Smith Lecture 2005
Is it worth believing? The Da Vinci Code and Real Spirituality

15 Sept 05 Perth

A flush-faced student barged into my college office and rammed his copy of *The Da Vinci Code* into my hands. “Read this!” he urged. “You’ll be out of a job!”

In order to explain what he meant, let me tell you a bit about my work.

I’m employed by New College at the University of New South Wales in Sydney to explore the place of Christianity in the twenty-first century intellectual world. I’m an academic myself—my doctorate was a study of theological ideas in the fiction of Patrick White, the Australian novelist.

My work as Director of CASE seeks to examine whether Christianity still makes sense in today’s world, and whether Christianity can help us make sense OF today’s world.

And I have been a follower of Jesus Christ since childhood, having grown up in a Christian home. I can’t remember a time when I didn’t know the story of Jesus as traditional biblical Christianity expresses it: that God came into the world in the person of Jesus, in the first century in the Middle East; that he spoke wisdom and parables and spiritual teachings, that he had miraculous power to heal; and that he died by crucifixion at the hands of the Romans and the insistence of the Jewish leaders, and then was raised by God from the dead on what we call Easter Sunday. My understanding is that his death and resurrection provide for all human beings a means by which we can be at peace with God, since his death was a substitute for our own punishment by God for our sins. One need only believe in this Jesus in order to receive God’s spiritual blessings—his forgiveness and his love.

If what I have just said sounds like gobbledegook to you, you will appreciate how complex is the task I face everyday of relating Christianity to today’s world of science, of scepticism, and of cold, hard facts.

But then along comes *the Da Vinci Code*, and suddenly everyone is interested again in ancient Christianity and spirituality.

Far from being out of a job, I have found over the last 18 months that there is an unprecedented level of interest in the claims that the novel makes about who Jesus is and what it means to be truly spiritual.

The novel has brought to the surface a truth about the human race that had been buried for a while—we are a deeply spiritual bunch. At first glance, we may look like we are simply materialists, chasing after the big money, the better home (and garden), and the holiday that tops last year's. But in our more reflective moments, we are very interested in whether life makes any deeper sense, whether human beings are more than DNA wound together to form a fascinating beast, and how we might make contact with the Divine.

It's not just *The Da Vinci Code* that has put spirituality and religious conviction back on the agenda. Events in world politics have also shifted the mood.

Before Sept 11, 2001, some analysts were talking about our age as the time when ideological conviction had run its course and capitalism had won. Francis Fukuyama famously wrote in 1992 about 'the end of history', meaning that the world had stopped worrying about beliefs and how to shape the world around those beliefs (how to 'make history') and was now concerned primarily and persistently with the creation of wealth, the operation of the market and the globalisation of the economy. The era of convictions was over.

And then the planes hit the Twin Towers.

Immediately, people began to query the Fukuyama thesis, since they saw in operation spiritual beliefs and convictions that drove human beings even to the point of suicidal destruction. It became blindingly obvious once more that religion and spirituality *really matter* to human beings—whether you are a believer in the doctrine of *jihad* as practised on 9/11, or a believer in peace, or a believer in Infinite Justice, as President Bush named his campaign in Afghanistan.

In fact, it can be argued that it is getting harder and harder to be an atheist or materialist in our current climate. It is becoming *intellectually* more difficult to be an

atheist. Science, far from disproving God's existence, is providing ways of explaining how God might have shaped the world, or how it might have begun. Even Bill Clinton described the genome project as "learning the language in which God created life".

It is also becoming a bit *offensive* to be an atheist. Oxford theologian Professor Alister McGrath writes, "The atheist agenda, once seen as a positive force for progress, is now seen as disrespectful toward cultural diversity." (*Twilight*, p.278). Believing that there is no god—and that people who think there is one are deluded—is seen as bad form in our era of tolerance and acceptance.

We have come back around to the view that the spiritual side of life is important to all of us: that it is connected with all of our lives—the way we relate to people, the way we work, the way we play, what we spend our money on. The spiritual is part of the everyday. Author of a popular Christian book on spirituality, Michael Raiter, says:

> Interest in the spiritual is emerging in the corporate world, the world of athletics, and in social justice. For example, businesses are now recognizing that it is in their best interest to have a concern, not just for the physical, mental, and social wellbeing of their employees, but also their spiritual wellbeing. Indeed, those employees who are holistically healthy tend to be more productive. (*Stirrings*, p.95).

The state of our spirits has become important to us again. And what we *believe* about the spiritual dimension has become a key question once more.

Or, to put it in a more probing manner, we are now asking ourselves the question: what is worth believing? What is really spiritual, and what is counterfeit or wishful thinking? What is just 'consumer spirituality', the kind of beliefs and values you can pick up using your credit card at the Mind Body Spirit festival in Sydney [do you have it in Perth?], and what is deep, real, lasting, life-changing belief?

Well, this is a big question.

In order to explore it, I wish to spend some time considering the claims of *The Da Vinci Code* about real spirituality. To do so, we need to look briefly at the novel's criticisms of traditional Christianity and the alternatives that it offers.

As we do so, we will look at why it is that we come to hold our beliefs, and whether or not these beliefs are justified—that is, whether they are worth having.

By the end, I hope I will have proposed to you not an answer but a question with a lot of thinking behind it. The question is this: how do you start your search for real spirituality?

For those who haven't read it, let me attempt a brief summary of *The Da Vinci Code*.

The plot

Harvard Professor of Religious Symbology, Robert Langdon, is called in by the captain of the French Police, to investigate a murder. The murdered man is Jacques Sauniére, curator of The Louvre, the famous art gallery in Paris. Langdon's assistance is required, because Sauniére has left a baffling collection of symbolic messages, beginning with the positioning of his own corpse in the shape of Leonardo Da Vinci's drawing, *The Vitruvian Man*. Langdon is joined by Sophie Neveu, an agent of the French Police and a cryptographer—one trained in the science and art of deciphering riddles. Together, they begin to piece together the clues as to why Sauniére was murdered and what secrets he was endeavouring to pass on as he met his demise.

The assassin is, in fact, a tragic figure called Silas, a "hulking albino" who is described as a monk[1] in the Opus Dei group within the Catholic Church. He is doing the dirty work of his Father, Bishop Manuel Aringarosa, who in turn is in the service of a shadowy

---

[1] There are, in fact, no monks in the Opus Dei association. Only official religious 'orders', such as the Jesuits or the Benedictines, have monks. Opus Dei is an association of laypersons and priests founded in 1928. This small error is one of many that add up to shake our confidence in the novel's claims to be historically accurate. For the association's own response to *The Da Vinci Code,* see Opus Dei, *The Da Vinci Code, the Catholic Church and Opus Dei,* Information Office of Opus Dei on the internet, 2005, viewed 23 August 2005, <http://www.opusdei.org/art.php?w=32&p=7017>.

character called The Teacher (‘Aringarosa’ in Italian means something like ‘red herring’). Together, they have systematically killed off the last remaining keepers of the secrets that Sauniére is now attempting to pass on.

These secrets belong to a group called the Priory of Sion, a secret society claimed to have existed since medieval times. Among this group’s previous Grand Masters have been famous figures such as Sir Isaac Newtown, Victor Hugo and Leonardo Da Vinci. What secrets does the group hold? Many, but the most startling one concerns the true history of Christianity—that Jesus was not divine, but a mortal prophet who was married to one of his followers, Mary Magdalene. And that the Bible is a fabrication by a Roman emperor in the fourth century, in order to suppress this truth about Jesus and maintain priestly power over the people.

Clues to this secret history of Christianity can be found throughout the great works of Western art and architecture, for those who have eyes to see them. Robert and Sophie come to realize that the Grand Masters of the Priory of Sion are being murdered to prevent them from making public these secrets of true faith. The Catholic Church, it seems, has a vested interest in maintaining the ‘falsehoods’ that Christians everywhere believe.

Robert and Sophie learn this alternative history when they visit Sir Leigh Teabing, a wealthy and bombastic scholar who was once Royal Historian and now lives in a castle northwest of Paris. Teabing is fascinated by the legend of the Holy Grail, and has reinterpreted it to refer to this story of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. She is the real Holy Grail, the vessel by which Jesus’ influence on the world continues. True spirituality is found in worshipping the feminine creative power, and celebrating sexuality and fertility. Teabing is desperate to solve the mystery of the Grail—his life’s ambition is to find the final resting place of Mary Magdalene and whatever secrets and treasures might be found with her bones. He will stop at nothing; in fact, he is the Teacher behind the assassinations.

The quest for the Grail accelerates as the different parties race from France to Switzerland to Scotland to England. It ends with the unravelling of Teabing’s devious schemes, and the reuniting of Sophie Neveu with her long-lost family—who are, to her

great surprise, in the bloodline of Jesus. Finally, Robert Langdon solves the mystery of where the Grail lies—back beneath the Louvre, where the whole adventure began.

Since this is so important to our assessment of *The Da Vinci Code*, let's summarize here the various different teachings on Christianity that the characters Leigh Teabing and Robert Langdon proclaim:

- Jesus was not divine. It wasn't until a church council in the fourth century that the Roman Emperor Constantine, motivated by politics, declared that Christians would now believe Jesus to be divine.
- The Bible, in particular the New Testament, was stitched together by another politically driven committee of church figures, once again manipulated into doing it by Constantine.
- There were many alternative accounts of the life of Jesus, which tell a very different story of him than the ones we have preserved as Holy Scripture in the Gospels (those Gospels known to us as 'The Gospel according to Matthew', 'Mark', 'Luke' and 'John'). These alternative accounts were destroyed by Constantine.
- But a few of these alternative 'gospels' survived. Documents found in 1945 in the sands of Egypt tell the true story of Christianity. They are known as *The Nag Hammadi Library*.
- Jesus and Mary Magdalene, one of the women whom the Bible records as followers of Jesus, were in fact married. Mary was carrying Jesus' child, later born in France and called Sarah, when Jesus was crucified (the fact of Jesus' crucifixion is not disputed in *The Da Vinci Code*).
- Jesus did not rise from the grave. There was no resurrection, as Christians believe. There is not a lot of specific discussion of the resurrection in the novel, but the implication is that Jesus died on the cross, and that his line continued through the child Mary Magdalene bore. The story of Jesus' resurrection is derived from the pagan myth of Mithras, the bull-god who was born on December 25 and rose from his tomb after three days—so claim Langdon and Teabing, at least.

- The claims of the Gospels that Jesus did miracles such as turning water into wine and walking on water are symbolic, not historical. That is, they provide metaphors and stories which people use to live their lives, but did not really happen.
- Sex is the means by which men and women commune with God. In particular, a man is spiritually incomplete until he has intercourse with a woman. The Church recast sex as sinful and disgusting, in order that it might wrest away for itself the power to act as a conduit to God.

Such material comprises a heavy load for something that fits the unofficial genre of 'airport thriller'!

But when you read a novel in an airport lounge, you don't have many study aids around you. You are after diversion and entertainment, not a history or theology lesson. In fact, the point of fiction is to entertain, to pull together facts and fiction into an intriguing story, and to satisfy you by the end, according to the rules of the genre. People differ on whether or not they think Dan Brown has done a good job in the genre, but his efforts have certainly been gargantuan. As we will see, Brown has covered most of the major Christian beliefs, some radical views of sex and human nature, and a vast reworking of the history of groups such as the Knights Templar.

But what happens when you *do* have study aids at hand—when you can check the kinds of claims made by Brown's characters? Does the airport novel deserve to survive beyond the customs check at airport security? Should it be allowed to influence life in the 'real world'?

In other words, do the views about Christianity that comes out of the mouths of the novel's characters provide a fair, truthful, accurate or believable alternative version of Christianity?

Is it worth believing?

My summary response for you tonight is NO.

Not one of the views expressed in the novel as outlined above stands up under scrutiny.

I know it sounds dismissive, but I can go into detail on each and every one of those claims and, I think, demonstrate to you that it is not worth believing. It is not my aim in this lecture to tease out all the details of those claims (although there will be some discussion). Indeed, I am hoping and expecting that many of you will have seen documentaries about *The Da Vinci Code* or perhaps read books or heard other talks about its claims. So it is not my brief to answer all the claims the characters make, one by one. But feel free to ask questions at the end if I can help on some specifics of the novel

My interest is in *why* people have been drawn to the novel, and drawn to the beliefs it offers and its criticisms of traditional Christian belief. If I am right, and the views of Sir Leigh Teabing and Robert Langdon don't really hold water, why are people so willing to accept them?

After all, isn't it just a novel?

The mood of our times

The explanation for why *The Da Vinci Code* has been so popular really is that it taps into the mood of our times. The novel resonates with how many people feel today about religion, the church, and the society.

1. We are suspicious of people trying to sell us something or wield power over us.

We particularly don't like authority figures. The novel focuses on the way people feel about the Church's authority. We hate the fact that the Church acts hypocritically, hiding immorality in its ranks while it preaches goodness and virtue. Listen to this quote…

2. The novel also makes a good deal of the rise of feminism and gender issues in Western society.

It suggests that religion and society have suppressed women, have foolishly ignored the feminine aspects of life, and have misunderstood the 'feminine' nature of religion as in line with nature's fertility and goodness.

The novel's account of the 'sacred feminine' is not (in my view) a very coherent one, misusing ideas from pagan history and a religious movement known as Gnosticism, but it

is nevertheless built on the general mood of our times that male dominance and patriarchal society structures have caused a great deal of harm and need to be reconsidered. This is such a flashpoint issue in today's world that it goes a long way towards explaining the novel's appeal.

3. We like to feel that all religious beliefs might be at least partially right (or only as deluded as each other!)

We like to think that every one has at least some grasp of the truth. This is called pluralism, and it is a widespread belief today. Looked at kindly, this instinct springs from a sort of humility and generosity, a desire that everyone be considered worthy of truth. It is a feature of our common humanity that all of us would be correct about at least some of life. Surely no-one has entirely fallacious beliefs.

In order to think everyone has access to the truth, we have to relax the technicalities of what that truth entails. It is based on the view that genuine spiritual knowledge is not specific; the specifics are just accidents of your birth and your culture. You are a Muslim because of where you were born and who raised you; likewise, an atheist, a Christian or an apatheist.[2] The specific beliefs don't really matter.

4. We like to be pragmatic about beliefs: if it feels right, and it helps you to get along, then you might as well believe it.

Consequently, we find it hard to accept that some people may have true beliefs and others might not.

This is the outcome of what can be called a pragmatic approach to knowledge. It makes it nearly impossible to challenge another person's beliefs. Not only is it seen as a move to enforce your own system on the other person, but it would also suggest that there is Truth out there somewhere such that one person's own beliefs might not be sufficient to understand life and live it well.

---

[2] A fabulous word for a person who really doesn't care whether or not there is a god. There's even a website: <www.apatheism.net>.

There are some healthy ethical sentiments in this position. No-one enjoys being told they are wrong, or even suggesting that one set of beliefs might fit with experience better than another. And because many people have suffered insults and inconvenience at the hands of over-zealous religious types, knocking on your door and thrusting salvation into your hands like a time-bomb, they are rightly wary of getting into the business of critiquing other people's beliefs.

That's fine, but if we surrender our faculties of criticism entirely, we end up in a very strange position with regards to knowledge. We end up saying that no knowledge is in fact solid or trustworthy, but that we shouldn't worry about that because it might upset people. This amounts to intellectual suicide.

Robert Langdon has a rambling conversation with Sophie Neveu late in the novel which comes around to precisely this point:

> "The Bible represents a fundamental guidepost for millions of people on the planet, in much the same way the Koran, Torah, and Pali Canon offer guidance to people of other religions. If you and I could dig up documentation that contradicted the holy stories of Islamic belief, Judaic belief, Buddhist belief, pagan belief, should we do that? Should we wave a flag and tell the Buddhists that we have proof the Buddha did not come from a lotus blossom? Or that Jesus was not born of a *literal* virgin birth? Those who truly understand their faiths understand the stories are metaphorical." (*The Da Vinci Code*, p. 451-2/342)

While I can sympathize with Langdon's compassionate motives for suggesting that we should never disenchant someone whose beliefs can in fact be shown to be false or contradictory, I also feel that he is being condescending here. He is taking the position of Jack Nicholson's character in the movie, *A Few Good Men*: they can't handle the truth! We need to reflect on what a serious and disturbing position has been taken. Langdon is suggesting that, although the beliefs of religious people might be shown not to match with reality as we know it now, we should not dispel these myths because they are doing a good job of providing meaning for people's lives. Fake meaning, but meaning nonetheless!

Langdon is promoting the pragmatic approach to knowledge which reflects a deep suspicion that we cannot really connect the world of our ideas, thoughts and beliefs with the 'real world'. We can only come up with concepts that seem to satisfy our intellectual,

emotional and spiritual needs. But there is no guarantee that they match anything beyond our own experience.

But surely there are religious beliefs, which, if true, have real-world consequences (likewise if false). For example, if a Christian believes that by doing miracles such as turning water into wine, Jesus gave those around him a glimpse of his divine calling, then it matters whether the miracles in fact occurred. If Jesus turned water into wine in the first century, without the aid of a laboratory, then it does tell us something about his power and authority. If he didn't, then he is either a liar or just a mortal (as Teabing believes), or both.

Conversely, if people hold beliefs that can be shown to be false, fabricated or contradictory, then it is in fact a compassionate thing to point this out. This is particularly true if the beliefs have consequences. You might be very sensitive about the time and place at which you point out the problems, but to leave people in ignorance is hardly benign when their ignorance may lead to their harm.

Because of the specific teachings of Christianity, we Christians find it impossible to accept the pragmatic view of knowledge. We cannot go along with the 'as long as everyone feels good about it' approach to truth. If Christianity is in fact true, it teaches that there is a God who will call the world to account for its deeds, its words and even its secrets. If that is in fact true, it would be cruel and neglectful not to make people aware of how we can be saved from God's judgment on that day of account.

While at first glance, the mood of our times seems tolerant and compassionate—'let people hold their beliefs, since it helps them get on in life'—it is in reality a careless and hard-hearted approach to take to other people. If a person's beliefs have important consequences (and many do), it is far more loving and generous to explore whether the belief is worth holding.

5. We believe in a kind of spirituality but not in dogma

The final idea we will consider concerning how we approach religious knowledge these days is dogma. 'Dogma' has become something of a swear word; to call someone 'dogmatic' is rarely a compliment. It suggests someone who is rigid, not open to nuances

and shades of grey, bloody-minded about their own scheme of things and unlikely to change their mind for anyone.

While I do know people who fit this description, dogma gets some undeserved bad press. It means something like ‘principles laid down by an authority’. We have already discussed the difficulties our contemporary culture has with authority. We also have difficulty with ‘principles’. We are very uncomfortable with the suggestion that an idea (say ‘stealing is evil’) is so obviously and universally true that we can call it a principle of human morality.

“But it all depends on the situation”, we might object. “Perhaps he had starving children to feed.”

“It was just a small adjustment of his expenses for taxation purposes”, another complains.

“I was just downloading the song to try it out and forgot to delete it afterwards”, says someone else.

We can always think of reasons why a belief shouldn’t be ‘set in stone’, but should be more fluid and changeable.

In some areas of life, this is certainly the case. Not all virtuous human behaviour can be clarified in a principle that lasts throughout ages and cultures. Sometimes, flexibility and adaptability are essential to living a moral life. However, the tendency of our times is to move pretty much *all* kinds of knowledge into this flexible condition.

But there is some knowledge that you need pure and simple, in principle form. For instance, it is a principle (dogma) of the Christian faith that God created the universe. We can argue about how he did it, what he created, and whether it involved a Big Bang, but it is nevertheless a basic Christian teaching that God did it.

This idea of simple enduring principles seems to be very unpopular today. *The Da Vinci Code* builds on the sense many people have that the dogma of the Church does not relate well to truly spiritual living. A good spiritual life seems to many of us to require great flexibility of beliefs rather than faith in certain enduring principles. Dogma has been replaced with the more encompassing and harder-to-define notion of spirituality.

Michael Raiter, writes:

> Once spirituality is cut loose from any confessional basis then the truth of an experience becomes self-validating. One can discover one's own private and personal spirituality. The issue is not so much one of truth or virtue, but it is simply utilitarian; it works for you. I have no right to judge what works for you. My only obligation is to respect the diversity of beliefs and experiences and to affirm you in what gets you through the night.[3]

Where dogma and religious doctrine are seen to be dry, lifeless and disconnected from our lives, spirituality embraces our lives and makes them richer. Robert Langdon speaks of "the mystery and wonderment that serve our souls" (*The Da Vinci Code,* p. 581/444), symbols and emotional experiences and exciting ideas which all lift the spirit without being tied down to any specific teachings about who God is.

There is, of course, a great deal that is good about this kind of spirituality. Wonder, deep feeling and rich experience of life are not to be frowned upon. But they shouldn't come at the price of ignorance. In *The Da Vinci Code,* we are offered a kind of spirituality that may seem attractive, but it comes at the cost of disregarding what has actually happened in history. Langdon and Teabing's version of Christianity comes at a high price—the distortion of history and the speculative intermingling of mythology, symbolism and theology in a way that disregards even the basic rules of good scholarship.

Christians may have to shoulder some of the blame for the move away from Christian principles/beliefs and towards a more vague spirituality. We have probably made Christian dogma seem overly obscure and complicated, full of arcane debates on God's Trinitarian being and what it means to be justified, sanctified and glorified. These complex theological points are sometimes important, but even when they are, they make Christianity seem remote and obsessed with the minute details of beliefs—in other words, dogmatic.

It isn't supposed to be like that. Jesus explained who God was to the ordinary people of the first century Middle East. His followers were fishermen and shopkeepers, not divinity professors (to be honest, there were a couple of those, too). The poet Dryden got it right:

---

[3] Michael Raiter, *Stirrings of the Soul: Evangelicals and the New Spirituality*, Matthias Media, Sydney, 2003, pp. 91-92.

> Faith is not built on disquisitions vain;
> The things we must believe are few and plain.[4]

Christianity, even when it is dogmatic, is meant to be attractively plain and simple to grasp.

With that admission of guilt in place, our society does need to reflect on whether we pay too high a price for the kind of spirituality that we like and crave. It may be that such spirituality is a bit like partying on a sinking ship, oblivious to the reality of the iceberg that is right in front of your path. Although it may enrich our lives in the short term, the question must be asked whether it has enough to offer the needy human soul over the long term.

Conclusion

The famous Oxford professor and novelist, C. S. Lewis, author of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* tells the story of his conversion to Christianity in a way which models the journey towards a real and legitimate spirituality.

After a long period of time discussing myths, the New Testament, points of theology, and the figure of Jesus with friends and colleagues such as J. R. R. Tolkien (author of *The Lord of the Rings*), Lewis came to believe that there was a God. He used to call himself an atheist, but through these discussions, through logical argument and through his own reading and thinking, he came to the view that there is some kind of god. However, it was more than a year later before he became a Christian, and when he attempts to describe the method by which he came to believe Christianity to be true, he cannot:

> I know very well when, but hardly how, the final step was taken. I was driven to Whipsnade one sunny morning. When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did […] It was more like when a man, after long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake.[5]

Lewis was a deep reader and thinker—he had invested a great deal of time and effort exploring the beliefs that he didn't hold. But then he suddenly found that he held them!

---

[4] John Dryden, 'Religio Laici' ['A Layman's Faith'], 1682.

[5] C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, Geoffrey Bles, London, 1955, p. 223.

I suspect this is entirely normal. We just have beliefs—we suddenly find that they are in our minds. But we are also aware that our beliefs can be *changed*, be it for good reasons, bad reasons, no reason, or just about any reason. We can't force ourselves to believe things, but we certainly change our minds about things when other ideas come along that appeal to us. And one of the amazing skills that human beings have is the ability to ask ourselves questions: "Why do we believe that? Is it a good idea to believe that? Should we continue to believe that?" We can interrogate our own beliefs.

My hope is that you will be willing to put yourself under that interrogation spotlight, to ask what is worth believing about religions, about the Bible, and about the person of Jesus, and to use all of the resources available to you in order to inform those beliefs.