

# The Da Vinci Code - Truth and Method, Rights and Responsibilities in Art and Society

We, the undersigned religious leaders, in our capacity as response team of The Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders, wish to address the following issues, arising from the recent movie publication of the "Da Vinci Code" and other related issues:

## The Da Vinci Code - Truth and Method, Rights and Responsibilities in Art and Society

Factual Background: Several days ago the movie version of Dan Brown's bestseller "The Da Vinci Code" was premiered. The movie raised strong objections from many Christian Circles, across the Christian spectrum, and of course within the Catholic Church. The issues concerned misrepresentation of the Church, its history, teaching and character. Of special concern was the sinister portrayal of a powerful Catholic community, Opus Dei. This issue comes shortly after a related issue that affected the Muslim community - the publication of the Mohammad caricatures. That public issue sparked violence, as did the earlier episode of Salman Rushdie's novel. They both raise some theoretical issues that are closely related to those raised by the Da Vinci Code. These events further recall some of the difficulties raised two years ago with the release of Mel Gibson's "The Passion of Christ" and the fear of increased anti-Semitic incidents in its wake. Thus, all three Abrahamic faiths have been implicated in recent times in issues related to their portrayal in art. In all three cases artistic creations have sparked fierce debate and protests.

## Statement of the Response Team of the Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders

1. One of the important lessons that the controversial events mentioned above point to is the continuing relevance of religion. Religion continues to fascinate the public imagination and continues to shape the public agenda in ways some thought would by now be obsolete. The continuing relevance challenges religions to find the suitable relationship with other institutions of society. The nature of this relationship must always be dialogical, with each side listening respectfully to the other, addressing issues posed by the other and adapting the form of its teaching and method to the other. To a large extent, the recent set of controversial events is a consequence of lack of sufficient dialogue between the different sectors of society. We thus recognize the need for deeper dialogue and call for it on an ongoing basis, as well as in relation to particular issues.
2. As part of this dialogue, religion must not be considered beyond the pale of questioning and criticizing. A healthy criticism between religious institutions and the institutions of society at large can be constructive. However, honest and fair investigation of historical truths should not give way to blanket suspicion and rejection of religion, simply because it is religion. A critical investigation of religion and its institutions has to be undertaken with the same care and concern for accuracy and respect that is applied to the critical discussion of any other institution or domain of knowledge. Though a hermeneutics of suspicion can be a healthy corrective in human endeavors, an unbridled attitude of suspicion should not be applied to the field of religion simply because it is religion.
3. One must seek out those forms of critical inquiry that are based on knowledge and factuality. Caricature and one-sided depictions hinder dialogue. The various crises that form the basis for this discussion all grow out of caricatures of religious groups and institutions. These caricatures compromise the quest for facts and for knowledge. The challenge of

education faces all our traditions. It is a continuing struggle to impart the highest and most accurate form of knowledge available to us. We are therefore saddened to see the growth of an attitude according to which "the fact of the matter does not really matter", as stereotypes and caricatures are interwoven with historical facts in the presentation of any of our religions. The present challenges provide an opportunity to increase educational efforts in relation to learning the traditions of other religions in a balanced and responsible manner.

4. While our different traditions have throughout their history been in conflict and competition, the present historical moment calls for collaboration in facing common challenges. Thus, the issue of truth is here replaced by the issue of method. While religions do not always share each other's truths, we urge a common method of respectful discourse, based on historical inquiry and responsible scholarship. These criteria apply to the study of one's own tradition, as well as, and possibly even more so, to the representation of the tradition of the other.

5. We all affirm the importance of freedom of speech, as well as of the freedom of artistic expression. However, all our religious traditions suggest a balance between rights and responsibilities. We cannot apply rights in an unbridled way, while ignoring responsibilities placed upon those who enjoy these rights towards other members of society and society at large. Respect and concern for the dignity of the other are part of the responsibilities we must practice. Solidarity with others must be a foundation of our new global society. We must carefully consider the balance between the two conflicting drives in cases of potential conflict.

6. Our traditions teach us ways of upholding the dignity of the other. Improper speech, wrongful representation and the undermining of credibility and good name are social vices that each of our traditions addresses in its particular way. Artistic expression and fiction in particular, cannot provide an exemption from the obligations that govern our human relations. The mixture of fictional representation and using the name of existing individuals and organizations in such a way as to affect their standing and respectability cannot be condoned.

7. The principle of human dignity must be upheld in our artistic work, as well as in our daily interactions. Dignity is a foundation of a healthy social order. The various bodies of society are called to uphold it. Often what leads to compromising the dignity of the other are financial and market considerations. The dialogue between religion, its institutions and values and other forces of society should lead to a healthy balance, by means of which considerations of financial gain and other considerations that serve the needs of the individual should not eclipse the principles of social responsibility and human dignity.

8. We encourage the development of art that is informed by religion and its teaching and that engages it in a variety of responsible ways, both challenging it and being inspired by it. The recent controversial incidents do not detract from the importance of all instruments of creativity serving the goals of edification, the spread of knowledge and the inspiration of the spirit.

9. As a means of facilitating the dialogue between religion and its institutions and forces associated with media and the arts, we recommend the creation of an advisory council that could serve as a resource for people working in the media and the arts. Such a council would consist of responsible and open-minded religious leaders from all religious traditions who would be willing to engage artistic creators in ways that are constructive. The proposed advisory council is not an interreligious censorship, but a conversation partner for raising

issues of factual accuracy and sensitivity, that could alert artists to potential problems of reception among the public of believers and explore ways of addressing such concerns. Such dialogue might prevent future crises, including violent crises, from arising in the future and could provide an important opportunity for representatives of religion and of other parts of society to enrich each other.

We wish to thank the Elijah Interfaith Academy Think Tank for its help in drafting the present statement and bringing it to our consideration.

Signatories (religions and leaders shown alphabetically):

Buddhist Leaders:

Jan Chozen Bays, MD, Soto Zen priest at the Great Vow Zen Monastery  
Venerable Norman Fischer, Founder of Everyday Zen Foundation, USA  
Venerable Blanche Hartman, Abbess of San Francisco Zen Center  
Venerable Jinwol Lee, President of United Religions Initiative of Korea  
Dharma Master Hsin Tao, Founder of the Museum of World Religions, Taiwan  
Venerable Geshe Tashi Tsering, Jamyang Buddhist Centre, London  
Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo, University of San Diego

Christian Leaders:

Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev, Bishop of Vienna and Austria (Russian Orthodox)  
Metropolitan Nikitas Lulias, Metropolitan of Hong Kong and Southeast Asia (Greek Orthodox)  
Cardinal Jose Maria Mejia, Former Secretary of the College of Cardinals and Vatican Chief Librarian and Archivist (Catholic)  
Patriarch Mesrob II, Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul and All Turkey (Armenian)  
Archbishop Boutros Mouallem, Galilee Archdiocese (Catholic)  
Bishop Vincentiu Poiesteanu, Secretary of the Holy Synod (Romanian Orthodox)  
Abbot Primate Notker Wolf O.S.B., Titular head and first representative of the Benedictine Order (Catholic)

Religions of India Leaders

Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh, Chairperson of Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha, United Kingdom  
His Holiness Swamji Sugunendra Theertha, Founder of Maadhwa Sangha, Udipi

Jewish Leaders:

Chief Rabbi Shear Yashuv Cohen, Chief Rabbi of Haifa, Israel  
Chief Rabbi Menachem HaCohen, Chief Rabbi of Romania  
Rabbi Richard Marker, IJCIC delegation representative  
Chief Rabbi Michael Melchior, Chief Rabbi of Norway  
Rabbi David Rosen, Director of Interreligious Affairs at the American Jewish Committee  
Rabbi Awraham Soetendorp, European Region President of the World Union for Progressive Judaism

Muslim Leaders:

Sayyed Jawad Al-Khoei, Al-Khoei Foundation, London  
Dr. Y. Mossa Basha, Chairman of the Muslim American Coalition  
Dr. Mustafa Ceric, President of the Council of Ulema, Bosnia-Herzegovina  
Maulana Dr. Wahiduddin Khan, President of the Islamic Center, New Delhi

Dr. Adamou Ndam Njoya, Former President of the African Muslim Congress, Cameroon  
Sheikh Muhammad Nur Abdullah, Director of the Islamic Foundation of Greater St. Louis,  
President Islamic Society of North America

(Quelle: [www.elijah-interfaith.org](http://www.elijah-interfaith.org))