



Why the fuss over Brown's *The Da Vinci code*? The dynamism of “icons” and the in/stability of meaning¹

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Abstract

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Dan Brown's book, "The Da Vinci code" (2003) and the subsequent motion picture by the same title (2006), have created a considerable stir within, but not limited to, Christian circles. The cause of the controversy is that, despite Brown's overt presentation of this work as fiction, it draws on figures, events and themes regarded in religious circles as sacred – most particularly in Christian circles. Holy figures, events and themes are sensitive matters to believers: the meanings attached to them are regarded as essentially fixed, with connotations of permanence and eternity. Literature of many kinds, however, reinterpret set meanings, loosening their perceived inflexibility, thus opening up a dynamism quite foreign to popular notions of definite meaning.

Opsomming

Waarom die stryd om Brown se *The Da Vinci code*? Die dinamiek van “ikone” en die on/stabiliteit van betekenis

Dan Brown se boek, "The Da Vinci code" (2003) en die daaropvolgende rolprent met dieselfde naam (2006), het redelik woe-linge binne Christelike kringe, maar ook daarbuite veroorsaak.

1 This is an altered version of a paper first read at the “Exploring The Da Vinci code” Public Conference, presented by the Department of New Testament, Unisa, at the Santa Sophia Conference Centre, Pretoria, in 2006.

Die oorsaak van die geskilgesprekke is dat, ten spyte daarvan dat Brown sy werk duidelik as fiksie aanbied, hy persone, gebeure en temas aanwend wat in godsdienstige kringe, en veral in Christelike kringe, as heilig beskou word. Sodanige heilige persone, gebeure en temas dra 'n hoë sensitiwiteitswaarde vir gelowiges: die betekenis daaraan geheg word as inherent standhoudend beskou, met daaraan gekoppelde konnotasies van permanensie en ewigheid. Verskillende soorte letterkunde herinterpreteer egter vaste betekenisinhoud wat die waargenome stabiliteit ontanker, sodat 'n nuwe betekenisdinamiek moontlik word – iets wat vreemd is aan algemene idees rondom 'n vasgestelde betekenis.

1. Read the book, seen the movie

Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci code*, first published in 2003, had elicited a range of responses. These were renewed three years later with the released motion picture based on the book, and with the same title. Another three years later, the fuss has not died down (see e.g. *Kerknuus*, 17 Maart 2009 on Scheepers, 2008). Private puzzlement, even bewilderment, on the matter often mirrored public confusion (cf. ORB, 2006), with the latter added to by a range of divergent responses from official church bodies (Williams, 2006a; 2006b; cf. Pentin, 2005:4; Malone, 2006a; 2006b), figures influential in religious circles, and other interested parties.² Internet websites and chat sites, bulletin boards and pod casts,³ chain-letter e-mails, religious and secular newspapers' main articles (e.g. Du Plessis & Farber, 2006:1), arts and culture analyses (e.g. Magwood, 2006:17; Retief, 2006:6), and letters columns, magazines (cf. Schaberg &

2 For instance, Kenneth Meshoe, leader of the African Christian Democratic Party, is quoted as follows in Du Plessis & Farber (2006:1): "We want to discourage ACDP constituents, the larger church body and its followers from watching the movie that is essentially filled with blasphemy and lies ... We have to be unshakeable in what we believe." This is an example of much of the popular religious reaction to the book and the motion picture. An alternative to this reaction is suggested in the last section of this article.

3 Consult e.g. the following websites:
www.countingdown.com/movies/3162623/board
www.ukchatterbox.co.uk/msg/65798
www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10509149/site/newsweek/?rf=marquee
www.online-literature.com/forums/showthread.php?t=4146
www.yzine.com/mona_lisa.htm
www.discussthedavincicode.com/
www.visitdavincicode.com/ZAF/
<http://davinci.thelife.com/2006/06/05/podcast-the-holy-grail-2/>

Johnson-DeBaufre, 2006, based on Johnson-DeBaufre, 2002; Callahan, 2004:93-96; Sheaffer, 2005:22-26; also e.g. <http://newdawnmagazine.com/special/index2.html>), radio and television talk shows, sermons (in one Afrikaans congregation I am aware of, a series of four sermons were preached on *The Da Vinci code*), talks, seminars, and seemingly endless discussions between people (religiously, a-religiously and anti-religiously inclined) have caused a veritable “Code clutter”. Apart from the motion picture, a series of books have been published that spin off from Brown’s code, such as critical analyses and/or readers’ guides (e.g. Welborn, 2004; Lunn, 2004; Gilvin, 2004),⁴ and also a humorous take or two on the matter (e.g. Eaton’s *The De Villiers code*, 2006⁵). The phrase “Da Vinci code” has now become an instantly recognisable metaphor for deciphering a difficult problem, also in scholarly fields such as medical research (cf. Huo *et al.*, 2005:477-478), Freudian psychology (cf. Cohen, 2005:729-740) and church ministry (e.g. Batchelder, 2005:2-19). At least for the next several years, the title of this book will remain a cultural reference icon that is potent enough with meaning that it will hardly need further explanation in public discourse.

2. Why the *Code clutter*?

A number of reasons have been suggested for this *Code clutter*. The most obvious among these explanations may be described with the words of one of the characters, the librarian Pamela Gettum, in *The Da Vinci code*, when she remarks (Brown, 2003:500): “Everyone loves a conspiracy.”⁶

It is clear, though, that it is not simply because it is a conspiracy novel that this book has been such a commercial success. As all serious reviewers have indicated, the literary nature of this book is not such that its good writing would attract readers. Neither the

4 See also the literature cited at www1.stthomas.edu/libraries/ireland/davinci_bib.htm “It seems like each week a new book is published addressing the various fallacies!” (Sharp, 2005:40).

5 Tom Eaton, in an interview on the literary website Litnet, describes his take on Brown’s original thus: “I’m also not a religious person, so I don’t get worked up over the arrogance of assuming that 600 pages of drivel by a write-by-numbers typist can reveal what 2 000 years of scholarship couldn’t. What I really mind, though, is that his excremental writing goes unchallenged” www.litnet.co.za/ricochet/homebru_tom_eaton.asp

6 Conrad (2006:2) erroneously lays these words in the mouth of the Robert Langdon-character.

authoring nor the editing of this book had prevented it from having more than its fair share of poor formulations, uneasy dialogue, awkward flash-back scenes, inconsistent chapter breaks, spelling and printing errors, an at times distractingly North-American frame of reference, and some unforgivably feeble style elements (why *must* "have to", "ought to", "want to", "should", "must", etc. be rendered "need to", up to thrice in a single paragraph?). In narratives, factual, historical, geographical and theological inaccuracies (cf. O'Collins, 2005:514-515; Szimhart, 2004:54-56; Carswell, 2006:7; Witherington, 2004:58-60) can easily be forgiven; with a novel such as this, there is, however, no excuse for poor writing.⁷

The subject matter of *The Da Vinci code* story is, of course, riveting. Church cover-ups, Jesus and sex, God on earth – these are gripping narrative themes.⁸ The more so in a culture (which many of us share) of media exposés, which lay bare, to our benefit, what powerful institutions wish to conceal: government corruption, big businesses' dishonest bookkeeping, the church and sexual abuse – to name just a few examples from recent media history. In *The Da Vinci code*, Brown plays brilliantly to this broad "exposé culture" in which we live, namely with his technique of fact-like, almost documentary-style presentation of the unfolding narrative (cf. Bazell & Kant, 2005:355, 362-363, 365-366; Witherington, 2004:58, Wilson, 2005:32-33).

Equally impressive is the way in which the novel presents its narrative reality of hidden codes and messages in paintings, architecture, word games, cultural icons and the like, creating in the reader a recurring "aha experience" (a term coined by German psychologist Bühler, 1907:14) of new insight. Combined with the fast pace in which two tumultuous days are presented within 577 pages (depending on the imprint one has at hand), Brown is evidently a "paperback writer" in the tradition of which The Beatles sang (cf. MacDonald, 1994:155-156) four decades ago:

It's a thousand pages, give or take a few,
I'll be writing more in a week or two.

7 Brown could characterise his novel as postmodern in its disregard for, for instance, historical and geographical detail (cf. McHale, 1987:17, 27-29, 38-39, 90-93); his track record, along with other aspects of his writing in this book, would, however, make it a difficult claim to sustain.

8 Brown had explored some of these themes in parallel ways in his previous novels (cf. Cohen, 2005:729-740).

I can make it longer if you like the style,
I can change it round ...

3. For better ...

One cannot help but wish that this writer had spent another few months, and his editor a few more weeks, on this project in order to straighten out the wrinkles, which would have rendered an altogether better novel. Little wonder then, that the *Sunday times* literary critic Michele Magwood (2006:17) characterises this book as merely an “airport novel”.

As to the motion picture version: at the Cannes film festival, where the film *The Da Vinci code* premiered, critics found it less that captivating (Christopher, 2006; cf. Du Plessis & Farber, 2006:1; Higgs, 2006:2). It must be said, though, that as a narrative the film version is more satisfying than the book, with less loose ends. Unfortunately, the nature of the film medium is such that it could not capture many of the subtleties of cultural references that permeate the code “symbology” in the book. Most of all, though, the motion picture helps us realise that this book, too, is open to various interpretations. The novel is, therefore, itself not an unchangeable “Holy Grail” (cf. Conrad, 2006:3). For instance, some of the debate resulting from the book has been incorporated into the film dialogue, albeit at times rather gracelessly. Still, these filmic reinterpretations undermine the shared error (cf. Retief, 2006:6) of a substantive section of fundamentalist believers and at least some fundamentalist anti-religionists, along with others, when they misread the novel as a history textbook.

The commercial success of both the novel and the motion picture thus has less to do with their respective artistic merits than with their subject matter. Different from the advertising industry, where touching on religion in sales messages has often proven to be counterproductive, in the book and movie industries religion, like sex, sells. This is shown not only by the long-standing sales records of the Bible, films related to Biblical narratives, and other directly religious literature (such as, locally, the highly profitable Afrikaans popular religion book market), but also by the way people react from religious convictions to publications and film releases. This includes, to name but two current examples, *The Da Vinci code* and the *Harry Potter*-series. Religiously motivated responses to these works, ironically, create extensive, and free, publicity value. The current *Code clutter* (*et nos ...*) thus parallels the earlier cases with, for instance, motion pictures such as *The last temptation of Christ* (1988; cf.

Riley, 2003), television programmes such as *Teletubbies* (cf. Ellison, 1999:3), board and computer games such as *Dungeons and dragons* (cf. Schnoebelen, 1989), and stage musicals such as *Jesus Christ superstar* (cf. Lombaard, 2006:6).

The question remains, though: Why do religious people often react so negatively to creative works such as *The Da Vinci code*?

4. Icons of faith

Another line of reasoning which has been suggested popularly for the stir this novel and motion picture have caused, argues that in a highly complex and terrifying world, people are ready to believe that, somehow, a grand conspiracy underlies it all (Magwood, 2006:17; cf. Wilson, 2005:33). Put more cynically: "When fiction is this popular, it tells us lies we desperately want to believe" (Conrad, 2006:2). In a world that has grown too large and complex⁹ for us to cope with intellectually and emotionally, this dynamic stirs a search for a more secure sense of identity (cf. Alexander, 2006:22-23, 56, 61) within large sections of Christianity. It is within these broad lines, most probably, that we should search for answers, when questions relating to works such as *The Da Vinci code* are asked: Why do many believers experience such literary (and other artistic) interpretations so negatively? Why the at times harsh reactions to new/newly-popular cultural designs related to religion, as if some kind of fundamental fear underlies this response, and as if (some aspect of) faith is in urgent need of protection?

I would suggest that one of the more important constituent factors – among a host of possible others – is that the core religious identity of many believers¹⁰ is bound not to what the essentials of their faith really are, but to their *ideas* of what these are. To refer to two examples central to Christianity:

9 This is the direct, though not always realised, implication of the "global village" (coined by McLuhan, 1992). In a sense, the growth in human awareness of the complexity of what is around us (Spradlin & Porterfield, 1984:114-122, 221-240), itself created this sense of estrangement (Berger, 1969:101 makes this point regarding religion too), from which springs a quest for (regained) certainty – ultimately, thus, a self-defeating, always circular endeavour.

10 This holds true not for Christianity only, and has application outside the sphere of religious matters too.

- Many believers' faith in Jesus do not relate first and foremost to the historical figure who lived in Palestine, but rather to a "composite Jesus", namely a figure abstracted from the socio-historical circumstances in which Jesus of Nazareth lived, constructed from a loosely conflated view of the New Testament writings, and coloured most strongly by certain dogmatic themes and historically-conditioned pieties. Most Christians remain unaware of these influences on the way Jesus is constructed in their "hearts" and minds; hence their adverse reactions to the findings of historical Jesus research. The object of their faith is not the concrete Jesus, but an "idealised" Jesus (cf. Carlson & Ludwig, 1994; Witherington, 1995; Evans, 1996). The picture formed in the minds of many believers of Jesus, and to which existential commitments are attached, is thus not historically oriented, but is what may be termed "iconic": it is the *picture* we have of Jesus that says a thousand words ...
- The popular¹¹ religious view of the Bible parallels this. For most Christians, the Bible is not primarily an ancient collection of writings written by different people to address certain issues of faith and people in their time. For most Christians, even when they may be vaguely aware of its historical development, the Bible is God's direct words to *me*. This implies that the hard work of determining probable ancient contextual meanings before seeking possible parallels and analogies in "my life" or for "our time", is superseded by personal religious requirements; hence the adverse reactions in many church circles to the historical-critical investigations of its Scriptures. Not what the Bible *is in itself*, but how *I think it is for me*, determines to a large extent most individuals' use of it. *Ideas* of holiness, communication with God, and the supernatural permeate the sphere of associations popularly related to the Bible. The cultural, religious, and personal icon "Bible" conjures up these "images" (cf., from different perspectives, Thiselton, 1992; Stuhlmacher, 1979; Deist, 1986). This "iconic" status of the Bible relates to such associations in the first instance.

Many people of faith – including everyday Christians and trained theologians – thus retain views of God, the Scriptures and faith that are highly idealist and essentialist, that is, unhistorical and non-rea-

11 Admittedly, what constitutes "popular", and thus "culture", is an intellectual, and perhaps somewhat elitist, construct (McGuigan, 1992:9-44). For such analyses, though, one cannot do without Weberian "ideal types" (cf. Weber, 1949:90).

list, in nature. Of faith is now demanded what the world cannot provide (a romanticised view of a paradisiac past would formulate "what the world can no longer provide"): constancy, stability, and certainty (cf. the positioning in Sommerville, 1999:39-54 of the values we expect from our news media *versus* those we expect from religion; see also Alexander, 2006:61, 64; Berger, 1969:36-38; Lombaard, 1999:vii²).

5. The worldview in the undercurrent

The above frame of reference on religion could furthermore entail vague, largely unformalised and unformulated worldviews,¹² such as that

- two distinct worlds exist, namely ours and a higher order, with the latter – heaven – the true abode of God (cf. McHale, 1987:136-37; Spradlin & Porterfield, 1984:19; Berger, 1969:34);
- this higher order can be glimpsed, but only through non-natural, that is supernatural means, namely revelations, by means of the Bible, visions, ecstatic experiences, enlightened thinking, inspiring sermons, et cetera;
- from these revelatory experiences, fragments of ultimate Holiness, namely God, are gathered (cf. Spradlin & Porterfield, 1984:16); by grouping these revelatory insights together, a fuller picture (= "icon") of God may be gained – a process which is often called "spiritual growth";
- throughout life, these experiences accumulate, in order to build up a more comprehensive picture of God; for many people, the very purpose of life is to have these "learning" experiences, as they "grow" more "towards" God.

This view of religion shows itself, to refer again to one of the examples mentioned above, in the way the Bible is viewed. It is completely feasible, in this line of thinking, to ignore the differences between the four New Testament Gospels. Each of these Gospels are simply held to be another of the windows on truth, i.e. God, which can – idealistically – be used to reconstruct what God really is like and wants us to do. At the base of this frame of reference lies a dualist, Platonic kind of worldview. What is higher is most important; we

12 This is typical of all aspects of identity (cf. Strauss, 2004:555-574; McGuigan, 1992:226-234), of which faith for religious people forms a central part.

“down here” build up a picture of God in various ways, throughout our lives, and live accordingly.

For this iconic, unhistorically oriented construction of faith,¹³ any attempt at detracting from the created icon, rather than contributing to it, equals heresy. What changes the icon, must thus be banned; only what adds to “my” or “our” icon, is acceptable. Hence, to recall again the earlier example: showing the differences between the Gospels (a thoroughly historical exercise) is met with shock. Ditto, any attempts in art (be it literature, painting, or motion pictures, etc.) to re-interpret the constructed icons, are rejected. What does not add to the already constructed icon (the “spiritual growth” referred to above), but detracts from it or offers substantially different alternatives, endangers the accepted icons of faith.

Thus, if *The Da Vinci code*, or any other work of scientific, literary or artistic nature, draws the icon into question, this tends to elicit strong reaction.

The distinction must be drawn clearly here. Works of art and scholarship (whatever their artistic or scholarly merit) cannot in any but the most exceptional of circumstances question the essentials of a given religion (or any other aspect of human activity, for that matter). Literature and science cannot endanger God or the Bible. However, these endeavours can, and often do (though not always equally dramatically), question the icons of faith, that is the mental, emotional, social, and individual constructions of religion we create (cf. Berger, 1969:183-185) and, importantly, often seek to enforce.¹⁴ This questioning also entails reinterpretation, that is destabilising old

13 This “iconic ... construction of faith” should not be confused with the views of Feuerbach (1841), influential for Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, which are often taken to mean that religion equals illusion. (Marx’s formulation of religion as an “opium for the people”, for instance, had more to do with the power of religion in suppressing people, which Marx (1843/1844) critiqued, than with the essence of religion itself.) By “iconic ... construction of faith” I mean to convey the important cognitive, emotional and existential constructs by which believers give expression to their faith.

14 Interestingly, and I think accurately, Conrad (2006:2) points out that *The Da Vinci code*’s real subject matter is not the abuse of faith, but of power. In recent international political history, this enforcement of iconically held beliefs was seen most publicly with the *fatwa* pronounced on Salman Rushdie (1988) for his work, *The Satanic verses* (cf. McGuigan, 1992:195-206). The fact that some states affirmed this power by banning the sale of the book within their borders, adds to the power associated with these iconically held tenets. The latter is paralleled now in countries where *The Da Vinci code* has been banned.

meanings and offering new ones. Because we feel our iconic images questioned by the new denotations and/or connotations, we may feel ourselves psychologically, even existentially, at risk.¹⁵ Our sphere of meaning could be, or has been, altered.

The latter would explain, to a significant extent at least, the often negative reactions to *The Da Vinci code* and other reinterpretations of the popularly-held icons within the Christian faith. In this respect, the distinction drawn by McGrath (1999:137; cf. Sharp, 2005:41) between readers who "place *do not disturb* notices on their mental faculties" and those who deliberately seek perspectives which lie outside their own "personal comfort zone", holds true.

6. Do alternatives exist?

One different way of constructing faith would be to approach Christianity in a manner that is at once both historical and mystical (cf. Welzen, 2006; Kourie, 2005; Spradlin & Porterfield, 1984:233). Every human presentation of God, be that in the Old or New Testament, in church dogmas, in art, and – perhaps the most difficult of all – in each person one encounters, is historically conditioned. Within each of these expressions of faith lies enmeshed complexes of contextual influences, not all of which, and certainly not the interactions between which, are identifiable. However, none of these "encounters" with God *is* God. In each instance, God is "just beyond" that presentation – hence, a mystical faith.

For those for whom it is possible to accept the ungivenness, the uncertainty of any presentation of God, simply because God remains the *Ganz Andere*,¹⁶ different ways of reacting to new artistic and scholarly interpretations become available. If any attempt at formulating something about God, even those in what are held to be inspired Scriptures, cannot grasp God in any firm sense, but can only approximate God, barely coming to a formulation (cf. Berger, 1969:183), then new attempts at such expression are not threatening. Though, of course, certain of these expressions may be held to be more valid than others, and certain expressions may be

15 Research into the diffusion of innovations throws much light onto this process (cf. Rogers, 1995; Brown, 1981). For a broader, sociological view, see Berger (1969:25-28).

16 Karl Barth's famous formulation, which has some interesting precursors among Christian mystics.

canonised as normative, all expressions have something to say. What is said may be critically weighed, and should be; it ought not to be feared, though.

This approach to faith, in which the icons are infirm, and changeable, is in one sense *more humane*: it allows us to appreciate other points of view for what they are – not in a shallow, politically-correct “celebrating diversity” sort of way, but for those expressions which are indeed serious attempts at grappling with the Unfathomable, as deserving of our attention. In another sense, this approach is *more religious* too: first, in that it gives superior expression to the fundamental aversion inherent in the Judeo-Christian faith tradition of worshipping images (be they existential icons or otherwise) of God; and second, in that it puts trust not in certain concepts related to God, but in God self.

This is therefore not an uncritical way of believing (i.e. spirituality; cf. De Villiers, 2006 relating to *The Da Vinci code*; and more broadly, Givone, 1988:149-156). It can engage, fiercely and historically, and mediated by a range of other readings (Brandt, 1993:68-97), with the validity of expressions of faith and non-faith regarded as less wholesome to its adherents, or untrue to the founding Scriptures of the faith, or falling foul of the important dogmas giving expression to the tenets of that faith, et cetera. Though this kind of faith may seem weaker, in that it does not hold dear any icons, it is in fact stronger, in that it can engage fully with all that comes its way, trusting not in the icons to give a sense of security, but trusting in God. And is that not precisely the point of faith?

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Key concepts:

construction of meaning
icons as set meanings
reinterpretation of religion
The Da Vinci code

Kernbegrippe:

betekeniskonstruering
herinterpretasie van godsdiens
ikone as vasgestelde betekenis
The Da Vinci code