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BEST-SELLING 'DA VINCI' BOOK SPARKS DEBATE ON THEOLOGY

BYLINE: Beth Barrett, Staff Writer

BODY:

Debbie Gordon of West Hills opened the best-selling "The Da Vinci Code" Catholic conspiracy potboiler one evening, and by 3 a.m. found herself peering at online photos of "The Last Supper" in a totally new way.

Was it really Mary Magdalene depicted to the right of Christ in Da Vinci's masterpiece?

While scholars say it is a clean-shaven Apostle John depicted in the painting, not a young woman, it is simply the possibility that Mary Magdalene could be seated in the coveted position at the right hand of Christ that has sparked the imagination of readers and theologians alike.

More than 5.5 million copies of Dan Brown's book have been sold since it was published last April, and its premise is the topic of book clubs, religious classes and water-cooler debates. At the top of the New York Times' best-seller list for 44 weeks, the murder mystery is a fictional search for the Holy Grail, which turns out to be a metaphor for Mary Magdalene, while offering provocative twists on more orthodox, patriarchal images of God.

"It made me think about things; it talks about reclaiming the feminine mystique, the sacred feminine," said Gordon, a product of a fairly traditional Catholic upbringing who is now facing questions about the role of women in the church from her 17-year-old daughter, Amy, who also read the novel.

"She wanted to know, is it really true that women were treated unfairly? I think the book was a good jumping-off point ... for a good conversation between me and my daughter."

Gordon is among a growing wave of Catholics, and non-Catholics, who are using the novel in seminars, study groups and other venues as a stimulus for exploring their faith and the role of women in religion.

Intrigued parishioners from St. Bernardine of Siena Catholic Church in Woodland Hills, where the Gordons worship, for example, plan to attend a March 2 panel discussion on the novel, sponsored by neighboring Temple Aliyah.

"Anything that gets people talking about God and the church is a good thing," said the Rev. Robert McNamara, the pastor at St. Bernardine's, who read the book.

Rabbi Rachel Bovitz of Temple Aliyah said she suggested the panel to dispel errors in the book about both Judaism and Christianity, but also to explore the role of women in both faiths.

"For centuries we have recognized, starting with Genesis in the Torah, that God is neither male nor female," Bovitz said. "(The feminine aspect) is the presence of God we feel among ourselves."

Elizabeth A. Johnson, a distinguished professor at Fordham University in New York, and other theologians have spent years in relative obscurity studying feminine images of God and women's influence on faith. For them, the popularity of the novel is an indication that those themes are beginning to resonate on a larger stage.

"It's like a frozen lake where now the ice is cracking in all sorts of places, as if something is coming from underneath, like springtime," said Johnson, whose 1992 scholarly work, "She Who Is," is widely considered among the best of the genre.

"The Da Vinci Code" also has sparked a new desire for exploring the fullness of God, including female images, and for the church to engage in a more honest dialogue with its members about its past and present.

"In light of the sex abuse scandal, most in the Catholic Church would not put it past the Vatican to suppress (controversial issues)," Johnson said. "People say, 'This is not beyond the realm of reason.' "

But for many other theologians, the hyperbole, historical inaccuracies, sloppy or nonexistent scholarship, and the presentation of church heresies as truth make any serious consideration of the book appalling.

"There are people who have left the church over this book," said Thomas Rausch, a Jesuit priest and theology professor at Loyola Marymount University.

Rausch hasn't read "The Da Vinci Code," and said he's "frustrated" at how the novel has been embraced by Catholics and others who are ready to accept fiction as truth - especially when they haven't read the extraordinary body of Catholic scholarship that would discount it.

"You're dealing with ignorance on a lot of levels," said Rausch, author of "Catholicism in the Third Millennium."

At the heart of Rausch's objection is the novel's suggestion of a secret knowledge about the church - particularly concerning an alleged relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene - held by a select few, and which church leaders have kept hidden for centuries. Claims to such knowledge existing, gnosticism, have always been treated as a heresy.

"This stuff is crazy; it's wacko," Rausch said. "It's not that it was hidden or repressed. Gnosticism was counter to the faith of the community. It was recognized as marginal."

Rausch said he understands the value of feminist scholarship and the hunger for more transparency in the church, but added, "I don't know any serious feminist who claims Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married" - an assertion central to the plot of the book.

David M. Scholer, professor of the New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, said it is important to reclaim Mary Magdalene's role as the "Apostle to the Apostles," but is problematic to speculate on events that are historically unwarranted.

"Was Jesus married to a female follower? ... There's not a shred of evidence that he was," Scholer said. "I always tell my students, what's possible is almost anything. What you have to ask yourself is, what is probable?"

Karen King, a professor of church history at Harvard University and author of "The Gospel of Mary of Magdala," concurred there is no historical indication of such a marriage. The reason, she said, is that Mary is identified by her own town of Magdala, not by her husband's, as would have been the case in the ancient world had she and Jesus been married.

But Mary Magdalene also was not a prostitute - a distortion promoted by an early church leader which still lingers in popular culture despite scholarly efforts to correct the error.

"I think the question that has to be asked is why (the book) is touching so many people," said King, an Episcopalian, whose latest research is based on lost texts discovered in Egypt in 1896.

"It has to do with people really being suspicious. If Mary Magdalene is not a prostitute, then what else is the truth?"

King and others have written about Mary Magdalene's role as an apostle akin to Peter, the leader of Christ's disciples. There is considerable theological agreement that Mary has a valid apostolic claim based on her witness to Christ's resurrection and subsequent instruction to spread the gospel.

The Vatican becomes nervous when the feminist critique becomes too sharp, particularly when it threatens Peter as the "rock" upon which the church was to be built, said Michelle A. Gonzalez, a professor

of theological studies at Loyola Marymount University.

"It's a work of fiction, but it does offer an entry point for Christians to imagine the role of the feminine in the divine," said Gonzalez, who read the book because she was constantly being asked whether or not she had.

"It pushes people to re-imagine how they understand God and Jesus, and that's something people have done throughout the ages. You see that in art and church teaching. Anything that opens people's imaginations to really re-address, or think about how they understand God, that's ultimately a good thing."

Paula McDonald, a Catholic and psychologist who lives in Calabasas, said it's not the Mary-Jesus marriage subplot, which she totally discounts, that's attractive to readers.

"The 'Da Vinci Code' introduces to some people for the first time the feminine image of God. That's very powerful and very useful," she said.

Feminist Christian theology emerged in the United States in the 1960s, but has come of age only in the past few decades.

Broadly, it means looking at the Holy Trinity - God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit - as well as the women of the Bible, through the "eyes and voices" of women as a way to more fully understand the Divine.

God in patriarchal societies is called Father, but Johnson, the Fordham professor, said that's evolved from a time when God was seen more through qualities of creator, protector and love than of gender.

God, for example, was referred to as "Father" just four times in the earliest gospel, but 120 times in the last, Johnson said.

Jesus, while male, speaks in tender language, and identifies himself with wisdom - a trait associated with the feminine Sophia. The Holy Spirit, traditionally most associated with the female, is imaged - for example, in the early Syrian church - as the great mother bird bringing food from heaven to her nestlings, Johnson said.

"The Scripture is very clear that God is neither male nor female, but God's image in the church is male," McDonald said. "That leaves many women without a God image that includes us."

Karen Torjesen, dean of the School of Religion at Claremont Graduate University, said "The Da Vinci Code" raises questions about how women's roles in Christianity have been understood, and misunderstood, by generations.

"Maybe the way we've received the tradition is wrong. If it is, we want to know," she said.

Peggy Auer, a Catholic who lives in Calabasas, said she found the book fascinating because it spoke of issues once unacceptable to put into print.

"I found myself nodding a lot," Auer said. "You say to yourself, 'Why not?'"

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CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

Dan Brown's novel "The Da Vinci Code" blends fiction, myth and fact into a best-selling novel that has left millions of readers fascinated, but theologians struggling to reassert the historical record of Christianity and the Catholic Church. Among the more controversial issues:

The Holy Grail: The mythical symbol is believed to be the chalice Christ drank from at the Last Supper. In the book, it is a symbol for the divine feminine mystique, specifically Mary Magdalene.

Mary Magdalene: Wrongly depicted for centuries as a prostitute, Mary was an early disciple of Christ, who was witness to his resurrection and instructed by him to spread the news. Scholars believe she never married and may have traveled to France after the resurrection.

In the book, Mary is believed to have married Christ and borne him a daughter, hence her role as a vessel

- or the Holy Grail.

"The Last Supper": Completed about 1497, the painting by Leonardo Da Vinci depicts Christ and his 12 apostles, just after Jesus announces that one of them will betray him.

The book theorizes that the apostle seated at Christ's right hand is Mary Magdalene, not John, and that the lack of a chalice on the table means the Holy Grail is a person rather than a cup.

"Madonna of the Rocks": Painted about 1485, Leonardo's painting is said to depict the Virgin Mary, John the Baptist, the baby Jesus and an angel.

The book maintains that the woman depicted is Mary Magdalene, and the kneeling child is her offspring with Jesus.

WHAT'S NEXT

"The Da Vinci Code" will be the topic of a panel discussion 7:30 p.m. March 2 at Temple Aliyah, 6025 Valley Circle Blvd., Woodland Hills. The event will include an overview of "The Last Supper" and other paintings by a representative of The Getty Center.

GRAPHIC: Photo:

(1 -- color) Debbie Gordon of West Hills and her daughter Amy began a dialogue about women and the church after they both read controversial best-seller "The Da Vinci Code" by Dan Brown.

Michael Owen Baker/Staff Photographer

(2 -- 5 -- color) Italian Renaissance artist Leonardo Da Vinci's best-known works include "Madonna of the Rocks," and "The Last Supper." At left, Dan Brown, author of the best-selling "The Da Vinci Code."

Box:

(1) CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES (see text)

(2) WHAT'S NEXT (see text)

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