

The sad result has been that her very name was forgotten, yet she is the Feminine Divine.

Really? In the novel she never does anything that suggests she is goddess-like. No sublime teachings, no unsurpassable goodness. No demonstrations of power. She does not lead or teach. She is not a woman of whom any feminist would be proud, for she is totally forgettable.

Did the Church demonise her? On the contrary. True, a pope concluded from a study of the Gospels that she had been a prostitute and this belief was widely adopted in the Latin (Western) part of the Church. But classifying her as a sinner was not denigrating her. She was honoured for being a repentant sinner, thus proving a model for all Christians. She belonged to august company. St Paul and St Peter were repentant sinners, greater sinners than a mere prostitute for they persecuted or betrayed their Lord. Note that they are men. Did the Church, perhaps, thus demonise men?

Shrines to Mary Magdalene have dotted Christian Europe and elsewhere for 1400 years. The earliest shrines were in Ephesus and Constantinople (modern Turkey), long before the shrines of France. Her feast day was celebrated from the eighth century and still is, by both the Latin (Western) Church and also the Orthodox and Oriental Catholic Churches, as well as by some Protestant Churches, and the Anglican Churches. The universities of Oxford and Cambridge were both founded and governed by the Church that Brown's characters say tried to obliterate her memory, yet they both have colleges (Magdalen College, Oxford; Magdalene College, Cambridge) which bear her name, as did — and do — hundreds of parish churches. Did someone say she is the "Forgotten One"?

### Constantine

In the novel Constantine plays an important role, for we are told that he invented and fastened onto the Church the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus, and that he purged the Roman Empire of the Gnostic documents which report the marriage of Jesus, documents showing Jesus was "a mere mortal".

This part reads like a catalogue of historical



St John the Baptist - Another portrait by Da Vinci displaying boyish characteristics

errors. Christians from the beginning believed Jesus shared the nature of God. Just read the New Testament, written 200 years before Constantine. See, for example, John 1:1-14, Philippians 2:5-10, Mark 12:1-9 and parallels (the parable of the wicked tenants), etc. Christians did not have to wait until Constantine to hold this belief.

There is no record of Constantine's ever ordering the destruction of Gnostic documents. He took no interest in such matters. In any case, the Gnostic documents still exist and can be found in any good book store or library. And they are studied in Catholic universities and seminaries as examples of early writings.

According to one of Brown's characters, at the Council of Nicea the bishops approved the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus by a narrow majority. Actually, around 270 voted for the doctrine and two voted against. Did I read reviews praising Brown for his scholarship?

### Opus Dei

In this novel the Catholic organisation Opus Dei features prominently. A member, Silas, is an assassin. His superior, a bishop, approves of the murders Silas commits.

The picture of Opus Dei in the novel reduced me to giggles. Fancy, an assassin who wears a long robe whilst stalking victims through undergrowth, who returns from killing four men to whip himself until he draws blood. I am not a member but my reaction was: You gotta be kidding!

Choosing an organisation which encourages traditional Catholic practices of prayer and spiritual discipline as representative of the

forces of murder and deceit has as much to recommend it as choosing the Salvation Army because its members are "soldiers".

Opus Dei has been deliberately chosen as the epitome of evil. After all, there is a belief that this organisation is secretive, extremely wealthy, and will stop at nothing to protect the Catholic Church!

In fact, it only has about 85,000 members, including some 2000 priests, out of 1.1 billion Catholics. It is not a "sect" for it is fully approved by the Church and functions alongside many other Catholic organisations. Most members are mums and dads doing their ordinary jobs, but trying to do so in imitation of Christ. They are distinguished by their earnestness in living as Christians and their acceptance of a code of discipline, involving regular times of prayer, retreats, and spiritual direction. Hardly a den of assassins.

*Opus Dei* (Allen Lane, 2005), a book by non-member John L. Allen, provides a balanced account of the organisation.

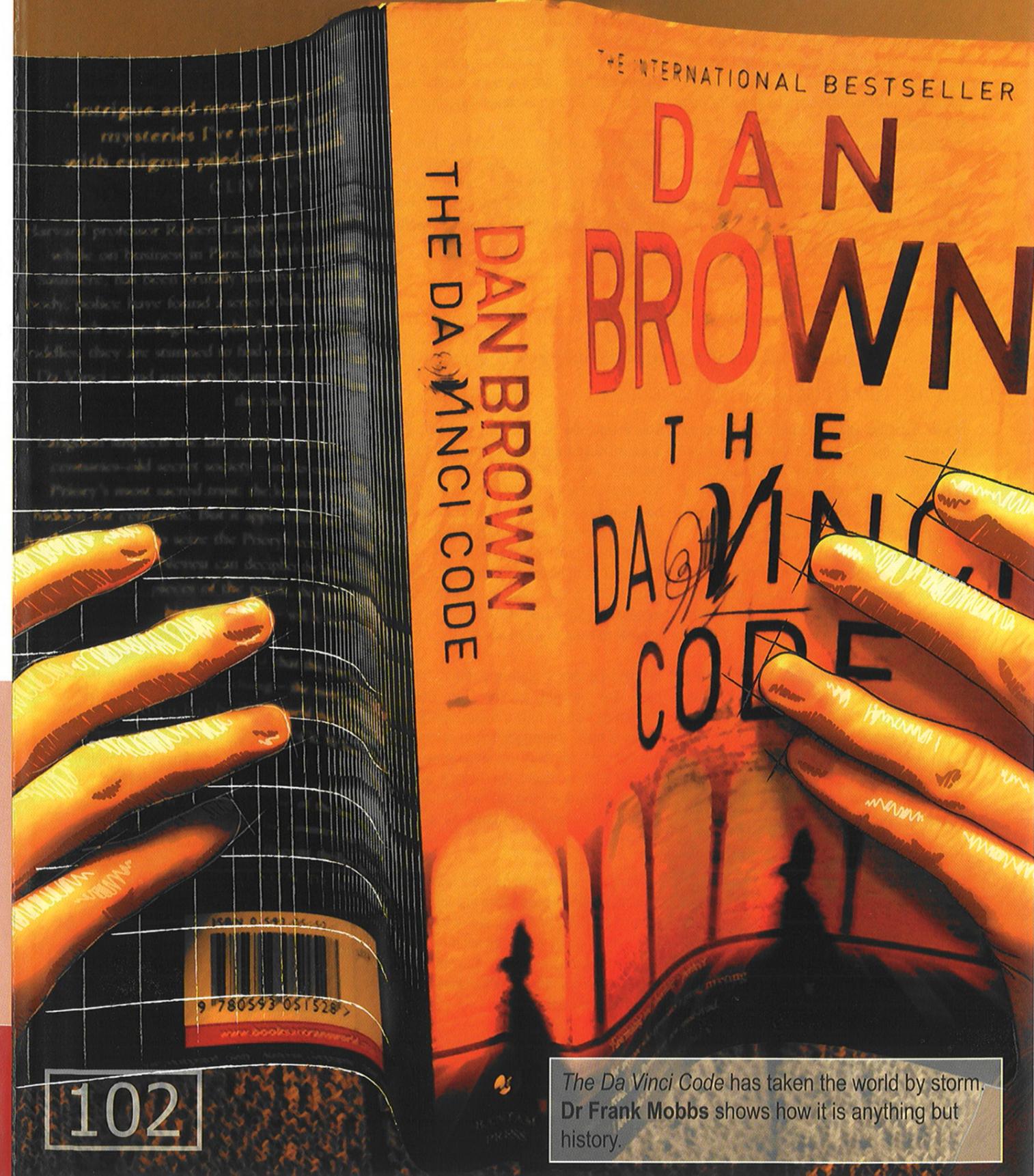
A final word. *The Da Vinci Code* is one of the silliest books you are likely to come across. Fiction it is, through and through, but fiction should have some resemblance to truth. This book has none.

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### Questions for discussion

1. Why do you think *The Da Vinci Code* has been so popular?
2. Have any people you have spoken with had their faith challenged by *The Da Vinci Code*? In what ways?
3. Where can Catholics find the information they need to strengthen their faith and to be able to explain it to others?
4. Do you think *The Da Vinci Code* presents us with an opportunity to explain our faith to others? How can we go about it?

# Debunking The Da Vinci Code

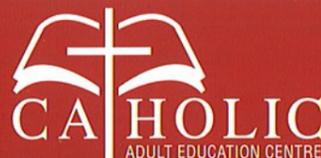


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*The Da Vinci Code* has taken the world by storm. Dr Frank Mobbs shows how it is anything but history.

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## What is the Bible?

A simple answer to this question is that the Bible is a book you can buy almost anywhere for a moderate sum in almost any language of the world. Its ultimate author, God, never complains about copyright infringements and has never sought payment or damages for unauthorised copying, quotation (often taken out of context), or misrepresentation. You may well say, only God can afford to be so laid back, and in a sense you are right. But, it is worth considering that few of us would tolerate our words being treated the way we often treat God's word. We would sue!

Another thing about the Bible is that it shows God is very trusting: the divine word has been entrusted fully to us. In the words of Deuteronomy 30:12-14, the word of God "is not in heaven... nor is it beyond the sea... No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe". The word of God has become human words, words that we can speak, words that we can think about (the heart being the seat of thought and action for ancient Israelites), words that invite

## Faith is the key

It is important to realise that the Bible is only perceived as 'the word of God' within the context of faith; that is, by those who believe in the one God who revealed himself to Israel. There is no way that one can prove the Bible is God's word: as the Bible itself says, who can put God to the proof? God is the measure of all things, not us. We believe the Bible is the word of God or we don't—and there are many who don't. They may respect it but believe that it is no more than a valuable artefact from ancient times. People are free to reject the Bible's claims and rejection does not necessarily imply bad will. It can be an honest decision, what is called 'following one's conscience'. Those who do believe the Bible hold that the 'gift' of faith comes from God; this does not mean however that God imposes it. The first chapters of Genesis teach that God creates the context and the guidelines in which human freedom can flourish. The mark of our freedom is our God-given ability to make decisions, to make an act of faith for or against the Bible. The Bible will invite us to believe,

*"In Sacred Scripture, the Church constantly finds her nourishment and her strength, for she welcomes it not as a human word, 'but as what it really is, the word of God.' 'In the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children, and talks with them.'"*

*(Catechism of the Catholic Church, 104)*

even challenge us about our faith, but it will never impose faith.

There is talk of a crisis of faith in our time. However, I think the question is not so much 'will there be faith?' but 'what kind of faith?' St. Paul lists faith, hope, and love as foundational 'virtues'. He was speaking within the Christian context but all

human beings need some kind of faith, hope and love to give meaning to their lives. Even an atheist has a faith; he or she believes God does not exist, without being able to prove it. Given the centrality of the subjective element in faith, one can understand the Church's concern for objective truth. It is necessary in order to help us make the right act of faith. We need all the help we can get, particularly in

and challenge us to make our own ("for you to observe"). We can say in Christian terms that the Bible is very 'incarnational': it enters fully into our life and world and, for Christians, the perfect manifestation of this is of course the incarnation of God's Word, the second person of the Trinity, in Jesus Christ. Let's take up God's invitation then and think a bit about the relationship between word of God and human words.

the modern world where the competition to win our hearts and minds is intense.

## The Bible as word of God; human words

A second, and obvious, thing about the Bible is that the 'word of God' (singular) is expressed in many human words. The Bible consists of different books of varying length and content with the Christian Bible containing two major parts: the Old Testament and the New Testament. How do we see the one word of God in such complexity and variety? This question can be tackled in two ways. One can try to trace the one divine word as it unfolds in and through the multiplicity of human words that comprise the Bible. Alternatively, one can start with the multiplicity of human words and see how they lead us towards the one word of God.

When we speak of the word of God and human words in the biblical context, it is best to think of a distinction rather than a separation. Our

conviction that God is one and perfect leads us to think of one word of God. This is especially so for Christians because of our belief in the Word who became flesh. However, the conviction that God has spoken in human words means that one can speak also of the many words of God. This gives enormous dignity and worth to our human discourse but it can also cause problems.

There has been a tendency at times in Judaism and Christianity to think that every word in the Bible bears some special meaning, a tendency that can become obsessive and distort our perception of biblical texts.

The Vatican II document on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, teaches that we need to pay attention to the Bible's literary forms in order better to understand God's revelation. In literary terms, this is the relationship between content and form: in order to understand what a person is saying (content), one needs to pay attention to the way he or she says it (form). We

*"God inspired the human authors of the sacred books. 'To compose the sacred books, God chose certain men who, all the while he employed them in this task, made full use of their own faculties and powers so that, though he acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever he wanted written, and no more.'"*

*(Catechism of the Catholic Church, 106)*

do this almost automatically with the common literary forms of our culture (e.g., headlines, editorials, text messages, songs, jokes). When we read the works of another culture, such as the Old or New Testament, we need to be sensitive to the way they communicate. Broadly speaking, there are three principal literary forms in the Old Testament: narrative (storytelling in particular), poetry and law. Individual words need to be understood within these diverse forms; some words are more important than others for advancing a story or illustrating a law.

## How the Bible came about

If the word of God has entered fully into our human words, it follows that it has also entered fully into the time and place in which we produce our words. For example, the New Testament was produced over a particular period of time in particular places by particular people (New Testament authors). We believe that God inspired these authors who lived at a certain time in certain places. However, inspiration is not a form of coercion but a form of liberation. It enables human beings to operate fully as human beings, both on the individual and community level, and within the human realm of time and space. In short, inspiration operates in all the ways that human beings communicate with one another: words, actions, feelings, discussions, work. At times inspiration took the form of a peak experience; at other times it involved the laborious, repetitive work of scribes and copyists.

Scholarly analysis of the Old Testament enables us to construct the following likely scenario. A prophet like Isaiah believes, on the basis of a variety of experiences, that God is calling or inspiring him to preach a message (it is both God's message and Isaiah's). A group of faithful disciples or even a whole society is inspired to recognise him as a true prophet and preserve his preaching. Deciding whether a prophet is true or false is not always easy, as the conflict between Hananiah and Jeremiah in chapter 28 of Jeremiah indicates. There are no hard and fast rules because, once again, it is a question of faith. Perhaps, after Isaiah's

preaching has stood the test of time, some scribes are inspired to edit and write down what has now become a large collection of the prophet's and disciples' sayings and stories. Finally, another generation of Israelites is inspired to recognise that the finished book should be included in the emerging 'canon' or list of Israel's sacred texts. From this scenario, one can see that inspiration touches different people in different walks of life over a considerable period of time.

We should not presume that the process of producing a biblical book was always harmonious. Inspiration does not mean that one escapes the human condition into a special 'magical' realm. There is good evidence in both Old and New Testaments that inspired authors and their disciples were at times in disagreement and conflict with one another or others over some issue. A classic example from the New Testament is the dispute between Peter and Paul over the mission to the Gentiles. In the Old Testament, the narrator of Jehu's bloody revolt in 2 Kings 9-10 approves his elimination of the house of

In a sense, the Bible remains 'unfinished business': it does not say everything or resolve everything. The Gospel of John ends with a frank acknowledgement of its limited nature.

## The Canon of Scripture

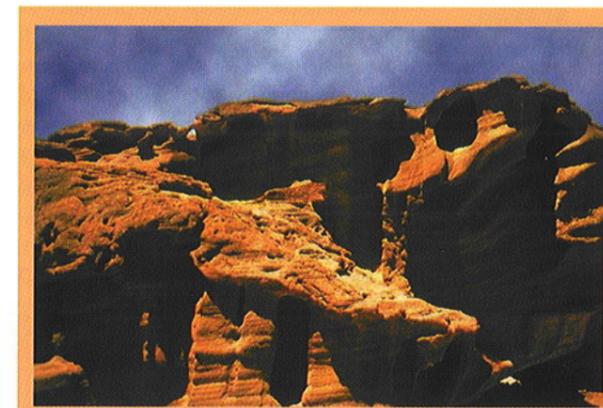
Eventually, the at times lengthy process outlined above came to a conclusion with the emergence of the canon or list of sacred scripture. As with the production of biblical books, it took some centuries in the Christian era (AD) for Judaism and Christianity to settle which books should be included and which should be left out. Even though this process involved human beings who thought, discussed, prayed and made decisions, both Jews and Christians believe that God mysteriously but effectively inspired the respective processes and decisions.

For Jews, the centrepiece of their canon came to be seen as the Torah (Pentateuch or five books of Moses). The second major part of their canon is Prophecy, which comprises both the 'former' and the 'later' or 'writing

*...the word of God... "is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe."*

Ahab: the prophet Hosea condemns it (cf. 1:4). The incorporation of differing views shows that they were regarded as important enough to be included in the emerging 'Bible' even though the differences may not have been resolved.

prophets'. It is interesting and informative to note that what they call 'the former prophets' is what we normally call 'the historical books' (Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings). The 'later prophets' comprise the three major



Caves of Qumran

The discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls in these caves from 1947 to 1956 has confirmed that Jewish scribes have preserved the Hebrew text of the Old Testament with remarkable accuracy over several thousand years. Copied around the time of Christ, the scrolls also contain some Hebrew text of books that Jews left out of their canon in 100 AD and Protestants left out in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.