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# Da Vinci Code: Christianity's Self-Dug Grave?

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For all the complaints from church leaders that Dan Brown's book makes fact out of fiction, is it possible that Christianity itself is primarily responsible for its success of *The Da Vinci Code*?

**D**an Brown's fictional novel *The Da Vinci Code* has achieved outstanding popular success, much to the dismay of Christian churches. Not only has it sold brilliantly, it has changed people. One woman who read the book said she felt it had altered her relationship with her church. If they had hidden this "truth" from her, she wondered in an online comment, what else might they have deceived her about? One survey in Britain found that over 60% of readers of the book now believe that Jesus married Mary Magdalene and fathered children by her.

This seems odd, considering that the book is listed as fiction, reviewed as fiction, and stocked in the fiction section of bookstores and libraries. Indeed, there are now literally scores of nonfiction books that very convincingly cast serious doubt on the novel's scholarship and the theory behind it. Most biblical scholars do not give much credence to it; nevertheless, many readers of *The Da Vinci Code* seem prepared to accept this fictional work as truth.

In essence, the novel puts forth a conspiracy theory which holds that the Church has distorted the person of Jesus Christ and subsequent history for its own ends. The modern mind has shown an eagerness to accept conspiracy theories, and once they have lodged in the popular imagination, these theories seem never to die. A century ago the prevailing rage was a conspiracy theory holding that the Jews were planning world domination, purportedly revealed in a secret document called [The Protocols of the Elders of Zion](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/anti-semitism/protocols.html) (<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/anti-semitism/protocols.html>). It took only one year for the *London Times* to expose that theory as a hoax, but surprisingly, the belief still lingers and informs attitudes to this day. This incident is considered by some to be the first in modern-day conspiracy literature. Much to the chagrin of Christian churches, it looks as though Dan Brown's novel could have a more lasting impact.

Why are conspiracy theories so popular, and why are so many people prepared to accept author Dan Brown's claims without further investigation? Is it just intellectual laziness and apathy? Or are people eager to accept fiction as fact because they sense they have been deceived by institutions that proclaim to be stewards of the truth?

Interestingly, Christianity's history has rarely been related accurately. It has even been suppressed in some ways by Christian historians and Church leaders, but not in the manner suggested by Dan Brown. We do not need to decipher difficult puzzles and riddles hidden in art and architecture to reveal the facts. The accurate story, a truth that is truly stranger than fiction and in many ways more intriguing than Dan Brown's thriller, has long been accessible in the annals of history for those who have been willing to look for it.

Many recognized and respected volumes on [church history](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/church-history/first-christians/47371.aspx) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/church-history/first-christians/47371.aspx>) outline the dramatic changes that Christianity underwent to become what it is today. For instance, the first few hundred pages of W. H. C. Frend's *Rise of Christianity* raise the question, "Why doesn't the church today practice what Jesus Christ practiced?. A solitary word, *syncretism*—the combining of different forms of religious beliefs into a single religion—encapsulates the answer. You might say Christianity long ago succeeded in what Dan Brown has only recently discovered is a very effective strategy: that of combining truth and fiction in a compelling way to sell a story.

Christianity, as it exists today, derives more from pagan philosophy and practices than it does from the teachings and practices of Jesus Christ. Most of the holidays, observances and symbols that are assumed to be "Christian" in origin were incorporated into Christianity,

centuries after Jesus' death, in an attempt to increase its size and scope. When Christianity began to take hold, [the Roman Empire \(/ancient-empires-kingdom-of-god-4371\)](#) was dominated by all forms of ancient, pagan religions. In order to make the new religion more attractive, church leaders chose to incorporate the practices of these religions rather than demand that new converts adhere to the practice of the followers of Jesus (See "[A Crisis of Identity \(http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-a-crisis-of-identity-677.aspx\)](#)").

At its beginnings, and indeed for about the first 200 years, Christianity was seen as just another Jewish sect because the early Church was still practicing a faith based upon the Hebrew Scriptures and the Torah. But gradually dogma, ritual and altered doctrine took the place of the Hebrew Scriptures taught by Jesus. Hollow creeds, recited chants and shallow, emotion-filled rituals replaced the role of godly actions and dedication to understanding the mind of God in serving as the hallmark of a follower of Jesus.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons why church attendance has fallen to record lows in many parts of the Western world. Christianity is perceived as having nothing relevant to offer in a modern, scientific world that is facing mounting ethical issues. In this environment, it becomes easier for people to accept fictional ideas about religion, particularly when they resonate with their own questions about the viability of the church.

But conversely, do these conspiracy theories perhaps touch a nerve in the public, who grasp at them as a means of distancing themselves from responsibility? Humanity is good at this, and it is a ploy as old as Adam. We reason that someone else should take the blame for our shortcomings in the hope that we can dismiss any moral obligation. "It's not our responsibility," we might propose, "because the church has misled us." This is a dangerous line of reasoning in a world that desperately needs moral wisdom and fortitude. We are, the Bible tells us, responsible for our own choices. It therefore behooves us to look earnestly for truth.