

## GOD'S WORD OR MALE WORDS? POSTMODERN CONSPIRACY CULTURE AND FEMINIST MYTHS OF CHRISTIAN ORIGINS

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“We predict the future. The best way to predict the future is to invent it.”

A secret conspirator on *The X-Files*<sup>1</sup>

A highly educated female friend once told me that the early Church taught reincarnation until, during the Constantinian era of the Church, a bishop's wife insisted on banning it.<sup>2</sup> What troubled me, as I pondered this comment, was not her New Age ideas—pastors are well prepared for this by our studies of contemporary culture. What really troubled me was the ease with which she asserted a conspiratorial view of early Church history. I had known many lesser-educated people who believed in global conspiracies, whether of the Jews or the Trilateral Commission, but this was a highly educated professional. Her comment illuminated the extent to which anti-authoritarian, often feminist, reinterpretations of Christian history have penetrated popular culture.<sup>3</sup>

The extent of that penetration was demonstrated in the popularity of *The Da Vinci Code*, a clever murder mystery in which Dan Brown portrays

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Robert Alan Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) 221.

<sup>2</sup> Similar notions are widespread in New Age literature. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross asserts that “reincarnation was taught in Christianity for hundreds of years. The teaching of it was eventually forbidden by the First Ecumenical Council, for purely political reasons” (“The Plowboy Interview,” *The Mother Earth News* [May/June 1983] 21–22). L. Ron Hubbard contends that, after condemning the teaching of reincarnation at Constantinople, “all references to the subject were expunged from the Bible” (*Have You Lived Before This Life? A Scientific Survey* [Los Angeles: Church of Scientology of California, 1977 (1950)] 282). See also Carol Bowman, *Children's Past Lives: How Past Life Memories Affect Your Child* (New York: Bantam Books, 1998 [1997]) 322–23; Sylvia Browne, *Mother God: The Feminine Principle to Our Creator* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2004) 19; Michael R. Hathaway, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Past Life Regression* (New York: Alpha Books, 2003) 26–28; Elizabeth Clare Prophet with Erin Prophet, *Reincarnation: The Missing Link in Christianity* (Corwin Springs, MT: Summit University Press, 1997) 172–223.

<sup>3</sup> “It is certainly not exaggerated to say that, considering the strongly distinctive distrust against the pretensions of divine or human authorities, feminist spirituality might even be described as an anti-authoritarian religion.” Donate Pahnke, “Religion and Magic in the Modern Cults of the Great Goddess,” in *Religion and Gender* (ed. Ursula King; Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) 172.

Christianity as a deliberate fraud fabricated by a misogynistic early Church. The “truth about Jesus,” we were told, is that Mary Magdalene and Jesus participated together in rituals of sacred sexuality. After Jesus was crucified, Mary supposedly fled to France with their daughter (the Holy Grail—or sacred blood line), who founded the Merovingian dynasty. The Priory of Sion then was established to protect the heirs of that dynasty and also created the Knights Templar to excavate the treasures of the Jerusalem temple. The Priory, the Templars, and the Masons are said to have preserved and ritually transmitted elements of this, particularly the knowledge that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were the *hieros gamos*—the sexually sacred couple.

Now, at one level, this is just fiction. *The Da Vinci Code* has the standard disclaimer: “All of the characters and events in this book are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.” So why all the fuss created by this book? The fuss is the seriousness with which Dan Brown himself intends this depiction of Christianity. His book begins with a prominently displayed “fact” page on which he states that the Priory of Sion is a real organization and that “all descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.” Brown also sympathized publically with the opinions expressed by his fictional protagonist.<sup>4</sup> It is clear that the average reader of *The Da Vinci Code* will have a difficult time separating fact from fiction. It is even more clear that a new hermeneutic has entered the mainstream of popular culture. The problem posed by *The Da Vinci Code* is greater than one particular novel because it appeals to a postmodern culture of conspiracy.

### I. MYTHS OF CHRISTIAN ORIGINS

Major newspapers regularly feature articles at Christmas or Easter featuring sensationalist scholarship, no matter how far-fetched. The increasingly clichéd assessment is that the “real Jesus” has been suppressed by the Church and that the Bible is derived from an ecclesiastical cover-up. “Themes of secrecy, concealment and conspiracy are almost as attractive as sex” for the modern media, notes Philip Jenkins.<sup>5</sup> Whether it is scholarly articles, television documentaries or news media, the message is always the same: neither the Bible as we know it nor the religious authorities who appeal to it can be trusted any longer.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Dan Brown reaffirmed the basic historicity of *The Da Vinci Code* on NBC’s *Today Show*, expressed his agreement with the ideas of *The Da Vinci Code* in an interview on ABC’s television program *20/20*, and said similar things in an ABC News special during the November 2003 “sweeps period” (“Jesus, Mary and Da Vinci”). See, for instance, James L. Garlow and Peter Jones, *Cracking Da Vinci’s Code* (Colorado Springs: Victor, 2004) 24.

<sup>5</sup> Philip Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost Its Way* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 198. Luke Timothy Johnson agrees with Jenkins’s assessment of media response to the Jesus Seminar: *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) 9.

<sup>6</sup> One book published to meet current demand is L. David Moore’s *The Christian Conspiracy: How the Teachings of Christ Have Been Altered by Christians* (Atlanta: Pendulum Plus Press,

In the cacophony of scholarly voices trumpeting their “assured results” today, it is not hard to find the raw material of popular conspiracy theories.<sup>7</sup> When Bruce Chilton described Jesus “as an inspired rabbi with an exclusively Jewish agenda”—an “illegitimate,” mystical teacher of *kabbalah* who created rituals to help his followers “see as he saw, to share his vision of God,” he admitted that he does not “take any source that refers to Jesus, in the New Testament or elsewhere, at face value.”<sup>8</sup> John Crossan, a principal member of the Jesus Seminar, considers the Gospel passion narratives as OT prophecy historicized and not as history remembered.<sup>9</sup> Randel Helms characterized the Gospels as “largely fictional accounts concerning an historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth, intended to create a life-enhancing understanding of his nature.”<sup>10</sup> Alvar Ellegård is even more daring in his assertion that the “historical Jesus” was an Essene teacher who predated Peter, Paul, and the early Church by a century: “Jesus of Nazareth, born of Mary at the end of Augustus’ reign, is a fiction created in the second century by the Gospel writers.”<sup>11</sup> Burton Mack presumes that the NT has more to say about early Christian social formation than about the divine, because “myths are good for creating marvelous narrative worlds in which to stretch the imagination and work out theoretical equations.”<sup>12</sup> Consequently, Mack

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1994), which reflects the basic themes: The “real” teachings of Jesus were changed by early Christian leaders who sought above all their own institutional self-interests and, therefore, the Bible (as well as those who proclaim the Bible today) cannot be trusted.

<sup>7</sup> Often, the scholarly “cacophony” is intentional, as Elaine Pagels makes clear at the conclusion of *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Random House, 1988): “What I discovered instead is that the ‘real Christianity’—so far as historical investigation can disclose it—was not monolithic, or the province of one party or another, but included a variety of voices, and extraordinary range of viewpoints, even among the saints (witness Augustine and Chrysostom!), as well as among those denounced as heretics, from Valentinus to Julian, and even, as we have seen, within the New Testament writings themselves. From a strictly historical point of view, then, there is no single ‘real Christianity’” (p. 152). Modern diversity of opinion regarding Christianity thus reflects the origins of Christianity itself. See also Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity*; Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); Robert W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996); Richard A. Horsley and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Message and the Kingdom: How Jesus and Paul Ignited a Revolution and Transformed the Ancient World* (New York: Grosset/Putnam, 1997); Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battle for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Doron Mendels, *The Media Revolution of Early Christianity: An Essay on Eusebius’s Ecclesiastical History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus: An Intimate Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 2000) xix, xxi, and 291.

<sup>9</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995) 6. See also *idem*, *The Essential Jesus: Original Sayings and Earliest Images* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994); *idem*, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Randel Helms, *Gospel Fictions* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1988) 10.

<sup>11</sup> Alvar Ellegård, *Jesus—One Hundred Years Before Christ: A Study in Creative Mythology* (Woodstock: Overlook, 1999) 257.

<sup>12</sup> Burton L. Mack, *The Christian Myth: Origins, Logic, and Legacy* (New York: Continuum, 2001) 68–69.

sees no need to resort to “the interventions of the divine, the mystique of a unique individual, or the help of a cosmic spirit” because he is satisfied that he is reading “the story of an inventive, highly imaginative people.”<sup>13</sup>

For many Americans, the idea that Christianity is “myth” was popularized by Joseph Campbell through a series of Public Broadcasting television interviews with Bill Moyers. Campbell relegated the enduring value of religious metaphor to the experience of the individual and emphasized spiritual experiences shared by everyone across time or cultural boundaries.<sup>14</sup> Campbell built on the pioneering work of C. G. Jung, who linked God to the psychological concept of collective unconscious and spirituality to the exploration of dreams, symbols, and myths. It was, however, Rudolf Bultmann who gave Christianity as “mythology” its classic theological description. Bultmann believed that “the real purpose of myth is not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but to express man’s understanding of himself in the world in which he lives.”<sup>15</sup> Bultmann’s agenda was to create authentic self-understanding as the basis for meaningful existential choices. For him, as for Campbell, historicity is subordinated to subjectivity.<sup>16</sup>

Bultmann’s students sought to escape pure subjectivity in a renewed quest for the historical Jesus. The concern initially was that, since Bultmann had so effectively dissociated the Christ of faith from the Jesus of history, people might have radical doubts about the Christ of faith. The goal, therefore, was to reestablish an historical foundation for the credibility of Christian proclamation. In reality, the new quest merely confirmed the depth of the crisis, as Ernst Käsemann said in 1953: “The issue today is not whether criticism is right, but where it is to stop.”<sup>17</sup> The reincorporation of

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 125. Mack admits, “It has never occurred to me that the extraordinary and incomparable features attributed to Jesus on the part of early Christians were not mythic” (p. 58). Jacob Neusner submits that “we look in vain for history in the form of narrative of events, sustained exposition of sequences of events, story-telling of a teleological order, in the writings of Christianity and Judaism before the advent of Constantine” (*The Christian and Judaic Invention of History* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990] 14–15). Neusner is convinced that “the issue of Christianity is not the historical Jesus, it is why Christianity . . .” (*Rabbinic Literature & the New Testament: What We Cannot Show, We Do Not Know* [Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994] 183). See also *Reimagining Christian Origins: A Colloquium Honoring Burton L. Mack* (ed. Elizabeth A. Castelli and Hal Tausig; Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996); *Whose Historical Jesus?* (ed. William E. Arnal and Michel Desjardins; Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997); Hyam Maccoby, *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1986).

<sup>14</sup> “Metaphors only seem to describe the outer world of time and place,” Campbell insists. “Their real universe is the spiritual realm of the inner life. The Kingdom of God is within you” (*Thou Art That: Transforming Religious Metaphor* [Novato, CA: New World Library, 2001] 7). See also David Leeming, *Myth: A Biography of Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology,” in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate* (ed. Hans Werner Bartsch; New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961 [1953]) 10.

<sup>16</sup> The weakness in Bultmann’s hermeneutic was exposed by Helmut Thielicke, who pointed out that “the emphasis lies on the subjective element, the change in our self-consciousness which produces that understanding” (“The Restatement of New Testament Mythology,” in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate* 146).

<sup>17</sup> Ernst Käsemann, “The Problem of the Historical Jesus,” in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (trans. W. J. Montague; London: SCM, 1964 [1960]) 34.

historical method after Bultmann has served to liberate subjectivity rather than to escape it.<sup>18</sup>

This liberation of subjectivity has spawned a flood of popular as well as scholarly reinterpretations of the "historical" Jesus. Many popular books about early Church conspiracy have been published since the discovery of the DSS which, as Jenkins observed, "have proved particularly fertile ground for the most torrid fantasies."<sup>19</sup> The flood gates of controversy opened in 1989 when Hershel Shanks broke the news in his *Biblical Archeology Review* that the DSS had been subjected to years of restricted access and that the Israel Department of Antiquities had been part of the conspiracy of obstruction. The media reaction was frenzied, and a chain reaction of stories, books, and myths resulted.<sup>20</sup> The well-publicized controversies about the DSS

<sup>18</sup> The post-Bultmannian quest for the historical Jesus found its quintessential expression in the work of the Jesus Seminar. Seminar founder Robert Funk alleges that the current quest for Jesus liberates him from "prevailing captivities," although Philip Jenkins thinks that, in spite of their protestations to the contrary, Seminar scholars create a Jesus that is more congenial to them (Funk, *Honest to Jesus* 20–21; Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels* 168). Funk admits that he spent a great deal of his life trying "to keep up with the latest fashions in theory and practice" and that it was easy to be "seduced," although he now claims to have seen the light. "The better part of wisdom is not to be entranced by the fashionable," he writes, "not to be taken in by the politically correct, not to fall victim to the politics of theory and quotation" (Funk, *Honest to Jesus* 10). What he is "now ready to confess" is that "the Apostles' Creed is very likely a cover-up . . . of the real Jesus" (ibid.). He maintains that "the New Testament conceals the real Jesus as frequently as it reveals him." He is convinced that the world in which we live is a product of the stories we tell; it is mythic. "Because we do not recognize them as fictions," Funk submits, "they can be dangerously deceptive" (ibid. 11). Funk also expresses confusion about myth and reality: "Nevertheless, I concede that there is a world out there and that it is solidly real. I just don't know for sure which aspects are real and which are illusions supplied by our myths and descriptions" (ibid.). One problem with Funk's "confession" is that its components fit the "latest fashions in theory and practice." He also adds this postmodern caveat: "I confess that my confession may be a cover-up. Reader beware" (ibid. 10).

<sup>19</sup> Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels* 191. One of the original Scroll team members, John Allegro, not only became disenchanted with his colleagues but proposed in 1970 that the origin of Christianity could be traced to the hallucinogenic drug psilocybin (a sacred mushroom). This was followed by his 1979 book, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Christian Myth* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1992 [1979]), which argued that NT writers imposed universal Gnostic mythological patterns onto the historical materials provided by the Teacher of Righteousness and the eschatological expectations of the Essene community. Unable to confine himself to the presupposition that Christ Jesus did not exist, Allegro's revised edition actually argued that the "real" Jesus engaged in homo-erotic baptismal initiation rites (p. 242)!

<sup>20</sup> Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh authored *The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception: Why a Handful of Religious Scholars Conspired to Suppress the Revolutionary Contents of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Summit Books, 1991), which argued that there was a Vatican-based conspiracy to suppress the scrolls because they were written by the Jerusalem church led by James, the brother of Jesus. In her *Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Australian scholar Barbara Thiering weighed in with her key to unlocking the "riddle" of the scrolls in 1992—a "peshet technique" which revealed that Jesus was the Wicked Priest (John the Baptist being the Teacher of Righteousness) of Essene teaching, married to Mary Magdalene, and that he was crucified but did not die, and lived to the ripe old age of 80 near Rome. Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy picked up on Allegro's thesis that pagan mythology had been superimposed upon Essene ideas and practices in their 1999 book, *The Jesus Mysteries: Was the "Original Jesus" a Pagan God?* (New York: Harmony Books, 1999). They argued that Gnostics were the true "original" Christians and that

especially reinforced conspiracy theories involving the Knights Templar. Since the Templars were custodians of the Jerusalem Temple during the Crusades, it is often suggested that they acquired secret documents, such as the DSS or the Gnostic Gospels, through that stewardship.<sup>21</sup>

For most popular conspiracists, Jesus and not Paul was the source of Gnostic tendencies within Christianity. Born and also raised in Egypt, they tell us, Jesus practiced Egyptian mystery religion. "Christianity was not the religion founded by the unique Son of God who died for all our sins," assert Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince in *The Templar Revelation: Secret Guardians of the True Identity of Christ*, "it was the worship of Isis and Osiris repackaged."<sup>22</sup> Picknett and Prince also assert that it was the heretics throughout Christian history who managed to keep the "truth" alive, and it is to the heretical traditions of Gnostic Christianity that they point their readers. By tracing "the underground stream of goddess mystery, of sexual alchemy and of the secrets that surround John the Baptist," they believe that today "we may even come to appreciate fully that old hermetic adage: *Know ye not that ye are gods?*"<sup>23</sup> Roman Catholic dissident Margaret Starbird agrees and re-introduces the "sacred feminine" to Christianity in her books, *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar* and *The Goddess in the Gospels*.<sup>24</sup> She claims that

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early orthodoxy was "constructing a permanent hierarchy of power" by which "the truth of Christianity's origins was . . . rigorously suppressed and a more acceptable history was concocted—a fabrication, which is still taken to be accurate by the vast majority today" (pp. 214 and 237). The formation of the biblical canon was reduced to "constant doctrinal conflict, flagrant forgery, and corrupt power politics in the early Church" (p. 248). While rejecting simplistic DSS paranoia, Neil Silberman found a more sophisticated hermeneutic conspiracy in the way that the scrolls have been handled. By detailing the current controversies surrounding the discovery, release, and translation of the scrolls, Silberman hoped to show how the scrolls have always been subversive (*The Hidden Scrolls: Christianity, Judaism, & the War for the Dead Sea Scrolls* [New York: Putnam's Sons, 1994] 27). According to Silberman, it is not necessary to postulate an international conspiracy because almost all scholars will simply "come away from study of the Dead Sea Scrolls with only heightened appreciation for the historical basis of his or her particular faith" (p. 109). Thus, writes Silberman, "there is something that cannot be so easily dismissed in the idea that the scrolls—being contemporary, unrevised religious literature of first-century Judea—provide evidence about the beliefs of Jesus and his followers that were later transformed and concealed by later generations of Christian scribes and theologians" (p. 135).

<sup>21</sup> Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince, *The Templar Revelation: Secret Guardians of the True Identity of Christ* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998 [1997]). See also Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2004 [1982]); Christopher Knight and Robert Lomas, *The Hiram Key: Pharaohs, Freemasons and the Discovery of the Secret Scrolls of Jesus* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1998 [1996]); Christopher Knight and Robert Lomas, *The Second Messiah: Templars, the Turin Shroud and the Great Secret of Freemasonry* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2000 [1997]).

<sup>22</sup> Picknett and Prince, *The Templar Revelation* 301–2. They also contend that the Church lost the sacramental significance of sex by losing sight of its Egyptian roots (pp. 363–64).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 364–65.

<sup>24</sup> Margaret Starbird, *The Goddess in the Gospels: Reclaiming the Sacred Feminine* (Rochester, VT: Bear & Company, 1998) 63. A close reading of Starbird's books shows both her Gnostic inclinations and her fondness for sensationalist authors. Cf. *ibid.* 109 and 144.

“the Church has been built over a tragic flaw in its very foundation, the Bride denied.”<sup>25</sup>

Not only do conspiracists draw upon the “assured results” of academic historical criticism, but they also look for congruence in the biblical critique provided by feminism.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, radical feminist scholarship provides the most direct route to *The Da Vinci Code*. Margaret Crook has declared that Christianity “is man-formulated, man-argued, man-directed,” and Rosemary Radford Ruether asserted that the “potential vision for a more radical and inclusive exodus community has been betrayed by a new triumph of patriarchy in the post-Pauline tradition of the New Testament.”<sup>27</sup> Kathryn Greene-McCreight called this “patriarchal silencing.”<sup>28</sup> Even Mary Daly, who is hostile to biblical theism, nevertheless subscribes to the theory that the early Church suppressed the “real Jesus.”<sup>29</sup> Naomi Goldenberg includes Jesus in the patriarchalism, so that it was only a culmination and not an innovation when “a male clergy nearly succeeded in erasing the contribution of Christian women from recorded history.”<sup>30</sup>

A major focus of the feminist attack is the biblical canon. Consequently, most feminists operate without scriptural boundaries and view all texts

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 76. Dan Brown betrays his reliance on these sources for *The Da Vinci Code* by having one of his characters cite the “historians” who have researched the Priory and Templars: “The royal bloodline of Jesus Christ has been chronicled in exhaustive detail by scores of historians . . . *The Templar Revelation . . . The Woman with the Alabaster Jar . . . The Goddess in the Gospels . . . Holy Blood, Holy Grail . . .*” (*The Da Vinci Code* [New York: Doubleday, 2003] 253). In each case the label “historian” is dubious, as they are all sensationalist authors who feed upon each other. *The Templar Revelation*, for instance, is heavily dependent upon *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*—as are Starbird’s *Woman with the Alabaster Jar* and *The Goddess in the Gospels*.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Women and Christian Origins* (ed. Ross Kraemer and Mary D’Angelo; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Anne Jensen, *God’s Self-Confident Daughters: Early Christianity and the Liberation of Women* (trans. O. C. Dean, Jr.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

<sup>27</sup> Margaret Brackenbury Crook, *Women and Religion* (Boston: Beacon, 1964) 5. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Womanguides: Readings Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985) 159.

<sup>28</sup> Kathryn Greene-McCreight, *Feminist Reconstructions of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 100.

<sup>29</sup> “The Judaic-Christian tradition has served to legitimate sexually imbalanced patriarchal society,” asserts Mary Daly. On the other hand, she is convinced that “the Jesus of the Gospels was a free person who challenged ossified beliefs and laws. Since he was remarkably free of prejudice against women and treated them as equals, insofar as the limitations of his culture would allow, it is certain that he would be working with them for their liberation today” (“After the Death of God the Father: Women’s Liberation and the Transformation of Christian Consciousness,” in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* [ed. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979] 59–60).

<sup>30</sup> Naomi Goldenberg, “The Return of the Goddess: Psychoanalytic Reflections on the Shift from Theology to Theology,” in *Religion and Gender* 150. Susan Cady, Marian Ronan, and Hal Taussig agree: “Sophia reached her peak of power as a divine person in the Hellenistic era, only to be limited in her growth to full divine status by Jewish monotheism, replaced in Christianity by the male Jesus, and erased as part of the Christological tradition by the church fathers” (*Wisdom’s Feast: Sophia in Study and Celebration* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986] 12). See also Susan Cady, Marian Ronan, and Hal Taussig, *Sophia: The Future of Feminist Spirituality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986).

produced in the first centuries as viable documents for recovering the “truth” about Jesus. According to Ross Kraemer and Mary D’Angelo, “both the study of women and the study of gender require consideration of the broad range of early Christian writings” because “canonical distinctions have little significance for the study of women in early Christian communities.”<sup>31</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza insists that the biblical canon “reflects a patriarchal selection process and has functioned to bar women from ecclesial leadership.”<sup>32</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether is even more harsh: “The Old and New Testaments have been shaped in their formation, their transmission, and, finally, their canonization to sacralize patriarchy. They may preserve, between the lines, memories of women’s experience. But in their present form and intention they are designed to erase women’s existence as subjects and to mention women as absence and silence.”<sup>33</sup>

Feminists are aware of difficulties with conspiracy theories and typically disavow them. Yet, the language of patriarchy is inherently conspiratorial. Patriarchy implies an oppressor—one or more of three candidates, according to Peter Knight: “individual men, women in complicity with male institutions, or ‘the system.’”<sup>34</sup> The further one moves away from individual men

<sup>31</sup> Ross Kraemer and Mary Rose D’Angelo, “Introduction,” in *Women and Christian Origins* 5.

<sup>32</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad, 1993) 167. Elsewhere, she writes: “The textual and historical marginalization of women is also a by-product of the “patristic” selection and canonization process of Scripture” (*In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* [New York: Crossroad, 1983] 53). Susanne Heine describes the problem in terms of the “canon within the canon”: “A church which goes by the model of the Pastoral Epistles and does not see that the praxis evidenced in these letters has already moved a long way from the canon in the canon which women also represent has also removed itself from the claim of Jesus and makes itself guilty of both the internal and external emigration of its members” (*Women and Early Christianity: A Reappraisal* [trans. John Bowden; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988 (1987)] 153). For more on the “canon within the canon” and feminist hermeneutics see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984) 12–14.

<sup>33</sup> Ruether, *Womanguides* ix. See also Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976); Susan Griffin, *Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1980 [1978]); Sherry Ruth Anderson and Patricia Hopkins, *The Feminine Face of God: The Unfolding of the Sacred in Women* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991); and Rosalind Miles, *The Women’s History of the World* (Topsfield, MA: Salem House, 1989 [1983]).

<sup>34</sup> Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X-Files* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 126. Knight claims that Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* “offers an account of what would come to be known as patriarchy as if it were a conspiracy, without ever fully cashing out the metaphor into literal fact” (p. 124). For an introduction to various facets of contemporary feminism, see Josephine Donovan, *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions of American Feminism* (New York: Continuum, 1992 [1985]); Ginette Castro, *American Feminism: A Contemporary History* (trans. Elizabeth Loverde-Bagwell; New York: New York University Press, 1990 [1984]); *U.S. History as Women’s History: New Feminist Essays* (ed. Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar; Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Francis Martin, *The Feminist Question: Feminist Theology in the Light of Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1994); Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown, 1991); and Christina Hoff Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).



the more conspiratorial the language becomes.<sup>35</sup> While it is true, as Linda Nicholson claims, that postmodern feminism will employ “multiple categories when appropriate” and forswear “the metaphysical comfort of a single feminist method or feminist epistemology,” its inescapable presupposition remains the victimization of women—a presupposition that easily conceives a hermeneutic of paranoia.<sup>36</sup> Feminist suspicion of authority and institutions undermines historical narratives and opens the door to idiosyncratic subjectivity.

## II. HISTORICAL FICTION AND FICTIONAL HISTORY

Neither “fiction” nor “myth” are “dirty words” for postmodern scholars because they perceive reality in terms of creative imagination. Elizabeth Clark observes that “in creating narrative history, the historian employs the same techniques that Freud identified as the dreamwork,” suggesting that historical texts are “little different from novels.”<sup>37</sup> Hayden White contends that the oft-cited difference between “history” and “fiction” (“that the historian

<sup>35</sup> Mary Daly writes: “The fact is that we live in a profoundly anti-female society, a misogynistic ‘civilization’ in which men collectively victimize women, attacking us as personifications of their own paranoid fears, as The Enemy. Within this society it is men who rape, who sap women’s energy, who deny women economic and political power. To allow oneself to know and name these facts is to commit anti-gynocidal acts. Acting in this way, moving through the mazes of the anti-female society, requires naming and overcoming the obstacles constructed by its male agents and token female instruments” (*Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1978] 29). See also *idem*, *The Church and the Second Sex* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985 [1968]) and *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974 [1973]).

<sup>36</sup> Linda Nicholson with Nancy Fraser, “Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism,” in Linda Nicholson, *The Play of Reason: From the Modern to the Postmodern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999) 114. Instead of one comprehensive understanding or ideology, Nicholson and Fraser laud the ambiguity of feminist theory, comparing it to “a tapestry composed of threads of many different hues.” They think “one might best speak of it in the plural as the practice of feminisms. . . . It is already implicitly postmodern” (pp. 114–15). While feminists are highly diverse, common to them all is the presupposition, as Karen Offen put it, that “to be a feminist is necessarily to be at odds with male-dominated culture and society” (“Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach,” *Signs* 14 [1988] 152). Greene-McCreight concurs: “However feminists embrace the Bible, the questions of woman’s identity and the role of patriarchy in circumscribing that identity are kept always at the fore as feminist theologians approach the Bible” (*Feminist Reconstructions of Christian Doctrine* 37).

<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth A. Clark, “The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the ‘Linguistic Turn,’” *CH* 67/1 21. The “non-fiction” best-seller at the root of the “fictional” *The Da Vinci Code* also blurs the distinction between fact and fiction. In *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln acknowledge: “It was with a vision akin to that of the novelist that we created our book” (p. 20). The authors leave little doubt about their presuppositions when they state clearly their aversion to “facts” and their preference for myth and legend: “Finally, it is not sufficient to confine oneself exclusively to facts. One must also discern the repercussions and ramifications of facts as those repercussions and ramifications radiate through the centuries—often in the form of myth and legend” (p. 312). It is the novelists, they assert, who are more “accustomed to synthesizing diverse material, to making connections more elusive than those explicitly preserved in documents.” The novelist “recognizes that truth may not be confined only to recorded facts but often lies in more intangible domains—in cultural achievements, in

'finds' his stories, whereas the fiction writer 'invents' his") is a dubious one, since it "obscures the extent to which 'invention' also plays a part in the historian's operations."<sup>38</sup> According to Naomi Goldenberg, "the present is largely a *fiction* of the past"—by which she means that the Latin root of the word for fiction, which means "to form," implies that the past constructs the present. Historical narrative becomes a vehicle of empowerment, and those with power to interpret the past shape the present.<sup>39</sup> In her widely quoted novel, Monique Wittig advises women seeking empowerment: "But remember. Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent."<sup>40</sup> When history is reduced to myth, the past loses objectivity, and postmodern imagination runs free.<sup>41</sup>

At the beginning of a scholarly essay on Mary Magdalene, Mary Rose D'Angelo cites Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Robber Bride*. One of the major characters in the Atwood novel is a military historian who ruminates on contemporary historiography: "Where to start is the problem, because nothing begins when it begins and nothing's over when it's over, and everything needs a preface: a preface, a postscript, a chart of simultaneous events. History is a construct, she tells her students. Any point of entry is possible and all choices are arbitrary."<sup>42</sup> A hundred pages later, the historian is once again a pondering postmodern:

*All history is written backwards*, writes Tony [the historian], writing backwards. We choose a significant event and examine its causes and consequences, but

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myths, legends, and traditions; in the psychic life of both individuals and entire peoples" (p. 20). Whether it is "non-fiction" or "fiction," in other words, the genre is essentially the same. All that matters is the "story."

<sup>38</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) 6–7. Hans Kellner emphasizes the making of history through the writing of history: "To get the story crooked is to understand that the straightness of any story is a rhetorical invention and that the invention of stories is the most important part of human self-understanding and self-creation" (*Language and Historical Representation: Getting the Story Crooked* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989] xi).

<sup>39</sup> Goldberg, "The Return of the Goddess" 148 (emphasis original; Goldberg here argues the affinity of goddess religion with psychoanalysis). As Michael Kammen puts it, "we have highly selective memories of what we have been taught about the past" and "the past may be mobilized to serve partisan purposes" (*Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991] 10). Applying the insights of memory research to the study of the Bible, Dominic Crossan concludes: ". . . while we do certainly remember, we remember by a reconstructive process. . . . That reconstructive process often claims equal accuracy and veracity for what we actually recall and for what we creatively invent" (*The Birth of Christianity* 67).

<sup>40</sup> Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères* (trans. David LeVay; New York: Avon Books, 1971) 89. Naomi Goldenberg comments: "The wisdom of the words lies in the recognition that belief in a state of beneficence that existed in the past is an idea which empowers in the present. Wittig recommends that an invented past can be substituted for a remembered one. After all, she implies, faith is simply a very strong wish" ("The Return of the Goddess" 155).

<sup>41</sup> Beverley Southgate recognizes the problem: "If 'judgement' or reason can no longer meaningfully aspire to historical truth, imagination or 'fancy' may be given freer rein" (*History: What & Why? Ancient, Modern and Postmodern Perspectives* [New York: Routledge, 1996] 121).

<sup>42</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride* (New York: Doubleday, 1993) 4.

who decides whether the event is significant? We do, and we are here; and it and its participants are there. They are long gone; at the same time, they are in our hands. Like Roman gladiators, they are under our thumbs. We make them fight their battles over again for our edification and pleasure, who fought them once entirely for other reasons.<sup>43</sup>

The significance of these sentiments is revealed at the novel's conclusion where the historian is pondering another major character's tragic (and deceptively conspiratorial) life and death:

But why bother, in this day and age—Zenia herself would say—with such a quixotic notion as the truth? *Every sober-sided history is at least half sleight-of-hand: the right hand waving its poor snippets of fact, out in the open for all to verify, while the left hand busies itself with its own devious agendas, deep in its hidden pockets.* Tony is daunted by the impossibility of accurate reconstruction.<sup>44</sup>

It is clear that, far from academic halls of ivy, the postmodern hermeneutic of suspicion thrives in popular culture.

It is also clear that, as D'Angelo observes in her essay on Mary Magdalene, feminist historiography can be characterized fairly by the quote from Atwood's novel:

. . . [A]ny version of Mary Magdalene she [the feminist historian] constructs is pieced together out of snippets. Nor are they snippets of fact, but rather snippets of the memories and expectations embedded in the distant conversations of long-dead authors with long-dispersed communities. The interpreter selects and arranges, waving these three or four relics out in the open, holding up these two or three iconic narratives, mapping both onto imagined vistas, only dimly aware of the agendas that must always remain even less clear to her than her own.<sup>45</sup>

D'Angelo here asserts that feminist historiography is not so much rooted in fact as in how women of today *wish* to see the past; it is designed to empower women. Of course, to feminists this is merely what men have always done and the turn-about is fair play. "If a patriarchal tradition has taken advantage of the essential fluidity of meaning and reference in language in order to serve its own interests," argues Erin White, "a feminist tradition can take advantage of the same fluidity in the interests of women and men."<sup>46</sup>

The feminist urge to undermine the "objective" male interpreter and "his" authoritative text has put feminism in the vanguard of postmodern re-imagining. According to Beverley Southgate, feminism is a "consciously adopted programme for the future" that is "concerned with changing values

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 109.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 457–58. Emphasis added—the emphasized text is used by D'Angelo at the beginning of her article on Mary Magdalene

<sup>45</sup> Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Reconstructing 'Real' Women in Gospel Literature: The Case of Mary Magdalene," in *Women & Christian Origins* 125.

<sup>46</sup> Erin White, "Religion and the Hermeneutics of Gender: An Examination of the Work of Paul Ricoeur," in *Religion and Gender* 94. See also Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

and perceptions of the past."<sup>47</sup> This feminist "programme" is grounded in "some measure of suspicion," June O'Connor declares, "given the androcentric context and content of inherited sources."<sup>48</sup> The most important thing about the hermeneutic of suspicion, according to O'Connor, is the way that it opens "up possibilities for recasting and reconstructing the concepts, theories and methods *we think with*."<sup>49</sup> Because "representation 'makes things happen,'" urges Judith Newton, feminists need to ascertain "the degree to which hegemonic ideology and power are seen as stable and impervious to change and the degree to which they are imagined to be internally divided, unstable, and in constant need of construction and revision. . . ."<sup>50</sup> Only in this way can they produce "something more than history as usual."<sup>51</sup>

So, who is to say, then, how fictional Miriam Winter's *Gospel of Mary* actually is? "It must be said, right at the beginning, that *The Gospel According to Mary* is an imaginative work," Winter writes. "Imaginative, but not ahistoric, for this text, which is not entirely factual, is not exactly fiction."<sup>52</sup> Like *The Da Vinci Code*, what Winter presents to the reader in *The Gospel According to Mary* is a patriarchal conspiracy in the early Church:

There was even talk of a canon, of making certain traditions authoritative for all. Women everywhere were disheartened. Their leadership was no longer recognized. Their experience was being misinterpreted. Their teaching, preaching and prophesying had been disqualified on theoretical grounds. What had become of the *koinonia*, that spirit of equality which was the special charism of the Pentecostal church? There were signs that there would soon be a hierarchically divided communion of saints, a church of the elite in which the women

<sup>47</sup> Southgate, *History: What & Why?* 136.

<sup>48</sup> June O'Connor, "The Epistemological Significance of Feminist Research in Religion," in *Religion and Gender* 46. Ursula King agrees, noting, "The politics of knowledge have until very recently been entirely shaped by men" ("A Question of Identity: Women Scholars and the Study of Religion," in *Religion and Gender* 222). Writes Elizabeth Fox-Genovese: "For texts enjoy a privileged position in the continuing process of fashioning and refashioning consciousness, of defining possibilities of action, of shaping identities, and of shaping visions of justice and order. But that power derives precisely from their inscription in a history reread as structured relations of superordination and subordination" ("Literary Criticism and the Politics of the New Historicism," in *The New Historicism* [ed. H. Aram Veeger; New York: Routledge, 1989] 222).

<sup>49</sup> Writes O'Connor: "Feminist inquiry questions, critiques, and reconstructs. It scrutinizes, relativizes and regularly rejects metaphors, concepts and approaches that have been cherished for years, indeed often for centuries. It also creates metaphors, searches for more adequate concepts, and proffers new approaches, bringing an air of detachment and an attitude of dispensability to inherited claims and categories" ("The Epistemological Significance of Feminist Research" 47). This agenda is not without repercussions, however. Among them, Southgate postulates, is its "confirmation of a more general relativism, its recognition of the inevitable partiality and contingency of any historical account, and its 'decentring' of any historical narration." The feminist hermeneutic, admits Southgate, "is contributing to the de-stabilisation of historical study" (*History: What & Why?* 99). The feminist agenda cannot at the same time serve two masters: historicity and female empowerment.

<sup>50</sup> Judith Lowder Newton, "History as Usual? Feminism and the 'New Historicism,'" in *The New Historicism* 155.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 166.

<sup>52</sup> Miriam Therese Winter, *The Gospel According to Mary: A New Testament for Women* (New York: Crossroad, 1993) 15.

were sure to feel oppressed. Was it the end of the age of freedom? Would wisdom disappear in the heat of theological definition? Soon no one would remember how it had once been. Women had not yet forgotten, but they had to make sure that the future did not misunderstand their spirited past.<sup>53</sup>

Is this fiction, history, or fiction masquerading as history? For most readers, the question is irrelevant. Winter acknowledges that her goal was to remain as close as possible to what she called "the gospel feeling."<sup>54</sup> The presupposition was also clear: "If the biblical word is not liberating for women, it is not God's life-giving word."<sup>55</sup> Most of all, Winter declares, "the task of feminist liturgy is to tell us over and over again to trust our experience which is where God's wisdom resides."<sup>56</sup>

A more compelling "imaginative" narrative is Jean-Yves Leloup's commentary on his translation of *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*. The Gospel bears witness, Leloup claims, "to an altogether different mode of understanding that the masculine mind typically overlooks: a domain of prophetic or visionary knowledge that, though certainly not exclusive to women, definitely partakes of the feminine principle, and is sometimes known as the angelic or Eastern dimension of human knowledge."<sup>57</sup> Although he insists his use of imagination does not have the usual connotations of fantasy, Leloup contends "it is the creative imagination that this gospel wants to awaken in us. . . ."<sup>58</sup> It was Mary Magdalene's creative imagination, he claims, that enacted the "resurrected Christ" as a response to the "apparition" which manifested itself to her on Easter:

Her creative imagination imbues all this with such a powerful presence that she can never leave it nor lose it; thus she creates the true Beloved, which constantly accompanies her and illumines her. This Reality is not any sort of psychological illusion, compensation, nor sublimation. It is an awakening to this intermediate world, and experience and a knowledge in which the Christ is offered as contemplation. . . .<sup>59</sup>

The Christianity of this Gospel, its translator, and the postmodern culture that hungrily devours it, is one of divine *gnosis* through the subjective awareness that supposedly yields it. It is also about the power the Church is said to have denied individuals in their search for *gnosis*.

The same can be said for Dan Brown's novels. "It was all about power," asserted one of the main characters in *The Da Vinci Code*. "Many scholars claim that the early church literally *stole* Jesus from His original followers, hijacking His human message, shrouding it in an impenetrable cloak of divinity, and using it to expand their own power." The culprit was, of course,

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 27.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 17.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 22.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 23.

<sup>57</sup> Jean-Yves Leloup, *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* (trans. Joseph Rowe; Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2002 [1997]) 13.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 17.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 18.

Constantine: “Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ’s *human* traits and embellished those gospels that made him godlike.”<sup>60</sup> The gnostic implications of *The Da Vinci Code* are clearer in Brown’s *Angels and Demons*. In the midst of an anti-papal conspiracy modeled on the ancient Illuminati, Brown’s main character gives voice to postmodern paranoia: “Since the beginning of history a deep rift has existed between science and religion.” Another character responds, “Religion has always persecuted science.”<sup>61</sup> The threat that modern science poses to religion, according to Brown, is its synthetic understanding of knowledge and the relativity of all religious truth-claims: “God, Buddha, The Force, Yahweh, the singularity, the unicity point—call it whatever you like—the result is the same.”<sup>62</sup> Another character puts it this way: “Religion is like language or dress. We gravitate toward the practices with which were raised. In the end, though, we are all proclaiming the same thing.”<sup>63</sup> The real issue is spiritual openness: “We all seek God in different ways.”<sup>64</sup> What matters most, when all is said and done, is simply the quest: “In the end we are all just searching for truth, that which is greater than ourselves.”<sup>65</sup>

An author with similar sentiments but less publicity is Lewis Perdue. His 1983 novel *The Da Vinci Legacy* was reissued in 2004, probably to capitalize on the interest generated by *The Da Vinci Code*. *The Da Vinci Legacy* features a murderous order of priests plotting to kill the pope and purify the Catholic church. Their scandalous secret is that the apostle Peter had fathered a secret, illegitimate child. Supposedly, the stability of the Catholic church would dissolve with the revelation of that secret.<sup>66</sup> As in all of the postmodern paranoia novels, the predominant message is the priority of power. One of the characters maintains: “Never forget that the Vatican is

<sup>60</sup> Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* 233 and 234. The same character who reduced Christianity to power also quotes Napoleon with approval: “What is history, but a fable agreed upon?” (p. 256). According to Brown’s main character, “every faith in the world is based on fabrication”—by which he means that religion is constructed upon human myths of metaphor (p. 341). The alternative is “to commune directly with God”—an alternative that, in the words of this main character, “posed a serious threat to the Catholic power base. It left the Church out of the loop, undermining their self-proclaimed status as the *sole* conduit to God” (p. 309).

<sup>61</sup> Dan Brown, *Angels and Demons* (New York: Pocket Books, 2001 [2000]) 31.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* 72. Another bestseller with a similar message is *The Footprints of God* (New York: Pocket Books, 2003) by Greg Iles. A super powerful government computer achieves the equivalent of human consciousness and provides the pretext for considerable authorial philosophizing about the universe as “an incubator of consciousness” (p. 488). God is “awareness without matter or energy. Pure information” (p. 408). Jesus did not have God’s power; he “was a healer, not a magician. Those stories were useful to those who built a religion around him” (p. 410). All that really mattered with Jesus were his words and deeds; when he died, there was no resurrection of the body, and even God “despaired.” God had “done his best as a man, and though he influenced many, his message was embellished, twisted, exploited” (pp. 411–12).

<sup>63</sup> Brown, *Angels and Demons* 110.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* 534.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* 110.

<sup>66</sup> Lewis Purdue writes: “So much would be called into question, so much which Catholics have held as holy. It’s possible that the Church as it exists wouldn’t survive such a revelation” (*The Da Vinci Legacy* [New York: Tom Doherty, 2004 (1983)] 221).

political even before it is religious. Power comes before the spirit.<sup>67</sup> Even more daring is Purdue's recent novel, *Daughter of God*, which is about a second messiah who was erased from history by the early Church because the messiah was a female. Once again, Constantine is our villain: "Constantine was paranoid about unity. He controlled the church for his own purposes and shaped theology for the sake of political expediency. So many things people today think are divinely inspired were actually Constantine's political edicts enforced by the power of the sword."<sup>68</sup> The main character, as in *The Da Vinci Code*, proclaims that "deceit and lies . . . underpinned every religion."<sup>69</sup> Like Brown, Purdue's remedy is a lifelong search. His main character declares: "Maybe what God really wants is not blind acceptance of dogma but a lifetime of searching . . . discarding what is obviously false, testing the rest."<sup>70</sup> Such discarding and testing, however, becomes little more than gnostic preoccupation with subjectivity.

Perhaps the most sophisticated purveyor of historical conspiracy fiction has been Umberto Eco, Professor of Semiotics at the University of Bologna. His first novel, *The Name of the Rose*, involved the suppression of a long-lost volume of Aristotle on laughter. Intriguingly, Eco used a plot device that became the vehicle for his next book. His hero mistakenly suspected that the murders were based on a pattern found in the Book of Revelation, and the guilty party accommodated him.<sup>71</sup> It would seem that, if the best way to predict the future is to invent it, there simply is no way to separate the observer from the "facts"! Eco's second novel, *Foucault's Pendulum*, samples nearly every volume of occult literature written on the Rosicrucians, Freemasonry, Illuminati, Templars, and associated groups. His main characters concoct what they think is a whimsical synthesis of all conspiracy theories ever conceived, and they add a new twist. Their problem is that some hardcore conspiracy buffs believe them and, as a result, eventually discover that what they have invented is a credible new conspiracy. As the three friends experience unsettling years of regression into their own paranoia, one of them is diagnosed with terminal cancer. Through him, Eco suggests a parallel with postmodern existence:

I'm dying because I convinced myself that there was no order, that you could do whatever you liked with any text. I spent my life convincing myself of this. I, with my own brain. And my brain must have transmitted the message to them [my cells]. Why should I expect them to be wiser than my brain? I'm

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 227.

<sup>68</sup> Lewis Purdue, *Daughter of God* (New York: Tom Doherty, 2000) 15–16.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 10.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 18. Purdue dispels all doubt in his author's note at the end of the novel: "But if we can find truth in fiction, the truth I have tried to write is the spiritual imperative to question and to search for a relationship with God. And further, to know that this relationship does not exclude different relationships that others have established. No faith has a monopoly on God any more than the color red has a more favored position in the spectrum of light from the sun" (p. 421).

<sup>71</sup> Umberto Eco's character theorized: "So, then . . . I conceived a false pattern to interpret the moves of the guilty man, and the guilty man fell in with it" (*The Name of the Rose* [New York: Warner Books, 1984 (1980)] 572).

dying because we were imaginative beyond bounds. . . . The world is behaving like my cells.<sup>72</sup>

The book ends with its narrator running from those who believe he has the key to an age-old secret that he and his friends had just invented. The narrator sees a dissolution of knowledge: "But now I have come to believe that the whole world is an enigma, a harmless enigma that is made terrible by our own mad attempt to interpret it as though it had an underlying truth."<sup>73</sup> Eco seems to suggest that postmodernity implies both paranoia and ultimate meaninglessness.<sup>74</sup>

### III. POSTMODERN CONSPIRACY CULTURE

While nearly all of the recent claims about Jesus and the early Church have been made in popular novels since the nineteenth century, what is new is the postmodern culture into which they have been dispatched.<sup>75</sup> Earlier claims, couched in the language of historical-critical scholarship, implied the necessity of discerning truth from error, reality from fiction. Current discussion of Christian origins is reconfigured by a hermeneutic of suspicion that is itself sustained by postmodern paranoia.

When Richard Hofstadter published his 1965 classic, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, it was still fashionable to think of paranoia as abnormal. Conspiracy thinking characterized individuals or groups that had become profoundly alienated or frightened, and the notion that paranoia could characterize popular culture was incongruous.<sup>76</sup> However, since the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King in the turbulent 1960s, followed by the Watergate scandals of the 1970s, this has changed. Recent books by Robert Alan Goldberg (*Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*), Peter Knight (*Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to The X-Files*), and Timothy Melley (*Empire of Conspiracy: The*

<sup>72</sup> Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990 [1989]) 468.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* 81.

<sup>74</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb sees clearly where postmodernism ends: "The beasts of modernism have mutated into the beasts of postmodernism—relativism into nihilism, amorality into immorality, irrationality into insanity, sexual deviancy into polymorphous perversity. And since then [since Nietzsche and Trilling], generations of intelligent students under the guidance of their enlightened professors have looked into the abyss, have contemplated those beasts, and have said, 'How interesting, how exciting'" (*On Looking into the Abyss: Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994] 6).

<sup>75</sup> The rise of theosophy and Oriental reinterpretations of Jesus in the nineteenth century incited sensationalist claims about the "real" Jesus as distinguished from the "Churchianity" initiated by the apostle Paul. Cf. Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003) 162–64, 267–90.

<sup>76</sup> Richard Hofstadter writes: "In the paranoid style, as I conceive it, the feeling of persecution is central, and it is indeed systematized in grandiose theories of conspiracy" (*The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* [New York: Vintage Books, 1967] 4). See also *The Radical Right: The New American Right Expanded and Updated* (ed. Daniel Bell; Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1964 [1963]).



*Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*) document the emergence of a post-modern conspiracy culture.

The direction that these three authors take can be distinguished from those who still largely follow Hofstadter. Elaine Showalter, for instance, portrays conspiracy thinking today as hysteria and includes both Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and Gulf War Syndrome among her "hysterical epidemics."<sup>77</sup> Michael Rogin views the whole canvas of American history through the eyes of subversive paranoia and approaches a cultural interpretation, although he settles for the notion that the root of the problem is trouble with mother.<sup>78</sup> Beyond this predisposition to psychoanalysis, Rogin also fails to notice how fundamentally American culture has changed recently. As a result, Rogin cannot help us to distinguish carefully the earlier American political varieties (to which Hofstadter also refers) from postmodern paranoia.

Goldberg, on the other hand, announces at the beginning of his book that he will not reduce "public fears to the sum of individual disorders" but will rather "seek to consider conspiracy imaging in its historical, social and political environment."<sup>79</sup> Surveying the impact on America of President Kennedy's assassination, Viet Nam, and the Watergate scandals, Goldberg describes a profound shift in American attitudes toward authority.<sup>80</sup> While postmodern paranoia may very well tap the American tradition of political demonology to which Rogin refers, it goes much further than that. It is the modern media explosion that makes the proliferation of conspiracy thinking possible and also validates it. The more one hears the same thing in different forms and forums, the more one is inclined to believe it—especially if the sources are perceived credible. It is a media environment that feeds cynicism and motivates both sides of the political spectrum to demonize each other.<sup>81</sup> It is an environment that also restructures modern life generally and transforms history. "A culture of conspiracy exists because their charges resonate with the words and deeds of those who shape opinion in modern

<sup>77</sup> Elaine Showalter thinks that "we must look into our own psyches rather than to invisible enemies, devils, and alien invaders for the answers." Conspiracy thinking for her derives from "psychological dynamics" (*Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1997] 207).

<sup>78</sup> Michael Paul Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie and other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) 237 and 292.

<sup>79</sup> Goldberg, *Enemies Within* xii.

<sup>80</sup> Conspiracy thinking, for Goldberg, permeates American culture and reflects the profound discontent Americans feel regarding their leaders. Whereas pollsters found that 75 percent of Americans trusted government in 1964, only one in three felt that way in 1976. In 1995, 75 percent indicated that they had no faith in the government's ability to do what is right. In a 1996 survey, one in four Americans were even willing to believe that government "elites" were involved in conspiracy (ibid. 259).

<sup>81</sup> Goldberg writes: "Media merchandisers legitimize conspiracy thinking and give it broad appeal. Their images remain in the public mind, forever shaping new experiences into consistent patterns" (ibid. 260). See also Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, *The Cynical Society: The Culture of Politics and the Politics of Culture in American Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

America,” Goldberg concludes. “The national media confirm their pleas and make conspiracism essential to an understanding of history and society.”<sup>82</sup>

Knight argues in his book that conspiracy culture shares with post-modernism generally the reflexivity of knowledge, where all knowledge is implicitly relativized.<sup>83</sup> “Conspiracy theories are now less a sign of mental delusion than an ironic stance toward knowledge and the possibility of truth, operating within the rhetorical terrain of the double negative,” he maintains. “. . . The rhetoric of conspiracy takes itself seriously, but at the same time casts satiric suspicion on everything, even its own pronouncements.”<sup>84</sup> As Knight sees it, conspiracy theory today is less likely to express an “irruption of the normal order” than “to express a not entirely unfounded suspicion that the normal order of things itself amounts to a conspiracy.” There is, in other words, less focus on a particular conspirator and more of a growing sense that “things as they are” result from conspiratorial forces. The consequence, according to Knight, is a “cynical and generalized sense of the ubiquity—and even the necessity—of clandestine, conspiring forces in a world in which everything is connected. Certainty has given way to doubt, and conspiracy has become the default assumption in an age which has learned to distrust everything and everyone.”<sup>85</sup>

The epitome of our American conspiracy culture was the television program *The X-Files*, a show often popular with the educated. According to Knight, *The X-Files* focused on the viewers’ inability to know anything about life with certainty:

With its endless reversal and re-evaluation of all certainties, *The X-Files* . . . dramatizes in a condensed and stylized form the perpetual motion of suspicion that marks out recent conspiracy thinking. Far from offering a paradoxically comforting and fixed paranoid interpretation of the last half-century of American history, it revels in an infinite hermeneutic of suspicion which undermines every stable conclusion the Special Agents reach. Rather than dwelling on any

<sup>82</sup> Goldberg, *Enemies Within* 243.

<sup>83</sup> Anthony Giddens concludes, “We are abroad in a world which is thoroughly constituted through reflexively applied knowledge, but where at the same time we can never be sure that any given element of that knowledge will not be revised” (*The Consequences of Modernity* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990] 39). See also *idem*, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991) and John B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995). Postmodernist Michel Foucault explicitly rejects the notion that knowledge can have any coherent theme: “A discursive formation is not, therefore, an ideal, continuous, smooth text that runs beneath the multiplicity of contradictions, and resolves them in the calm unity of coherent thought . . .” (*The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* [trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith; New York: Pantheon Books, 1972 (1969)] 155). For Foucault, this insight is derived from the impossibility of any totalizing discourse: “The horizon of archeology, therefore, is not a science, a rationality, a mentality, a culture; it is a tangle of interpositivities whose limits and points of intersection cannot be fixed in a single operation. Archeology is a comparative analysis that is not intended to reduce the diversity of discourses, and to outline the unity that must totalize them, but is intended to divide up their diversity into different figures. Archeological comparison does not have a unifying, but a diversifying effect” (pp. 159–60).

<sup>84</sup> Knight, *Conspiracy Culture* 2.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* 3.

particular fixed *product* of conspiracy theorizing, *The X-Files* concentrates, in line with other examples, on the *process* of repeatedly discovering that everything you thought you knew is wrong.<sup>86</sup>

What *The X-Files* and other instruments of postmodern culture do, in Knight's judgment, is shift the understanding of conspiracy thinking away from Hofstadter's "small cabal of ruthless agents" who adversely affect the course of American history, toward a more diffuse notion of "vested interests that can only be described as conspiratorial, even when we know there probably has been no deliberate plotting."<sup>87</sup> People eventually come to believe that the "powers that be" are stacked against them and that institutional structures, once trusted, are actually sinister. "The rhetoric of conspiracy thus offers a symbolic resolution to the problem of representing who is responsible for events that seem to be beyond anyone's control," observes Knight. "It speaks to a time in which neither an older faith in individual agency nor an emergent understanding of complex causation is satisfactory."<sup>88</sup>

Melley, in his book on conspiracy culture, calls this structural paranoia "agency panic," which he defines as "a broad pervasive set of anxieties about the way technologies, social organizations, and communication systems may have reduced human autonomy and uniqueness."<sup>89</sup> "Agency panic" for Melley shares a symbolic universe with postmodern thought generally, particularly "the theoretical proposition—now widely accepted in the humanities—that individuals are 'constructed' by powerful systems of knowledge or discourse."<sup>90</sup> To Melley, "agency panic" is "a nervous acknowledgment, and rejection, of postmodern subjectivity."<sup>91</sup> In "agency panic," he thinks, there is a postmodern transference of willful agency from individuals to conspiratorial corporate entities in the romantic hope of restoring individual potency. This heightened awareness of "diminished human agency" portrays "the system" as an enemy of the self, which, according to Melley, is analogous to paranoia.<sup>92</sup> Melley refuses to conceive such paranoia as a sign of pathology because it does not function as a defense of a partisan political position so much as a defense of the individual.<sup>93</sup>

In an age when Americans are experiencing unprecedented crises of personal and national identity, conspiracy culture casts a lengthy shadow over hermeneutics. "Narratives of conspiracy now capture a sense of uncertainty about how historical events unfold, about who gets to tell the official version

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. 28.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. 32.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000) 7.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. 38.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. 15.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. 11. Melley elaborates, "The theory of social conspiracy thus recuperates the 'decentered' subject in a sense, assigning to the collective agency of the conspiracy the supposedly lost qualities of the individual: self-presence, individual unity, autonomy, and a protected 'interior' as the site of identity" (p. 145).

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. 11.

of events,” contends Knight, “and even about whether a causally coherent account is still possible.”<sup>94</sup> Melley concurs, pointing out that “conspiracy theory arises from radical doubt about how knowledge is produced and about the authority of those who produce it.”<sup>95</sup> Knight maintains that conspiracy culture, like postmodernism generally, “plunges everything into an infinite regress of suspicion.”<sup>96</sup> Conspiracy theories inhabit a postmodern plausibility structure in which they are not only intelligible but credible. Deficiencies of logic or fact cannot handicap them precisely because they are so well grounded in a perception of how the world “really is.”

How the world “really is” has become a major theme of popular fiction, particularly the espionage thriller. Such fiction, as Gina Macdonald observes, “is by nature paranoid in its psychology, with its structure delineating the limitations of human action and its themes concerned with whether the real or the true is knowable or if it even exists.”<sup>97</sup> The novels of Robert Ludlum are proto-typical.<sup>98</sup> With a love for history and a penchant for political and religious extremists, Ludlum searches beneath the official explanation of contemporary events. According to Macdonald, Ludlum’s novels are “the nightmare possibilities behind the headlines.”<sup>99</sup> Although they are fiction, Melley notes, these novels have become “increasingly popular in a period marked by skepticism about unmediated access to reality.”<sup>100</sup> The result has not been

<sup>94</sup> Knight, *Conspiracy Culture* 3. In postmodernism, all that really matters is discourse and, as Derrida sees it, there is nothing outside the text; or, as Francis Watson reformulates it, “there is no encounter with pre-textual reality but an ungrounded succession of interpretations wandering from nowhere to nowhere” (*Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994] 85).

<sup>95</sup> Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy* 13.

<sup>96</sup> Knight, *Conspiracy Culture* 4. One demonstration of contemporary conspiracy culture was the three distinctly different expressions of it in the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* at the end of July 2003. In the sports section, a regular columnist informed readers that conspiracy theories were casting a cloud over the World Series victories of the Twins, the Minnesota baseball team. Readers also learned that a healthy segment of German youth were convinced that the Bush administration was itself responsible for the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Dan Barreiro, “Conspiracy Theories Envelop the Twins,” *Star Tribune* [July 30, 2003 C5–6]). In the commentary section, the Episcopal vote to ordain a homosexual bishop (in Minneapolis) was described as a “challenge to reclaim Jesus’ words”—a Jesus described by the columnist as “a renegade anti-establishment proto-feminist communitarian bachelor Jew” whose real message of love and acceptance was suppressed, if not throughout Church history, at least now certainly by the “Christian [far] right” (Fenton Johnson, “Gay’s Struggles and the Challenge to Reclaim Jesus’ Words,” *Star Tribune* [July 30, 2003 A13]).

<sup>97</sup> Gina Macdonald, *Robert Ludlum: A Critical Companion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1997) 138.

<sup>98</sup> Dan Burstein observes, “Dan Brown has said that Robert Ludlum is among his favorite writers, and you can see in *The Da Vinci Code* a touch of vintage Ludlum . . .” (“Secret Societies,” in *Secrets of the Code: The Unauthorized Guide to the Mysteries Behind The Da Vinci Code* [ed. Dan Burstein; New York: Squibnocket Partners, 2004] 162).

<sup>99</sup> Macdonald, *Robert Ludlum* 10–11. Macdonald suggests that Ludlum’s goal is neither mere entertainment nor fear-mongering but the promotion of democratic civility. Ludlum’s books, according to Macdonald, are “his warnings to heed history, to beware of tyrants and intolerance, and to not give up on the power of the individual to make a difference.” “He would like to be remembered,” she thinks, “for . . . lessons about democratic values—particularly tolerance” (p. 16).

<sup>100</sup> Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy* 17.

a renewal of democracy through invigorated individual agency but a descent into cynicism. "In a nation increasingly fragmented into minorities each of which feels itself to be besieged," Knight observes, "paranoia becomes the default political style."<sup>101</sup>

Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence have interpreted all of this theologically in *Captain America and the Crusade against Evil*. They discern a contradictory American civil religion in which peacemaking is accomplished through holy war and argue that this *Captain America* paradigm is grounded in a Deuteronomic-Puritan grand narrative of cosmic paranoia. Consequently, Jewett and Lawrence advocate a renunciation of history as "the arena of cosmic warfare," since "conspiracy theory eliminates the need or possibility for any pragmatic assessment of historical or political factors."<sup>102</sup> While their study has many insights, it suffers from at least two glaring weaknesses. First, by relying upon the "tools of modern biblical research," their critique of conspiracy culture must depend upon the hermeneutic of suspicion that feeds it. Thus, there is no real reason to trust the words of Jesus (in which they express confidence) any more than the other biblical words of violence they reject. Secondly, by so narrowly construing conspiracy culture as a product of Deuteronomic-Puritan theology, they fail to account for broader expressions of contemporary culture that can only be described as postmodern.

Marilyn Ferguson shed more light on distinctively postmodern conspiracy culture when she wrote of "new paradigm shifts under way in health, learning, the workplace, and values."<sup>103</sup> She called this global movement the "Aquarian Conspiracy," and what she had in mind was no "cabal of agents"—no paranoid plotters or fringe groups with personality disorders. Yet, *somehow*, all her conspirators worked together to effect a cultural revolution.<sup>104</sup> The focus of Ferguson's "Aquarian Conspiracy" was a hermeneutic of suspicion grounded in subjectivity: the growing predominance of that "direct knowing" which undermines all grand narratives based on secondary knowing, such as religious dogma.<sup>105</sup>

This hermeneutical revolution implies that, when ordinary readers of the Bible are bombarded constantly with conflicting, often hostile, information,

<sup>101</sup> Knight, *Conspiracy Culture* 43.

<sup>102</sup> Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 198.

<sup>103</sup> Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy: Personal and Social Transformation in the 1980s* (New York: St. Martin's, 1980) 41.

<sup>104</sup> Ferguson elaborates, "In the beginning, certainly, most did not set out to change society. In that sense, it is an unlikely kind of conspiracy. But they found that their *lives* had become revolutions. Once a personal change began in earnest, they found themselves rethinking everything, examining old assumptions, looking anew at their work and relationships, health, political power and 'experts,' goals and values. . . . Taking a broader view of history and a deeper measure of nature, the Aquarian Conspiracy is a different kind of revolution, with different revolutionaries. It looks to the turnabout in consciousness of a critical number of individuals, enough to bring about a renewal of society" (ibid. 24 and 26).

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. 385.

they increasingly fall back on their own insights.<sup>106</sup> Gnostic scholar Elaine Pagels contends that “an increasing number of people today . . . cannot rest solely on the authority of the Scriptures, the apostles, the church—at least not without inquiring how that authority constituted itself and what, if anything, gives it legitimacy.”<sup>107</sup> In her latest book, *Beyond Belief*, Pagels argues that the biblical canon subjected religious experience to the authoritative control of the Church, a move directed primarily against the leadership of spiritually gifted women. This spiritual detour created by the Constantinian Church, she contends, only now is being undone by modernity, which, like Gnosticism, enshrines the experience of choosing. The new alternative, she affirms, is “not a different ‘system of doctrines’ so much as insights or intimations of the divine that validate themselves in experience—what we might call hints and glimpses offered by the luminous *epinoia*.”<sup>108</sup> The timeless appeal of the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas is, for Pagels, its recognition that “one’s affinity with God is the key to the kingdom of God.”<sup>109</sup> To Pagels and the postmodern culture she inhabits, “true spirituality” means freedom to pursue one’s own religious truth, as the Gnostics did, unencumbered by dogmatism.<sup>110</sup>

Pagels exemplifies the feminist scholarship that undergirds popular conspiracy theories and is cited in most of them. One discerns clearly in her writings both the hermeneutic of suspicion and contemporary infatuation with Gnosticism—the consequence of which has been a surge in autonomous quests for “authentic” spirituality.<sup>111</sup> Her call for a re-appropriation of Gnostic spirituality is more than historical revisionism; it collapses the biblical distinction between God and the self. Indeed, so closely identified are these experiences of the self and God in popular culture that Harold Bloom can characterize “American religion” as “irretrievably Gnostic—the knowing of

<sup>106</sup> Darrell Jodock writes, “It is not expected that they will accept the authority of the Bible first and then believe the Gospel. Rather, believers catch sight of the gospel and are transformed by its message before being confronted with the question of the authority of the Scriptures. . . . At this level no neutral bench marks are available, there is only open-eyed involvement” (*The Church’s Bible: Its Contemporary Authority* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989] 86–87).

<sup>107</sup> Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979) 159. June O’Connor concurs: “When feminist scholars ask us to examine the fact that the normative sources of Christianity, Judaism, Islam and other religions were authored by men, conveyed by men, and canonized by men, they ask us to notice a fact. When they ask us on what grounds women were excluded from authoring, naming and establishing the canon, they ask questions that carry moral import as well as historical-critical connotations” (“The Epistemological Significance of Feminist Research” 48).

<sup>108</sup> Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* 183.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.* 75.

<sup>110</sup> “The Gnostics reputedly practiced *spirituality*,” scoffs Jenkins, “while their orthodox opponents succumbed to mere *religion*” (*Hidden Gospels* 208).

<sup>111</sup> Cf. Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual but Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Amanda Porterfield, *The Transformation of American Religion: The Story of a Late-Twentieth-Century Awakening* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994 [1993]); Elizabeth Lesser, *The New American Spirituality: A Seeker’s Guide* (New York: Random House, 1999); and Ptolemy Tompkins, *The Beaten Path: Field Notes on Getting Wise in a Wisdom Crazy World* (New York: William Morrow, 2001).

a “self-within-the self”—in which “the self is truth, and there is a spark at its center that is best and oldest, being the God within.”<sup>112</sup> Renaut suggests that this has a great deal to do with “an individual closed in upon himself, sacrificing all social concern to the affirmation of his own independence”—or, as John Loeschen puts it, with the individual “strangled in his own ego, trapped in himself, *incurvatus in se* in a tragically ironical sense.”<sup>113</sup> The tragedy of postmodernity is the ambition of the individual and the limits of experience.

#### IV. A CONCLUDING UNSCIENTIFIC POSTSCRIPT

When David Yallop argued in 1984 that Pope John Paul I had been the victim of a Vatican-based murder conspiracy, his book was not intended as fiction. After compiling the mountain of circumstantial evidence that is typical for conspiracy theories, Yallop concluded, “No jury confronted with the evidence contained in this book could return in Albino Luciani’s case a verdict of ‘death by natural causes.’ No judge, no coroner in the world would accept such a verdict on this evidence.”<sup>114</sup> The validity of Yallop’s assertion was less verifiable than its plausibility in a culture of conspiracy—a culture in which collaboration between Constantine and the early Church to suppress the truth about Jesus also seems entirely plausible.

The current religious conspiracy novels build upon the legacy of earlier works, such as Irving Wallace’s *The Word* (1972), which portrayed the creation of a fictional gospel, Hugh Schonfield’s *The Passover Plot* (1965), and *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970). The constant repetition of sensational themes in postmodern culture has reinforced their plausibility for an audience that increasingly questions the very foundations of knowledge itself.<sup>115</sup> Readers who would never consider the turgid prose of academic discourse are exposed instead to more palatable but equally definitive portrayals of life envisioned upon postmodern presuppositions. Even when they are assured repeatedly that these portrayals are “only fiction,” readers

<sup>112</sup> Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992) 49 and 54.

<sup>113</sup> Alain Renaut, *The Era of the Individual: A Contribution to a History of Subjectivity* (trans. M. B. DeBevoise and Franklin Philip; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) 138; John R. Loeschen, *Wrestling with Luther: An Introduction to the Study of His Thought* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1976) 44.

<sup>114</sup> David A. Yallop, *In God’s Name: An Investigation into the Murder of Pope John Paul I* (New York: Bantam Books, 1985 [1984]) 364.

<sup>115</sup> Philip Jenkins refers to this phenomenon in his discussion of the media-generated credibility for Thiering’s “crackpot ideas” on Jesus and the DSS: “The proliferation of accounts gives the impression that this is a powerful and influential theory, which gains the attention of a lay audience that would otherwise pay little attention to academic debate. Thiering’s view will be cited as authoritative in discussions in church groups years afterward, as will ideas that the Vatican conspired to conceal the Scrolls. Such canards surface regularly to the puzzlement of academic speakers, who are at a loss to know where lay audiences are picking up such odd ideas. In this field, a chasm separates the assumptions of professionals and lay enthusiasts, even, or especially, if these enthusiasts read widely” (*Hidden Gospels* 196).

cannot help but question traditional historical narratives, including those of the Bible. This, of course, is precisely the agenda for much of the historical fiction to which they have been subjected.

The task of the Church remains both to use the culture, so as to be intelligible, as well as to critique the culture, so as not merely to be reduced to an instrument of the culture itself. This task, aptly described as the problem of "Christ and culture," has been with the Church since its inception. The Church must demonstrate that traditional faith-based articulations are not as irrational or implausible as most postmoderns perceive, even if this is not the same as creating faith.<sup>116</sup> The Church also needs to demonstrate that postmodern critics postulate a Christianity of political intrigue which reflects their own paranoia, even if it cannot so easily reconstruct a chronicle of the early Church.<sup>117</sup>

The assertion that Constantine imposed a political resolution of doctrinal disputes is, to use J. N. D. Kelly's words, "altogether too clear-cut."<sup>118</sup> This assertion behaves as a hermeneutic of suspicion rather than as a cogent historical argument.<sup>119</sup> The issue is not whether politicians played a role in shaping the Church's canon, for instance, but whether that canon also reflected the Church's confession of faith. For the most part, this seems to have been the case. With the exception of peripheral communities that nurtured alternative scriptures, the writings canonized reflect popular usage. As Wilhelm Schneemelcher (summarizing Jülicher) put it, "the canon grew and was not 'made'"—by which he meant "that it is a collection of writings which in the first place were read and loved in the churches and only then were combined in a canon."<sup>120</sup> David Trobisch demonstrated, on the basis of careful textual analysis, that the canon was a product of publication and

<sup>116</sup> A "civil" apologetic (1 Pet 3:15–16) has an important place along side faithful proclamation. It can open a dialogue in which the Word of God will do its work. Cf. David R. Liefeld, "Coming to Grips with 'Civility': A Strategy for the Postmodern Parish," *Logia* 13/1 (2004) 17–28.

<sup>117</sup> Philip Jenkins had it right when he wrote: "The vastly exaggerated claims made on behalf of these gospels are more revealing about what contemporary scholars and writers would like to find about the first Christian ages, and how these ideas are communicated, accurately or otherwise, to a mass public. The alternative gospels are thus very important sources, if not for the beginnings of Christianity, then for what they tell us about the interest groups who seek to use them today; about the mass media, and how religion is packaged as popular culture; and about how canons shift their content to reflect the values of the reading audience; and more generally, about the changing directions of contemporary American religion" (*Hidden Gospels* 5). Even Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza admits that modern scholars "inescapably fashion the Historical-Jesus in their own image and likeness" (*Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation* [New York: Continuum, 2000] 6).

<sup>118</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Longmans, 1960 [1950]) 259.

<sup>119</sup> As Francis Watson notes, the major weakness of the postmodern hermeneutic is that "it can allow no place for the universality associated with belief in the world as already created by God prior to human linguistic practice" (*Text, Church and World* 87).

<sup>120</sup> Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha: Volume I: Gospels and Related Writings* (ed. Edgar Hennecke; trans. R. McL. Wilson; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963 [1959]) 36. Schneemelcher does not consider canon formation "a process of elimination, a mass destruction as it were or a violent rejection of all kinds of writings." Instead, according to Schneemelcher, "there was a firm adherence with a wonderful tact to what was traditional, to what had already for internal reasons gained an authoritative place in public worship" (p. 37).



distribution. When controversy erupted in the early Church, the widespread acceptance of a "canonical edition" of the Scriptures could be appealed to rather than legislated.<sup>121</sup> Formation of the canon was a confession of faith. We cannot go much beyond that without betraying partisan agendas in a postmodern culture where the hermeneutic of suspicion borders on paranoia.<sup>122</sup>

The Church also must make clear that the constantly repeated refrain, "Everything happens for a reason," is not Christian faith nor even a suitable basis for it. Such sentiments degenerate into paranoia even more often than they reflect authentic Christian faith in the providence of God. The yearning for meaning and purpose that energizes "agency panic" in a postmodern world of seemingly hostile but impersonal structures is understandable but incomplete. Our postmodern "sea of subjectivity," with its endless searches of the inner self provoked by both ancient and postmodern Gnosticism, contrasts sharply with the particularity of biblical revelation. In the movie *Secondhand Lions*, Robert Duvall delivers part of his "what-it-takes-to-be-a-man" speech to his vulnerable young nephew. He encourages believing in stories of good triumphing over evil, "whether they are true or not." Yet, at the conclusion of the movie, viewers are deeply moved to discover with the adult nephew that the "tall tales" he had been told by his recently deceased uncles were true after all. Like the nephew in *Secondhand Lions*, Christians know it finally *does* make a difference whether stories are true or not.<sup>123</sup> Proclamation of the gospel in the twenty-first century, no less than in earlier centuries, is grounded in an authoritative Scripture.<sup>124</sup>

<sup>121</sup> David Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 34–37.

<sup>122</sup> John Dominic Crossan contends that it makes little difference, ultimately, "what paranoia or suspicion, what motivation or prejudice, what theological position or even historical presumption" may lie behind contemporary conclusions regarding the Bible. "The only question finally is, Are they valid?" (*The Birth of Christianity* 100). Unfortunately, this begs the question of how validity may be determined without presuppositions rooted in postmodern paranoia. Nearly all historians recognize the errors of Holocaust revisionism but many fail to see its similarity to some common presuppositions about the early Church. Michael Schermer and Alex Grobman surface the broader issues in their book, *Denying History: Who Says the Holocaust Never Happened and Why Do They Say It?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000): "Holocaust denial is clearly a form of pseudohistory. It is an affront against history and how the science of history is practiced. . . . If historians practiced history as the deniers do, there would be no history, only competing ideologies screaming to be heard among the cacophony of dogmatic voices" (p. 251). Unfortunately, "pseudohistory" usually gets attention today only when it comes to the Jewish Holocaust; yet, it is just as problematic when it comes to the early Church. See also Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (New York: Plume, 1994).

<sup>123</sup> Erwin W. Lutzer cut through the sentimental "spirituality" associated with books like *The Da Vinci Code* when he wrote "that the 'spirit' of Christmas and Easter means nothing unless the events actually happened" (*The Da Vinci Deception* [Wheaton: Tyndale House, 2004] 111).

<sup>124</sup> It is important to recognize, as does Tremper Longman III, that story versus history is an artificial antithesis: "Can literary artifice be true? The answer is yes. To ask whether the Bible is literature or history is to set up a false dichotomy. The Bible is both—and much more" ("Story-tellers and Poets in the Bible: Can Literary Artifice Be True?" in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic: A Tradition, A Challenge, A Debate* [ed. Harvie M. Conn; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988] 149).