Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Interdisciplinary Humanities and Communication Studies
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.36985

An Analysis of Gnosticism in The Da Vinci Code

Ruochen Qi

The Fortieth Middle School of Shenyang City, Shenyang, China
notjayanne@qq.com

Abstract. Since its release, the film *The Da Vinci Code* has provoked widespread controversy for its subversive narrative of Christian history. Taking Gnosticism as its theoretical framework, this study employs a literature analysis method to systematically examine the Gnostic elements embodied in the film's characterisation, symbolic usage, and thematic construction. The findings reveal that the film implicitly challenges orthodox Christian doctrines by reconfiguring Mary Magdalene as a symbol of sacred femininity, analogising the process of code-breaking to gnostic awakening, and dramatising the debate over Christ's humanity versus divinity. At the same time, the "pseudo-Gnostic" contradiction exhibited by the pivotal character Leigh Teabing exposes the popular-cultural adaptation of ancient heretical thought and its inherent tensions. This study offers a new semiotic and narratological analytical approach for understanding the expression of heterodox ideas in religious-themed cinema.

Keywords: *The Da Vinci Code*, religion, Gnosticism, semiotics, cryptography

1. Introduction

The Da Vinci Code (2006), adapted from Dan Brown's bestselling novel, begins with the murder of the Louvre curator and unfolds a religious-historical mystery centred on the "Holy Grail". The film's portrayal of Jesus' humanity, the status of Mary Magdalene, and the Church's suppression of historical truth directly touches upon core tenets of orthodox Christianity, sparking intense debates among theological, historical, and popular audiences upon its release. Academic discussions have largely focused on the film's historical authenticity [1] and semiotic interpretations [2], yet a systematic intellectual-historical connection to Gnosticism remains underexplored. Gnosticism, a Christian heterodoxy that flourished in the Mediterranean world during the second and third centuries, asserts salvation through secret knowledge (gnosis) to escape the material prison and return to the divine source. Its critique of the evil material world and the falsity of ecclesiastical authority resonates strongly with the film's subversive narrative [3]. Adopting a literature analysis method and drawing upon primary Gnostic texts (e.g., the Nag Hammadi Library) as well as contemporary scholarship, this study examines the Gnostic underpinnings of the film's representations of sacred femininity, its semiotic decoding logic, and its christological debates, while also clarifying the divergences between the film and orthodox Gnosticism. The study aims to reveal how popular religious cinema employs heterodox ideological resources to construct narrative

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.36985

tension, and to provide a fresh analytical framework for the interdisciplinary study of religion and cinema.

2. Plot analysis

2.1. Sacred femininity and the "deleted Christ"

Certain Gnostic sects regard Sophia as a fallen female divinity who, driven by a desire to create independently, fell into the material world and was imprisoned by the Demiurge; her gnosis can only return to the divine source through awakening [4]. The film places Mary Magdalene in a parallel position, casting her as the wife of Jesus and the embodiment of the Grail – the Sangreal reinterpreted as "royal bloodline" (San Greal), symbolising the female divinity long suppressed by the orthodox Church. The claim that the figure depicted as John in Leonardo's Last Supper is in fact Mary implies a union with Jesus, and in Gnostic tradition, sacred marriage symbolises spiritual union. The film equates Mary with the Gnostic Sophia, whose descendants must reclaim their identity through knowledge (the symbolic codes left by the Priory of Sion). It should be noted, however, that a key difference exists: mainstream Gnosticism often adhered to docetism, denying the reality of Christ's flesh, whereas the film instead emphasises Jesus' humanity through his marriage and offspring [5]. Yet both approaches – whether denying or affirming the flesh – fundamentally undermine the orthodox doctrine of Christ's exclusive divinity.

2.2. Semiotics as a tool for gnosis

Symbols such as the Rose Line, the pentagram, and the Fibonacci sequence serve in the film as cognitive pathways leading the protagonists to unravel the Church's deceptions. The Vitruvian Man pose of the murdered curator directly references the Renaissance humanist archetype represented by Leonardo da Vinci. Reading the film through a Gnostic lens, Langdon's decoding process parallels the initiate's awakening through mysteries – beneath the surface of the material world (church architecture, paintings, historical documents) lies a truth deliberately erased by the Church. This narrative logic, which treats knowledge itself as a liberating force, closely aligns with the Gnostic credo of salvation through gnosis [3]. Symbols are not merely plot devices but visualisations of Gnostic epistemology: each decrypted layer strips away official narration, just as the Gnostic must pierce through the false cosmos fashioned by the Demiurge to touch the divine spark within.

2.3. The debate over Christ's humanity and divinity

The film has the character Teabing openly declare that "the Bible was written by men," a line that directly echoes the Gnostic questioning of orthodox canon – Gnostics held that the Church had altered Jesus' original teachings, transforming a human wisdom teacher into a cosmic saviour. After the Council of Nicaea (325 CE) established Jesus' divinity, any emphasis on his humanity was deemed heretical [6]. The film portrays this historical process as a political manoeuvre by Constantine, reinforcing its deconstruction of ecclesiastical authority. Yet, as noted, the film differs fundamentally from orthodox Gnosticism in its christology: Gnosticism denies the reality of Christ's flesh, while the film affirms his earthly marriage and bloodline to challenge doctrine. This divergence indicates that *The Da Vinci Code* is not a pure Gnostic work but a popularised "modern Gnosticism" – it appropriates the anti-dogmatic, anti-institutional spirit of Gnosticism while presenting it in a more dramatic and visually compelling manner for contemporary audiences [7].

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.36985

3. Analysis of Leigh Teabing

3.1. Character background and identity

Leigh Teabing is the most complex figure in the film. Ostensibly a British Royal historian, Grail scholar, and old friend of Robert Langdon, he is a wealthy aristocrat living in a lavish château outside Paris. When Robert and Sophie flee to his castle pursued by the police, Teabing appears eager to explain the secrets behind the Grail and the Last Supper, but in fact harbours ulterior motives, seeking to use them to obtain crucial information. Teabing's true identity is the "Teacher" – the mastermind behind the entire conspiracy. He manipulates Bishop Aringarosa and the albino monk Silas to orchestrate a series of murders, including that of Louvre curator Jacques Saunière and other Priory members, with the sole aim of forcing Robert and Sophie to locate the Grail and expose the secret of Jesus and Mary, thereby overthrowing Catholic authority. At the film's end, Teabing is arrested. This duality – the outwardly learned gentleman and the clandestine schemer – itself constitutes a Gnostic opposition between appearance and reality, light and darkness.

3.2. Leigh Teabing's core assertions (from a gnostic perspective)

Teabing's central arguments directly connect to Gnostic challenges to orthodox Christianity. He asserts that Jesus was a mortal man who fathered children with Mary Magdalene, and that the Church – particularly Emperor Constantine – deified Jesus at Nicaea to suppress this truth. This claim resonates with Gnostic texts such as the Gospel of Philip, which hint at a special relationship between Jesus and Mary; Gnostics maintained that the Church distorted the original teachings, transforming a spiritual guide into an instrument of clerical power. Teabing's reinterpretation of the Grail is even more subversive: he argues that the Sangreal is not a cup but the "royal bloodline" (San Greal) – Mary Magdalene and her descendants. He uses the positioning of Jesus and Mary in the Last Supper and the triangular space between them as visual evidence, asserting that this gap represents both the Grail and the feminine, thereby placing Mary as the guardian of female divinity. In the Gnostic system, Sophia is the embodiment of feminine gnosis, degraded by the Demiurge; Mary plays a similar role in the film – she is stigmatised by the Church as a prostitute, her true status passed down only through secret societies. Teabing's critique extends directly to the Church's violent history: he accuses it of burning heretics and erasing historical records, particularly the systematic suppression of documents and witnesses related to the Grail. The opening scenes of Silas's self-flagellation already hint at extremism within the Church, and Teabing expands this criticism to the entire institution. From a Gnostic viewpoint, the orthodox Church did indeed destroy numerous Gnostic texts (which only resurfaced with the Nag Hammadi discovery in 1945), and Teabing's accusations dramatise this historical reality to a considerable extent. However, despite the superficial alignment of Teabing's rhetoric with Gnostic anti-ecclesiastical positions, his motivations run counter to the Gnostic spirit: he obsessively seeks material evidence such as Mary's remains, reducing gnosis to tangible artefacts and thereby abandoning the Gnostic pursuit of transcending matter; he styles himself as the "Teacher" and aims to use the secret to control the Church, contradicting Gnosticism's anti-authoritarian essence; and he employs murder and coercion as means, becoming another "Demiurgic" tyrant. This internal contradiction makes Teabing a distorted Gnostic – he appropriates Gnostic discourse but degrades it into a bloody power struggle, thereby vividly revealing how popular culture adapts ancient heterodox ideas and the irreconcilable tensions inherent in such adaptation [8].

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.36985

4. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the underlying Gnostic elements in the film *The Da Vinci Code*, and the findings indicate that the film reconstructs the concepts of sacred femininity and gnosis through semiotics and narrative structure, revealing a fundamental challenge to orthodox Christianity. This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing a systematic analysis of the film's Gnostic dimensions within the framework of film and religious studies. While previous scholarship has examined the novel's religious and symbolic content, few studies have focused specifically on the film adaptation's treatment of Gnostic themes. The findings extend previous theories by demonstrating that the film's use of Gnostic motifs is neither superficial nor merely decorative, but constitutes a coherent narrative and philosophical framework that shapes the entire plot. This study has practical significance for the field of religious film studies, as it offers a model for analyzing how esoteric religious traditions are adapted and transformed in popular cinema. This study is limited by its narrow scope, as it examines only one film, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. One potential limitation is the lack of comparative analysis with other religious films that employ similar Gnostic or esoteric themes, such as The Last Temptation of Christ, which could be addressed in future research. Future studies could focus on comparative analyses of multiple religious films that engage with Gnostic and esoteric traditions, examining how different directors and screenwriters interpret these ancient ideas for diverse cultural contexts. Overall, this study provides new insights into the relationship between religious films and Gnosticism, and highlights the importance of understanding how popular cinema serves as a vehicle for the transmission and transformation of esoteric religious ideas.

References

[1] Wortham, R. A. (2016). Religious pluralism, cultural continuity and the expansion of early Christianity: Stark revisited. *The Social Science Journal, 53*(4), 573–580. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2016.07.006[reference:0] [reference:1]

[2] Graf, S. (2023). With the eyes of an artificial angel: Benjamin and Adorno reading Kafka. *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society, 9*(2), 515–543.

[3] Borsch, F. H. (1970). *The Christian and gnostic Son of Man*. S.C.M. Press. (Studies in Biblical Theology, 2nd ser., 14)

[4] Humphries, M. L. (1999). *Christian origins and the language of the Kingdom of God*. Southern Illinois University Press.

[5] Calinescu, M. (2008). Rereading Mircea Eliade's Youth Without Youth, a story of suspicion and camouflage. *Religion, 38*(4), 375–381. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.religion.2008.05.013

[6] Strube, J. (2024). Religious comparativism, esotericism, and the global occult: A methodological outline. *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society, 10*(1), 106–133.

[7] Astuti, P. A. A., Hardianto, A. W., Romadhon, M. S. S., & Hangsing, R. P. (2024). Marketing religious programs on television as a nonfavorite program: A study in Indonesia. *Journal of Islamic Marketing, 15*(10), 2439–2460.

[8] Unstad, L., & Fjørtoft, H. (2021). Texts, readers, and positions: Developing a conceptual tool for teaching disciplinary reading in religious education. *Learning and Instruction, 73*, 101448. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2020.101448