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**Orthodox Christianity: Divine Revelation or historical contingent?  
Contrasting Social Scientific Approaches to *The DaVinci Code*, *the Gospel of Judas*  
and other heresies.**

**By Fr Dn Anthony Perkins**

The recent news regarding the “Gospel of Judas” and the media blitz surrounding *The DiVinci Code* have given anti-clerical polemicists the opportunity to renew their attack on core Christian doctrines. None of their attacks have merit. In fact, they have been decisively refuted countless times over the past 2000 years. But, due to many factors (to include pride, an anti-Christian intelligentsia, and *sola scriptura*... but don't get me started!) the same old heresies keep coming back; there really is “nothing new under the sun”. In this essay I try to provide a theologically and scientifically sound response to one of the challenges being mounted to our faith by briefly exploring the relationship between historical contingency and Orthodoxy.

It is tempting to assume from the uneven and seemingly imprecise evolution of Christian doctrine in the early Church that the development and spread of Orthodoxy is no different from the development and spread of any ideology or worldview. According to this view, common among secular and mainstream Christian intelligentsia and their flocks, one can simply take the tools that sociologists and political scientists have used to explain the development and domination of communism, fascism, liberalism, etc. and use them to explain the development of Orthodox Christian doctrinal and institutional hegemony. ***According to this approach, Christian dogma – together with its supporting organizational and cultural structures - is seen as the evolutionary heir of an earlier primordial soup: no better or worse than its forgotten competitors, only lucky that various sociological/political factors made it “fitter.”*** While much of the data the adherents of this approach use to make their case is bogus (*The DaVinci Code* is full of basic historical errors and innumerable misconstructions), the basic sociological framework alluded to above does describe the situation reasonably well:

- Orthodoxy had competition from the very beginning
- Personal and impersonal social and institutional forces worked to privilege Orthodoxy over its competition
- Orthodoxy gradually developed an interconnected structure of liturgical, organizational, and canonical supports that buttressed its legitimacy at the expense of its competition
- Orthodoxy's competition was declared heretical and driven underground

Despite the fact that we could use the same outline to describe, say, the triumph of Communism in Russia of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is hard to find fault with it. Which brings me around to a point I have made in other essays – we should not be surprised that science (even the fuzzy branch of it that I practice) can occasionally describe theologically significant phenomenon. When properly executed and framed, science reveals the glory of God in His creation and augments other forms of revelation. But

when torn from its proper theological moorings (as happens all too often today), science does no more than reveal, reify, and legitimize our fallen condition. As such, when Orthodox Christians study the historical development of Orthodoxy, we see the fruits of God's continuing real and visceral incarnation in the Church and how He works through it (and us) for our salvation. We revel in the triumph of Orthodox theology and the manner in which eternal Truths are given expression through historical events. As noted above, this is NOT what the secular scientist sees and does. Lacking a belief in transcendent and unchanging Truth, he sees only confirmation of his own moral relativism and belief that all morality and institutions are historically contingent expressions of ambition, superstition, etc. This is not to say that the secular scientist is amoral: because he has made an idol of fallen man, he cannot help but bemoan the loss of theological pluralism that Orthodoxy's triumph caused. We all have access to the same data, but the implications are completely different. To approach the matter from a slightly different angle, the secular scientist sees the rise of communism in Russia and the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire as being expressions of the same basic phenomenon. The Orthodox scientist recognizes the similarities in the patterns, but, being attuned to the spiritual dimension of these movements, exults in the one and is repulsed by the other. Moreover, rather than seeing the similarity of these events as proof of random evolution and historical contingency, he sees an obvious sign that our world remains a battleground between good and evil.

**Conclusion: There is nothing new under the sun**

*But this heresy is permitted to fashion itself into as many various shapes as a courtesan, who usually changes and adjusts her dress every day. And why not? When they review that spiritual seed of theirs in every man after this fashion, whenever they have hit upon any novelty, they forthwith call their presumption a revelation, their own perverse ingenuity a spiritual gift; but (they deny all) unity, admitting only diversity. And thus we clearly see that, setting aside their customary dissimulation, most of them are in a divided state, being ready to say (and that sincerely) of certain points of their belief, "This is not so; "and, "I take this in a different sense; "and, "I do not admit that." By this variety, indeed, innovation is stamped on the very face of their rules; besides which, it wears all the colourable features of ignorant conceits. (Tertullian: Against the Valentinians)*

One cannot help but notice (and bemoan) how contemporary culture has reproduced the sorts of conditions that allowed for the flourishing of Gnosticism and many other heresies during the pre-Nicene period. These conditions include:

**A proliferation of "authoritative scriptures"** – and a declining commitment to the Orthodox canon of scripture among many Christians. Several factors have led to this state of affairs. Modern literary criticism has created an academic climate that undermines the authority of the Scriptures. Renewed academic interest in non-canonical epistles and gospels – partially due to the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library – has added to the problem. Because of the insights they provide into the culture of the time, academics tend to treat these texts as being every bit as valuable and useful as the canonical gospels and epistles. Some actually go so

far as to privilege the non-canonical texts because of their democratic nature and to dismiss the canonical texts due to their affiliation with authority. Ironically, Protestant “*sola scriptura*” has made the problem worse for most Christians. A rigorous adherence to scripture may protect those in fundamentalist denominations from the lure of heretical texts, but it has left those in mainline denominations with neither this protection nor that of a Church hierarchy.

**Ineffective refutation.** Whereas the fathers of the early Church wrote volumes “refuting heresies”, many modern Christians find the very concept of heresy repugnant. Most lack the catechetical grounding to provide a coherent response to attacks (if they even recognize them as attacks!). Moral critics have been effectively sidelined as politically motivated extremists thanks to a hostile media and a democratic and individualistic approach to morality and moral authority within our culture.

**Relatively weak central Church authority.** While the collegial episcopate of the Orthodox Church is sound, the Orthodox Church has very limited influence over the majority of the world’s Christians. One cannot help but be struck by the anarchic state of contemporary Christianity – and note that this same condition (actually much less of it!) allowed for the development of early Christian heresies. To make matters worse, the most persuasive authority on Earth – the combined might of Hollywood and Madison Avenue – is actively working to market heresies and undermine traditional Christianity.

#### **For Further Reading:**

Ireneaus of Lyon. *Against All Heresies*. (free at [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org)).

Perkins, Pheme. 1980. *The Gnostic Dialogue: The Early Church and the Crisis of Gnosticism*. New York: Paulist Press. (I’ll loan you my copies of this if you want)

1994. *Gnosticism and the New Testament*. Augsburg Fortress Press. (ditto)

Tertullian. *Against the Valentinians*. (free at [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org)).