The Da Vinci Code
From a Muslim’s Perspective

Introduction

Two summers ago, before boarding the plane from Chicago’s O’Hare airport to New Delhi, I bought the famous bestseller, The Da Vinci Code, to pass my time during the 14 hours non-stop flight. I had heard quite a lot about this novel by Dan Brown, and some of the youths and speakers had asked my opinion on it. So I thought that this would be a good opportunity to go through the novel.

On the Positive Side

My first comment is that don’t forget the nature of the book: it is a novel based on imagination and not on fact. It combines the detective, mystery, crime and conspiracy fiction genres, and a little bit of romance also. The Last Supper’s painting by Leonardo da Vinci is the central theme of this novel, weaving the early Christian history to the conspiracy of the Catholic Church in suppressing the royal bloodline of Jesus and the role of women in order to maintain its control on the church.

Whenever Muslims read anything from Christians that seems to be in line with the Islamic view about Jesus, it indeed incites their interest and momentarily they forget that this is just fiction and not a historical document.

There are some passages of interest for Muslims in The Da Vinci Code:

1. On the Bible:
“The Bible is a product of man, my dear. Not of God. The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds. Man created it as a historical record of tumultuous times, and it has evolved through countless translations, additions, and revisions. History has never had a definitive version of the book.”
(p. 250-251 of March 2006 Anchor Books edition.)

Don’t the Muslims also believe in the Bible as the word of God? It is true that Muslims believe in the Injīl, but the Injīl is not the same as the New Testament (the Christian part of the Bible).

Injīl was a book revealed by Almighty God upon Prophet Jesus himself, it was a divine book while the New Testament is truly the “product of man.” The four gospels in the New Testament are apparently attributed to four authors by the names of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. The earliest of these Gospels, the Gospel of Mark, was written in or about 60-70 CE. (Matthew and Luke relied on two sources: the Gospel of Mark and a document consisting of sayings of Jesus which is no more extant.)

Even the attribution of these four gospels to the four individuals mentioned above is not certain. According to Robert Funk, “All the gospels originally circulated anonymously. Authoritative names were later assigned to them by unknown figures in the early church. In most cases, the names are guesses or perhaps the result of pious wishes.”

While we believe that the original İnnal was comparable to the Qur’ân (in the sense that both are the revelations of God upon His prophets), the four Gospels of the New Testament are only comparable to the narrations in hadith and biographical work on the life of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Many non-Muslim scholars have missed this fundamental difference in the nature of the Qur’ân and the New Testament. The Christian Bible —being a product of man— can be put under historical criticism but the Qur’ân —being a revelation of God— is beyond the scope of historical criticism. As far as the hadith literature is concerned, Muslim scholars have devised a rigorous method of hadith criticism in order to sift the authentic and reliable from the fabricated and unreliable narrations.

2. ON THE NATURE OF JESUS: HUMAN OR DIVINE?

Referring to the famous ecumenical gathering known as the Council of Nicaea (325 CE), Dan Brown’s character, Teabing, speaks:

“At this gathering,” Teabing said, “many aspects of Christianity were debated and voted upon… and, of course, the divinity of Jesus.”

“I don’t follow. His divinity?”

“My dear,” Teabing declared, “until that moment in history, Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet… a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless. A mortal.”

“Not the Son of God?”

“Right,” Teabing said, “Jesus’ establishment as the Son of God was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicaea.” (p. 253, also see p. 277)

As Muslims we have no quarrel with this narration since we believe that Jesus was not the Son of God but a mortal prophet… a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless. A mortal. Nonetheless, the change in the status of Jesus from a mortal to a divine is based on Roman influence upon Christianity. When the Hebrew metaphorical expression of “son of God” (in the meaning of “beloved of God”) reached the Greeks, it was taken in its literal meaning since they already believed in the concept of son of God. Thus Jesus “the metaphorical son of God” in Hebrew became “the real Son of God” in Greek.

3. ON THE BIRTH OF JESUS & CHRISTMAS

Even declaring the 25th of December as the birthday of Jesus is a fabrication. As Dan Brown makes Teabing speak:

“The pre-Christian God Mithras—called the Son of God and the Light of the World—was born on December 25, died, was buried in a rock tomb, and then resurrected in three days.” (p. 252)

And so when Christianity became the official religion of Rome, the pre-Christian God’s birthday was declared as Jesus’ birthday.

Jesus’ birthday has not been mentioned in the New Testament. The Gospel of Luke only describes the season and the surroundings in which Jesus was born. It describes that Joseph and Mary to whom he was engaged had gone to Bethlehem to be counted in the census: “It so happened while they were there that the time came for her to give birth; and she gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no space for them in the lodge. In that region there were shepherds keeping watch over their flocks in night.” (Luke 2:6-8)

So Mary gave birth in the manger (a feeding trough for sheep) since it was empty at that time because the shepherds of Bethlehem used to take their flocks to the mountainside and fields, and stayed there even at nights.

This shows that the season in which Jesus was born was not winter. The shepherds of Bethlehem always brought their flocks in from the mountainside by mid-October so as to protect the sheep and themselves from the cold rains of winter. If Jesus was born on the 25th of December, the manger would not have been empty.

For the first four centuries, the Christian church did not celebrate the birth of Jesus. So how did the church start celebrating Jesus’ birthday on 25th December?

The Romans were pagans and worshipped many idols. One of their gods was the Sun-god. Every year, on December 25, died, was buried in a rock tomb, and then resurrected in three days. So the pre-Christian God Mithras—called the Son of God and the Light of the World—was born on December 25. Thus, starting in the 4th century, the church in Rome changed the date of the pre-Christian God’s birthday to the date of Jesus’ birthday.

Constantine I, the 4th century Roman emperor, converted to Christianity. Although he and the majority of his citizens became Christians, it was not easy to abandon their pagan customs. They imported some of them into

Vol. 29 * 19 Dhul Hijja 1428 * 29 December 2007 * No. 24
Tel: (905) 707-0982 muhammad57@rogers.com Fax: (905) 737-9781
Christianity—of course, with a different name. The Church which needed the support of Rome obliged; and it declared that the 25th December be celebrated as the birthday of Jesus!5

These aspects of Christianity in *The Da Vinci Code* would indeed be very fascinating to Muslim readers since it confirms their beliefs about Jesus as a Prophet (nabi) and Messenger (rasūl) of God and not as a son of God. Say: He, Allāh, is One, Allāh is the Refuge; neither has He given birth nor has He been born (from anyone); and none is equal to Him. (The Qur’ān, chp. 112)

But they must always remember that this a novel which also promotes ideas which are not acceptable from the Islamic point of view. This is what brings me to my second comment about the novel.

**On the Negative Side**

A Muslim reader must be always conscious of the fact that *The Da Vinci Code* is a novel and not a book on history of religion or theology. There are certain aspects of this story which would be unacceptable even to a Muslim.

1. **MARY MAGDALENE: JESUS’ WIFE?**

   The main theme of *The Da Vinci Code* is the royal bloodline of Jesus. In this plot, Mary Magdalene occupies the central place. Mary Magdalene has been portrayed in the Bible as an ex-prostitute who accepted Jesus and became his devoted follower. Dan Brown transforms Mary Magdalene from a poor ex-prostitute to a royal descent from the House of Benjamin who not only became a close companion of Jesus but also his wife.

   Not only that, the plot thickens further: “Behold,” Teabing proclaimed, “the greatest cover-up in human history. Not only was Jesus Christ married, but He was a father. My dear, Mary Magdalene was the Holy Vessel. She was the chalice that bore the royal bloodline of Jesus Christ. She was the womb that bore the lineage, and the vine from which the sacred fruit sprang forth.” (p. 270)

   So now there is a royal bloodline from Jesus and Mary Magdalene; after his crucifixion, she secretly traveled to France, and gave birth of a daughter whose name was Sarah. (p. 276) Dan Brown’s character in *The Da Vinci Code*, Sophie Venev, is a living descendant of Jesus!

   As Muslims we wouldn’t have any problem with a married Jesus; however, before relating a woman to Jesus as a wife we should have a good historical basis for it. It is true that Islam strongly promotes marriage and that most prophets were married but with consideration to Jesus’ ascension to the heaven, we shouldn’t have difficulty in accepting the view that he was not married. For me, as a Muslim, the final chapter of Jesus’ life-story had not yet been written. Who knows, maybe when he comes back with Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.), Jesus will marry and have children.

2. **FEMININE BASIS OF THE CHURCH**

   Another aspect of *The Da Vinci Code* which comes through clear is that Dan Brown is promoting the feminist agenda against the Catholic Church:

   “The woman they were speaking of,” Teabing explained, “is Mary Magdalene. Peter is jealous of her.”

   “Because Jesus preferred Mary?”

   “Not only that. The stakes were far greater than mere affection. At this point in the gospels, Jesus suspects He will soon be captured and crucified. So He gives Mary Magdalene instructions on how to carry on His Church after He is gone. As a result, Peter expresses his discontent over playing second fiddle to a woman. I daresay Peter was something of a sexist.”

   Sophie was trying to keep up. “This is Saint Peter. The rock on which Jesus built His Church.”

   “The same, except for one catch. According to these unaltered gospels, it was not Peter to whom Christ gave directions with which to establish the Christian Church. It was Mary Magdalene.”

   Sophie looked at him. “You’re saying the Christian Church was to be carried on by a woman?”

   “That was the plan. Jesus was the original feminist. He intended for the future of His Church to be in the hands of Mary Magdalene.” (p. 268)

   Although as Muslims we don’t agree with celibacy of the priests in the Catholic Church and its view of women as obstacle in the path of spirituality, we can’t accept the hypothesis presented by Dan Brown in the novel. Even the Qur’ān talks about the hawāriyun—the disciples of Jesus in a positive way.

   We have no problem in accepting the fact that a woman of ill-repute repents, becomes a sincere follower of Jesus and is highly respected by him, but that she became his successor to lead the Church cannot be sustained. There is no precedence in the history of religions from the Qur’ānic point of view where a woman becomes the successor of a prophet. The first experience in Muslim history when a woman took lead in socio-political matters of the community was a total disaster. The first civil war in Islam was the Battle of Jamal in which ‘Aisha bint Abi Bakr led the rebel forces against the rightful Muslim leader, Imam ‘Ali bin Abi Tālib (a.s.).

3. MIRACLES: FABRICATION OR FACT?

Another aspect which should be a concern to Muslims is the fact The Da Vinci Code downplays the phenomenon of miracle.

Langdon smiled, “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.” (p. 369)

“...The Bible represents a fundamental guidepost for millions of people on the planet...If you and I could dig up documentation that contradicted the holy stories..., should we do that? Should we wave a flag and tell...that Jesus was not born of a literal virgin birth? Those who truly understand their faiths understand the stories are metaphorical.” (p. 370)

Jesus’ birth from virgin Mary is also the belief of the Muslims confirmed in the Qur’ân itself. (3:41-46; 19:16-20) The Qur’ân describes the power of miracles that God had given to Jesus: healing the blind and curing of the lepers; bringing the dead back to life by God’s permission; knowing the things hidden from one’s eyes. (See 3:48)

This passage of The Da Vinci Code reminds me of some Muslim scholars of the early last century in Egypt who became so much impressed by modern science that they started even denying the miracles mentioned in the Qur’ân and started giving scientific explanations for them.

For example, the parting of the river by Prophet Musa was explained away as result of an earthquake! They didn’t realize that by explaining away the parting of the river as an earthquake more questions arise: Why did it only occur when Musa was looking for an escape for his people? Why did it last for so long that his people could cross over? And then why it end right when Pharaoh and his army entered the path? What coincidences!

Another example is the story of Feel in the Qur’ân (chapter 105) where Abraha and his army were destroyed by the birds striking them with pebbles. This was obviously a miracle. But some Egyptian scholars tried to explain the devastation of Abraha and his army as a result of epidemic. This, however, raises many questions: How come it only occurred at the time when Mecca in danger? How did the epidemic afflict only the invading army and not a single Meccan perish because of that disease?

**Closing Remarks:**

As a novel, it has many twists filled with mysteries and unexpected turns—and that is what keeps the reader glued to the book till the end. It is a good read; but remember, it is a novel and not a book of history or theology.

***