

Debunking the Da Vinci Code

by Sabrina Ferrisi

Carl Olson and Sandra Miesel don't like hoaxes, especially when it comes to the faith. Olson is the former editor of *Envoy* magazine, and Miesel is an expert on the Church in the medieval era. The two teamed up to write *The Da Vinci Hoax*, (available through Ignatius Press) which Chicago's Cardinal Francis George describes as the "definitive debunking" of Dan Brown's best seller *The Da Vinci Code*. Register correspondent Sabrina Ferrisi spoke to the authors.

Ferrisi: Dan Brown writes about the Holy Grail and the Church's supposed attempts to suppress it. What is the real story?

Miesel: The Church has never said anything about the Holy Grail. Medieval legends of the Holy Grail began in the 12th century. The Grail only appears in literature, with its meaning tied to legitimate Christian belief in the holy Eucharist. Nobody ever went out to look for the Grail. It is well established that ideas of old pagan myths filtered into stories of the Holy Grail. The first place the Grail is ever mentioned is in the *Tale of the Grail*, written by Chretien de Troyes, a Frenchman in the 12th century. The idea of the Grail being the bloodline of Mary Magdalene and Jesus comes from occult books. The book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, which came out in the 1980s, talks about this "great secret" of the Grail. It's based on false documents that were planted in the French National Library by Frenchmen Pierre Plantard and his collaborators in the 1950s. The documents showed a supposed genealogy of the descendants of Christ.

Ferrisi: Brown says the Emperor Constantine was baptized on his deathbed and implies he was never a believer.

Olson: Constantine was baptized on his deathbed, but this was common at the time. There is a great deal of evidence that he was a believer in Christianity. He desired to go to the Jordan and get baptized there. He called together the Council of Nicaea in 325 to combat the Arian heresy. There was unity lacking in the Roman Empire. And Constantine did see Christianity as a unifying influence. But to say he was not a true believer is a very cynical statement that does not hold up to the evidence.

Ferrisi: What about Brown's assertions that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene?

Miesel: This legend all began with a crooked priest in France in the 1890s. This priest made money by selling masses. He renovated his church and built an expensive house. Eventually, his bishop made him quit as a priest. The village where he lived, however, wanted the house made into a tourist attraction. So in the 1950's, a restaurant owner said a secret parchment and Templar treasures had been found in or near the church. Plantard created this fake parchment. He had been a devout Catholic but went on to become a conman. The parchment supposedly supported the idea of a secret bloodline of Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

Ferrisi: Brown says Constantine invented Jesus' divinity and that no one ever believed this beforehand, not even Jesus' followers.

Olson: This is the biggest lie in the book. It goes directly to the heart of Christianity. ... If no one believed Jesus was divine, then why were Christians persecuted? Why were they willing to go to their deaths? "Jesus' divinity is in the writings of all four Gospels, the writings of St Paul and all the early Church Fathers in the first three centuries. In our book, we quote 12 Church Fathers — these were early theologians whose writings the Catholic and Orthodox Church look to as authoritative guides.

Ferrisi: What about this Priory of Sion? Brown claims it is an ancient organization charged with protecting the tomb of Mary Magdalene.

Miesel: There never was a Priory of Sion organization that spanned a thousand years. In 1956, Pierre Plantard formed the Priory of Sion in France. The group's interest was in mystical and esoteric doctrines. He eventually built a myth of himself as the descendant of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Then a supposed member of the priory committed suicide in 1992. Plantard was brought to testify in court, and under oath, he said he had made everything up. He died in 2000. Brown is a very deceptive writer. In fact, I can hardly find a single fact that is true in his book.

Ferrisi: Who were the Knights Templar, and did the Church accuse them of heresy — as Brown asserts?

Miesel: The Knights Templar were basically monks who fought. They were founded in 1108 and designed to help the Crusades conflict in the Holy Land. The Knights became very popular and many people joined them. At their peak, they never had more 300 full-fledged knights in the Holy Land, but they did have thousands of members: chaplains, servants, workers, lay people.

Ferrisi: How and why were they persecuted?

Miesel: In 1291, the Holy Land was retaken by the Muslims. The Knights went back to France where they had lots of property by this time — thousands of plots — which people had given to them. They operated what amounted to a chain of international banks. You could put money down in Paris in one of their centers and take it out in Rome. In '1307, King Philip IV of France decided he wanted their money. He had all of them arrested: about 1,500 to 2,000 people. The king said they were heretics. He did this on his own authority, not the Pope's. The Pope at this time was in Avignon and was very weak. He was told about this after the fact. The Knights were imprisoned, tortured and made to sign wild things: that they worshipped an idol called Bathomet, dishonored the crucifix and were homosexuals. About 100 to 200 of them would not admit this and were burned at the stake. Pope Clement was horrified originally. But when he read their confession, he gave permission to investigate. Eventually, King Philip IV brought his soldiers to the Pope and put strong pressure on him to sign a decree in 1312 that suppressed the order. In 1314, the last two Templar Knights were burned at the stake.

Ferrisi: What about all the assertions made against Opus Dei?

Olson: Brown uses Opus Dei to replace the old bogeyman in anti-Catholic literature, which used to be the Jesuits. Brown's language is laughable. It's not a religious order. There are no monks or sisters. He describes it as a church; it's not a church. It's a personal prelature. It is almost exclusively made up of lay people, and its goal is to promote the vocation of holiness in the world.

Ferrisi: Brown says Leonardo Da Vinci mocked the Church.

Miesel: Everything Brown tells you about Leonardo Da Vinci is wrong. Maybe he was a homosexual, but he was not flamboyant. In fact, he was quiet and reserved. In the Last Supper painting, Da Vinci is illustrating St. John's Gospel. Mary Magdalene is not the person next to Jesus [as Brown asserts]. It is St. John, who is always depicted as young and effeminate. There is no evidence that Da Vinci hated the Catholic Church. He died a believing Catholic. His last will specifically requests a Catholic funeral.

Ferrisi: Brown says the Church, from the beginning, launched a smear campaign against Mary Magdalene.

Olson: This is ludicrous, especially when you see that the Gospel mentions her 12 times and she is the first witness to the Resurrection. In fact, during the entire medieval era, 400 to 1400 A.D., she was the most popular saint in the Western Church. Eventually Mary, the mother of Jesus, became more popular.

Ferrisi: What disturbs you the most about The Da Vinci Code?

Miesel: That people are taking this as true. Why is this happening? Because people don't have real faith, and because Catholics have been so poorly catechized. They don't know how the Gospels were formed, what the early Church believed, that the divinity of Jesus was not an invention. Brown exploits ignorance. It doesn't occur to people to check stuff in their encyclopedias. They only look on the Internet and find all kinds of strange Web sites supporting this stuff. People like conspiracy theories. The Church scandals have made all of this easier to take in. It is a sad commentary that Christians and Catholics are reading this. It's a masterpiece that appeals to the weaknesses of our age.

Olson: The most disturbing thing is its success. People are spiritually gullible and put their brain on hold to embrace something that is anti-Catholic. This is a prejudice that's deeply engraved in American culture. The Da Vinci Code appeals to people who don't like religious authority. It promises special knowledge and says the Catholic Church is false. If Jesus isn't divine, he can't make any moral demands. The scandal is that Jesus is alive and that you have to decide for or against him.

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