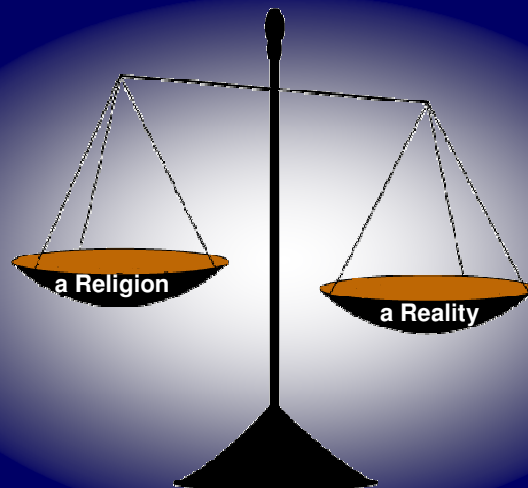


The Real Scandal of Religion

*a response to popular scandals,
conspiracies and delusions
about the person
of Jesus*



MICHAEL SHARROW

And face it – if there’s no resurrection for Christ, everything we’ve told you is smoke and mirrors, and everything you’ve staked your life on is smoke and mirrors. Not only that, but we would be guilty of telling a string of barefaced lies about God, all these affidavits we passed on to you verifying that God raised up Christ – sheer fabrications if there is no resurrected Christ...If Christ weren’t raised, then all you’re doing is wandering about in the dark, as lost as ever...If all we get out of Christ is a little inspiration for a few short years, we’re a pretty sorry lot!

- St. Paul of Tarsus

First Apostolic Letter to the Church in Corinth
[The Message]

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with a man who says he is a poached egg—or he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool...or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher.

- C. S. Lewis

Mere Christianity

Introduction

At a recent family gathering, a discussion briefly broke out around the general themes and claims of the *Da Vinci Code*. While not all present had seen the movie or read the fascinating novel by Dan Brown, all were at least generally aware of its themes and popular scandal. One family member, having recently seen the movie, commented that while much of the movie was enjoyably fictional, they found the concluding remarks by some of the main characters to be profoundly insightful. The movie dialogue excerpt being referenced was:

Robert Langdon (Tom Hanks): *History shows us Jesus Christ was an extraordinary man, a human inspiration – that’s it. Nothing more. That’s all the evidence proves. It only matters what you believe. Why does it have to be that Jesus was human or divine? What if human is divine?*¹

Sir Teabing (Ian McKellen): *The divinity of Christ was not even doctrine until some council in Nicea led by a radical pagan emperor (Constantine) decided he was! What if you found out that the greatest story in history was a lie?*

That scene from Ron Howard’s adaptation of Brown’s novel takes some literary license with its representation of the following dialogue found towards the end of the actual novel:

Marie Chauvel: *It is the mystery and wonderment that serve our souls, not the [object of faith] itself. The beauty of [the faith] lies in her ethereal nature...For some the [faith] is [something] that will bring them everlasting life. For others, it is the quest for lost documents and secret history. And for most, I suspect, [it] is simply a grand idea...a glorious unattainable treasure that somehow, even in today’s world of chaos, inspires us.*

In the course of the conversation, the final comment was made that, “The closing lines of the movie really had a good point. The church is so established, and there’s so much institutional investment in Christianity that even if Christ was found out to be different than we think or these scandals were true, the faith wouldn’t disappear. The good of it is in what you believe and choose to make out of it [Christianity].”

¹ Brown, Dan; *The Da Vinci Code* © 2003

With that, the truly scandalous assertion of the *Da Vinci Code* was embraced — hook, line and sinker. A vast majority of the “scandal” in the novel was overtly fictional restatement of history and elaboration of various conspiracy theories. While the overt plot scandals were more popularly highlighted in various media outlets, the real propositional scandal was the subtle ending dialogue: that Christianity was a mental relief for the people, with value being in the personal comfort found in believing.

While concepts of pluralism (all religions are the same) and postmodern religious thought has been a growing reality for many decades, it was shocking to hear the core conclusion so literally articulated. It was the casual conclusion reached by some family members during this conversation that confirmed that it is necessary and worthwhile to address some of the “real scandals” of a “religion” as hinted at by media pieces such as the *Da Vinci Code*.

Religion as a “Nice Social Institution”

Without the curt tone of his predecessor, Dan Brown’s proposition in this was highly unoriginal. It was in the nineteenth century that Karl Marx, the famed founder of socialistic and communist economics, said, “Religion is the opiate of the people.”

There is no shortage of “nice” institutions in modern society. Between local and federal government, schools(s), humanitarian/civic groups (i.e. Red Cross, Boy Scouts, United Way), corporate/organizational employers, industry groups, clubs/social networks and the like, modern mankind is awash in institutional outlets. Marx was very true in his insightful observation — organized, institutional and systematic assemblies around shared sentiments serves to calm the human qualms of their exposed vulnerability and partial knowledge. Like any analgesic, the comfort of institutionalism does nothing to cure the actual vulnerability — it merely serves to alleviate the distressing symptoms. Similar to a morphine drip for terminal patients, traditional religions ease the lifelong and agonizing execution of the human syndrome.

Society does not need another distraction or anesthetic from reality. If Christianity is just a “religion” as defined generically (a set of beliefs and rituals adhered to by a group of people institutionally), which is itself just one of a potpourri of human distress outlets, then what a paramount waste of energy it is. With the very real ailments facing various societies and humanity as a whole, a foolish enterprise such as an untrue Christianity would be so supremely irrelevant and extravagantly wasteful as to warrant wholesale loathing by all people groups. Surely, Christianity is not worth preserving if its only redeeming virtue is the consoling benefit of another superstition or religion to people frightened by reality.

Redemptive Truth Downstairs or Not at All

As a bleached and neutered religious distillate, Christianity offers little proprietary or exclusive benefits for a would-be religious follower. Christianity as such a religion is but a fairly common amalgam of mysticism, methods and dogma, albeit advantaged by exceptionally historic credentials and a unique God-man narrative. The liturgy, while magnificently developed and varied, lacks any “shooting star” superiority over many other eastern alternatives. The moral prescriptions resonate with dozens of alternatively defined dogmas similarly awash in platitudes. Any romantic notion of Christianity as a nice flavor of spiritualism is as feeble a position to hold to as any clinical delusion. Indeed, it is this very idea of a distilled religious form drawn from the tenets of Christianity that is subtly advocated by modern Romantics and the undertones of works such as the *Da Vinci Code*, where it is cordially ushered “upstairs” among the other “nice” institutional faith systems.

It was Francis Schaeffer, in his classic work, *Escape from Reason*², who articulated on the dichotomous lens through which most of life is segregated: an “upper” or “upstairs,” and a “lower” or “downstairs” of reality. The “upper” part or “upstairs” is where intangibles, ethereal and “fuzzy” affiliates resided – things like artistic preference, style,

² Schaeffer, Francis A; *Escape from Reason* © 1968

grace, the will, the soul, love, morality, significance and other things that philosophers would term “universals.” The lower part of thinking or “downstairs” was the realm for the “particulars” of reality – nature, mathematics, chemistry/biology, history, social sciences and the like. In his book, Schaeffer identifies a human trend across the ages, notably evident across art, music, philosophy, politics and society at large, whereby a Platonic dualism (upstairs/downstairs) of reality has been embraced and advanced. Initially, categories are harmless devices for discussion and rational intercourse – but over the course of centuries, the resulting implications of this dualism can be very startling. As Schaeffer said:

An autonomous lower story will always eat up the upper. The lesson is: whenever you make such a dualism and begin to set up one autonomous section below, the result is that the lower consumes the upper. This has happened time after time in the last few hundred years. If you try artificially to keep the two areas separate and keep the autonomous in one area only, soon the autonomous will embrace (adversely) the other.

The proposition presented to society via mediums like the Da Vinci Code is for intelligent human beings to politely accept religions as nonsensical yet dignified by adopting this duality of thinking. Inevitably, living in a dual system of inherent contradictions leads to apathy and despair. The “despair” is that of a dis-unified rationality – meaning, the proposition in modern times to intellectually swallow both the rational world of facts and the irrational word of optimism, fancy, or “upstairs” faith as a blindly incoherent duet. This proposition is despairing because it shatters the inner hope for unified truth and commends one to concede all such desires for integration of cosmic realms. Within the human psyche is a desire for unified comprehension. Everything should balance out at the end of the day. Accountants would say your debits must equal your credits, scientists that there is a balance between matter and energy and the basic man that reality must eventually be coherent and rational.

A belief that is so arbitrary in basis and fanciful in composition that it must reside in the “upper” realm of social consciousness is certainly a foolish object to align one’s entire life to. Affinity for superficial or inconsequential matters such as musical genre preference, culinary tastes, modes of leisure and the like justly escape the harsh

requirements of “downstairs” or “lower” realm categories. However, for a person to adhere to a faith system like Christianity with full gusto as just a “religion” while admitting the delusional pretext that it is mostly for the benefit of earthly inspiration – such a person is, as St. Paul so bluntly stated, to be pitied beyond all fools. A life of sacrificial conformity to look like a person who is cured from this cancer of our very essence while believing it to really be just an expensive pain-reliever is certainly a waste of the brief time allotted a person to live on this planet.

The Brute, the Romantic and the Religious Realist

Like a patient alarmed to realize the manipulated sensations induced by the morphine drip of superstition and religion, and manically inclined to pull out the IV is Modern Man awash in scientific, historical and sociological knowledge. Indeed, the past few centuries have seen generations of people increasingly alarmed to discover just how little we actually knew about our universe and the reality that sustains it. Much of social lore has been found to be little more than elaborate superstition engineered to alleviate panic of the mysterious unknown. The collective of mankind has thus found itself divided and gravitating toward varieties of what can be thought of as three main camps: the Brutes, the Romantics or the Religious Realists.

The Brutes advocate an honorable death by facing cold reality free of synthetic delusions. Brutes see themselves as intellectual purists, astute enough to realize that what one “believes” has little or no impact upon ones physical and likely metaphysical condition. Believing gravity to be a farce does nothing to diminish its real effect upon an object. Similarly, Brutes would protest, fanciful affinity for some ethereal spiritual system seems to be an archaic and superstitious bypass to facing the harshness of mortality. Atheistic or at least agnostic tendencies are practically a default position for those truly committed to the camp of the Brutes.

Romantics, in turn, embrace the paradox of reality and mortality as a motif of human will – the power to deny fates’ normative path in exchange for the beautiful

delusion of individual choice. The power of belief is demonstrated in the resulting motivation, mobilization and inspiration of mankind. While the morbid thought of fate and the afterlife could sober even the most jovial of persons, such burdens should not prevent a person from delighting in the relief and lifts of supernatural elections. Allegiances to faith systems, the practicing of rites and the full-hearted adherence to religion is a common entitlement or right of all people. Members of the Romantic camp of course see little need in “dying on the hill” of apologetics. The object of faith is a resource of alleviation in this life regardless of any ontological or objective verdicts on particulars of religious form. In fact, rather than electing to die on any particular “hill,” Romantics would seek to rally all kinsman of spiritual conviction on the same united hill in defiance to Brutish melancholy and despair.

These two diametrically opposed platforms of Brutes and Romantics wage battle across all social arenas, religious sects, national mindsets and historical eras. While the battles wage on, the war still ends with a corpse – the trophy, it seems, is in the recognized dignity of the journey.

The Romantic platform is truly the most diabolical or devious of the camps. As Schaeffer extensively elaborated on, the pursuit to discreetly excuse faith in Christ as a “religion” belonging in the “upstairs realm of collective thinking” is one of the most subtly malignant plots of human history. To put Jesus of Nazareth on the shelf of Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny – where the value or merit is in the byproduct of senseless belief – is a cosmically criminal proposition.

Gridlocked in the plains between the camps of Brutes and Romantics is found the guild of Religious Realists. Such contrarians claim a precarious interlude of Brutish reality – acknowledging the morbid fate born by mankind – while exclusively reveling in the delightful freedom of Romantic ideals as enjoyed when based upon objective foundations. Religious Realists reject the false dichotomy of reality versus the supernatural, while cataclysmically holding to a position of high regard for objective truth. The Religious Realists delight in the harshness of their present human condition not because of some

increased dosage of fanciful opiates, but by the relief of a radical antidote! Religious Realists, while calling people to a non-rational or super-rational life of transformation beyond simple calculated truth statements do not rest in a pool of irrational thoughts. Indeed, Religious Realists “die on the hill” of exclusive insight to the underlying human disease and also the means by which to be saved from its natural fate. Exclusive truth and salvation mongers, as they’ve been labeled by many Romantics, the Realists soberly acknowledge reality while participating in the joys of a “religious” experience beyond mere superstitious forms and practice.

Truth or Dare: the Religion that Seeks “Downstairs” Qualification

Christianity (literally the “Way of the Anointed One”) possesses one cavalier distinction among the palette of world faith systems: a call to be tested and found true or to be discarded entirely. While numerous particulars of the Way involve a “belief in things unseen and things hoped for,” the entire chandelier of faith is suspended by a statement of religious and philosophical bravado: if Jesus of Nazareth was not the Son of the one true God and was not raised from the dead according to the Gospel narratives then the entire tapestry of Christian faith is malarkey (1 Corinthians 15:19). Consider, by contrast:

- ▶ Islam cares not that Mohammed died evangelizing by the sword, that the Quran is an anthology of restatements (Mohammed was illiterate); or even that Paradise is an elusive aim even within harsh theocracies. The faith is to be embraced by all without question, without suspicion and without inquiry.
- ▶ Mormonism cares not that history and archeology are mutually exclusive with the faith. Mormon doctrine blatantly states that it is not a faith system based upon or subject to history.³
- ▶ Buddha’s very real decaying body, Hinduism’s pantheon of conflicting deity personalities⁴ and Baha’i’s incoherent “Bob-isms” all avoid conceding to objective tests which would lead to incriminating conclusions⁵

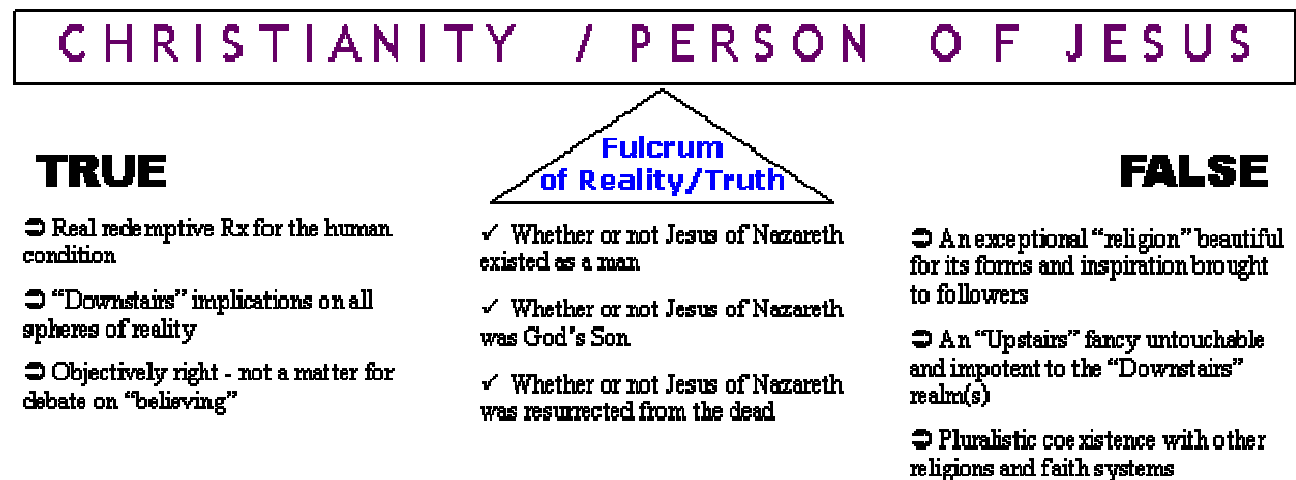
³ Ostling, Richard N.; Ostling, Joan K.; *Mormon America: the power and the promise*

⁴ There are more than 300 million distinct deities identified within the sects of Hinduism.

⁵ Netland, Harold A.; *Dissonant Voices: religious pluralism and the question of truth*

Christianity boldly invites humanity to consider two points: (1) if Jesus Christ is anything less than the Gospel record then laugh at and pity all adherents to the Way, and (2) consider induction into a Kingdom Now reality that pierces the shroud of secular versus sacred, reality versus mystical and subjective preference. To the defiant Brute and proud Romantic, both of these propositions are terrifying. The only halfway plausible alternatives to such a bold confrontation are their claimed positions of complete atheism (denial) or some form of pluralism/universalism.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the very fulcrum of historical reality to measure and weigh the objective status of the “Way of the Anointed One.” The fulcrum of the person of Jesus determines whether the status of “distinguished religion” or that of the cosmic cure for the human condition is due for Christianity.



History Misquoted, the Scandal Unfolded & the Real Merit of Christianity

The historical scandal of the *Da Vinci Code* storyline is not Jesus of Nazareth as a human father, but as a man who was only divine by political assignment via some corrupted council hearing orchestrated around the 4th century. Contrary to the cinematic portrayal, the Council of Nicaea was actually convened with a very prominent debate not

on the *divinity* of Jesus Christ – but his *humanity*.⁶ His divinity was so undeniable that many faith communities were struggling to grasp His simultaneous humanity in the truest sense.

The scandal of Dan Brown’s storyline is not the prospect of an alternative Christ story. Indeed, that is the very fulcrum point an intelligent skeptic should seek out; and, such a topic stands above conspiracy theories or subjective assertions on the plane of historical evidence. Rather, the scandal is found in the casual epilogue suggestions – that, in lacking sufficient evidence to debunk Christianity’s central claims, we should follow the Romantic path of diversion from the terrifying implications of numerous passages in Scripture that speak of the very exclusive escape options available for mankind.⁷

The Brutish and Romantic platforms are bypasses to the intense implications of an “innocent” verdict on Christianity, and a reduction of the faith to a mere “religion” or socially accepted institution. The “Way of the Anointed One” is a radical exchange of life substance⁸, a transformation of being⁹, a fundamental rebirthing¹⁰. Through an adoption-like process, one can receive entry into a Kingdom Now reality. Within this Kingdom is a vast administration model (the “Body”) and a number of mystery portals (sacraments), all of which when distilled apart from the Vine via formulaic or single dimension applications resemble a lifeless “religion.” Sadly, untold millions settle for a subsistence living on the dead branches of the Kingdom as a very “good religion” without seizing the extra-religious Way of a life “on the Vine.”

⁶ Shelley, Bruce L.; *Church History in Plain Language*

Erickson, Millard J.; *Christian Theology* (2nd Edition)

⁷ See John 14:6, Matthew 7:14-21, Mark 3:29, Mark 8:34-38, Luke 9:62 and Luke 24:38-39

⁸ Luke 9:24, Romans 6:3-6

⁹ 2 Corinthians 5:17

¹⁰ Titus 3:4-8, John 3:3-7, 1 Peter 1:23

Conclusion

That family conversation around the holidays in which the *Da Vinci Code* scandals were discussed represents the present day social dialogue on faith and reality. Very similar discussions are taking place at countless office water coolers, neighborhood coffee shops, and suburban dinner tables every single day in various forms. Books and films like the *Da Vinci Code* have not suddenly created any new debates, but have rather covertly catapulted one of history's foremost impasses – the place of faith and objective truth within the context of human knowledge – into the mainstream of human consciousness.

Classic arguments and coy little ploys to bypass the real thrust of the matter have been injected into the social forum for circulation among contemporary minds. Each person must wrestle with the person of Jesus Christ and the real significance of faith in something like Christianity. Cheap escapes like cordially dismissing Christianity as a trite religion in the “upstairs” of collective thinking, discounting it as another social institution pleasant for those so easily amused, or bundling it among all other religions as equally pointless manifestations of superstitious delusions still fail to resolve the chief problem facing mankind. Whether you disconnect the morphine drip entirely or elect to consume an alternate “social opiate” the underlying disease and subsequent terminal condition still remains.

Carpe Diem!