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## The truth at the heart of 'The Da Vinci Code'

By Elaine Pagels

Archbishop Angelo Amato, a top Vatican official, recently railed against "'The Da Vinci Code'" as a work "'full of calumnies, offenses and historical and theological errors.'" As a historian, I would agree that no reputable scholar has ever found evidence of author Dan Brown's assertion that Jesus and Mary Magdalene married and had a child, and no scholar would take seriously Brown's conspiracy theories about the Catholic group Opus Dei.

But what is compelling about Brown's work of fiction, and part of what may be worrying Catholic and evangelical leaders, is not the book's many falsehoods. What has kept Brown on the bestseller list for years and inspired a movie is, instead, what is true -- that some views of Christian history were buried for centuries because leaders of the early Catholic Church wanted to present one version of Jesus' life: theirs.

Some of the alternative views of who Jesus was and what he taught were discovered in 1945 when a farmer in Egypt accidentally dug up an ancient jar containing more than 50 ancient writings. These documents include gospels that were banned by early church leaders, who declared them blasphemous.

It is not surprising that "'The Da Vinci Code'" builds on the idea that many early gospels were hidden and previously unknown. Brown has said that part of his inspiration was one of these so-called Gnostic Gospels as presented in a book I wrote on the subject. It took only three lines from the Gospel of Philip to send Brown off to write his novel:

*The companion of the savior is Mary Magdalene. And Jesus loved her more than all the disciples, and used to kiss her often. . . . The rest of the disciples were jealous, and said to him, "'Why do you love her more than all of us?'"*

Those who have studied the Gospel of Philip see it as a mystical text and don't take the suggestion that Jesus had a sexual relationship with Mary Magdalene literally.

Still, by homing in on that passage and building a book around it, Brown brought up subjects that the Catholic Church would like to avoid. He raised the big what-ifs: What if the version of Jesus' life that Christians are taught isn't the right one? And perhaps as troubling in a still-patriarchal church: What if Mary Magdalene played a more important role in Jesus' life than we've been led to believe, not as his wife perhaps, but as a beloved and valued disciple?

In other words, what Brown did with his runaway hit was popularize awareness of the discovery of many other secret gospels, including the Gospel of Judas that was published in April.

There have long been hints that the New Testament wasn't the only version of Jesus' life that existed, and that even the gospels presented there were subject to misinterpretation. In 1969, for instance, the Catholic Church ruled that Mary Magdalene was not a prostitute, as many people had been taught. The church blamed the error on Pope Gregory the Great, who in 591 AD gave a sermon in which he apparently conflated several women in the Bible, including Mary Magdalene and an unnamed sinner who washes Jesus' feet with her tears.

But even that news didn't reach all Christians, and it is the rare religious leader who now works hard to spread the word that the New Testament is just one version of events crafted in the intellectual free-for-all after Christ's death. At that time, church leaders were competing with each other to figure out what Christ said, what he meant -- and perhaps most important, what writings would best support the emerging church.

What we know now is that the scholars who championed the "'Gnostic'" gospels are among the ones who lost the battle.

In the decades after Jesus' death, these texts and many others were circulating widely among Christian groups from Egypt to Rome, Africa to Spain, and from today's Turkey and Syria to France. So many Christians throughout the world knew and revered these books that it took more than 200 years for hardworking church leaders who denounced the texts to successfully suppress them.

The copies discovered in 1945, for example, were taken from the sacred library of one of the earliest monasteries in Egypt, founded about 10 years after the 313 AD conversion of Constantine, the first Roman emperor to join the fledgling

church. For the first time, Christians were no longer treated as members of a dangerous and seditious group and could form open communities in which many lived together. Like monks today, they kept in their monastery libraries a very wide range of books they read aloud for inspiration.

But these particular texts appeared to upset Athanasius, then archbishop of Alexandria; in the year 367 he sent out an Easter Letter to monks all over Egypt ordering them to reject what he called "illegitimate and secret books." Apparently, some monks at the Egyptian monastery defied the archbishop's order and took more than 50 of the books out of the library, sealed them in a heavy jar and buried them under the cliff where they were found 1,600 years later.

In ordering the books destroyed, Athanasius was continuing the battle against the "Gnostic" gospels begun 200 years earlier by his revered predecessor, Bishop Irenaeus, who was so distressed that certain Christians in his congregations in rural Gaul (present day France) treasured such "illegitimate and secret writing" that he labeled them heretics. Irenaeus insisted that of the dozens of writings revered by various Christians, only four were genuine -- and these, as you guessed already, are those now in the New Testament, called by the names of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Irenaeus said there could be only four gospels because, according to the science of the time, there were four principal winds and four pillars that hold up the sky. Why *these* four gospels? He explained that only they were actually written by eyewitnesses of the events they describe -- Jesus' disciples Matthew and John, or by Luke and Mark, who were disciples of the disciples.

Few scholars today would agree with Irenaeus. We cannot verify who actually wrote any of these accounts, and many scholars agree that the disciples themselves are not likely to be their authors. Beyond that, nearly all the gospels that Irenaeus detested are also attributed to disciples -- some, including the Gospel of Thomas, to the original 12 apostles. Nonetheless, Athanasius and other church leaders succeeded in suppressing the gospels they (and Irenaeus) called illegitimate, won the emperor's favor and succeeded in dominating the church.

What, then, do these texts say, and why did certain leaders find them so threatening?

First, they suggest that the way to God can be found by anyone who seeks. According to the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus suggests that when we come to know ourselves at the deepest level, we come to know God: "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you." This message -- to seek for oneself -- was not one that bishops like Irenaeus appreciated: Instead, he insisted, one must come to God through the church, "outside of which," he said, "there is no salvation."

Second, in texts that the bishops called "heresy," Jesus appears as human, yet one through whom the light of God now shines. So, according to the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus said, "I am the light that is before all things; I am all things; all things come forth from me; all things return to me. Split a piece of wood, and I am there; lift up a rock, and you will find me there." To Irenaeus, the thought of the divine energy manifested through all creation, even rocks and logs, sounded dangerously like pantheism. People might end up thinking that they could be like Jesus themselves and, in fact, the Gospel of Philip says, "Do not seek to become a Christian, but a Christ." As Irenaeus read this, it was not mystical language, but "an abyss of madness, and blasphemy against Christ."

Worst of all, perhaps, was that many of these secret texts speak of God not only in masculine images, but also in feminine images. The Secret Book of John tells how the disciple John, grieving after Jesus was crucified, suddenly saw a vision of a brilliant light, from which he heard Jesus' voice speaking to him: "John, John, why do you weep? Don't you recognize who I am? I am the Father; I am the Mother; and I am the Son." After a moment of shock, John realizes that the divine Trinity includes not only Father and Son but also the divine Mother, which John sees as the Holy Spirit, the feminine manifestation of the divine.

But the Gospel of Mary Magdalene -- along with the Gospel of Thomas, the Dialogue of the Savior, and the Gospel of Philip -- all show Peter, the leader of the disciples, challenging the presence of women among the disciples. We hear Peter saying to Jesus, "Tell Mary to leave us, because women are not worthy of (spiritual) life." Peter complains that Mary talks too much, displacing the role of the male disciples. But Jesus tells Peter to stop, not Mary! No wonder these texts were not admitted into the canon of a church that would be ruled by an all-male clergy for 2,000 years.

Those possibilities opened by the "Gnostic" gospels -- that God could have a feminine side and that Jesus could be human -- are key ideas that Dan Brown explored in "The Da Vinci Code," and are no doubt part of what made the book so alluring. But the truth is that the texts he based his novel upon contain much deeper and more important mysteries than the ones Tom Hanks tries to solve in the movie version that opened this weekend.

The real mystery is what Christianity and Western civilization would look like had the "Gnostic" gospels never been banned. Because of the discovery by that Egyptian farmer in 1945, we now at least have the chance to hear what the "heretics" were saying, and imagine what might have been.

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