus, in addition to being a best seller, the novel also contains much material that is both incorrect and extremely offensive to Christians. Even if this novel had been presented as a pure work of fiction the denigration and devaluation of Jesus and the scriptures the novel contains would be deeply offensive to Christians.

However, Dan Brown has gone much further by adopting a number of dubious tactics to create an impression for his readers that much of the material in the novel is actually factual. Firstly, he includes a so-called "FACT" page within his novel, which states "all descriptions of artworks, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate". This claim is in itself untrue and misleading and is also designed to give a false air of truth and reality to various anti-Christian claims in the novel which are neither artworks, architecture, documents or rituals – but which will appear to the reader to be derived from them. Secondly, on his FACTS page, Brown alleges that a secret society called The Priory of Sion is a real organisation that was founded in 1099. Actually, the documents supposedly revealing the existence and history of the Priory of Sion known as *Les Dossiers Secrets* are now known to be the work of a convicted confidence trickster named Pierre Plantard. We shall be discussing this in more detail later. Thirdly, Brown says he received research assistance in the preparation of the book from a number of prestigious organisations such as the Louvre, The Royal Greenwich Observatory, Catholic World News etc. In fact virtually all of these organisations deny any contact with Brown prior to the novels publication. He may have gleaned some facts from their websites, just as any of us can do these days, but that does not really amount to assistance. Fourthly, the semblance of veracity and authority is further enhanced by the fact that the hero of the novel is a Harvard Professor and most of the anti-Christian statements are delivered to him by another authority figure Sir Leigh Teabing who is said to be British Royal Historian. It's these attempts to present fiction as fact that make this novel particularly offensive and dangerous. The danger is that many readers will accept Dan Brown's fiction and factual inaccuracies as the truth.

Even at a non-Christian level the novel is extremely inaccurate. For example in the realm of architecture the French meridian (quickly displaced by the Greenwich meridian) did not pass through the Louvre (as asserted on page 589 of the novel) but through the Paris observatory. In the field of art Madonna on the Rocks is painted on wood not canvas (and so Sophie would not have been able to put her knee through it), also the two versions of that painting (which do indeed exist) are almost exactly alike, rather than radically different as asserted in the novel (page 191). These are but a few examples of the myriad mis-statements in the novel.

However, my talk today is designed to isolate the claims in the novel which are either contrary to Christian faith or defamatory towards the church and then to go on to show that these are either untrue or at best highly distorted representations of the truth. The numbers of incorrect statements in the novel (even when we restrict ourselves to the Christian realm) are so large that I'm not going to attempt to deal with ALL of them in this talk – it would simply take too long and become boring. Instead I'm going to concentrate on those untruths and mis-statements that are most damaging to our Christian faith and the Christian Church – but don't assume that just because I don't deal with some particular statement made in the novel that I agree with it. In this case silence is not to be taken as acceptance or agreement. I'm also going to give lots of opportunities for questions and comments. Please feel free to use these question times to comment on those aspects of the novel we've been discussing or to comment on anything in my presentation.

A number of mis-statements are aimed at the Catholic Church in particular rather than at Christianity in general. Indeed I'm surprised that the Catholic Church and Opus Dei have not taken legal action against Dan Brown and his publishers for portraying them as a murderous organisations which use assassins and which have murdered numbers of people in modern times. Brown does slightly soften that allegation towards the end of the novel on page 559, where he states that the Opus Dei officials responsible for the murders which introduce the novel are renegades, but he never withdraws his allegations about previous murders to contain the bloodline of Christ and to preserve the secrets of the Society of Sion. Incidentally all of the page references I shall give today are to the Corgi edition of the novel published in 2004, which was the edition I used in researching this talk.

A Brief Summary of the Novel

Let's start with a very brief resume of the plot of the novel. The story concerns a professor of religious symbology (Robert Langdon) who is called in by heroine Sophie Neveu (whose name incidentally means new knowledge) to help solve the mystery of the murder of the curator of the Louvre museum. Langdon is accused of this murder and it appears that he can only prove his innocence by solving the mysterious encoded messages left by the victim. This involves solving ciphers and anagrams and the interpretation of many of Leonardo da Vinci's artworks, especially the Mona Lisa and the Last Supper, although the novel degenerates into a chase scenario with the French police pursuing Langdon and Neveu. The solution to the murder mystery is eventually found to be linked to the Holy Grail (usually said to be the chalice containing Christ's blood, but said to be Mary Magdalene's womb in the novel) secret societies of the Priory of Sion and the Knights Templars and a caricature of the Catholic organisation "Opus Dei". However, the real secret, revealed by the villain of the book Sir Leigh Teabing, is documents, which are said to have been suppressed by the Vatican and hidden by the Priory of Sion for a thousand years because they contradict orthodox Christianity. Neveu and Langdon visit many locations to try and track down these documents without success, but at the end of the novel Langdon realises they are hidden at the Louvre. The novel is not terribly well written (the characterisations are rather wooden and the dialogue is poor), but there is no doubt that it was cleverly designed to have particular appeal to a wide range of people especially feminists, New Agers and conspiracy theorists. It was incredibly badly researched on both factual and historical levels and appears to have been intended as a deliberate attack on Christianity.

Reasons Why the Novel is Offensive to Christians

The main reasons why the novel is offensive to Christians are that it asserts the following things:

1. Jesus is not God; he was only a man (pages 315 and 318).
2. Jesus was viewed by the Church as a man and not as God until the fourth century, when he was deified by the emperor Constantine at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD and in a close vote (page 315).
3. The Church's teaching about Christ is false (page 318).
4. The Bible we have today was financed and put together by a pagan Roman emperor – Constantine (pages 313 and 317).
5. There was never a definitive version of the Bible (page 313) and we cannot confirm its authenticity (page 342).
6. The Gospels and indeed all of the New Testament have been extensively edited to support the claims of later Christians that Jesus was God and also in other respects (page 317).
7. In the original Gospels, Mary Magdalene rather than Peter was directed to establish the Church (page 334).
8. The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Coptic Scrolls support this story (page 317).
9. There are documents that prove the NT of our Bible today to be false (page 451).
10. Christians understand that the virgin birth of Jesus is not real (page 452).
11. Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene.
12. She is to be worshiped as a goddess.
13. Jesus got her pregnant, she was pregnant at the time of the crucifixion (pages 335 and 342) and the two had a daughter and she is the "Holy Grail" because she bore Christ's child (page 327).
14. That daughter gave rise to a prominent family line that is still present in Europe today.
15. There is a secret society known as the Priory of Sion that still worships Mary Magdalene as a goddess and is trying to keep the truth of 1 to 9 above alive but hidden (pages 217-219).
16. The Catholic Church is aware of all the foregoing and has been fighting for centuries to keep it suppressed (page 534). It has often committed murder to do so (page 355).
17. The Catholic Church is willing to and often has assassinated the descendants of Christ to keep his bloodline from growing (page 355 and 544).
18. The organisation of the Catholic Church known as Opus Dei has murdered and committed other criminal acts to preserve the secrecy of the above statements regarding the nature of Jesus (pages 109).

Clearly most of the above go to the heart of our Christian faith and the last three are particularly defamatory of the Catholic Church.

The Priory of Sion

Let's start by dealing with item 15 – the veracity and functions of the secret society known as the Priory of Sion, as this is a fairly simple issue and will give you a flavour of the lack of quality of Dan Brown's research. According to Brown's "FACT" page The Priory of Sion is a real secret society founded in 1099 and goes on to add that in 1975, Paris's *Bibliothèque Nationale* discovered parchments known as *Les Dossiers Secretes*, identifying numerous

members of the Priory of Sion, including Sir Isaac Newton, Botticelli, Victor Hugo, and Leonardo da Vinci. The novel goes on to depict the Priory of Sion as a secret society defending the bloodline of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene. Because it allegedly holds the secret of this bloodline, it is persecuted by the Catholic Church. The Priory is also devoted to worshipping "the sacred feminine" and holds sex orgies as a form of ritual worship.

Les Dossiers Secretes also formed the basis of other books promoting a similar anti-Christian message to that of the Da Vinci Code such as *Holy Blood*, *Holy Grail*, and *The Messianic Legacy*. However, we now know that these documents were created – i.e. forged – by a group headed by a convicted confidence trickster named Pierre Plantard. The Priory of Sion was a club founded in 1956 by four young Frenchmen. Two of its members were André Bonhomme (who was president of the club when it was founded) and Pierre Plantard (who previously had been sentenced to six months in prison for fraud and embezzlement).

The group's name is based on a local mountain in France (Col du Mont Sion), not Mount Zion in Jerusalem. It has no connection with the Crusaders, the Templars, or previous movements incorporating "Sion" into their names.

The organisation broke up after a short time, but in later years Pierre Plantard revived it, claimed he was the "grand master" or leader, and began making outrageous claims regarding its antiquity, prior membership, and true purposes. It was he who claimed that the Priory stemmed from the Crusades, he (in conjunction with later associates) who composed and planted *Les Dossiers Secretes* in the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, and he who created the story that the Priory was guarding a secret royal bloodline that could one day return to political power. This is documented in letters written by Plantard which are still in existence.

After Plantard's claims regarding the Priory came to public attention, his former associates contradicted him. A 1996 statement made to the BBC by André Bonhomme the Priory of Sion's original president, said:

The Priory of Sion doesn't exist anymore. We were never involved in any activities of a political nature. It was four friends who came together to have fun. We called ourselves the Priory of Sion because there was a mountain by the same name close-by. I haven't seen Pierre Plantard in over twenty years and I don't know what he's up to but he always had a great imagination. I don't know why people try to make such a big thing out of nothing.

The BBC itself concluded:

There's no evidence for a Priory of Sion until the 1950s; to find it, you [have to] go to the little town of St. Julien. Under French law every new club or association must register itself with the authorities, and that's why there's a dossier here showing that a Priory of Sion filed the proper forms in 1956. According to a founding member, this eccentric association took its name not from Jerusalem but from a nearby mountain (*Col du Mont Sion*, alt. 786 m). The dossier also notes that the Priory's self-styled grand master, Pierre Plantard, who is central to this story, has done time in jail.

For an extensive chronology of the events surrounding Pierre Plantard, the Priory of Sion, and its eventual demise, see the online materials assembled by researcher Paul Smith at: <http://www.priory-of-sion.com/>

Paul Smith notes:

Pierre Plantard was sentenced on December 17, 1953, by the court of St. Julien-en-Genevois to six months in prison for breaking the French law relating to "*Abus de Confiance*" (fraud and embezzlement).

The evidence for this is found in a letter written by the Mayor of Annemasse in 1956 to the sub-prefect of St. Julien-en-Genevois, which can be found in the file that contains the 1956 statutes of the Priory of Sion and the 1956 registration documents of the Priory of Sion:

In our archives we have a note from the I.N.S.S.E dated 15 December 1954 advising us that Monsieur Pierre Plantard was sentenced on 17 December 1953 by the court in St. Julien-en-Genevois to six months imprisonment for a 'breach of trust' under articles 406 and 408 of the Penal Code.

In the 1980s, Plantard asserted that he had spent a number of years in retirement from the Priory of Sion, during which time a man named Roger-Patrice Pelat had served as its grand master. Following the death of Pelat, Plantard claimed to have regained his position as Priory grand master.

Pelat, however, had been involved in a corruption scandal, and Plantard eventually became involved in the investigation of this scandal by the French courts. Paul Smith notes:

When Judge Thierry Jean-Pierre became the presiding French judge heading the enquiry into the Patrice Pelat financial corruption scandal of the 1980s, Plantard voluntarily came forward during the 1990s offering evidence to the enquiry, claiming that Pelat had been a "Grand Master of the Priory of Sion." The judge ordered a search of Plantard's house, which uncovered a hoard of Priory of Sion documents, claiming Plantard to be the "true King of France." The judge subsequently detained Plantard for a forty-eight hour interview and, after asking Plantard to swear on oath, Plantard admitted that he made everything up; whereupon Plantard was given a serious warning and advised not to "play games" with the French judicial system. This happened in September 1993, and it was all reported in the French press of the period. This was the reason for the final termination of the Priory of Sion in 1993.

In 1975, Plantard had begun calling himself "Plantard de St. Clair" to pretend a connection with a noble Scottish family involved with Freemasonry who'd built the strange Chapel of Rosslyn near Edinburgh. (This is why *The Da Vinci Code* claims the blood of Christ survived most directly in the Plantard and St. Clair families' p347.)

Pierre Plantard died in 2002.

Clearly the real history of the Priory of Sion as researched by the BBC and others bears absolutely no relationship to that presented as FACT by Dan Brown. It is not an ancient secret society, but merely a figment of the vivid imagination of a modern French criminal.

Opus Dei

Having dealt with one secret society let us turn to item 18 to deal with another organisation which is not a secret society, but which is perhaps a little obscure to most of us – Opus Dei. Indeed Opus Dei is probably the most controversial organisation within the Catholic Church. Opus Dei states of itself:

Opus Dei was founded in Spain in 1928 by a Catholic priest, St. Josemaría Escrivá, with the purpose of promoting lay holiness. It began to grow with the support of the local bishops there and was approved as a secular institute of pontifical right by the Holy See in 1950. Opus Dei's work has been blessed and encouraged by Popes John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul I, and John Paul II. In 1982, John Paul II established it as a personal prelature of the Catholic Church after careful study of its role in the Church's mission. The culmination of the Church's support for Opus Dei and its message came with the 2002 canonisation of its founder. Pope John Paul has called Opus Dei's founder "the saint of ordinary life."

As far as I can determine after much careful research, the above is true, and indeed the organisation does much good work in promoting the sanctifying value of work and ordinary life, but there are one or two disturbing facts. I believe that the worst things that can be said about Opus Dei are that it is rather right wing politically – even somewhat fascistic, it is intolerant of other religions, it is somewhat extremist by today's standards as regards holiness in personal life for its members and it may be somewhat manipulative of its members who are more susceptible to its influence. However, there is no evidence that its members practice corporeal mortification, especially the extreme variety portrayed in the novel and absolutely no indication that they have been associated with any criminal or violent acts.

Consequently, I believe the novel totally misrepresents Opus Dei. About the only truth told in the novel is that they do indeed have a \$42 million 17 story headquarters in Lexington Avenue New York. At least Dan Brown got that right.

Murder and Criminal Acts by the Catholic Church

Before we turn to the novel's more damaging claims from the perspective of the Christian faith, let's just dismiss items 16 and 17. I know of absolutely no evidence, not even the smallest suspicion that the Catholic Church has been involved in this kind of behaviour since the middle ages. Certainly the Catholic church has an unfortunate ancient history and was involved in such evils as the Crusades, and the Inquisition, but that was long ago when society was much more primitive and such brutality was the norm. That certainly does not excuse such acts by those who claim to be Christians, but it is very different from claiming that the Church is involved in organised criminal activity today, its sins of modern times are more those of omission (such as failure to discipline and control Catholic priests). Once again I believe that Dan Brown has no evidence for his assertions. Indeed we can also say that there was great provocation for the Crusades in terms of military invasions and the destruction of the church of the Holy Sepulchre (destroyed by the Muslims in 1009). We can also say that the numbers of people put to death during the Inquisition was much smaller than the millions implied by Dan Brown – probably no more than 50,000 at most.

I don't want to defend the Catholic church too strongly, but I do think Dan Brown has gone completely over the top here.

The Composition of the Bible

So turning now to those statements which impact our faith most directly as non-Catholics, let's start with items 4, 5 and 6 – the assertions that Constantine and/or the First Council of Nicea controlled the composition of the Bible or edited and amended its contents. Those of you who were at my "An Overview of the Bible" training day should already have a

good idea why these allegations are completely and demonstrably untrue, but for the sake of completeness I'm going to repeat some of that material, selected to address this particular issue, and also add one or two points that are particularly relevant to these particular issues.

We need to start by looking at how and why the Bible came to contain the books which we find within it today.

How Were the Precise Contents Decided

Introducing the Idea of the Canon

In theological jargon, this is called the issue of 'canonicity'. The word comes from the Greek root word 'kanon' or 'reed' in English, which was used as a measuring rod. This was first applied to scripture by Origen in the 3rd century AD. He used it to denote 'the rule of faith' – the standard we use to evaluate Christian religious writings. Later the term came to mean a 'list' or 'index'. Now it has come to mean the officially accepted list of books that constitute the bible.

Tests for Inclusion in the Canon

The church did not create the canon, rather it recognised or discovered which books had the necessary quality of inspiration to be included as part of 'the word of God'. The church merely recognised the 'divine authority' which God had given to certain books. The main criteria used were as follows:

1. Was the book written by a prophet of God or a spokesman for God?
2. Was the writer confirmed by acts of God such as miracles?
3. Does the message tell the truth about God (for God cannot contradict himself) when compared with other books in the canon?
4. Does it come with the power of God? That is does it have a power to transform lives and change and convert people.
5. Is it generally accepted by the people of God?

The OT Canon

I imagine that when he made his statements about the Bible, Dan Brown had the NT rather than the OT in mind – but he does refer to the whole Bible, so lets start off by looking at the OT Canon.

Some scholars hold that the council of Rabbis held at Jamnia near Jaffa in AD 90 fixed the Hebrew canon, but in my view this is not strictly correct. That council merely 'raised questions about the presence of certain books in the canon' and none of the books which the council refused to admit to the canon had ever been there previously. The council did consider the right of certain OT books such as *Esther*, *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes*, *Song of Songs* and *Ezekiel* to remain in the OT canon, but although questions were raised no serious wish to remove these books was voiced. Thus, no decisions regarding changes to the books of the OT canon were made at Jamnia.

The OT canon was established by tradition and long usage, certainly no later than 150 BC, and probably as early as the fourth century BC. From that time onwards the Jews were convinced that prophetic voices had been stilled and there was thus no new revelation from God until the advent of Jesus and the beginning of NT times. The last OT books recognised as canonical were Malachi (written between 450 and 430 BC) and Chronicles (written no later than 400 BC). These two books, along with all the other familiar books of the OT appear in the Greek translation of the Hebrew OT canon – which we call the Septuagint – made between 250 and 150 BC.

The Hebrew OT canon was traditionally divided into three parts: The Law (or the Torah), The Prophets (or the Nebhim) and The Writings (the Kethubhim), which in full were as follows:

The Law	The Prophets			The Writings	
	Former Prophets	Latter Prophets	Poetical Books	Five Rolls	Historical Books
Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	Joshua Judges Samuel Kings	Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekiel The Twelve	Psalms Proverbs Job	Song of Songs Ruth Lamentations Esther Ecclesiastes	Daniel Ezra- Nehemiah Chronicles

This is the same as our OT canon, although the number of books differs because we divide each of Samuel, Kings, Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah into two books and we make separate books for each of the minor prophets which are combined into one (The Twelve) in the Hebrew canon. We have also altered the order of the books.

The canonicity of these books was upheld by no lesser an authority than Christ himself. In Luke 11:51 Jesus said “from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah”. Abel is referred to in Genesis (Genesis 4:8) whilst Zechariah’s death is referred to in Chronicles (2 Chronicles 24:21). Genesis is the first book of the Hebrew canon and Chronicles the last and thus Jesus was affirming the whole Hebrew canon. He also impliedly approves the canon in Luke 24:44 where he said that all things which were written in the Law, The Prophets and the Psalms concerning him must be fulfilled – thus affirming the three sections of the Hebrew canon.

The three-fold division of the Hebrew canon is also affirmed by a number of non-biblical writers such as Philo and Josephus.

There are also various Apocryphal books of the OT. They were excluded largely for three reasons:

- (i) They have many historical and geographical errors;
- (ii) They teach false doctrines that are at variance with the canonical scriptures;
- (iii) They lack prophetic power and religious feeling characteristic of the canonical scriptures.

A brief summary of these Apocryphal books is as follows:

First Esdras

Second Esdras

Tobit
Judith
Additions to Esther
The Wisdom of Solomon
Ecclesiasticus
Baruch
Susanna
Bel and the Dragon
The Song of Three Hebrew Children
The Prayer of Manasseh
First Maccabees
Second Maccabees

Thus it is clear that the OT canon was decided no later than the 1st century AD and no books have been added to or subtracted from that canon since then. Thus neither Constantine nor the First Council of Nicea had any influence whatsoever on the OT canon. But, how do we know that the text of the canonical books of the OT in our Bible today is the same as that which those books contained in Jesus' time? The one answer which fixes that issue beyond doubt is the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The Dead Sea Scrolls contain one complete OT book (Isaiah) and thousands of fragments from all OT books (except Esther) found in manuscripts dating from the 3rd century BC to the 1st century AD. Prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls the only manuscripts we had dated from much later, such as the Cairo Codex from AD 895 and the Codex of the Prophets of Leningrad from AD 916. The oldest complete manuscript of the OT is the Codex Babylonicus Petropolitanus from AD 1008.

The Dead Sea Scrolls consist of some 40,000 – 50,000 fragments. From these fragments more than 500 books – including many non-biblical works – have been reconstructed. These include copies of the entirety or the majority of most of the books of the OT dating from more than a century before the birth of Christ.

To see the astonishing accuracy of the Hebrew copyists who produced the later manuscripts just referred to, let's consider the book of Isaiah, which has a complete copy amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls. In Isaiah chapter 53, there is only one word in question after 1,000 years of copying – and that does not change the meaning of the text. Gleason Archer says, "In the whole of Isaiah more than 95% of the text is identical with modern manuscripts and the 5% variation consists chiefly of obvious slips of the pen and variations in spelling." These variations do not generally change the meaning.

The Dead Sea Scrolls are genuine and well authenticated and we can thus be quite certain that the OT text in our modern Bible is that of the original Hebrew canon of the OT and was certainly not doctored by Constantine or anyone else in the Christian Church. What the Dead Sea Scrolls do not contain is material relevant to the NT – this is hardly surprising since they were the records of a Jewish sect. Thus Dan Brown is completely wrong in his assertion, noted in item 8, that the Dead Sea Scrolls contain material supporting his allegations about Jesus and the Bible. This is simply untrue.

The NT Canon

Let's now turn to the part of the Bible on which I believe Dan Brown's attention was fixed – the NT. Here the basic criterion for inclusion of books in the canon was divine inspiration and the main test for this was 'apostolicity'. For the church was built upon the foundation of the apostles. This does not necessarily mean apostolic authorship, but could extend to apostolic approval.

This apostolic authority derives from a commission from God to the apostles. Thus, for example Paul defends the authority of his teaching on the basis of his commission from the Lord. The importance of this authority was well recognised by the early church, so that Ignatius wrote "I do not wish to command you as Peter and Paul; they were apostles."

The early church had a great need to establish a 'canon' of approved books because of the prevalence of heresy. Some heretics such as the Gnostic leader Marcion and the apocalyptic visionary Montanus even tried to establish their own competing canons. The first canon comprising all the 27 books currently included in the NT (and no others) was published by Athanasius in AD 367 in a festal letter to the churches. Shortly after Athanasius, Jerome and Augustine also circulated their own lists. This 27 book canon of the NT was confirmed by the Synod of Hippo in AD 393. This did not confer on these books any authority which they did not already possess – it merely confirmed that authority. Since that time there has not been any serious questioning of the canon of 27 books.

Thus we must concede that the canon of the NT was not completely and finally fixed until after the First Council of Nicea in AD 325 – although the Council of Nicea confirmed all but about five books of our current NT canon. However, - and this is most important – church leaders met in around 190 AD to consider the issue of which gospels and epistles should be used by the churches and compiled a list which was widely circulated called the Muratorian canon. The Muratorian canon includes all the books of the current NT canon except Hebrews, James and 1 and 2 Peter (because of doubts about their authorship) and only includes two books not within the current canon - The Wisdom of Solomon and The Revelation of Peter. A further NT canon, the Barococcio Canon was published a few years later in around AD 206 and this canon contained all the books of the current NT canon apart from Revelation. Even earlier Irenaeus (130-202 AD) Bishop of Lyon had cited and approved all the four canonical gospels and most of the Pauline Epistles. Thus we can say that the NT canon was virtually fixed by the beginning of the third century AD – more than 100 years before the First Council of Nicea and we can also say that none of the Gnostic gospels referred to by Dan Brown (which we shall look at in more detail a little later) was in the canon at that time, or indeed in any generally accepted canon of the Church at any time. By contrast the acceptability and authority of the canonical gospels has been recognised from the earliest Christian times.

There were various Apocryphal books such as:

Epistle of Pseudo-Barnabus

Epistle to the Corinthians

Apocalypse of Peter

The Gospel According to the Hebrews

Second Epistle of Clement

The Acts of Paul and Thecla

Epistle to the Laodiceans

Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians

The Seven Epistles of Ignatius

but these never enjoyed more than temporary or local recognition and no major church council ever voted to include any of them in the NT. There were also a number of Gnostic books (although nothing like the 80 gospels Dan Brown speaks of) such as:

Gospel of Thomas
Gospel of Philip
Gospel of Mary
Gospel of the Egyptians
Gospel of Truth

Which were generally regarded as heretical by the mainstream church and it was never suggested by the Church authorities that these should be included within the canon of the NT.

The Gnostic gospel writings probably did not even exist at the time the Muratorian canon was compiled, as they were not written earlier than the late second century AD and many probably date from the early third century AD. In fact no document written after AD 120 was ever seriously considered for inclusion in the NT canon. As just stated we shall look at this in more detail later.

As with the OT the question arises “how do we know that the books of the Muratorian canon contained the same text as those of those in our NT today?” We can know because we have access to a number of early manuscripts.

Some of the important early NT manuscripts are:

John Rylands MS (AD 130) – a portion of the gospel of John found in Egypt
Bodmer Papyrus II (AD 150 –200) – most of John’s gospel
Chester Beatty Papyri (AD 200) – major portions of the NT
Codex Vaticanus (AD 325 –350) – nearly all of the Bible

Although it is true that the last of these – the Codex Vaticanus – might have been subject to alteration by Constantine, the earlier manuscripts do not support such a theory as they are in close agreement with Codex Vaticanus.

Furthermore, there is very good agreement between the texts of the various manuscripts, so that there is little doubt that we have the correct wordings in almost all cases. It is true that there are marginal notes and insertions, but these are obvious and easily eliminated (and have been eliminated from our modern bible texts such as the NIV). Dockery, Mathews and Sloane write:

For most of the biblical text, a single reading has been transmitted. Elimination of scribal errors and intentional changes leaves only a small percentage of the text about which any questions occur.

They conclude:

Although there are certain differences in many of the New Testament manuscripts, not one fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith rests on a disputed reading.

Thus, for example, there are different versions of the gospel of Luke as between the Eastern and the Western churches (with the Western tradition being more extensive), but no

fundamental Christian doctrine is at stake here. So I conclude with a statement from Sir Frederick Kenyon “The Christian can take the whole Bible in his hand and say without fear or hesitation that he holds in it the true word of God handed down without essential loss from generation to generation throughout the centuries.”

It is also clear from the foregoing that there IS a definitive version of the Bible (in Hebrew as regards the OT and in Greek as regards the NT) in which no important wordings are disputed by serious scholars – contrary to what Dan Brown says. Of course, there are different translations of these Greek and Hebrew versions into English, but it is ridiculous to state on that ground that there is no definitive version. We might as well say that there is no definitive version of the works of Victor Hugo or of any books or manuscripts not written in English. The definitive versions are, of course, the original language versions.

We can confidently refute Dan Brown’s claim that there is no definitive version of the Bible and that the contents of the Bible were fixed or amended by a Roman Emperor or indeed by the First Council of Nicea. As we have seen the evidence against such assertions is overwhelming.

Gnosticism and the Gnostic Gospels

Dan Brown appeals for support for many of his ideas to the so-called Gnostic gospels - which we have already mentioned. Indeed I assume it is partly by reference to these that he made the claim I listed as numbers 8 and 9.

Let’s start by considering what Gnosticism was. Gnosticism was not a single doctrine or cult. It was rather a wide range of philosophies which in their original forms pre-dated Christianity, but which in the first and second centuries AD borrowed some (but not all) Christian doctrine. Thus Gnosticism of the first and second centuries AD was largely derived from Christianity, but did not hold to the main Christian doctrine that Jesus came to redeem mankind from sin. Instead they generally held that Jesus’ function was to redeem man from the material world (which they regarded as wholly and innately evil - in line with Neo Platonic philosophical ideas). This redemption from the material world was to be achieved not merely through Jesus’ death but in addition through special knowledge (gnosis) which adherents needed to acquire in order to achieve redemption.

This philosophy started to become widespread during the second half of the first century AD and most of the later books of the NT are at least to some extent devoted to warning against it and refuting it. It largely died out during the fourth century AD. Gnosticism could never have been accepted by Christians because its rejection of the material world is totally and fundamentally at odds with the Jewish roots of Christianity which clearly affirms the material creation as “good”.

The Gnostic gospel texts we have today were all discovered about 60 years ago at Nag Hammadi in Egypt apart from the so called “Gospel of Mary” which is contained in the Akhmim Codex from the fifth century AD now in the Egyptian Museum at Berlin. However, applying the term “gospel” to these writings is misleading as they are not at all like the canonical gospels. They contain little if any narration of the deeds, life, teachings, passion or resurrection of Jesus and consist almost entirely of collections of sayings. Some of these sayings correspond to material to be found in the canonical gospels and some do not.

Probably the best known work of the Nag Hammadi collection is the *Gospel of Thomas*. Yet, *Thomas* also falls outside the genre of the New Testament Gospels despite the fact that many of its 114 sayings are directly or indirectly related to Matthew, Mark, and Luke. *Thomas* has almost no narration and its structure consists of discrete sayings. Unlike the canonical Gospels, which provide a social context and narrative for Jesus' words, *Thomas* is more like various beads almost haphazardly strung on a necklace. This in itself makes proper interpretation difficult. F. F. Bruce observes that "the sayings of Jesus are best to be understood in the light of the historical circumstances in which they were spoken. Only when we have understood them thus can we safely endeavour to recognise the permanent truth which they convey. When they are detached from their original historical setting and arranged in an anthology, their interpretation is more precarious." Also Christ's deeds, especially his death and resurrection, are much more important than his teachings. Thus the Gnostic gospels fail to teach what is really important about Jesus.

In preparing for this talk I studied the Gnostic gospels in some detail and I can confidently assert the following:

1. Unlike the canonical gospels the textual reliability of the Gnostic gospels is in considerable doubt. Not only are there large gaps in the text, but in the majority of cases these were also translated from the original Greek into Coptic in a process of unknown accuracy since the original texts are lost. Indeed James Robinson editor of *The Nag Hammadi Library* says that all indications are that the process of translation was inadequate. Furthermore, unlike the canonical books of the NT, we do not have a number of different manuscripts that can be compared. Incidentally this makes nonsense of Dan Browns claims about the meaning in Aramaic of parts of the text of the Gnostic gospels (such as Mary being Jesus' companion) they were not written in Aramaic, but Greek and so far as we know they were never translated into Aramaic.
2. The authorship of the Gnostic gospels is unknown. Certainly the apostle Thomas did not write the *Gospel of Thomas*.
3. The Gnostic gospels show distinct signs of having been derived from the canonical gospels of the NT, but distorted to conform with Gnostic beliefs. Indeed some of the Gnostic gospels – e.g. the Gospel of Truth – contain lists of the canonical gospels, which shows that the canonical gospels were earlier and already had established authority. The marked shift of the Gnostic gospels away from Jewish culture and ideas of the overtly Jewish canonical gospels to a Hellenistic, Neo Platonic viewpoint is in itself very revealing. Indeed, the Gnostic gospels are rather anti-Jewish – hardly a mark of the authentic Jewish origins of Jesus.
4. The manuscripts of the Gnostic gospels we now possess date from 350-400 AD, but all scholars of repute believe that the originals were written between 140 and 300 AD – with dates in the late second century or early third century being the most probable. This is not only much later than the canonical gospels (which were all written well before 100 AD), but also well after the lifetime of any of the apostles or other contemporaries of Jesus. Thus unlike the canonical gospels the Gnostic gospels are not eyewitness accounts. Indeed, noted biblical scholar Raymond Brown affirmed that from the Nag Hammadi "works we learn not a single verifiable new fact about the historical Jesus' ministry, and only a few new sayings that might possibly have been his."
5. The Church never recognised the authority of the Gnostic gospels or considered including them in the NT canon. Indeed Origen (185-254 AD) wrote more than 100 years before Nicea:

“I know a certain gospel which is called “The Gospel according to Thomas” and a “Gospel according to Matthias” and many others have we read – lest we should in any way be considered ignorant because of those who imagine they possess some knowledge if they are acquainted with these. Nevertheless, among all these we have approved solely what the church has recognised, which is that only the four gospels should be accepted.”

6. There was no attempt by the Christian church to suppress knowledge of the details of Gnostic doctrine. In *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus went to great lengths to present the theologies of the various Gnostic schools in order to refute them biblically and logically. If suppression had been his concern, the book never would have been written as it was. Further, to argue cogently against the Gnostics, Irenaeus and the other anti-Gnostic apologists would presumably have had to be diligent to correctly represent their foes in order to avoid ridicule for misunderstanding them. Patrick Henry highlights this in reference to Nag Hammadi: "While the Nag Hammadi materials have made some corrections to the portrayal of Gnosticism in the anti-Gnostic writings of the church fathers, it is increasingly evident that the fathers did not fabricate their opponents' views; what distortion there is comes from selection, not from invention. It is still legitimate to use materials from the writings of the fathers to characterise Gnosticism."
7. The Gnostic gospels describe Jesus not as someone who died on the cross and rose again, but simply as a teacher. In their view Jesus brings good advice, but not good news.

Thus the Gnostic gospels are not indications of early Christian views which have somehow been suppressed. Rather they are late works based on the canonical gospels, but distorted to fit in with Gnostic theology. They are the writings of heretical hangers on at the fringes of Christianity who tried to harness *some* Christian ideas to conceptions entirely antithetical to Christian teaching. The Gnostic gospels do not have and have never had any place in Christian literature, nor do they present a possible authentic alternative view of the life and times of Jesus Christ.

The Nature of Jesus

In the assertions we listed as 1, 2 and 3 earlier Dan Brown claims that Jesus is not God, but only a man; that the early church was well aware of this; that Jesus was not considered as divine before being deified at the First Council of Nicea; and that the Church’s teaching on Christ is false. This latter assertion appears to follow logically if the truth of the earlier assertions I have just noted could be established.

It is certainly true that the First Council of Nicea met mainly to consider the claims of the Libyan Presbyter, Arius that Jesus was not co-equal with God the Father, but that he was a lesser divinity created by the Father to create and manage the material universe. Thus under Arian doctrine Jesus was held to be subordinate to God the Father. This line of thinking derived mainly from Neo Platonic views that matter was evil (you may remember we considered that issue in relation to Gnosticism) and that a pure and holy God could not therefore be involved with matter and the material universe. Arius never claimed that Jesus was only a human being as Dan Brown alleges – he could not have found any scriptural support for that idea! Further, he would have been rapidly condemned by the huge amount of scriptural evidence against it!

Although his ideas were derived from Greek philosophy, Arius did claim scriptural support for his position and cited many Bible texts to support his ideas. The delegates to the First Council of Nicea voted by an overwhelming majority – the final vote was 316-2 (the numbers here are somewhat in doubt, but the vote was certainly massively against Arius) – that Arius’ ideas were heretical and should be condemned (anathematised in the language of the early Church). Hardly the close vote claimed by Dan Brown. This view was again affirmed by the Church at the Council of Constantinople in AD 381 and yet again at the Great Council of Chalcedon in AD 451.

Some 19th and 20th Century historians (such as the German historian Eduard Schwartz) have sought to characterise this dispute within the church as a power struggle within the early Church rather than as a theological dispute. Undoubtedly the early Church, like all human institutions, had its share of interpersonal struggles and conflicts, but, notwithstanding this, there is no doubt that the theological issues being disputed with Arius were real.

The council encapsulated their condemnation of Arianism in a statement of belief or a creed. The most important element of this was the statement that Jesus was “of the same substance as the Father”. This provided a firm foundation for our modern Trinitarian theology. Neither prior to the First Council of Nicea or at that Council had there had ever been any real contention that Jesus was not divine (as Dan Brown alleges) – virtually the whole of NT scripture clearly affirms Jesus’ divinity. However, there had been some question over the exact nature of the relationship between the Son and the Father. The debate was over whether Jesus was a lesser divinity who had been brought into existence by the Father (as Arius alleged) or whether Jesus was completely equal to the Father (as was confirmed by the First Council of Nicea).

I don’t believe that Arianism can be directly refuted from scripture. However, I do consider that it can be shown that scripture overwhelmingly supports the Trinitarian position, even though that concept is not directly mentioned in scripture (although it has scriptural support – see Matthew 28:19 and 2 Corinthians 13:14) – indeed it was not until 60 years after the First Council of Nicea that the doctrine of the Trinity was clearly formulated. This is too big a subject to deal with in detail today; those of you who are interested in the details can download my articles on Arianism and the Council of Chalcedon from my website.

However, I do just want to say that I believe the refutation of Arianism comes from a number of propositions, each of which has strong scriptural support, some from both the OT and the NT. These are:

- (i) there is only one God (see Deuteronomy 6:4, Isaiah 44:6, Isaiah 45:5-7, 1 Corinthians 8:4-6);
- (ii) we should only worship God; no-one and nothing else (see Deuteronomy 6:13, Deuteronomy 5:7-9, Exodus 23:24, Matthew 4:10);
- (iii) Jesus is to be worshipped (see Matthew 2:11, Hebrews 1:6);
- (iv) Jesus himself stated that he was God, and was explicitly referred to as God (see John 8:12-59, John 10:24-42, John 12:44-50); and
- (v) Jesus had a number of divine attributes. He is said to be Eternal (John 1:1, John 8:58), Omnipresent (Matthew 28:20), Omniscient (John 16:30), Omnipotent (John 16:30), and Immutable (Hebrews 1:12)

Accepting the truth of these statements as established – and my article cites many other scriptures which support each of them - then, we see that on the one hand Jesus Christ is God

and can receive worship, but that on the other hand there is only one God who alone is to be worshipped. These apparently conflicting statements can only be reconciled if we accept that Jesus IS God BUT that he is also of one being and substance with God the Father. Indeed, Jesus specifically stated that He and the Father were one (John 10:30).

If we were to accept the Arian position that Jesus is a lesser created being who is some lesser kind of God, we would be forced into a polytheistic position where we have two Gods both of whom are to be worshipped - which is inconsistent with some of the clearest and strongest statements in scripture. Therefore, I contend that Arian beliefs are inconsistent with scripture.

Although I do not accept the authority of the Gnostic gospels it is probably worth saying at this point that they do not portray Jesus as human as opposed to divine. Indeed on the whole they emphasise the divine nature of Jesus to a greater extent than do the canonical gospels (see John 4:6, Matthew 4:2, Mark 11:15-17 and many other references). If you wanted to remove the human Jesus from the NT you would have to leave out all four of the gospels. However, it is also not open to us to believe that Jesus was merely human – a good man. As C S Lewis said, if Jesus was only a man he was not a good man – he was either a liar, a lunatic or the devil from Hell. Jesus did not leave open to us the possibility of believing in him as merely a good man and a great teacher – he did not intend to do so!

The true Christian view of Jesus is balanced – he is 100% human but also 100% divine. He needed to be 100% divine so that he could be suitable sinless sacrifice for us, fully able to pay the penalty that our sins deserve. At the same time he needed to be 100% human in order that he might be able to stand in our place and suffer that penalty – death on the cross. As we have seen the NT amply testifies to both the human and to the divine nature of Jesus.

The Church's teaching on Christ is not false, it is Dan Brown's assertions that are false. They are nothing more than a 21st century recreation of an Arian/Gnostic myth.

The Virgin Birth of Jesus

Whilst considering Jesus, let's take a look at another matter which Dan Brown says is false – the virgin birth of Jesus, item 10 on our list. Indeed, Dan Brown goes further and claims that all Christians know this is not real. I can personally testify that this is a false claim as I believe in the virgin birth. But let's take a look at the evidence. Firstly, two of the gospels testify to the virgin birth (Matthew 1:18-25, Luke 1:26-38) and John's gospel implies it (John 1:12-14). The virgin birth was also predicted in the OT (Isaiah 7:14) – although it is unlikely that Isaiah would have interpreted his words in that way in his time. Secondly, a child resulting from the human Mary being “overshadowed” by the Holy Spirit clearly fulfils the requirement we have already noted that Jesus must be 100% God and 100% man. If Mary had been raped by a Roman soldier or Jesus conceived through union with Joseph as some have suggested that requirement could hardly have been fulfilled.

The only reason to doubt the virgin birth is really a refusal to believe in the miraculous – but if we believe in a God who created the whole universe how can we doubt His power to perform the miraculous if and when He so wishes? A second reason to doubt might be found in the claim that the story of the virgin birth was to equate Jesus to the heroes of Greek mythology. However, the conceptions of these heroes resulted from sexual union between a God and a human woman for whom the God lusted. There is no sense of anything of that

kind in the Bible narrative. Indeed due to the early dates of writing of the gospels there was hardly time for a myth to evolve around the birth of Jesus.

A Further reason why we should accept the virgin birth as genuine is that the early church clearly believed it. Early forms of the Apostles creed dating from the second century AD pronounced the virgin birth and the early Church Fathers testified to it. Thus Ignatius, bishop of Antioch wrote in AD 110 “For our God Jesus Christ was conceived in the womb of Mary ... by the Holy Ghost.” Ignatius received this information from John the Apostle. His firm attestation to the virgin birth as an historical fact in AD 110 means that the doctrine of the virgin birth must have been prevalent for some time. Other post-Apostolic writers such as Aristides and Justin Martyr also clearly attested to the virgin birth.

Even the Islamic Koran testifies to the virgin birth of Jesus.

Mary Magdalene and Feminist Issues

Lets now turn to the issues that I might classify as relating to Mary Magdalene and feminism – items 7 and 11-14 on our list.

Let’s begin by making it clear that the NT gospels do not denigrate Mary Magdalene, although there is often confusion about which NT references are to Mary Magdalene as there are seven different Marys referred to in the NT, these are:

Mary the Mother of Jesus (Luke 1:30-31)

Mary of Bethany (John 11:1)

Mary the mother of the James who was not the Lord’s brother (Matthew 27:56)

Mary the wife of Clopas (John 19:25)

Mary the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12)

Mary otherwise unidentified (Romans 16:6)

Mary of Magdala – Mary Magdalene (Luke 8:2)

There is nothing in the NT which identifies Mary Magdalene with the otherwise unidentified sinner (or sinners as there may have been more than one anointing of Jesus - scholars are unclear as to whether the three gospel references are to the same event – Luke’s account in particular sounds different) who wiped Jesus’ feet with her hair. Even if this woman was Mary Magdalene (possibly in the Luke event, as John claims it was Mary of Bethany and Mark says the event took place in Bethany, thus implying it was Mary of Bethany), I do not believe the gospel writers intended it as a slander. Apart from the designation of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute by the church in the Middle Ages, Christian tradition has always revered Mary Magdalene as a great saint and as a disciple. Indeed the Eastern Church holds her equal to the Apostles. All four gospel accounts put her at the foot of the cross, indicate that she was one of those who went to tend Jesus’ body and make her the first witness of the resurrection (against Jewish culture which did not accept the testimony of women). If orthodox Christianity launched a “smear campaign” against Mary Magdalene (as Dan Brown alleges) then it was very badly done. Anyone who has read the Bible will see that women are accorded far more liberty, rights and standing than was the norm in any contemporary culture.

Dan Brown says that Mary Magdalene was married to Jesus, but I am almost certain that Mary Magdalene was unmarried, because she is identified by her home town (Magdala – a small fishing village). If she were married she would be identified by reference to her

husband (Mary the wife of ...). There is certainly no evidence that Jesus was married (either to Mary Magdalene or anyone else). Indeed the scriptures say that the Church was his bride – implying that he did not already have another (Ephesians 5:21-23). Some critics have stated that an unmarried Jewish man in the first century AD would have been extremely unusual. However, some Jewish sects such as the Essenes were largely celibate, so it was probably not as unusual as some have supposed. Furthermore, John the Baptist was almost certainly celibate and the Jewish historian Josephus states that there were celibate Jews.

Even the Gnostic gospels provide no firm evidence of Jesus' marriage. The Gnostic gospel of Philip has been seen as providing such evidence, because it names Mary Magdalene as Jesus' "companion". However, the word translated "companion" is a general word that can mean partner, colleague, business associate, friend etc. Thus this is no evidence at all. The gospel of Philip also says that Jesus kissed Mary. It does not (as Dan Brown asserts) say that he kissed her on the mouth (because the text is illegible at this point and could equally well say that he kissed her on the cheek). In any event, in the gospel of Philip a "kiss" usually symbolises a sharing of spiritual grace and in no other place in that gospel does the word "kiss" have any romantic significance.

Dan Brown asserts that Christians are against women. However, for a man of the first century AD Jesus was remarkably acceptive of women. He spoke to them in public and accepted them as close friends – all of which was contrary to Jewish custom. On the other hand the Gnostic gospels, which Dan Brown claims are more feminist actually denigrate women. So, for example, the gospel of Thomas has a section, which goes as follows: Simon Peter said to them "Make Mary leave us for females don't deserve life." Jesus said "Look I will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of Heaven." (Gospel of Thomas verse 114).

It was at least partly because of such content that the Gnostic gospels were never accepted by Christians.

Certainly pagan societies did not view or treat women well – contrary to what Dan Brown would have us believe. In Greece, India and China women had few if any rights and were considered the property of their husbands. Aristotle wrote that a woman ranked somewhere between a man and a slave. In fact the status of the average Athenian woman was much closer to that of a slave than to that of a man. Even ancient Roman pagan scholars agree that the advent of Christianity was a turning point in the treatment and status of women.

Dan Brown also advocates a concept which he calls "the sacred feminine" and asserts that this is illustrated in pagan rituals such as the Hieros Gamos (sacred marriage) ritual said to have been observed by Sophie in the novel. It is likely that such ceremonies were practised by the Gnostics (at least according to Irenaeus). Again this is part of the reason why they were not accepted by the early church. The goal of these sex rituals was to enable a man to gain special knowledge of God at the moment of orgasm. It is not clear what if anything women were expected to gain, and these rituals can hardly be regarded as a celebration of the feminine. In so far as a man does experience an altered state of consciousness at such a moment the experience is analogous to the states experienced through the use of drugs, rhythmic dancing etc. The ultimate goal of these experiences is dominion and the denial of guilt or sin. As Dan Brown says in the novel "it was man not God, who created the concept of sin". This is dangerous – very dangerous as we are not able by ourselves to overcome our

sins let alone become divine - and certainly has nothing to do with the elevation of women or the celebration of the feminine.

Dan Brown also claims that Jesus gave Mary Magdalene authority over the Church rather than Peter. That would certainly have been an anathema to first century Jews for a woman to have been given supreme authority over men. Furthermore, I have been completely unable to trace any such reference in any of the Gnostic gospels. I believe that Dan Brown is simply pandering to the feminists here.

Political Issues

The novel represents the faith offered by the Gnostic gospels as socially revolutionary, indeed so socially disruptive that the Emperor Constantine was forced to suppress it. However, this simply does not accord with historical fact. It was not Gnostic teaching which was turning the world upside down. It was the Christian faith - to which half the Roman Empire had become converted in spite of the vicious persecution and suppression by all the might of that Empire under Diocletian – which was doing that!

Dan Brown's myth has it completely wrong. It isn't the case that the canonical NT was spiritually and socially quiescent, colluding with the Roman Empire while the Jesus of the Gnostic gospels was politically and socially subversive and extremely dangerous. It was completely the reverse. That's why Christians were being persecuted and dying for their faith, whilst Gnostics were not.

It may well have been that Constantine's acceptance of Christianity was at least in part politically motivated, but that does not prove that he changed the nature of Christianity for political ends. Indeed, as we have seen, historical fact opposes this contention.

Dan Brown also represents Christians as "the winners" who imposed their view of Christ on the world. However at the time the NT gospels, indeed at the time the whole of the NT, was written Christians were not the winners. They were persecuted by the Jews and were starting to become seriously persecuted by the Roman Empire. As we have seen the canon of the NT was almost completely established before that persecution reached its height.

Conclusion

I think we've seen that *The Da Vinci Code's* attacks on the Christian faith are entirely without substance, as they are based largely on untruths or (occasionally) on distortions of the truth. However, in conclusion I want to return to a theme we introduced right at the beginning of this talk – why is the novel so popular?

We mentioned that this was probably because it panders to New-Agers, Feminists and Conspiracy Theorists. That's true, but I think it goes deeper. In my view the *Da Vinci Code* is a kind of anti-Bible. It seeks to undermine, indeed to demolish, orthodox Christianity, and then goes on to try and establish a new religion – a modern, indeed post-modern, version of Gnosticism combined with contemporary New Age views and a Romantic view of the "sacred feminine".

Dan Brown's view of religion is perhaps well expressed by a quote from his earlier book *Angels and Demons* in which one of the main characters says:

“Faith is universal. Our specific methods for understanding it are arbitrary. Some of us pray to Jesus, some of us go to Mecca, some of us study sub-atomic particles. In the end we are all just searching for truth, that which is greater than ourselves.”
A typical post-modern expression.

In comparison we have the “offence” of the Christian gospel, which teaches us that we can only be saved through faith in the death resurrection and Lordship of Jesus Christ and can contribute nothing of our own. Against this the humanistic teaching of Dan Brown is extremely attractive to many. He presents Jesus as merely human - so that we are thus at liberty pick and choose from amongst his teachings (essential for post modernists). He presents a worldview where we are saved by personal development and inward searching – increasing our knowledge, understanding and spirituality – our “gnosis”, rather than being saved by faith.

In an age when the Church has lost much authority and even many church going Christians are not firmly grounded in the basic truths and doctrines of our faith, I consider that the teachings of this novel are extremely dangerous. The Church and indeed all individual Christians need to adequately understand the errors and dangers of these teachings so that they can personally resist them and inform others of the truth. That is precisely why I put together this talk.

What then should Our Response Be

Let’s do away with Dan Brown’s Neo-Gnostic post-modern myth, his assertions that we can save ourselves through self knowledge, self adulation and narcissism. Instead let’s proclaim the “Good News” that something radical happened in our world as a result of the real historical events of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as a result of which our world is a different place. Let’s leap over the stumbling block of the cross and embrace it in all its apparent foolishness and declare that we are saved from our sins, not through our own efforts or knowledge, but through faith in the death resurrection and Lordship of this Jesus. That we are called to self giving love and radical holiness, looking forward to a new world in which God will make everything right. That Jesus is not a mere human teacher, but our Lord and master at whose name every knee should – and one day will – bow down confessing him as Lord.