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Potshots hit Catholics, again

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The last acceptable prejudice is anti-Catholicism. That's not me (a Roman Catholic) talking, but scholar Philip Jenkins, a Protestant, in his book *The New Anti-Catholicism*. In our "correct" society, a statement seen as racist, anti-Semitic, anti-woman or gay bashing will disqualify a writer for years -- but not insults to Jesus Christ and those who follow his precepts. Far from it: Enlarge shop-worn Catholic-conspiracy tales into book length, and it can make you

rich and famous, as it has one Dan Brown, author of *The Da Vinci Code*. The novel mixes fact with fiction in docudrama form, spewing a passel of baseless conjectures against Catholicism, representing modern feminist revisionist theory.

Doubleday distributed more than 10,000 free advance copies to the media, which, according to the *New York Times*, was more copies than any of his earlier books sold -- a major reason why the book hit the best-seller list. Let's go into as many canards as we can quickly. Brown says Jesus was not the son of God but a good man elevated to God status by the emperor Constantine as a means of boosting the Roman's power, with the New Testament adjusted to support the God myth. Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene who, at his crucifixion, was carrying his unborn child. The Holy Grail was not the chalice from which Christ drank

at the Last Supper, but literally the womb of Magdalene: a secret that Catholicism -- indeed all Christianity -- has preserved by countless murders to suppress the "sacred feminine" truth. The key is supposedly found in Da Vinci's "Last Supper," where, Brown insists, the figure at Christ's right is not St. John but Magdalene (not true, insists Bruce Boucher, curator of arts and sculpture at the Art Institute of Chicago, who has debunked the theory).

Brown's supposed "research" is derived from extremist feminist theories, including *The Gnostic Gospels* by Elaine Pagels; *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* by Michael Baigent, Richard Leight and Henry Lincoln, and *The Goddess in the Gospels: Reclaiming the Sacred Feminine* by Margaret Starbird. These eccentric suppositions are co-mingled with fact and sloppy research (the ancient

Olympic games were held to honor Zeus, not Aphrodite; the Knights Templar, who supposedly guarded the Magdalene "secret," did not build the cathedrals of their time, they were constructed by bishops throughout Europe; the gothic cathedrals do not represent feminine symbolism (as critic Sandra Miesel asks scathingly, "What part of a woman's anatomy does a transept represent? Or the kink in Chartres' main aisle?"). While hatred of Roman Catholicism dominates the book, no part of the church receives more invective than Opus Dei, the personal prelature of John Paul II.

A "monk" of Opus Dei (astoundingly, Brown doesn't understand that the group has no monks) is a murderer, killing to keep the Magdalene "secret" from being exposed. While not an Opus Dei member, I am familiar with, and admirer of, among other things, its schools for the

education of disadvantaged youth in Chicago, where I once taught. Because of Opus Dei's great influence, when its founder died, more than a third of all the world's bishops petitioned the Vatican to begin the process of his canonization. When John Paul II declared Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer a saint last October, the many thousands in St. Peter's Square stretched all the way to the Tiber River.

The novel is part of a genre to present a hate-filled stereotype of Roman Catholicism as a villain. "Almost as troubling as the sheer abundance of anti-Catholic rhetoric is the failure to acknowledge it as a serious social problem," writes Jenkins, distinguished professor of history and religious studies at Pennsylvania State University. "In the media, Catholicism is regarded as a perfectly legitimate target. . . .

What sometimes seems to be limitless social tolerance in modern America has strict limits where the Catholic Church is concerned."

The Da Vinci Code is only the latest crude assault, as frightening in its own way as were recent demonstrations by mobs at Catholic cathedrals in New York City and Montreal (no "hate crime" sanctions were invoked there). That this erratic tale will soon fade away will be fitting justification for a church whose founder died, out of love, for man's redemption and prophesied its unending persecution -- but also that will endure to the end of time.

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