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Updated: 08:38 AM PT April30, 2004

Guests: Steve Waldman, Steve Wasserman, Karen King, Harold Attridge, James Garlow, Erwin Lutzer

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

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ANNOUNCER: DEBORAH NORVILLE TONIGHT.

DEBORAH NORVILLE, HOST (voice-over): "The Da Vinci Code," it's been a best-seller for more than one year. Ron Howard wants to turn it into a movie. Now the backlash, a string of books claiming to debunk Dan Brown's take on Christianity and conspiracy, Jesus, and Mary Magdalene.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: They're going to discover the reality that Jesus is truly the son of God.

NORVILLE: Tonight, the fight over "The Da Vinci Code." Some say it's a fascinating exploration of church history. Others say it's an attack on their faith.

Plus, Michael Jackson headed back to court again with a new lawyer and a new security team. The king of pop says his very life is at stake.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

ANNOUNCER: From Studio 3K in Rockefeller Center, Deborah Norville.

NORVILLE: And good evening, everybody. We've got lots of ground to cover this evening, so let's get right to it.

Right now, there are more than 10 books on the shelves, all responding in one way or another to "The Da Vinci Code." And three more books on the same subject are due out this summer. Tonight, we're joined by the authors of two of those books. The Reverend James Garlow wrote "Cracking Da Vinci's Code." And Reverend Erwin Lutzer, is the author of "The Da Vinci Deception."

We should note that Dan Brown, how is the author of "The Da Vinci Code," declined our invitation to come on the program tonight. His publisher says he's busy working on his next book.

Mr. Lutzer, I want to start with you first.

You in your book make no bones about it. You think that this is a direct attack on Christianity. You say—quote—"It is a direct attack against Jesus Christ, against the church, and those of us who are his followers and call him savior and lord."

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Why do you think this to be so?

REV. ERWIN LUTZER, AUTHOR, "THE DA VINCI DECEPTION": Well, Deborah, the reason is because it attacks the two fundamental doctrines that are the foundation stones of Christianity, the deity of Christ, by asserting, the novel does, that Constantine invented the deity of Christ at the Council of Nicaea in 325, which would mean that Christ isn't God, but he was made into a God.

And then secondly, it attacks Christianity by calling into question the validity of the New Testament manuscripts and gives an alternate form of Christianity through the Gnostic Gospels. So when you put those two things together, you realize that the heart of Christianity is at stake because the heart of Christianity is the divinity of Jesus, the fact that he was both God and man.

(CROSSTALK)

LUTZER: And if that's not true, Christianity collapses.

NORVILLE: I can understand that position. What I think is interesting is, this has never been purported to be anything other than a novel, although Dan Brown does make the claim that certain parts of the novel are true.

LUTZER: Well, you know, when you read the flyleaf of the novel, it talks about all of the things that are true. And then there are certain quotes where he said that he did a lot of historical research. But I want you to know that quite apart from that, the important thing is there are people who are reading it who think it might be true.

There are believers who are (AUDIO GAP) in doubt. And there are unbelievers. And in their case, it might be confirming some of the suspicions they had about the church. So regardless of his intentions, the fact is, some people are reading it as an historical novel rather than just pure fiction.

NORVILLE: Is that your fear as well, Reverend Garlow, that people are reading this book and getting the real message of Christianity completely backwards?

REV. JAMES GARLOW, AUTHOR, "CRACKING DA VINCI'S CODE": Well, do want to say, it's not a fear. It's not a fear at all. The fact is, Dan Brown's book is in 40 languages, but the Bible, portions of it, is in 4,000 languages. So I don't have a fear of it, because long after Dan Brown's book is gone, the Bible will still be strong.

But the fact is, people are reading it. Dr. Lutzer's is correct. And in some cases, if they're very weak Christians or they don't know the Bible well or they don't know their history, they're trashing what they have of their Christian faith and assuming mistakenly that Dan Brown's book is accurate history, which it is not.

NORVILLE: I want to get into the specifics of this.

And, Reverend Lutzer, you mentioned at one point that you and many others who have written books similar this, and certainly Reverend Garlow is one of them, the notion that the after king Constantine became a Christian was the beginning of the notion that the Council of Nicaea, which happened at 325 A.D., after King Constantine became a Christian, was the beginning of the notion that Christ was God, a deity, that it didn't exist 300 years before that, which you say is total hokum.

LUTZER: It is.

And we can prove that, first of all, because the New Testament itself teaches the deity of Jesus Christ so clearly.

And then you have the church fathers. I think, for example, of a man named Ignatius who, in the year about 110, called Jesus Christ God incarnate. So you can go back 200 years easily before 325 and you can find a whole host of church fathers that affirm the deity of Christ.

And then consider this. Think of all the Christians who were willing to die for their faith in ancient Rome because they believed that Jesus Christ was God. The deity of Christ is the basis of it all. Constantine did



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not invent it. One further word, there was a man by the name of Arius denying the deity of Christ and getting a following.

That's why the counsel was called; 318 bishops met together. Only two did not agree with the complete deity of Jesus Christ. So it's not that Constantine invented the deity of Christ. Christ is God, and the Christian Church believed that to be true from the beginning.

NORVILLE: As I noted at the beginning of the program, Dan Brown is not available to be a part of this, but we wanted to try to get his input as best we could. So we went to his Web site, where he has some responses to some of the challenges that you and the others have made, one of which is, he says: "History is written by the winners"—it's a quote that is also in his book—"those societies and belief systems that have conquered and survived."

"Many historians now believe," he says, "as do I, that in gauging the historical accuracy of a given concept, we should first ask ourselves a far deeper question: How historically accurate is history itself?"

Reverend Garlow, is it—is it a concern—I know it's not a fear. Is it a concern that in even pointing to the Council of Nicaea, using a true historical event that was extremely important in the Christian Church, by even referencing it, Dan Brown gives some validity to his notions which are included in his book?

GARLOW: Oh, no, I think it's important that he does refer to the Council of Nicaea, in 325, a real event, an important event. He makes claims such that it was a close vote.

Well, the vote, as Dr. Lutzer has already pointed out, it was 316-2, so hardly a close vote. Referring to the Council of Nicaea is not the problem. This notion that history is written by the winners and so the losers, they're trounced out, the fact is, Christianity grew extremely fast through the first 300 years, and it did in fact take over the Roman Empire and it did set aside many Pagan notions.

But history, as it has been recorded of the church history from that point on, certainly includes all of the flaws and the warts and the sins and the failures of the church. If the church was as manipulative as Dan Brown would have you believe, none of those warts would be included in present-day church history. But it is.

NORVILLE: Another part of "The Da Vinci Code" is the notion that there are other books of the Bible that were not included in the 66 books of the Bible that we're all familiar with, some of those called the Gnostics.

What can you say about that? Mr. Brown makes the assertion in his book that those were left out because it broadened the notion of Christianity to a point that was one that the church, in that case the Roman Catholic Church, was extremely comfortable with, the role of women in a more elevated position, etcetera.

GARLOW: Are you asking me?

NORVILLE: Yes. Go ahead.

GARLOW: Well, the Gnostic Gospels or Gnostic texts were discovered in 1945, translated into English in 1977. And they date roughly from the 2nd, 3rd, and perhaps 4th century, 250, 150 A.D., 250 A.D., 300 A.D. In contrast to that, the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, are somewhere before 70 A.D. So the fact is, the Gospels are written, the Gospels in the New Testament are written way before the Gnostic writings that come later.

Now, as it pertains to the issue of women, throughout the New Testament, Jesus is very strong, as is Paul in a number of his statements, in elevating the role of women. And where the Gospel of Jesus Christ has gone, it has elevated the role of women. Jesus was in one sense a true feminist in terms of the equality of women in their redemptive standing before God.

NORVILLE: Let's go to a quote from Dan Brown that we also pulled from his Web site on women. He said: "Women in most cultures have been stripped of their spiritual power. The novel touches on questions of how and why this shift occurred and on what lessons we might learn from it regarding our future."

That doesn't really say anything, Reverend Lutzer, about the role of women in the early church. It's more of a statement of a purpose of women in general, is it not?

LUTZER: Yes, for sure. But if you read "The Da Vinci Code," you find out that there's an emphasis on the divine feminine and the idea that one encounters God through a sexual ritual.

Now, that's a part of Paganism. That's never been a part of Christianity. And if I may just go back to the Council of Nicaea and the Gnostic Gospels, there's not one shred of historical evidence that Constantine rejected the Gnostic Gospels or that they even came up for discussion, because, at that time, the New Testament essentially, as we have it today, was already authoritative. So it was simply not an issue at the Council of Nicaea.

The Gnostics were very interesting people. We're glad that those Gnostic texts were found. But they represent something other than Christianity, the belief that one can have an experience of God apart from the historical death, resurrection of Jesus.

NORVILLE: One of the things that's interesting I think to readers of

"The Da Vinci Code" is the plausibility of it, the fact that, gee, that

might be possible, in the same way that Michael Crichton made a fortune

when he wrote "Jurassic Park" on the plausibility that you might somehow be

able to get DNA out of an ancient bug stuck in amber from prehistoric times

and somehow regenerate it into animals at a theme park down in Costa Rica -

· not likely to happen, but plausible.

You could make the extension that, gee, maybe one day it would be possible. Is that not the popularity of this, just the possibility? It's a fun notion to toy with, but there's really nothing serious about it?

GARLOW: I think that's definitely a part of it, the appeal to conspiracy. It kind of appeals to a part of all of us.

I think there's a deeper message, and that has to do with this. There's something within the human heart that does not like to admit it is broken and needs help from a God outside of itself. And when we come as a Christian, we come with acknowledgement that we have something wrong with within us. It's called sin. And we're broken and we need God's touch.

Now, if you don't accept that and you reject that notion, you have to believe that somehow you are OK, or all right, or you can look within for God or for your health and your source.

NORVILLE: And you know, it's funny. Dan Brown says he loves these kind of discussions. But he said this: "Religion has only one true enemy, apathy. And passionate debate is a superb antidote." He said: "These authors are serving an important purpose by engaging people in meaningful discussions. Whether they support or refute the ideas in my novel is really immaterial."

You feel like these books, yours among them, are bringing people closer to the faith because Dan Brown's books may have led them astray?

GARLOW: Well, I do believe there's a good discussion going on, because, perhaps for the first time, for many people, they're actually asking the question, is my New Testament reliable and is Jesus truly divine?

And if they will research that and follow that question on through, they're going to come to some answers that are very exciting to me personally. People are going to discover the authenticity of the New Testament and that Jesus Christ is who he claimed to be.

NORVILLE: Let me give you a quick answer to that too, Reverend Lutzer.

LUTZER: Well, do you know what the exciting thing is? When people compare the evidence—you know, when you talk about the Gnostic Gospels, I encourage people to read these Gnostic Gospels, because instead of seeing their similarity to the New Testament, we notice their differences. They are radically different.

And in the New Testament, you're presented with a Christ who, because he is God, is actually qualified to bring us into God's presence to declare us as perfect as God himself is, which is the good news of the Gospel. And there's nobody else out there who's able to do that. No other religious leader is capable of it because of the divinity and the humanity of Jesus.

Let everyone investigate the claims for themselves and see whether or not they come to that very compelling conclusion.

NORVILLE: Gentlemen, let me ask you both to stick around for a few minutes. We're going to take a short commercial break.

But when we come back, we're going to be joined by two theologians to hear what they have to say about "The Da Vinci Code"'s portrayal of Jesus, the church, and the book's most controversial assertion, the role of Mary Magdalene in Jesus' life and in Christianity.

More in a moment.

ANNOUNCER: Coming up, could this famous work of art hold a secret truth about Jesus' real relationship with Mary Magdalene? Unlocking "The Da Vinci Code." Where does the truth end and fiction begin?

DEBORAH NORVILLE TONIGHT is coming right back.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

NORVILLE: More now on cracking "The Da Vinci Code" controversy.

We're joined again by Dr. James Garlow, who wrote "Cracking Da Vinci's Code," and the Reverend Erwin Lutzer, the author of "The Da Vinci Deception."

Also joining us our discussion now is a professor of ecclesiastical history at the Divinity School of Harvard University, Professor Karen King, and the dean of Yale's Divinity School, Professor Harold Attridge.

Thanks to all of you for being with us.

Let me start with you now, Professor Attridge. This popularity of "The Da Vinci Code" is astonishing, 56 weeks on the best-seller list. What is it about the origins of Christianity which is at the focus of this book that has struck such a chord with so many readers?

HAROLD ATTRIDGE, DEAN, YALE DIVINITY SCHOOL: Well, I think the origins of Christianity have always fascinated both believers and unbelievers. Knowing how this movement got under way is something of a mystery and the enormous success that it had within the course of the first three centuries of the Christian era. And then to add a little bit of conspiracy and a hint of sex, and you have a best-seller.

NORVILLE: Professor King, let's get into the hint of sex. This notion that that somehow Mary Magdalene may have been more than just a devout follower of Jesus is one of the central themes of this book and, in fact, the Holy Grail, as Dan Brown claims later on in the book. What do you make of all of that?

KAREN KING, PROFESSOR, HARVARD DIVINITY SCHOOL: Well, of course, Mary Magdalene has often been known in terms of her sexual roles. She's most known in the West, of course, as a prostitute. And of course there's not a shred of information of evidence of any kind in the ancient historical record.

(CROSSTALK)

NORVILLE: How did that get started?

KING: Well, we see it happening actually first in the 4th and 5th centuries. It becomes most promulgated with a sermon that Pope Gregory gave at the end of the 5th century.

But it comes by doing what I call a kind of confusion of Marys. That is to say, there's a whole set of Marys in the New Testament text. Of course there's Mary the mother. There's Mary and Martha, the sister of Lazarus. And we have Mary Magdalene and some other Marys.

And what happens is that they start beginning to be identified with each other. So we see, for example, in the Gospel of John, that Mary, the sister of Lazarus, anoints Jesus in preparation for his burial. She becomes identified with Mary Magdalene. And there's also this very interesting story in the Gospel of Luke where a sinner woman, an unnamed sinner woman also anoints Jesus for his burial.

And so now we get this conflation where we see Mary Magdalene becomes a sinner woman. And, of course, what kind of sin do women do? It becomes a sexual sin. And she goes on and is identified then with the woman caught in adultery in John 8, who's also nameless and every other sort of sinner woman in Gospels.

NORVILLE: Professor Attridge, there's another confusion about biblical language, and that is this notion of those who were afflicted by the devil.

Back in those times, sickness, I gather, could have been perceived as the work of the devil?

ATTRIDGE: That's correct.

NORVILLE: How has that gotten misinterpreted in modern times?

ATTRIDGE: Well, I'm not sure. Demonic possession is something that we don't regularly use as a category of understanding illness. It was widely used in the 1st century. And one of the things that Jesus is credited with is the ability to expel demons and heal at the same time.

NORVILLE: And one of the reasons the Mary—the prostitute comes is because, just before she's mentioned in one part of the Book of Luke, there is another Mary who indeed was a prostitute, but it's a different woman?

ATTRIDGE: There's a sinner woman. Yes, there's a woman in Luke who anoints the feet of Jesus as Mary of Bethany does in John. And in the same general context, there's a reference to a woman from whom seven demons were expelled, Mary Magdalene.

NORVILLE: I want to get into what I think has gotten a lot of people all riled up about "The Da Vinci Code." And quite frankly, it comes at the very beginning of the book.

It's a single page that begins by saying fact. And what it says is:

"The Priory of Sion, European secret society founded in 1099, is a real organization. In 1975, Paris' Bibliotheque Nationale discovered parchments known as Les Dossiers Secrets, identifying numerous members of the Priory, including Sir Isaac Newton, Botticelli, Victor Hugo, and Leonardo da Vinci."

It goes on and talks about Opus Dei, a secret it says has "a dangerous practice known as corporeal mortification." And then it goes and says:

"All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate."

That big word right there that says fact has gotten a lot of people thinking that everything else in this book is fact. Let's take this point by point. The Priory of Sion, is this a secret society that in fact exists? Who wants to go for that one? Don't all raise your hand at once.

ATTRIDGE: This is an area that I have very little expertise in.

It would not surprise to me that there exists such a secret society. We all know that there were all sorts of secret societies through the late medieval, and the Renaissance and early modern periods, some of them quite respectable secret societies, like the Masons, for instance, who have done a lot of good work in various parts of this country.

But just to posit the existence of a secret society doesn't then

warrant the conclusion that it does awful things that this book says that

this one did. I just don't know enough about it to

(CROSSTALK)

NORVILLE: All right, Dr. Garlow, you look eager, sir.

GARLOW: Well, the Priory of Sion was mentioned in the 1960s and is discounted as a myth, a hoax. This occurred in France. There's no credible witness that there is any such thing existing through the pages of history prior to this fabrication in about the late 1950s or 1960s.

NORVILLE: And what about these documents that were supposedly discovered in the library in France in 1975 that identified members of this secret society, some of the great notable names of the 14th, 15th century? Have those been proved to be accurate? Do they exist? Is that—quote—

“fact,” as Mr. Brown asserts?

GARLOW: I don't know who you're asking.

NORVILLE: Dr. Garlow, you seem know about this one.

GARLOW: No, I don't know much about this one.

As a matter of fact, I think that's part of the poetic license of the novel that Dan Brown takes throughout the book, from many things that don't have any substance to them. And it keeps us away from really the cardinal issue. The cardinal issue is, who is this Jesus?

NORVILLE: And let's get into the real crux of the issue. In “The Da Vinci Code,” he talks about the painting of the last supper, and that when you look at the painting of the last supper, he says it is more than just a depiction of the Eucharist that Christ offered prior to his crucifixion, but, rather, there is a lot of symbolism. Specifically, if you look to the right of Jesus, you see this V.

In “The Da Vinci Code,” Reverend Lutzer, he talks about this being a symbol for the feminine chalice. Do you want to get into that one and why you think that may not actually be true?

LUTZER: Well, the best I can do with that one, Deborah, is simply to quote the words of art historians.

I think, for example, Jack Wasserman, who is a retired art historian who said—and I think I'm quoting him accurately—that virtually everything that Dan Brown says Leonardo da Vinci is wrong. So I think that what he's really doing here is, here's stretching a point to try to read into it the fact that—or the notion, I should say, that Jesus Christ—that the Grail is Mary Magdalene, who bore his child.

I might say also, regarding those documents in France, I'm not up to date on all those things, but I do need to say that, in France, legends regarding Mary Magdalene and John the Baptist and so forth had been circulating for centuries, dating way back to about the 9th century.

What Dan Brown has cleverly done is to take these legends, use these in his book, and try to pass them off as plausible history. And that's why I guess we're having this discussion.

NORVILLE: It is why we're having this discussion. And just because plausible seems to be operative word, there is one definition, No. 2 on my dictionary printout, that says, “giving a deceptive impression of truth or reliability.”

We'll get into more of the plausible aspects of "The Da Vinci Code" with our panel when we come back. We'll take this break and we'll be right back.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

NORVILLE: Welcome back. The best-seller "The Da Vinci Code" has sparked all kinds of controversy. It is a novel, a work of fiction. But Dan Brown, who wrote the book, says he centered the story on a series of facts.

And that's what's got everybody talking, many who feel the "facts" in "The Da Vinci Code"—and I put quotation marks around that—are something that they need to attack, that it is also an attack on the very foundations of the Christian church and on Christian faith. We should note again that Dan Brown has declined to be a part of our discussion tonight.

But we are back with the Reverend James Garlow, the Reverend Erwin Lutzer, Karen King, professor of ecclesiastical history at Harvard, and Yale's Divinity school dean, Harold Attridge.

Let's go back to looking at that painting, if we could, of the last supper, because there is still some more symbolism in there.

Professor King, I know that you are not an art historian, but I do know that you are something of an expert on Mary Magdalene. There is a figure to the right of Jesus on the other side of the V we're looking at that, in "The Da Vinci Code," Dan Brown says, that's not a man. That's a woman. Would Mary have been present at a gathering such as the last supper?

KING: Well, of course, we don't know what the apostles looked like, so as far as the painting goes, it's not possible, you know, to say in that regard.

But it's quite plausible that there were women present at the last supper. We know that Jesus had women followers with him during his entire ministry. We know that there were woman apostles after the ministry. For example, in Romans, Paul talks about Junia, foremost among the apostles. She's a some. Now, that has been changed. You know, scholars in fact changed that because they said a woman can't be an apostle. But we have evidence of that. We have evidence of women being important followers of Jesus all through his ministry, and indeed foundational in the spread of the church after Jesus' death.

NORVILLE: When you look at that picture, do you think that's a woman or do you think that's a man?

KING: Well, I think there are conventions that we look at. We have very strong images of male and female as convention of the representation of gender. So the question is really, what would someone have thought in the time in which it was painted? And there are historians who assure us quite clearly that it's a male figure.

NORVILLE: Dr. Lutzer, you're senior pastor of the Moody Church in Chicago. What have your parishioners said about this particular part of "The Da Vinci Code" to you?

LUTZER: Well, you know, there are many people, of course, who have read it. And when I spoke on it, I was surprised at the number of people who were acquainted with the book.

But I think the most troubling part to the believers and to me, perhaps one of the most troubling parts, is the notion that Jesus was actually married to Mary Magdalene and that they had a child. In fact, I think he calls her Sarah, which is very interesting. I'm wondering where all these details come from.

But, actually, the historical evidence for the marriage of Jesus to Mary Magdalene simply does not exist. One of the Gnostic texts does say that Mary Magdalene was the companion of Jesus, but that doesn't necessarily mean marriage, even if the Gnostic texts were taken as authoritative. So I think we have to tread carefully here.

(CROSSTALK)

NORVILLE: And Professor Attridge, when you look at the conjugation in the Greek of the word for companion, does it denote something more than simple friendship? Or is that specifically what it means?

ATTRIDGE: I believe the word is a Greek loaned word in Coptic. Coptic is language in which the text survives. This is the Gospel of Philip. And I believe the word is coinonias (ph), which is related to the word coinonee (ph), or fellowship.

And it's clear that there were women who were members of the fellowship of Jesus, and I think this text is affirming that, yes, Mary was one of those people who was a fellow of Jesus. And I think many early Christians were quite clear on this, that men and women were equal members of the fellowship of Jesus. And I think the text exemplifies that.

NORVILLE: "The Da Vinci Code" also makes reference to a scroll that was found that was partly damaged that talks specifically about Jesus kissed her on the, and "blank." That's where the hole in the text is. What do you make of that, Dr. Garlow?

GARLOW: Well, they had to supply the word "kissed her on the lips," first of all. This is from a document written in the year 250, approximately.

I have considerably more confidence in the literature that was written probably before the year 70 A.D., which tells us what Jesus was really like, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

NORVILLE: Let me ask all of you in the few minutes that we've got left, what troubles you the most about the book like "The Da Vinci Code." You each come from slightly differing places.

Professor King, let me speak with you first about that, as a professor of ecclesiastical history. What bothers you about this book, if anything?

KING: Well, I actually think that one of the services "The Da Vinci Code" has done is precisely to let us see the enormous diversity of early Christianity, that we have a lot of voices, that the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the meaning of his teachings, questions about the roles of women, questions about the nature of the church and authority, were all being hotly debated in the early church.

These are sorts of things that we can now see were being contested. And these new Gospels, new literature we've found are themselves historical resources of considerable importance for painting this portrait of the early church and letting us see this. It's the case that these texts also argue for the divinity of Jesus. But, in some ways, there's been an overemphasis in the modern period on the lack of Jesus' humanity.

And I think that people are very, very interested in understanding precisely Jesus as a human figure as well as a divine figure. I think that there is also an enormous amount of interest not only in women's leadership, but also in a modern theology of sexuality that is very different from that that is offered to us by early Christianity in antiquity.

And in this case, texts like the Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of Philip very much assert that Jesus loved Mary more than other women, even more than the male disciples. And that turns out to be a statement about the spirituality of women, about the spirituality of people being more important, in fact, than their physical relationships.

NORVILLE: Let me stop you there.

Professor Attridge, you want to respond?

ATTRIDGE: Well, I think the most disturbing thing about the book is the ways in which there are facts embedded in it that are taken totally out of context and they're given a spin that distorts them I think quite dramatically.

Just to take the case in point, the example of the Gospel of Philip and the kissing on the mouth, if that's what the restoration of the lacunar is to be, and I think it probably is a reasonable one. That has to be understood in the context of that text, which is very much interested in Christian rituals, including the ritual kiss that takes place in the Eucharistic assembly.

And I think what's going on in that text is telling a story that warrants and grounds that Christian practice,

saying Jesus did it, so can we.

NORVILLE: The context is so important to all of this.

ATTRIDGE: That's right.

NORVILLE: I'm going to thank all of you so much for being with me.

It's been an interesting discussion.

Professor Attridge from Yale Divinity School, Professor King from Harvard.

Dr. Garlow, we appreciate you being with us. Your book is called "Cracking Da Vinci's Code." It's got a really good picture of the last supper in there.

And, Reverend Lutzer, we thank you as well. Your book, "The Da Vinci Deception."

Thank you all.

ANNOUNCER: Up next, the fascination with mysticism, conspiracies, and ultimate doom, one critic's take on why "The Da Vinci Code" is blurring the line between fact and fiction—when DEBORAH NORVILLE TONIGHT returns.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

NORVILLE: "The Da Vinci Code," why is it so successful? What about America's fascination with conspiracy theories? And has the line between fact and fiction blurred?

Next.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

NORVILLE: "The Da Vinci Code" and all the books that have been written to dispute it are part of a larger cultural and commercial phenomenon. From "The Da Vinci Code" to "The Passion," 2,000 years after his death, Jesus has become Hollywood's and publishing's hottest leading man.

We're joined now by Steve Waldman, who is the CEO and founder of Beliefnet.com, and Steve Wasserman, who is the editor of "The L.A. Times" Book Review.

And, gentlemen, thank you so much for being with us.

Steve Wasserman, let me start with you first. There is just this

flood of "Da Vinci"-debunking books hitting the stands. A couple more are

going to be coming out this summer. Are they really all trying to—quote

· "crack the code" or is there a little bit of a commercial motivation here, too? It's nice to write a good thing while it's hot.

STEVE WASSERMAN, EDITOR, "L.A. TIMES" BOOK REVIEW: Well, I think there's less of a cynical for the appearance of all these books, but rather it's the compliment that theology pays to literature, that they take fiction so seriously that they feel they have to combat it by bringing out a lot of books that dispute this or that alleged fact that surfaces in what is after all described appropriately as a novel.

NORVILLE: You know, it's interesting. Dan Brown is not available, because the publisher says he's working on his next book, which will be a continuation of the character in this one.

But he was on "The Today Show" when the book came out the first time around a year ago, and said all of

the art, all of the architecture, all of the secret rituals and secret societies that are in the book are historical fact.

I asked the panel that we had with us if that was what had gotten a lot of people excited. You read a lot of books. Is it the fact that he purports that the founding tenets are truths that have gotten everybody going crazy?

WASSERMAN: Well, I think that readers always like a good tall tale to be rooted in a plausible sequence of alleged facts.

But like Oscar Wilde, Dan Brown is a disciple of Mr. Wilde, who once admonished us, never let the facts get in the way of a good story. He is exemplary in his execution of that maxim.

NORVILLE: And, Steve, you would have a different view on why you think "Da Vinci Code" and all of the religious books that have come out lately are so popular.

(CROSSTALK)

NORVILLE: I'm sorry. I've got Steve Waldman in here. I've got two Steves here.

WASSERMAN: Oh, you said the other Steve.

(LAUGHTER)

NORVILLE: Yes, my New York Steve here.

STEVEN WALDMAN, BELIEFNET.COM: You know, there are actually two other books in the last two years that have sold better than "The Da Vinci Code." One is "The South Beach Diet."

The other one, the best-selling book of the last two years is a book called "The Purpose-Driven Life," which is also a religious book. It's actually sold millions more than "The Da Vinci Code." It's a traditional Christian book.

And I mention that by saying that I don't think it's just about alternative visions of Jesus or Christianity. It's a bigger trend. It's part of a tremendous consumer interest in religion, spirituality. Because we're a mostly Christian country, it tends to take the form of interest in Christianity.

NORVILLE: Why Jesus, though? Why not be broad, and if it's all about the afterlife, and really feeling that you have been spiritually fulfilled, why has there not been more of a view towards the Prophet Muhammad, for instance, or more of a view toward Judaism?

WALDMAN: Because we're still a 83 percent Christian country.

NORVILLE: It's a numbers game?

WALDMAN: And for most people, Jesus still is the heart of their spirituality. I mean, you have seen—remember how long "Touched By An Angel" was in the top 10 shows, and you do see a lot of other instances of general spirituality also having a lot of appeal. But I think it makes sense that because it's fundamentally far more Christians than any other faith, that it would go that way.

NORVILLE: And it's funny you bring up "Touched By An Angel," because when that show first premiered on CBS, most of the people naysayers said it doesn't have prayer of staying on the schedule, and it lasted a very long time.

WALDMAN: Right. And people said the same thing about Mel Gibson's movie, that it's going to be a flop. It's just a vanity project. And here we are \$350 million in receipts later, everyone's saying, wow. It turns out there are a lot of people who are really interested in faith. Now, that's something we've actually known not for two or three years, but a few thousands years.

NORVILLE: Correct.

WALDMAN: But it's clear that consumer marketplace, the media marketplace is catching up now to consumer demand.

NORVILLE: And, Steve Wasserman, how is that translating in the publishing world? When you go to the book-sellers convention now, is the religious material now a very much a part of the mainstream collection of the books that are out there?

WASSERMAN: Well, there's no question but that the interest in spirituality has been very strong for a very long time in American life. And, of course, it's not just Jesus, who enjoys a kind of brand name recognition unrivaled by any competitor.

Books by the Dalai Lama, or this and that fellow who seeks to provide some spiritual sustenance in a time when for most people faith seems the only thing they can hang on to as events swiftly accelerate. And these things happen with more, how to put it, intensity at times of vast and rapid change. We're ending one century. We've begun another. And I think that has something to do with the interest.

NORVILLE: Yes, I'm going to take a break right there. I also want to ask both of you the question, does 9/11 have anything to do with this?

More of our conversation on the bend toward Christianity and issues of faith when we come back.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

NORVILLE: We're back now with more on the backlash to "The Da Vinci Code" and the incredible popularity of religion in publishing and entertainment these days. We're joined by Steve Waldman—he's the CEO and founder of Beliefnet.com—and Steve Wasserman, the editor of "The L.A. Times" Book Review.

Gentlemen, I want to show you both these T-shirts and just get you to react to them. We've got this one right here that says, "Mary is my homegirl." You can see that down if you're down in the Village or SoHo here in New York and probably lots of other places. And if that one's not your size, you've got the "Jesus is My Homeboy" T-shirt.

Steve Waldman, what do you make of this? I mean, this is—this is different.

WALDMAN: Well, you know, I think I saw a number that it was something like an \$8 billion industry of Christian books, merchandise, souvenirs. In addition to T-shirts, there are Christmas ornaments of nails that you can hang on your tree. I mean, it's endless. And I tend to think...

NORVILLE: Is this Christianity or is this commercialism?

WALDMAN: Well, there's been a fine mixture of them for many, many years. And I don't think that's going to go away, and obviously not just Christianity, but any—if we look at Madonna and cabala, you know, religion and commercial issues mix a lot.

But I tend to think that we're going to be seeing this for a while,

because I believe this is part of a broad demographic trend, which is to

say, naturally, the baby boomers, and that the baby boomers are naturally -

· the upper end of the age grouping is getting to the point where they're dealing with their own mortality or the death of their parents.

The younger end of the baby boomers are having kids and trying to figure out how to raise them. And so they're naturally at the moment of life when they would care about spirituality and faith, and that that's really part of what's driving this intense commercial interest.

NORVILLE: If that's the case, then that's going to go on for another, what, 10, 15 years.

WALDMAN: Yes.

NORVILLE: Because the baby boomers are just beginning to get into those mortality-thinking years.

WALDMAN: And the other thing that's happened is that because boomers are shoppers, we don't have a particular allegiance to any brand of cereal or any political party or company or anything like that. We shop.

And so that means we're not only getting our information from our minister. We're also getting it from books and movies and mass media.

NORVILLE: And, Steve Wasserman, how are you seeing that reflected in the book industry? And we just heard the figure \$8 billion for everything, including books of a spiritual nature. As you look at the books that are in the pipeline, is there a lot more to come?

WASSERMAN: I believe there is. There's a whole underground world of Christian book-selling, with their own networks of bookstores.

The Jerry Jenkins' series "Left Behind."

NORVILLE: Right.

WASSERMAN: Which posits an apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic world.

The rather delightful series and tales by Jan Karon that are set in a kind of mythical, happy America, which harkens back to a more golden time, free of conflict. These things are very appealing to people, as I say, that live in fairly tormented times. And I think Steve Waldman is exactly right. I do think that a baby booming generation aging, facing its own mortality, does search with increasing desperation for some spiritual relief.

And the book is as yet the best vessel for the conveyance of both deep knowledge and lasting entertainment.

NORVILLE: Do you think 9/11 has anything to do with it also?

WASSERMAN: Maybe, although this trend antedates 9/11 by some years.

But 9/11 certainly ratcheted it up, because, of course, we now have an administration which insists that the world is increasingly divided into good and evil. And this echoes many of the sentiments that many of the more fundamentalist interpretations of the Bible insist is the case.

NORVILLE: Well, in times of uncertainty, most people do turn to faith of one kind or another.

Steve Waldman, Steve Wasserman, thanks so much for being with us tonight. Appreciate it.

WASSERMAN: You're welcome.

NORVILLE: When we come back, we're looking ahead. Michael Jackson is making a comeback—a comeback to court, that is. We'll find out exactly what the charges might be from the grand jury indicting him in just a moment.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

NORVILLE: Now a look ahead to tomorrow, when Michael Jackson will be back in court to be arraigned on charges of child molestation.

Dan Abrams, the host of MSNBC's "THE ABRAMS REPORT," will have a seat right there in the courtroom. And he joins me now from Burbank.

Dan, what do you think is going to happen tomorrow?

DAN ABRAMS, HOST, "THE ABRAMS REPORT": Well, I think that the defense team is finally going to find out exactly what the charges are against Michael Jackson.

Look, we expect that it's going to be the same charges that the prosecutor initially filed, seven charges of molestation, two charges of administering an intoxicating agent to a child. But it's possible that there could be fewer or more charges that this grand jury actually went forward with.

It's also possible that the grand jury has indicted others associated with Michael Jackson, so a lot of questions will be answered at tomorrow's arraignment.

NORVILLE: How much of a difference will it make that Michael Jackson now has a new attorney as of just a few days ago?

ABRAMS: You know, I don't think it's going to make that much of a difference in the long run. I think the defense is going to be similar. I think he had very good lawyers. I think he has a very good lawyer.

But certainly, there's going to be a different person standing up on his behalf at that arraignment tomorrow.

NORVILLE: You got to wonder what's going through Michael Jackson's mind. There was a story in "USA Today" about Michael Jackson has been spending a lot of time getting the haberdasher. He's using the same tailor as Louis Farrakhan to outfit him for the trial. What's up with that?

ABRAMS: Deborah, believe it or not, lawyers actually spend a lot of time talking to their clients about what clothes to wear to court. It may sound odd, but think about it. You remember the Menendez brothers' trial, those brothers in California accused of killing their parents.

NORVILLE: Yes.

ABRAMS: The lawyer told them to wear sweaters in court.

NORVILLE: All right.

ABRAMS: Because she wanted them to look casual. So I am not surprised that somebody is looking very carefully at what Michael Jackson is wearing.

NORVILLE: Well, we will be looking very carefully at "THE ABRAMS REPORT" tomorrow—it will 6:00 Eastern time—for all the details.

And of course, tomorrow night at 9:00, I will be back for a special one-hour look at Michael Jackson's day in court.

That's our program for today. Thanks so much for joining us.

Up next, has American support in the war in Iraq dwindled? Joe Scarborough is going to be taking that up. And that's coming up next on "SCARBOROUGH COUNTRY."

See you tomorrow.

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