

“TRUTH, RELIGION, AND THE DA VINCI CODE”

A sermon given at the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts

On November 2, 2003

By the Rev. Ken Sawyer

There is a book, *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown, that came out last spring and sold a whole lot of copies. Many of you have read it, I know. I read it myself on summer vacation, racing through it in just a couple days. It has that kind of appeal.

It is a murder mystery, but more. As the writer Andrew Greeley put it, it is “a skillfully written read, complete with secret codes, anagrams, elaborate technology, pagan sex orgies, sudden reversals of fortune, age-old conspiracies, pre-Christian fertility cults, the Knights Templar, Gnostic gospels, ... feminist ‘theory’ and frantic midnight rides through Paris.”

Others are less convinced of Dan Brown’s skill. The journalist Sandra Miesel wrote that “In the end, Dan Brown has penned a poorly written, atrociously researched mess.” I don’t propose to delve much further into the question of his writing skill. I know some folks who read more mysteries than I have found Brown less subtle than they prefer, but I don’t often treat myself to a murder mystery and I liked the book just fine. A real page-turner.

But that is no reason for a minister to mention some book he read last summer. No, it’s the issue Sandra Miesel raised when she criticized not Brown’s writing but his research that suggests a sermon. Because several of you have asked me, Is the religious stuff true in the book, true in the literal sense? A murder mystery it may be, but in the unfolding of the plot Brown introduces all sorts of claims about religion.

I think I can respond to those questions without either (1) giving away the murder mystery itself or (2) having this be just a book report, since the religious claims he makes take us well beyond his story. They repeat a fascinating version of religious history that is increasing both widespread and controversial.

Let me go back to Andrew Greeley’s review to give you a sense of how questions about religion arise from the story. “The battle over control of the Holy Grail in which the two protagonists ... are caught up is between the ‘Priory of Sion’ and Opus Dei. The former has been given charge of the Holy Grail, which might reveal secrets that will severely damage

Christianity [by which Greeley, a Catholic, seems to mean Catholicism]. The latter [Opus Dei, an ultra-conservative Catholic cult] has been charged by the Vatican with destroying the priory and the secrets of the Grail.

“The priory struggles to keep alive a religion of balance between male and female (celebrated in ritual intercourse) which Constantine crushed out of Christianity to strengthen male power.” I don’t want to give away too much of the story, but just so we’re clear how untraditional Brown’s history is, for him, to continue Greeley’s synopsis, “Mary Magdalene ... was the consort of Jesus and the mother of his daughter, Sarah, whose descendents are still alive.”

After that, Greeley gets even more explicit about the plot, and I won’t go on. But then he raises the question much on many readers’ minds. He writes, “All of this is rich material.... Still, the reader must wonder how much of it is fantasy. The answer, I would argue, is that practically all of it is fantasy.”

Not just the murders, the chases, the detective work, etc. No, practically all of it, Greeley thinks -- for instance, the notion of “the Roman curia [as] smooth, sophisticated schemers who will stop at nothing to preserve the power of the [Roman Catholic] church.... The curia is hardly all that deft and devious,” Greeley counters. “It is in fact a fractionalized bureaucracy whose heavy-handed personnel would have a hard time conspiring themselves out of a wet paper bag.”

And he goes on to enumerate how “the book is filled with historical inaccuracies.” But it is not just he who’s ready to name alleged errors – the internet is filled with sites where people report them. The afore-mentioned Sandra Miesel writes that “So error-laden is *The Da Vinci Code* that the educated reader actually applauds those rare occasions where Brown stumbles (despite himself) into the truth.... No datum is too dubious for inclusion, and reality falls quickly to the wayside.”

She happens to be particularly aware of his errors regarding the medieval persecution of witches and “the actual development or construction of Gothic architecture [where] correcting the countless errors becomes a tiresome exercise.”

Anyone who wants to find lists of Brown’s likely hits and misses can do so easily on the internet, though I don’t want to spend much more time on that here this morning. If you want mistakes in particular, some Catholic sites are particularly forthcoming.

More balanced is a good, short report by Margaret Mitchell of the University of Chicago Divinity School, who found herself also “Besieged by requests for [her] reaction to [the book].” She found it “largely fun to read,

if rather predictable and preachy[,] a novelistic thriller that presents a rummage sale of accurate historical nuggets alongside falsehoods and misleading statements,” which she then very briefly itemizes.

The most important to mention is how “Paganism is treated throughout *The Da Vinci Code* as though it were a unified phenomenon, which it was not (‘pagan’ just being the Christian term for ‘non-Christian’). The religions of the Mediterranean world were multiple and diverse....”

Mitchell also notes that while “Brown propagates the full-dress conspiracy theory for Vatican suppression of women,” feminist scholars and others have argued for decades about other interpretations, and Brown’s history ignores the major role that Mary, mother of Jesus, has been accorded by the Catholic Church over time.

Some of these arguments might not matter as much if Brown had not begun his novel with a page headed “FACT,” which includes dubious information about the Priory of Sion and then claims that “All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.” On his own website, Brown makes the same claim to authenticity. As I said, lots of experts have weighed in to the contrary. Art historians, for example, cite many factual errors in Brown’s handling of Leonardo.

Personally, that doesn’t ruin the book for me. In fact, the arguments over questions about the paintings of the Mona Lisa or the Last Supper have been educational, and while they cast Dan Brown’s claims in doubt, the book is still fun watching him be so creative. Fiction lets an author do that.

But Brown’s unsupportable claims to authenticity do leave some questions, the largest one being, What are we to make of his broader perspective, not just on symbols or rituals but the whole notion that life used to be much nicer, more peaceable and egalitarian, when people lived in matriarchal societies and worshiped the Goddess, before the patriarchal post-Constantinian Catholic Church suppressed the eternal feminine and the crucial balance between male and female, ushering us into a world of war and oppression?

That is a gross oversimplification, of course. But in its fuller form, though without so strong an effort at demonizing the Catholic Church, that view is widely shared in some circles today, and a variant of it shows up in some adult programming in UU churches, including here.

It is a description of history that has helped countless women and some men as well to rethink their views of deity and of themselves, finding strength and wisdom in Goddess worship and in the celebration of womankind.

While that history has become more commonly known and accepted in parts of our culture, it has simultaneously been called into question by anthropologists and other scholars who argue that the evidence to support it just isn't there.

For instance, Cynthia Eller wrote last year, in *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future*, "Theoretically, prehistory could have been matriarchal, but it probably wasn't, and nothing offered up in support of the matriarchal thesis is especially persuasive.

"However," she quickly adds, "a myth does not need to be true – or even necessarily *believed* to be true – to be powerful, to make a difference in how people think and live, and in what people value."

As it happens, she thinks the myth is not only "demonstrably fictional" but that it perpetuates gender stereotypes that feminists and others should want to challenge and discard, not perpetuate. Many other feminists feel quite the opposite, and if you think this middle-aged male is going to weigh in on one side or the other, ha!

But I do want to grapple with the question, Does it matter whether something is true or not when it comes to theology or religion? That's what Brown is dealing with when introduces so much of the argument about matriarchal prehistory, the eternal feminine, and the rest, the same story of history that we promulgate in some of our adult UU programs. It makes for an entertaining read, it has contributed to a stronger spirituality for many people here. Does it matter if scholars say that, carried as far as the thesis often is, the evidence isn't there to support it? It may not be true in an empirical or historical sense. How much does that matter?

I had a parishioner in my first church, in Maine, a former Baptist minister, who once wondered aloud if most people were able to honor a myth, to cherish a myth, to live by a myth, if they knew or even if they suspected it was not historically true. Other Protestant clergy I knew then freely acknowledged that the Jesus myth, the Nativity myth, even the resurrection myth, were not historical, but were nonetheless bearers of truth, parts of the way their religion worked for most of their folks, a mythology that provided a set of stories and words and values that were still vital even if the ministers and maybe others had no illusions themselves that the Bible is historically accurate. It got me wondering about the nature of religious truth

I have been thinking about giving this sermon ever since, but I've kept putting it off because I've been of two minds about it all. Well, after thirty years, I am still of two minds. Maybe there are two kinds of minds, and I've

got some of both. Maybe you do, too, though I bet we each have our own balance between them.

You may recall my last sermon, about Michael Servetus, the first modern Unitarian, still much honored among us. Perhaps his most notable trait was a radical search for truth, refusing to be limited by tradition or authority. And as modern UUs we sometimes name among our goals the “free and responsible search for truth.” We are the kind of people who show up in opposition when school board are considering the exclusion of evolution from science textbooks, or the introduction there of Creationism. Who might want to know whether people really used to live in matriarchal, peaceable societies. I am of that kind of mind. I’m curious about the research.

And yet I have always loved the basic doctrine of Bokononism, the religion invented by Kurt Vonnegut in his novel, *Cat’s Cradle*. It is this: “Live by the *foma* that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy.” *Foma* are harmless untruths. Live by the harmless untruths that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy. And maybe “untruths” is too strong a word; let’s redefine *foma* as harmless untruths or uncertainties.

This is also part of our UU heritage, what got us called practical religion in the nineteenth century. Believe what you want, if it makes you a better, happier person. And if the thought of an early, happier, matriarchal world sounds good and makes you feel better and more hopeful, well, no one can disprove it. It is no more unlikely than the various stories accepted by billions of Christians, Muslims, Jews, and others.

I am of that kind of mind, too. I think it’s a healthy mind for us to have here, where we believe so many different things. Goddess worship, you bet. And existentialism -- thanks for letting me hang out here, too. Christian, Jew, Buddhist, humanist, atheist, theist, whatever.

True, a person may prefer a different religious home if a Mormon, a fundamentalist Christian, a conservative Muslim, or an orthodox Jew. But I like to try to practice my Bokononism in any such case. I don’t want my disagreement with any faith to blind me to the fact that it may work fine for others in helping them be brave, kind, healthy, and happy.

Before I close, let me distinguish *foma* from lies. Because I think both parts of our minds are averse to religious deceit.

In his science fiction novel, *The Truth Machine*, James Halprin imagines the invention of such a device would wreak havoc on the leadership of most denominations, for disbelief would be unveiled. “Although most religious leaders sincerely believed, there were hypocrites and charlatans of all denominations who used religious dogmas to

manipulate others.... But Unitarian leaders passed the truth telling exams more consistently than those of other faiths, since Unitarianism espoused no dogma other than human kindness and respect. Any opinion about the nature or existence of God and humankind's relationship with its Creator were automatically acceptable to the denomination. So its leaders had nothing to lie about."

Nothing to lie about, thanks to an openness to all sorts of beliefs, *foma* included, a pragmatic devotion to a religion of human kindness and respect. And also thanks to a Servetus-like determination to know those things that can be known, not dogmas nor anything else we claim to believe that we don't, but those things we come to believe for ourselves. Openness and conviction alike. A religion that seeks truth in a spirit that is neither closed-minded nor unduly credulous but both responsible and free.

After thirty years, that's still where I am, pondering. Maybe when it comes questions about the nature of religious truth, being of two minds is the way to be.