

THE GRAND ILLUSION

THE DECEPTION
OF ANOTHER
GOSPEL

The sensational illusionist

Howard Thurston once boasted that he could walk an elephant across the stage and no one would notice. Later, Doug Henning actually performed that feat to the amazement of his audience. And, who can forget the magic of David Copperfield, who made a jumbo jet disappear on national TV? Illusion can be fun. We are intrigued by the deception and we love to be fooled when it doesn't matter.

By its very nature illusion tampers with our perception of reality. What we think we see is not what is actually there. Now, that is fine when we're being entertained, but it's not okay when it interferes with life. Deception is a terrible thing when it leads us away from the truth. A life based on a lie is like a house built on the sand. In the end it cannot survive. A new Christianity based on a new gospel is today's new illusion. Actually, it is an old show with a modern twist that is receiving rave reviews. Opening in 1985 as "The Jesus Seminar," this revival of ancient Gnosticism as the true Christianity immediately caught the attention

BY DAN HAYDEN

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of major news periodicals such as *Time Magazine*, *Newsweek*, and *US News & World Report*. The Discovery Channel gave it prime time coverage, and Peter Jennings of ABC News thought it was significant enough to qualify as a TV special. The world had discovered a new Jesus who was more human than the biblical Jesus, and people were delighted.

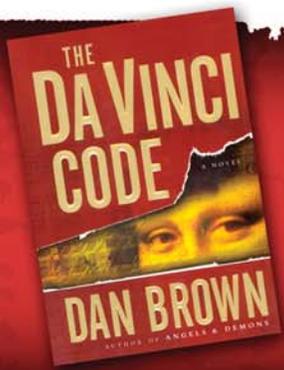
Recently, however, there has been a meteoric rise in popularity for the revisionist ideas of The Jesus Seminar. Dan Brown's

become the new reality. The audience is wowed by the illusion, and millions of people are loving the show.

What Is Gnosticism?

"Gnosis" is a Greek word for knowledge, and Gnostics were those who believed that ultimate union with God was achieved through special knowledge and transcendent spiritual experiences. Epiphanius (AD 310-403) was the first to use the term "practicing Gnostics" giving us the name

emerged as a separate and competitive force to the apostolic teaching. Followers of this system claimed to have special insights gleaned from secret encounters with God that elevated them over the historic church. Epiphanius and Iranaeus wrote against them in strong, polemic language and branded their teachings as heresy. This was not your mainstream Christianity, nor was it the original Gospel of Jesus. It was an aberrant cult that reinterpreted the message of Christ by transforming it into the likeness



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novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, is forging an indelible impression on our post-modern culture with the same Gnostic ideas about Jesus. With six million copies sold (and still counting), *The Da Vinci Code* with its new gospel has turned The Jesus Seminar into popular conversation. According to Paul Maier, "The book is being translated into 40 languages and will be made into a film by Columbia Pictures."¹

Modern Gnosticism is having a field day in the public forum, publicly slandering the church and historic Christianity as deliberate frauds who have squelched the truth about Jesus for centuries. Jesus is not God after all, they say, and the Bible is a contrived fabrication to hide the "genuine Gospel." Christianity has terrorized the world with its exclusive message of a divine Savior long enough. Now everyone can relax and enjoy life.

It's an "abracadabra" performance in which things that have no substance are lifted out of the shadows of history to

for this teaching.² Iranaeus (AD 120-202) earlier described them as those who "overthrow the faith of many, by drawing them away, under a pretense of [superior] knowledge..."³

The roots of Gnosticism sprouted in the early years of the church. Influenced by Plato and the ancient mystery religions, certain quasi-Christian groups claimed to have an inside track on spirituality as a result of secret knowledge obtained from transcendent sources. The apostle Paul warned Timothy about "the opposing arguments of what is falsely called 'knowledge'—which some have professed and thus gone astray from the faith" (1 Timothy 6:20-21). The temptation to elitism through secretive knowledge that went beyond the teachings of the apostles was already present in the formative years of the church.

Yet, fully developed Gnosticism did not come into its own until the second and third centuries after Christ. A well-defined system of esoteric Christianity eventually

of a mystery religion in the name of Christianity.

So Gnosticism is not a new thing. What is new is the contemporary fascination of many with the writings of Gnosticism in their attempt to redefine Christianity as a man-centered religion. Humans are their own gods and the way to a utopian existence is to follow the path of enlightenment. This is Gnosticism, and it is the new Christianity that is posing as the true faith rediscovered.

What About Those Hidden Books?

The catalyst for this resurgence of interest in Gnostic thinking was a spectacular archaeological find at Nag Hammadi, Egypt in 1945. An Arab boy by the name of Muhammad Ali found a clay jar which, when broken, revealed an ancient Coptic (Egyptian) manuscript. Later discoveries in the same region produced numerous other manuscripts that have since become known as the Nag Hammadi Library of the Gnostic

Scriptures. Until that time the Gnostic writings had been known only as they were referenced in the writings of others. Suddenly the treasures of the Gnostic community were discovered and Gnosticism was back—complete with its own Bible.

It has taken several decades to decipher and translate the Coptic scrolls of the Nag Hammadi Library. An English edition of these writings was published in 1977 and French and German translations have been published as well. This project was the

believe pretty much whatever we wish to believe.⁴

Five of the titles of the Gnostic scriptures are represented as Gospels: the Gospel of Truth, the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of the Egyptians, and the Gospel of Mary. As with the New Testament Scriptures, however, there are also other types of literature in the Gnostic writings; the Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles, the Apocalypse of Paul, the

ings—the product of an emerging cult. Dr. Darrell Bock makes this crucial observation concerning these writings:

Their dates range from the second to the third century AD, although a few works are alleged to be older or at least to reflect older views. This could be the case for some bits of this material, but not for most of it. The bulk of this material is a few generations removed from the foun-

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impetus for the Jesus Seminar launched by Robert W. Funk in 1985, and it is the foundation for the alternative Christianity espoused by Dan Brown in *The Da Vinci Code*. There is now a new Bible that reveals to us a new Jesus and a new Christianity—and it's all the rage.

Erwin Lutzer describes the impact of the newly discovered writings of the Gnostic Scriptures:

Some people like this alternate Bible better than the one we're acquainted with; they like what it teaches about God, Christ, mankind, and women. This Bible gives us permission to make God into whatever we want him (or her) to be. This Bible accepts the divine feminine and personal esoteric knowledge. At last we are free from restricting doctrines such as the Virgin Birth, the unique deity of Christ, and his resurrection. This new Bible is broad enough to embrace our culture and lets us

Exegesis of the Soul, and so forth.

In other words, the Gnostics evidently knew that it was important for them to create a separate collection of scriptures that reflected their own ideas since the New Testament books could not be used for their purpose. Everything in the Bible was contrary to what they were teaching, clearly highlighting the fact that Gnosticism is not another version of primitive Christianity but, rather, a totally different religious system. Gnosticism is simply a cross-dresser that has borrowed the clothes of Christianity. Like an illusion, it is not what it appears to be.

Robert Funk and Dan Brown are assuming that Gnosticism is the original Christianity that was later smothered by the more popular version of the church. Yet, Christianity was anything but popular in the early centuries, and historians have clearly demonstrated that Gnosticism was not the original Christianity. There is no question that the Gnostic writings were written later than the New Testament writ-

tings of the Christian faith, a vital point to remember when assessing the contents.⁵

So, here's the bottom line. Gnosticism is not Christianity and the Jesus of Gnosticism is not the Jesus of the Bible. It is not the true version of the Gospel. Far from it. It is a corruption of the message of Jesus masquerading as the genuine thing—a magic show where illusion is presented as reality. The fact that it is popular would make Houdini proud. ■

ENDNOTES

1. Hank Hanegraaff and Paul L. Maier, *The Da Vinci Code: Fact or Fiction?* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2004), p. 6.
2. Darrell L. Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2004), p. 63.
3. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), p. 315.
4. Erwin W. Lutzer, *The Da Vinci Deception* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2004), pp. 19-20.
5. Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*, p. 64.