

AFRICAN CHRISTOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF THE "DA VINCI CODE"

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INTRODUCTION

When in April 2003, Doubleday published the fourth of Dan Brown's novel and sequel to the bestselling *Angels and Demons*, titled *The Da Vinci Code*, little did the world know the stunning effects this book would have on the historical and religious spheres of the world. This amazing thriller has the record of selling six thousand copies on its first day on bookstands and shooting to the top of the bestseller chart in the first week of its publication, a position it maintained for sixty weeks.¹ The sales record of the code continued to escalate and by early 2006, it had sold an alarming forty million copies in over forty different languages, fetching Dan Brown an estimated One Hundred and Forty Million pounds. He also signed a multi-million pound contract with Columbia pictures for the adaptation of the book into a film which starred renowned actor Tom Hanks as one of the key characters of the novel: Professor of Religious Symbology, Robert Langdon.²

A brilliant combination of homicide, conspiracy, romance, religious expose and historical reconstruction, the code is simply described by many as a masterpiece. Dan Brown's new novel shocked the world by its claimed revelations in a way that not even David Yallop's *In God's Name*, Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation Of Christ*, or the bestselling *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* of the 1980s by Richard Leigh and Michael Baigent, had done. The book attacks the very roots of Christendom, its doctrines and beliefs, and is still causing a great deal of confusion for four and half years after its publication. This is because the author gives every impression that what he wrote is no fiction, but plain fact. He actually begins his novel with an opening page titled FACT. Whether his alleged facts are true or not, we shall see in the course of this work.

The Da Vinci Code has had a very negative effect on the faithful in Africa and indeed in the teaching of the universal church. In this work, we set out to make an evaluation of this novel based on the conception of Christ as held by the African Christian. In order to do this, we shall examine the claims in the novel critically; recall antecedents that led to its publication; discuss its challenges on the dogmatic teachings of the church, its effects on current teachings on Christology and Ecclesiology and then having studied the religious expression of Africans, we shall evaluate it in this light. However, before we do these, let us have a brief summary of *The Da Vinci Code*.

AN X-RAY OF THE DA VINCI CODE

The Da Vinci Code is a complex but interesting story. In it a mysterious murder of Jacques Sauniere, a master of religious symbology and renowned curator of the Louvre in Paris brought about investigations by Robert Langdon, a Professor of Symbology at Harvard University. Langdon was joined by a police cryptographer, Sophie Neveu, a granddaughter of Sauniere. Sauniere was the head of a secret religious group called the Priory of Sion which was saddled with the responsibility of guarding the secret of the true nature and whereabouts of the Holy Grail. Langdon and Neveu were out to search, following the clues left by

Sauniere, for the long-sought Grail. Those who mysteriously murdered Sauniere had used the *Opus Dei* (a prelature of the Vatican founded by the Spanish priest Josemaria Escriva)¹ to lead them to the Grail's hiding. In the course of their adventures, Langdon and Neveu met Sir Leigh Teabing, a wealthy aristocrat and expert on the Grail, who expiated on the historical background to its mystery.

Jesus was born into the polytheistic Greco-Roman world (which with the exception of Israel, practiced monotheism). The pagans (from Latin "Paganus" which means "Country dwellers") clung to old religions of nature worship. The Roman Catholic Church according to Dan Brown, had demonized the Pentacle (a pre-Christian pagan symbol that relates to Nature-worship, existing over 4,000 years before Christ) as part of the Vatican's effort to eradicate pagan religions and convert people to Christianity. Langdon holds that the original feminine meaning of the Pentacle (which symbolized Venus, the goddess of female sexual love and beauty) is correct, but its demonic interpretation is historically inaccurate.⁴ Natural sexual union between man and woman (the hallowed act of *Hieros Gamos*) through which each becomes spiritually whole, had been recast as a shameful act. The pagan world was matriarchal, exalting the goddess worship, but Christianity perpetuates patriarchy, a deviation from the Roman way of life.⁵ Leonardo Da Vinci, a well documented devotee of the ancient ways of the goddess, had his work in hidden symbolism. His Fresco *The Last Supper* is one of the most astonishing tributes to the Sacred Feminine. This "truth" Dan Brown claims to expose.

The possession of a powerful secret since Christ's time by a French king Godefroi de Bouillon is a serious point. Fearing that the secret may disappear after his death, the king founded the secret brotherhood called the Priory of Sion in 1099AD, which is to pass the secret from one generation to another quietly. During the years the Priory discovered hidden documents which the Church would stop at nothing to get.⁶ The Knights Templar (Order of the knights of Christ and the Temple of Solomon) was formed for this purpose. Pope Innocent II in a Papal Bull declared the Knights an independent army, subject not even to religious or political powers. This made them powerful and wealthy. In October 13, 1307, Pope Clement V crushed them as heretics,⁷ but the treasure of the documents he desired to seize slipped away. It was already entrusted to the Templar's shadowy architect, the Priory of Sion. These have been moved and re-hidden several times. The documents are called Sangrael (Holy Grail). It derives from the French "Sangrael" which evolved to Sangrael and eventually split into two words "San" "Greal" meaning holy Grail.

This Grail is not the cup Jesus drank from at the Last Supper (as generally believed) and with which Joseph of Arimathea later caught his blood at the Crucifixion. It is a metaphor for something else. Brown supports this claim by depending on fifty titles (books by well-known historians, some contemporary and others centuries old).⁸ Leonardo Da Vinci, a former Grand Master of the Priory of Sion, knew the whereabouts of the Grail during his life time. This he demonstrated in his art especially the painting: *The Last Supper* on the wall of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan. In the painting there were thirteen cups, not one chalice. The Holy Grail was a woman not a chalice.⁹ It represents the Sacred Feminine and the goddess eliminated by the Church. Brown maintains that Mary Magdalene is the Grail, depicted by legend as the beloved disciple. She was not a prostitute, but the early church titled her so to cover up her (the Church's) dangerous secrets namely: she was married to Christ and at Jesus' crucifixion,

fled to France and gave birth to a daughter whose name was Sarah; there the divine ancestral line of Christ was continued down through the ages. Sir Leigh Teabing explained things to Langdon and Sophie by quoting the Gnostic gospel of Philip: "And the companion of the Saviour is Mary Magdalene. Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her...". In those days the word companion in Aramaic literally meant spouse.

Pertaining to the Bible, Teabing argues that it did not arrive by fax from heaven, but it is a product of man. Why were only four gospels chosen out of more than eighty considered for the New Testament? In fact the Bible as it is today was collated by Emperor Constantine who was not a Christian but was baptized on his deathbed, too weak to protest.¹⁰ His goal was to bring stability between warring pagan religion and Christianity. Brown argues further that before the council of Nicea, convoked by Constantine, which dealt with the divinity of Christ among other things, Jesus was viewed by his followers as a prophet and a powerful man.

That he is Son of God was officially proposed and voted on by the council of Nicea. Constantine thus turned Jesus into a deity existing beyond the scope of the human world an entity whose power was unchallengeable.¹¹

Heresies sprang up for those who chose the original history of Christ (about his human traits). Similarly, *The Da Vinci Code* purports that the Coptic Scrolls and the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in 1948 and 1950 respectively speak of Christ's ministry in human terms.

CRITIQUE OF THE DAVINCI CLAIMS

From the x-ray, we have made of *The Da Vinci Code*, certain claims stand out. These we shall examine critically under the following headings.

The Non-Divinity Of Christ: The first loophole in Teabing's narration is his claim that the divinity of Christ was decided in a vote 300 years after his death. This is because writings of St. Paul which date as early 50 – 68 AD,¹² show Paul acknowledging his worship of One Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things exist (cf. 1Cor. 8:5-6). He goes further to confirm Jesus' equality with God in Philippians 2:6-11. The author of the letter to the Hebrews quotes from the Old Testament passages that show Jesus sharing in God's glory, such as Psalm 102:25-27 (cf. Heb. 1:1-13). Even St. John whose gospel dates as far back as 90AD¹³ does the same. Is it possible then that Christ's divinity was decided only in 325 AD, when such personalities as St. John and his Johannine community and St. Paul were already believing it and Paul was teaching it in the cities and towns he visited in his missionary journeys, more than 250 years before the convening of the council of Nicaea? (Note that 1 Corinthians and Philippians are among those letters believed to have been genuinely written by Paul himself).

The Council of Nicaea approved the Bible as it is today with the four gospels for the following reasons: Apostolic-roots as a ground for truth, widespread use and to fight false teachings.¹⁵ Prior to the council, due to the destruction of Sacred literature at the persecutions, it was important for Christians to identify these books by naming them. This was to know which were most important and worth dying for.¹⁵ Also, the assertion that there were over 80 gospels (p.313) is actually false, because even the Nag Hammadi library mentioned by Leigh Teabing (p.317), consisted of 45 documents with separate titles and only five of these were

named gospels: Truth, Thomas, Philip, Egyptians and Mary.¹⁶

The doctrine of the divinity of Christ and the Bible though proclaimed and compiled by man respectively, were done under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. **Jesus and Mary Magdalene:** The second important claim in the Code is Jesus' alleged marriage to Mary Magdalene. This marital union of Jesus and Mary was a potentially political union with the legitimate claim to the throne of King Solomon, because Mary was from the tribe of Benjamin and of royal blood and Jesus was of the House of David. Mary did have a daughter for Jesus called Sarah and through her Christ's royal blood was perpetrated. This family from whom the Merovingian kings of France arose still exists today with two family names: Plantard and Saint-Clair.

Let us begin by asking the question: "From whom was Mary running in order to save Christ's unborn child? Was it from the Jews who had him killed and yet did not touch his mother or herself (Mary Magdalene) at the crucifixion? Was it from the antagonistic Peter, that is, is it likely that Peter would want to harm Jesus' wife and unborn child just because he disliked its mother? Was it from the persecutions which were yet to break out, because if Mary was pregnant at the crucifixion, the child ought to have been born before the persecution recorded in Acts 8 arose and therefore she could not have given birth in France? Or was it from the "misogynist" Catholic Church which at that time was yet to spring up? Robin Griffith-Jones (2006) notes in his book *The Da Vinci Code and the Secrets of the Temple*, that Dan Brown must have been carried away by some parchments, doctored and named "Dossiers Secrets" by the Frenchman Pierre Plantard who founded the "Priory of Sion" in the 1950s¹⁷ (Brown claimed the Priory of Sion was an European secret society founded in 1099). He did this to lay rightful claim as heir to the kings of France.¹⁸

Secondly, the claim that Mary was Jesus' wife is too far fetched. The author even stated that the social decorum at that time forbade a Jewish man to be unmarried (p. 330). The question is: Did the social decorum at that time permit a woman (married for that matter) to seat among twelve men at a meal as important as the Passover and leave her head uncovered as seen in the picture of the Last Supper? Also, we know that Jewish men and women did live in the wilderness, some in a celibate state as a manifestation of their dedication to God.¹⁹ Besides, from the accounts of Jesus' life and teachings in the Gospels, can we say Jesus was one who cared much about the social decorum of the time? If Mary Magdalene had been married to Jesus, she would have been distinguished by reference to a male connection as in the case of the five other Marys mentioned in the New Testament (cf. Lk.1:30-31; Jn.11:1; Mt. 27:56; Jn 19:25; Acts 12:12). The allegation also, that the church branded Mary a prostitute to erase her ties with Jesus, is false. This error may have arisen from a homily by Pope Gregory the Great in 591 in which he mistook her for the woman Luke calls the Sinful woman (cf. Lk. 7:36-50).²⁰ But this is not a doctrine of the Church. On the contrary, she is mentioned prominently in the four gospels; most of the Church Fathers praised her and the Catholic Church celebrates her feast day on 22nd July every year. What greater honor can one be accorded than these? The novel also tells of Sophie Neveu seeing the hint of a bosom in the effeminate looking figure in the *Last Supper*. This is not true. The only hint of a bosom is in the viewer's mind. What Langdon described as "Scotoma" (p.243), is actually at work again. The authors of the book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* propose that Leonardo Da Vinci believed in the heretical notion that Jesus had a twin brother. This was the belief that Thomas,

called the twin (cf. (Jn.21:20), was the twin brother of Jesus. Leonardo portrayed this in several of his works. *The Last Supper* depicts two virtually identical Christs.²¹

Now looking at the Gnostic gospels and their evidence of these claims, we shall first of all note that the key part of the text quoted by Teabing is broken due to age. It reads thus:

*And the companion of the...Mary Magdalene...her
more than...the disciples...to kiss her often on her...
Philip 63:33-36*²²

If this is the present condition of the text, it would be a great act of presumption to interject the words put there by the author as seen in the x-ray of the Code. Besides, contrary to Teabing's explanation, the word the author of Philip used for "Companion" is a word borrowed from the Coptic language (Greek) which is "Koinonos" and means "Companion". This is not the ordinary Greek word for wife which is "Gyne", but for sister in a spiritual sense.²³ By and large the Gnostic gospels cannot help us understand Christ, for they present a different view of God, Christ, salvation, revelation and spirituality. We therefore state once more that Mary Magdalene was never married to Jesus. In fact, she was not even of royal descent.

SOME ANTECEDENTS TO THE DA VINCI CODE

It is a belief among some philosophers that every effect must have a cause. To this effect, we seek to have a look at what really might have inspired or influenced Dan Brown into writing his famous novel: *The Da Vinci Code*, beginning with some remote or immediate cause of opposition to Christ.

The first opposition to Christ came with no fault of His from King Herod for His being prophesied as a king who will come to liberate the world (Matt.2:13). King Herod hearing about His birth sought to kill Him, but Christ was able to escape with the help of the message that came from God to the Magi and to his parents who ran away with him to Egypt. When he claims to be before Abraham, his fellow Jews wanted to stone him on the grounds that he claimed to be God while they saw and knew him only as a man who is not yet 50 years (Jn.8:57-59). Now, we shall see that Christ's claim to be God by himself and by the Church has been a point of controversy as it appears very clearly in *The Da Vinci Code* which to some extent is the cradle of Dan Brown's motivating factor, that is, to oppose the divinity of Christ.

Man is ruled by his ideas. The writers of the *Da Vinci Hoax* rightly observed that Dan Brown is a non-traditional Christian and appears to have a sincere, even deep dislike for the historical, traditional Christian beliefs, but has a strong belief in a variety of feminist notions about God.²⁴ They pointed out that the major theme of the Code is the call to a recovery of the "Sacred Feminism" and revitalized worship of a goddess. This is evident in his own words as quoted: "Two thousand years ago, we lived in a world of gods and goddesses. Today we live in a world solely of Gods, where women in most cultures have been stripped of their spiritual power,"²⁵ thus, the Code draws its inspiration from the goddess spirituality.

As a matter of fact, Dan Brown was not a Christian in the traditional sense of the word, thus he sought to destroy faith in Jesus Christ and the teaching authority of

the Church. Ashomolowo Matthew, founder and senior pastor of Kingsway International Christian Center (KICC), in *Newswatch*, June 26, 2006, p.25, observed that Dan Brown was influenced by a group of people who around AD 400-500, rose in the Church to oppose the Trinity and the Divinity of Christ. According to him, "They argued that Christ could not have been Lord, and he could not have been God and that he was an ordinary man". No wonder then that Carl E. Olson and Sandra Miesel (2004), clearly stated: "More than just fiction or an entertaining book, the chart-topping novel was purposefully written to challenge what people believe about God, Jesus Christ, the Bible, Mary Magdalene, religion, history and the nature of truth itself".²⁶ He sought to redefine and mutilate Catholicism and by this sought its destruction from the roots.

Reading through the novel, there are three major books that seemed to have really pushed Dan Brown into writing this 'thriller': *The Templar Revelation*, *Holy Blood*, *Holy Grail* and the Gnostics gospels especially those of Philip, Mary Magdalene and Thomas. While the Gnostics gospels depicted Mary's closeness to Jesus and claimed that she was the Apostle of the Apostles and above all was married to Jesus Christ, the *Holy Blood*, *Holy Grail* and *The Templar Revelation* commonly held that Jesus was not so much the Son of God as a devoted son of the goddess and they denied his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead, thus establishing that historical, creedal Christianity is a lie, an elaborate ruse born out of the thirst for power and a violent desire to suppress the truth about Jesus: that he was a mere mortal or a married man with lofty political goals or the high priest of an Egyptian mystery religion.²⁷

About the Holy Grail, Robin Griffith-Jones tells us that it developed from being seen as a shallow dish that held the Eucharistic host to a precious stone decorated with gold that gives life to the dying and later to the Chalice of the Last Supper in which the blood of Christ was collected.²⁸ The authors of *The Da Vinci Hoax*, borrowed from P.M Matarasso's *Quest of the Holy Grail* to say that "...the Grail itself is the symbol of God's grace. At once the dish of the Last Supper, the vessel which received the effusion of Christ's blood...are the mysteries of the Eucharist unveiled"²⁹ Taking a leaf from there, Dan Brown implored the Last Supper painting of Leonardo Da Vinci.

The painting of the *Last Supper* by Leonardo Da Vinci showed among the apostle, a seeming image of a woman whom Dan Brown interpreted to be Mary Magdalene. It might interest you to know that Dan Brown got the title of his book by combining the painter's name with his painting which he believed to be coded. Some of the appeals of Brown's novel are said to be undoubtedly due to its use of the renaissance genius and its striking claims about the meaning and content of his painting. More so, Dan Brown is said to have explained that he was first exposed to this fact by an unnamed instructor while attending an unidentified art school in Spain. Accordingly, his instructor told the class that although there is not a chalice depicted in the painting,³⁰ the Holy Grail can still be found seated next to Jesus, that is, Mary Magdalene.³⁰ Added to this painting are the paintings of the Mona Lisa and the Virgin of the Rocks.

All these put together, informed Dan Brown's novel which was nothing but an appeal to individualism and the exaltation of the experiential which means a renouncement of doctrine, dogma and rules and harbours the notion that truth cannot be known.³¹

THE CHALLENGES OF THE CODE ON DOGMATIC TEACHINGS OF THE CHURCH

By dogmatic teachings we mean truths revealed by God (directly and formally), which are presented by the Church for belief, as revealed by God, either through a solemn decision of the extraordinary Magisterium (Pope or Council) or through the ordinary and general Magisterium of the Church (Episcopacy). It is rooted in the divine word or the Church's tradition - *fides divina* and *fides catholica* respectively.³² The following teachings and doctrines amongst of the Church face challenges from the Da Vinci Code: The Trinity, The Motherhood of God (Theotokos) and Dogmatic Constitution on Divine revelation (Dei Verbum).

The Trinity: The Trinity (Trinitate) coined by Tertullian, refers to the three divine persons of Godhead. They are the same in essence and equal in dignity and majesty. These persons are God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. The Divine word, Jesus, must of necessity be united to the God of the universe and the Holy Spirit must have his habitation and abode in God. Thus, it is absolutely necessary that the Divine Triad be summed up and gathered into a unity... by that unity it means the sovereign God of the universe.³³ Laurence Cantwell S.J reflected on the equality of the three persons of the Trinity when he wrote: "This is the Catholic faith, to venerate one God in Trinity and Trinity in unity; not confusing the persons; not dividing the Essence... The Father is God. The Son is God. The Holy Spirit is God. And yet there are not three Gods but one God only."³⁴

The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. Deny divinity of the son (Jesus) and you think of the Holy Spirit as a vague manifestation of divine power at work in the Church. But there is one indivisible Godhead; the self-same dominion is wielded fully by Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus and the Father are one (Jn.20:30). To deny the divinity of Jesus (the second person of the Trinity) is tantamount to destroying the truthfulness of the Trinity in general. Christ is a God-made-man and not God-inspired-man as depicted by Brown: "Jesus Christ was a historical figure of staggering influence, perhaps the most enigmatic and inspirational leader the world has ever seen."³⁵ This denies him consubstantiality with the Father (Homoousios).

Motherhood of God (Theotokos): Viewing Brown's work from the ambient of church history, we will see Nestorianism resurfacing. If Jesus' divinity is downplayed, the dogma of Theotokos, Mary being the Mother of God will be endangered. She will simply be Christ Bearer (Christotokos) or Mother of the man Jesus. No wonder Da Vinci painted a bizarre scene - an awkwardly posed Blessed Virgin Mary sitting with Baby Jesus... Instead of the usual Jesus' blessing John the Baptist, Da Vinci reversed the case in *The Madonna Of The Rocks*.³⁶ However, Theotokos is biblically based as demonstrated by Jn. 14:8-9; Lk.1:32, 35, Jn.10:35 and Jn.10:30, just to mention a few. Regarding those who do not accept Theotokos, Cyril of Alexandria issued out twelve anathemas: The first states: "If anyone does not acknowledge that Emmanuel is in truth God, and the holy Virgin is in consequence Theotokos, for she brought forth after the flesh the Word of God who has become flesh, let him be anathema."³⁷ Jesus is the Logos, that is, Word and Reason. Even some philosophers agreed that the Logos is the artificer of the universe, for instance Zeno and Cleanthes.³⁸ Supposing Brown's *Da Vinci Code* is correct, then the truth of the Eucharist will be put in question. We believe and worship it acknowledging Christ's real presence there as incarnate God.³⁹ If the divine nature of Christ is denied, then his flesh could not give life either in salvation history as in Holy Communion.

Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: This deals with the manifestation of God's redemptive love to man through His Word... The divine revelation is carried out through Christ the Word made flesh by the power of the Holy Spirit. By this divine revelation, the invisible God (Col.1:15; 1Tim.1:17) from the fullness of His love, addresses men and women as His friends and moves among them (Ex. 33:11). Jesus therefore is the mediator and sum total of revelation (2Cor.1:20; 3:16-4:6; Heb.1:1-2). This revelation is traceable to the Patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. The entire Old Testament is a preparation for the coming Messiah, the Son of God himself, beginning with it the idea of the Proto-Evangelium (Gen. 3:15). If Jesus is simply a mortal, then the Old Testament expectation of the Messiah (Christ) and its fulfillment in the New Testament are hogwash.

The Church dogmatically holds that Sacred Scriptures are divinely inspired and inerrant. Inspiration means the divine origin of the Scripture, that is, it is God who influenced the authors of the Old and New Testament books of the Bible. Inerrancy refers to the truth that the Scripture is free from errors theologically and doctrinally, because there may be chronological and scientific errors in it. However the reality is that the Bible is a book of faith. God is truth, infallible and He inspired the authors. Thus the Bible is inerrant. But we must bear in mind that the authors were human beings with limitations and that they wrote in human language. If the Da Vinci Code were to be right, then inspiration and inerrancy of Sacred Scripture become a scandal to Christians.

Internal evidence as regards the inspiration and inerrancy to the Scripture is found in Is.40:8; 55:10-11; Jer.1:19; Hab.2:2-3; 2Tim.3:14-17; 2Pet.1:19-21; Heb.4:12-13, etc. In some Jewish writings, the Israelites had believed in the inspiration of Moses, the prophets, authors of wisdom literature and the priests, as servants of Yahweh. The Old Testament is quoted in the new Testament about 350 times. This shows that Jesus and the apostles shared the belief of Judaism in the divine origin of the scripture.⁴⁰ Regarding extra biblical Sacred Scripture, Vatican I {1869-1870} maintained that the church accepts the scriptures not because they are approved by her authority... but because God is the author through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. More of these evidences are found in Chapter 3, Nos. 11, 12 and 13 of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of Vatican II. Similarly, Popes Leo XIII in his *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), Decree on the Pontifical Biblical Commission (February 13, 1905), Benedict XV's *Spiritus Paraclitus* (1920), and Pius XII's *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943) have contributed immensely toward this direction.

THE CHALLENGES OF THE CODE ON CONTEMPORARY CHRISTOLOGY AND ECCLESIOLOGY

We have seen the challenges of the code on the dogmatic teachings of the church, with particular reference to the Trinity, Motherhood of God (Theotokos) and Divine Revelation. We shall now examine its challenges on contemporary Christology and Ecclesiology.

Christology: We have given a critique of the claims in the code, but let us imagine what this book *The Da Vinci Code* would do the conception on the doctrine of Christ held by the present day Christian. If Christ were not the Son of God, then indeed all hope is lost for the average Christian whose most popularly quoted verse in the Bible especially in Nigeria is "For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in Him may not perish, but

have eternal life." (Jn.3:16). The Code ridicules and challenges the very foundation of Christianity which is the belief in the Word of God, who existed with God from the beginning. This word was incarnated by the power of the Holy Spirit, was born of a virgin and died for the sins of all men and women. Three days later he rose from the dead and ascended into Heaven, from where He shall return to judge all peoples at the end of time. These are the articles of faith professed in the creed.

If Christ was a mortal prophet, then he could not have existed with God from the beginning; there would be no need of a virgin birth and he could definitely not have risen from the dead. Therefore, the New Testament will have to be rewritten and indeed the whole history of the world in which these beliefs have played a major role. But if this is true, the author would have done well to tell us what the theology or basic doctrine of the Church that Christ had wanted Mary Magdalene to carry on would have been. Remember that no other prophet in the Bible founded a church.

Ecclesiology: The Code also strikes at the roots of everything that is Catholic. To start with it discredits the validity and honesty of the Catholic Church. It means the Church is built on lies and is only a tool for politics and social exploitation. To say in Teabing's words, that "we worship the gods of our fathers is to say the Church is a collection of people on a wild goose chase in the hope of a fool's paradise". If the words of the Code are to be swallowed, then the church in all her dishonesty is not worth a dime as regards morals and social matters. She would therefore best keep her mouth shut when such issues arise. It would mean the church's position on such issues as sexual morality, contraception, the dignity of human life, and social Justice should be re-evaluated.

The church's insistence on celibacy for her priest is also questioned. Imagine the number of young virile men who were fooled into fighting their passions and suppressing their libido just because they were taught that their Master did it. Little wonder some unable to control their sexual appetite, yielded to their desires and caused a great deal of scandal. The Church would therefore have to permit her priests to get married. Who knows perhaps the Church's position on same-sex marriages would also be ignored. After all, she has not been telling humanity the truth from the beginning. The Code therefore challenges the origins of the Church, her hierarchical structure with the Supreme Pontiff as visible head and believed to be the Vicar of the Son of God (*Vicarius Filii Dei*), her methods of administration and her norms, rites and practices, which are all built on the idea that Jesus Christ was true God and true man who was tempted in every way that we have, but did not sin. (cf. Heb. 4:15).

THE DA VINCI CODE AND AFRICAN CHRISTOLOGY

Having seen most claims of *The Da Vinci Code* in attempting to deny the divinity of Christ and to discredit the Church and bearing in mind the topic of our discussion, it is of great importance that we consider the cradle of the African beliefs and their interpretation of the person of Jesus Christ vis-à-vis the claims of *The Da Vinci Code*. On this note we begin with the Africans relationship with his God (gods) to see how this has help his understanding of the person of Jesus Christ.

THE AFRICAN AND TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION

John Mbiti in his book *Introduction To African Religion* stated that Africans are notoriously religious and that they carry their religion wherever they go. This explains how committed an African is or would be when it comes to matters of faith and beliefs. Looking at that we call to mind the African belief in God (gods) and deities, sacred places and shrines, ancestral spirits (spirit mediators), the power and roles of (chief) priests in the community, etc; derived from the religious system of the non-Christian African identified with the various ethnic cultures of pre-colonial Africa as they interacted with one another and influence one another to different degrees.⁴¹

In most African traditional societies (theologies) the idea of a Supreme Being is distinctly apparent, whether he is conceived as creator or begetter, whether or not he is a part of man's proximate experience. Generally, the Supreme Being is conceived as the creator of the universe and the owner of all that there is. More so, in his relation with man, A. Shorter (1977) affirmed that the Supreme Being is not alone, but with three or more other levels of spiritual beings which are referred to as modes, mediators, divinities, etc. While the modes are conceived as different manifestations of the Supreme Being the mediators are conceived as created beings who are nevertheless associated with the activity of the supreme being; and the divinities as subordinate beings, whose activity is to a greater or lesser extent independent of the Supreme Being. The African in his religious expression relates to these different orders of being both in his life experience and in formal worship.⁴²

The Supreme Being the African believes is directly present in human experience and is directly approached in simple form of worship which takes the form of direct invocation of the creator and of simple offering to him⁴³ like of first fruits oblation after the food gathering expedition (New yam festival of the Igbo in Nigeria). Shorter exemplified this belief in the Supreme Being by quoting this exultation of the *pygmy* theism in Zaire as they call him "Kmvoum", and it says, "In the beginning was Kmvoum, today is Kmovoum, tomorrow will be Kmvoum..."⁴⁴. The mediators are the ancestral spirits, the good spirits who sought and won the favor of the Supreme Being during their life time and whose friendship with the living today is pledged of future blessings and they are addressed by some or most African cultures as great elders, the great mediators. since the African believed that the Supreme Being was the ultimate source of all blessings; rain, good harvest, plentiful meat, children, victory in war peace and harmony etc, he saw his experience of and communication with the Supreme Being as channeled almost exclusively through spirit mediators⁴⁵. However, in some cultures (Kimbu Nuer) as according to Shorter, the ancestors and the spirit are the Supreme Being as well as God. They are separate being having a mystical unity. The Yoruba of Nigeria has it on the other hand, that the relation between the divinities with the Divinity can be intimate and sometimes tensed, but are still worshipped together.⁴⁶

Places of worship are believed to be sacred and are highly regarded as such. This is because they are places where God's name was invoked and sacrifices were offered for one favour or another. Priests were believed to speak God's message and so were also considered as prophets, as men always consulted them to know the mind of God (the gods). This clearly shows that even before Christianity, as observed by M. Mununguri (1998), "...the African already knew God. He knew his closeness to him but as unknown, for he was ignorant of his intimate secrets..

he saw God as transcendent yet immanent, near and far at the same time...⁴⁷ until
his closeness to him was revealed in and by the person of Christ.

AFRICAN CONCEPTION OF THE PERSON OF CHRIST

As already mentioned, *The Da Vinci Code* tries to remove everything divine and Godly from the person Christ, claiming that Christ was only a mortal man who lived a good life as a prophet while he was married to Mary Magdalene. This is to affect in a negative way the Christian conception of the person of Christ and his life as the Son of God and as God in himself. Contrary to this, the African from his traditional beliefs in the Supreme Being, modes, mediators and divinities, sees Christ as the God not different from the one that his ancestors had come to know as the creator of the world and the owner of all that there is, for Christ has come to fulfill the faith his ancestors had in God they adored without really knowing him and to bring to fulfillment the African longing for life.⁴⁸

Recognizing this, M. Mununguri (1998), tells us that in order to express his adherence to the Son of the God of his ancestors and to express his gifts and roles in bringing life into the African community, the African addresses Christ as celestial host, proto-ancestor, eldest of the great family, living mediator, great master initiator, etc. These titles, according to him express a new closeness to the God of his ancestors through the event of his becoming man (Incarnation).

As New Age religions invites people to make up their own deities, Carl E. Olson and Sandra Miesel (2004) observed that *The Da Vinci Code* "...invites them to invent their own history, to replace the gospel of Jesus Christ with a scripture that cater to contemporary preoccupation like feminism..."⁴⁹ as it tries to suggest the ordination of women into the priesthood which even in the African society is not common. Even though it was a deliberate attempt to discredit the Christ image understood by the African and the role of the Church in the life of the African, he is convinced that no matter how complex society is, there are certain roles that are meant for men and for men alone. Thus the African understanding of Christ as a proto-ancestor corresponds better to the idea that the African have about the role played by those who have preceded us in the relationship with the Lord of life. The African's ancestor, as already seen, plays a determinative role in the life of the tribe, the clan and the extended family. They are presumed to receive life from God and to transmit it to the living terrestrials and that is what Christ has come to do (Jh 1:1-3, 17:5) "Christ is the ancestor per excellence because he fulfills all the criteria required by African tradition to be created among the ancestors and he goes beyond these criteria of selection in the sense that the life that he gives is himself".⁵⁰ This R.J. Schreiter (2002) added: "through his death, therefore, Christ becomes our brother ancestor in fullness. By being linked with Adam, Christ's ancestorship acquires a transcendental quality since he is able to transcend family, clan and racial limitations in a way that our ancestors cannot."⁵¹

By virtue of his being the Son of God, he is the eldest, since for the African, in the view of Mununguri, the first who is the eldest is God and Christ His Son has the same qualifier as that of his Father because he is the image of the unseen God, the first born of all creation (1 Cor 15:20; Rom 11:16) and he automatically becomes master initiator who introduces the Africans into a knowledge of God as an African initiator introduces the youth into the traditions of the community and into adult society. Through his teaching, Christ reveals to the African the will of God and the coming of his reign in the world.

Chiefs and kings are highly revered in the African community. To demonstrate this reality in relation to the person of Christ, Schrieter quoted the Bantu prayer that addresses Jesus as "Chief of human beings, may your body and blood give us to be heirs of your power, you the living God...Amen."⁵² This means, therefore, that for the African, Christ is not only a chief but Chief of chiefs who in himself is the living God who assume the nature of man to bring to the African the message of eternal life, taking the role of a prophet (Mt 5:17-18) and afterwards offering himself as an eternal sacrifice, taking the role of a priest (Mk 15:37; Mt 27:46). As a prophet, he is for the African a diviner, seer, revealer of secrets possessions of the spirit or just the man of God and as priest he is the medium through which the live giving power of God comes to men because he conforms within himself the life force which he mediates to his people. "He is himself the messenger, the message and the medium of communication. He communicates himself to the African in himself and by himself and the Africans call him 'Muonbezi' (in Swahili) or 'Molobeli' (in Lingala) which means 'intercessor and mediator'.⁵³

Finally, to express the greatness of Christ by the African, Mununguri tells us that all these names drawn from African anthropology and sociology will always be limited in their ability to express the person of Christ, the Incarnate Word, but attached to an aspect of the salvific activity of Christ, they translate the experience that the African has had of God in and what he expects since He has resolved to reveal Himself definitely in his Incarnate Son for "...truly the risen Christ opens for the African a perspective of a full life, a life without end, something to which the African aspired from the beginning..."⁵⁴ for he is God, the God of his ancestors.

EVALUATION

From the discussion above, we have seen from the x-ray, that the Code openly attacked the divinity of Christ and claimed that he was married to Mary Magdalene. It condemned the Church's position as a vehicle of truth and claimed that right from history the Church has been anti-feminist. We have also seen that *The Da Vinci Code* would have been written out of some personal motive for economic reasons, to preach feminism, and above all, to ridicule the Christ of God and his Church by misinterpreting certain facts about the Bible and the Holy Grail with an influence from Leonardo Da Vinci's paintings especially of the Last Supper. Again we have seen that the Code posed a lot of challenges to the dogmatic teachings of the Church (about The Trinity, The Motherhood of God - Theotokos-, and Divine Revelation - God's revelation as recorded in the Sacred Scripture) and to contemporary Christology and Ecclesiology to the extent that some people are beginning to cast doubt on the gospel message and on the Church as the vehicle of truth where the Good News has become bad news. And lastly we have looked at the African and his religious expression as it affects his understanding of the person of Christ so as to afford a background to the evaluation proper.

Now, even though we have presented some basic problems raised by *The Da Vinci Code* and have tried to offer some critical evaluation of them, we wish to offer some basic ones based on the understanding that we have of African Christology.

To establish that Christ was not God, Dan Brown first claimed that Christ was married to Mary Magdalene and had a child. His claim was on the fact that every human person is androgynous⁵⁶ with which Christ would not be complete if he was not married. Monsignor Aniagwu, the Parish Priest of St. Leo's Catholic

Church Ikeja Lagos, as reported in Newswatch, 26 June, 2006, reacted to this claim from the point of view of Jesus' mission of saving the world to which Christ chose not to marry. This applies to an aspect of African traditional priesthood but not strictly. We know in the African community certain sacrifices demand that the priest should abstain from every kind of sexual relation so that he will be clean and worthy to offer such sacrifice. If this is true for the African traditional priest, how much more for Christ the Supreme High Priest who was to offer the Supreme Sacrifice? Christ's celibate life was not a thing to contest whether or not it was self evident.

To say that Christ was not God, still from that point of view, is completely superfluous to the African Christian. This is because, for the African, Christ is not only a Priest and an Ancestor, but the God of his ancestors who has chosen to reveal Himself through His Son Jesus Christ. By this the African will not tolerate any idea of a married God since right from the onset, as we have seen, at least from our research, the African has never conceived any divinities who were wives to the Supreme Being. More so, the unity between the Divinity and the divinities partially suggests the unity between the three persons of the Trinity (God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit) as they are adored and worshipped together one God for ever and ever.

From the African conception of the ancestor as one who lived and established a biological or spiritual community, one would have agreed with Dan Brown that it is possible that Christ would have been married. But alas, this is not so, the Church rather is the Bride of Christ. The African Christian clearly understands this that is why he or she calls Christ not just an ancestor, but a Proto-Ancestor.

It is good to note that Brown advocacy of feminism was a deliberate attack on the celibate priesthood of the Church and on the Church's refusal to ordain women into the priesthood. The issue of the celibate priesthood has already been dealt with when we were dealing with the Jesus' marriage controversy as we argued from the point of view of his mission. On the issue of the ordination of women, the authors of *The Da Vinci Hoax* in their critique of *The Da Vinci Code* affirmed that there is a unique difference between the male and the female sexes. They say while the male sex symbolizes God in His transcendence, the female sex symbolizes creation. This makes it clear that not every role performed by a man that a woman does. Judging from the African conception of Christ as a priest and the roles he has to play, it has never been heard, at least from our research, that a woman was made a priest or even a member of the elders' council. With this, women completely have no place in the priesthood of the Catholic Church. However they share in the common priesthood of Christ by virtue of their baptism.

Finally, as we share the view of Carl E. Olson and Sandra Miesel, "unlike the deities of the mysteries (whom Dan Brown compared to Christ) who were nebulous figures of an imaginary past, the Divine Being whom the Christian worshipped as Lord was a real person on earth..."⁵⁶ So, despite the fact that *The Da Vinci Code* depicted Christianity as a deliberate sham, Christians as mindless followers of lies and superstition, and Church leaders as deceptive, power-hungry murderers, the African Christians and Christians in general will never take this serious because the Code has only succeeded in chasing the wind.

CONCLUSION

And this shows us in his book that the Holy Grail is not a myth. When the world is at its height or when the worst, the horns must still be the mountains, which is what the Holy Grail is. This explains the fact that Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* is not a faithful history work, is a novel and not a historical document. It is a work of fiction, not a member of the church nor a church historian. The dogmatic and historical of the Bible were true, then the Christian faith is a consequence of man's search for the truth. The meaninglessness of our hope is thus exposed.

However, the truth is that the Church's founder is Jesus and truth is the Kingdom. He founded His Church on the Rock (Mt 16:18). The power has prevailed and no power shall prevail over the Church's mystical body. The Church will ever remain relevant despite the growing rate of apostasy. Christians in general and African Christians in particular should bear in mind that Dan Brown is not the first person to propound these unsuccessful oppositions to the Church and His Church and there is no assurance that he will be the last. The bona fide earliest opponents Jesus' divinity (Cf. Mt 3:17-18, & Mt 27, Mk 16:7). Likewise heretics such as Arius and championed around HERETIC, by an Alexandrian presbyter Arius, pastor of the person of Christ. In spite of these, the Church is still waxing stronger, therefore the faith of Africans in the Church should not be shaken instead it calls for deeper faith in witnessing to Christ for He is God for ever and ever. Even Jesus Christ himself truly prophesied that "the gates of Hell can never prevail against His Church". (Matt 16:18)

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