

Public Mandated Symbols of Divinity and their Correlation to Privacy, Security, and Trust

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Privacy and Security: Creating Trust in Globally Networked Societies

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Few works of art are transcendental in time and multiple cultures. Perhaps some of the best known masterpieces are not remembered for simply their beauty, but throughout generations and across borders are appreciated, immortalized, or divinized for their greater meaning and the resonance or significance that it carries. No matter the medium – spoken word, sculpture, oil painting, music, dance, broadcast television, etc – many of these works born from the imagination of man (or woman), have a greater social or spiritual significance that escapes beyond the memory, paper, stone, analog, or digital canvases which they were recorded to become symbolic or metaphoric for something greater. Daniel J. Solove, author of *The Digital Person: Technology and Privacy in the Information Age* argues that, “metaphors are instructive not for their realism but for the way they direct our focus to certain social and political phenomena.”ⁱ

Although a debate exists whether the Jewish and Christian Bible is a work of the imagination of the people as a guide towards religion or the explicit Word of God – as the Qurán is understood – no greater phenomena epitomizes this construct beyond the interpretation from these sacred works of art becoming the foundation for most of the social, cultural, and political movements for the last two-thousand years. Like a figurative *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* painted by Georges-Pierre Seurat in 1884 – 1886 seen not as neo-impressionist pointillism but only dots on a canvas, deconstructing the Bible a pragmatist will only find a series of letters in a pattern that are recognized to be words.ⁱⁱ But as a whole – also like the Seurat masterpiece being seen as a Parisian landscape of a bustling park – the bodies of text which make up the Bible have stood for much of the creation and destruction of society for the last several thousand years. It is the most printed and read book in the history of the world and the *Father* that it represents has been used

to justify more wars and killings by *His* children in the non-fictional world than any other subject or cause.

A modern-day masterpiece that has elicited much debate on the topic of the interpretation of the Bible is Dan Brown's "The Da Vinci Code."ⁱⁱⁱ Published in 2003, Brown's fictional and controversial novel argues the Vatican has been hiding the truth behind a familial relationship between Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene. This plot, its greater meaning, and the significance of that meaning to the 40-plus million readers that have purchased the novel; and who correlate the fictional work with their interpretation of the Bible have done more for the sales of the book than the wordsmithing by the author.^{iv}

The protagonist in Brown's *Da Vinci Code* and his earlier novel "Angels and Demons" (2000) is Robert Langdon, a Professor of Religious Symbology at Harvard University. Langdon uses his academic knowledge of the cultural significance of symbols through-out history to help solve a sadistic murder at the Louvre in Paris. At the museum, Leonardo Da Vinci's painting of the *Mona Lisa* – after the Bible perhaps the most famous work of art of all time – acts as a bridge between the parallel truths that Langdon finds and the story that the Vatican has been disseminating in its Bible. A clue hidden within the *Mona Lisa* leads him on a path that unravels the cover-up by the Vatican in trying to hide the truth behind Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and the Holy Grail.

The truth and the privacy behind the secret of the institution of the Church could be broken if Langdon publishes his findings. The Church has a vested institutional and financial interest of keeping the claim of secrecy behind the matter, which creates the catch-22. This conflict of truth, trust, divinity, privacy, and security can be explored further by the analysis of other symbols that are prevalent in

literature, history, and even today in the online domain and how they correlate with religious beliefs.

The institutional mandating of publicly adjourning these symbols – with metaphoric transfixed religious connotations or denotations – to an individual or party diminishes the receptive parties' claim of privacy. Similar to Brown's depicted vested interest in "The Da Vinci Code" the inherent flaw of creating a system where the enforcement of the practice by the same bureaucracy that bore the law/tradition focuses and favors more the perceived welfare of the institution or society instead of the individual that is potentially being forced to unveil personal information about their religious practices that they may rather keep private. And no larger bureaucracy exists than the institution of the Church. Solove states that, "there are great inequalities in bargaining power in many situations involving privacy" between large bureaucracies and individuals because, "people often lack sufficient bargaining power over their privacy."^v This hypocrisy creates an *Orwellian* atmosphere that strips agency from the accused and at-large may breed warrant-less bias and gross defamation.^{vi}

Should the Church have a right to keep the secret? Is Robert Langdon justified if he chooses to unveil his new found information and erode the framework of trust throughout much of the civilized world? Can one man's actions unseat the bureaucracy? If Langdon was an actual professor at Harvard, he may be asking these questions and having this debate with his real-life counterpart Alan F. Westin. Westin, a former faculty member of Harvard, and Professor of Public Law and Government Emeritus at Columbia University, would answer that the church has the right to keep the truth hidden and Langdon would not be justified to expunge the secret. Westin says that privacy is, "the claim of an individual" or institution "to

determine what information about himself or herself should be known to others.”^{vii}

Thus, it is the claim of the Church as the forbearers and gate keepers of divine information to withhold that secret as its own claim to privacy. Langdon would be breaching the privacy claim of the Church for announcing his interpretation of facts.

The issue of bargaining power is a lofty one. If the reciprocal events were to take place, the Church has hugely disproportionate bargaining power over an individual. Whether through excommunication or just nearly endless resources the Church could do far more harm to an individual than the same individual could do to the bureaucracy.

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Scarlet Letter” epitomizes this reciprocal relationship of an individual’s privacy being invaded by the Church.^{viii} Written in 1850 but taking place in colonial Boston, the story revolves around how Hester Prynne was being shunned by the Church for committing adultery through being forced to wear a scarlet red piece of cloth in the shape of an “A” on her bosom at all times to symbolize her adulterous act. Although Prynne’s husband is presumed dead, her disobedience of refusing to name the father of her bastard daughter comes with this mandate.

Hester Prynne’s privacy and that of her daughter are breached because the bureaucracy’s Puritanistic laws supersede her claim to privacy by keeping the father’s name a secret. Prynne did not exasperate her disobedience after her punishment. She remained steadfast throughout the majority of the novel and would not name the father and even satirized her mandated punishment by decorating the symbol with gold embroidery, like it was a broach or other piece of jewelry. She even named her daughter Pearl to further satirize the punishment. She volunteered and worked as a seamstress to support herself and her daughter. Thus the meaning

of the “A” changed for many of those that were viewing and judging her from her village, where they said that the “A” has become known to them to as a sign of her strength as if it stood for being “able.”

If Robert Langdon or any symbologist were to study the history behind the scarlet letter that Prynne was mandated to wear, they would learn a great deal about how the meaning of the metaphor changed over time from “adultery” to “able” and how the privacy themes in the novel mimicked the actual mentality of the Puritan Church in New England. The novel begins with a nameless narrator describing how the book was written by a former surveyor in the courthouse who had fictionalized the novel from accounts and manuscripts from court documents of two-hundred years past.

The history of Puritanism in the New England colonies follows suit to the novel with their being limited to no claim by the citizenry for privacy. The Church’s power as the only prevalent bureaucracy of the colony instituted numerous schemes of surveillance. The church organized tythingmen who were individuals who were responsible for supervising and reporting the conduct of ten families, informers who were paid for tips on their neighbors, night watchers, clergy who regularly visited households to inspect the on-goings of the home’s inhabitants, morality courts, and were the first census and administrative offices of the New World.^{ix} Instead of Orwell’s Big Brother watching, the church abused their power to have the people’s *Father* (God) watching over them, but not as omnipresent as the Bible says, instead as an invasive abuse from *His* stewards.

Like this hypocrisy of the actual Church, the father of Pearl Prynne is divulged to be the colony’s minister Arthur Dimmesdale. The secret remains hidden until Minister Dimmesdale’s doctor Roger Chillingworth, who is Prynne’s lost husband

acting incognito to get revenge on his estranged wife for having a child with another man, notices a branded “A” on Dimmesdale’s chest. This adulterous symbol, unlike Hester Prynne’s is hidden from the world under his clothes and although unstated is assumed to be a self-inflicted voluntary punishment out of his own guilt instead of an institutional mandate like that of the mother of his child. Before Chillingworth discloses his found information – as was the same dilemma of Robert Langdon – Hester Prynne, Pearl, and Dimmesdale publicly announce the truth and thus relinquish Westin’s claim of what information about themselves they deem to be private versus public.

Fiction has a way of interpreting real life events and real life events have a way of transcending from fictional accounts; so was the adulterous accounts of the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher of the Plymouth Church of Brooklyn, New York, in the 1870s with Elizabeth Richards Tilton and the parallels to the accounts of Hawthorne’s “The Scarlet Letter” written twenty years earlier.^x Like his fictional counterpart Dimmesdale, Henry Ward Beecher committed adultery with one of his parishioners and tried to hide the truth to the public by coming to a legal treaty of compromise with Tilton’s husband. And like Chillingworth or Langdon, a third party was looking to make public the private accounts of the individuals. This time though due to the technology of the late 19th Century, the press leached onto the story and made the adulterous act a national headline. Now instead of scarlet, the “Adulterous A” was printed in black ink for not just local villagers to see and judge in passing, but for the world to read anywhere.

Two other symbols of mandated adornment chronicle one of the darkest atrocities of the 20th Century. The most attributable symbol of Nazi Germany during the Third Reich is the swastika. As Robert Langdon could have attested, the history

of the symbol is a rich one. It was first used over 3,000 years ago making it the oldest symbol known to man. Then up until the 1920s the swastika was known as a positive symbol that represented life, the sun, power, strength, and good luck in various cultures around the world.^{xi}

This symbol has been poisoned by the hateful use of it by Adolf Hitler during the Nazis rule over Germany and has become symbolic of anti-Semitism and the holocaust. During the holocaust Germany committed acts of genocide towards all people of non-Aryan blood in Europe. Hitler tried to systematically eradicate the entire European Jewish population and succeeded in murdering six million European Jews.^{xii} Jennifer Rosenberg in *The History of the Swastika* exclaims:

In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler described the Nazis' new flag: "In *red* we see the social idea of the movement, in *white* the nationalistic idea, in the *swastika* the mission of the struggle for the victory of the Aryan man, and, by the same token, the victory of the idea of creative work, which as such always has been and always will be anti-Semitic." Because of the Nazis' flag, the swastika soon became a symbol of hate, anti-Semitism, violence, death, and murder.^{xiii}

Beyond the symbol of the swastika which for Germans was meant to show national pride through unity when adorned, Nazis forced Jews to wear their own symbols as a first step in their dehumanization process and genocidal plot. According to the United States Holocaust Museum, "the Nazis ordered Jews to wear identifying badges or armbands" with the Star of David symbol ascribed like Hester Prynne's scarlet letter. Similar Stars of David were marked on business store fronts and houses to brand them as places of Jewish habitat before millions of Jews were sent from these homes to walled ghettos, which acted as citywide prisons, against their will. Not just their privacy of religion was being trampled on, but their privacy at home was stolen as well. Rosenberg continues by stating:

The Germans regarded the establishment of ghettos as a provisional measure to control and segregate Jews. In many places ghettoization lasted a relatively short time. Some ghettos existed for only a few days, others for months or years. With the implementation of the "Final Solution" (the plan to murder all European Jews) beginning in late 1941, the Germans systematically destroyed most ghettos. The Germans and their auxiliaries either shot ghetto residents in mass graves located nearby or deported them, usually by train, to killing centers where they were murdered.^{xiv}

To finalize the dehumanization of the Jews, Germans shaved their heads and separated men from women so everyone would look nearly identical...like cattle going to slaughter. They enumerated each prisoner at the concentration camps with a permanent tattoo, like Dimmesdale's branding as a constant reminder of their fate. Thus the brand stripped them of the last thing they could claim to be their own: their family name.

There were many Jews that tried to fight the Nazis, the largest being in the Warsaw Poland ghetto uprising during the spring of 1943.^{xv} But as Solove explained an individual or a small group have unequal power with a giant bureaucracy. Many others who were either too demoralized or too weak did not fight therefore unlike in the Bible when King David of Israel slayed the giant Goliath...the underdog could not win this fight. Those that did not fight were not simply conformists, but trusted the lies that were given to them by the Nazis and could not imagine anything being worse than what they've been put through already. This led to the mass killings in gas chambers at the concentration camps where the refugees/prisoners were promised showers but instead only got "The Final Solution."

The scarlet letter and the Star of David arm band are somber examples of symbols being used to control people through a religious framework. They are examples of man and bureaucracy at its worst. Not all usages of symbols in relation to religion are negative. The wedding ring or wedding band in many western

religions is a symbol of love and devotion to another. The bindi worn on the forehead of married Hindu women publicly shows the same. These examples are not mandates but social norms and are voluntary. A man or a woman would not be condemned in either religion for being seen in public without these symbols. The issuance of the mandate by the institution and the policing by the same bureaucracy creates the catch-22, but as these practices are voluntary they create more of a positive social network context than have any serious negative repercussions.

Within the online domain in today's connected Information Age the usage of certain symbols can improve privacy, safety, security, and trust. Many websites prominently display a BBBonline or Truste logo to show that they adhere to standardized privacy policies. Other websites that target children as an audience state in their privacy policies that they do not collect personal information from kids or do so with only the parents consent. The usage of the Internet by children creates additional hurdles for parents who want the ability to dynamically restrict certain inappropriate content – similar to the Vchip in televisions – but are limited within the scope that they have access to tools to allow this form of parental voluntary supervision.

The debate over online pornography has been quite vociferous on both sides regarding the mandating of a .xxx Top Level Domain to assist parents in offering a framework to block inappropriate content. Most recently U.S. Senators Max Baucus (D-Mont.) and Mark Pryor (D-Ark.) introduced S.2426 in the 109th Congress on March 16, 2006 that would require, “web sites with adult content to have a .xxx domain.”^{xvi} This legislation died in the 109th Congress and similar bills would most likely fail as well, but serious movement on making the domains voluntary exist today. According to ICM Registry over 500,000 .xxx domains have already been

preregistered pending the 2007 ICANN decision.^{xvii} By institutionalizing online pornography on a Top Level Domain, parents will have greater agency to block the content but the U.S. Dept. of Commerce objects to it because they feel it legitimizes the business model of online pornography.^{xviii} But with 500,000 website domains queued at an annual leasing rate of \$60, a business model that is set to bring in \$30 million a year before the first letter is typed on the keyboard or mouse button clicked is already legitimate.^{xix}

If the system of online pornography domain names becomes voluntary it follows Westin's claim about safeguarding an institution's own public information. Some websites may not classify themselves as being pornographic or necessarily adult content, for instance a website of photos of artistic works may include nudes that some parents and conservative groups may deem as inappropriate for their children but many others may deem as educational. These people or group's interpretations of the Bible set their moral and social code of conduct, which shuns pornography and subjectively views certain content obscene that may be accepted by the mainstream public.

To follow the examples stated earlier with the Star of David, the Michelangelo Buonarroti sculpture from 1504 of the man that the symbol immortalizes before he was made King of Israel to some conservative groups is offensive because it shows an anatomically correct naked adolescent young man.^{xx} The statue of *David* though is well respected as one of the greatest Renaissance masterpieces by scholars and the mainstream public. It may even rival Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* as the most recognizable piece of artwork after the Bible. If the .xxx domain were mandated, it is highly plausible that a conservative group could lobby hard enough to require that

this masterpiece be branded with a Scarlet XXX and hidden from future generations of online web searches by children.

As Solove said, “metaphors are instructive not for their realism but for the way they direct our focus to certain social and political phenomena.” Thus, if a conservative group were to win these debates the significance of unintended consequences of information loses would be staggering. Like the tythingmen of colonial New England, societies would regress to living in fear of any personal information about them which would remain private in their own policing standards could become deemed inappropriate by a third party running the bureaucracy and made public. Although through physiology it would be difficult or impossible for Hester Prynne to have hid her pregnancy, it would not be difficult for Henry Ward Beecher and Elizabeth Tilton to have kept their secret hidden. Or it would not have been at all difficult for a Jewish family in Warsaw or Berlin to keep their faith secret to avoid persecution by the Nazis.

Westin was correct when he said that an individual or an institution should be able to protect any information about themselves from being made public so individuals can govern their own lives and not be mandated to say or do something against their will. The Bible says to treat others the way that you yourself would like to be treated. If this belief from that trusted work of art was followed, the history books would be free from genocides, bias, and hate. Also, Robert Langdon’s study on the cultural significance of religious symbols would include far more references to positive metaphors like wedding rings and bindis; and far less scarlet letters and Star of David arm bands.

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End Notes

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- ^v Solove, pgs 82-84.
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