

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County

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The Merit of the DaVinci Code Rev. John M. Higgins, Ed. D

Probably no novel in recent history has raised as much attention as the DaVinci Code. The Code is a novel but it does have enough truth in it to have raised frenzy among many preachers. It has also spawned dozens of books - some called the fraud of the DaVinci Code.

Many preachers were affronted by the tradition that Jesus did not die on the cross but lived, married Mary Magdalene and produced a family line that exists today. This is a very old tradition and I doubt we will ever know the truth of such claims. What amuses me is the number of persons of various religious stripes who must take up the story and attack it.

I am more interested in some of the other questions the book raised, some of which are valid, if not true, and put serious doubt about the validity of some fundamental Christian claims.

Just about the time the film version of the Code appeared, I was in the nearby Publix market when one of my former students spotted me and asked, "Have you seen the DaVinci Code?" I hadn't seen it at that time but she said, "I knew all that from your class", I wasn't sure from what she said to what she was referring. I certainly did mention the historical evidence that the doctrine of the Trinity was not biblical but came out of the early councils of the Church, particularly the Council of Nicaea. I did not agree that the Emperor Constantine was still a pagan and used the council to unite the empire under his rule. In fact, I said that there was conflicting evidence about Constantine. Whether he converted to Christianity soon after a great battle which made this emperor or on his death bed or whether he never converted is not a matter on which all scholars agree.

To recap the story: By the end of the first three centuries of the Christian era, Christianity had gained many followers in the Roman Empire. However, there were many disagreements among the various Christian groups. There were still Jews who were followers of Jesus. For example, the Ebionites were strict observers of Jewish law but followed the teachings of Jesus as those of a great figure in Jewish history. Among those who were not Jewish, Jesus followers, a great schism arose. Unlike many of the disagreements during the first three centuries, this one caught on throughout the empire. Remember, the Roman Empire was not just a great deal of Europe but also included Mediterranean Greece, northern Africa and the Middle East. In fact, the intellectual center of the empire was Alexandria in Egypt. Alexandria was a city where almost half of the population was literate, highly unusual in the world of that time.

In settling the plot of the Code, Brown, the author, reminds us that the doctrine of the Trinity was settled at a great Council at Nicaea by a vote of the over 300 bishops present. He doesn't mention the name of Athanasius or the difficulties which caused the pronouncement of doctrine. As I recall, he obliquely deals with the development of the bible without going into detail. These two issues deserve much more thought as history gives us the clues as to how the whole Christian doctrine evolved and how the New Testament became "canon."

Early Christianity was hardly a unified religion. There were numerous different teachings and holy days differed from province to province. There was, for example, no general agreement as to when Christmas should be celebrated nor Easter. Different saints were venerated in various parts of the Roman world and the division of church authority were not clear. Added to this, the Roman Empire itself was in a constant state of flux. Rome was a marvel of political power holding territory from

Britain, most of what is now France, Spain, the territories around the entire Mediterranean Sea and North Africa, including what is now Egypt, the Middle East up to Persia and Turkey.

Three major figures brought Christianity into power. Constantine, first, because he was an absolute ruler on whom all real power depended, Athanasius and Arius because they forced the first pronouncement of doctrine on the early church. Athanasius also defined the books that were to form the New Testament.

With all its power, culture, law, roads and culture, Rome had a fatal flaw. There was no provision for the orderly transfer of power from one emperor to another. When one emperor died - often by assassination - generals vied for the imperial throne. Christianity grew during the first three centuries of our era. It was a time of constant warfare over who would become emperor.

Although there had been persecutions of Christians from time to time and in particular provinces of the empire, an empire wide persecution did not take place until Maximian, in the year 303 CE, saw Christians as threats to the unity of the empire - at least in Western Europe. Within four years, he was challenged by rivals for the throne. One of those rivals was Constantine, a shrewd and ruthless man with great ambition. At one point in his battles, he saw a vision of the cross with a message. "In this sign thou shalt conquer." He put the cross as his emblem and in 312 CE, won the Battle of the Milvian Bridge near Rome. Together with Licinius, he became co-emperor and they issued the Edict of Milan which made Christianity a legal religion. Most likely, the troops of Constantine had become Christians.

Within a few years Licinius withdrew from the Edict and began to persecute Christians under his control. Constantine sided with Christians and the war became a Christians against Pagans.

Constantine won and soon thereafter, Christianity became a favored religion in the empire. Constantine then moved his capital to Byzantine where he assumed control of the church, naming bishops and favorites to posts. He also made the clergy and bishops officers of the empire. (We see this today in the Roman collar and the purple of bishops - all symbols of Byzantine officials.)

Whether or not Constantine ever became a convert is contested by scholars. The DaVinci Code contends that he never became a Christian but used Christianity for political purposes. Some contend that he became a Christian after the Battle for the Milvian Bridge; others say he was baptized later. One author gives a logical answer by saying that he was a catechumen who was baptized as he neared death - logical, because it was a custom at that time to delay baptism and the forgiveness of all sins until death was near.

At any rate, the church was not yet as organized as today and there were many different views on the authority of the church and the nature of Jesus. For 150 years prior to the ascendancy of Christianity, the problem was "Who was Jesus?"

For the most part, the question arose in Alexandria, the intellectual capital of the empire. (Alexandria was the first city in history where a large percentage of the citizenry was literate.)

Two great figures in history presented themselves - Athanasius and Arius. By 320 CE both held a rank just below bishop in Alexandria. Athanasius is regarded as a Saint by both Catholic and Orthodox Christians. Arius is considered a heretic. However, in the Church of that time, Arius held the position that Jesus was not God; that he was a subordinate being who was not eternal or of the same substance as the Father. Jesus was a special being created to carry the message of heaven to the earth but not a deity. This teaching spread from Alexandria throughout the whole Eastern Church.

If you saw the film, there were pictures of riots superimposed on the main story but it was not quite clear that this was Christian against Christian. It was riots, particularly in Alexandria but also in Nicomeia - a city almost as important as Constantinople on the sea of Marmare. Constantine was not overly happy that he had defeated Paganism only to have his Christian supporters divided. To defuse this threat to empire unity, Constantine - not church leaders - called the Council of Nicaea in the year 325 CE. This was and is a major event in history as it was the first Ecumenical Council and the first pronouncement of doctrine in Christian history. As told by Church apologists, it was a conference where the bishops fasted, prayed and waited for the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. Then they made their pronouncements - Church doctrine in actuality. Most of the bishops had been ordered by Constantine to support the position of Athanasius who opposed Arius and insisted that Jesus was divine, existed eternally, and was of the same substance as the Father.

At the time of the Council, neither Arius nor Athanasius were bishops and could not take part in the deliberations. However, Athanasius prepared the arguments for Bishop Alexander and Arius helped Eusebius of Nicomedia. The side of the emperor won and in addition to defining Jesus as part of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Jesus was now officially believed to be the Son made into a human to suffer for the sins of humanity.

Most writers leave it at that. However, Constantine recanted several times and reverted to the teaching of Arius. Each time, he exiled Athanasius who had become Bishop of Alexandria. Each time Constantine or his sons who succeeded him changed positions, either Athanasius was exiled or Arius was exiled depending on how the current emperor twisted. Athanasius was exiled five times, but returned to hold the post of Bishop of Alexandria for forty six years.

At one low point, Athanasius went to Constantinople and intercepted the chariot of Constantine to demand an audience where he convinced the emperor of the correctness of his position.

Arius was on his way to see the emperor in Constantinople when he was in sudden distress and went to a latrine where it is said that he excreted his whole intestines, spleen and other internal organs. At least the pious who believed that divine retribution was the lot of Arius believed that. A more likely explanation was given by those who claimed that he was the victim of poison. Poison was a common end of adversaries and difficult to detect.

Arius whom some claim to be the first Unitarian did not have his doctrines die with him. Arianism lived on for three hundred years after the death of Arius. Several of the emperors were Arians and arguments and riots continued for a long of time. Many of the Barbarian tribes who invaded Rome were Arians.

Arianism lives on today among those who are acquainted with Christianity and even belong to churches. If my students are any indication of how many are professed but perhaps not attending Christians, think Jesus was not God, 'Arianism' is well and thriving. I know that I told you I was astonished to learn that some third of my classes last year insisted that Jesus was a different entity than God. Even today, after seventeen centuries, the notion that Jesus was not God is alive - even though there is no denomination that takes that stand except Jehovah Witnesses, some Christians, and one small fundamentalist sect I discovered ten years ago.

Remember please, that the nature of Jesus and the Trinity took six Councils to complete the definition of Jesus in orthodoxy and that took over three hundred years.

Strangely, Protestantism which rejected much of Catholic teaching accepts the Trinity and the formulations of the nature of Jesus. Despite the difficulties one may have about how these decisions

about "truth" were made, they still accept the notion that a group of humans believed that they received divine guidance and made dogmatic pronouncements that still guide the lives of a billion and a half people.

But Athanasius did not disappear into history. Having survived Arius and the Arian emperors, he was possibly the most important figure of his time in the Eastern Church. As Bishop of Alexandria, as I said the Intellectual capital of the Roman Empire, he assumed the position of the foremost theologian of his time. It was he who examined and promoted the twenty seven books of the New Testament as we know them today. He separated the "apocrypha" - the other writings - from what he considered true.

Up until the time of Athanasius, many scriptures were circulating. Some told of the childhood of Jesus, there were the "Gospel of Mary Magdalene", the "Gospel of Peter", the "Gospel of Jesus", and numerous other gospels. One of them, the "Gospel of Enoch", lived on for three hundred more years as sacred to much of Christendom from Ethiopia to the Slavic countries. Many of the non approved gospels were destroyed but a good many were preserved in monasteries throughout the Christian world. Enoch was lost until about 1772, when British invaders in Ethiopia discovered Enoch in Ethiopian monasteries. Other copies were found in Slavonic monasteries. Only two or three of the monastery copies still survive but translations can be found in many reference books today.

At any rate, the defining moment in the canonizing of the New Testament was in 367 AD. It was the custom of the Bishops of Alexandria to write as soon after the Epiphany to all the churches under his authority designating the date of Easter and the beginning of the Lenten Fast. By fixing the date of Easter, the yearly message from Alexandria fixed all other Christian festivals of the year. The reputation of the Egyptian Church was so great that Rome disseminated these dates to the Western Churches and he, Bishop of Antioch, gave the information to the Syrian Churches.

That year, Athanasius wrote to the churches and identified the divine scriptures and separated them from the heretical writings. He then enumerated the scriptures that were canon. First he named the books of the Old Testament which doesn't differ from those accepted by the rabbis. Most likely, this was not a problem for most Christians. Next, he wrote:

Continuing, I must without hesitation, mention the scriptures of the New Testament, they are the four Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, after them the Acts of the Apostles and the seven so called catholic epistles of the apostles - namely, one of James, two of Peter, then three of John and after these one of Jude. In addition, there are fourteen epistles of the apostle Paul, written in the following order: the first to the Romans, then two to the Corinthians and after these the one to the Galacians, following the one to the Ephesians, thereafter of the Philippians and one to the Colossians and two to the Thessalonians and the epistle to the Hebrews and then immediately two to Timothy, one to Titus, and lastly the one to Philemon. Yet further, the Revelation of John.

These are the springs of salvation in order that he who is thirsty may refresh himself with the words contained in them. In them alone is the doctrine of piety proclaimed. Let no one add anything to them or take anything away from them.

However he did recommend other readings but condemned other books which today some writers refer to as "The Other Bible".

Athanasius's definition of the canon of the NT has stood since 367 CE. While Martin Luther did disagree with some of the books, the canon has been generally accepted by all Christian sects.

As has been said, many of the offending writing were destroyed, but not until modern times have major writings been recovered. The discovery of ancient Coptic documents beginning in 1896 continued throughout 1945 and today we have the Nag Hamedi collection which has been housed in various museums throughout Egypt and Germany. Today, scholars are studying the gospels of Philip, Peter, Bartholomew and especially those of Mary Magdalene and Thomas. Thomas may revolutionize the thinking about the New Testament. It appears to have predated any of the canon bible and is mainly the sayings of Jesus. Some scholars believe that the Gospel of John and Revelations are not in harmony with the remainder of the gospels and that Thomas should be substituted for John. This is a discussion that may never reach the fundamentalists who rely so heavily on Revelations, particularly for their views of the end of the world.

The speculations about the Gospel of Mary of Magdala do not circle around the legend of her marriage to Jesus as John England mentioned last week but they do have her migrating to France where she lived in caves. This gospel does emphasize Mary's intimate relationship with Jesus but not having children who formed a distinct Jesus line as do other legends.

In my opinion, the DaVinci Code reminds the world of the actual history of the development of doctrine and the development of the New Testament. It also reminds us that the repression of other versions of scriptures did exist and more are being found and translated during the past century and now. Unfortunately, some of the discoveries take decades to be translated and have been repressed by some church authorities for reasons best known to themselves. There is a growing literature today about the discovered early texts. It sheds light on how forceful and strong men defined Christianity as we see it today.