

Equal Time for Freethought

Interview with Robert M. Price by Neil J. Murphy, June 11, 2006

Transcribed by Joel Schlosberg

Neil J. Murphy: Was Leonardo da Vinci a member of the Priory of Sion, a secret society reaching all the way back to the Crusades? Does his famous painting "The Last Supper" contain a hidden code about the society's most precious secret? Did Jesus father children by Mary Magdalene? And what was the Holy Grail all about? Dan Brown's bestselling novel [*The Da Vinci Code*](#) and its popular movie adaptation have stirred the popular imagination by cleverly inserting these questions and possible answers within a riveting whodunit narrative. Many readers and viewers have been so swept away by the drama of this *Raiders of the Lost Ark*-style murder mystery that they have accepted Dan Brown's fictional reconstruction of Christian origins and medieval history as established fact. Well, we have as our guest today, as a corrective on all of this, New Testament scholar Robert M. Price. And we're gonna talk about his new book [*The Da Vinci Fraud: Why the Truth is Stranger than Fiction*](#).

[After reading the event announcements] Now we're gonna turn to our interview today with Robert Price, who is the editor of [*The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave*](#) and [*The Journal of Higher Criticism*](#). He's also the author of many books, including [*The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man: How Reliable is the Gospel Tradition?*](#), [*Deconstructing Jesus*](#), and [*Beyond Born Again*](#), and today we have on to discuss his new book, *The Da Vinci Fraud: Why the Truth is Stranger than Fiction*, and he joins us today for the remainder of this program.

Robert Price, welcome back to Equal Time for Freethought!

Robert M. Price: It's always great to be here!

Neil J. Murphy: Thank you very much!

Let's start out, just for those that, perhaps, were under a rock for the last couple of years. What exactly is *The Da Vinci Code* about, and why do you think it has caused such great popularity *and* controversy?

Robert M. Price: Well, it's a story about war between two competing cabals with a secret to fight over it. It presupposes that there's this Priory of Sion order descended from the Knights Templar, and that the Knights Templar and the Crusades in Jerusalem discovered evidence that Jesus had begotten a child on Mary Magdalene, who went to France with their daughter Sarah, and this all eventually led to the foundation of the Merovingian dynasty. And supposedly, there are descendants of Jesus and Mary alive today. And the Catholic Church, or at least Opus Dei, this conservative devotional group in it, wants to keep the mouths of the Priory members shut. Da Vinci figures into it only because he is supposed to have been one of the grand masters of the ultra-secret Priory of Sion group, and left clues about this in some of his paintings.

And there's a lot of screaming about it being anti-Catholic, but the book and the movie both eventually exonerate the church and just say that it was a scheming renegade loose cannon bishop, not the Church, that was murdering people and knew too much. So people apparently have not read the whole book or seen the whole flick when they scream about this.

But in the movie, this detective is the granddaughter of the last grand master who was

killed by an agent of this bishop, and with his dying breath, he manages to put her and this Harvard scholar on the trail of figuring out the secret again. And she, then, turns out to be the last member of the house of Jesus.

And the whole thing is really silly. It's based on a modern hoax concocted in the 1950s by a man named Pierre Plantard, the leader of a French right-wing Vichy sympathizer group called Alpha Galates. This man thought he was Merovingian and should be sitting on the throne of France, and concocted the notion of a modern Priory of Sion with Da Vinci and others involved. He fabricated documents; there's no evidence for that. The real Priory was a monastic order that was absorbed by the Jesuits in the 17th Century. And so it was all based on a hoax that Dan Brown got from several pseudo-scholarly books, especially [*Holy Blood, Holy Grail*](#) by Baigent, Lincoln, and Leigh, who recently sued him to get a piece of the action, the profits.

Neil J. Murphy: Yeah, money, it seems, rules above — what did the old saying go, "Money is the root of all evil", so apparently you can have your religious beliefs and your money too, apparently.

Robert M. Price: Yeah.

Neil J. Murphy: One of the things I felt that Dan Brown does, it's a little deceptive, is: in doing my research for today's show, it seems that, while at the same time, he admits that the book is a work of fiction, he doesn't exactly say it's nonfiction either. Do you find that to be deceptive, and why you label your book "The Da Vinci Fraud"?

Robert M. Price: Well, I'm willing to give Brown the benefit of the doubt, that he is a victim of the fraud and an unwitting perpetrator of it. He does say at the beginning of the book, "My characters are fictional but all of the background information is quite true." Well it isn't. And you can pick holes, as I do, in the book, with Baigent and various other authors who just don't know their butt from their elbow when it comes to historical method. I don't think anybody's perpetrating a scheme here, but it's a grossly wrong, bogus theory that poor Brown was sucked into and then found he could make a lot of money off of.

Neil J. Murphy: Let's delve in, step by step. What are the specific fraudulent areas in *The Da Vinci Code*? Let's go step by step.

Robert M. Price: There is no modern Priory of Sion. There was none that Da Vinci belonged to or any of the other big names that appear in these documents that Plantard and his buddies faked. There is no reason to believe that the Knights Templar had any particular occult expertise or knowledge that would blow the lid off Christianity. They were persecuted as heretics by Charles the Fair of France just because they were bankers and he wanted their money. And he trumped up absurd charges, saying that they were kind of semi-Muslim/semi-pagan, not real Christians. There's no evidence for that. But *they* did not claim that they had anything to do with Jesus or Mary Magdalene. That's an unrelated thing.

People have speculated, even going back to Martin Luther, that Jesus and Mary Magdalene could have been married. If they're real historical individuals, which I doubt very much, it's certainly possible. But that's another thing where there's just no proof of this. They quote a couple of ancient Gnostic texts out of context; there's really no reason to believe it.

But if it were true, the most hilariously improbable thing in the book is that this would bother anybody; that people would kill to stop this from coming out. Because the Catholic Church does *not* teach, and has *never* taught, that Jesus was a god, *not* a man. They've always taught that Jesus Christ was fully divine *and* fully human. So that if one said Jesus *couldn't* have married and had kids, you would have been a heretic. They don't think he did, and there's no reason to think he did, but it would raise interesting, silly questions. You know, if they had kids, would they have been demigods? It's sorta like these old comics where Superman marries Lois Lane; would their kids have had powers or not? It's sort of fun to think about, but it's in no way disturbing to orthodoxy.

And if someone came out with some bombshell that *would* be upsetting if true, who would believe 'em?!? Think about a couple of years ago, when one of these Raëlian people had a press conference, that said that they cloned somebody just like the original alien colonists did. Just kooks! Nobody would take this seriously for a second!

Neil J. Murphy: Yeah, sort of like a glorified flat-earth theory, almost.

Robert M. Price: Yeah! I mean, even if true, one could never render it plausible, and even if true, it wouldn't be damaging. But there are questions that the book and movie raise that *would* be damaging if you could see through what Dan Brown says to the real facts of the case.

Neil J. Murphy: Yeah, let's get into that, because the subtitle of your book is "why the truth is stranger than fiction." Yet the very book, *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown, has caused people, ironically, to question the so-called truth of the Catholic Church. Do you find that a bit ironic, and why, in your research, do you find that the actual historical truth about early Christianity is more interesting, and perhaps stranger, than the fiction?

Robert M. Price: Well, that is the irony, because he seems to be this subversive. "Say, let me tell you the *real* story about Christian origins; what they don't want you to know." Then what he tells you is *preposterous*, and so he's in effect inviting people to say, "Oh well, I guess the Pope's right after all." But he isn't.

When you look at the real answers to the questions, for instance: Who decided what books would make up the Bible? Well, it wasn't Constantine, as some kind of fiendish advertising executive, like Brown says; in fact, that would've made more sense. It was sort of a haphazard process that took centuries and was never officially done until the Counter-Reformation. And they had strange criteria; they would accept books as apostolic even though they plainly were not written by apostles, because they taught what the church liked; they would eliminate others that had the names of apostles on them because groups liked them that they didn't like, so it was guilt by association; they would reject a book if it meant that you didn't have the proper *number* of books; like Irenaeus said we can only have four gospels, and why? Well, there's four corners of the world! There's four winds! There's four directions! So that settles that!

Neil J. Murphy: Yeah, you need perfect harmony, apparently.

Robert M. Price: No Christians of any stripe today would accept such reasoning for a second. They have no idea of the haphazard, slipshod rationalizations that led to the

contents of the Bible! It's much *weirder* than Brown says.

Neil J. Murphy: Hmm, interesting. One thing I find curious, as you've been talking about, in reference to the whole notion of *The Da Vinci Code* being a fraud is, it seems like what you're talking about here, with the formation of the books of the Bible, it almost sounds like it's a real political contest. In other words, you have these competing egos, and these competing books trying to become the official canon, and apparently the notion of God ordaining the books of the Bible and divine inspiration kind of goes out the window after the details you've just described.

Robert M. Price: It does seem like that, and the standard response by the orthodox is, "well, yes, it's got human fingerprints all over it, but like the writing of the books themselves, these decisions were *guided* by the Holy Spirit." Well, you can say that if you want, but I just find that to be just outrageous spin. When you look at the reasoning involved, you wonder, "Must I accept the conclusion without the reasoning that led to it? Who gave these people the authority to do it?" Protestants especially are in a corner here, because they say that "We accept the Bible, not the mere traditions of men and the Church." And yet, what led to the table of contents of the Bible? Just votes and consensuses of unknown bishops over hundreds of years, with horse-trading deals — "If you'll accept the Letter of the Hebrews, we'll swallow hard and accept Revelation" — I mean if you say "well, God was involved in this somehow", you can believe whatever you want, but you can't really expect outsiders to think it's plausible.

Neil J. Murphy: Sounds like a glorified spiritual flea market, almost.

Robert M. Price: And when you're using the result as a bludgeon to say, "I'm sorry, you can't be gay or you're going to hell. I'm sorry, you can't hold this position or you're gonna fry." *That's* what's insidious about it.

Neil J. Murphy: Kind of puts family values out the window at that point. I'm just curious, I wanna go back into some of the specific areas of *The Da Vinci Code*. One of the things that the plot of the book centers around, as you mentioned before, is the notion that Jesus had a child with Mary Magdalene, there is a descendant of Christ. What exactly was the *real* role of Mary Magdalene, as opposed to Dan Brown's fictional account of it?

Robert M. Price: Well I think, originally, Mary Magdalene is simply a re-Christening of the goddess Isis. There are a number of mystery religions in the ancient world contemporary with Christianity and even much older, in which there's a divine savior who dies and is brought back to life by his divine consort. Baal is brought back by Anat; Cybele brings Attis back to life; Aphrodite brings Adonis back to life; Isis brings Osiris and so on. Well it seems to me that what we have here, just as in these other stories — Isis and Nephthys go to seek the body of the slain god Osiris — you've just got the names changed.

Neil J. Murphy: So it's basically rewriting the story and just changing the names.

Robert M. Price: And it is just a story, which is what myth means. These are not, I think, historical characters. So that, I think, is the original point. And even Mary the

prostitute. As conservative scholar J. B. Lightfoot argued, "Magdalene" doesn't refer to being from the town of Magdalene, which didn't exist yet, but it's based on the Aramaic for "hairdresser", which denoted "prostitute" or "madam". Even that, as Barbara Walker in her great [encyclopedia](#) points out, probably meant that Mary had something to do with being a sacred prostitute in these ancient religions. And it's all been historicized and reinterpreted. At least that's what I think; the evidence seems to point in that direction. And Brown comes very close to saying that, with all this stuff about the divine feminine; but then he wants to have his cake and eat it too, and he says, "But, Jesus and Mary did actually exist, 'cause they have to have or I don't have a plot here." A myth can't have a contemporary descendant.

Neil J. Murphy: So what you're saying, at least from what I understand, is that you feel that all of this is based upon the not-necessarily-proven notion that Jesus was a first-century historical person.

Robert M. Price: I find that highly doubtful.

Neil J. Murphy: And not only that. One of the things that I find really interesting, that you mention in your book, is the notion that a lot of people, and I think Dan Brown takes this from other people, that Jesus might have survived the Crucifixion, which if that's the case, would kind of blow the Christian story out of the water. Why don't you talk about that?

Robert M. Price: Now Brown *doesn't* say that, but a number of the people he cites do. And it's another version of the same theory, that like John and Yoko, they both left Palestine for France, and he's buried *there*, and so forth. This is fascinating because in the Gospels, you do have various loose ends that imply at one time, the story was told in such a way that it ended with Jesus cheating death and escaping the Cross, that he was crucified but survived it, as the heroes of various romance novels of the day did.

For instance, he dies only after a mere six hours, so when Joseph asks for the body, Pilate says, "Well he's dead already? Go verify it." And before he dies, he's given this vinegar or something on this sponge. Which implies he *doesn't* die; they drug him, and that's why he appears to be dead early, and Joseph asks for the body because they're gonna nurse him back to health. Now Joseph is said to be rich. Why? So he can bury Jesus in his own newly prepared tomb. In these novels, sure enough, somebody is buried in an aristocrat's tomb to motivate tomb robbers to come and open it up. They think, "Oh, rich guy died, he must have all kinds of goodies in there, let's steal 'em!" And when they open it up, the person is coming around again, they're waking up; and they say, "Oh my gosh, what are we gonna do? Here's a witness, let's take him with us." Well, I think that's why Matthew makes it explicit Joseph was a *rich* man, to indicate how Jesus got out of there. Otherwise, he would have just been left to rot. And this business, in the Gospel of John, having Jesus not only show his hands and feet to show he's physical, not a ghost; which could mean he's *still* alive, rather than alive *again*.

Neil J. Murphy: Very interesting. I'm just curious, I wanna move into something else that I find very interesting. The book talks about the notion, as you mention, of the Priory of Sion. Do you find a connection between that group and the modern-day Opus Dei?

Robert M. Price: No, I don't think so. The modern Alpha Galates is this right-wing

political group in France. It's possible there are individuals in it who are in Opus Dei, but I don't think there's any reason to think that as organizations they have any link.

Neil J. Murphy: OK, so there's no necessary correlation between the two.

Robert M. Price: No, I wouldn't be surprised; like somebody in one's church might turn out to be a member of the Klan, but you didn't know it and wouldn't have wanted them to be

Neil J. Murphy: I'm curious also. You've mentioned before about this kind of political battle to form the official doctrines of the Church. Now, a lot of people are not aware of the fact that there was another tradition, the Gnostic tradition, which was actually suppressed, and as far as I understand, Dan Brown doesn't actually even mention that, because it seems to me he *assumes* the first-century historical Jesus existed and that the story is *actually* true. Why don't you talk about that Gnostic tradition being suppressed and the connection with *The Da Vinci Code*?

Robert M. Price: Well, he *does* mention Gnostics but gets it wrong. He thinks that Gnostics were sort of free love advocates and had sacred orgies. And there's no real reason to think that, but the church fathers used to; it's just a way of vilifying your opponents. But he makes them into, like, sex/magick/Crowleyites sort of, Aleister Crowley-type. That's not what they were. They were much more uptight than even St. Augustine. They were like Orwell's Anti-Sex League. But they believed Jesus had been on Earth, but that far from being someone who could father children, most Gnostics thought that Jesus was simply a kind of a specter who took on the appearance of a human being, sort of like a holograph on *Star Trek*. So these are the *last* people that would have taught that Jesus had fathered children. They were kind of an elite, mystical group; a lot like Buddhism. And just like in Buddhism today you have people who believe, "Well, there never really was a historical Buddha, it's a symbol for enlightenment", that still exists in Buddhism, but in Christianity it's been exorcised. Constantine did put the kibosh on all that kind of thing; he persecuted the so-called heretics.

Neil J. Murphy: I'm curious. How does Da Vinci, himself, come to play a role in all of this?

Robert M. Price: It's the *weirdest* thing. They have these implausible readings of paintings. For instance, the Last Supper. They say, "Well, he doesn't have the chalice on the table, which means he's winking at you, telling you it wasn't literally a chalice of wine or blood; it must have been his bloodline." No! It's just based on the Gospel of John, where the Last Supper doesn't have the bread and wine. He does that in Chapter 6. He says, "Oh, and Jesus is sitting next to this effeminate-looking character." Yeah, it's the kid, John, son of Zebedee, who's sitting next to him in the Gospel of John. It's just nonsense. And they say, "Look at the way Jesus and that character are seated vis-à-vis one another." It's sorta like, if you draw lines over them both, they form an **M**, meaning that this must be Mary Magdalene." I'm not exaggerating! It's just so preposterous!

And some people have said, that people in Da Vinci's day did encode maps and things in their paintings. Yeah, that could be. But there's just no evidence that Da Vinci had any interest in any such thing, or did any of it in his paintings.

Neil J. Murphy: So I think it's safe to say that the freethinkers should view this as Dan Brown attempting to replace one fanciful set of myths with another fanciful set of myths.

Robert M. Price: That's right, yeah.

Neil J. Murphy: We only have a few minutes left, so I kinda want to wrap this up and give an overview. Do you think, overall, that your book attempts to say the following sentence, whether you agree or disagree: "Dan Brown has raised the right questions with the wrong answers." Do you agree or disagree with that?

Robert M. Price: Wholeheartedly yes. That's exactly the problem — and the opportunity. By making these questions current, that gives us a chance to say, "you know, there is a point there! You're not going to find it in this book, but here's some books where you *might* find it! It's *rare* that people are *this* up on a book that raises all of these big questions! Good to take advantage of, from our standpoint.

Neil J. Murphy: Do you think overall, then, as your work for the Jesus Seminar has shown, that perhaps the *grand* truth that can be gotten from these books, is that Jesus himself really never existed and was kind of just a literary myth, or was just something that was, for lack of a better word, copyrighted from other stories?

Robert M. Price: Well, that is the way I view it. There are many intelligent, well-read scholars that think they *can* reconstruct a historical Jesus. They could be right. I think they're a bit credulous, but they're certainly critical scholars; and there's a variety of opinions that I think no one will be able to iron out. It remains a question with no set answer. And that is what the faith of orthodoxy can never stomach. We as skeptics don't promote some alternative dogma; our point is history can never yield dogmas. And this is probably the most clear case of that.

Neil J. Murphy: What a beautiful way to end it. And on that note, I'd like to thank you very much for coming on Equal Time for Freethought. Once again, I highly recommend this book: a really good counter and criticism of pop culture that's so sorely needed. The book, again, is *The Da Vinci Fraud: Why the Truth is Stranger than Fiction*. I wish we had more time, maybe we'll have you back on again if there's a *Da Vinci Fraud 2*. Because I hear there's actually another book coming out.

Robert M. Price: Oh, no, you're kidding me.

Neil J. Murphy: That's what I've heard. Which means you're guaranteed another appearance on this show. So, congratulations!

Robert M. Price: Thanks for having me on!

Neil J. Murphy: Thanks for coming on again.