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'Da Vinci Code' spurs questions, objections

By MARK O'KEEFE

After reading "The Da Vinci Code," Holly Jespersen wondered if Jesus Christ did in fact wed Mary Magdalene and father her child, as the novel claims.

"It definitely made me question all that I have been brought up to believe," said Jespersen, a Presbyterian who lives in Chicago.

Glen Gracia of Boston had a similar reaction, questioning the validity of the Bible if, in fact, it was commissioned and manipulated by the Roman emperor Constantine for political purposes, as the book asserts.

"I was basically floored," said Gracia, a former practicing Catholic who can't wait to confront his devout mother with "this historical information."

Alarmed by such reactions, defenders of traditional Christianity have launched a counteroffensive on author Dan Brown's thriller, which is in its 46th week atop The New York Times' fiction best-seller list, has sold more than 6 million copies, is being translated into more than 40 languages and will be made into a Columbia Pictures film directed by Ron Howard.

Books and articles with titles like "Dismantling the Da Vinci Code" and "The Da Vinci Deception" have been or are about to be published. Preachers are giving sermons in response to church members who ask why they were never told there was a Mrs. Jesus. Web sites and discussion groups are humming over the book's "heresies."

Christians respond

A collective Christian outcry is rising, with some of the country's most influential clerics joining in.

In The Catholic New World, the newspaper of the archdiocese of Chicago, Cardinal Francis George calls the book "a work of bizarre religious imaginings" based on "a facade of scholarship" that exploits the public's "gullibility for conspiracy."

When "The Da Vinci Code" was released in March 2003, church leaders paid little



TIM BOYD / Associated Press

Author **Dan Brown** no longer gives interviews on "The Da Vinci Code." On the book's first page, he makes an assertion that galls his critics: "All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate."

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attention. Brown was an obscure author; this wasn't the first time a novel had taken shots at Christianity. And it was, after all, fiction.

But as the book became a publishing phenomenon, religious leaders noticed that readers, even in their own congregations, were taking the novel's historical claims as fact. "Jesus, Mary and Da Vinci," a November ABC special that seriously explored Brown's themes, made clear that this was a cultural force to be reckoned with.

Yet where some Christian leaders perceive a threat, others see an opportunity. The book has sparked interest in early Christian history, with the public suddenly fascinated with topics such as the Council of Nicea in 325.

"It's only a threat if people read this fictional book naively, don't think critically about it and don't pursue truth," said the Rev. Mark Roberts, pastor of Irvine Presbyterian Church in Irvine, Calif. "Now that we have people thinking and talking, we can look at the real evidence of Jesus."

Brown has stopped giving interviews. But on the book's first page, he makes an assertion that galls his critics: "All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate."

Feminine roots

The plot centers on the search for the "Holy Grail" by a brilliant Harvard symbologist and a beautiful French cryptologist, who follow clues in the work of Leonardo Da Vinci.

For example, the feminine-looking person on Christ's right in Da Vinci's "The Last Supper" is supposedly not the apostle John, as is conventionally assumed, but Magdalene, described in the New Testament as a woman who had seven demons cast out of her, followed Christ and was the first to see him after his resurrection.

As the clues lead them through the museums and cathedrals of Europe, Brown's protagonists discover a centuries-old conspiracy, advanced by a patriarchal Roman Catholic Church bent on covering up the truth about the feminine roots of Christianity and the formative impact of its predecessor, pagan goddess worship.

Opus Dei, a Catholic organization based in New York, is portrayed as particularly sinister, with a corrupt bishop directing a devout albino assassin to do his dirty work. George and other Catholics have accused Brown of prejudicially tapping into the public's suspicion of the Catholic hierarchy in the wake of the church's sex abuse scandal.

"If someone were to say this is just a cute story, that would be fine," said Brian Finnerty, communications director for Opus Dei. "But to present this book as historical is fundamentally dishonest."

The greatest protest has been over the book's negative portrayal of central Christian beliefs, including:

- Christ's divinity. Brown writes that Constantine collated the Bible, omitting some 80 gospels emphasizing Christ's human traits in favor of four that made him God. This was supposedly done at the Council of Nicea, "in a relatively close vote."

But the actual vote was 300-2, said Paul Maier, professor of ancient history at Western Michigan University, and it did not determine Christ's divinity. That was attested to much earlier "by many New Testament passages, as well as by the earliest Christians and all the church fathers, even if there was some disagreement as to the precise nature of that deity," Maier said. The Council of Nicea "did not debate over whether Jesus was only mortal or divine, but whether he was created or eternal."

- The Bible's inerrancy. Peter Jones, co-author of the soon-to-be-released "Cracking the Da

Vinci Code," says that in trying to establish that the Bible was cooked by Constantine and his cronies, Brown overlooks the fact that four-fifths of what is now called The New Testament was deemed divinely inspired in the first century -- two centuries before Constantine and the Council of Nicea.

• Christ's celibacy. Even feminist scholars, such as Karen King, a Harvard professor who may be the world's leading authority on early non-biblical texts about Magdalene, have said there is no evidence that Christ was married to her or to anyone else.

George and other traditionalists treat the claim as absurd. "All I have to say is, nobody ever told me to keep secret the fact that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene," the cardinal told The Chicago Sun-Times.

"All those martyrs the first 300 years, they were covering up the fact that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene? Why in heaven's name would someone go to their death to protect that secret? It's absurd."

The controversy leaves Jespersen confused. She is "still absolutely convinced that Christ is God," but thought Brown "made a compelling argument" that Jesus was married. Jespersen plans to attend "A Discussion on 'The Da Vinci Code' " at Chicago's Old St. Patrick's Catholic Church this month, featuring two college professors.

Regardless of what she learns there, Jespersen is glad she read the book.

"It has been a great conversation piece for me," she said, "and has encouraged me to question what I have always accepted just because it is what I was taught."

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