

THE CASE FOR CHRISTIANITY

IS DAN BROWN A LIAR?

THAT would be a tough call to make of a novelist, whose profession is all about making up stories!

But where *The Da Vinci Code* is perhaps a bit unfair with its readers is in blurring the line between fact and fiction. We like reading both history and fiction, but we like to be sure which is which.

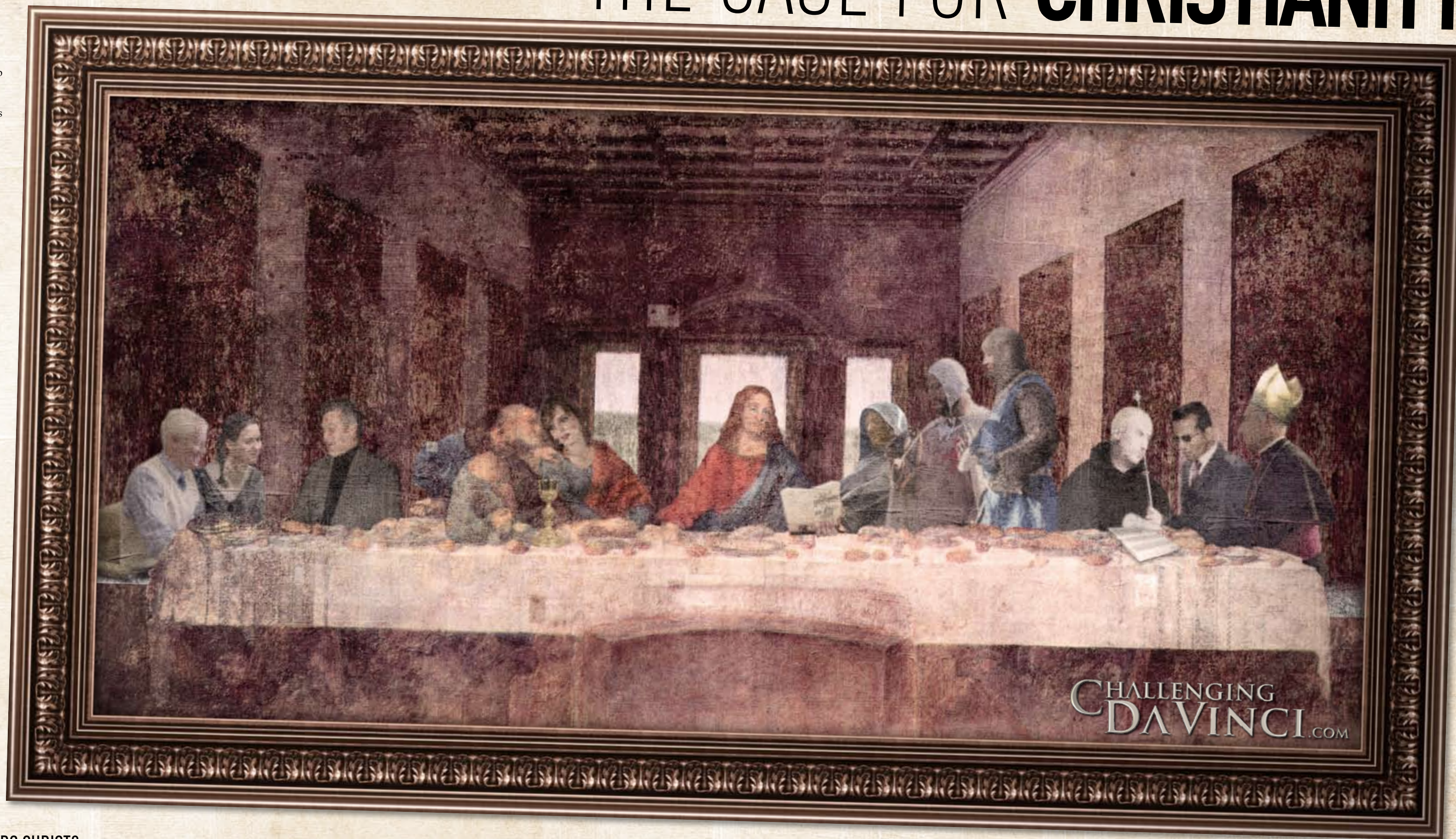
So when Dan Brown opens his novel with a page headed 'FACT', we expect to be able to rely on it. Yet of the three facts listed on that page, only one deserves that description. Yes, there is a devout Roman Catholic group called Opus Dei and they have a large headquarters in New York City. However, the other two facts – one, that there exists an ancient secret society called the Priory of Sion with members such as Leonardo da Vinci and Sir Isaac Newton; and two, that “all descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate” – are both false.

Here are just a few of the claims of the novel about Christianity that can't possibly be true:

- “The Bible was stitched together by Emperor Constantine.” But it was all already in use before Constantine came along.

- “There were many other accounts of Jesus' life that were left out of the Bible.” The truth is that we only know of a cluster of bits and pieces of other documents about Jesus. The best material is in the Bible itself.

- “Jesus was declared divine by a narrow vote at the Council of Nicea.” No, he was considered divine from the earliest days and declared divine at the council by 298 votes to 2!



IS THE BIBLE FICTION?

THE *Da Vinci Code* claims that the Bible is a book of made-up stories that people cling to for meaning in life. This assumes people are too dumb to see that something is made up, and instead go on living out a fantasy because it suits them.

When people turn to the Bible, they are genuinely seeking answers, and it is the kind of book that really does provide them. The Bible contains the longest story you could ever write – it starts with the creation of the universe, and ends with the re-creation of a new universe out of the old one. You can't get any more comprehensive than that!

In the pages in between, it is mainly about one nation, Israel, and how a Jew named Jesus changes the course of world history through what he teaches, how he dies and his miraculous return from the dead. Christians believe the story of God's relationship with Israel reveals to all of us who God is, what he wants and how we live in harmony with God.

Christians base their confidence in the Bible on a number of things:

- The accuracy of the storytelling. Despite the rumours, the Bible tells an exceedingly accurate history of the ancient world in the literary styles of its time (you could hardly expect it to give precise scientific data about stars, for example).

- People find that the Bible's teachings really do match with human experience. We read about characters who are very believable – full of flaws, yet also wanting to escape their own wickedness and strive for good. The Bible's teachings about how to live a good life ring true.

- The story of the Bible really does fit together, as we discover that Jesus is the climax of God's plan for the world, and his crucifixion and resurrection are all part of God's method for answering the great problems of the human race.

WAS MARY MAGDALENE MRS CHRIST?

THE eyebrow-raising claim of *The Da Vinci Code* is that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene, one of the women who followed him around Israel as he travelled. But is there any reason to think this is true beyond the general 'vibe' that it would make sense for a Jewish teacher to be married?

Leigh Teabing, the Royal Historian in *The Da Vinci Code*, thinks so. He says: “the marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene is part of the historical record”.

Is he right? Not really at all. To start with, the best historical

documents about Jesus (the ones we have in the Bible) never say that he was married. There's nothing that even hints at it. Mary is significant in the New Testament, since she saw Jesus risen from the dead (read John 20:1-18). However, there is no suggestion that she had a special relationship with Jesus.

The idea that they were married comes from some people's interpretation of some ancient historical documents known as the Gnostic Gospels. These are fragments of writings from around 150-200 years after Jesus. Two of them, The Gospel of

Philip and The Gospel of Mary contain passages which talk about how much Jesus loved Mary Magdalene, and that he would sometimes kiss her. From these fragments of writing, some people have speculated that Jesus and Mary were a couple. But they are making a huge leap in logic. In those Gnostic Gospels, it is also said that all the Christians kissed each other – it was their sign of greeting, not necessarily a passionate kiss. (The evidence of this is in 1 Corinthians 16:20 in the Bible.) What's more, the Gnostic Gospels are very incomplete and there are words and

sentences missing. We can't even be sure of what they are saying about Jesus and Mary.

So why does the novel make such a big deal of this claim? For starters, the idea that Jesus and Mary had a family together makes for a great story. But Dan Brown's main goal seems to be to make Jesus more human, and to make women more important to Christian spirituality. Both of these goals are good ones, but *The Da Vinci Code* isn't going to achieve it by playing loosely with history so that people can't really find out who the real Jesus and the real Mary Magdalene are.

WAS JESUS REALLY GOD?

YOU could never accuse Dan Brown of shying away from the big questions! This has to be one of the biggest questions raised in *The Da Vinci Code*, and indeed one of the key questions in the entire history of the world.

Exactly who was Jesus, and could it possibly be true that he was God in the flesh?

Leigh Teabing suggests that the original Christians thought no such things about

Jesus, prior to Emperor Constantine's intervention. Here's what Teabing tells Sophie Neveu:

“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”.

If Jesus was God, what would you expect of him? Plainly, he would do the sorts of things that the Bible tells us he really did

do. He healed the sick, using the power over nature that only God could have. He performed miracles of space and time that convinced those who witnessed them of his authority. He taught things that seemed to solve life's questions in such a wise way that they must have come from a higher understanding.

And then he died. Jesus' death would have seemed to put to rest the fancy that he was divine. After all,

gods don't die. But then the greatest 'test' of his god-ness began. Jesus returned from the dead.

The New Testament records that hundreds of witnesses saw him at different times and in different places, three days after he had died and been entombed.

Only God can conquer death, so the resurrection of Jesus gives us that vital evidence that Jesus did in fact come from God.