

Teaching moment: Temple Church and The Da Vinci Code

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As master of the Temple Church in London, one of the sites featured in The Da Vinci Code, Robin Griffith-Jones has had the chance to talk to hundreds of people about the claims of the best-selling novel. His book on the topic, The Da Vinci Code and the Secrets of the Temple (just published by Eerdmans), is based on a regular talk he gives to visitors at the Temple Church. Before coming to the church, Griffith-Jones was a minister at a housing project in Liverpool and also worked with Mother Teresa's sisterhood in India. Educated in theology at Cambridge University and ordained a priest in the Church of England, he is the author of The Four Witnesses and The Gospel According to Paul. We talked to him about the popularity of The Da Vinci Code and how it has affected his life at the Temple Church.

How has the popularity of *The Da Vinci Code* changed your responsibilities and routines at the church?

We have five times more visitors now than we had three years ago. We allowed the film company in to film here. With the fee, we will be able to employ a part-time marshal in the church for the next three years or so to keep the church open to visitors seven days a week.

For more than a year I have been giving a talk on *The Da Vinci Code* almost every week; numbers are currently running at 150 to 200 people in the audience each time. As important as anything in this talk is the opportunity it gives people to ask questions. It is humbling to hear how the novel has variously unsettled or encouraged or convinced the people who have read it.

I respond as fully as I can to the questions. I am sometimes challenged: Do I really think it is worth giving all this attention to the novel? I would rephrase the question: Do I really think it is worth giving all this attention to the people who have read the novel? My answer is yes.

What are people most interested in seeing at the church?

The tomb that Robert Langdon, Leigh Teabing and Sophie Niveau were looking for! But once people have spent a few minutes in the church, they realize what a very special place it is: very calm after the hurly-burly of Fleet Street.

When visitors realize our Round Church was built to re-create the shape and the holiness of the round Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem—to duplicate, here in London, the holiest place on earth—many of them are slightly moved, I think. It opens the eyes, even of nonbelievers, to a world of the imagination which they had never entered before.

What are your normal responsibilities at the church?

During the week I am mostly the chaplain to the community of lawyers who work all around me. The church was entrusted by the king to two societies of lawyers, Inner and Middle Temple, in 1608; they still maintain it, and do so with great generosity.

On Sundays we have a loyal congregation of all ages but see very few lawyers; they are, quite sensibly, with their families, well away from the Temple where they work all week. We are finding the funds now to have services on weekday evenings, when the lawyers themselves can join us.

Ours is a busy church. We use the most traditional form of service, from the 1662 Prayer Book—and we have a wonderful choir of men and boys.

Can you give us a brief account of the Knights Templar and how the Temple Church came to be?

The Templars were founded at the time of the Crusades, around 1118, to protect pilgrims in the Holy Land. No wonder that they built round churches—such as our own—to “re-create” the Holy Sepulchre. (Our Round Church was built in 1185.) They were soon given vast endowments and estates, and became expert at their management. So they came to be used by the kings of Europe and the popes to manage national and papal finances. (The French treasury was in the Temple in Paris throughout the 13th century.) The Lombards, the Jews and the Templars invented international banking, complete with credit transfers and a money market. All of this gave the Templars vast wealth and power; it had nothing to do with Mary Magdalene!

As you can see, almost every theme pursued in *The Da Vinci Code* is a theme close to my own heart. I was asked recently whether I was a real-life Robert Langdon. Well, no. But I am probably as close to being a “symbolologist” as anyone can be.

You seem to regard the novel’s popularity as a teaching moment.

So many people—inside and outside the churches—have wanted to ask so many questions for so long about Christianity, but have felt they might seem insulting or stupid. The novel has brought a lot of these questions out into the open. If the churches raise the drawbridge, hide in their ancient pageantry and make some angry or dismissive response, it will simply confirm in people’s minds that we have something to hide or simply don’t know the answers to their questions. What if we take this opportunity to present our story? It is far more exciting, humane and deep than Dan Brown’s; let’s help people to hear it.

I am not being naive. Of all the people reading the novel or seeing the film, perhaps one in 10,000 will read my book or hear my talk. Well then, we need 9,999 more people to be taking the opportunity this craze offers.

I am not being unduly optimistic, either. The film will, I suspect, be utterly gripping. It will provide, for millions of people, a credible—but utterly false—narrative of Christianity. This is unsettling.

In the past couple of months I have seen two films, *The Constant Gardener* and *Syriana*. I knew nothing about the chemicals industry and the oil industry before I saw the films, and in fact, of course, I still know nothing. But now, for each of those industries, I have a vivid, dramatic narrative in my mind. The films have given me a template into which I can fit anything else I hear about these topics. The film of *The Da Vinci Code* will offer the same for Christianity. And it is false. We have our work cut out for us.

Though the book is based on a number of major fabrications, you seem to have sympathy with aspects of the book—for example, its interest in Jesus' sexuality. Why?

Why not? Jesus was wholly human. The Bible says nothing either way about his being married or single. Why, I am regularly asked, do the churches assume he was single? It’s a good question.

As a historian—setting aside for a moment the theological questions to which this gives rise—I see in front of me a genuinely open issue. And to the extent that Christology is based on the historical record of scripture, that leaves Christology with some unexpectedly open issues too. (Of course, Christology is based on other things as well. Fine. Let's explain these foundations, openly and honestly.)

Is all this unsettling? Yes. Should we therefore block our ears to the questions the book raises, huff and puff and tell people not to be obsessed with sex? No. It is the churches that have for 2,000 years been obsessed with sex; everyone else has been getting on with it. So let's be frank and generous, and engage in a genuine discussion, until people actually want to hear why we still believe—and believe it is important—that Jesus was single. (If we do; I know that some very distinguished historians of the early church do not.)

I sometimes hear, from conservative Christians like myself, how disappointing it is that people cannot tell the facts of scripture from the fantasies of *The Da Vinci Code*. Well, that's odd. The novel's characters say that Jesus was a married man and father. We say he was born of a virgin, walked on water, raised people from the dead and came out of his own grave. Which of these accounts, to a neutral observer, seems more fantastical? I think it is time we admit that our claims are bizarre—and then people will respect us when we explain why we think these claims should be believed.

So has the appearance of this best seller been a positive thing in your eyes?

To the extent that the churches have responded with generosity, energy and openness, yes. To the extent that we have drawn up the barricades and fired out angry salvos, no. And with the film about to come out, the need for responses is not over yet.