

FACT, FAITH, and CONFUSION

By Gary Wayne Jensen

Dan Brown's DaVinci Code (Doubleday, 2003) has been a hot item for almost two years. It has for months found a home at the top of the New York Times "*Best Sellers List*." Reviewers hail the work as "brilliant" and "riveting." Critics, on the other hand, have labored to expose its flaws. I side with the critics. The DaVinci Code is riddled with errors, not only in its details, but also in its premises. That it is written as fiction does not negate the damage spread by its anti-Catholic (incidentally, this writer is not Catholic) and anti-Christian agenda. Yet, again, his attempt is not successful. The very notion, for example, that the Roman Catholic Church reeled in all the Scriptures already in circulation, deleted their embarrassing "feminine" attributes, and got contemporary believers to swallow a newly-invented, masculinized god-head, is utter rubbish. Such a scheme was both sociologically impossible to pull off at the time, and it is unsupported by any reputable evidence. Apologist Hank Hannagraaff and historian Dr. Paul Maier have responded with their book, The DaVinci Code: Fact or Fiction? (Tyndale, 2004) in order to set the record straight on Brown's long list of mistaken assertions.

For all the attention this book has already received, however, there is one aspect that is not adequately covered. In addition to his explicit attacks, Dan Brown also distorts the very definition of faith in the biblical sense of the term. In a conversation between the two main characters, for example, Robert Langdon says to Sophie:

"Every faith in the world is based on fabrication. That is the definition of faith—acceptance of that which we imagine to be true, that which we cannot prove."
[Proceeding, as Langdon does, to allege contradictory documents of all the world religions, including Christianity, Langdon continues,] *"Those who truly understand their faiths, understand the stories are metaphorical"* (p.341, 2).

To ensure a tight critique here it is important to throw Brown a few bones. In truth, some aspects of Christianity are metaphorical. This is not news. The open teaching of Christianity from the beginning is that the God of the Bible is not a *literal* "Father," in the sense of having a physical body, and Jesus is not a *literal* "Son of the Father" in the sense of being born from a goddess! Language by its nature falls short in expressing these matters, which elementary wisdom understands. Secondly, Christians also concede that by strict definition Christianity is not absolutely provable (this situation is in fact parallel with scientific and historical inquiry in general). Notice, however, that atheism, agnosticism, humanism, scientism, and post-modernism aren't provable as faith positions either. One must rather do the work of actually weighing the case for each position and choose the strongest position.

Beyond these two points Brown utterly confuses his readers just as he appears confused himself. What we find in the above quotation are a series of non-sequiturs, half-truths, and the confusion of terminology. Readers may rightly wonder whether Brown knows in his own mind what he is talking about. His basic intention, however, is hard to miss. The author wishes to convey to his readers that faith is an irrational act.

This gets at the heart of perhaps the most fundamental challenge in modern Christianity—the need to recover for ourselves as Christians, and to commend to our world, a biblical and accurate definition of faith. Is faith a leap into the dark for no reason? Or has there been a costly perversion of a term that betrays instead a fundamental confusion about faith, both inside and outside Christianity?

The contemporary attack on Christianity by critics from outside in fact has less to do with the lobbing of embarrassing facts into our yard than it does with relegating faith to the realm of mere feelings and the irrational. Note, for example, Stephen J. Gould's *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*. (Ballantine, 1999), p.22; and also Joseph Campbell's conversation with a Catholic priest, in *The Power of Myth with Bill Moyers*. (Anchor, 1991), p.266; to name just a few. Yet non-Christians are only part of the problem! In my twenty plus years as a pastor I have often been confronted by Christians (and non-Christians as well) who were offended at my attempts to "defend" our faith. And two personal friends of mine were recently asked to leave their positions as pastors of a large Christian congregation because they sought to equip their church with skills for defending Christianity in our secular climate. It seems that the challenge of proclaiming the Gospel in our day demands not merely the defending of the Gospel, but also defending its defense!

We must recover a sense of faith that includes the rational because the Bible itself points us in that direction. While we are not called to understand God's ways in an *exhaustive* way (Job, Isaiah 55:9), and while it is true that we often "*see in a mirror dimly*" (1 Corinthians 13:12), the Bible does lead us to believe it is *reasonable* to trust Him. Nowhere in Scripture (Matthew 18:3 notwithstanding) is it ever hinted that we must deny our intelligence to trust in Him. To the contrary readers are commanded to love the Lord your God with "all your *mind*" (Matthew 22:37). Indeed, the prophets urged their hearers to *rethink* the folly of idolatry (Isaiah 44:9). Paul writes that our refusal to *think* will be one of the standards of judgment against sinners (Romans 1:18). The Psalm writer urges us to *consider* (a rational act) the reality of God (Psalm 8:3).

Quite apart from the Bible, the word "faith" is consistent with a reasonable act. When you say, "*I have faith in you, John,*" do you mumble under your breath, "*so I'll throw my caution to the wind.*"? Of course not! Rather, you are effectively saying, "*Your track record of the past gives me confidence in you for the future!*" The denial of rationality in the act of faith demeans the person we say we are trusting. It is rationally-based confidence, on the other hand, that alone crowns faith's object with dignity.

And the message of Christianity is indeed worthy of your faith in the sense in which we have been describing faith. It is not within the scope of this essay to lay out the broad range of supporting evidence for the truth of the God of the Bible. *Reasons to Believe* (www.reasons.org) offers a host of articles and books to that end. You may also access my essay, "*Hoax? Myth? or Literally True?*," together with a host of others, at my website, www.christianityontheoffense.com. The point here, however, is to invite you to consider the truth of the God of the Bible with your *mind*. Discover for yourself that trusting Him is not nonsense, but the *smartest* choice among alternatives.