



Revisionist Fiction and Religious Dogma

The Hidden Undercurrents

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Abstract

The reinterpretation of religious ideas and beliefs through literary works has become an established literary genre. While some of these works seek to challenge religious authority on historical grounds, others question the relevance of traditional religious beliefs in providing solutions to our existential problems. Two works in this genre, the well-known thriller *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown and the critically acclaimed book *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* by Nobel Prize winning Portuguese author José Saramago, exemplify these diverse tendencies in employing fiction to probe religion. In the former, the authenticity of religious facts is questioned while the latter utilizes fiction to show the inadequacy of religious beliefs in answering our deepest problems. This paper contends that the confrontation with religious dogma in these two works is an expression of intellectual movements and ideologies, *The Da Vinci Code* relying on New Age ideology while *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* drawing on existentialist themes. It also shows how these ideologies themselves are driven by the underlying religious polarities of the sacred and the profane.

Keywords: sacred, profane, mysticism, new age, existentialism

Introduction

Literature and religion make strange bedfellows; mostly, they get along well but there are times when the relationship is marred with bitterness. None other than T. S. Eliot believed that religion and literature have much to gain from each other. Lamenting the secularization of literature, Eliot remarked that modern man “. . . is simply unaware of, simply cannot understand the meaning of, the primacy of the supernatural over natural life” (352). Talking specifically about the relationship between literature and Christianity, he says that the

interaction “should be unconsciously, rather than deliberately and defiantly Christian” (346). In other words, literature should have a subtle religious message or experience to impart to its reader, without which, it cannot be called literature in the real sense of the word.

The truth is that since antiquity, all forms of literature, particularly fiction, have been used to communicate religious truths. Whether it be the Bible of the Christians or the Mahabharata and Ramayana of the Hindus or the Jataka tales of the Buddhists, religions have always relied on literature to propagate their message. Some religious texts deal with the esoteric aspects of religion in a prosaic manner while others convey teachings in the form of stories or parables. It is arguable whether the former was meant for the elite while the latter for the masses. This interpretation should resonate with theorists of a Marxist persuasion, but what is indisputable is the fact that it is the fictional version, not the philosophical treatises dealing with the ponderous problems of existence, that grip the psyche of the common people. Myths, fables, epics and religious folklore have always held sway over the imagination of the people.

Viewed from the atheist’s point of view, all religion is fiction. On the other hand, for a believer, the world of religion assumes the character of fact, more palpable and real than the material world. Over such ardent belief, the impact of literary work which challenges established truths is limited. The obvious response in such cases is that of vehement opposition and criticism. The attitude towards any fictionalization of religious truths, whether sympathetic to religion or not, is to label it as an act of denigration, a sort of foolish audacity of the human to comprehend the divine. To win a convert from this side of the camp, comprised generally of conservatives and some fanatics, is difficult. On the other extreme are the die-hard atheists who are already convinced about the falsity of all religious truths and for whom any religious fiction that challenges conventional notions is welcome. They are as closed-minded as conservative believers because they see any literature of this genre simply as another weapon in their armor. Neither the criticism of the former nor the praise of the latter is a dispassionate and objective appraisal of revisionist fiction because each of them has an axe to grind. Thankfully, the majority do not belong to either of these camps and are willing to evaluate the books on their persuasive merit. It is from this assorted group of readers, comprised of agnostics, rationalistic atheists, and curious enthusiasts of religion, that religious fiction, especially of the subversive kind, can hope to get an appropriate response. Poised on the edge of belief and non-belief, these people are open to a new rendering of old fables, a fresher interpretation which might either tilt them to view religion in a more favorable light or make them discard religion altogether.

In this paper, we study the impact of two modern works of fiction which present the life of Jesus in uniquely different ways and have had a huge influence in the Christian world. The focus of this paper is not to endorse or oppose their viewpoints but to understand the background against which such fictional works emerge and its social relevance. This necessitates an investigation of religious phenomenon in its individual and collective dimensions, especially, its hidden undercurrents where, we claim, the origin and purpose of such fiction lies. *The Da Vinci Code* is a household name today, thanks to the immense popularity enjoyed by the book as well as the Hollywood movie based on it. No other work of fiction in the last two decades has had a cult following of the kind that the *Da Vinci Code* has enjoyed. When first published in 2003, the book was a huge success and was dubbed “a publishing phenomenon” (Minzesheimer). It is a thriller set in modern Europe which starts

with the murder investigation of the curator of the Louvre in Paris in which a Harvard professor of religious symbolism is falsely implicated. Trying to clear his name by getting to the bottom of the truth, the professor, Robert Langdon, is joined by a French police agent, who happens to be the granddaughter of the murdered curator. Together they undertake an action-packed journey through France and England, deciphering several codes and symbols along the way which finally culminates in the unravelling of a sinister plot by the Vatican to suppress long held secrets of Christianity regarding the life of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. The book is a page turner that aims to persuade that Christianity as practiced today is a distorted version of the life and teachings of Jesus.

The other book, *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, originally written in Portuguese, is a literary work of the highest quality by the Nobel Prize winning author José Saramago. It is an account of the life of Jesus, not from the biblical perspective, but, as the name suggests, from the viewpoint of the narrator, an alter-ego of Jesus. The Jesus depicted here is not the Son of God but the son of his father, Joseph, who reluctantly follows the destiny that God had chosen for him. It portrays Jesus as an individual beset by the same problems that afflict all human beings, but who, at the same time, was helplessly aware of the Messianic role thrust on him by God. This story of Jesus, stripped of religious veneration, becomes as fascinating and insightful, if not more, than the New Testament version. By refusing to adorn biblical characters with a religious halo, be it Jesus, a guilt-torn Joseph, his wife Mary, portrayed as a less than an ideal mother, or the devil, shown here as a carefree pastor, Saramago performs an exercise in inversion, which exposes the contingent nature of faith. One critic, Richard Eder, says that “the tone that launches Saramago’s New Testament . . . is a special blend of irony and innocence, of playfulness and melancholy; a disputatiousness that mocks not only received doctrine but its own mockery as well.”

The Sacred, the Profane, and the Human

To understand the role that religious sentiment plays in the life of an individual and society, we need to explore the notion of “the sacred” which underlies all religious beliefs. Emile Durkheim, in attempting to discover the origin and function of religion in society, observed that to sanctify an object, a person, or an entity is the core element of religion, the point of its genesis. In his seminal work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, which describes the origins of religion, he writes that “the division of the world into two domains, one containing all that is sacred and the other all that is profane, is the distinctive trait of religious thought” (34). Religion is society interiorized in the consciousness of man. Society and social forces are the originators of the ideas of “sacred” and “profane,” and in this sense, Durkheim believed in the fundamental primacy of the social existence as compared to the religious existence. Religion is interpretable in terms of social needs and forces.

Along with Durkheim, there were other prominent reductionist trends in religious thought. Freud attempted a reduction of religious sentiment to the psychological domain of the instinctual forces (1913). Earlier, Marx had sought to reduce religion to an expression of class consciousness, famously calling it the “opium of the people.” However, around the same time as Freud, Durkheim, and others were proposing their reductionist accounts of religion, another equally powerful paradigm was offered by Rudolf Otto, who believed in the irreducibility of the religious instinct, termed the “Numinous” (7). In his book *The Idea of the*

Holy, the numinous is described as a state of mind distinct from the ethical, social, psychological, aesthetic, or other modes of experience. Describing it, Otto says that “there is only one way to help another to an understanding of it. He must be guided and led on by consideration and discussion of the matter through the ways of his own mind, until he reaches the point at which the ‘Numinous’ in him perforce begins to stir, to start into life and into consciousness” (7). What Otto was pointing to was the fact that the numinous is a faculty that can only be awakened or evoked, not willed through rational means. The path-breaking ideas of Otto opened a new dimension in understanding religious thought and this theme was later picked up and developed most forcefully by Mircea Eliade.

Eliade, a Romanian religious philosopher, summing up his ideas about religion in a cryptic statement, says “Sacred and Profane are two modes of being” (14). In other words, the ideas of sacred and profane are among the most fundamental, a priori aspects of our consciousness. It is certainly prior to social life and irreducible to any other element of human nature, as Freud and others had unconvincingly suggested. Eliade adopted a phenomenological approach to religion and tried to show that religion is an awareness of the presence of the sacred in the mundane world. Building on the ideas of Otto, who called the idea of the Holy an a priori concept, Eliade, too, defines the sacred as prior to the objective and subjective realities of an individual. To the archaic mind, the sacred is synonymous with the real, and thus the objective reality of an entity in the world depends on its ability to partake in the sanctity inherent in the universe. Influenced by Kant, both Otto and Eliade emphasize the importance of the notion of the sacred in shaping the perceptual structure of the human mind. Thus, there is an inherent religiosity in the human mind which is impossible to abandon as it is the very fabric of our awareness. To discard this aspect of the human mind is to invite an inner alienation and neurosis, both individual and social. The malaise of the modern man, Eliade says, stems from the fact that “he finds it increasingly difficult to rediscover the existential dimensions of religious man in archaic societies” (13).

There are discernible parallels here with Carl Jung; this is understandable since Eliade and Jung used to meet and exchange ideas frequently in the 1950s. As a psychoanalyst, Jung had parted company from Freud precisely because he believed there was something in the unconscious that was much more primordial and independent of the instinctual pressures of the libido. Terming it the “collective unconscious,” he says that “in addition to our immediate consciousness, which is of a thoroughly personal nature and which we believe to be the only empirical psyche (even if we tack on the personal unconscious as an appendix), there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite form to certain psychic contents” (43). Jung looked upon the life of an individual as a playing out of these archaic symbols, called the “archetypes,” which exert a force on the human mind without ever coming to the forefront of consciousness. He emphasized the role of the religious element in restoring the psychic balance of the individual. Jung and Eliade suggested that religious symbols and motifs play a fundamental role in shaping human consciousness, both individual and collective. More importantly, they both maintained that the vitality of a society depends on its ability to remain connected with these hidden realms, the archetypes in the case of Jung and the domain of the sacred for Eliade.

Interestingly, these thinkers also point to the fact that there is a parallel instinct that lures us in an opposite direction towards the profane. In addition to this primeval need for sanctity, the human mind also has an equally powerful urge to throw off the yoke of sanctity. In his later writings, Freud spoke about the ambivalence of desires and the paradox that civilization creates (1962). Constant obstruction of the instinct of gratification builds up an inner tension that seeks relief in the profane, which in Freudian terms, is a sort of indulgence in the pleasure principle. Due to the prohibitive influence of religion, deep down in the human psyche, pleasure is associated with temptation, the experience of pleasure is considered a kind of capitulation to the devil, and asceticism is extolled as the only path to heaven. Yet, pleasure is inextricably tied with our ability to endure existence and, in fact, biologically, forms the very foundation of existence. We crave for transcendence, but we also crave for delight; alongside the urge to consecrate life is a parallel urge to desecrate it. The concept of “Thanatos” in the Freudian system, “the shadow” in the Jungian system and in the common parlance, the idea of the devil that lurks within us, attests to the presence of this force. From the most ancient times people have known that everyone has a latent possibility of manifesting both, the best and the worst. Our social life, too, is marked by this tendency to indulge in excesses of brutality and excesses of kindness. What explains this basic paradox of the co-existence of immeasurable good with the capacity to do untold evil?

An answer to this question can probably be found in Georges Bataille, another important thinker who tries to understand religion from the viewpoint of the sacred-profane dichotomy. For him, the origin of the primitive notion of the sacred in the human lies in the perception of the animal world, which, in its animality, reminds the human of lost immanence as opposed to the equally fascinating and mysterious world of the tool, which the human finds discontinuous and profane. Bataille talks about primitive man’s awareness of “this continuity, which for the animal could not be distinguished from anything else, which was in it and for it the only possible mode of being, offered man all the fascination of the sacred world as against the poverty of the profane tool” (1989: 35). Thus, in Bataille, one finds a hitherto unexplored dimension of this dichotomy, almost an inversion; the sacred is the disruptive, irrational animal energy, the forbidden Dionysian instinct for intoxication while the profane is the restrictive force, the tool-like rational imposition on the non-rationality inherent in the sacred. Elaborating further on the intimate connection between the sacred and the profane and the constant dialectic that plays out in human experience, he writes that “what is sacred attracts and possesses an incomparable value, but at the same time it appears vertiginously dangerous for that clear and profane world where mankind situates its privileged domain” (1989: 36). In fact, in this unique ability to sustain both forces at the same time lies the essence of what makes us human. A human is a house torn apart, a conglomerate of these opposing tendencies, a Hobbes and a Rousseau inhabiting the same mansion, and there is no escape from this creative tension. It is this instinct to be fully human – neither God nor Devil – that also prompts us to swing between the two extremes because neither of these polarities captures the essence of human nature.

Given this innate preordained liaison, can literature that questions cherished religious beliefs be viewed as a manifestation of that urge to embrace the profane? It might seem farfetched to seek the springs of literary effort in the innate human affinity for the forbidden, but in the sacred-profane paradigm, all sublime things, including literature, can, at the root, be

traced to one of these primordial tendencies or modes of being. Here too, Bataille provides illuminating answers. He notes “to the extent that we participate in a sacred horror . . . we become human” (2000: 88). Revisionist literature that disparages the mysterious sanctity of religious beliefs can be viewed as a form of participation in the sacred horror, but it would be a mistake to think of it as simply a manifestation of the desire to desecrate the holiness attached to religious ideas. Literature, an expression of the social *Zeitgeist*, is the most potent vehicle to inject the human element in religious thought when religion begins to look remote and unapproachable. The transcendental kernel of religious truth, the numinous, may become shrouded and obscured by ethical, political, and other ideologies from which it needs to be periodically rescued, and this is done most effectively by revivifying the popular imagination through subversive fiction. More importantly, in the absence of this dialectic, the sacred risks the danger of losing its meaning. By an outward act of denigration through fiction, an inner restoration of integrity in the collective psyche is accomplished. Writing about the attempt of literature to penetrate the sacred domain, Bataille writes, “the ban beautifies that to which it prevents access” (2012: 6). Subversive literature attempts to bring the divine closer to the human and can be a means of reconciling the sacred with the profane.

This explains why incarnation is a common theme in both Eastern and Western religious literature. It is a recurrent topic in certain Eastern religions while Christianity believes in the fact that Jesus, the Son of God, was fully human and died for the salvation of humankind. The common thread that runs through all religions is the enchantment with the idea of embodying the divine. The idea of God assuming human form is an endorsement of the body-mind-spirit triune conception. We share with the incarnation some characteristics through which we become aware of the possibilities of transcendence within ourselves. Historically, the supernatural aspect of divine figures has been glorified at the expense of their human nature. Subversive religious literature, by underemphasizing the divine aspect, attempts to redress the balance in favor of the human element which had been progressively lost. In this sense, they further the psychological end for which religions resort to the theme of reincarnation.

By portraying the divine figure of Christ in a human light, both books we consider depict Jesus as a human, though exalted, being. He is not just someone to be worshipped but one who symbolizes the deepest enigmas of human existence. Christianity, though it has always proclaimed that it celebrates the historical Jesus, in actual practice, has never been at ease reconciling his divinity with his historicity. In contrast, the works that we analyze here show Jesus as a human being, susceptible to human frailties and foibles, a historical being instead of a transcendental deity. The emphasis here is to argue that human nature need not be incompatible with the divine state. Religious traditions implicitly emphasize this incompatibility and prescribe a renunciation and abandonment of the body. A transfiguration of the human body and mind into something unearthly is the prerequisite for transcendence. The divinity of Jesus would be questionable if resurrection had not happened. It is this incompatibility of human body and holiness that is resented by the collective human psyche. The result is a tendency to find common ground which is what subversive literature seeks to discover. It may find expression in the repudiation of orthodoxy and the canon and glorification of the mystic tradition, as it does in *The Da Vinci Code*. Or it may adopt a highly philosophical approach towards religion to show that religious urges are expressions of deep existential questions, as in *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*. Common to both these

approaches is the centrality of human consciousness and the possibility of the co-existence of the transcendent and the human. Of the two approaches, the former is more well-known and has been a tremendous force in shaping religion across the globe. It is also known as the New Age movement, which has its roots in the 19th century and became a real force to reckon with in the 20th century. This movement believes in a clear distinction between spirituality and religion, a distinction that has become too passé to be explained but which has inspired all kinds of reinterpretations of religious scriptures and beliefs. We contend that *The Da Vinci Code* was very much inspired by New Age ideology and, therefore, a better understanding of this phenomenon is warranted.

New Age Influence

To fix a starting point for any movement is always difficult and debatable and this becomes especially so for an amorphous, eclectic social phenomenon like the New Age movement. However, it is almost universally accepted now that the heyday of this movement in the West was the late 1960s, an era in which all kinds of idealistic philosophies, Pan-Psychism, alternative therapies, meditations, healing practices, etc. jostled for popularity. Enlightenment values were questioned and the paradigm of human betterment based on a scientific worldview was considered misguided. A revolt against traditional beliefs and morality characterized all aspects of artistic creativity that germinated from the movement – from music to fashion and literature. A reactionary movement at the core, it aimed to challenge power structures that had dominated society. Like all reactionary movements, it widened the chasm between the forces that wanted to preserve the status quo and those that desired an overhauling of the system. Its characteristic hallmark was nostalgia for the past and repugnance for the present.

Though a phenomenon of the 20th century, people who were part of the New Age movement tried to project it as a continuation of an ancient struggle. Their thesis was that the esoteric inner core of religion has always been at war with the exoteric mode in which religion is generally preached and practiced by the powers that control religious authority.

It is more plausible to see the New Age movement as a manifestation of the traditional hostility between conservative and liberal intelligentsia which centers around diverse views of religion. Conservatives embrace orthodox religious ideology, which believes in a tangible mode of religious practice and maintains that a search for an inner intangible truth in the transcendental realm is futile. They accentuate the difference between external aspects of different religions, thereby emphasizing the uniqueness, not necessarily the greatness, of each religion. The New Age gospel, on the other hand, believes in the unity of all religious thought, that there is no significant difference in the teachings of different religions, and emphasizes the importance of an inner perception of truth. It also believes in a transcendental reality which engulfs all humanity, obliterating differences by its transcendence. The conservative movement has little patience with ideas that lead to a loss of identity, and is an effort to assert individual identity and prove its superiority. The liberal movement on the other hand focuses on the destruction of various identities and possibly a complete merging of all identities under some umbrella term like humanity, brotherhood, or spirit. This sociological tussle became a widespread global phenomenon and led to a full-fledged ideological confrontation, dubbed the “culture war” in the USA, the preeminent seat of this struggle.

While the culture war may explain the dynamics of the movement, its genesis remains a little obscured. Rather than point towards an irrational fascination with the East, Peter Berger, believes that the New Age movement was a response to cope with the demands of modernity. Writing about the relationship between modernity and secularization, he says, “Modernity has brought with it a massive threat to the plausibility of religious belief and experience. Put differently, modernity thus far has been antagonistic to the transcendence of the human condition. . . . But those who do not have such religious commitments can also see the dilemma posed by secularization – that secularization frustrates deeply grounded human aspirations – most important among them, the aspiration to belong to a meaningful and ultimately helpful cosmos” (110-11). Another dilemma of modernity is that of “futuraity,” which Berger defines as “endless striving, restlessness and a mounting incapacity for repose” (105). It is this disease of futuraity that explains the New Age counterculture that made the West look eastwards. He further writes, “A good deal of culture and counterculture can be understood as insurrections against the tyranny of modern futuraity, not to mention the vogue of transcendental meditation and similar mystical aspirations towards a liberating timeless now” (104). Berger thus believes that the seeds of New Age ideology lie in defining characteristics of the modern age.

Not all cultural theorists view the New Age movement as an organic development in response to the dilemmas of modernity. Some believe that it is truly characterized by a wholesale import of Oriental culture and ideas. Describing the phenomenon, Slavoj Žižek says, “The often-present New Age inscription [is one] in which the shift in paradigm is interpreted as an advance beyond the Cartesian mechanistic-materialistic paradigm towards new holistic approach that brings us back to the wisdom of Ancient oriental thought” (69).

Be it a result of Oriental influence or a reaction to the modern socioeconomic situation, the unmistakable fact remains that Christianity could not maintain its philosophical aloofness from these countercultural forces. One major result was the effort to incorporate Gnosticism into Christianity. The Gnostic Gospels, which are not part of the biblical canon, were proclaimed to be the original teachings of Christianity that were suppressed by the early Church. This relook at Christian teachings was met by enthusiasm in some quarters and hostility in others. While those sympathetic to New Age ideas tried to rid Christianity completely of its Abrahamic heritage, others denounced Gnosticism as the worst form of heresy. Interestingly, some who are in the center believe that the Christian canon in its standard form fulfils all spiritual needs without needing the support or import of Gnosticism. In fact, Žižek is convinced that a reinterpretation of Christian teachings without necessarily looking for esoteric teachings or symbolism is the right way to understand the truths of Christianity. “The problem with Gnosticism is that it is all too serious in developing its narrative of an ascent towards wisdom. Gnostics are Christians who miss the joke of Christianity” (Žižek and Gunjevic: 178). The truth remains that liberal Christianity overall has been rather sympathetic to Gnostic interpretations of Christianity, which explains why Brown could persuasively include it in his arguments against early Christianity.

In a way, the New Age movement is a misnomer because there was hardly anything new about it. In fact, it was a reversion to the Romanticism of the 19th century and a rediscovery of its themes. The only thing novel about New Age was the assimilation of Oriental thought which became its defining characteristic in the popular imagination. The precursors of the

movement were none other than Goethe, Schiller, Schlegel, and Hegel. The themes of the return to nature, the immanence of spirit, and the emphasis on subjectivity, themes that characterize Romantic philosophy and literature, were picked up by the New Age movement. From Goethe, Wordsworth, and Blake to the mystical literature and cult books of the 70s, such as Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* and Robert Persig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, they form a continuum. What these books peddled was the pan-psychistic, holistic worldview supplanted by a belief in the infinite potential of the human being. *The Da Vinci Code* did not drop out of nowhere; an established tradition of literature based on New Age themes paved its way. By the end of the last century, traditional New Age ideology needed a reinvigoration without looking Eastwards, and Christian dogma needed reinvention; the time was ripe for a rewriting of the biblical story and message. In short, the world was waiting for a book like *The Da Vinci Code* to fill that gnawing void.

Dan Brown: Fiction and Alternative Truth

For a book in the digital age, *The Da Vinci Code* was an unqualified success. One writer called it “the global stimulus programme of the embattled publishing industry” (Langley). Brown, who was an obscure figure and whose earlier two works had been hardly noticed, suddenly became the most discussed author. Several people have speculated about the reasons for this humungous success. Mostly, they ascribe it to the fact that Brown offered a potboiler which was based on a salacious rendering of the most divine figure of Christianity. While there may be some truth in this, others believe that the roots lie much deeper in the collective psyche of modern humans. One reviewer likens it to a, “rekindling of the desire to reconnect with the divine in a world which has been robbed of divine secrets and stripped of divine codes, a world which continues to erase the wisdom of ancients, and which denies that our stories can contain truth or even a glimpse of it” (Bowers: vii).

To be fair to Brown, some credit must be given to the plot itself which is a heady mix of murder, mystery, drama, suspense, codes, symbols, and the figure of Jesus, an undeniably ingenuous cocktail. Its characters are contemporary, its plot historical, and its themes religious; it involves crime and violence and the aim is revisionary. Additionally, Brown claims that all information contained in the book was well researched and is accurate. The reader is taken on a rollercoaster ride from one incredible revelation to another through a series of events which overwhelm before one can make sense of them, which accounts for the fact that readers and critics alike mention having read the book in one sitting. What is surprising is that, despite the audacity and the outrageousness of Brown's claims, he weaves together a web of facts which somehow makes his version plausible and the boundary between fiction and fact is blurred.

To better understand the impact of *The Da Vinci Code*, it is imperative that we sort out the ideas around which the story is woven. One can distinctly see New Age influence in the curious mélange of themes that intersect in Brown's story: the primacy of the spiritual, the revival of the Gnostic gospels, the cult of the sacred feminine, the suppression by the dominant, masculine and power hungry Church, and the pagan origins of Christian rituals. Built on these themes are revisions of conventionally accepted religious beliefs and fact-claims: Jesus married Mary Magdalene and had a progeny, the original gospels were suppressed by the early Church and contain the true teachings of Jesus Christ, and a body of men called the Priory of Sion, which exists to this day, tried to preserve the original teachings of Christ. Brown contends

these controversial claims are historical facts based on solid research. The accuracy or inaccuracy of his claims is for historians to decide. What concerns us here is to understand what made these themes so effective in capturing the reader's imagination? What made the collective psyche so receptive to this revision of age old beliefs? There is no better way to answer this question than to understand it through the sacred-profane paradigm. As mentioned earlier, the alienation engendered in the human mind by decades of orthodoxy could only be reversed by embracing the profane. A progressive accentuation of the rift between the divine Jesus and the historical Jesus left Christians struggling with the widening chasm. One possible solution, which conservatives had long doggedly resisted while the masses were increasingly ready, was the induction of New Age themes into traditional Christianity, and this is exactly what *The Da Vinci Code* offers.

Take for example the sacred feminine theme. One of the central turning points in the novel is the scene where Sophie Noveu, the police detective who accompanies Robert Langdon in his quest for the holy grail, witnesses a ritual in which her grandfather, the murdered Jacques Sauniere, and the grand master of the Priory of the Sion, participated; this led to Sophie's eventual estrangement from her grandfather. The ritual as described in the book resembles goddess rituals of Eastern religions. Why would Christianity need to borrow such practices from other religions to validate its authenticity? The answer is evident. How else, except by importing the concept of the sacred feminine, can one claim that Jesus married Mary and had a child, as done in the book without hurting Christ's divine stature? This is how Brown manages to hunt two birds with one stone; he satisfies the collective longing to relate to a more human Jesus without subtracting an iota from his divinity. The conservatives on the other hand denounce this as another example of the self-flagellating liberal full of contempt for all things Western, who looks towards Eastern wisdom with awe and reverence. They see an ominous design here for propagation of liberal values in the name of rediscovering the spiritual core of Christianity. Brown himself has never been shy of professing that spirituality is more valuable than religion. In a quote attributed to him, he says "For me, the spiritual quest is a life-long work in progress."

With the passage of time and the not so enthusiastic response to the movie based on the book (the visual depiction is not as convincing as the firing of the imagination by the print version), the book's influence has somewhat waned. Some of the many claims made in the book have been hotly contested. The true legacy of the book, however, is its audacious attempt to portray an earthly Jesus and this will last for some time.

Saramago: The Unanswered Questions

Unlike *The Da Vinci Code* where the imprints of the New Age movement are easily traceable, Saramago's work, *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* is harder to place. It cannot be explained away merely as a reaction by the rationalistic Western mind in favor of an Eastern form of spirituality. There is no pan-psychism or monistic idealism being peddled here, no sacred feminine. What characterizes the work instead is the repudiation of religion itself and the idea of God as a divine, benign power. Although the God ridiculed in this book is the God of the Old Testament, the reader is left with no doubt that what is repudiated is the very notion of God, whether transcendent or immanent. Saramago, a self-professed atheist, uses language and history with remarkable dexterity to score a point against all religious beliefs.

In contrast to *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Gospel* does not doubt historical facts in the Bible but simply provides an alternate version of the life of Jesus, albeit with some additions, deletions, and rearrangement. The name of the book itself is revealing since the canonical gospels are those of Matthew, Luke, Mark, and John, not of Jesus. However, were Jesus to tell his own story to a confidante, what would it be like? This is the question Saramago tries to answer through his version of the story. Seen outwardly, it is an eyewitness account of Jesus' life from birth to crucifixion. However, the themes Saramago brings out in his portrayal of Jesus' life could not have been more different. His themes address the other aspect of the thwarted longing of the collective psyche, the desire to redeem the profane. Outwardly, it seems that Saramago's position is that religion is irrelevant to modern man and that he suggests a repudiation of the sacred-profane dichotomy. But closely viewed, his position is more nuanced. It belittles religious beliefs and texts but in the process, discovers the very sacredness of the search itself. There is no sacred end to be achieved; the very journey is sacred. The religiosity it discovers is not in what Jesus taught but in what he thought and, controversially, Saramago claims that the thoughts of Jesus and God did not match.

Take, for example, the theme of guilt that suffuses the whole narrative. The well-known story of Herod killing all the children under the age of two in Bethlehem is a pivotal moment in the novel. Joseph, father of Jesus, overhears a conversation between two soldiers discussing Herod's planned massacre and realizes the danger to his family. He rushes to the cave where Mary is lying with the infant Jesus and hurriedly moves out saving his family. But the guilt of having allowed other children to be murdered torments him. Tortured by nightmares, anxiety, and restlessness, he becomes a mental wreck driven by this remorse. He undertakes a fatal journey to rescue a neighbor from a city which is fighting the Romans where he is mistaken for a rebel, captured, and crucified, miles away from his family in an unknown land. In a poignant scene described with unimaginable pathos by Saramago, the young Jesus and his mother are described frantically searching for Joseph only to discover his brutalized corpse which Jesus caresses with loving tenderness. When Jesus too begins to be haunted by nightmares, Mary realizes that he has inherited his father's guilt and tells Jesus about his birth and escape from Herod's massacre, a truth that she had so far withheld. Jesus, too, is stricken with remorse and chooses to leave home. In his wayward sojourn to find peace, he meets the devil, suggestively named Pastor in the book.

This brings us to another important theme of the book, the question of evil. Jesus is shown to have spent four years with Pastor, a sort of benign devil, who assigns Jesus the task of attending to a flock of sheep, and in the process he is coached into questioning the prevalent notions of morality and religious truth. This purely imaginary account of Jesus is an example of fictional wizardry that does not attempt to conceal the completely fantastical nature of this episode. At the same time, the bewildered young Jesus is unable to make sense of Pastor's actions. Pastor does not seem to respect God yet possesses profound wisdom. Highlighted here by the young Jesus is the human condition of confusion at the interpenetration of the ideas of sacred and profane in the modern world.

The one theme shared by *The Gospel* and *The Da Vinci Code* is the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Interestingly, the chasm that separates the *Da Vinci Code* from *The Gospel* is the widest on this heretical theme. Here we find a simple assertion of the human Jesus, his discovery of an oasis of love and happiness in the company of Mary Magdalene

during suffering and bereavement. Saramago presents Mary Magdalene as no disciple or mystical figure but an ordinary woman, indeed a prostitute, who was passionately in love with Jesus but who also had a foreboding that she would lose him. What interests Saramago is the captivity of Eros in the hands of a cosmic plan. Yet what emerges superior in the end is Eros.

The central theme of the book, the idea of an evil God, is delineated in an episode in which Jesus is shown as lost in a mist covered sea for forty days where he is engaged in a conversation with God in the presence of Pastor, the devil. In this conversation, which occupies the last part of the book, Saramago depicts God as a dictator of the universe whose only concern is executing his plan with precision. The plans conceived by God are motivated by a desire to spread his dominion over distant lands without in the least being bothered by the countless human lives that will need to be sacrificed. The list of future martyrs for God's cause that goes on for pages is narrated to a shocked and horrified Jesus, who until then was unaware that he was destined to play the role of the most important martyr of all. The contrast between the tender relationship Jesus shared with his human father, Joseph, and his relationship with God, the heavenly father, who views his son Jesus as mere pawn in the cosmic game, could not be more stark.

To do justice to the above mentioned unique features of the work, one would need to turn to an existentialist interpretation. Since Kierkegaard, Christianity has been greatly influenced by existentialist thought, which, originating in the late 19th century, blossomed in various directions in the mid-20th century, most of which were atheistic. The thoughts of Martin Buber, Jacques Maritain, Karl Barth, and others have had a profound impact on modern Christian themes. Most of them favored a reinterpretation of Christian texts in light of existentialist themes of faith, dread, anxiety, death, etc. However, more than anyone else, it is in Rudolf Bultmann's thought that we find a close resemblance with the way Saramago deals with Christianity. Bultmann is most well-known for his advocacy of demythologization of Christianity. Talking about the relevance of the gospels he writes, "We are bound therefore to ask whether, when we preach the gospel today, we expect our converts to not only accept the gospel message but also the mythical worldview in which it is set?" (3). The mythical world view in question is the worldview of the Roman world, which had its own cosmology, ethics, metaphysics, and psychology, all of which, according to Bultmann, stand discredited in the eyes of modern humans. He says that in our age, the mythological setting of Christianity has lost its relevance. He exhorts the Christian to look beyond and find the immutable kernel, the core of Christ's teachings. This is exactly what Saramago attempts to do, using literature as the medium of demythologization. He is doing the spade work for Bultmann by employing fiction to delegitimize the accepted mythology. Ironically, he does this, not by rejecting the supernatural events and miracles mentioned in the Bible, the accepted worldview of Jesus's time, but by exaggerating it to the extent that its legitimacy to the modern mind is automatically undermined. This curious effect is brought about both by content as well as stylistic uniqueness. Content wise, the various episodes of Jesus' life have a surreal tragico-comic quality that highlights the incongruousness of history and religion. The supposed narrator, while giving an eye witness account of Jesus, does not abstain from juxtaposing modern events and ideas with the Roman period without any loss of irony. Stylistically, the sentences are long and winded, mostly in a passive form and the usual rules of punctuation are dispensed with. This mode of narration, though odd in the beginning, becomes as indispensable for the

message as the content itself. The anomalous language becomes the vehicle for mirroring the anomaly that exists in the portrayal of Jesus in the New Testament. The demythologization, as prescribed by Bultmann, is complete.

However, this is where Saramago's resemblance to Bultmann ends. To the question posed by Bultmann, "Does the New Testament embody a truth which is independent of its mythical setting?" (3), Saramago's answer is "No." While Bultmann believes in an existential message of Christ which is independent of historical facts and details, Saramago believes that the message is not what the New Testament records but what it failed to record. According to the narrator of *The Gospel*, the competent judges of the life of Jesus are not Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John but the contemporary, modern human, who has the benefit of hindsight to write a Gospel according to Jesus. To him, the life of Jesus was a life full of skepticism, denial, suffering, and anxiety, interspersed by temporary repose in the arms of Mary Magdalene. The unspoken message of Jesus's life and vicissitudes was God imposing his will on a hapless man. Jesus chose to convey his message as a reluctant messiah but who inwardly believed that the universe is truly meaningless. Saramago, by carrying on Bultmann's task of demythologization, externally and internally, takes it to its logical conclusion, which, he claims, leads not to an uplifting existential message of hope but to a pessimistic one of despair.

The message of *The Gospel* is clear. Saramago tries to bring out the existential dilemmas of living that have remained unchanged since the days of Jesus. The themes of guilt, despair, hopelessness, freedom, and bondage occupied Jesus more than the bringing of heaven on earth. The book tries to show that these existential questions were never addressed by canonical Christianity. The greatest testament to Christ's humanity was the fact that he was beset by the same problems as us and he, too, looked heavenwards like we do, only to be met by a God that either did not have the answers, or was so self-absorbed and narcissistic that the questions did not interest him in the least.

The one common element while describing the various episodes of Jesus's life is the intense pathos that surrounds and suffuses each depiction, incident after incident, in the life of Jesus, painted in the most heart rending manner, which refuses to be explained away by any religious justification. It is the suffering that a human being undergoes that has been elevated to the level of the sacred in this work. The real glory is the beauty of human fortitude in the midst of so much deprivation. At the same time, the juxtaposition of this unbearable anguish of the characters in the Bible with the absurdity of the notion of a benign God revered by them lends a sublime comic touch to the entire tragedy. Žižek and Gunjevic, talking about the paradox of Christ's life, say that it "can be viewed as condemning us to permanent anxiety but also as something inherently comical" (178). Saramago, true to his Marxist roots, attempts to expose the hollowness of religion in providing answers to man's perennial questions and instead mocks the folly of presupposing that any higher being can have such answers.

Saramago utilizes fiction to dramatically overhaul our religious beliefs without concealing the fact that to challenge the standard narrative and expose its deformities, there is no better way than to offer another version, inverted and comical, but equally profound. In the end, the novel, by carrying out thematic inversions in his portrayal of Jesus, succeeds in accomplishing the most profound conceptual inversion that lies at the very root of religion, the inversion of the sacred and the profane.

Conclusion

Despite the external similarities, the difference between Saramago's and Brown's approach is quite significant. Brown challenges external facts about Christianity while leaving inner assumptions unchallenged; he views traditional Christianity from a conspiratorial angle, as an institution that has its dark secrets. Saramago does the exact opposite by confronting the characteristics of idols that we worship without questioning the idols themselves. Without explicitly stating so, he wants his readers to revisit Christian beliefs from an existentialist perspective. Understandably, the audiences who get offended by the two works are disparate. Conservative Christians who have built their lives around the literal truths of the scriptures are more upset by Brown's version than Saramago's. On the other hand, liberal Christians, who adopt a more symbolic approach towards scripture to prove its relevance in the modern age, are more perturbed by Saramago's work.

At a deeper level, it is from the sacred-profane paradigm that the true significance of these two works in revisionist fiction is revealed. Both attempts to question religious authority are expressions of the simultaneous interplay of the sacred-profane-human triad. It is to stem the declining vitality of the notions of the sacred and the profane that human mediation in the form of revisionist literature is needed. In *The Da Vinci Code*, it is the injection of the profane in the sacred that bridges the gap. In *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, it is the search for the sacred in the profane that fulfils the same purpose. The New Age movement was a move from the oppressive rigid sacralization of Christianity by the conservative ideology to a pantheistic sacralization inspired by Eastern religions. Existentialism was a reassertion of the very sanctity of the myriad expressions of human nature and a celebration of the uncertain, contingent truths of existence.

It is symptomatic of our age that when deep rooted collective energies get out of sync, they find expression in new movements and ideologies. While superficially appearing to be mocking religious dogma, the real function of these books is therapeutic. They utilize literature to provide an outlet to vent the long-suppressed urges of humanity. In this way, they restore the balance in the collective human condition.

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