A LIKELY STORY:
THE DA VINCI CODE AS WORK ON MYTH

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UFOs, crop circles, big cats ... and the Holy Grail. They're all part of a continuum. They feed our need for myths ... Books aren't the half of it. The Internet is aswarm with such notions. The academic establishment looks down its disapproving nose at those who peddle them. But there they err. Every debate must be joined, else it will be lost by default. That was my reason for writing Shades of Grail – aside from the royalties, of course.

"Professor Vernon Drysdale", in Robert Goddard, *Days without number : a novel* (London: Bantam Press, 2003), 253.

It is a genre which, if it were not usually so tedious, would repay study as a manifestation of twentieth-century popular culture ...

Richard Barber, *The Holy Grail: imagination and belief* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 310.

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Abstract

Theory of myth is used as an explanatory framework within which to explore the enormous and controversial popular appeal of the novel *The Da Vinci Code*, first published in 2003. *The Da Vinci Code* is a site of contestation between truth and falsity. Modernity has used the category of myth to contain and control false stories that claim to be true. Myth is characterised here as story-with-significance but also as story believed by people other than scholars and the guardians of legitimate culture. The novel reinserts story into religious history, finding 'natural' significances to replace those progressively exposed and expunged by scholarship and liberal theology. *Code's* major themes, the sacred feminine and the bloodline of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, endorse popular knowledge about religion, inheritance, identity, community and gender, knowledge that is threatened by detraditionalisation, feminism, and modernity's emphasis on the autonomous individual. The bloodline myth's move into the category of fiction further blurs the boundaries between the legitimately true and the mythically false.

INTRODUCTION

Why *The Da Vinci Code*?

In the world of fiction publishing, *The Da Vinci Code* has been a phenomenal success¹. First released in late 2003, the novel has sold over 40 million copies worldwide according to its publisher's reckoning in March 2006, and has been translated into 44 languages. According to the book industry, *Code* is the fastest-selling fiction title ever, despite the fact that, as of January 2006, it was still available only in hardcover in the United States. Its forthcoming publication in paperback there, with an initial print run of five million, will doubtless boost its readership even further. *The Da Vinci Code* was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for a record 136 weeks, and won "best book" at the 2005 British Book Awards. A Hollywood movie of the novel is due for release in May 2006².

These data are especially remarkable given the book's religious themes. Religious history has not generally been a money spinner for fiction writers and their publishers, nor has it been a prominent subject around which blockbuster thriller plots are constructed. Dan Brown's book came out of nowhere to strike a mysterious chord with millions of readers. As one commentator asked at the height of *Code* frenzy, "how the hell did an unknown author writing on an obscure subject make publishing history?"³. My thesis attempts to answer that question, from a religious studies perspective.

¹ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (London: Corgi Books, 2004 [2003]).

² "Da Vinci case writer admits big differences," *Dominion Post* (Wellington, NZ), 10 March 2006, p.A12. Edward Wyatt, "5 million copies of *Da Vinci Code* planned," *New York Times*, 9 January 2006, p.C8.

³ David Grainger, "The passion of the Da Vinci reader," *Fortune* (8 March 2004): 48.

By and large, critics have been dismissive of *The Da Vinci Code*. Its writing style is formulaic and pedestrian, its “historical” themes (the word is nearly always in disdainful quotation marks) are ludicrous and full of inaccuracies, and its characters are one-dimensional stereotypes⁴. What seems to bother its denigrators most however is that readers may take seriously the book’s construction of Christian history. At the heart of the novel is the thesis that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married and had a child who was an ancestor of the French Merovingian dynasty. The Holy Grail of Western legend, it is proposed, is actually the royal bloodline of Jesus and the Magdalene which continues to this day, guarded by secret societies and feared by the Catholic Church and all upholders of traditional Christianity. The Church’s rendering of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute is presented as but one aspect of its suppression of goddess worship and ancient reverence for “the sacred feminine”. The novel’s plot concerns the quest by a Harvard professor of “Religious Symbology” and his female French cryptographer companion to discover these truths in the face of murderous opposition from Opus Dei, dedicated to upholding the Church patriarchy, and from other Grail seekers corrupted by their lust for power.

While it is impossible to gauge how many of the book’s millions of readers believe there might be some truth in the Grail-bloodline connection and the Church’s subsequent suppression of women, the Vatican itself was concerned enough to appoint a senior cleric to respond to *Code*. In 2005, the Cardinal Archbishop of Genoa convened a seminar to rebut the book’s “lies, distortions and errors” which, the cardinal noted, “it astonishes and worries me that so many people believe”⁵. In New Zealand, advertisements run by the Catholic Enquiry Centre ranked *The Da Vinci Code* up there with tsunamis and the collapse of moral standards as causes of a falling away of

⁴ For example, see Christopher Howse, “I’ve cracked the Code: it’s rubbish,” *The Daily Telegraph*, 6 August 2004, p.B6.

⁵ Philip Matthews, “The secret history,” *New Zealand Listener* (30 April 2005): 34.

the faithful⁶. During the shooting there of scenes from the *Code* movie, a nun knelt outside Lincoln Cathedral in a lengthy prayer vigil to protest the book's heresy which, as she saw it, was leading people away from the truth about Jesus⁷.

In possibly the only objective measurement to date of *Code*'s impact on the views of its readers, a poll of 1000 Canadians conducted by the National Geographic Channel in mid-2005 found that one third believed there are descendants of Jesus alive today and that a secret society exists to guard his bloodline⁸. I would speculate that at least some of the other two-thirds, while unwilling to commit themselves, suspect there might be something in it, if only on the basis that there is no smoke without fire. Perhaps many *Code* fans would concur with the conclusion of one American reader: "I knew that many of the things in Brown's book weren't true ... But I just wanted them to be"⁹.

Analyses of why this particular book has become the religious fiction we believe, half-believe or would like to believe, generally lay the blame squarely on us, the ignorant and credulous reading public. The reactions of those I have labelled the culturally and religiously competent are examined in later chapters but, overall, *Code*'s critics bring to mind Peter Brown's comments about scholarly discourse on popular religion. "It is still normal to assume that the average homo religiosus ... and more especially, the average woman, is a bear of very little brain"¹⁰. Women greatly outnumber men when it comes to fiction reading, and the ease with which women have apparently been taken in by *Code*'s nonsense is no great surprise to some.

⁶ "If you're questioning, we're answering," *Capital Times* (Wellington, NZ), 9-15 March 2005, p.20.

⁷ "Nun stages Da Vinci Code protest," *BBC News* website (16 August 2005), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/1/england/lincolnshire> (accessed 16 September 2005).

⁸ "Third of Canadians believe Da Vinci Code," *UPI Newstrack* 26 June 2005 (Expanded Academic ASAP Plus database, article A133555254).

⁹ Linda Kulman, "Jesus in America," *U.S. News & World Report* (22 December 2003): 49.

¹⁰ Peter Brown, *The cult of the saints: its rise and function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 20.

“A desire to believe it is the same appetite that goes for Madonna’s red-string Kabbalah,” notes Christopher Howse in *The Telegraph*¹¹. According to biblical scholar Ben Witherington, *Code*’s heroine Sophie Neveu sadly represents “the postmodern American public ... seeking insider knowledge (gnosis) so she can understand the secret of her own identity”¹².

Other critics take a more sympathetic view of reader gullibility, but still fail to provide a satisfying explanation of *Code*’s appeal. Like a great many things in the post-millennial West, it may all be to do with “9/11”, the 2001 terrorist attack on New York’s World Trade Center. This event has apparently left us with somewhat paradoxical needs: to escape from reality and, at the same time, to explain reality by means of conspiracy theories¹³. For me, the conspiracist explanation of the book’s success is not enough. A large number of thrillers rely on conspiracies and, as one of *Code*’s cliché-prone characters acknowledges, we all love a good one¹⁴. There is something about this particular conspiracy that, I believe, draws in many who would otherwise scoff at alien abductions, coded predictions in the Bible, and the Masonic/Jewish/Illuminati (etcetera) takeover/s of the world.

Another all-purpose de-coder of *Code* is postmodernism: the loss of institutional authority, the decline of organised religion, and people’s willingness to believe the worst of every public figure and corporate body¹⁵. Again, such broad-brush explanations are not totally satisfying. The Catholic Church, especially the Vatican and individual religious orders, have long been objects of suspicion in the West, and anti-Roman novels are nothing new. Why this book should encapsulate what are, to the defenders of

¹¹ Howse.

¹² Ben Witherington, *The Gospel code: novel claims about Jesus, Mary Magdalene and da Vinci* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 19.

¹³ For example, Jonathan Freedland, “Pure escapism from a sad reality,” *The Age* (Melbourne), 9 August 2004 (reprinted from *The Times*); Roland White, “Ripe for a conspiracy,” *The Press* (Christchurch, NZ), 14 August 2004, p.D12 (reprinted from *The Sunday Times* London).

¹⁴ Genial, erudite, tea-drinking, bespectacled librarian Pamela Gettum, on page 500.

¹⁵ For example, Freedland; Witherington; Howse; and White.

modernity, the inevitable dumbed-down outcomes of the postmodern turn, remains unclear.

For its own part, religious studies has dealt with the controversy around *The Da Vinci Code* by remaining aloof from it. The leading journals in the field have yet to carry any substantial essays on the topic. Biblical scholars such as Ben Witherington, Amy Wellborn and Bart Ehrman have written monographs in *Code*'s wake but concentrate on refuting the novel's historical assertions and exposing its doctrinal errors rather than providing much in the way of informed analysis of its appeal¹⁶. In *Secrets of the Code*, a collection of essays and extracts most of which pre-date the novel's publication, Karen King, Elaine Pagels and Susan Haskins among others, discuss gnosticism, the Nag Hammadi texts and the character of Mary Magdalene¹⁷. Again, there is little analysis beyond the question of whether *Code* has got it right or horribly wrong.

To provide what I hope is a more nuanced examination of *The Da Vinci Code*, I have turned to the theory of myth. As I will discuss in the following chapter, myth has been notoriously difficult to define in scholarly circles. I have taken the category to encompass stories that are somehow important, significant and profound. Hans Blumenberg used the word "prägnanz" or "pregnance" to stand for myth's characteristic quality of being "laden with meaning", "compelling" or "pressing"¹⁸. In a recent editorial in the *New Zealand Listener*, religious affairs writer Philip Matthews also puts *Code* into the category of myth in the sense of story-with-significance. "...[W]ith religious meaning defunct for most, we look for human stories to function as collective myths". To Karen Armstrong's suggestion that the novels *Heart of Darkness* and *Under the Volcano* are among our modern myths, Matthews

¹⁶ See Chapter One.

¹⁷ *Secrets of the Code: the unauthorised guide to the mysteries behind The Da Vinci Code*, ed. Dan Burstein (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004).

¹⁸ Hans Blumenberg, *Work on myth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985 [1979]), 69, and 111 translator's note i.

adds “ – and I’m not being silly – Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*. Yes, it’s a rubbishy and undemanding page-turner, but there are plenty of those, so why should this one strike a chord?”¹⁹. I would suggest that the mythic chord struck by this novel is currently a great deal louder than the echoes of Conrad and Lowry, and it is one that religious studies ought to be paying attention to. As a character in Umberto Eco’s wonderful parody of the occult conspiracy thriller observes, “Maybe only cheap fiction gives us the true measure of reality ...”²⁰

Finally, I must add a personal note. Like a gourmet who sometimes indulges a clandestine taste for mass-produced hamburgers, I am a person of serious reading habits who now and then falls with shameful glee on what might politely be termed ‘fringe literature’ in the field of religious studies. Beginning with *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* in the early 1980s²¹, I devoured every library book I could find on the mystery of Rennes-le-Château and the holy bloodline. I moved on to the secrets of Fatima and Medjugorje, the real truth about the Dead Sea Scrolls, whether Jesus was an astronaut, and how the whole religion thing began with the sinking of Atlantis as recorded in ley lines and planetary alignments. This secret vice reached a high (or possibly low) point when I discovered, in *Bloodline of the Holy Grail*²², that through my Irish O’Connell ancestors, I too am descended from Jesus and Mary Magdalene. I can only hope that, in approaching *The Da Vinci Code*, my critical faculties have not been too greatly blunted by the weight of this monumental heritage.

¹⁹ Philip Matthews, “Words and deeds,” *New Zealand Listener* (7 January 2006): 3.

²⁰ Umberto Eco, *Foucault’s pendulum* (London: Pan, 1990 [1988]), 495.

²¹ Baigent, Michael, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln, *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982). It was published in the United States under the title *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* and is referred to as such in *The Da Vinci Code*. In this thesis, I cite this book by its original title.

²² Laurence Gardner, *Bloodline of the Holy Grail: the hidden lineage of Jesus revealed* (Rockport, MA: Element, 1996). Gardner’s contribution is discussed further in Chapter Three.

In a more serious vein, this thesis is an attempt to explain to myself just what it is about all this stuff that is so appealing and why I, along with several million others, finished *The Da Vinci Code* and thought, “Well, I suppose it could be true ... couldn’t it?”

In the remainder of this introduction, I attempt a brief genealogy of *The Da Vinci Code*’s central historical themes, and reconstruct the alternative religious history presented in the novel and its four named non-fiction sources.

In Chapter One, the scholarly and popular usage of the category of myth is examined. Myth has been, I conclude, a useful tool for dismissing that which is not scholarship, not history, not true culture; that which is taken seriously by people other than ourselves. In this sense, myth has been an appropriate label for *The Da Vinci Code*, but the labelling process has failed to limit its impact or dent its appeal.

Chapter Two looks at the often uncomfortable relationship between religion and myth. Demythologising has tried to strip Christianity of its other-than-historical accretions, but *Code* does an effective job of putting some new and exciting ones back into the Christian narrative.

The mythic significance of *Code*’s major themes – the bloodline of Jesus, and the sacred feminine – is discussed in Chapters Three and Four. The bloodline draws on a wealth of religious and secular significance surrounding blood. Women’s historical exclusion from formal participation in Western religion is strongly challenged by the concept of the sacred feminine, but whether women might benefit from the reappearance of this mythical beast is questionable.

I begin each chapter with verses from the New Testament, in which the word “myths” appears five times²³. Christian scripture is as unambiguous about myths as the Archbishop of Genoa was about *The Da Vinci Code*: they oppose faith and history; they are the enemy of truth. The problem with myths, however, is that they so often look like the truth, as the New Testament implicitly recognises. Truth and myth are not the polar opposites implied by popular usage and, I suggest, in most scholarly usage as well. In my conclusion, I return to the theory of myth and examine how useful it has been in this case study of what is perhaps a defining myth of our present religious moment.

Where it has come from

Hans Blumenberg described myths as “stories that are distinguished by a high degree of constancy in their narrative core, and by an equally pronounced capacity for marginal variations”²⁴. This variation makes it difficult to construct a tidy developmental schema for an individual myth. Tracing a story’s genealogy is “a mug’s game” in the view of myth theorist Wendy Doniger. The results never resemble the classic tree of a main trunk and side branches, but myth’s offshoots “grow back down into the soil and produce new roots and trunks until one cannot tell where the original root was”²⁵.

If Darwinian theory is applicable to myth, the bloodline story’s capacity for unpredictable variation has been the key to its survival. When debunkers have shown that one element is fatally flawed, another theme steps into its place and becomes the new ‘final’ truth. Anthropologist William Sax has

²³ Biblical quotes are taken from *The Holy Bible: new revised standard version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

²⁴ Blumenberg, 34.

²⁵ Wendy Doniger, *The implied spider: politics & theology in myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 144; *Other people’s myths: the cave of echoes* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 60.

described recitations of the Mahabharata in Indian villages: “it is always the ‘other guy’ – the bard from the next valley, or the illiterate and benighted peasant – who has got the story wrong”²⁶. A similar impulse has led successive tellers of the bloodline myth to begin their version with a ritualised rubbishing of previous findings. Even the foundational telling of the story made “some dubious leaps of faith” in the opinion of *Code*’s historian Sir Leigh Teabing (p.340)²⁷, whose name nonetheless reflects the debt owed by Dan Brown to *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. Teabing is an anagram of Baigent, and Leigh honours another of the book’s co-authors. Such recognition has not been enough for Baigent and Leigh, who have sued *Code*’s publishers for their role in this “pretty bad novel ... Brown has ruined our material”²⁸.

Legal proceedings seem tame in comparison with the accusations levelled at one another by some of the myth’s guardians. On his website, conspiracy theorist David Icke wonders whether bloodline genealogist Sir Laurence Gardner is in fact a shape-shifting reptile who takes part in human sacrifice and blood-drinking rituals²⁹. Modern myth-making is not a career for the faint-hearted.

Most tellers of the tale trace their roots to *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, but that work drew much of its material from well-established stories about the Holy Grail, the Knights Templar, the Cathars, Rosicrucians and Freemasons. The idea that Jesus had a sex life and fathered children was also nothing new. The sexual nature of Jesus was explored in Nikos Kazantzakis’s 1955 novel *The Last Temptation of Christ*³⁰, made into a

²⁶ Quoted in Doniger, *Other people’s myths*, 67.

²⁷ To avoid a proliferation of footnotes, I have included page references to *The Da Vinci Code* within the body of my text. See note 1 for full citation of the edition used.

²⁸ Hugh Davies, “Brown stole idea for Da Vinci Code, claim authors,” *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 October 2005.

²⁹ David Icke, “Is this true, Sir Laurence?”

<http://www.davidicke.com/icke/articles2/gardnershifts.html> (accessed 2 September 2005).

³⁰ Nikos Kazantzakis, *The last temptation of Christ*, trans. P. A.. Bien (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960).

highly controversial film in 1988. D. H. Lawrence foreshadowed *The Da Vinci Code*'s linking of the bloodline and the sacred feminine in a rather cringe-making novella written in 1931. A post-resurrection Jesus finds true spiritual enlightenment in the arms of a devotee of Isis, then departs for the afterlife leaving the pregnant priestess to fend for herself³¹.

The unwritten outcomes of Lawrence's story were projected by *Holy Blood* into medieval and modern times. In asserting that "what happened to Jesus was of less importance than what happened to the holy family ... the blood royal...", the bloodline myth claimed its independence and gained a life of its own³².

The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail placed considerable importance on the treasure-hunting activities of the late 19th century parish priest of Rennes-le-Château in southern France, first documented in *L'or de Rennes* by Gérard de Sède in 1967. De Sède proposed that Bérenger Saunière had discovered the treasure of the Visigoths, looted from Rome in 410 CE, and had become fabulously wealthy as a result. Henry Lincoln, one of *Holy Blood*'s authors, discovered a message hidden in ancient parchments purportedly found by Saunière, which led him to the Templars, the Priory of Sion and, eventually, the secret of the bloodline. He made three documentaries for BBC television in the 1970s, then teamed up with Baigent and Leigh to write the book³³.

Lincoln has since dissociated himself from the narrative core of the bloodline – it is a "mystification" – and has concentrated on the *real* secret of Rennes-le-Château, namely that sacred geometry shows the area to be a pentangle, a gigantic temple for goddess worship, probably constructed by survivors from the lost continent of Atlantis³⁴. This particular side branch of the story,

³¹ D. H. Lawrence, "The man who died" in *The short novels* (London: Heinemann, 1956 [1931]).

³² Baigent et al, 378.

³³ *ibid*, 16-19.

³⁴ Henry Lincoln, *The holy place: the mystery of Rennes-le-Château: discovering the eighth wonder of the world* (London: Cape, 1991).

concluding that it is all about the Goddess, would later rejoin the main bloodline trunk in *The Da Vinci Code*.

The mystery of Saunière and his wealth has remained a leading theme of the narrative, with his village being a destination for pilgrims bearing “plans and spades and picks and even dynamite” in search of the treasure³⁵. In 1986, *The Tomb of God* revealed that Jesus’ body was the real secret and that it was buried near the town³⁶. Shortly after, the owner of the supposed resting place tired of the tourism boom and demolished the site³⁷.

The foundational importance of Saunière’s career to the bloodline myth has been effectively demolished in the view of many, with the revelation that he made his money from the sale of masses, with a little grave robbing on the side³⁸. The story, it seems, was concocted by a local hotel owner, eager for business, with the assistance of de Sède. *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* “internationalized de Sède’s hoax and, to the delight of everyone involved, called into question the foundations of Judeo-Christian civilization”³⁹. The absence of any mention of Rennes-le-Château from *The Da Vinci Code* demonstrates that this once vital subplot has become somewhat of an embarrassment. But the naming of the Louvre curator Jacques Saunière, whose murder opens the novel, is a gesture to its former importance. One of *Code*’s named sources, *The Templar Revelation*, remains convinced there is a real mystery in Saunière’s story; the amount of trouble the hoaxers appear to have gone to “argues in favour of their having something to offer”⁴⁰.

³⁵ Bill Putnam and John Edwin Wood, *The treasure of Rennes-le-Château: a mystery solved* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2003), 1.

³⁶ Richard Andrews and Paul Schellenberger, *The tomb of God: the body of Jesus and the solution to a 2000-year-old mystery* (London: Little, Brown, 1986).

³⁷ Putnam and Wood, 174.

³⁸ The debunker most often cited is Jean-Jacques Bedu in *Rennes-le-Château: autopsie d’un mythe* (1990). This book has not been translated into English but is available in French at Paul Smith’s website <http://www.priory-of-sion.com>, along with other documentation of the ‘true facts’.

³⁹ Stephen O’Shea, *The perfect heresy: the revolutionary life and death of the medieval Cathars* (New York: Walker, 2000), 303-304 note 260.

⁴⁰ Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince, *The Templar revelation: secret guardians of the true identity of Christ* (London: Bantam Books, 1997), 47.

According to a recent count, over 300 books have been written on Rennes-le-Château⁴¹. With the advent of the World Wide Web, the amount of information now available to the determined researcher is beyond quantifying. A Google search on the words 'Jesus' and 'bloodline' in mid-2005 resulted in 93,600 hits. Numerous Internet chatrooms are devoted to debate, story telling and story correction, as the myth branches out in ever more tangled directions. The story has become infinitely larger than its identifiable creators, thus meeting one of scholarship's qualifying criteria for myth: it should be anonymous⁴².

One bloodline branch that has dug its way back into the soil and now looks like a trunk is the sacred feminine. Before her appearance in 1993, the story was, in the words of a feminist critic, "a drama of male gods, of male begetters, of the male bloodline and of male heirs ... written by men who feel threatened by feminism"⁴³. It seems they had every reason to feel threatened, as feminism was shortly to launch a hostile takeover bid for the myth. In *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar*, Margaret Starbird brought Mary Magdalene to centre stage as the embodiment of the sacred feminine, the ultimate ancient truth behind it all. "The bloodline is basically irrelevant," Starbird concluded. What matters is "the resurrected feminine consciousness" which will counter a *real* myth, "the myth of the dominant male"⁴⁴.

In *The Da Vinci Code*, the bloodline remains a central theme but is starting to show the strain of cohabitation with the sacred feminine, as will be discussed in Chapter Four. Whether this will disrupt the myth's narrative core, or prove to be a profitable mutation, is as difficult to predict as genetic

⁴¹ Putnam and Wood, xi.

⁴² Doniger, *Other people's myths*, 28.

⁴³ Michèle Roberts, "God the father," *New Statesman* (19 December 1986): 66.

⁴⁴ Margaret Starbird, *The woman with the alabaster jar: Mary Magdalene and the Holy Grail* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Co., 1993), 178.

mutability itself. Other plot lines have come and gone, apparent losers in the mythic contest for survival of the fittest. Environmental pressures are unremitting. It has been reported that the makers of *The Da Vinci Code* movie have consulted “Catholic and other Christian specialists” on how they might modify the plot “to avoid offending the devout”⁴⁵. Westminster Abbey’s reported refusal to allow scenes from the film to be shot within its precincts have given rise to rumours that episcopal and even royal pressures have been brought to bear in the Establishment’s ongoing suppression of the truth. Such dark speculation has not been allayed by the mundane explanation given by one of the film’s stars, Sir Ian McKellen, that “the proposed financial arrangements were deemed insufficient by the abbey’s chapter”, so Lincoln Cathedral stepped into the breach for a consideration of £100,000⁴⁶. Discernible plot modifications and changes in location may themselves become the subject of new mythic branches as the story moves beyond the printed page and cyberspace. The ‘real story’ behind the making of the cinematic *Code* will doubtless provide mutations sufficient to keep the myth going for some time yet.

The story it tells

It is a challenging task to distil a coherent story from the hundreds of books, to say nothing of the tens of thousands of magazine articles and postings on the Internet, that make up the information bank behind *The Da Vinci Code*. This section attempts to construct ‘the story’ from *Code* and its named sources.

The novel cites four books as providing the historical information supporting its alternative version of Christian history (p.339-340). These are:

⁴⁵ “Da Vinci movie losing the plot,” *The Press* (Christchurch, NZ), 10 August 2005, p.B8 (reprinted from *The Times*).

⁴⁶ Chris Hastings, “Money, not Christianity, behind abbey’s rejection of Da Vinci Code, says Sir Ian,” *The Daily Telegraph*, 2 October 2005, p.A12.

*The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*⁴⁷

First published in Britain in 1982, this work takes the mysterious wealth of a 19th century priest in an obscure French village as its starting point. It concludes that he discovered the secret of the bloodline of Jesus, and it lays out in great detail the story of the bloodline and its guardians down the centuries.

The Woman with the Alabaster Jar. Mary Magdalene and the Holy Grail (1993).

Margaret Starbird, an American Catholic, was profoundly shaken by her reading of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. Her book emphasises the importance of Mary Magdalene and the need for the sacred feminine to be restored to Christianity.

The Templar Revelation: secret guardians of the true identity of Christ.

Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince have written extensively on UFOs, the Shroud of Turin, and various secret societies and conspiracies. This 1997 book also places considerable emphasis on Mary Magdalene and her suppression, but proposes that John the Baptist was the true Christ and was worshipped as such by the Templars and others. This theme is not picked up by *Code*.

The Goddess in the Gospels: reclaiming the sacred feminine.

This is Starbird's 1998 "spiritual autobiography", charting her journey from orthodoxy to feminist spirituality. She finds considerable evidence for the sacred feminine in Christian texts, utilising gematria, a system for establishing symbolic meaning among Hebrew and Greek words of the same numerical value. Her journey is also marked by "an incredible series of synchronicities".

⁴⁷ See Bibliography: Primary Sources, for full citations.

In the following reconstruction of *Code's* central themes, the events and interpretations that are shared by the novel and all four sources are presented as established fact. For example, all agree that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married and had at least one child. Where the books do not agree, or a hypothesis is offered by only one or two of them, this is indicated by the inclusion of such qualifiers as 'possibly', 'probably', 'alternatively', and the like.

Despite their frequent lack of unanimity about the details, *Code* and its sources are agreed on one thing. The history of Christianity, as handed down by the Church and mainstream scholarship, is wrong and has deliberately been made so. The true story, painstakingly retrieved from hidden traditions, symbols and coded references, legends and so-called heresies, can be revealed at last, heralding the dawning of a new age.

* * *

Christianity had its origins in the religion of ancient Egypt. In Osiris, we see the dying-and-rising Sun God who was joined in sacred union with his Sister-Bride, Isis. The holy marriage, which symbolised the divine equality of male and female, may also have been practised by the men of early Judaism, who consorted with Temple priestesses to experience the female aspect of God, the Shekinah.

In Neolithic Europe and the Middle East, the supreme deity was female until displaced by Indo-Aryan invaders during the fourth century BCE. Goddess worship has fought a losing battle with the one male God of Judaism and Christianity ever since, which is why women have been regarded as unclean, sinful and even demonic throughout the West's recorded history.

Jesus of Nazareth was probably influenced greatly by the religion of Egypt. Indeed he may, like Moses, have been Egyptian himself and possibly

planned to re-introduce goddess worship to the Jews. Jesus wasn't God Incarnate, the Son of God, or divine in any way, but was wholly human. His main objective was probably to restore the royal throne of David in Jerusalem and, as the direct descendant of David, to rule Israel as its king. Jesus may have been an Essene and a Zealot, and he may have betrayed the true Christ, John the Baptist, to Herod in order to secure his own worldly power. Jesus probably died on the cross but the Essenes may have staged a mock crucifixion, enabling him to live on until 70CE when he perished with the freedom fighters of Masada. The Q gospel, a hypothetical source document for the New Testament, may have been written by Jesus himself.

Mary Magdalene and Jesus were married, probably to cement his claim to the throne because Mary was also royal, a member of the tribe of Benjamin and a great heiress to the lands around Jerusalem. Their union recalled another foundational marriage, that of the daughter of King Saul, a Benjamite, to King David. The wedding at Cana, described in the Gospels, was probably that of Jesus and Mary, and their relationship is also recorded in the Gnostic Gospels and possibly even in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The marriage had to be kept secret because the joining of two royal dynasties would have been highly threatening to the Romans and their puppet king, Herod.

As well as its dynastic, temporal importance, the marriage could also have been a ritualistic re-enactment of the Isis-Osiris sacred union through which the male was able to experience the divine female and become fully human. This aspect is confirmed, in coded form, in the Gospel story of Jesus' anointing by a woman. This woman was probably Mary Magdalene, a priestess of Isis.

Mary Magdalene was the leading disciple of Jesus, the one whom he designated to lead the movement after his death. Peter and the other male disciples were antagonised by Mary's closeness to Jesus and her leadership

status, because she was a woman. This is another reason why the marriage and Mary's role have been left out of the official Christian texts and why she came to be labelled a fallen woman.

The crucifixion put paid to any immediate hopes that the monarchy would be restored, but Mary found she was pregnant with the new heir to the throne. At this time, the Jesus movement probably split into two camps: the adherents of the message, led by Peter and reflecting the impact of Jesus' spiritual teachings among the common people; and the adherents of the family, the royalists devoted to preserving the Davidic-Benjamite bloodline that would, they hoped, eventually be enthroned in a liberated Jerusalem. The adherents of the message, with the later assistance of St Paul, are recorded by history as the winners. Jesus was Romanised and deified, and the family/bloodline group was forced underground because the imminent arrival of a doubly-royal child made their existence even more politically threatening to the Romans and Herodians.

Mary gave birth to a daughter, perhaps in Egypt where she had returned to her religious roots, but more likely in what is now the south of France. Under the protection of Joseph of Arimathea, Mary had fled to a Jewish community in Gaul. She may have travelled with her sister Martha, her brother Lazarus (whose sister, recorded in the Gospels as Mary of Bethany, is really Mary Magdalene), and Jesus' aunts Mary Salome and Mary Jacobi. Their arrival is attested by French legend and is commemorated in the name of their landing place, the town of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. Mary lived there as a hermit for forty years.

It may have been that the birth of a daughter, Sarah (meaning princess), was a severe blow to the royalist cause. They were anticipating a warrior king who would return to the homeland and claim his throne. With Sarah's arrival, a longer-term strategy was needed, and the sojourn in Gaul turned into a kind of Babylonian exile from which the Jewish royal family, with suitable

male heir, would one day return. However, as a priestess of the Goddess, Mary Magdalene would have recognised that a daughter born from the sacred marriage was a most precious being. The child may be remembered in the form of Saint Sarah the Egyptian, one of the Provençal black madonnas who are also said to represent the ancient worship of Isis, the Great Goddess, in Christian disguise.

Following the failure of the Jewish uprisings against the Romans in the first century CE, the sacred/royal family had little choice but to remain in France. Five hundred years later, a descendant of the princess Sarah probably married into the royal line of the Merovingian Franks who, themselves, may have been descended from the Jewish tribe of Benjamin. The Merovingians were apparently possessed of miraculous curative powers, were regarded as holy, and had Jewish names and long hair, which made them very like Jesus. The Church by this time was probably aware that it was their inherited blood that made the Merovingians special and a threat to the growing power of the clerics who had become the new adherents of the message, so the kings were betrayed and the dynasty overthrown in the eighth century. The bloodline reportedly lived on in the dukes of Aquitaine and the de Bouillon family.

The First Crusade may have been an attempt to restore Jesus' bloodline to the throne of the Holy Land, and it succeeded briefly when two de Bouillon nobles became kings of Jerusalem in the early 1100s. One of them founded a secret organisation there, called the Priory of Sion, whose purpose was to guard the bloodline and keep it secret from the Church, whose message-oriented religious orthodoxy was well-established by this time and was central to the institution's power. The Priory reportedly discovered a great treasure beneath the ruins of the Temple in Jerusalem, and established the Knights Templar to retrieve it. This treasure could have been a complete genealogy of the bloodline, plus documents written by Jesus' early followers, the Q gospel, Mary Magdalene's diaries, her bodily remains, and perhaps

even the marriage certificate. The booty was spirited away to Europe by the Templars, who became so rich and powerful, possibly by blackmailing the Church, that they were suppressed by the French king and the pope in 1307.

Shortly before the Templar suppression, the temporal and spiritual powers in France had joined forces to crush another wayward group, the Cathar heretics. The Cathars were possibly one of the earliest 'New Age' groups on record. They emphasised peace, love and gender equality in the pristine spirit of the first followers of Jesus and Mary. They may have known about the sacred marriage and may even have carried the bloodline themselves. This is why Cathar women who survived the brutal suppression were forced to marry northern French nobles, in order to water down the dangerous blood. More importantly, the Templars and the Cathars were probably allies, and it may be that the Cathar treasure, spirited away from their stronghold of Montségur before it fell in 1244, was actually the original Templar treasure from Jerusalem.

Around this time, the cult of the Virgin Mary was promoted by the Church, to emphasise the virginal but maternal aspect of woman and to denigrate the sexual nature of the sacred feminine as personified by Mary Magdalene, by now officially a prostitute.

The legend of the Holy Grail first appeared in France in the late 12th century, and may be the first widely disseminated telling of the true Christian story, albeit in safely allegorical form. Said to be the cup used at the Last Supper or the chalice in which Joseph of Arimathea collected the dying Christ's blood, the Grail actually represents the bloodline itself and the womb of Mary Magdalene who bore it. This is demonstrated by the fact that its old name, Sangraal, which is usually rendered as San Graal, should really be Sang Real or Blood Royal.

Despite concerted attempts by the powerful to destroy the Templars, the Cathars and anyone else who knew the secret, the Priory of Sion survived under the leadership of its grand masters. The most famous of these was Leonardo da Vinci, who encoded the truth into such paintings as *The Last Supper* and who, incidentally, may have been responsible for producing the Turin Shroud by 'photographing' himself onto a piece of cloth. Clues about the bloodline may also be found in the work of other painters such as Poussin, Botticelli and Fra Angelico. It is possible that the 'church of the Holy Grail' survived down the centuries in the inner sanctums of the Freemasons, the Rosicrucians and other occult organisations.

The Holy Grail resurfaced in recent history with the apparent discovery of treasure and explosive documents in the tiny village of Rennes-le-Château in southern France. In 1891 the village priest, Bérenger Saunière, became inexplicably wealthy, possibly because he stumbled across ancient parchments while renovating his church. This remained a minor story until the 1950s, when the Priory of Sion suddenly registered itself as a society in France and began depositing documents in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, now known as the Dossiers Secrets. The Dossiers record the Priory's mission to re-establish the Merovingian monarchy in present-day France, in the person of the Priory's then Grand Master Pierre Plantard de St-Clair. It is likely that the Plantard and St-Clair (or Sinclair) families are the only direct Merovingian descendants left and are thus the remaining carriers of Jesus' blood. The Rennes parchments are said to confirm the Priory's claims. Saunière, like the Templars, was paid by the Church to keep quiet.

It is possible that the Rennes-le-Château saga and the modern emergence of the Priory of Sion constitute a gigantic hoax. It is equally possible that they are deliberate obfuscations by the real Priory to deflect the Church and treasure-hunters from the Holy Grail until the right historical moment arrives for the truth to be revealed. The Catholic Church may be getting rather nervous at the prospect of that historical moment, which could precipitate an

unprecedented crisis of faith and a crumbling of its patriarchal power and wealth.

The eventual revelation of the Grail may constitute a kind of Second Coming of Christ, in which his descendant assumes the throne as the benign and holy ruler of a democratic United States of Europe. Alternatively, as the Age of Aquarius dawns and a new enlightenment impacts upon humanity, it may be that we are discovering the truth for ourselves through the ever-wider dissemination and acceptance of the bloodline story and its origins in the sacred feminine. It is not impossible that the bells of St Peter's will one day ring out to welcome home the Lost Bride, Mary Magdalene, and her holy family. In any event, the truth is setting us free from centuries of lies and cover-ups about the Sacred Bridegroom and his equally Sacred Bride.

1. MYTH, HISTORY AND CULTURE

... rebuke them sharply, so that they may become sound
in the faith, not paying attention to Jewish myths ...
The letter of Paul to Titus 1:13-14

The otherness of myth

Myth is story to be believed¹. Myth does not present itself as fiction, a product of the imagination, or an allegorical representation of reality. It tells stories about things as they really are, or were. As philosopher of myth Ernst Cassirer observed, in myth “word and name do not merely have a function of describing or portraying but contain within them the object and its real powers. Word and name do not designate and signify, they are and act”². Myth tells the truth about the real world and real history. In myth, there is no distinction between reality and our interpretation of it, between nature and culture. Myth naturalises interpretations of the world and makes them into the way things are. In the words of Roland Barthes, “the signifier and the signified have, in [the myth consumer’s] eyes, a natural relationship ... myth is read as a factual system”³. Myth is not to be believed *in*, it is to be believed. Myth tells it like it is.

While *The Da Vinci Code* is fiction, the book presents its core information as real history, as opposed to the incorrect history invented and perpetuated by the Christian Church, particularly by the Roman Catholic Church. “The New Testament is false testimony,” according to *Code*’s “Professor of Religious Symbology” Robert Langdon, a falsity demonstrated by the “scientific evidence” of “thousands of ancient documents” (p.451). The novel’s “Royal Historian” Sir Leigh Teabing states that “almost everything our fathers taught

¹ Doniger, *The implied spider*, 2.

² Ernst Cassirer, *Mythical thought* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1955[1925]), 40.

³ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972 [1957]), 131.

us about Christ is false" (p.318). The new history of Christianity, the Holy Grail and the "sacred feminine", presented by Langdon and Teabing in the central chapters of the book, abounds with references to the work of "well-known historians ... real historians" (p.224-225) and "countless scholars" (p.342). Statements such as "the marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene is part of the historical record" (p.330) and "the royal bloodline of Jesus Christ has been chronicled in exhaustive detail by scores of historians" (p.339) are supported by the citing of four real-life books, the best-known being *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* which "finally brought the idea of Christ's bloodline into the mainstream" (p.339-340).

Dan Brown himself has not overtly claimed the status of historical fact for the alternative narrative of Christianity which his heroes espouse, but he finds it an attractive one. On his website, he says "it is my belief that the theories discussed by these characters have merit ... the secret described in the novel has been chronicled for centuries, so there are thousands of sources to draw from ... it was too well documented and significant for me to dismiss"⁴. The publication of a special illustrated edition of *Code* in 2004 adds to the perception that this is more than just a novel. As one critic has observed, it used to be a "tight, economy-class thriller; now it's impersonating an encyclopedia"⁵.

It seems clear that the 'historical fact' presented in *The Da Vinci Code* is intended, at the very least, to be taken seriously as a theory based on considerable documentary evidence and supported by large numbers of historians and other scholars. This is story to be believed.

The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail, the leading source cited by *Code*, stakes the claim of story to be believed much more overtly, as its publication as a work of non-fiction shows. The paperback edition has 35 pages of notes and

⁴ Dan Brown, *The official website of Dan Brown*, http://www.danbrown.com/novels/davinci_code/faqs.html (accessed 28 June 2004).

⁵ Matthews, "The secret history," 36.

references, and its bibliography lists 275 works, including many French and German titles. One of its authors, Henry Lincoln, spent more than ten years researching the topic⁶. Like all good historians whose work challenges the accepted narrative, Baigent et al present their findings about the holy bloodline as an hypothesis: "We cannot, of course, be certain that our hypothesis is correct in every detail [but] we are convinced that the essential outlines ... are accurate"⁷.

Story to be believed provides a starting point for a definition of myth and for the classification of *The Da Vinci Code* as such. This bare-bones definition, as a beginning, would not be disputed by scholars of myth. What they fail to agree on, however, is what comes next. After all, story to be believed also applies to the Bible, academic histories of the Christian Church, scathing book reviews, and scholarly analyses of myth itself. There would be little agreement as to which of these belongs in the category of myth. It has become part of what we might term the myth of theory about myth that scholars introduce their own work with discussion about the academy's inability to decide what it is talking about. "Most theories of myth are remarkably lacking in a definition of myth", notes Elizabeth Baeten⁸. Myth is "a particularly shifty label", according to Richard Walsh⁹. Ivan Strenski begins his analysis of myth theories with the oft-quoted lines: "Myth is everything and nothing at the same time. It is *the* true story or a false one, revelation or deception, sacred or vulgar, real or fictional ... there is no such 'thing' as myth"¹⁰, and concludes that theorising about myth largely consists of arguments about and prescriptions of what 'it' is.

⁶ Baigent et al, 16-19.

⁷ *ibid*, 430.

⁸ Elizabeth M. Baeten, *The magic mirror: myth's abiding power* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 23.

⁹ Richard G. Walsh, *Mapping myths of biblical interpretation* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 26.

¹⁰ Ivan Strenski, *Four theories of myth in twentieth-century history* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), 1.

In everyday usage, we seem clearer about the existence of myth and what it is. We apply the word in the plural to a particular category of literature or an oral tradition, as in 'myths and legends', which we generally respect while agreeing that they are not true in any literal sense. In the singular, 'myth' tends to be used for a story, theory or idea that is not true but some might believe it, or which was once believed but no longer stands up. 'Mere myth' and 'just a myth' indicate the word's use as a term of derision indicating that some people apparently believe such things but we know better. We know that myth does not accurately represent or explain reality. It is a distortion of the way things really are. Myths are not true, although some people think they are. To our bare-bones definition of myth as story to be believed, we may add ... by other people but not by us.

Myth's 'otherness', its status as story or theory other than the accurate one, believed by people other than us, is its major defining characteristic according to myth theorist Elizabeth Baeten. The word is always applied by the observer, the scholar, the debunker, the theorist, the one who knows the true story. It is a category defined by negatives, by what myth is not and by what it is alien or opposed to. In Baeten's words, myth describes "what does not belong to the existential, intellectual, cultural, or historical position of the person applying the label ... myth functions or works to identify and classify aspects of human existence that are foreign to the observer"¹¹.

In describing what is alien and does not belong, the category of myth also works to define what is known and does belong. It is a boundary-setting device, "enclosing the real and the truthful and excluding the unreal and untrue"¹². Myth is thus posited as the opposite of science, history and reality as a whole, and the unmasking of any story or theory as myth helps to reinforce the line of distinction between them. Scholar of myth Wendy Doniger has summed up myth's function of establishing both the excluded

¹¹ Baeten, 24.

¹² Walsh, 31.

and the included: "We tend to call other people's stories 'myths' while we call our own stories history"¹³.

History versus pseudo-history

In everyday terms, history is the respectable opposite of myth. 'You can't argue with history,' we say, whereas our application of the label 'myth' to a story about the past immediately sets it up as a narrative to be proven wrong by the facts. Myths about the past do not faithfully record real events and relationships but invent them, or myths distort things that actually happened to such an extent that the whys and wherefores of history become absurd and false. By implication, history is a faithful recording in which cause and effect can be described because they already existed in the reality of the past.

Like myth, 'history' is a shifty label. It denotes both the events of the past and the activity of studying those events. In popular usage, history encompasses both what we 'know' about the past and the work of people who study the past. Our everyday understanding of the work of historians is summarised by Peter Munz as "an activity that transcribes facts from reality to a piece of paper, an activity that is guided solely by the concern for truth"¹⁴. History, in popular usage, does not distinguish between reality and our interpretation of it, between nature and culture, between what historians now call history and historiography. History tells it like it really was, just as its despised other, myth, purports to do.

This positivist conception of history underpins much of the criticism levelled at *The Da Vinci Code* by historians and biblical scholars. Amy Wellborn uses the example of the "European conquest of North America" to show that,

¹³ Doniger, *Other people's myths*, 172 note 3.

¹⁴ Peter Munz, *The shapes of time: a new look at the philosophy of history* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan, 1977), 246.

while past interpretations might have been those of the 'winners', to use the word of *Code's* historian Teabing, "[w]hat's still true ... is that the conquest *happened* out of certain motives and with particular consequences which, if we have the right information, can be perceived ..." ¹⁵. The causes and effects of historical events are thus real and present in history, and we can locate them if we have enough of the right information. They are not the result of interpretation and the assumptions or political context of the interpreter. In Wellborn's view there is a sharp dualism between what happened and what did not. Her monograph is peppered with the exclamation, usually in italics, that much of what *Code* presents as historical fact "*just didn't happen!*". Mary Magdalene's 'suppression', widespread goddess worship, the Christian 'takeover' of pagan rituals, and the exclusion of gnostic texts, *just didn't happen*.

Similarly, Ben Witherington concludes a lengthy discussion about *The Da Vinci Code's* "obsession with God's gender" with the information that God the Father, Son, King and Lord is "grounded in a particular set of historical relationships". These relationships, it is implied, existed in history; they are not contingent upon our interpretations and our 'reading into' the "historical records" that are the New Testament, but have their own objective reality in the past ¹⁶. God's gender is a fact of history, a truth transcribed by the gospel writers to a piece of paper.

The synthesis presented in *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* and reprised in *The Da Vinci Code* is "a parody of history ... pseudo-history" ¹⁷, "one of the all-time great works of pop pseudo-history" ¹⁸. 'Pseudo', like 'myth', means false according to the Oxford Dictionary, but it is a masked falsity. Pseudo-history looks like history and lays claim to the real thing by imitating it. Critics'

¹⁵ Amy Wellborn, *De-coding Da Vinci: the facts behind the fiction of The Da Vinci Code* (Huntingdon, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2004), 18.

¹⁶ Witherington, *The Gospel code*, 150-169, 21.

¹⁷ Putnam and Wood, 179.

¹⁸ Laura Miller, "The Da Vinci con," *New York Times Book Review* (22 February 2004): 23.

use of the prefix acknowledges the story's refusal to respect the boundaries between truth and falsehood, and the likelihood that readers will not know where the line of demarcation has been erected by scholarship.

The Da Vinci Code's take on history is pseudo because it masquerades as history while getting things horribly wrong. It doesn't even know, for example, that Leonardo da Vinci is generally referred to by his first name, "Da Vinci" isn't his surname and anyway it has a small 'd' because his family was from Vinci¹⁹. And that's the least of it²⁰:

- The Nag Hammadi texts, used as evidence of the sacred marriage, do not predate the synoptic gospels;
- Jesus' divinity was not suddenly thought up by the Emperor Constantine and/or the Council of Nicea;
- The contents of the New Testament were not arbitrarily chosen nor were the gnostic gospels deliberately suppressed;
- There is no documentary record of Jesus' marriage or that he had a sexual relationship with Mary Magdalene;
- The Dead Sea Scrolls are irrelevant because they are not Christian and do not mention Jesus;
- There is no evidence that the woman who anoints Jesus in the gospels is actually Mary Magdalene;
- The ancient Jews did not engage in ritual sex;
- The early Christian gnostics were not proto-feminist Isis-worshippers;
- The early church didn't have a problem with women or sex or Mary Magdalene;
- The sacred feminine has been very much honoured down the centuries in the person of Mary the mother of Jesus, who is ignored by *The Da Vinci Code*.

¹⁹ Bruce Boucher, "Does The Da Vinci Code crack Leonardo?" *New York Times*, 3 August 2003, p.2.26.

²⁰ For historical controversies, see Witherington; Wellborn; and Bart Ehrman, *Truth and fiction in The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Furthermore, among other things²¹:

- There are 698 pieces of glass in the Louvre's pyramid monument, not 666;
- The Church of Saint-Sulpice is not on the world's first meridian line;
- Trains to Lille do not depart from Paris's Gare Saint-Lazare.

A writer who gets the details wrong is likely to have got the big picture wrong as well. True scholars do not play fast and loose with the facts of history and geography.

The academic communities of History, Biblical Studies and Religious Studies

thus seem agreed that *The Da Vinci Code* and its precursors such as *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* have devised a story that presents as 'to be believed' and that regrettably it is taken seriously by many people.

Concurring with Witherington and Wellborn, Karen King, professor of ecclesiastical history at Harvard, has described most of *Code*'s themes as "very marginal ideas that have no historical basis"²². Bruce Boucher, senior curator at the Art Institute of Chicago, describes *Code*'s take on art history as "more sangria than sangreal ... the author's grasp of the historical is shaky"²³. Likewise, *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* is deemed unbelievable. "The improbability of its thesis is fully matched by the wretchedness of its style," observed historian Charles Wood²⁴. The book itself cites Marina Warner's judgement upon it – "a heap of hooley"²⁵, a sentiment echoed by Martin Marty – "sensationally misguiding ... absolutely hokey"²⁶. Susan Haskins, author of a major work on Mary Magdalene, calls it "bizarre ... far-fetched ... the book offers no new insights into the historical

²¹ David A. Shugarts, "The plot holes and intriguing details of The Da Vinci Code" in *Secrets of the Code*, ed. Burstein, 254-283.

²² Kulman, 47.

²³ Boucher, p.2.26.

²⁴ Charles T. Wood, "Holy blood, holy grail," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (Winter 1984): 659.

²⁵ Baigent et al, [inside front cover].

²⁶ Maurice Reidy, "Breaking the Code," *Commonweal* (12 September 2003): 46.

figure of Mary Magdalen”²⁷. *The Da Vinci Code* and its sources have not convinced the ‘us’ of scholarship, but unfortunately some other people have believed.

The problem with these myths is that they present themselves in the guise of scholarship and history. They do not stick honourably to their side of the boundary but, in the typically ‘shifty’ way of myth, they contest the arena of academic truth. They assert that they know better than historians and biblical scholars because their methods of establishing the truth are better. The authors of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* devote several pages to the question of why mainstream scholars had failed to make the appropriate connections and draw the obvious conclusion that the Holy Grail was actually the bloodline of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. The answer to this puzzle, they conclude, lies in modern scholarship’s segregation of knowledge into distinct disciplines and the inability of these disciplines to communicate effectively with one another. Disciplines do not reflect the way things really are. “[R]eality, history and knowledge cannot be segmented and compartmentalised according to the arbitrary filing system of the human intellect”²⁸. Scholars have become experts in very particular fields and they “tend generally to regard fields other than their own with considerable suspicion – spurious at worst, at best irrelevant. And eclectic or ‘interdisciplinary’ research is often actively discouraged as being, among other things, too speculative”²⁹.

So historians generally ignore legends and romances about the Holy Grail, biblical scholars dismiss them out of hand, and everybody writes off experts on the occult and esoteric, especially when the Knights Templar are involved. In his satirical take on the conspiracy genre, *Foucault’s Pendulum*, Umberto Eco has one of his characters assert that “[i]f somebody brings up the

²⁷ Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: myth and metaphor* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1993), 369.

²⁸ Baigent et al, 326.

²⁹ *ibid*, 325.

Templars, he's almost always a lunatic ... There are lunatics who don't bring up the Templars, but those who do are the most insidious. At first, they seem normal then all of a sudden ..."³⁰. Such prejudice among mainstream scholarship has done nothing but hinder its ability to uncover the truth, conclude the bloodline researchers.

Scholars place too much emphasis on documentary evidence and far too little on traditions and sagas that have survived far longer than the often sparse records, according to Baigent and his fellow researchers: "it is not sufficient to confine oneself exclusively to facts"³¹. Thus, historians and others have not had the breadth of vision necessary for the telling of the true story of the holy bloodline. Their compartmentalised knowledge distorts the real world, and a wider perspective is required: "a mobile and flexible approach that permits one to move freely between disparate disciplines, across space and time ... In short, one must synthesise – for only by such synthesis can one discern the underlying continuity, the unified and coherent fabric, which lies at the core of any historical problem"³².

The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail acknowledges its unorthodoxy. To historians, its conclusions are likely to be "tantamount to heresy"³³. This anti-orthodoxy is however a virtue, as it has enabled the writers to draw the disparate strands of history together into a coherent and logical explanatory narrative. Robert Langdon, *Code's* religious symbologist, also espouses synthesis: the world is "a web of profoundly intertwined histories and events. The connections may be invisible ... but they are always there" (p.32). Langdon shares his name with a real-life unorthodox historian. The non-fictional Robert Langdon is described by Massey University's Pacific historian Kerry Howe as having "a prodigious knowledge of historical and related sources", and is "one of the more indefatigable Pacific historians

³⁰ Eco, 63, 67.

³¹ Baigent et al, 328.

³² *ibid*, 327.

³³ *ibid*, 325.

arguing that academic orthodoxy has got it wrong". In his 1975 book *The Lost Caravel*, the real Langdon argued that Polynesia is infused with Spanish genes, religion, culture, social institutions and technologies left by sailors shipwrecked in the 16th century. "Few academics have taken the time seriously to critique Langdon's views", observes Howe, as there is little evidence for them and a large mass of data to refute his claims³⁴. That *Code's* scholarly hero has the same name as another maverick historian may be sheer coincidence but, in the world of historical synthesis and interconnectedness, coincidence is a rare beast.

Code's synthesis-based positivism, ('what you've been told is lies – here is the real story'), is thus met with an equally determined positivist stance from some scholars. The bloodline genre claims it has perceived the hitherto unrecognised or suppressed relationships that exist in the reality of history, and its critics counter that history's realities are of an entirely different order. In the battleground of story to be believed, this narrative has been assisted by modern scholarship's own anxieties about where the boundaries between truth and falsehood lie and whose purposes are served when 'we' rush to repair the breaches made by other people's unbelievable stories. *The Da Vinci Code's* resident historian sums up the problem by quoting Napoleon: " 'What is history, but a fable agreed upon?' ". "History," Teabing continues, "is always a one-sided account ... the winner writes the history books" (p.343).

Refusing history's interpretive turn

The whole pseudo-historical project of *The Da Vinci Code* could be summed up by its critics as "a hard core of interpretation surrounded by a pulp of disputable facts", if this wasn't already a description of the output of 'genuine'

³⁴ K. R. Howe, *The quest for origins: who first discovered and settled New Zealand and the Pacific Islands?* (Auckland, NZ: Penguin, 2003), 130.

historians, quoted approvingly by Peter Munz³⁵. “History is not what happened but what people think happened,” Munz continues. “Our historical knowledge ... is of historical knowledge – not of what actually happened”³⁶.

History’s grand recitations of fact and explanatory narratives have increasingly been called into question by the critics of enlightenment and modernity. History is now, like myth, “a mode of working up reality”, a method of managing the past’s “boundless absolutism” which contains no relationships, no explanations and no stories until we construct them through the process of naming and interpreting³⁷. Hans Blumenberg contended that myth and enlightenment are allies “in a way that is still reluctantly admitted ... in their work to overcome anxiety relating to what is unknown or even still unnamed ...”³⁸. And, postmodernists would add, in their work to conquer and control the unknown and nameless.

Historical knowledge has become problematic. Some of the most basic facts of history – ‘Columbus discovered America’, ‘Arthur ruled Britain’, ‘the Moriori were New Zealand’s indigenous people’ – have been ‘exposed’ as myths constructed and perpetuated in the service of particular ideologies. Postmodernism has made history into a site of contestation in which historians’ assumptions, ideologies and power plays must be laid bare. In the words of cultural theorist Michel de Certeau, the writing of history is:

a writing that conquers ... History furnishes ‘facts’ destined to fill formal frameworks determined by an economic, sociological, demographic, or psychoanalytical [or other] theory. This conception tends to direct history toward ‘examples’ which must illustrate a doctrine which has been defined elsewhere³⁹.

³⁵ Munz, 248.

³⁶ *ibid*, 208, 205.

³⁷ Blumenberg, 1, 31.

³⁸ *ibid*, 163.

³⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The writing of history* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), xxv, 119.

Code's Teabing, while claiming that his own knowledge is uncontaminated truth, adopts an admirably suspicious stance in relation to the conquering knowledge of history's winners: "The modern Bible was compiled and edited by men who possessed a political agenda" (p.317).

Writers of history ought at all times to be aware that their reconstructions of the past are not full and accurate representations of reality but are partial and "mutilated knowledge", according to philosopher of history Paul Veyne⁴⁰. Nonetheless, despite recent qualms on the part of historical scholarship about its ability to be certain of anything, the popular understanding of history as a faithful and objective record persists. History's self-questioning has created a vacuum in the arena of true knowledge and, as will be discussed in the next chapter, the crisis in managing the boundaries between fact and fiction is especially acute in the study of Christian origins. *The Da Vinci Code* has gone into this positivist vacuum, where historians increasingly fear to tread, with new certainties. Historical documents such as the Nag Hammadi codices do not leave us ignorant but prove the facts, even when such records are literally mutilated. The gnostic gospel of Philip reports that "... the companion of the [word obliterated] is Mary Magdalene. [Word obliterated] loved her more than all the disciples, and used to kiss her often on her [word obliterated]"⁴¹. *Code* (p.331) is happy to fill in the gaps without the irritating square brackets and qualifying footnotes employed by anxious scholars, and the Aramaic word for 'companion' is translated as 'spouse' despite the original script being Coptic. *Code* thus provides readers with unambiguous certainty that "the marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene is part of the historical record" (p.330).

In his discussion of the "myth" of the historical Jesus, Hal Childs states that our belief in history as an immediate representation of reality indicates a powerful emotional need which has been largely unaffected by the

⁴⁰ Paul Veyne, *Writing history: essay on epistemology* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan, 1984), 13.

⁴¹ Wesley W. Isenberg, "The gospel of Philip" in *Secrets of the Code* ed. Burstein, 109.

intellectual critique of positivism in modernity. What Childs calls this “unconscious Cartesian legacy”, which splits subject and object and creates historical facts that exist independently of their knower, has persisted despite the “age of suspicion”⁴². That myth, as other of suspicious and self-conscious history, has stepped in to satisfy this need should be no surprise according to Hans Blumenberg. Both myth and history work to contain and organise reality by alerting us to significance. Significant events “stand firm in the temporal flux”, and do not allow for our indifference or indecision about whether they happened or what they meant⁴³. Myth, along with positivist history, presents significance as an inherent quality of past events and objects, not as an interpretation we apply in retrospect. It is a fact of nature and it reassures us that “the world and the powers that hold sway in it are not abandoned to pure arbitrariness”⁴⁴.

“We are uncovering an immanent rationality of history,” exclaim the over-excited conspirators of *Foucault’s Pendulum* as they respond to the uncanny significances emerging from the absurd story they cynically set out to create⁴⁵. Their discovery is echoed by *Code’s* Robert Langdon: “[m]y friends, as you can see, the chaos of the world has an underlying order” (p.134). Perceiving the past’s inbuilt rationality is far more reassuring to our Cartesian selves than the awful possibility that it might all be chaos or, in Eco’s words, reality is an enigma “that is made terrible by our own mad attempt to interpret it as though it had an underlying truth”⁴⁶. In our usual understanding of the categories, history and myth have far more in common than not in their work to render the enigma of the past less terrible. The bloodline myth occupies what Marcel Detienne called “a provisional site, an open camping

⁴² Hal Childs, *The myth of the historical Jesus and the evolution of consciousness* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 73.

⁴³ Blumenberg, 67.

⁴⁴ *ibid*, 42-43.

⁴⁵ Eco, 435.

⁴⁶ *ibid*, 95.

place ... the shadow cast by circumstantial reasoning ..."⁴⁷ and, we could add, a site of mythic certainties that has been partially vacated by history.

Siting myth in popular culture

According to Richard Walsh, who uses the concept of myth to interrogate models of biblical scholarship, much of the theorising about myth has been "self-interested and snobbish". Myth is characterised as pre-scientific explanation which the modern and enlightened individual, exemplified by the theorist, has progressed beyond⁴⁸. The other people who remain in myth's grip are therefore unscientific, primitive and unenlightened. Some of the discourse around *The Da Vinci Code* reveals the construction of an assumed readership who embody just these unfortunate characteristics.

"Who buys such tosh?" asks Peter Hawes in the magazine produced by Massey University for its extra-mural students, people who are at least *trying* to improve their minds and must therefore be warned against myth that looks like learning. "Well, probably the tobacco belters who went to see Mel Gibson give Christ what-ho; and then voted for Bush ... And you'll doubtless find a copy in the glovebox of every Bighorn and MU"⁴⁹. Catholic writer Sandra Miesel contrasts the ignorance of other people with the sensibility of "the educated reader [who] actually applauds those rare occasions where Brown stumbles (despite himself) into the truth"⁵⁰. "People who read little [sic] or no serious or scholarly works ... are reading *The Da Vinci Code* and

⁴⁷ Quoted in Walsh, 51.

⁴⁸ Walsh, 62.

⁴⁹ Peter Hawes, "The Da Vinci Code," *EXMSS Off Campus* (March 2005): 19.

⁵⁰ Sandra Miesel, "Dismantling The Da Vinci Code," *Crisis: Politics, Culture & the Church* (1 September 2003): 2, <http://www.crisismagazine.com> (accessed 15 February 2005).

priding themselves on their knowledge and sophistication,” worries Larry Carstens in the orthodox Catholic *New Oxford Review*⁵¹. *The Da Vinci Code*’s “cultural and political agenda” according to Joe Wolverton in the ultra-conservative John Birch Society’s organ *The New American*, amounts to an attack on the foundations of Christian civilisation⁵². As an example of popular culture, *The Da Vinci Code* is not only ‘other’ of history and scholarship but apparently threatens civilised standards and legitimate culture as a whole.

Like myth and history, ‘popular’ is another shifty label. At its most neutral, it describes something that is well-liked and successful, and *The Da Vinci Code* has undoubtedly been both. But the word also has elitist connotations. Popular culture is frequently construed as what’s left over after we have decided what high or legitimate culture is, according to cultural theorist John Storey. Just as myth denotes what is alien to the standpoint of the person applying the label, the popular is also a category bounded by negations. Popular culture is not-Shakespeare, not-Ravel and not-Botticelli. Legitimate culture is defined by its complexity, freedom from economic imperatives, intelligent consumption and, generally, its European origins. The popular thus demonstrates simplistic tendencies, media-driven commercialism, a mindless passivity in its consumers, and a genesis in America⁵³.

In his classic sociological analysis of taste and the construction of cultural distinction, Pierre Bourdieu says that the boundary between legitimate and popular culture is “a sacred frontier” by which “the sacred sphere of culture” must be forever closed to the lower, coarse and vulgar tastes of “the profane” and popular⁵⁴. Controlling the definition and possession of

⁵¹ Larry Carstens, “Errors and deception in *The Da Vinci Code*,” *New Oxford Review* (February 2005): 29.

⁵² Joe Wolverton, “Debunking the *Da Vinci* hoax” *The New American* (21 March 2005): 28.

⁵³ John Storey, *An introduction to cultural theory and popular culture* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 7-8.

⁵⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984 [1979]), 7.

legitimate culture is a significant way in which the dominant classes maintain their hegemony, and this is achieved by the construction of a “cultural competency” through which good taste, or its absence, is demonstrated. Nowhere is the holy frontier more clearly demonstrated than in the cultured approach to fine art.

According to Bourdieu, the definers of legitimate culture work to maintain the borders by positing a “pure gaze” whereby a painting, for example, is viewed with a refined and sublimated detachment, a pleasure in the form that has little to do with the thing represented in the painting. The cultural competency required for the pure gaze involves a knowledge of historical contexts and artistic traditions, an aptitude for perceiving and deciphering specifically stylistic characteristics, and the ability to see that the work ‘signifies’ things beyond those directly represented⁵⁵. The cultured elite has historically posited the pure gaze as inborn, a natural characteristic of the dominant class, “a new mystery of immaculate conception” as Bourdieu describes it⁵⁶. Good taste is something either you’ve got or you haven’t.

In contrast to the naturally pure gaze of the elite, the populace possesses a naïve gaze which does not distinguish between representation and the object represented, and refuses the cultured distinction between form and function. For a painting to be seen as good, it must be a pleasing and reasonably accurate representation of the real, which brings viewer and image together rather than maintaining the distance and detachment required by the pure gaze. “Working-class people expect every image to explicitly perform a function, if only that of a sign,” says Bourdieu. “The people chiefly expect representations and the conventions which govern them to allow [the people] to believe ‘naively’ in the things represented”⁵⁷. Like myth, cultural products must tell the uncultured about the facts of reality, not establish distance from them.

⁵⁵ *ibid*, 53.

⁵⁶ *ibid*, 68.

⁵⁷ *ibid*, 5.

With the rise of art history as an academic discipline, cultured taste is increasingly seen as something that might be able to be learned. The pure gaze of the natural connoisseur is becoming the knowing gaze of the art historian, “which identifies experience of the work with an intellectual operation of deciphering”⁵⁸. Art history has revealed the workings of cultural competency, but the frontier between the competent and incompetent remains. The works of Leonardo da Vinci, for example, are “academically consecrated”⁵⁹ and may be deciphered intellectually only by the culturally educated who have acquired the requisite competency.

Leonardo's paintings are, of course, a major theme of *The Da Vinci Code*. As a grand master of the Priory of Sion and thus a keeper of the Holy Grail's true secrets, he is said to have provided clues in his work about the close relationship of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and his reverence for the sacred feminine (p.311-338). *The Last Supper* is full of such clues, provided we look at it with the correct gaze. The disciple on Jesus' right turns out to be a woman, not the young man we've always been told was John the Beloved Disciple:

The individual had flowing red hair, delicate folded hands, and the hint of a bosom. It was, without doubt ... female.

‘That’s a woman!’ Sophie exclaimed.

Teabing was laughing. ‘Surprise, surprise. Believe me, it’s no mistake. Leonardo was skilled at painting the difference between the sexes.’ (p.327)

Correctly deciphering *The Last Supper* thus requires a move back from the standpoint of the cultured elite to a more naïve perspective. There *is* a difference between the sexes, a stable difference which can be represented in art. Flowing hair, delicate hands and a bit of a bosom equal female, especially when such a skilled artist is at work. *The Da Vinci Code* reads the

⁵⁸ *ibid*, 68.

⁵⁹ *ibid*, 65.

painting as a factual system, an act of consumption that reveals myth at work, in Barthesian terms⁶⁰. That one of the disciples is a woman becomes a common-sense interpretation, unsullied by the distancing cultured knowledge that the artistic representation of gender is a product of its times. In contrast, Georgetown University's Professor of Religious Art opts for the knowing gaze: "gender is a culturally and socially conditioned product. What you and I accept today as being masculine or feminine is most likely not what would have been accepted in Florence or Milan during the fifteenth century"⁶¹.

But some knowledge of art history, and psychology as well, are needed to explain how we've got it wrong for so long and have failed to see that "*The Last Supper* practically shouts at the viewer that Jesus and Magdalene were a pair" (p.329). The work was until recently covered with layers of grime and over-painting. The reality of the image was obscured not just by dirt but also by its status as a cultural icon:

'Everyone misses it,' Teabing said. 'Our preconceived notions of this scene are so powerful that our mind blocks out the incongruity and overrides our eyes.'

'It's known as *scotoma*,' Langdon added. 'The brain does it sometimes with powerful symbols.' (p.328).

The Da Vinci Code takes a highly functional view of art as representation, but it has the art historian's knowledge that great paintings must be subjected to the intellectual operation of decipherment. Sometimes this can be difficult, even for the most culturally competent. "The Grail is literally the ancient symbol for womanhood," says Robert Langdon (p.321); distinguishing between the literal and symbolic, the signified and the signifier, can be tricky stuff even for Harvard symbologists.

⁶⁰ Barthes, 131.

⁶¹ Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, "No, I do not believe there is a woman in *The Last Supper*" in *Secrets of the Code* ed. Burstein, 230.

In its claim to 'know' about great paintings while displaying a naïve perspective and a "weak grasp of context"⁶², the novel is guilty of rising well above its natural station in the popular. "The most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated", says Bourdieu⁶³. *Code's* reading of *The Last Supper* as image to be believed goes against all the dictates of legitimate culture while pretending to possess genuine knowledge and truth. It is wrong-headed, vulgar myth.

* * *

When the other asserts that it is an insider, when it cites genuine insiders in its references, when it claims to do the job better and denigrates its academic and cultured 'colleagues', and when it enjoys far greater popular and commercial success than they do, the sacred boundaries between the included and the excluded are threatened.

The Da Vinci Code is what Pierre Bourdieu terms "middle-brow" culture in relation to the high culture of scholarship, art, truth and knowledge. Firmly located in the popular, middle-brow nonetheless exhibits serious pretensions:

Middle-brow culture owes some of its charm ... to the references to legitimate culture it contains and which encourage and justify confusion of the two ... by combining two normally exclusive characteristics, immediate accessibility and the outward signs of cultural legitimacy ... Its producers have taken on the role of divulging legitimate culture⁶⁴.

Despite Bourdieu's conclusion that middle-brow culture implicitly reinforces all the standards set by the cultural and academic elites who exclude it, and thus "nothing could be less subversive than these controlled

⁶² Boucher.

⁶³ Bourdieu, 56-57.

⁶⁴ *ibid*, 323.

transgressions”⁶⁵, the reactions of *Code*’s cultured critics reveal rather more anxiety. By asserting new truths to millions of readers about the certainties of history, the right way to do scholarship and the sensible approach to paintings, *The Da Vinci Code* has established itself as a legitimate target for categorisation as myth, the story which is unfortunately believed by people who know no better.

Like middle-brow culture, myth “vibrates in the middle” in the words of Wendy Doniger⁶⁶. The sharp dualisms constructed by reason – nature and culture, the real and the representation, knowledge and ignorance – become confused. In *The Da Vinci Code*, popular leaches into culture and invention encroaches upon history. Reason’s boundary management is challenged. As quoted at the beginning of this chapter, the writer of the New Testament letter to Titus warns of the danger of paying attention to Jewish myths. In a culture which still describes itself as ‘Christian civilisation’, Jewish myths are the resident alien, the subversive stranger within. They are the stories which look like our stories, pretend to know better than our stories and are a great deal more successful at it, but are *not* to be believed.

⁶⁵ *ibid*, 326.

⁶⁶ Doniger, *The implied spider*, 6.

2. RELIGION AND MYTH

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty ... We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the mountain.

The second letter of Peter 1:16, 18.

The demythologising conspiracy

The overarching theme of *The Da Vinci Code* is that there has been a cover-up of the truth about Jesus and Christian origins, instigated in the 4th century by a collusion of the temporal and spiritual authorities for their own worldly ends. "[E]stablishing Christ's divinity was critical to the further unification of the Roman empire and to the new Vatican power base" (p.315). With the collapse of Rome, power and authority became centred in its surviving church, which had to define and maintain orthodoxy at all costs. In Sir Leigh Teabing's words:

You must understand the Church's powerful motivations to conduct such a cover-up. They could never have survived public knowledge of a bloodline. A child of Jesus would undermine the critical notion of Christ's divinity and therefore the Christian Church, which declared itself the sole vessel through which humanity could access the divine and gain entrance to the kingdom of heaven (p.340-341).

So successful has the cover-up been that the Church has come to believe its own cooked-up stories about its founder. "The Vatican is made up of deeply pious men who firmly believe these contrary documents [the Grail] could only be false testimony ... Nobody is more indoctrinated than the indoctrinator" (p.317-318). The conspiracy against the truth thus has its origins 17 centuries ago and the resulting fabrication of ancient history has become the standard narrative, believed by Church and people alike. American Catholic

writer Father Andrew Greeley agrees that the present-day Catholic Church is incapable of foisting upon the masses stories which it knows to be false. The Vatican, he says, is a “fractionalized bureaucracy” whose personnel “would have a hard time conspiring themselves out of a wet paper bag”¹.

Nonetheless, the impression left by *Code* is of an institution which, at least in its inner sanctum, knows that it has been the purveyor of myths designed to keep the faithful ignorant and compliant for the last two thousand years. “The Piscean ideal believes that man must be *told* what to do by higher powers because man is incapable of thinking for himself” as Sir Leigh Teabing puts it, using the astrological paradigm (p.357).

The authoritarian Age of Pisces ended rather sooner for biblical scholars than it apparently has for the Catholic Church and its followers. In the 17th century, Spinoza proposed that the books of the Bible must be explained in relation to the mundane causes, historical conditions and cultural presuppositions of the times in which they were written. Scripture is a product of the human intellect and can therefore be studied with reason and rational methods. Or, as Teabing bluntly puts it, “The Bible did not arrive by fax from heaven” (p.312). The rational separation of the Bible’s scientifically-verifiable facts from its pious fictions, otherwise known as myths, became a major project of the Enlightenment.

Considerable religious anxiety was engendered by the publication of a life of Jesus by German scholar David Friedrich Strauss in 1835, so much so that he lost his academic post as a result². Strauss aimed to subject “the whole history of Jesus ... to a critical examination, to ascertain whether it have not some admixture of the mythical [and] to what extent the ground on which we

¹ Andrew M. Greeley, “Da Vinci Code is more fantasy than fact,” *National Catholic Reporter* (3 October 2003): 18.

² David Friedrich Strauss, *The life of Jesus critically examined*, 5th ed trans. George Eliot (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1906 [1835]).

stand in the gospels is historical”³. Myth is established by Strauss as story to be believed but not in the context of historical scholarship and scientific enquiry. His labours led him to conclude that the gospel narratives, while received and proclaimed by the Church as history, are to be regarded “for the most part as mere mythi” by the critical theologian⁴.

Anticipating the theories of a later historical positivist, *Code's* Teabing, Strauss wondered whether these ‘mythi’ accruing to the Jesus of history were the result of “fraudulent intention ... intentional deception” on the part of the gospel writers. Such a conclusion would be a gross misunderstanding of Christian myth, he stated. Most of the mythical elaboration, such as the transfiguration, reflected ideas current among the Jews of the time and were “of an accordance with the sentiments of a multitude”; newly-invented stories, such as the resurrection, were designed “merely to give clearness, connexion, and climax, to the representation”. Myths convey eternal religious truth but should not be confused with verifiable historical events, of which the gospels contain very few⁵.

Despite Strauss’s arguments for the sacred value of the Christian myths, his work has tended to be seen as a triumph of historical positivism in its war against mythical falsehood. In his introduction to the fifth edition of *The Life of Jesus* in 1906, Professor Otto Pfleiderer wrote: “Strauss’s criticism broke down the ramparts of dogmatism, new and old, and opened to the inquiring mind the breach through which the conquest of historical truth might be won”⁶. The critical theologian’s distinction between history and “mere mythi” is the Straussian legacy, one which has spread further than he might have wished. For the general populace, the laity, the unlearned – that is, people other than critical theologians – Strauss’s findings were off limits. In the preface to the first edition he wrote:

³ *ibid*, xxix.

⁴ *ibid*, 782.

⁵ *ibid*, 83-86.

⁶ *ibid*, xxvi.

Investigations of this kind may, however, inflict a wound on the faith of individuals. Should this be the case with theologians, they have in their science the means of healing such wounds ... For the laity the subject is certainly not adequately prepared; and for this reason the present work is so framed, that at least the unlearned among them will quickly and often perceive that the book is not destined for them ... they understand not that of which they are ambitious to speak⁷.

The unlearned and ill-prepared laity thus constitute a problem for the progressive biblical scholar who, in Strauss's view, is left with several options including keeping quiet about it all. The honest theologian, who preaches that myth is not historical fact, is likely to be accused of hypocrisy or heresy by church and congregation. The only way of resolving the issue may be for the preacher to resign. However, the spirit of science and the consequent progress of Christian theology are unstoppable, so that eventually even minds "less cultivated" will get to hear that Christianity is not nearly so grounded in history as it claims to be⁸.

It is interesting to speculate whether Strauss would have been surprised, had he lived to a biblically advanced age, by the response to the book *Honest to God* in 1963, or by the heresy trial of New Zealand's Lloyd Geering four years later. Strauss may well have believed, or hoped, that 'advanced theology' would have solved its myth/history dilemma during the intervening 130 years, and that the 'less cultivated' laity would slowly but surely have come to the view that eternal truth does not require grounding in dubious historical events. As Strauss expected, Christian scholarship had proved unstoppable in its mission to separate "the revelatory wheat from the mythic chaff", as Richard Walsh has described the "classic Enlightenment project" that is modern biblical scholarship⁹. Adolf von Harnack, Albert

⁷ *ibid*, xxx.

⁸ *ibid*, 782-784.

⁹ Walsh, 89.

Schweitzer and Rudolf Bultmann, among many others, had searched the gospels and found very little in the way of history. The task, in Bultmann's eyes, was to "demythologize" Christianity of its "primitive science", and to find its existential core, making the religion relevant and understandable to the modern mind. After all, "for modern man the mythological conception of the world ... [is] over and done with"¹⁰.

The problem was however that biblical scholarship had largely kept its findings to itself. The New Testament's mythical accretions, such as the virgin birth, the miracles and the resurrection, were stories to be believed by other people but known by the privileged few to be other than historical truth. Theologians had largely opted for Strauss's 'silent hypocrisy' option.

*Honest to God*¹¹ was an attempt by John Robinson, Bishop of Woolwich, to bring Christianity up to date by rejecting the idea of a personal objective deity 'up there', incarnated 'down here' in the person of Jesus, in favour of 'God as the ground of our being', following in the spirit of Paul Tillich and other modern theologians. To its publisher's astonishment, the book sold 350,000 copies in its first few months, making it "the fastest-selling new book of serious theology in the history of the world"¹². Amidst the resulting controversy, in which he was dubbed 'the atheist bishop' and 'destroyer of the faith', Robinson wondered why his presentation of the results of modern biblical scholarship came as such a shock to many readers. Do "theologians and churchmen ... wish their ideas to have public circulation?" he asked. "Sometimes indeed one almost wonders if they do. 'Not in front of the people' seems to be the unwritten rule"¹³. He used the analogy of a currency crisis, particularly apt in mid-20th century Britain, to conclude that the "paper money" of creeds, doctrines and dogmas no longer has exchange value, and

¹⁰ Rudolf Bultmann, "Jesus Christ and mythology" in *Rudolf Bultmann: interpreting faith for the modern era*, [ed] Roger A. Johnson (London: Collins, 1987), 292.

¹¹ John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 1963).

¹² *The Honest to God debate*, ed. David L. Edwards (London: SCM Press, 1963), 7.

¹³ *ibid*, 237.

converting the paper into the gold of spiritual truth is “increasingly confined to the circle of a religious in-group”¹⁴. The ‘out-group’, judging by surveys and Robinson’s correspondence, either hold “popular religious ideas [which] are still incredibly more naïve than bishops and clergy often suppose”, or “great numbers of people equate myth with falsity” and have ceased to believe that there is anything at all behind the paper money. “Modern scientific man” will not see myth as what happened; Christianity needs to “come clean” about its supposedly historical basis¹⁵.

The heresy trial of New Zealand theological college principal Lloyd Geering in 1967 demonstrated similar conflicts between the demythologised enlightenment of the scholarly theologian and the mythical mindset of conservative Presbyterianism. Geering was charged with denying that humans have immortal souls, along with making heretical statements about Jesus. While the charges were eventually dismissed, the event showed that, in Geering’s later summation,

over a number of decades there had been a big gap growing up between what theologians and biblical scholars were talking about, and what went on in the churches ... Many in the churches had no idea what had been happening since about 1840 ... Some felt as though they had been kept ignorant by the church¹⁶.

Arguing that the challenges posed to traditional religion in our supposedly radically different postmodern era are in fact nothing new, Paul Heelas notes that “grand religious narratives have for long been under threat”. However, he concedes that such threats were confined to the theological elite for many years and have only recently broken out into more popular discourse:

¹⁴ *ibid*, 243-245.

¹⁵ *ibid*, 257-267.

¹⁶ Bianca Zander, “Conversations without God,” *New Zealand Listener* (27 January 2001): 33.

“postmodern differentiated religion ... could also have been around for a long time in theological quarters”¹⁷.

The Da Vinci Code contends that there has long been a silent agreement between the Catholic Church and the Priory of Sion, guardians of the bloodline-cum-Holy Grail down the centuries. As long as the Priory keeps quiet about its potentially explosive secrets, the Church will not bother it. In Teabing's words, “the Church and the Priory have had a tacit understanding for years. That is, the Church does not attack the Priory, and the Priory keeps the Sangreal documents hidden” (p.356). In the light of both Robinson's and Geering's comments about the gap between biblical scholarship and the religious ideas of ‘ordinary’ Christians in the mid-20th century, a strange parallel might be drawn between *Code's* mysterious Priory and the scholarly community of demythologisers. As long as the academy confined its discourse about Christian mythology to its own members, popular religion could continue much as it had done for centuries, with creeds, dogmas and liturgies infused with mythical language describing supposedly historical events.

Managing Christian myth

Recently, the scientific investigation of Christian origins has entered the mainstream, particularly in the United States. The quest for the historical Jesus, as it has become known, has seen several books about the Jesus of history reach the American best-seller lists. Authors such as John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg and John Spong have high public profiles when compared with the perhaps self-imposed obscurity of the traditional biblical scholar. The work of the Jesus Seminar, an association of American and international academics, has been covered by both *Time* and *Newsweek* in

¹⁷ Paul Heelas, “Introduction,” in *Religion, modernity and postmodernity*, ed. Paul Heelas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 9.

front page spreads. “Recent years have been very good for the Jesus business”, according to one conservative critic of the resulting “commotions in both the academy and the church [which] create a media-fed demand for more of the same”¹⁸. Scholarship can no longer be charged with adopting a ‘not in front of the people’ stance; indeed, it could almost be accused of realising that there is popular kudos, and money, to be made from demythologising.

Christian scholarship in modernity has constructed myth as its despised other, in the view of Richard Walsh, and has largely accepted “the popular understanding of myth that has dominated Western culture”¹⁹. The Jesus Seminar has produced a pared-down version of scripture, separating the ‘genuine’ from later additions, the historical from the mythical²⁰. Its members have famously concluded that less than twenty percent of the sayings and deeds attributed to Jesus by the gospels are authentic in any historical sense²¹. Strauss’s contention that most of the gospels comprise “mere mythi” can now be qualified with scientifically satisfying exactitude: ‘most equals just over eighty percent. However, in their response to the demythologising project and the consequent revision of the traditional understanding of Christian belief, biblical scholarship and theology have demonstrated a rather more ambivalent attitude to the religion’s mythical quota. Myth may be the ancient and redundant other but, given its predominance in scripture, it must be managed.

Demythologising has required a shift in the operation of Christian belief. Belief, as the acceptance of statements about divine intervention in history, has long been foundational to Christianity. As Lloyd Geering states, “Christianity, almost more than any other religion or path of faith, has tended

¹⁸ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The real Jesus: the misguided quest for the historical Jesus and the truth of the traditional gospels* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 1.

¹⁹ Walsh, 89.

²⁰ Robert W. Funk, *The five gospels: the search for the authentic words of Jesus* (New York: Polebridge Press, 1993).

²¹ *ibid*, 4.

to identify faith with a particular and unchangeable set of beliefs, such as a Creed or Confession”²². The Nicene Creed’s propositions that Jesus “was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary” and, after death, “on the third day he rose again” have, in modernity, been revealed as other than historical facts. These statements, now seen as the language of myth, require a more nuanced kind of belief which avoids the conclusion that faith has become, as Mark Twain put it, “believing things you know ain’t so”²³. For Christians unable to reject the conclusions of the demythologisers, belief now involves decoding the mythical elements to locate the truth that lies within them. Christian myth becomes story to be believed *in*, rather than believed literally.

The understanding of myth as sacred story, containing spiritual truths that transcend the Enlightenment’s requirement of accurate location in time and space, arose during the Romantic reaction to modernity’s new world based on science and reason. Myth as story to be decoded returns to Plato’s construction of the classical myths as allegories, “the moral teachings of ancient sages, merely concealed under a bait of fantasy”²⁴. According to Andrew Von Hendy, such stories were categorised as fables in medieval Europe, and the word myth did not appear until 1760, when it displaced “the more humble fable”²⁵. Myth took on religious connotations, becoming “a type of narrative that conveys insight so inexhaustible in its significance that it transcends its mere local occasion and historical situation”²⁶. As science and reason progressively excised the workings of God’s plan from the public sphere of human history, myth was relegated to the increasingly private sphere of religion where it could be managed by methods other than the scientific. “The more that secular values prevail in the marketplace and

²² Lloyd Geering, “A contemporary expression of faith” in *Faith in an age of turmoil: essays in honour of Lloyd Geering*, ed. James Veitch (London: Oriental University Press, 1990), 242.

²³ *Webster’s new world dictionary of quotable definitions* (2nd ed., 1988).

²⁴ Andrew Von Hendy, *The modern construction of myth* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), 2.

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ *ibid.*, 25.

religion is accorded its own sphere of sensibility, inaccessible to reason but also irrefutable by it, the more 'myth' appears to be a genre capable of conveying permanent truth to the sensitive bourgeois seeker"²⁷. Mr Casaubon, in George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch*, is frequently cited as the archetypal Romantic truth-seeker, interminably decoding the world's myths in search of the eternal knowledge which is 'the key to all mythologies'. The same impulse, to abstract perennial truth and spiritual guidance from culture-bound and historically situated myths, was to have a popular future in the work of Sir James Frazer, Robert Graves and Joseph Campbell.

Religious studies also contributed to the Romantic rescuing of myth from the dustbin of outdated worldviews to which modernity sought to consign it. By emphasising the numinous, the holy, the sacred as a 'wholly other' beyond the grasp of reason, the work of scholars such as Otto Rank and Mircea Eliade established myth as a cornerstone of universal religious experience. In Eliade's words, the function of myth is "to reveal the exemplary models of all human rites and all significant human activities"²⁸. But the uncovering of these exemplary models requires scholarly decoding, an activity which perhaps found its fullest expression in the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss in the mid-20th century. The meanings embedded in individual myths are found not in their narratives but in the structures or constituent units that make up the stories. Narrators of myths and their audiences are unaware of these meanings at a conscious level but, when the structures are broken down and their relationships analysed, a logical and often surprising meaning can be determined from an apparently bizarre tale. Ultimately, myths can be represented in mathematical formulae which reveal their transcendent meaning, "above the ordinary linguistic level"²⁹.

²⁷ *ibid*, 67.

²⁸ Mircea Eliade, *Myth and reality* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1964), 8.

²⁹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The structural study of myth" in *Myth: a symposium*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1974 [1955]), 86.

Liberal Christian theology has taken on board the Romantic understanding of myth as sacred story and the consequent requirement to extract perennial truth from it. At times however, this insight seems to sit in uneasy coexistence with the everyday definition of myths as other people's untrue stories. As one prolific populariser of enlightened biblical scholarship, John Spong, describes the task: "[i]t is the beast of literalism that must be purged so that the depth of truth contained in these narratives can be rescued and heard in our generation"³⁰. A degree of violence must be visited upon the sacred stories in order to cut away other people's mythic layers: "[a]s with the fine knife of a skilled surgeon or perhaps even a laser beam of cutting light, we can separate in the myths of the past, the truth, from the containers of that truth"³¹.

The meanings extracted via the surgical uncovering of sacred truth from fatty layers of obfuscating myth can be considerably less satisfying than the original narratives. The nativity stories, for example, are the gospel writers' way of saying that "God entered the life of Jesus". Likewise, the resurrection is a myth denoting that "Jesus had been taken into God and vindicated by God"³². As Bishop Spong concedes, the resultant theology is "almost by definition, fuzzy, imprecise, and relatively unappealing". This cannot be helped, however, as the correct modern understanding of Christian myth inevitably results in the loss of previously accepted religious beliefs. "The only churches that grow today are those that do not, in fact, understand the issues and can therefore traffic in certainties. They represent both the fundamentalistic Protestant groups and the rigidly controlled conservative Catholic traditions"³³.

³⁰ John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from fundamentalism: a bishop rethinks the meaning of scripture* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1992), 215.

³¹ *ibid*, 34.

³² *ibid*, 216, 233.

³³ *ibid*, 35.

Understanding the issues around myth can be seen as a kind of theological competency, paralleling the cultural competency identified by Pierre Bourdieu as a requisite for the proper appreciation of fine paintings and other cultural products³⁴. Just as art requires an “intellectual operation of decipherment” in accordance with the strictures of legitimate culture, so should Christian myth be interpreted with theological sophistication and detachment. Sacred stories, like paintings, are not to be naively believed in a manner which refuses any distinction between the form of representation and the truths represented within them. The “beast of literalism”, in Spong’s words, is other of modern, liberal, relevant theology. Reading Christian scripture as a Barthian factual system³⁵ is to read it as myth without understanding that myth is something other than untruth. When we read New Testament references to Jesus’ transfiguration, such as the verses from *2 Peter* quoted at the beginning of this chapter, theological competency requires that we decipher “eyewitnesses” and “cleverly devised myths” very differently from our post-Enlightenment assumption that the writer was there and didn’t invent any of it in order to satisfy the audience’s expectations.

Like cultural competency, theological competency is restricted to the enlightened minority. Bourdieu’s “sacred boundary” between the cultured few and the vulgar many must be maintained. As John Robinson observed forty years ago, people in the Christian West have become divided into a dwindling minority for whom the Bible is historical truth, and an ever-increasing number who see it as little more than made-up stories, that is, myths³⁶. A more recent Catholic commentator has noted that literalism, or the refusal of biblical myth as expression of abstract sacred truth, still holds sway with most people. “Skeptical literalists take one look at the Tower of Babel, the star of Bethlehem, Peter and Jesus walking on water and – taking them as if they are CNN press reports – scoff them away as myths”. On the other hand, “credulous literalists blithely accept the talking snake, the mass

³⁴ See Chapter One.

³⁵ Barthes, 131.

³⁶ *The Honest to God debate*, 257-267.

suicide of the Gadarene swine, multiplication of the loaves and fishes as if they had the same rock-solid verifiability as the assassination of John Kennedy”³⁷. The new truth about Christian myth, despite its considerably wider circulation, seems just as difficult to grasp as the more shocking revelation that it was all ‘mere mythi’ in the first place. Either way, in our literal acceptance or literal rejection of the gospel stories, we remain in the grip of myth as story to be believed.

A major outcome of theology’s myth management project has been the loss of story, or at least the loss of plot. If theorists of myth agree on anything, it is that myth requires a narrative demonstrating cause and effect³⁸. As Wendy Doniger sees it, myth is the grafting of plot onto story. Things do not just happen, as they do in everyday life; they happen ‘because’³⁹. The “law of mythical causality” proposed by Ernst Cassirer provides that “every simultaneity, every spatial coexistence and contact, provide a real causal sequence ... [in myth] there are no accidents”. Cassirer went on to observe that, in its reliance on history as the true story in which the divine intervenes, Christianity employs a “mythical indigenesness” which explains much of its power. “Certain mythical intuitions are so deeply embedded in the fundamental doctrines, the dogmatic substance of Christianity, that they cannot be removed without endangering this substance itself”⁴⁰.

By removing from the Jesus story the interconnected plot details of miraculous birth, supernatural powers, sacrificial death and triumphant resurrection, his richly detailed biography is reduced to the life story of any religious leader: he was born, he preached, he died. The loss of transcendent mythic plot from mundane historical story deprives religious ideas of their grounding in narrative. In the violence done to its myths, wrenching abstracts from the concrete, it could be argued that antiliteralist

³⁷ William J. O'Malley, “Scripture and myth,” *America* (30 July 1994): 7.

³⁸ For example, Doniger, *Implied spider*, 1; Cassirer, 45; Blumenberg, 12; Baeten, 25.

³⁹ Doniger, *Implied spider*, 81.

⁴⁰ Cassirer, 45-46, 248-249.

Christianity has literally lost the plot and hence much of its indigenous mythic power.

"The popular audience delights in plots that proceed logically and chronologically," Pierre Bourdieu observed of the taste that is not-cultured. This delight springs from "a deep-rooted demand for participation" by audiences who want both to understand and to be involved in the action⁴¹. Christianity denuded of its mythic plot may thus have lost a great deal of its appeal for the not-theologically competent. As Hans Blumenberg noted of demythologised Protestantism, "sheer grace does not set up anything to narrate, any more than pure justice does"⁴². Undermining "traditional religious illusions", as demythologising and theological myth management have done, might have a few unwanted outcomes in the view of Lloyd Geering, because "something more dangerous" could step into the mythic vacuum⁴³. In the view of some Christian commentators, *The Da Vinci Code's* tightly plotted new certainties have done just that.

Remythologising religion

The term 'detraditionalisation' has been applied to the "crisis of tradition and memory, disruption of culture and received history" in modernity⁴⁴. According to the detraditionalisation model, Western societies have undergone a radical break with the past. Religious certainties have disintegrated, church authority has been eroded, and only a fundamentalist few believe any longer in the grand historical narrative of Christianity⁴⁵. In line with the detraditionalisation thesis, Pope Benedict XVI recently warned that "the

⁴¹ Bourdieu, 32.

⁴² Blumenberg, 195.

⁴³ Lloyd Geering, *On becoming human* (Wellington, NZ: St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society, 1988), 36.

⁴⁴ Joseph Mali, *Mythistory: the making of a modern historiography* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 10.

⁴⁵ see Paul Heelas, "Introduction," in *Detraditionalization: critical reflections on authority and identity*, ed. Paul Heelas et al (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 7-8.

disquieting process of secularization is occurring in many parts of the world [and] the Christian foundations of society risk being forgotten”⁴⁶. Radical demythologisation would seem to be a perfect partner in crime for detraditionalisation’s broader assaults on Christian certainties and values.

In contrast to the thesis of a radically detraditionalised West in modernity, scholars have proposed a co-existence model in which tradition continues to exert influence and authority alongside the desires and expectations of individuals. We may be rather more detraditionalised than our ancestors, but there has not been the “systematic collapse of authoritative cultural voices” proposed by the theorists of revolutionary disruption⁴⁷. Nor, one could argue, has there been the systematic collapse of the cultural voice of religious myth posited by Bultmann and others. Indeed, as determinedly as biblical scholarship and theology have worked to rid enlightened Christianity of its despised other, or at least to contain it using the methods of modernity, myth has found new opportunities to reassert itself.

To theorists of myth, the category’s resilience in the face of rationalism’s attacks is only to be expected, particularly in the case of Christianity which has woven myth into its very fabric. As Hans Blumenberg observed, we never get rid of myth, we just continue to work on it. The more deeply embedded a myth is, in a cultural and social context, the more it will be worked on and worked over, despite scholarship’s claims to have brought myth to an end via the facts of history and science. The Christian story is one of the myths entrenched in the Western consciousness “so that every allusion is recognised with an ‘Aha!’ and that every reshaping, retelling, will make it clearer”⁴⁸.

⁴⁶ Benedict XVI, Pope, “Address to the ambassador of New Zealand to the Holy See, 17 June 2005,” <http://www.cathcomm.org.nz/media> (accessed 24 June 2005).

⁴⁷ Heelas, “Introduction,” in *Detraditionalization*, 7-8.

⁴⁸ Blumenberg, 274.

Reshapings and retellings serve to “paper over the cracks” that appear in established myths, according to Doniger⁴⁹. Under the pressures of science and historicism, large cracks have appeared in the Christian myth. Divine intervention in human history and miraculous events that defy scientific logic have become story unable to be believed. But, as discussed, the conversion of these concrete mythic events into abstract non-narrative truths has been less than satisfying. The scholarly attack on myth has consistently been countered by “daring and violent amendments and twistings”⁵⁰ of the Christian story, which have sought to reinscribe updated historical certainties. Such amendments have served to provide new narrative explanations of Jesus and his movement, proposing causes and effects that rely on the interventions of forces other than the traditionally-conceived God of Christianity. Jesus’ biography, progressively denuded by scholars, is replenished with fresh new detail.

An early example of the ‘rational re-narrativising’ of the Jesus story was the 18th century publication of a fictional life of Jesus by German writer Karl Heinrich Venturini, which provided a new explanation of the resurrection. Venturini proposed that Jesus was taken down from the cross still alive and was revived by the Essene community at their Dead Sea monastery. The theme of Jesus’ survival and subsequent career as an Essene was reprised in the 19th century story *The Brook Kerith* by Irish writer George Moore. Robert Graves, in *Jesus in Rome* (1957), conjectured that an alive Jesus was freed from the tomb by Roman soldiers who were bribed to broadcast the news of a resurrection⁵¹. Perhaps the most popular 20th century revisioning, before the publication of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, was Hugh Schonfield’s *The Passover Plot*, depicting Jesus “ransacking the Old

⁴⁹ Doniger, *The implied spider*, 55.

⁵⁰ Blumenberg, 175.

⁵¹ Karl Heinrich Venturini, *Natürliche Geschichte des grossen Propheten von Nazareth* (Copenhagen: Bethlehem, 1800-1802); George Moore, *The Brook Kerith* (London: Heinemann, 1931); Robert Graves and Joshua Podro, *Jesus in Rome: a historical conjecture* (London: Cassell, 1957); Hugh Schonfield, *The Passover plot* (London: Hutchinson, 1965). For discussion of theories about Jesus’ survival, see John Cornwell, “The case of the empty tomb,” *The Weekend Australian Magazine* (26-27 March 2005): 28.

Testament for prophecies of his passion” and following a predetermined messianic script that went badly wrong⁵².

To scholars’ embarrassment, some of their own have also staged mythic break-outs from the denarrativising trend. In 1970, Dead Sea Scrolls expert John Allegro published *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*, a “philological investigation” showing that Jesus was invented to conceal the basis of Christianity and “Israelitism” in a sacred mushroom fertility cult. The New Testament is the coded story of the holy fungus, using puns and word plays. The word ‘Christian’, for example, means “smeared with semen”, and ‘Judas Iscariot’ translates as “erect phallus of the storm”. Allegro concluded that “the story of Jesus was a hoax for the benefit of the Jewish and Roman authorities engaged in persecuting the cult ... the historicity and validity of the New Testament story is in ruins”⁵³. A similar decoding project by Australian academic Barbara Thiering revealed that Jesus married twice, fathered three children, survived until at least the age of 70, and probably died in Rome⁵⁴. Thiering’s work is extensively cited to support the conclusions of bloodline researchers, particularly Laurence Gardner⁵⁵.

Daring amendments to the Jesus myth have also incorporated the Romantic understanding of myths as vehicles for transcendent mystery, containing within them salvific truths available to those ‘in the know’.

Making Jesus a member of the Essenes, a thesis rejected by mainstream scholarship⁵⁶, has enabled Christianity’s remythologisers to identify an underground stream of wisdom in the religion. Helena Blavatsky, founder of

⁵² Cornwell, *ibid*.

⁵³ John M. Allegro, *The sacred mushroom and the cross* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1970), 102.

⁵⁴ Barbara Thiering, *Jesus the man: a new interpretation from the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Sydney: Doubleday, 1992).

⁵⁵ See Chapter Three.

⁵⁶ Ehrman, 34-35.

Theosophy, and American psychic Edgar Cayce, located Jesus within the 'Great White Brotherhood', a wisdom tradition originating in the lost continent of Atlantis, passing to Egypt, thence to the Essenes, and still at work today behind the scenes⁵⁷. These ideas have persisted in the 'New Age' knowledge of actress and writer Shirley MacLaine, for example, who is assured that "according to the Dead Sea Scrolls ... Christ was a member of the Essene brotherhood which, among other things, believed in reincarnation"⁵⁸.

In *The Da Vinci Code*, new historical certainties have combined with perennial hidden wisdom to provide a satisfying new narrative for readers wary of the received story, unconvinced about a personal deity presiding over world affairs, but who still hear the "cultural voice" of entrenched religious myth. Wendy Doniger has identified a group she terms "the remythologized" who have begun to react against "thoroughly demythologized" secular humanism but are unable to return to naïve, literal "un-demythologized" belief. Such people "have eaten their way through Marx and Freud and are still hungry"⁵⁹. The Catholic Church's Working Group on New Religious Movements recently conceded that New Age spirituality is attractive because "so much of what it offers meets hungers often left unsatisfied by the established institutions" and because it caters to an "increasing nostalgia and curiosity for the wisdom and ritual of long ago"⁶⁰. Doniger's "remythologized" would seem to be highly susceptible to that most ancient enemy of Faith, identified by the Working Group as gnosticism.

According to the World Bank, knowledge has become "perhaps the most important factor determining the standard of living ... for countries in the

⁵⁷ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age religion and Western culture: esotericism in the mirror of secular thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 314-316.

⁵⁸ Quoted *ibid*, 316.

⁵⁹ Doniger, *Other people's myths*, 120.

⁶⁰ "The old gnosticism and the New Age," *The Pope Speaks* (January/February 2004): 9.

vanguard of the world economy”⁶¹. Knowledge, of itself, has thus become a new Weberian means of grace in the modern West, with those possessing the best and most of it apparently guaranteed a materially rich life.

Accessing spiritual knowledge, previously hidden in history or known only to a select few, has a particular attraction for the remythologised for whom religious faith, available through the grace of God and the dogmatic pronouncements of the Church, is no longer an option. The faith society has become the knowledge society.

Modern knowledge, in the sense used by the World Bank, is geared towards material gain, so the seeker of spiritual truth must look to the past and the gnosis to be found in ancient sources. Gnosis, literally translated from the Greek as ‘knowledge’, has come to mean “divinely inspired, intuitive, and intimate knowledge as opposed to intellectual knowledge of a specific area or discipline ... [knowledge of] the reality beyond perception, or, for that matter, religious doctrine”⁶². The word has also acquired connotations of pre-Christian antiquity, secrecy, unorthodoxy and heterodoxy, self actualisation, anti-materialism, anti-institutionalism and anti-authoritarianism. As Karen King observes, gnosticism as “a rhetorical term” denotes everything that the Christian Church is not. Like myth, gnosticism is a troublesome other of Christianity⁶³.

Gnosticism has become fashionable of late and has been identified as a strong influence in the Kabbalah movement, the *Matrix* films, Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* novels, and 1994’s best-selling book of spiritual insight, *The Celestine Prophecy*⁶⁴. The supposed antecedents of modern gnosticism include the Nag Hammadi texts, found in Egypt in 1945. These ‘gnostic gospels’ have created considerable scholarly controversy. Karen

⁶¹ Quoted in Carl Davidson and Philip Voss, *Knowledge management* (Auckland, NZ: Tandem Press, 2002), 18.

⁶² “Glossary” in *Secrets of the code*, ed. Burstein, 341.

⁶³ Karen King, *What is gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1-2.

⁶⁴ Peter Stanford, “The secret world of the new gnostics,” *The Independent* (18 March 2004), p.B25.

King and Elaine Pagels have argued that they demonstrate a wide and healthy diversity in the beliefs of early Christians, while Ben Witherington has countered that orthodoxy was well-established from the beginning and that the 'gnostics' were always seen as heretical and misguided⁶⁵. Such disputes matter little to *The Da Vinci Code*'s assertion that there was a real Jesus story to which the 'official' Christian myth itself constituted a "daring and violent amendment" in Blumenberg's words. The Nag Hammadi gospels are the testimony of "those who 'chose' the original history of Christ" (p.317); they are "the earliest Christian records" (p.331) and are therefore, by definition, the most reliable ones.

Gnosticism and the remythologising of Christianity involve a search for pristine origins, locating the original and true Jesus. This Jesus must, however, be credible in the modern, 'demythologised', epoch. Christ as Messiah was invented by the Church, in *Code*'s view. "Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet ... a great and powerful man, but a *man* nonetheless ... the early Church literally *stole* Jesus from His original followers, hijacking His human message, shrouding it in an impenetrable cloak of divinity, and using it to expand their own power" (p.315-316). Revealing the human Jesus behind the Christian construction demonstrates the workings of myth as posited by Blumenberg. Myth forms as the gods press their way "out of formlessness into appearance ... [myth is about] all the metamorphoses of the gods into the forms of particular human beings"⁶⁶. Jungian psychologist Erich Neumann saw the modern de-supernaturalising of Jesus as a mythic domestication and personalisation of the god figure⁶⁷. "*The Da Vinci Code* suggests a very human, very approachable savior", says one reviewer⁶⁸ and, thus, a more believable one. As one of the authors of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* puts it, "on the basis of what we know of human experience, it is more plausible that a man ... is married than it is that

⁶⁵ Ben Witherington, "Why the 'lost gospels' lost out," *Christianity Today* (June 2004): 26-32.

⁶⁶ Blumenberg, 352-353.

⁶⁷ See Von Hendy, 190.

⁶⁸ Kulman, 49.

he should be born of a virgin, walk on water, and rise from the dead”⁶⁹. Jesus becomes less of a god and more of a ‘regular guy’.

The mythic domesticating of Jesus, making him a person like us or the person we would like to be, has long been recognised as a feature of the quest for the ‘real’ Jesus of history. Albert Schweitzer famously concluded that scholars searching for Jesus tend to find reflections of themselves⁷⁰. A feminist critic of the quest, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, accuses male scholars of constructing their desired ‘true selves’, revealing the historical Jesus to be a charismatic, countercultural action hero⁷¹. *Code*’s Jesus – an ambitious man in touch with his ‘feminine side’, a father married to a ‘power wife’, and seeking to liberate people from oppressive religion and foreign global domination – enables a more inclusive identification with the representation, particularly among women readers. In *The Da Vinci Code*, Jesus becomes a richly detailed and understandable person once again, in contrast to the remote, abstract and increasingly formless figure of Christ. Story has been updated and reinserted.

Of course, Christian orthodoxy has always held that Jesus was “fully human”, in the words of the Nicene Creed. For *Code* to assert that the Church turned him into a being other than “a man nonetheless” merely demonstrates that Dan Brown is more familiar with heresy than with sound doctrine. Jesus’ humanity, however, may be another of those well-kept secrets tightly held by the theologically competent. Many scholars and theologians construct a demarcation between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Marcus Borg draws a line between “the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus”⁷², and John Dominic Crossan has discussed the

⁶⁹ Quoted *ibid*, 46.

⁷⁰ Albert Schweitzer, *The quest of the historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 4.

⁷¹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus and the politics of interpretation* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 13.

⁷² Marcus Borg, “Re-visioning Christianity” in *The once and future Jesus* [by] The Jesus seminar (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2000), 59.

ongoing “dialectic between Jesuses and Christs” over the centuries⁷³. While the Jesus/Christ distinction may be tenable for theologians and biblical scholars, it may not be so clear to Doniger’s remythologized or to many of Strauss’s ill-prepared laity. *The Da Vinci Code*’s assertion that the Christ of faith was actually the self-interested invention of a power-hungry Church cuts through the difficulties of theological discourse, leaving the cabal of the competent to talk among themselves as, by and large, they always have done.

* * *

Some commentators have regretfully asked why *Code* has enjoyed such success relative to Mel Gibson’s contemporaneous film *The Passion of the Christ*, which also presents a highly detailed Jesus story. One such critic unknowingly answers his own question: Gibson’s is a “sympathetic, faith-based cinematic retelling”⁷⁴. The old myth is re-presented without the requisite papering-over of the cracks that have appeared under the pressure of modernity. Suspected historical inaccuracies, possibly anti-Semitic in nature, along with implicit supernaturalism and a Jesus who suffered far too much for no rational reason, do little to repair the breaches made in the traditional Christian story by the modern requirement for credible cause and effect.

Martin Buber stated that religion works to simplify existence, whereas myth expresses its fullness. “It is strange and wonderful to observe how in this battle religion ever again wins the apparent victory, myth ever again wins the real one”⁷⁵. In both scholarship and popular culture, the urge to find in the West’s religious past stories to be believed, peopled by credible characters,

⁷³ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: a revolutionary biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 200.

⁷⁴ Wolverton, 28.

⁷⁵ Martin Buber, *The legend of the Baal-Shem*, trans. M. Friedman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 11.

remains a powerful one as we continue to work on the most entrenched of our myths.

3. THE BLOODLINE

... instruct people not to teach any different doctrine,
and not to occupy themselves with myths
and endless genealogies that promote speculations
rather than the divine training that is known by faith.
The first letter of Paul to Timothy 1:3-4.

Classic analyses of myth, such as that by Ernst Cassirer, see it as a problem of rationality, a strangely persistent flaw in humanity's intellectual progress. Reason has somehow allowed this primitive mutation to live on, and myth's survival tactics must be explained so they can be overcome. Myth is reason's perverted twin, and can therefore be conquered by "the laws and principles of knowledge"¹. Nonetheless, as Cassirer ruefully observes, myth acts with "a real force that seizes upon consciousness"², a force that seems to be beyond the explanatory power of epistemology. Myth's appeal lies in its "tonality", its "life feeling"; the designation of things as sacred represents "cries of mythical emotion"³. Myths make emotional sense.

In the following two chapters, the emotional sense of *The Da Vinci Code's* two major themes – the bloodline and the sacred feminine – is examined. The Goddess has recently become a cry of mythical emotion for many seeking a greater female presence in religion and history. And the bloodline is the latest reworking of the 'life feeling' always aroused by the most vital of shared human substances.

¹ Cassirer, 11.

² *ibid*, 5.

³ *ibid*, 61, 68, 78.

Blood as essence

Blood is a substance carrying enormous mythic significance across the spectrum of human cultures. In the view of anthropologist Melissa Meyer, blood symbols and rituals are “nearly universal”; everyone engages in “blood verbiage” and has done so throughout history⁴. Writing of European constructions of race and nation, Uli Linke posits blood as “a dominant metaphor or gestalt, mapping fundamental cultural assumptions about gender, sex and race”; blood is “an organizing metaphor”⁵. Malinowski’s famous description of myth as “a hard-worked active force” in the functioning of society would seem to apply equally to blood as one of myth’s own dominant tropes⁶. According to Michel Foucault, blood constituted “one of the fundamental values of society” well into modern times in the West. “Power spoke through blood ... blood was a reality with a symbolic function”⁷.

The Da Vinci Code is infused with blood’s power and significance: “blood was the backbone of the Sangreal” (p.221). The bloodline of Jesus, overtly royal and implicitly sacred, is the overarching theme of the novel. Near the end of the story, the Merovingian descendant Sophie Neveu finally meets her long-lost brother: “as they embraced, she could feel the power of the blood coursing through his veins ... the blood she now understood they shared” (p.577). In a demythologised milieu in which the receiving of Christ’s blood via the mystery of the Eucharist has largely lost both the stamp of reality and the symbolic meaning it once carried, the new story recasts the blood of the Saviour as a powerful substance transmitted through the generations, just like the genes on a Mendelian chart. Blood remains the

⁴ Melissa L. Meyer, *Thicker than water: the origin of blood as symbol and ritual* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1,4.

⁵ Uli Linke, *Blood and nation: the European aesthetics of race* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), vii-viii.

⁶ Bronislaw Malinowski, *Myth in primitive psychology* (London: Kegan Paul, 1926), 23.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *The history of sexuality volume 1: an introduction* (London: Allen Lane, 1979 [1976]), 147.

central motif in the revised Christian story but carries a new, scientifically satisfying and extensively documented certitude that does not require belief in transubstantiation or reference to an ineffable reality beyond the symbol. Despite the shifts in plot and character, blood persists, retaining what Hans Blumenberg called the “iconic constancy” characteristic of myth⁸.

Blood is equated with life itself. “You shall not eat flesh with its life, that is its blood,” instructs the Lord at the beginning of history (*Genesis* 9:4-5). “The life of the flesh is in the blood”, we are reminded in *Leviticus* (17:11). Blood would seem to be a perfect exemplar of myth’s refusal of any distinction between the concrete and the abstract, the sign and the signified. Myth’s law of “emanism”, proposed by Cassirer, locates power or charisma as a concrete substance contained within the flesh and blood of individuals, or in their bodily remains such as the relics of saints⁹. Meyer calls this the principle of synecdoche, by which blood becomes the carrier of a person’s spirit or life essence¹⁰. Blood as the vehicle for individual characteristics was the basis of theories about blood humours, or vitalism, from the earliest days of medicine, according to Douglas Starr. The composition of blood determined its bearers’ levels of tranquillity, timidity, courage or ferocity, and possibly even their faith and beliefs. Seventeenth century physicians experimenting with transfusions pondered the nationwide religious upheaval that might result if a Quaker’s blood were ever transfused into an archbishop¹¹. The logic of vitalism informed the practice of bloodletting, a medical cure-all that persisted well into modern times, to drain disagreeable humours and diseases from patients¹².

The mythic significance and power of blood have been reinforced by science. Disease, DNA and destiny are embedded in this dominant

⁸ Blumenberg, 149.

⁹ Cassirer, 56-58.

¹⁰ Meyer, 3.

¹¹ Douglas Starr, *Blood: an epic history of medicine and commerce* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 5-10.

¹² *ibid*, 17.

metaphor. Blood continues to provide a cultural mapping, a shorthand signifier of assumptions about individual, family and racial strengths and shortcomings. As one geneticist puts it, “the idea of biology – blood – as essence is still very much alive”¹³. Blood infected with the HIV virus, for example, becomes a defining characteristic of its possessor. The discovery of blood groups or types in 1900 confirmed traditional knowledge that other people’s blood is different. Science and vitalism came together in the work of the German Society for the Study of Blood Groups in the 1930s. Type A blood, more common among Germans, was found to be associated with intelligence and military capability whereas Type B, relatively common among Jews and Slavs, rendered them more suited to retail trade. The scientifically-proven superiority of German blood received legal status in the Nuremberg Blood Protection Laws of 1935¹⁴. Thereafter, “the blood myth was transformed into the greatest blood bath in recent memory”¹⁵.

Family blood

Just as racial ideologies can be underpinned by blood, so too are the supposed characteristics of an extended family, denoted by the shorthand ‘bloodline’. Blood has long been assumed to be the vehicle of inheritance, a view supported by science well into the modern era; Charles Darwin believed that blood was the agent of inherited deficiencies such as deaf mutism. Through the work of Gregor Mendel in the 1860s, blood and inheritance were separated with the identification of genes¹⁶. Nonetheless, blood as a signifier of inherited identity and family essence retains a powerful position in our repertoire of blood verbiage. At his sister’s funeral, Charles Spencer memorably invoked this dominant metaphor when he claimed a role for the Princess of Wales’s “blood family” in the upbringing of her sons, in

¹³ Steve Jones, *In the blood: God, genes and destiny* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), viii.

¹⁴ Starr, 75.

¹⁵ Foucault, 150.

¹⁶ Jones, 11-12.

implicit contrast with the well-known 'dysfunctionality' of their father's Mountbatten-Windsor blood kin¹⁷. As Sophie intuits in *Code*, we 'share our blood' with our ancestors and immediate family; our relationship with them is not like our relationships with other people.

Tracing bloodlines or family histories has become a widely popular occupation, even an obsession for some. It is "one of today's fastest-growing leisure pursuits" in the view of one British genealogist. "Most of us at some time or other are intrigued to know who our ancestors were"¹⁸. American social historians Robert Taylor and Ralph Crandall state that the vogue for genealogy has assumed "tidal proportions" in the United States since the 1970s¹⁹. Blood looms large in the modern passion for genealogy. Geneticist Steve Jones describes family history as people's search for "the great source from which their blood derives"²⁰.

This enthusiasm for identifying those with whom we share our blood may be one of Cassirer's cries of mythical emotion, protesting modernity's valorising of the autonomous individual who, ultimately, stands alone in a world of his or her own making. In *The Da Vinci Code*, the Grail quest turns out for orphan Sophie Neveu to be a quest for blood family, and finding them changes "everything in her life ... 'I have a family. That's where I'm going to start. Who we are and where we came from will take some time'" (p.586).

"There is no such thing as society", Margaret Thatcher famously observed during her crusade to put some backbone into a Britain enfeebled, in her view, by class communities of welfarism, trade unionism and inherited privilege, all of which she saw as barriers to individual efforts and

¹⁷ Charles Spencer, "Full text of Earl Spencer's funeral oration," (6 September 1997), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/politics97/diana/spencerfull/html> (accessed 16 April 2004).

¹⁸ Brian Loomes, *The concise guide to tracing your ancestry* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1992), 4, 5.

¹⁹ Robert M. Taylor and Ralph J. Crandall, "Historians and genealogists: an emerging community of interest" in *Generations and change: genealogical perspectives in social history*, ed. Taylor and Crandall (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), 14.

²⁰ Jones, 61.

aspirations. "There are individual men and women, and there are families"²¹. The rise of New Right economic and social policies throughout the Western world has confirmed the Enlightenment's identification of the individual as the central agent of progress and growth. With the decline of institutional religion and the burgeoning of interest in spiritualities that eschew dogma, historicity and inherited tradition, the individual is endorsed as self-actualising and independent, able to choose freely in an environment unencumbered by the stifling burden of the past. Communities, if they exist at all in 'the Market', are voluntary aggregations of individuals: shareholders or stakeholders brought together for the time being by common material interests rather than by such nebulous connections as shared blood.

Modernity's 'loss of community' has been seen as part of the broader process of detraditionalisation, discussed earlier²². The radical detraditionalisation thesis would have it that community, communal authority and shared customary practices have been either overcome or undermined, depending on your point of view. But, as religious studies scholar Paul Morris has observed, 'the way things used to be' can itself be a product of 'the ways things are now'. A past "is constructed in opposition to, and normally as an earlier stage of, the detraditionalized present. This redefining and reworking of the past actually creates that past"²³. For those experiencing a lack of community, the past can be construed as containing an abundance of it, providing people with a security rarely felt today along with an identity far richer than that of 'autonomous individual'.

Taylor and Crandall propose that the growth of interest in family history happened as "the perplexed sought to recover an identity, to forge a kin cohesiveness" in response to geographical and socio-economic mobility and

²¹ *The Oxford dictionary of quotations* (1996).

²² See Chapter Two.

²³ Paul Morris, "Community beyond tradition" in *Religion, modernity and postmodernity*, ed. Paul Heelas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 224.

the modern “fluidity” of the family unit²⁴. Ties of blood create what Morris terms communities of descent, in which identity does not depend on ideology or beliefs (or socio-economic status, for that matter), but is non-negotiable, “vouchsafed at birth” and which binds individuals to the perceived reality of an historic community²⁵.

As the *Letter to Timothy* cited at the beginning of this chapter explains, Christians are not a descent community, buttressed by “endless genealogies”, but congregate voluntarily on the basis of a faith received by divine grace and held in common with otherwise disparate individuals. In the language of the Market, Christians are an aggregation of stakeholders in the religious economy. In religious studies terms, they are an “assent community”²⁶. Unlike ‘Jew’, ‘Christian’ is not an inherited identity and, as previously discussed, it is an identity not subscribed to by an increasing number of the West’s autonomous individuals. Taylor and Crandall’s “perplexed” must look elsewhere for a vouchsafed identity that avoids the stresses of free choice and voluntary association, let alone the requirement to believe other people’s stories. By looking to the ancestors, an imagined community can be constructed on the non-negotiable basis of blood. A kin cohesiveness is located in the past, which may not be experienced in the present. The lost community of extended family is recovered, and history provides the researcher with a richer sense of self, independent of troubling discourses about national identity, post-colonialism and indigenouness. In addition, the creation of a blood community of the dead helps avoid having to cope with one’s living relatives in an era of family ‘fluidity’.

As Paul Morris observes, all communities have a discourse of descent, even if “the historically dominant discourse of (Christian) assent has tended to obscure the realities of descent in the literature of the West”²⁷. Geneticist

²⁴ Taylor and Crandall, 9-10.

²⁵ Morris, 238-240.

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ *ibid.*, 241.

Jones agrees. "Christianity has always emphasised the chosen rather than the ancestors", but he cites the practice of retrospective ancestral baptism in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints as an example of the realities of Christian descent²⁸. The Mormon solution to the problem of non-assenting ancestors has been a boon to family history researchers generally. In line with the assent community model, deceased family members must be individually identified by name, then bound or sealed to the Church one by one. In the course of this project, the Mormons have compiled the largest database of family records in the world and have made it available to non-Church researchers²⁹. The information revolution as a whole has spurred the family history enterprise enormously. In addition to the Latter-Day Saints' resources, historical census data and a host of other civil records are now available via the Internet.

The Da Vinci Code also creates a community of descent, finding in today's Plantards, Saint-Clairs and Neveus the blood of a remote ancestor. The mythic domestication of Jesus is bolstered by the knowledge that, unlike God, he had blood and passed it on to future generations. We now know better than the 17th century physicians who worried that other people's religion might be transfused along with their blood. But, for those who have lost the consolations of a faith community and are imagining new non-autonomous identities vouchsafed by descent, there is a vicarious thrill in the revelation of a bloodline that goes all the way back to Jesus. For those who want to go deeper into the research beneath *Code's* story, there is the even more attractive possibility that a personal link might be found into its endless genealogies.

²⁸ Jones, 43.

²⁹ Taylor and Crandall, 10-11.

Jesus' royal blood

Among the sociological and religious drivers behind the passion for family history, Taylor and Crandall note the very human motivation “to produce ancestral models of courage and unblemished character”³⁰. While one’s living family may be a disappointment, as Sophie Neveu finds when she chances upon her grandfather engaging in sexual exhibitionism (p.413-414), the dead with whom we share our blood may be more amenable to the attribution of illustriousness. One historian has coined the term “filiopietistic antiquarianism” for family researchers’ habit of glorifying the ancestors without regard for “the facts” of their lives³¹. Allied to this is the ever-present hope that a genuinely illustrious progenitor will be uncovered, demonstrating that the researcher’s family is a cut above other people’s.

Along with its stand against the individualism prescribed by modernity, genealogy may also be a cry of mythical emotion in response to the modern dogma that all individuals are not only autonomous but are also equal. Taylor and Crandall find in family history a tension that is “the basic American penchant for proclaiming equality while practicing exclusiveness [through] social and cultural certification from Europe”³². At each election time, *Burke’s Peerage* researches the ancestry of American presidential candidates who are all, in theory, equally capable of the mythic journey from log cabin to White House. Senator John Kerry, it turned out in 2004, is related to King Harold of Hastings fame, Henry III, various French monarchs, the Emperor of Byzantium, Ivan the Terrible and the royal family of Albania. The director of *Burke’s* confidently predicted that “because of the fact that the Presidential candidate with the most royal genes and chromosomes has

³⁰ Taylor and Crandall, 10.

³¹ Robert Anderson, “The place of genealogy in the curriculum of the social sciences,” in *Generations and change*, ed. Taylor and Crandall, 86.

³² Taylor and Crandall, 5.

always won the November Presidential election, the coming [2004] election, based on the previous 42 Presidents, will go to John Kerry”³³.

As noted, Steve Jones describes family history as a search for the one great source of our blood, a search that disregards science’s conclusion that we each have thousands of bloodline sources of which none has a single path through history. Nonetheless, he states, “even a short journey upstream is almost guaranteed to unearth a magnificent ancestor. More or less everyone in the Western world is descended from the Emperor Nero ...”³⁴. Like John Kerry, many of us may have at least a few drops of royal blood. Royal and aristocratic blood is different, previously construed in its blueness even to be a different colour, but certainly transmitting qualities that are not those of the everyday red stuff.

“The legend of the Holy Grail is a legend about royal blood,” says Sir Leigh Teabing (p.535). The (fictional) Sophie Neveu and her brother, descended from the (real) Plantard and Saint-Clair families, represent “the most direct surviving royal bloodline” (p.579). While *The Da Vinci Code* is silent about the specific qualities transmitted in this bloodline, its royalness appears to be its distinguishing feature. Royal blood, or “royal genes and chromosomes” as *Burke’s Peerage* describes it, apparently renders its possessors well qualified for the American presidency or, in the case of Jesus’ line, uniquely suited to rule over Europe. *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* found that the aim of the French Merovingian bloodline promoters seemed to be the establishment of a “theocratic United States of Europe ... ruled by a dynasty descended from Jesus”. In the view of the authors, this might not be a bad thing. The new Europe would be built on “deep-rooted emotional and spiritual foundations”, countering the “cynicism, dissatisfaction and disillusion” of the late 20th century³⁵.

³³ “Senator John Kerry’s royal lineage,” *Press release Burke’s Peerage* (8 September 2004), http://www.burkes-peerage.com/press_release7.htm (accessed 10 November 2004).

³⁴ Jones, 61-62.

³⁵ Baigent et al, 434-437.

A present-day proponent of this view is Laurence Gardner, a “Knight Templar of St Anthony”, an attaché to the European Council of Princes, and the incumbent “Jacobite Historiographer Royal”³⁶, the latter position presumably giving him a real-life authority equivalent to that of *Code*’s fictional Royal Historian Sir Leigh Teabing. In 1996 Gardner published *Bloodline of the Holy Grail*, containing 80 pages of genealogical tables showing that the Stuart claimants to the British throne represent the most direct bloodline in descent from Jesus. Gardner’s endless genealogies gather in the Emperor Constantine, Brân the Blessed, King Arthur, Lancelot and Lohengrin, Macbeth, Robert the Bruce and Mary Queen of Scots³⁷. A renewed constitutional monarchy, comprising their descendants, the “true Grail heirs”, and functioning as “Guardians of the Realm”, would overcome Europe’s modern legacy of dictatorships, dysfunctional democracies and godless republics³⁸.

Nostalgia for lost communities of descent may be paralleled by a sense that the benevolent despotism believed to be characteristic of past royal bloodlines might be preferable to the democratic rule of autonomous individuals deemed to have an equal right to political expression. *The Da Vinci Code* is silent on the possible worldly aspirations of the bloodline, so perhaps comment may best be left to the iconoclastic makers of the 1970s film, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. The (Merovingian-descended) monarch grandly announces to the peasants, “I am Arthur, your king”, to which their ragged leader replies “I thought we were an autonomous collective!”³⁹.

³⁶ Gardner, *Bloodline of the Holy Grail*, back jacket.

³⁷ *ibid*, 329-413. Personal links into the bloodline can be investigated through Internet chat groups such as http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Merovingian_descendants

³⁸ *ibid*, 295-300.

³⁹ Ingrid D. Rowland, “Pop esoterica! Leonardo da Vinci at the beach,” *New Republic* (16 August 2004): 25.

Despite democracy, the royal bloodline retains its attraction and explanatory power. Charles Spencer's 1997 invocation of his sister's "blood family" has taken a new turn with the revelation that Diana Princess of Wales may have been assassinated because she was a Merovingian. A recent exposé asserts that "due to her links with the ancient Merovingian line of kings – the line amazingly revealed in Dan Brown's bestseller *The Da Vinci Code* as descended from Jesus Christ – Diana was seen as a 'threat' to the stability of the British monarchy." Like her ancestors, notably Jesus himself, Diana "threatened the establishment" and had to be got rid of, as she was "grooming" Prince William to be a Stuart monarch who would efface the House of Windsor. Stuart claimant Prince Michael of Albany agrees that Diana's death in the Pont de l'Alma tunnel, an ancient Merovingian sacred site of course, was no accident. As he concludes, "it is all to do with the question of blood"⁴⁰. This hard-worked active substance continues to link and explain otherwise senseless and distressing events. With blood, as in myth, there are no accidents.

Jesus' Jewish blood

The Da Vinci Code, while emphasising the bloodline's royal qualities, makes no claims for its consequent right to rule over Europe or usurp the House of Windsor. Within its bloodline theme, however, can be discerned more covert and equally mythic notions about blood. We may be equal and autonomous, but life might be easier if everyone were more like 'us' in an era where the rights of 'them' are perceived to be getting more than their fair share of attention. Other people who wish to live in 'our' society but bring to it very different notions about culture, religion, gender roles and the like, need to overcome their previous blood ties and learn to fit in.

⁴⁰ "Da Vinci Code bombshell: the secret that killed Diana," *Woman's Day* (29 August 2005): 27-28.

Echoing Schweitzer's observation that scholarship about Jesus tells us more about the scholars than it does about their subject, conspiracy theory critic Rich Cohen argues that "the legend of a Jesus who escapes the Crucifixion and settles in the South of France says less about Jesus than it does about a European need to get the Messiah out of the clutches of the Hebrews, to de-Jew him into a continental"⁴¹. Again, there is a strange parallel with the noble lineage constructed for Senator John Kerry. Amidst the lists of princely Christian antecedents, *Burke's Peerage* notes in passing that Kerry's father's family was "originally Jewish by religion". Formerly named Kohn, they hailed from some unnamed shtetl in what became Czechoslovakia. "Senator Kerry's Jewish roots appear to have become almost extinguished in favour of his WASP ancestry," commented Roger Powell, "the leading British genealogist"⁴². Jesus' descendants, like John Kerry's patrilineal ancestors, have had their un-Christian blood extinguished.

Myth theorist Edith Hall has observed that "subjective ethnicity is an extremely fluid social construct ... In myth the ethnicity of heroic figures is remarkably mutable". Hall cites the 'Black Athena' project of reassigning the racial characteristics of leading figures of classical Greek civilisation, from the 'white' end of the spectrum to the 'black', as a contemporary example of mythic mutability in action⁴³. Closer to home, Kerry Howe has reviewed theories about the origins of the Maori and observes that notions of 'the Aryan Maori' lasted well into the 20th century. As previously noted, the real-life Robert Langdon quite recently proposed a Pacific infused with Spanish genes. Such theories, says Howe, are rooted in 19th century imperialism and amount to "intellectual occupation, possession and control"⁴⁴. By

⁴¹ Rich Cohen, "Welcome to the conspiracy," *Vanity Fair* (May 2004): 84.

⁴² "Senator Kerry's royal lineage."

⁴³ Edith Hall, "When is a myth not a myth?" in *Black Athena revisited*, ed. Mary R. Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 343.

⁴⁴ Howe, 168.

locating the origins of other people's ethnicity closer to our own, the other is rendered more familiar, more manageable and less irritatingly different.

New Zealand scholar John MacMillan Brown found that the original inhabitants of the Pacific were "a fair-complexioned, wavy-haired, long-headed race"⁴⁵. These mythical aborigines sound remarkably similar to the Merovingians, the cornerstone dynasty of *The Da Vinci Code*. In the 6th century, Procopius described the Merovingian monarchs: "their bodies are white, their hair is gold, their appearance is tall and noble"⁴⁶. While the activities of Jesus' descendants between the first and fifth centuries remain obscure or, as *Code* puts it, "Christ's line grew quietly under cover in France" (p.345), they eventually entered public life as fully-fledged Aryans or, in polite terms, Indo-Europeans⁴⁷.

This "bold move", in Teabing's words (p.345), effectively extinguished the dynasty's Jewishness, but bloodline researchers debate exactly which of 'our' ethnic characteristics it acquired – French or English. *The Da Vinci Code*, following *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, opts for a French line of descent from Jesus' only child Sarah and, fittingly, locates the Holy Grail itself beneath the inverted pyramid outside the Louvre (p.590-593). Laurence Gardner takes seriously the legend that Joseph of Arimathea brought the Grail to Glastonbury in England, and he traces a Celtic bloodline from this Joseph who, he says, was actually Jesus' brother, James. The two lines eventually intermingled, giving the French and the Celts/English/British strong claims to the blood of Jesus although, as noted, Gardner believes the Scottish Stuart line to have the best of it⁴⁸. Myth as other people's untrue stories is enlisted in the armoury of cross-border rivalries. The competing bloodline narratives link into foundational national myths, helping to define

⁴⁵ Quoted in Howe, 135.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing myth: narrative, ideology, and scholarship* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 213.

⁴⁷ Bruce Lincoln argues that 'Indo-European' has become a scholarly code-word that stands for the now unacceptable signifier 'Aryan'. Ibid, 209-216.

⁴⁸ Gardner, *Bloodline of the Holy Grail*, 94.

'our' characteristics as against 'theirs'. The noble and cultured Merovingians founded Paris (*Code* p.345), King Arthur of Grail fame epitomises the doughty British national character, and the Stuarts personify feisty Scottish independence.

New Testament scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza tells the story of an adult education class discussing modern historical Jesus scholarship. On being informed that Jesus was a Jew, many participants objected vehemently. After lengthy debate, one student concluded: "If you are so insistent that Jesus was Jewish, then you are probably right. But the Blessed Mother for sure was not...". Schüssler Fiorenza asserts that much Christian scholarship has been guilty of a similar extinguishing of Jesus' Jewishness and otherness. Judaism has too often been located as part of Jesus' 'background', from which he stands out as a unique, unprecedented, heroic figure, one who becomes more familiar to 'us'⁴⁹. If, as myth theorist Bruce Lincoln proposes, myth is "ideology in narrative form", then much of historical Jesus scholarship can be seen as "myth with footnotes"⁵⁰.

Popular and scholarly constructions of Jesus come together in *The Da Vinci Code* and its associated genre. Whatever the ethnic composition of the bloodline, it is clearly no longer Jewish. Other people's blood has been occupied, possessed and controlled by incorporation into genuinely European, indisputably Christian, and mostly very blue, blood. As the founder of 'our' religion, even if most of us no longer assent to it, Jesus is more comfortably located in 'our' historical and religious heritage.

⁴⁹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In memory of her: a feminist theological reconstruction of Christian origins* (London: SCM Press, 1986 [1983]), 105-106.

⁵⁰ Lincoln, 209.

The blood of Christ

Blood has always been “a divine thing”, according to Durkheim. In his study of the incest taboo, he found the origin of blood’s sacredness in totemism. The clan forms “a single flesh, a single blood” which is that of the unique being or totem from whom they all descend. The sacred ancestor is incarnate in every member of the clan and resides in their blood⁵¹.

Durkheim’s analysis of the attitudes of “primitive societies” towards blood has obvious resonance with the genealogical concerns of modern ancestor hunters in their quest for the one great source of their blood. However, this is a quest which many of them would not construe as in any way a search for the divine. It is a quest for a human community of people who were like us and have bequeathed to us their composite identity.

Other theorists locate blood more on the ambivalent border between the sacred and the profane. For Italian medievalist Piero Camporesi, “it is always along the frontier of blood – on the red line between pure and impure – that the inexhaustible drama between the sacred and the profane is played out”⁵². Just as myth itself “vibrates in the middle” between us and the gods, so does our blood verbiage comprise “a mixture of the cosmic and the banal”, encompassing both ultimate questions and everyday concerns⁵³. In its rendering of Sangreal as ‘royal blood’ rather than ‘Holy Grail’, *The Da Vinci Code* pulls the blood of Christ back across the border and into the profane world.

Pioneering scholar of religion Max Müller called myth “diseased language”. Ernst Cassirer agreed that myth often does strange things with words. “The source of all mythology is linguistic ambivalence, and myth itself is a kind of

⁵¹ Emile Durkheim, *Incest: the nature and origin of the taboo* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1963 [1897]), 86-89.

⁵² Piero Camporesi, *Juice of life: the symbolic and magic significance of blood* (New York: Continuum, 1995 [1988]), 121.

⁵³ Doniger, *The implied spider*, 6-8.

disease of the mind, having its ultimate root in a 'disease of language'"⁵⁴.

Linguistic ambivalence is at the heart of *The Da Vinci Code*:

'The word *Sangreal* derives from *San Greal* – or Holy Grail. But in its most ancient form, the word *Sangreal* was divided in a different spot.' Teabing wrote on a piece of scrap paper and handed it to her.

She read what he had written.

Sang Real.

Instantly, Sophie recognized the translation. *Sang Real* literally meant *Royal Blood*. (p.336)

"If the Holy Grail is not the 'sang real' or 'blood royal', the whole argument (such as it is) falls to the ground...", historian Richard Barber observed of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail's* thesis. Barber locates the origin of this mythic "mistaken etymology" in the 15th century writings of John Hardyng, who secularised the French Grail romances and enrolled them in "the glorification of an England in decline". Hardyng's stories of a royal-blooded King Arthur were designed to counter the Scots' promotion of their own heroes, like Robert the Bruce. 'Sang real', it seems, is "a misreading or whim of an English writer perhaps not entirely at ease with French"⁵⁵.

Anthropologists have observed that myths undergo particular change at cultural and linguistic borders⁵⁶. Minor elements of stories borrowed from neighbours may become dominant themes in their new settings. Heroes turn into villains, or vice versa, and words can acquire new, bowdlerised meanings. But scholarly cavils and more sympathetic anthropological analyses matter little to myth as the true story in which object and representation are undifferentiated. 'Blood royal' is as reasonable and

⁵⁴ Cassirer, 22.

⁵⁵ Richard Barber, *The Holy Grail: imagination and belief* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 311, 227-228.

⁵⁶ For example, Franz Boas and Claude Lévi-Strauss. See Von Hendy, 218, 234.

obvious a translation of 'sangreal' as any other, just like the reassigned gender of Jesus' beloved disciple in *The Last Supper*.

Ambivalence about Jesus and his blood remains however. Whatever the qualities found in Jesus' blood, and transmitted down the generations, divinity is apparently not among them. This was "a great and powerful man, but a *man* nonetheless. A mortal," says Teabing. "Not the Son of God?" asks Sophie. "Right," comes the reply (p.315). The idea that "a deity had spawned a mortal bloodline" could only be an oxymoron, to Christian dogmatists and rational Grail-seekers alike (p.340). *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* generally agrees. "So far as we personally are concerned, Jesus's lineal descendants would not be any more divine, any more intrinsically miraculous, than the rest of us". But Baigent et al do not believe that their bloodline hypothesis conflicts with the basic tenets of Christianity. If Jesus was indeed God incarnate, then why would God not experience sexuality and paternity, in order to participate fully in the human condition?⁵⁷ Or, alternatively, to be domesticated and become more like us?

Code also leaves the door open to finding more in Jesus' blood than just royal genes and chromosomes. The bloodline is frequently described as that of "Christ", and the personal and possessive pronouns for Jesus are always capitalised – He, Him and His – in a way that is increasingly outmoded in works of theology. Dan Brown identifies himself as a Christian and notes that opposition to his novel comes largely from "the strictest of Christian thinkers who feel the idea of a 'married Jesus' serves to undermine His divinity ... I don't agree with this interpretation"⁵⁸. While *Code* is unconcerned with the prospect of the bloodline toppling secular dynasties, it implicitly ascribes to it enormous religious power. If the secret is revealed, "the Vatican faces a crisis of faith unprecedented in its two-millennium history" (p.356). The Grail bloodline has an eschatological role in the spiritual renewal of humanity.

⁵⁷ Baigent et al, 433-434.

⁵⁸ Dan Brown, *The official website*.

“The End of Days, Langdon thought. The end of Pisces and the beginning of Aquarius was allegedly the historical marker at which the Priory planned to release the Sangreal documents to the world” (p.525). The emergence of the bloodline is bound to see the beginning of an infinitely healthier spiritual consciousness for humankind.

The construction in *The Da Vinci Code* of a new, liberatory and woman-friendly holiness will be examined in the next chapter. However, in the bloodline myth, the blood of Christ continues to have a salvific function, whether through the rise of a benevolent ruling dynasty or by heralding the dawn of a New Age. In its borrowing of the Holy Grail myth, made ambivalent by its move across linguistic borders, *Code* reinscribes the concern of the religious West with the blood of its divine Saviour. The Holy Grail, incorporating the blood motif, is another of Hans Blumenberg’s ‘significant things’ through which the West continues its work on myth.

Myth’s insistence that the ‘real’ must be concrete and potentially visible, even if only to those in the know, informs both the Grail/bloodline hypothesis and the traditional Catholic construction of the blood of Christ. If, as Blumenberg observes, the Messiah has already come, then “the difficulties that follow hard on the question of what he brought with him are inescapable. Something has to be exhibited ...”⁵⁹. The only concrete things that can be left by a Saviour who was bodily taken up into heaven are the blood and flesh he shed on earth or, indirectly, objects he touched or clothes he wore. The mythic impulse for tangibility results in “the display of dubious relics”, as Blumenberg puts it⁶⁰: Jesus’ foreskin, pieces of the True Cross, the Shroud of Turin and, if it could be found, the Holy Grail. These objects are real and, in theory at least, do not require the workings of faith to prove or disprove their authenticity, as scientific investigations of the Turin Shroud in recent years have shown. On the other hand, the concreteness of Christ’s flesh and

⁵⁹ Blumenberg, 227.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

blood as experienced in the Eucharist is available only through the lens of faith. The doctrine of transubstantiation, which holds that the bread and wine of the Mass are converted by consecration into the body and blood of Christ, also concretises Jesus' blood but in a way that can be known by faith alone. The mysterious tangibility of the Mass is unavailable to non-believers.

Historian Richard Barber locates the origin of the Holy Grail myth firmly in the eucharistic ritual. In his study of the Grail's genealogy, he notes "this is not the book I expected to write when I started. I believed that I would be engaged with pagan myth and marvellous Celtic stories ... and that the first shape of the Grail would be dimly discernible in the remote past"⁶¹. Instead, he found that the Grail theme, first recorded in literature by Chrétien de Troyes in the 12th century, arose from the medieval Church's new emphasis on the Eucharist. In an era when the growing authority of the papacy was being consolidated, and uniformity of doctrine and practice imposed across Christian Europe, the Mass became "a major test of orthodoxy ... To demonstrate their authority, and that of the Church as a whole, the ecclesiastical authorities reinvented the Mass". The ritual became highly theatrical, with the elevation of the Host a standard part of it. The Lateran Council of 1215 reaffirmed the real presence of Christ at the Mass, and linked the eucharistic chalice with the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper⁶².

According to Uli Linke, the wine/blood element was withdrawn from the Mass by the late 13th century, and its consumption became the exclusive privilege of priests, who received on behalf of the laity until well into the last century⁶³. Christ's blood was an increasingly remote, mysterious and desired substance, infusing medieval religiosity with "a sensitivity to blood to rival the Aztecs," as Piero Camporesi describes it⁶⁴. The hagiographies and writings

⁶¹ Barber, 369.

⁶² *ibid*, 136-140.

⁶³ Linke, 118.

⁶⁴ Camporesi, 101.

of mystics of the period are saturated with blood verbiage. Catherine of Siena urged her nuns to “bathe in his blood and become drunk with his blood, and sate yourselves with blood and clothe yourselves with blood”. During the visions of Mary Magdalen dei Pazzi, she “saw nothing but blood, tasted nothing but blood, felt nothing but blood, thought nothing but blood, spoke nothing but blood ...”⁶⁵. Blood relics abounded, bolstered by the treasures looted from Byzantium by early 13th century crusaders⁶⁶. The ritual sacredness of Christ’s blood was underlined and reinforced by the blood libel, arising in the 12th century, which ascribed to Jews a need for the blood of Christian children, to be used in their vile parody of the Mass. Almost as horrendous as their lust for Christian blood was the Jews’ widely-believed habit of stealing consecrated hosts for their own perverted religious purposes⁶⁷.

In the first Grail romance of Chrétien, written around 1190, the Grail is a sizeable, richly decorated dish, carried in a mysterious procession by a young woman. The dish is not yet ‘holy’ and has no obvious connection with the Christian story. It was only in Robert de Boron’s *History of the Grail* at the beginning of the 13th century that it became the vessel used by Jesus at the Last Supper and in which his blood was collected after the crucifixion. In Sir Thomas Malory’s immensely popular *Morte d’Arthur* 200 years later, the “Sankgreall” actually contains Christ’s blood, brought to Britain by Joseph of Arimathea. Over three centuries, the Grail evolved from a beautiful but worldly dish into “the most precious of all relics, tangible evidence of Christ’s sacrifice for mankind”, mysteriously appearing before its seekers but always just out of reach⁶⁸.

Barber concludes that the Grail’s evolution mirrors the Christian laity’s experience of the eucharistic blood ritual. “The celebration of the Mass was

⁶⁵ *ibid*, 73, 69.

⁶⁶ Barber, 128-131.

⁶⁷ Linke, 145-153.

⁶⁸ Barber, 22-24, 41, 213-217.

an occasion for adoration, not participation, and the remoteness and inaccessibility of the Grail are paralleled by the remoteness of the Eucharist for the ordinary worshipper, who might take part in communion once a year. The chalice of the Mass contained the consecrated wine, which was withheld from the lay congregation ... as a result the chalice became an object of almost superstitious reverence". The Holy Grail, containing the actual blood of Christ as does the communion chalice, became in secular literature an object of intense desire and adoration. "There can be no doubt that the image which the authors had in mind was the central mystery of the performance of the Mass." The Grail, in Barber's view, is the Eucharist "recreated by secular imagination"⁶⁹.

The development of the Holy Grail myth, in Barber's analysis, seems to exemplify the conclusion of scholars that myth follows ritual, providing story to explain and justify performance. The work of Jane Harrison and the Cambridge 'myth and ritual' school in the early 20th century established the academic orthodoxy that ritual is primary and its rationalisation in myth is secondary⁷⁰. The Grail rationalisation of the eucharistic ritual was however a secular one, sitting outside Christian orthodoxy and eventually despised by it. After the Reformation and the cleansing of 'papist theatricality' from worship, one English Puritan preacher described Malory's Grail romances as "the vile and stinking story of the Sangreall"⁷¹.

As myth rose with ritual, so the re-imaging and de-literalising of ritual has forced myth further from the sphere of the sacred and into the profane. Indeed, the secular story of the royal bloodline of Jesus could be seen as a secondary mythic rationalisation of the West's disengagement from the primary and near-universal blood ritual of the Mass. In the mid-20th century words of the Roman Catholic Church itself, the faithful were too often

⁶⁹ *ibid*, 218.

⁷⁰ Von Hendy, 104-108.

⁷¹ Barber, 227.

“strangers or silent spectators” at the Mass⁷². By the end of the millennium, many had withdrawn even from that role, at least in Western societies. According to anthropologist Lévy-Bruhl, myths are “the products of a primitive mentality which appear when that mentality is endeavouring to realise a participation no longer felt”⁷³. While we may dispute the word ‘primitive’ when applying this dictum to ‘our’ civilised myths, his words reinforce Barber’s thesis that we create myths when we feel distanced from the communal rituals of religion.

Wendy Doniger has argued that people may convert more easily to myth than to ritual when ritual is based in accounts that have become other people’s other-than-historical stories. “We might see an example of a ritual that has survived without its myth in the experience of all those sufferers who have no interest in or understanding of religion at all but were dragged to church, Sunday after Sunday, by devout parents – and who, even as adults, may feel a pang of guilt every Sunday that they miss Mass”⁷⁴. The Sunday lie-in may in itself have become a ritual rationalised by the new truth that the blood of Christ was invented by the Church to cover up the profane reality of Jesus’ bloodline. The ritual receiving of the Saviour’s blood is now an experience as remote from the majority of people in the West as it was when the Holy Grail myth arose.

* * *

The Holy Grail remains an evocative secular symbol, used in a variety of contexts to indicate a remote and highly desirable goal. It may also denote something that we used to have but which is no longer within our grasp. The Grail’s story, as told in *The Da Vinci Code*, resonates with nostalgia for a past imbued with community, homogeneity, kin cohesiveness and a sure

⁷² “The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy [*Sacrosanctum Concilium*]” in *The documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbott General Editor (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965), 154.

⁷³ Von Hendy, 104.

⁷⁴ Doniger, *Other people’s myths*, 126.

sense of one's place in the world. It also refers to a past in which, it seems, everyone believed the same things about the same God.

The gods are the defining others in all myths, in Wendy Doniger's definition. Further, she asserts, myths are about the withdrawal of the creator from the universe⁷⁵. God's name is rarely invoked in *Code*, and then usually in a context that denotes a departure from involvement in worldly affairs. "The Bible is a product of *man*, my dear. Not of God," says Teabing (p.312). The idea that God would father an earthly son is, as noted, dismissed. But in its construction of the secular royal bloodline, *Code* creates a new sense of community to replace the lost communality of Christendom. Ties of blood stand in place of ties of assent. "The thought of community may be only the modern withdrawal of God", observed Jean-Luc Nancy; the idea of community may have come to occupy the socially cohesive place formerly inhabited by the sacred⁷⁶.

⁷⁵ *ibid* 3; Doniger, *The implied spider*, 55.

⁷⁶ Morris, 234.

4. THE SACRED FEMININE

Have nothing to do with profane myths and old wives' tales.
Train yourself in godliness ...
The first letter of Paul to Timothy 4:7

The violence perpetrated by patriarchal religion against the sacred feminine, against Mary Magdalene as its representative, and thus against all women, is the second major theme of *The Da Vinci Code*. The book constructs the ancient world as a golden age in which men and women peacefully co-existed, in balance with each other and in tune with Mother Nature. The rise of male monotheisms, especially Christianity, put paid to this prehistoric Garden of Eden, rendering women profane lesser beings, victims of the male lust for power and control. The treatment of Mary Magdalene epitomises the patriarchy's attitude to woman and her formerly revered attributes.

The Da Vinci Code responds to a cry of mythical emotion from Western women protesting their exclusion from history and religion, to say nothing of their stereotyped portrayal as the dumb helpless blondes of thriller fiction. But the novel's construction of gender, and its resultant analysis of religious history, have resulted in a story that is still other people's, more specifically men's.

What is the sacred feminine?

The sacred feminine makes its first appearance in *The Da Vinci Code* on pages 42 and 43. Robert Langdon explains to the French police about the "personal passion" of murdered Louvre curator Jacques Saunière for "relics relating to fertility, goddess cults, Wicca and the sacred feminine". We discover that Langdon is working on a book entitled *Symbols of the Lost Sacred Feminine*, which he is sure will be controversial. The sacred feminine

is thus about fertility, goddesses and witchcraft, 'Wicca' being the Old English word for witch. Witches, we later learn, were construed by the Catholic Inquisition as "free thinking women ... female scholars, priestesses, gypsies, mystics, nature lovers, herb gatherers and any women 'suspiciously attuned to their natural world'" (p.173). The sacred feminine has to do with woman and nature; it is ancient and it has been lost.

Langdon further enlightens the police on pages 60 to 63, when their captain is in danger of confusing paganism and devil worship. "The ancients envisioned their world in two halves – masculine and feminine. Their gods and goddesses worked to keep a balance of power ... When male and female were balanced, there was harmony in the world. When they were unbalanced, there was chaos." The female half, Langdon explains, includes Venus, the goddess of "female sexual love and beauty", as well as nature and Mother Earth, perfection and "the cyclical qualities of sexual love". Cast out by the Christian Church, the symbols of the sacred feminine have been perverted and demonised.

The female half of the world is concerned with sex, love and beauty; the male half, by implication, is not. Langdon explains, this time to Sophie Neveu, what happens when the gender balance is upset and the masculine runs amok: "testosterone-fuelled wars, a plethora of misogynistic societies and a growing disrespect for Mother Earth". Because it has become a man's world, "the gods of destruction and war" have taken over (p.174).

Masculinity, it appears, is not sacred. Indeed, men can achieve "spiritual enlightenment" only by having sex with women. "Holy men who once required sexual union with their female counterparts to commune with God now feared their natural sexual urges as the work of the devil ..." (p.174). The notion of the sexually receptive female as essential to male enlightenment is reprised throughout the novel. "Physical union with the female remained the sole means through which man could become

spiritually complete and ultimately achieve *gnosis* – knowledge of the divine” (p.410). Langdon recalls his lectures to the callow youths of Harvard, urging them to revise their attitudes to sex: “challenge yourself to find that spark of divinity that man can only achieve through union with the sacred feminine” (p.413).

Female genitalia are therefore sacred. The petals of the rose, “the premiere symbol of female sexuality”, resemble women’s sexual organs (p.341), and the entrances to Gothic cathedrals symbolise vaginas, “complete with receding labial ridges and a nice little cinquefoil clitoris above the doorway” (p.430).

The link between the sacred feminine and the Holy Grail, however, returns the concept to its first descriptor, “fertility”. The V-shaped chalice resembles the womb and stands for “femininity, womanhood and fertility”. The sacred feminine is now defined as “the power of the female and her ability to produce life.” Woman is “the sacred giver of life ... life-bringer” (pp.321-322). Sex, performed with the sacred feminine as its guiding principle, should “celebrate the reproductive power of the female ... The ability of the woman to produce life from her womb made her sacred” (pp.409, 411). Christianity’s representative of the sacred feminine is Mary Magdalene, who was “the Holy Vessel ... the chalice that bore the royal bloodline of Jesus Christ. She was the womb that bore the lineage ...” (pp.335-336). Fecund wombs are foundational to the sacred feminine.

Finally, the lost sacred feminine must be found if the world is to be saved. “We are starting to sense the dangers of our history ... and of our destructive paths,” observes Sophie’s grandmother. “We are beginning to sense the need to restore the sacred feminine” (p.581). Only through her restoration will humanity hear “a woman’s voice ... the wisdom of the ages” and become wise itself (p.593).

To summarise then, *Code's* sacred feminine encompasses female reproductive characteristics, sexuality, beauty, perfection, wisdom, and women's close relationship with nature. It is an idea of immense antiquity, which has been deprived of its power in the last two thousand years. It must be restored, not least because it is essential to the spiritual progress men must make if they are to learn not to behave so badly.

She is old, she is lost

The Da Vinci Code's characterisation of the sacred feminine as the dominant force in a long ago age when the supreme deity was female and women were powerful and revered, rests on a large body of both scholarly and popular work. That this work is highly controversial, in academic, feminist and pagan circles, makes it a good example of the utility of the category of myth in the containment and control of other people's untrue stories. To its critics, matriarchal goddess-worshipping prehistory is bad scholarship, a mythic invention of tradition that is of little use to modern women. For its proponents, such criticisms demonstrate entrenched androcentrism among mainstream scholars who cannot imagine a world in which men are not in charge and who therefore are unable to acknowledge the patriarchal myth they themselves are enslaved by.

The notion of matriarchal prehistory is generally traced to the work of Johann Jakob Bachofen, a German jurist and historian who published *Mother Right* in 1861. Bachofen proposed that the original state of humankind was "hetaerism", or natural promiscuity, in which women were constantly abused and exhausted by male lusts. Women invented agriculture, because they are closer to nature, and decided that "regulated naturalism" would also govern their sexual availability. They instituted marriage and mother right, or matrilineality, founded on a new religious worldview. "The religious primacy

of motherhood leads to a primacy of the mortal woman"¹. The resultant matriarchy was characterised by universal freedom and equality, hospitality, and aversion to restrictions and conflict; society back then had "an air of tender humanity"².

Bachofen's theory was not however a paean to a lost golden age. Patriarchy's eventual victory over mother right was an essential step in the progress of 'man' from a state of nature to a state of grace. The supremacy of the "male creative principle", enshrined in patrilineality and male monotheisms, makes possible human transcendence over nature, and achievement by individual effort³.

Matriarchy was, in some respects, the victim of its own success, according to Bachofen. Enthusiasts like the Amazons took things rather too far, "showing how hard it is, at all times, for women to observe moderation". On the other hand, mother right's longevity demonstrates "how hard it has been for men ... to overcome the inertia of material culture and to achieve the highest calling; the sublimation of earthly existence to the purity of the divine father principle"⁴.

Mother Right reflects the 19th century's romanticisation of myth as the vehicle of pre-scientific truth. Like Mr Casaubon, Bachofen mines the myths of the Egyptians, Indians and pre-Classical Greeks to uncover "an authentic, independent record of the primordial age, a record in which invention plays no part". These myths tell an extraordinary story, difficult for modern 'man' to believe, but that makes them all the more credible; patriarchy could never have invented a matriarchal predecessor, which remained "an utter puzzle" to the Classical Greeks and Romans⁵.

¹ J. J. Bachofen, *Myth, religion, and mother right: selected writings*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967 [1861]), 87.

² *ibid*, 81.

³ *ibid*, 109-111.

⁴ *ibid*, 101, 118-119.

⁵ *ibid*, 72-74.

As Rosemary Radford Ruether observes, Bachofen's theory must also be seen in the context of the view, dominant in the 19th century middle classes, that women naturally belonged in the dependent domestic sphere while men just as naturally governed both society and family⁶. This view was already being challenged by debate about women's education, property rights and suffrage, and by the realities of working class women's lives. With the decline of family-based economic production, women were being increasingly drawn into factory and mill work, domestic service and urban prostitution. Bachofen's new history was taken up by Friedrich Engels for whom "the overthrow of mother right was the world historic defeat of the female sex" and provided the model for all subsequent exploitative class relations⁷.

Engels' endorsement meant that matriarchal prehistory became Soviet academic orthodoxy, but mother right went out of scholarly fashion elsewhere for much of the 20th century. Anthropology's growing emphasis on localised fieldwork, as opposed to universalising 'armchair' theories, showed that matrilineal kinship systems and the worship of female deities in other people's societies did not seem to mean a particularly enhanced status for other people's women⁸.

But the idea lived on in the work of classicist Robert Graves. In *The White Goddess*, he documented the violent displacement of 'the Goddess' by the masculine deities of invading patriarchal tribesmen⁹. Graves has probably had more impact on what one commentator describes as "general interest in mythology and matriarchal values" than on "academic scholars [who]

⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Goddesses and the divine feminine: a Western religious history* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 249.

⁷ Quoted *ibid*, 16.

⁸ See Cynthia Eller, *The myth of matriarchal prehistory: why an invented past won't give women a future* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2000), 31-33.

⁹ Robert Graves, *The white goddess: a historical grammar of poetic myth* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966 [1948]).

hesitate to acknowledge indebtedness to G[raves] because of his tendency to fill in the gaps of historical fact with generous dollops of intuition”¹⁰.

Psychoanalysis, another other-than-scholarly project that tended to take myth far too seriously, also theorised about “the Eternal Feminine” among Carl Jung’s archetypes, the “realm of the Mothers” in the unconscious¹¹. In *The Great Mother* (1955), Jungian psychologist Erich Neumann found, in the Bachofian progression from matriarchy to patriarchy, the universal requirement for heroes to sunder the primal unity with their mothers in order to join the masculine world of culture and civilisation, a view popularised by Joseph Campbell¹².

Such work ensured that the prehistoric ‘Age of the Goddess’ became common knowledge among a wide audience increasingly distanced from traditional religion but interested in scientific explanations of other people’s stories. With the rise of second wave feminism in the 1970s, Bachofen was revisited and enlisted in the cause of modern women’s economic and social progress. In *The First Sex*, Elizabeth Gould Davis argued that women were the original humans, inferior males being a later mutation. Men eventually revolted and exacted revenge on women and their female deities, exemplified by the “cultureless barbarians” of ancient Israel who instituted the age of “masculism”¹³. Merlin Stone published *The Paradise Papers* in 1976, later retitled *When God was a Woman*, and told a similar story. Universal goddess worship was overthrown by Aryan “battle axe cultures”. The Hebrew priestly caste, the Levites, were probably Indo-Europeans; Moses, Aaron and their male descendants were Aryan agents of the Jewish turn against the sacred feminine¹⁴.

¹⁰ Katherine Snipes, “Robert Graves” in *Encyclopedia of world literature in the 20th century* (Farmington Hills, MI: St. James Press, 1999), v2, 296-297.

¹¹ Von Hendy, 121.

¹² See Carol Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess: finding meaning in feminist spirituality* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1997), 86-88.

¹³ Elizabeth Gould Davis, *The first sex* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972 [1971]).

¹⁴ Merlin Stone, *The paradise papers: the suppression of women’s rites* (London: Virago, 1976), 78, 131-143.

Such reconstructions of the past relied on analyses of ancient texts, themselves products of an already entrenched patriarchy, which required reading between the lines to extract a matriarchal truth. Material evidence came from the work of Marija Gimbutas, a Lithuanian-born archaeologist who carried out extensive excavations in Central and Eastern Europe and published a number of books on Neolithic culture. Cynthia Eller sums up her influence: "Gimbutas is now routinely hailed by feminist matriarchalists as the brilliant polymath who has scientifically proven the claim that prehistoric societies were woman-centered and goddess-worshipping, and destroyed only recently"¹⁵. Because of the geographic focus of her work, Gimbutas moved the action away from the Hebrews and construed a new set of patriarchal villains, the "Kurgans" from the steppes of Russia. The genesis of sexism in a vague region beyond the Iron Curtain perhaps made sense to a Western audience in the Cold War era. And at least her theory could not be accused of anti-Semitism.

The academic arguments against prehistoric goddess dominance and woman-centredness focus on lack of evidence. Gimbutas in particular is accused of finding feminine symbols where none exist and, like Graves, of infusing her work with large 'dollops of intuition' to construct a grand universalising theory¹⁶. Other women archaeologists have conceded that gender analysis has been a late arrival to their discipline, with the first collected volume on the topic appearing only in 1991¹⁷. As a result, the literature of popular culture stepped into the vacuum, using the ideas of Gimbutas and others to construct a Stone Age in which 'early Man' was not the only one doing interesting and inventive things¹⁸. *The Chalice and the Blade* by Riane Eisler, and the novels of Jean Auel, are perhaps the most

¹⁵ Eller, 38.

¹⁶ See both Eller and Ruether passim.

¹⁷ *Engendering archaeology: women and prehistory*, ed. Joan M. Gero and Margaret W. Conkey (London: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

¹⁸ Joan M. Gero and Margaret W. Conkey, "Introduction" in *ibid*, 4.

widely-read examples, having a similar impact in their day as *The Da Vinci Code*'s current influence on popular ideas about women and Christian history¹⁹.

The overall narrative of the lost matriarchy is widely accepted, according to Cynthia Eller, because it provides a powerful explanation of how things got to be the way they are; "this is precisely what myths do"²⁰. As patriarchy was defined and refined as a socially-constructed phenomenon of dubious merit, rather than the divinely-ordained or natural order of things, feminism found its myth of origins. Myths are true when "the reality to which they point has 'always' been perceived as true or becomes newly perceived as true," says Wendy Doniger²¹. The new 20th century truth that gender discrimination is wrong and can be dismantled, required a genealogy of patriarchy to show how and why it developed. Patriarchy, rather than women, became the new 'other', the foreign interloper from the steppes who launched the war against women and the Goddess.

When considering the problem of patriarchy's own other, namely "man-murdering Amazonianism", Bachofen noted that "wherever such an intensification of feminine power occurs, it presupposes a previous degradation of woman and must be explained by the necessary succession of extremes"²². Classicist Edith Hall has observed that the story of the Amazons used to be read as historical truth – the matriarchal tribe subordinated by male Greek heroes – but is now generally seen as part of the Greek male's self-definition through the construction of an other, "a matriarchal society embodying the exact opposite of his gender identity"²³. Eller documents Amazon myths from several cultural contexts, concluding

¹⁹ Riane Eisler, *The chalice and the blade: our history, our future* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1987); Jean M. Auel, *The clan of the cave bear* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1980).

²⁰ Eller, 5.

²¹ Doniger, *Other people's myths*, 31-32.

²² Bachofen, 173, 104.

²³ Hall, 346.

that they serve as Malinowskian social charters, justifying male dominance and the unpleasant and ultimately less important tasks that women are required to do. "There is the need to justify them [different gender roles]", wrote Malinowski, "to vouch for their antiquity and reality, in short to buttress their validity"²⁴. Modern Amazon myths, such as John Knox's "monstrous regiment of women", continue to remind people what can occur when immoderate women take charge.

The recent rise to power of some immoderate women in the political and economic life of many Western countries would seem, according to Bachofen and Hall, to call for the construction of an other. In matriarchal prehistory, the Kurgans have taken the place of the Amazons, the latter now revealed as men's self-justifying creations, in demonstrating what happens when one gender dominates. Academic debate continues about whether the Kurgans ever existed and whether Old Europe suffered their massively disruptive invasion or merely absorbed one of the migrations that have always been part of its history²⁵. 'True' history or 'false' myth, the Kurgans serve the purpose of defining what life was like before our present gender enlightenment.

More importantly, matriarchal prehistory suggests repeatability, especially now that the Kurgans' patriarchal successors are looking vulnerable. Blumenberg proposed that myth provides the consolation that humanity does not have to be deprived entirely of an ancient, better state. "Why should what has once been not come alive again?"²⁶. The coming alive of the sacred feminine ought to mean a better deal for women but, judging by the construction of gender in *The Da Vinci Code* and its sources, it could result in more of the same.

²⁴ Malinowski, 42.

²⁵ Eller, 157-166.

²⁶ Blumenberg, 62.

She is nature, she is womb

Thirty years ago, anthropologist Sherry Ortner asked, “Is female to male as nature is to culture?”. The task of culture is “the transcendence, by means of systems of thought and technology, of the natural givens of existence”.

Women, she contended, are universally defined as “closer to nature than men, men being seen as more unequivocally occupying the high ground of culture”²⁷.

Many of religious studies’ foundational theorists have indeed located women at the nature end of the spectrum. According to Durkheim, “women are like profane beings” compared to men²⁸. They take care of “the affective functions” while men are engaged with the intellectual ones²⁹. In Freud’s view, civilisation is a masculine achievement on which women exercise a “retarding or restraining influence”, representing as they do the profane or ‘natural’ interests of family and sexuality³⁰. In his construction of matriarchal prehistory, Bachofen located the genders on opposing sides of the nature/culture divide. While matriarchy may have been a peaceful and caring state of affairs, its defeat was necessary if ‘mankind’ was to transcend nature and the animals, and achieve individualism and a refined spirituality³¹. Bluntly stated, the thesis is that women have babies, so their minds must necessarily focus solely on this ‘natural given’ and its bodily concomitants. Being somewhat removed from the birth process, or possibly seen as totally irrelevant to it in ancient times, men could get on with transcending, creating, reasoning, and so on.

²⁷ Sherry B. Ortner, “Is female to male as nature is to culture?” In *Feminism in the study of religion: a reader*, ed. Darlene M. Juschka (New York: Continuum, 2001 [1974]), 75.

²⁸ Emile Durkheim, *The elementary forms of the religious life* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961 [1912]), 138.

²⁹ Quoted by Nancy Jay, *Throughout your generations forever: sacrifice, religion, and paternity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 136.

³⁰ Sigmund Freud, “Civilization and its discontents” in *The Freud reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1989 [1930]), 745.

³¹ Bachofen, 109.

This kind of radical gender dualism is disputed by a number of subscribers to the theory of prehistoric goddess dominance. Merlin Stone rejected descriptions of the “female religion” as a “fertility cult”, finding this definition to reflect “the many oppressive and falsely founded patriarchal images, stereotypes, customs and laws that were developed as direct reactions to Goddess worship”³². In other words, the woman and nature equation may tell us more about men than about women. Carol Christ, perhaps the leading advocate of the Goddess today, finds few differences between the sexes other than their (usually) distinctive sexual organs. Cultural conditioning, she concludes, accounts for the gendered assignation of qualities like aggression, nurturance, individualism, relationality and embodiment³³.

The Da Vinci Code opts for the traditional view that femaleness and femininity are well-defined and are equally determined by biology. In this, the novel draws heavily on the work of Margaret Starbird, formerly a “conservative and very orthodox daughter of the Roman Catholic Church”, who discovered “the devastating flaw in the foundation of the Church – the scorned and repudiated feminine”, and set out to restore it³⁴. As noted, two of *Code*’s four named non-fiction sources are by Starbird.

Starbird finds Christianity’s repudiated feminine, or its “lost Bride”, to embody “gentleness, intuition, and inspiration” in contrast to the masculine values of “strength, order, and reason”. While many human attributes are not gender specific, masculine and feminine energies are nonetheless “opposites”³⁵. The “feminine principle of love and relatedness” defines women, and the “masculine principle of Logos/reason, which is associated with power and light” sums up men³⁶. Bachofen would not have disagreed.

³² Stone, 8, 14.

³³ Christ, 148-150.

³⁴ Starbird, *The Goddess in the Gospels*, xi.

³⁵ *ibid*, 37-38.

³⁶ Starbird, *The woman with the alabaster jar*, 159.

Dualism pervades the world of human relations in *The Da Vinci Code*. The murdered Jacques Saunière, as well as being passionate about relics of the sacred feminine, also had “a passion for dualism ... Everything in pairs. *Double entendres. Male female. Black nestled within white... White – female. Black – male*” (p.427). A similar worldview causes *Code*’s hero Robert Langdon some discomfort when the rules governing sexuality and gender are transgressed. Leonardo da Vinci was, “despite the visionary’s genius, ... a flamboyant homosexual” (p.72). Being gay *and* a genius is clearly an anomalous situation, and ‘flamboyant’ is a strangely old-fashioned adjective, frequently employed in an earlier journalistic era as a ‘straight’ code word for sexual ‘deviance’³⁷.

Langdon later passes through the Bois de Boulogne, an arena for the Parisian sex trade or, as Langdon sees it, “a purgatory for freaks and fetishists”. He is especially perturbed by “a gorgeous blond woman [who] lifted her miniskirt to reveal that she was not, in fact, a woman. *Heaven help me!* Langdon turned his gaze back inside the van and took a deep breath” (p.216). In his scholarly guise, Langdon is able to valorise the perceived gender ambiguity of the *Mona Lisa*, who turns out to be a fusion of the god Amon and the goddess Isis (pp.167-168). Quite how *Mona Lisa* differs from the Bois de Boulogne’s transvestite is unclear. Perhaps the crucial thing is that the mini-skirted ‘freak’ is “gorgeous”, whereas the person in the painting is, in the words of one of Langdon’s students, “Da Vinci in drag ... one ugly chick” (p.167) and is thus unlikely to tempt our hetero-hero into a transgressive and embarrassing encounter.

Following Starbird, *Code* describes the culturally conditioned world of gender and sexuality as if it were the natural state of things. In Barthian terms, there is no distinction between reality and its gendered interpretation. The mythical

³⁷ An obituaries editor with the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper once explained that the deceased’s “peccadilloes (unusual sexual tastes, drunkenness and so on) are tactfully powdered over with euphemism (‘flamboyant’, ‘convivial’ etc).” R. W. Holder, *A dictionary of euphemisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 134-135.

is naturalised; the world really is divided into two halves, each with fundamentally different, exclusive attributes. Any attempt to cross the dividing line, or to question its very existence, must be frowned upon.

Myth also operates in the embodiment and concentration of the sacred feminine in the female reproductive and sexual organs which operate, in the same way as blood, to contain the feminine essence. Gimbutas found that prehistoric art is infused with “the feminine force”, hence “the vulva dominates symbolic portrayals”³⁸. The search for signs of the sacred feminine became, in Cynthia Eller’s ironic words, a “vulva-finding expedition [which] at times went to rather remarkable extremes ... the walls of Paleolithic caves [are] plastered with disembodied vulvas”. Eller lists 59 symbols, ranging from bears and lions to dots and “meanders”, that have been deemed by various researchers to denote a “matristic consciousness” in preliterate societies³⁹. *The Da Vinci Code* relies heavily on this Gimbutas-inspired methodology, finding vulvas and wombs in cathedral doorways, roses, compasses and, ultimately, in every V-shape. Robert Langdon generally fails to heed his own warning that “a career hazard of symbologists was a tendency to extract hidden meaning from situations that had none” (p.235). To paraphrase Freud, sometimes a V-shape is just a V-shape.

Gimbutas insisted that the ancients’ emphasis on breasts, buttocks and vulvas is irrelevant to the modern concept of pornography. Prehistoric society cultivated “a natural and sacred sexuality neglected by modern culture ... obscenity did not exist”⁴⁰. While it would indeed be anachronistic to accuse our ancestors of trading in pornography, it is reasonable to ask how a revival of their reductionist female representations might enhance the status of women today. Locating the sacred feminine in the reproductive apparatus does not seem to be too far removed from the modern

³⁸ Marija Gimbutas, *The living goddesses*, ed. Miriam Robbins Dexter (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001 [1999]), 3, 7.

³⁹ Eller, 119, 122-123.

⁴⁰ Gimbutas, 5.

pornography industry's project to reduce women to the sum of their sexual parts.

The Da Vinci Code proposes that Mary Magdalene is a more relevant role model for modern women than is Christianity's traditional embodiment of the sacred feminine, the Virgin Mary. The latter Mary is conspicuous by her absence from the novel, in tacit acknowledgement of the thesis that she may be more of a hindrance than a help to the feminist project. As bloodline genealogist Laurence Gardner sees it, the mother of Jesus was "a thoroughly sexless wonder who represented nobody ... she has never been a model for everyday womanhood". The rediscovered Magdalene, in contrast, "has sexual presence, and her story embodies a wealth of adventurous experience"⁴¹.

Feminist scholars have convincingly analysed the function of the Virgin as a mythic creation and disciplinary agent of the patriarchal Church. In Marina Warner's view, Mary's paradoxical combination of motherhood and perpetual virginity "deepens the [Catholic woman's] need for religious consolation, for the screen of rushes against the perpetual frost of being carnal and female. By setting up an impossible ideal the cult of the Virgin does drive the adherent into a position of acknowledged and hopeless yearning and inferiority"⁴². Mary mysteriously overcame the nature/culture split by fulfilling her natural reproductive role without contaminating her sacred self. This can never be a reality for her female followers, but her image must be retained as a constant reminder that women's profane concerns render them, like Mary, subordinate to a masculine deity and male religious leaders.

Mary Magdalene also appears to have overcome the split, but in a way that is open to all women. True religion, it seems, is not opposed to nature but

⁴¹ Laurence Gardner, *The Magdalene legacy: the Jesus and Mary bloodline conspiracy* (London: Element, 2005), 161.

⁴² Marina Warner, *Alone of all her sex: the myth and cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Pan Books, 1990 [1976]), 337.

embraces it. If we are to be spiritually whole, we must honour and trust our bodily inclinations. Mother Nature and the sacred feminine are bound together, possessing a wisdom and rightness long denied by Western religion. In line with New Age thinking⁴³, *Code* posits religion as one thing but 'natural' spirituality as something else altogether.

Sexy adventuress Mary Magdalene thus becomes a woman who seemingly managed the difficult task of having it all, without supernatural intervention. She combined a high-flying career in religious leadership and the priesthood with a fulfilling sexual relationship and dynasty-establishing motherhood.

But, in the end, Mary's is the same old cautionary tale for women who dare to challenge religion's confinement of them to the ghetto of the profane. Her promising career is terminated by pregnancy and single parenthood. She is exiled to France and becomes a hermit for the rest of her life. Woman's biology is still her identity and her destiny, requiring life-long expiation. In *Code*, Mary Magdalene is little more than a vessel, a womb, an incubator for the male seed. She is, ultimately, a V-shape like those apparently plastering Paleolithic cave walls and undoubtedly spray-painted onto the surfaces of many a contemporary urban structure.

She is the salvation of men

In *The Da Vinci Code*'s first action-adventure set piece, Robert Langdon senses danger as he ponders the murder of the Louvre curator. Overwhelmed and sweating, Langdon retreats to a museum toilet, "the men's room", from which he is rescued by the feminine wisdom of Sophie Neveu, "clearly a hell of a lot smarter" than he is (p.124). Rescuing men from their self-imposed exile in the "empty ... sterile ... harsh" redoubt of the

⁴³ Hanegraaff, 397-400.

men's room is apparently a new and exciting role for women in the action adventure of modernity.

According to *Code*, men can only become 'real' by allying with the feminine half of the world in order to access the sacred feminine. The salvific role must be shared, with women allowed to take their rightful place in the redemption of humanity. The trouble is, women's rightful place appears to be confined to the bedroom. As noted, *Code* posits (hetero)sexual intercourse as the only means by which men can achieve the "spiritual wholeness and communion with God" (p.411) necessary to the new hero.

Code's emphasis on sacred sex raises the suspicion that male fantasies are at work in this supposedly feminist myth. Bachofen's primeval 'hetaeristic' sexual anarchy, originally enjoyed by lust-driven men, is recast as sacred ritual, prayer through orgasm, in which spiritually famished men can be nourished. *Code* attempts to head off such suspicions by casting patriarchy and misogyny as the true villains of the piece.

The men's room, and all it stands for, is the object of sustained criticism in *Code*. In a rare feminist analysis of treasure-hunting adventure fiction, Isabel Santaulària observes that the genre has adapted somewhat in response to late modernity's "crisis of masculinity". "The whole 'issue' of men is a matter of public debate, and the outcome of this debate seems to suggest they do not have many avenues of advancement in the future"⁴⁴. Thriller writers want to be seen as part of the gender discourse, problematising male authority and traditional notions of heroism, and agreeing with what they perceive to be the basic premise of feminism: patriarchy is responsible for the world's ills. In *Code*, patriarchy is epitomised by the violent, mercenary greed of Opus Dei, and by the blind misogyny of the Vatican's celibate men. The apparently enlightened Sir Leigh Teabing reveals his egomaniacal

⁴⁴ M. Isabel Santaulària i Capdevila, "'He comes back badder and bigger than ever!' Readapting the masculine and negotiating the feminine in treasure-hunting adventure fiction," *Journal of Gender Studies* (November 2003): 217.

unreconstructed masculinity when it becomes clear he has pursued the Holy Grail at all costs, including murder. "I am a lone knight, surrounded by unworthy souls," he concludes, in an ironic nod to what *Code* knows to be the outmoded conventions of imperialist, racist, masculinist adventure fiction (p.553).

However, Santaulària warns, we should be suspicious of the motives behind this seeming revision of the genre. "Adventure narratives incorporate self-criticism of their masculinist policies as a form of self-defence"⁴⁵. By focussing on the misbehaviour of its obviously outdated, neo-Kurgan villains, *Code* underscores the reconstructed 'metrosexual' qualities of its hero⁴⁶. Langdon is a serious scholar, has an aversion to violence, drives badly (p.230), suffers from claustrophobia (p.43), and is a sensitive man who is experiencing "unexpected emptiness" as a result of lifelong bachelorhood (p.57). Langdon's qualities suggest some of the ways in which men might access new avenues of advancement in the future, avenues which women may be threatening to take over. One of these is religion itself.

Code fixes on male-dominated religion as the cause of gender trouble. This seems to accord with popular enlightenment generally, which sees religion as outmoded, the cause of strife, suffering and guilt. As one religious studies academic reports, "my students ... point to the wrongs religions have perpetrated: the wars waged, heretics burned, women and minorities oppressed and lands despoiled ... religion attracts such criticism with unusual force"⁴⁷. Following Marx, modern scholarship sees religion as but one cultural manifestation of the economic and social bases of society, but it

⁴⁵ *ibid*, 220.

⁴⁶ According to its originator, Marian Salzman, 'metrosexual' describes "a certain breed of straight, sensitive, modern men who see nothing wrong with exfoliating and going to see a weepy film." Carol Midgley, "A womanly eye for the masculine guy," *Dominion Post* (Wellington, NZ), 20 August 2005, p.B2 (reprinted from *The Times*).

⁴⁷ Marion Maddox, *God under Howard: the rise of the religious right in Australian politics* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2005), 162.

may be that academic theory is far removed from other people's identification of it as the primary problem. Bachofen explicitly rejected the notion of religion as effect rather than cause: "the religious aspect of matriarchy is at the root of its social manifestations. The cultic conceptions are the source, the social forms are their consequence and expression"⁴⁸.

In *The Da Vinci Code*, Bachofen is reprised and updated. "Constantine and his male successors successfully converted the world from matriarchal paganism to patriarchal Christianity by waging a campaign of propaganda that demonized the sacred feminine, obliterating the goddess from modern religion for ever" (p.172). The mythic appeal of this simple summary is clear. Constantine's male successors constitute the only major Western institution left that overtly rejects modernity's dogma of equal employment opportunities. The Catholic barrier to priestly ordination for women looks set to remain in the foreseeable future⁴⁹. If religion is the final and most obdurate upholder of sexism, it must have invented it in the first place. Christianity, in its Roman Catholic guise, may be the last bastion of the Kurgans.

If religion is the problem, then religion must change. Even some of *Code's* most religiously orthodox critics concede that institutional Christianity and Christian scholarship have not been very gender inclusive and that the novel responds to a genuine feeling that religion needs to look a lot less masculine. Writing in *The Christian Century*, Mark Burrows comments that "readers have warmed to the author's efforts to envision a religion more deeply committed to women's experience and leadership than the one they have encountered in church"⁵⁰. Amy Wellborn reluctantly appreciates *Code's* appeal "for women who feel disengaged from Christianity for what they understand (rightly or wrongly) to be its unjust conceptualization and

⁴⁸ Bachofen, 88.

⁴⁹ The 1994 papal decree *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* ruled the ordination of women out of the question, and was followed by an instruction, *Responsum ad dubium*, that the matter was not to be discussed further by Catholics. John Cornwell, *Breaking faith: the Pope, the people, and the fate of Catholicism* (New York: Viking Compass, 2001), 180.

⁵⁰ Mark S. Burrows, "Gospel fantasy," *The Christian Century* (1 June 2004): 21.

treatment of women”⁵¹. According to Giles Whittell in *The Times*, surveys have found that *Code* readers like its “generally plausible idea that Christianity, religion, life, the universe and everything might be better off if it were a bit more ... female”⁵². One reader’s cry of mythical emotion against the “suppression of real women as widely practised in the monolithic multinational monotheisms”, calls for rediscovery of the “real” Holy Grail – “the vital idea of the divinity of women”⁵³.

The strange thing about patriarchal Christianity, however, is that it has apparently been feminised over the past century or so. Women, construed as profane beings inextricably tied to the mundane and incapable of transcendence, appear to have effectively taken over. They espouse Christian beliefs more than men do, and they attend church in far greater numbers⁵⁴. Women’s representation among the Protestant clergy is growing rapidly⁵⁵. Previously seen as a suitable occupation for aristocratic second sons, or a rare means of socio-economic advancement for males of more humble origins, the priesthood of the ‘feminised’ Church is now a somewhat eccentric employment option for unusual men, but a promising new career choice for women on the move⁵⁶.

A number of studies show that religious men, clerical and lay, score relatively highly on personality tests measuring ‘feminine’ traits⁵⁷. Setting aside the ongoing debate about nature and nurture in this linkage of femininity and religiosity⁵⁸, let alone its implicit assumptions about gender

⁵¹ Wellborn, 73.

⁵² Giles Whittell, “Mrs God and other novel heresies,” *The Press* (Christchurch, NZ), 3 July 2004, p.B5 (reprinted from *The Times*).

⁵³ Kate Leftwich, “Crack The Da Vinci Code,” *New Zealand Listener* (9 April 2005): 8.

⁵⁴ Tony Walter and Grace Davie, “The religiosity of women in the modern West,” *British Journal of Sociology* (December 1998): 641-643.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 641.

⁵⁶ This is not to deny the gender hostility and less-than-equal treatment experienced by many ordained women. See Liz and Andrew Barr, *Jobs for the boys?: women who became priests* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2001).

⁵⁷ Leslie J. Francis, “The psychology of gender differences in religion: a review of empirical research,” *Religion* 27 (1997): 87-89.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

traits, one question remains. Have women and 'feminine' men indeed taken over, or have 'masculine' men merely opted out? Having eradicated the Goddess and imposed their patriarchal vision of the divine, perhaps the Kurgans have moved on to more rewarding projects. As global capitalism's most prominent hero, Bill Gates, sees it, "[j]ust in terms of allocation of time resources, religion is not very efficient. There's a lot more I could be doing on a Sunday morning"⁵⁹. Religion is not part of life in the men's room.

The phenomenon of the "feminization of American religion" was identified by Barbara Welter in her analysis of women's history in the first half of the 19th century. The 'separate spheres' gender ideology of the Victorian age decreed that religion belonged to the private domestic sphere and was thus part of women's special realm. In Welter's view, the feminisation of religion was "less a victory than a strategic retreat by the opposition. Certain areas of societal concern were given over to woman not because of her efforts but because either society or the occupation had changed". What Welter calls "a new species, Economic Man" had indeed moved on to more masculine endeavours⁶⁰.

In her analysis of American fundamentalist rhetoric in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Betty DeBerg has shown that few conservative Protestant preachers and writers were comfortable with the concession of the church to women. Male clergy, she argues, had a stake in preserving their work as a source of masculine identity and power, anticipating that women's numerical dominance would eventually lead them to claim religious authority and leadership over men as well⁶¹.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Scott Altran, *In Gods we trust: the evolutionary landscape of religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3.

⁶⁰ Barbara Welter, "She hath done what she could: Protestant women's missionary careers in nineteenth-century America" in *Women in American religion*, ed. Janet Wilson James (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980), 125; Barbara Welter, "The feminization of American religion: 1800-1860" in *Clio's consciousness raised: new perspectives on the history of women*, ed. Mary S. Hartman (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 139.

⁶¹ Betty DeBerg, *Ungodly women: gender and the first wave of American fundamentalism* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), 81.

Among their concerted efforts to prevent women from teaching, speaking in church or otherwise transgressing scripturally-defined behavioural norms, male leaders attempted to reclaim religion by an infusion of “muscular Christianity”. DeBerg’s examination of fundamentalist literature in this period reveals persistent calls for “new heroes”, “real men” endowed with “manly vigor” to take up the mantle of ministry in the church militant. Popular preachers adopted “an exaggerated masculine demeanor”, implicitly defining appropriate feminine behaviour as passive, unassertive and lacking in vigour⁶². One revivalist minister, Billy Sunday, regularly delivered a sermon entitled “The Fighting Saint” in which he claimed the role of “a knight-errant who would defend American womanhood against all enemies”⁶³.

As DeBerg concludes, the conservative “gender agenda” of today’s Christian Right owes much to its fundamentalist predecessors of the 19th and early 20th centuries⁶⁴. Locating the gender agenda of *The Da Vinci Code* alongside that of the Christian Right may not seem an obvious move, but the implication in *Code* is that religion has been impoverished by the departure of masculine men. The women and feminine men left in charge have not done a good enough job of changing religion; Christianity has become a fossilised redoubt of pre-modern attitudes. Robert Langdon is cast in the role of saviour, a knight-errant like Billy Sunday, who will reconstruct religion around a reconstructed masculinity forged in the late 20th century’s crisis of gender ideology. Langdon’s manly weapons are brain rather than brawn, scholarship as opposed to pugilism, but his claim to leadership of the restructuring project is not disputed.

What makes *The Da Vinci Code*’s vision of religious renewal much more attractive than that of the Christian Right is the book’s positive take on the sexual revolution of late modernity. Where biblical literalists see the decoupling of sexual mores from the confines of moral standards as a very

⁶² *ibid*, 88.

⁶³ *ibid*, 89.

⁶⁴ *ibid*, 153.

bad thing, *Code* perceives an opportunity for men to reclaim religion without having to compromise their sexual freedom. Infusing the men's room with sexually-induced spiritual enlightenment may well encourage a mass re-conversion of men eager to experience the salvific power of the sacred feminine as part of the initiation ritual. The return of 'real men' will also ensure that women and feminine men are relieved of the burden of religion's guardianship. Updating religion by ridding it of its repressive ideas about sex may allow men to reclaim their heroic leadership roles in this institution from which they have been prematurely and misguidedly departing since the Enlightenment.

* * *

On the face of it, *The Da Vinci Code* appears to be a revolutionary myth, as theorised by Georges Sorel. Disputing the structuralist analysis of myth as conservative social charter, Sorel's definition of the myth that demands change has been summarised as: "the image held by participants in a movement of impending action in which their cause will triumph"⁶⁵. The tales of profane old wives, castigated in the *Letter to Timothy* which heads this chapter, might in fact be a major resource in the cause of human progress.

Wendy Doniger, however, urges caution when listening for 'real women's voices' in other people's stories. Ironically, women have traditionally been the purveyors of tales, but they are usually defamed in myth. "When a man pretends to speak as a woman, it is not usually to her benefit"⁶⁶. Isabel Santaulària agrees. At its core, she concludes, treasure-hunting adventure fiction is still "a mummified stronghold of patriarchal conventions" in which the male heroic function is to "rescue the damsel in distress, kill the bad guy, save the world"⁶⁷.

⁶⁵ Georges Sorel, *Reflections on violence* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1950); Michael Curtis, *Three against the Third Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959), 129.

⁶⁶ Doniger, *The implied spider*, 120.

⁶⁷ Santaulària, 215.

Code's construction of the sacred feminine as the embodiment of fertility seems designed to keep women barefoot and pregnant. Its identification of women's sexuality as the sole means by which men can access the numinous, serves to keep women in their other natural position – horizontal. Both outcomes should open up new opportunities for real men to reclaim their natural Bachofian place as the prophets, leaders and scholarly custodians of Western religion.

CONCLUSION

For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine,
but having itching ears they ... will turn away from listening to the truth
and wander away to myths.

The second letter of Paul to Timothy 4:3-4

Myth is indeed a particularly shifty label¹. I began this essay with the aim of examining the chord struck by *The Da Vinci Code* among its millions of readers. By utilising theories of myth, I hoped to 'explain' that chord sympathetically, without denigrating the novel's readership as I believe a majority of its critics have done. I have ended my thesis with the charge that, at least in its depiction of the sacred feminine, *Code* perpetuates myth at its insidious worst. Apparently a rousing proclamation of feminist spirituality, the sacred feminine actually seems more to do with bolstering an outdated gender ideology and reclaiming religion for men.

While I can identify a personal empathy for some of *Code*'s 'mythic' themes, I must consign others firmly to the category of other people's stories: stories that are not merely untrue but are downright ignorant, pernicious and reactionary. I am left in the uncomfortable position that, having welcomed myth in and encouraged it to tell its story, I find in the end that I would rather it went away again and took the silliest of its 'significances'² with it.

I am thus caught between the classic Enlightenment view of myth as primitive pre-scientific other, and the Romantic position that myth can be a vehicle for conveying perennial truth, or at least the 'perennial' truth of our present moment³. I join the *Code* reader who wanted to believe some of what he read, even though he knew it wasn't true⁴, in Detienne's "provisional

¹ Walsh, 26. See Chapter One, p.24.

² Blumenberg, 67. See Chapter One, p.35.

³ See Chapter Two, pp.52-53.

⁴ Kulman, 49. See Introduction, p.3.

site, [the] open camping place” between the stronghold of legitimate knowledge and the despised wasteland to which other people’s untruths are relegated⁵. Even if its veracity might be a little dubious, ‘we’ the readers of *The Da Vinci Code* find in the book a story that is a great deal likelier than the accounts produced by the Church and critical scholarship.

My work on the bloodline myth leads me to conclude that the ‘facts’ of the bloodline are, at the very least, half-baked, but that some interesting ‘perennial truths’ can be extracted from it. It speaks to our discomfort with modernity’s valorisation of the autonomous individual. It allows us to find a quasi-religious identity vouchsafed by descent rather than constructed by our own faith or effort. And it contests our apparently contradictory modern dogmas that we are all equal and that we must acknowledge and celebrate our differences. The bloodline’s ultimate symbol, the Holy Grail, speaks of Westerners’ growing distance from a communal religious identity and, perhaps, of our nostalgia for an imagined past in which belief and ritual were essential threads in the social and cultural fabric that held us together. Today, we perceive that a strong religious fabric is apparently holding together the West’s rediscovered other, Islam, and perhaps we feel a renewed impetus to wonder what has happened to our own ties of belief and ritual in modern times.

These complex notions are carried by the powerful signifier that is blood. As myth’s theorists insist, there is no distinction between the signifier and the signified in myth⁶, which is what makes its stories so accessible and uncomplicated in times of perceived complexity and instability. Blood *is* identity, both secular and religious, and retains its iconic constancy when individual and communal identities are felt to be unstable or under threat.

⁵ See Chapter One, p.35.

⁶ See Chapter One, p.22.

The recasting of history as the transmission of a single embattled bloodline through two millennia is a clear rejection of history-as-chaos. While many of us may join *The Da Vinci Code* in its suspicions about history written by the winners, the option of viewing the past as Umberto Eco's enigma made terrible by our own mad attempts to find truth in it⁷, may be an option too far. If we reject one construction of history, we cannot seem to live with the resultant vacuum, so an alternative story must step into the breach. The bloodline myth confirms for us that the past is not about random events: myth is "a system of the elimination of arbitrariness ... a structuring that is opposed to the intolerable indifference of space and time", as Blumenberg put it⁸. No matter how subtle and sophisticated we believe our analysis of the world is, there remains an undeniable attraction in a clear-cut story which extracts natural significance from the intolerable indifference. At one level, we know that the history of Christianity comprises the complex interplay of innumerable forces and influences; at another, it is deeply reassuring to suspect that it is really all about blood and bad men. Ultimately, for most of *Code's* 40 million readers, I suspect the analyses of religious history's complexities remain other people's stories and that, in *Code*, we can claim a story that feels much more like our own.

Similarly, while I am suspicious of much of its 'factual' basis, *Code's* sacred feminine embodies a perennial truth I share with many others. Western religion may be but one reflection of our social and economic bedrock, but that does not excuse its treatment of women. The continued exclusion of women from the Roman Catholic priesthood, the current antagonism towards the prospect of women bishops in the Church of England, and the intransigence of gendered language in creeds, liturgies and theological tomes, are symptoms of a deep-seated malaise in mainstream religion. The gender agenda of fundamentalist denominations is even more depressing, if only because it is more overt.

⁷ See Chapter One p.35.

⁸ Blumenberg, 42-43, 96.

The Da Vinci Code fails to address this malaise because it re-imports into the provisional all those notions about gender which the culturally competent had categorised as myth and consigned to the wrong-headed side of the divide⁹. 'The feminine' is a social construct, not a natural given. Women are not biologically softer, kinder, more caring, more nurturing and more environmentally friendly. Men are not naturally more rational, more aggressive, uncaring, unkind and rampantly destructive¹⁰. Like religion, gender is a world of our own making, forged on the bedrock of social and economic structures which, by and large, do not reward the work involved in nurturing and caring, nor the practical demonstration of concern for the environment, regardless of which sex exhibits these behaviours.

Code seems to demand revolutionary social change which, it believes, will take place through a radical revision of religion, but it leaves in place a gender ideology rooted in the (same old) feminine woman and the (slightly revised) masculine man. To imagine the desired new society as more feminine does nothing to address the status and responsibilities with which femininity has perennially burdened women.

But perhaps such criticism is unfair. Am I demanding too much of what is, after all, just a novel – and a potboiler at that? Is it reasonable to expect cheap fiction to rise above mythic notions of gender and to envisage a world free of the constraints imposed on humankind by femininity and masculinity?

The appeal of *The Da Vinci Code*'s sacred feminine lies precisely in its refusal to rise above the myth of gender. Roland Barthes famously

⁹ See Chapter One, p.37-41.

¹⁰ I acknowledge the debate among feminist theorists about the impossibility of knowing what is biologically determined and what is socially constructed when it comes to gender. The classic liberal position I adopt here has been subject to the feminist critique of objectivity and the mind/body split, and refusal of the traditional sex/gender dualism. In this context, I would argue that such debate has had little impact on popular 'knowledge' about gender. See the essays in *Knowing women: feminism and knowledge*, ed. Helen Crowley and Susan Himmelweit (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

developed his theory of myth around a photograph of a black soldier saluting the French flag. Barthes argued that this 'snapshot of reality' incorporated "imperiality" and French convictions about ethnic and cultural superiority and inferiority, presenting these constructs as natural, a factual system, the way the world really is¹¹. *Code* presents its gender ideology as a similar snapshot of reality. It does not demand that we change what we 'always knew' about the sexes, namely that men are masculine and women are feminine.

The construction of gender, like the writing of Christian history, is a complicated process that continues to perplex and elude us. *Code*'s world of two halves stands firm as a picture of reality against the contention of, say, Carol Christ that the main difference between the sexes lies in the arrangement of their sexual organs¹². The other people's story presented by Christ goes against what we have always known to be true of our gendered world and also against our growing 'knowledge' that things would be better if men were kind and gentle like women. Myth might sometimes turn notions of gender upside down, as in the story of the Amazons¹³, but it does not challenge gender's naturalness or imagine a world without it. Nor, by and large, do the rest of us most of the time.

That a novel rather than a work of non-fiction should be at the centre of controversy about the truth of Christian history underlines Zygmunt Bauman's contention that fiction has become the shelter of truth in the postmodern age. "We read novels ... because they offer us the pleasant impression of inhabiting worlds in which the notion of truth is unshakeable; by comparison, the real world appears to be an awfully uncertain and treacherous land". The deeper the uncertainty which rankles in the real world, Bauman contends, the higher becomes the certainty value of fiction. Novels "offer a foothold for legs seeking in vain support in the quicksand of

¹¹ Barthes, 116-130.

¹² See Chapter Four, p.101.

¹³ See Chapter Four, p.98-99.

changing fashions, of identities that do not survive their own construction and of stories with no past and no consequence”¹⁴.

Up there with *The Da Vinci Code* in the religious fiction bestseller market are the ‘Left Behind’ novels of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, which weave fictional plots around fundamentalism’s literal truth of the forthcoming “Rapture”, when Christians will be taken up to Heaven while unbelievers are left to cope with the ghastly well-deserved aftermath¹⁵. These stories, set in a future that is known to be real if yet unrealised, are wholesome fiction for the faithful in the quicksand of Western religion. In the same way, *The Da Vinci Code* is a fictional foothold for atheists and the religiously disaffected for whom the traditional Christian story no longer rings true but nonetheless remains their religious heritage and needs to be explained.

Claims for the postmodern truth value of fiction echo Andrew Von Hendy’s contention that myths come to the fore in times of religious and social change and uncertainty. The word ‘myth’ itself entered the English language during Europe’s early modern wars of religion, when the new category became a “site for the working out of contemporary religious anxieties”¹⁶. Ivan Strenski has observed that some of scholarship’s most determined ‘workers on myth’, such as Cassirer and Malinowski, were Jews displaced by the rise of a Nazi ideology infused with mythic notions about blood and belonging¹⁷. When we are less than certain about our traditional religious beliefs, ethnic and national identities, gender roles and a great deal else, or when our certainties are threatened, the site of the anxiously provisional expands and the process of triage slows down.

¹⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and its discontents* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 119-121.

¹⁵ Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left behind: a novel of the earth’s last days* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1995), and subsequent titles.

¹⁶ Von Hendy, 2-3.

¹⁷ Strenski, 195-199.

I have argued that *The Da Vinci Code*'s reinsertion of story into a religion increasingly bereft of story is one explanatory element in the novel's appeal¹⁸. Planting the new Christian story within the framework of a novel, a genre that is clearly nothing other than story, challenges the rules of engagement which we thought governed the contest between truth and falsehood. As Bauman observes, "one of the great paradoxes of a civilization bent on the extermination of paradoxes is that the *truth* of the West, the truth of modernity, found its home in the self-same work of *fiction* which it fought tooth and nail"¹⁹.

In the Introduction to this essay, I proposed that the bloodline myth has survived and prospered because of its capacity for endless mutations and variations that have enabled it to adapt to changing fashions and to incorporate new ideas generally labelled 'politically correct'. With *The Da Vinci Code*, the myth has perhaps made its most dramatic shape-shift so far by locating itself in the category of fiction. This is a bold and typically 'shifty' move on myth's part. It has apparently retreated from the field of non-fiction, leaving the arguments about facts, data and interpretation to the 'legitimate' experts. The myth seems at last to have admitted that it is indeed just a story, designed for those with itching ears who choose to read novels rather than harken to the sound doctrine of scholarship.

But it may be that the bloodline myth has made its canniest move yet. By finding a home in the fictional, this myth has removed itself from the criticisms of the competent. It has declared the objections and corrections of scholars and theologians to be irrelevant to the much more likely story of our religious past as presented in *The Da Vinci Code*.

¹⁸ See Chapter Two, p.58-60.

¹⁹ Bauman, 118.

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