

Updated November 21, 2005

At the request of some of my students in "Religion and the Challenge of Science," I have read *Angels and Demons* and *The Da Vinci Code*. I had read *The Da Vinci Hoax: Exposing the Errors in The Da Vinci Code* last summer (Carl E. Olson and Sandra Meisel; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), but my students insisted that I had to read the novels myself. Having read the novels, I can now recommend *The Da Vinci Hoax* with renewed enthusiasm.

Fact or Fiction?

My students seemed surprised that I didn't want to read the novels. I told them that the novels were filled with hatred of Catholicism and that they didn't notice it because they, too, hate the Church. My students replied, "But they're just fiction--just a fun read."

Imagine that you love someone. It might be your parents, your spouse, your brothers or sisters, or your own children. Now please imagine that someone writes a story in which your beloved is portrayed as a murdering, sexually perverted, greedy, stupid, power-hungry, lying criminal. If you really love the person who is being slandered and defamed in the story, you will not find the story a "fun read."

The Church is my spouse. I have given up a human spouse and natural children in order to join myself to the Body of Christ. I believe that the Roman Catholic Church is the one, true Church founded by Jesus through the ministry of the apostles. I know my own sinfulness and I know a great deal--more than I want to!--of the sins of other priests. See <<http://www2.canisius.edu/~moleski/classq/judas.pdf>>. I do not attribute my sins or the sins of other Catholics to the Church. When we sin, we have only ourselves to blame. It is in the light of the Church's teaching that I am able to tell the difference between good and evil, sin and innocence.

It is impossible for me in a short space to list all of the distortions of history, philosophy, philology, and theology that the two novels contain. I have no difficulty granting authors a "suspension of disbelief" when they are constructing an alternate reality such as Middle Earth (Tolkien), Narnia (C.S. Lewis), Hogwarts (Rowling) or the surreal cosmos of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Universe*. I have thoroughly enjoyed countless science fiction novels, detective stories, novels, and short stories that have required me to grant the author's creative premisses. I have even laughed at some of the *Monty Python* skits. Brown overdrew his account with me, however. Both novels are freighted with assertions about language, symbols, history, science, philosophy, and theology that I find wrong, misleading, and unfair. I grieve the effect that his novels have had on discourse about the Church. Many people do not have the resources to see where he has ceased to draw on facts and begun to fantasize about history.

I want to complete these notes before the end of this semester (spring, 2005) for the sake of those students who asked me to read the books. I cannot go into as much detail as the book-length treatments that attack or defend the novels. All I can do here is sketch a few objections.

I. *Angels and Demons* (New York: Pocket Star Books, 2000).

Ambigrams

Brown treats these symbols as signs of the greatest creative intelligence. He is therefore patting himself on the back as he does so, because the book is littered with them (including the title, "Angles and Demons"). I do not share his enthusiasm for these graphic games nor do I feel the shock and horror of his characters as they gaze upon them for the first time--especially the Illuminati Diamond (473).

Magical Machinery

Brown says "Good science fiction has its roots in good science" (75). But the novels are packed with impossible technology:

- A civilian X-33 Mach-15 hydrogen scramjet that can be prepared for flight in five minutes (395).
- An "antique" Mickey Mouse watch (114) that runs on batteries, is waterproof and shockproof, glows in the dark, has two or more "tiny dials" and an alarm function whose beep saves Langdon from death (388). If there are any such electronic Mickey Mouse watches, they're not collector's items. I had a Mickey Mouse watch when I was a kid (somewhere between 1957 to 1964, I'd guess. No Mickey Mouse watch from Langdon's childhood (the 1960s) would have all the features attributed to the watch in the book.
- Battery-powered security cameras whose broadcast transmissions can be received within the Vatican (58).
 - Why would CERN or the Vatican use battery-powered security cameras? Who would tend the batteries?
 - How many frequencies would be made available for that purpose? Brown imagines at least 86 channels (148). Brown invents such useless cameras so that the terrorists can provide convenient pictures of the ticking time bomb (all movie bombs have got handy clocks on them to show how much time is left before our heroes get killed; 80).
 - Why can't the Swiss guards search for the security camera rather than the magic plastic antimatter container? They ought to be able to pinpoint the video transmissions without any difficulty (172). After all, it was "transmitting all along" (491).
 - "Your cameras don't have GPS locators on them?" (132). What video cameras *do* have GPS locators on them?
- A button-sized tracking device that "broadcasts to GPS satellites" (the GPS satellites transmit signals; they do not receive them).
- A battery-powered electromagnetic antimatter trap that contains no metallic elements in it and can confine a quarter-gram of antimatter in a *perfect* vacuum for 24 hours but cannot use any other source of electricity but its own specially-recharged batteries (78-82, 167).

I fly radio-controlled airplanes and hence have a personal interest in battery technology, frequency distribution, and effective range for transmissions. I obtained my HAM license last summer (KC2NEB--a lowly technician's license). For a man who purports to love science, Brown strains the limits of credulity in order to create dramatic scenes, especially that of the ticking-time bomb hidden under St. Peter's.

Batteries don't discharge on a fixed schedule except in Brown's fantasy world.

If the vacuum in the plastic container isn't *perfect*, then a particle of matter will annihilate a particle of antimatter. It isn't easy to make an absolutely *perfect* vacuum. I doubt that there are any such things in any chambers of any size in the world. And the little handheld wonder also has to have a transparent viewport to show the tiny blob of antimatter for the battery-powered video camera to show to the world.

Why doesn't Vittoria simply have the technicians at CERN unplug one of her charging posts (93) and ship it on the magic jet plane to Rome? Four hours ought to give them plenty of time (168). But that simple technological act would rob Brown of a photogenic moment. Movie-makers like big explosions near helicopters (blowing up radio-controlled helicopters is cheap and flashy).

- Mad scientists who can use hideously expensive resources without reporting on their experiments to those who fund them.
- A Genesis machine that allegedly creates something out of nothing and proves that the Genesis story

is credible. But the production of antimatter in the story is accomplished by the investment of huge amounts of energy from the CERN super-collider (71). Changing matter into energy or energy into matter is *not* making "something out of nothing." Such conversions follow the laws of conservation of matter and energy.

- A machine whose design is so complicated that its secret dies with its creator (whatever one scientist can invent, other scientists can reverse-engineer).
- A helicopter that can climb at a rate greater than 5000 feet per minute (504). The Apache helicopter, with twin turbines, only climbs at 1450 fpm. The Bell JetRanger climbs at about 1170 fpm.
- A tarp sloppily left in the cockpit of a helicopter that can be turned into a parachute in the space of a few seconds and that survives a 5-kiloton blast a few thousand feet away (506). Our hero holds onto a couple of bungee cords, steers himself toward the "ragin" Tiber River, and hits a whitewater stretch of the river--"frothy and air-filled"--that softens his dive three times more than still water and that is simultaneously deep enough for him not to hit bottom. There is no such stretch of "ragin water" on the Tiber in Rome. I doubt whether there is any stretch of water that would have that much splashing as well as that much depth.
- Flammable liquid so volatile that a small quantity splashed on clothing immediately reduces a corpse to ashes that can be swept up and hidden from sight in an instant. Have you ever tried to burn fish bones or turkey bones on a campfire? I have, and I know how difficult it is to burn them completely; there is not now and never will be a lamp oil that can cremate a corpse, no matter how much sugar and perfume you put in it (359, 554-555). We could, if we wanted to be scientific about the matter, calculate the maximum BTUs to be obtained from ethanol and butane and then determine how many gallons would be required to reduce a human body to ashes. But that would ruin a couple of symbolic sequences in the book (burial in his father's tomb, 555, and the ascent into a pillar of fire, 562).
- A portable refrigeration unit that can turn an entire apartment into a cold-storage freezer (the energy requirements for cooling that much air in a poorly-insulated space are enormous).
- A magic 5 megaton blast (87) that does no damage to folks two or three miles away because the energy released gets sucked back into the point of origin shortly after the blast (499). Explosions don't work that way in the real world. No one standing outside (or floating down by parachute or magic tarp) would survive uninjured.
- Shielded walls around the Vatican that stop all external transmissions from being received but that do not block internal transmissions (148). You can inhibit radio waves with paint and metal, but I don't think you can use electromagnetic fields to keep the transmissions out. If you jam all signals, you jam all internal signals, too (and that ruins the wireless security cameras).
- Dollars to donuts there are no "hermetic vaults" in the Vatican Archives. I think it's just a gimmick so Langdon can suffer extra stress while solving another symbolic problem. According to National Geographic, there are 30 miles of shelves in the Archives. If we imagine (for the sake of argument) that the shelves are 10 high, then there are 3 miles of aisles to walk in their storage space. You don't just pop in and find what you want by reading the labels on the shelves (193-194).
- A convenient air-hose that Langdon can see but his attacker can't (417). Though it has no regulator on it, Langdon is able to fake drowning convincingly, then breathe as needed from the air-hose to stay alive. The air is on when he needs it and off when he doesn't.

Kohler: "Science has now proven those gods [of the sun, earth, and the ocean] to be false idols. Soon *all* Gods will be proven to be false idols" (25).

When science discredits gods and goddesses, Brown treats this as a magnificent intellectual accomplishment. But when the Church attacks polytheism as idolatry, Brown treats it as destruction of "the sacred feminine" (*DVC*).

Kohler: ["Outspoken scientists like Copernicus"] were murdered. ... Murdered by the church for revealing scientific truths. Religion has always persecuted science" (31).

Copernicus was a Franciscan canon (a member of a Catholic religious order). He wasn't outspoken. He only published his work at the very end of his life. It was dedicated to a Pope who accepted it without condemnation or controversy. Copernicus had no new observations to prove the truth of the heliocentric system. Like Ptolemy, he assumed that planets moved in perfect circles at uniform velocity. Copernicus' system, as published, required *more* cycles and epicycles than the Ptolemaic system and was less accurate at predicting the motion of the planets.

Various religions (Hinduism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, and Islam) have taken different views of science. It is simply false to say that all religions have hated science "since the beginning of history" (31). The Catholic church is *not* against the theory of evolution (46); it only objects to the *atheistic interpretation* of the theory of evolution.

Vittoria: "So, when Hubble shocked the world by scientifically proving the Big Bang was accurate, the church claimed victory, heralding this as *proof* that the Bible was scientifically accurate" (69).

True: Hubble's observation of red-shifted light from distant galaxies did help confirm the Big Bang theory.

False: The Roman Catholic Church *never* claimed that this proved "that the Bible was scientifically accurate." The Roman Catholic Church does *not* read the Sacred Scriptures the way that Protestant fundamentalists do.

Vittoria: "My dad wanted to bring science to a higher level ... where science supported the concept of God."

The natural sciences deal with the physical universe. If there is an infinite, all-knowing, all-powerful God, that God is not *part* of the physical universe and therefore is beyond scientific observation. To reason from the nature of the physical world to the existence of one God is to engage in *metaphysics*, not *physics*.

Kohler suffers from an operatic malady, conveniently unnamed (how unscientific!), that leaves him crippled for life. He is saved from death by a single dose of medicine (also unnamed) administered by a compassionate doctor who waits until his parents are distracted (452-454). The Catholic Church has never prohibited the use of licitly produced medicine to cure our ills; that is typical of Christian Scientists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and some other fundamentalists sects.

The Galileo Affair

"Even nonscientists were familiar with the ill-fated astronomer who had been arrested and almost executed by the church for proclaiming that the *sun*, and not the earth, was the center of the solar system. Although his data were incontrovertible, the astronomer was severely punished for implying that God had placed mankind somewhere other than at the *center* of His universe" (32).

This is the kind of passage that makes me gnash my teeth with despair. It's just two short sentences, but they require a very long explanation to show how much falsehood is packed into them.

1. Galileo was never threatened with execution.
2. Galileo had no data that proved the earth orbited the sun. The observation that *proved* this

incontrovertibly (stellar parallax) were not made until almost two centuries later. Galileo was punished for teaching as fact what was not yet established as fact.

3. In the medieval world view, the earth was the last, lowest, and least perfect part of creation. There was no pride in being "at the *center* of His universe." All perfection of truth, beauty, and goodness was to be found above the orbit of the moon.
4. Galileo rejected Kepler's ellipses and affirmed the Ptolemaic/Copernican system of cycles and epicycles.
5. Galileo's great contribution to the development of our understanding of the solar system was his work on the laws of motion. Newton united Galileo's laws with Kepler's ellipses and his own law of gravity to produce the portrait we have today of the heliocentric system.

Gnostic Pantheism

Langdon: "[Galileo] held that science and religion were not enemies, but rather *allies*--two different languages telling the same story, a story of symmetry and balance ... heaven and hell, night and day, hot and cold, God and Satan. Both science and religion rejoiced in God's symmetry ... the endless contest of light and dark" (33). "It seemed his Creation experiment, exactly as your Bible predicts, produced everything in pairs. Opposites. Light *and* dark" (523).

This view of God turns up in many forms in world religions. The Taoists use the yang-yin symbol to express this doctrine that there is no real difference between good and evil, light and darkness, truth and falsehood:



There are many ways to interpret this symbol: at the heart of black is white, at the heart of white is black; at the heart of true is false, at the heart of false is true; at the heart of masculinity is femininity, at the heart of femininity is masculinity; there are no absolutes; all contraries are aspects of one all-embracing reality. Vittoria: "Antimatter is *yin* to matter's *yang*" (75). For Catholics, there is a real difference between the Creator and the created, light and darkness, good and evil. Our interpretation of the Bible does *not* lead to the idea that they are all "one and the same" or "aspects of the same reality."

Brown does not consistently abide by this reconciling symbol. The drama in his books depends upon his audience agreeing with him who is really good and who is really evil; Langdon is *not* treated as if his goodness is merely the illusory opposite of the evil priest.

Vittoria: "*Each of us is a God*, Buddha had said. *Each of us knows all. We need only open our minds to hear our own wisdom*" (484).

This self-centered, introspective standard of religious truth is typical of the "gnostics." "Gnosis" is a Greek word meaning "knowledge." An agnostic is someone who "doesn't know." Gnostics of all varieties judge the gospel by the light of their "own wisdom."

False Etymologies

"[*Shaitan*] is Islamic. It means 'adversary.' The Church chose Islam for the name because it was a language they considered dirty. ... *Shaitan* is the root of an English word ... *Satan*" (34).

"Satan" is from Hebrew. The Christian use of the Hebrew word predates Mohammed, the founder of Islam, by five centuries. The Muslims, like the Christians, got the word from the Jews.

"*Novus Ordo Seclorum* ... means 'New Secular Order'" (112).

"Seclorum" is a poetic contraction of "seclorum" which is a genitive plural word meaning "of the ages." It is true that the adjective "secular" is derived from the same root, but putting "seclorum" in the singular and treating it as if it were the English adjective is nonsense.

The *pantheon* (a place where all the gods and goddesses are worshiped) has nothing to do with *pantheism* (the believe that everything is part of God and God is part of everything; 224).

Paranoid Conspiracy Theories

In both books, Brown asserts that huge, rich, powerful, and wise secret societies have existed for thousands of years. It is impossible to prove that such conspiracies did not exist because the absence of sound historical documentation about them simply "proves" that they kept their secrets well. At the same time, Langdon is capable of "naming names" of the members of the secret societies--and unraveling all of their secret codes--because historians like himself know all about them (38-41).

Imaginary Conclave Rituals

- The cardinals do not meet by candlelight.
- They cannot accidentally acclaim a man as pope (561).
- They no longer are locked into one building. They meet in the Sistine Chapel and are housed in a modern residence.
- Only 120 cardinals may vote, not 165 (121).
- No special *preferiti* are formally nominated before the Conclave begins (154).
- The Vatican staff do not abandon their offices during the Conclave.
- The camerlengo is a cardinal, not a priest (135). He takes care of the pope's secular affairs. John Paul II's camerlengo was Cardinal Eduardo Martinez Somalo.
- "The protocols for this event are holy--*not* subject to modification" (134). False. They've been modified many times for many different reasons. John Paul II added the ringing of the bells to the burning of the ballots.
- There is no official "Great Elector" (161). This is jargon for a cardinal who acts effectively to get another cardinal elected.
- The office of "Devil's Advocate" had nothing to do with conclaves (542). It was part of the process of naming someone a saint. The Devil's Advocate had to find all the reasons *not* to list the candidate as a saint.
- "Those men [the cardinals] are the foundation of this church" (165). False. Bishops are the successors of the apostles. The cardinals are a small group within the college of bishops.
- The conclave is not "one of the oldest traditions in Christendom" (185). It dates to the middle of the thirteenth century.

Other Noxious Elements

The Prayer of St. Francis begins, "Make me an instrument of your peace." "God, grant me serenity [not "the strength"] to accept the things I cannot change" is the first line of the Serenity Prayer (169), which was apparently composed by Reinhold Niebuhr.

"The practice of 'god-eating'--that is, Holy Communion--was borrowed from the Aztecs" (243). Brown doesn't explain how a Palestinian Jew learned about the Aztec rituals in 29 AD when the culture did not develop until *twelve centuries later* (!) in South America. Brown's rule seems to be, "If there is any resemblance between Christianity and another religion, the other religion is to be given priority and Christianity devalued as a consequence."

Pope St. Celestine V was the last pope (of four) to resign (1294 AD). He died at age 91. No evidence of murder has ever been found, let alone a 10-inch nail carelessly left in the skull by the murderers (352)!

In vitro fertilization to conceive a child out of wedlock is as contrary to the Church's teachings as a priest and nun breaking the vow of chastity (543-544).

To His Credit

Brown is correct that archeologists believe that they have found St. Peter's tomb underneath the basilica (481, 487). The excavators did, indeed, uncover an ancient cemetery, part of a road, and a niche that held the bones of a man.

Brown has thought of yet another way to tell the story of a father murdered by his unwitting son. This is the *Oedipal Myth*. It's not terribly original--Brown got the idea from the Greeks.

II. *The Da Vinci Code: A Novel* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

"Fact"

Brown and his central character, Langdon, take "ancient documents" uncritically, as if everything written in ancient times must be treated as true. Even if *Les Dossiers Secrets* exists, which I very much doubt, its allegations about the existence and membership of the Priory of Sion should be taken with a grain of salt. The fact that a great library has a book on its shelves does not mean that it is a great book.

Opus Dei (Latin: "Work of God")

Brown's fabrications and half-truths about this Catholic organization are detailed at <http://www.opusdei.org/art.php?w=32&a=2177>. Of course, if one *assumes* that Opus Dei is a secret terrorist organization, then every argument that Opus Dei makes on its own behalf must, of course, be a coverup. As in the case of other paranoid conspiracy theories, the lack of evidence supporting Brown's allegations is taken to be proof of how tremendously effective the Opus Dei vow of silence is.

Every religious group within the Catholic Church has got its unhappy ex-members and its detractors. Opus Dei is drawing flak these days because it is a relatively new organization (founded 1928) and has a great zeal for observing the whole of the Catholic faith. Many modernist Catholics dislike Opus Dei's emphasis on fidelity to the doctrine and discipline of the faith and are eager to discredit the group for using "brainwashing" and "coercion." All religious communities have "formation programs" that teach newcomers how to live the life of the community and all of them have some form of obedience--otherwise, they would not be *religious communities*. In the days when the Society of Jesus was faithful to its vow of obedience to the Pope, it drew similar criticisms.

"Corporal mortification" is part of the Catholic tradition of spirituality. The phrase literally means "putting the body to death" from the Latin word, *mors, mortis*, "death," which gives us the words mortal, mortality, and immortality. Corporal mortification does *not* mean suicide or causing oneself permanent physical harm. The phrase is meant to *symbolize* "death to self." Catholics in the United States are required to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday and to abstain from meat on the Fridays during Lent; we are also supposed to fast for one hour before receiving Communion (down from the requirement to fast from midnight the night before). They may also choose various forms of fasting and abstinence voluntarily as a sign of devotion to God. Other forms of mortification may involve the use of a light whip (the "discipline") and a chain around the thigh (the "cilice"). All Jesuit novices used these in pre-Vatican II formation, though not with much enthusiasm. There are many other forms of mortification: wearing rough clothing (hair shirts or sackcloth [burlap], kneeling, keeping vigil, pilgrimage, ascending stairs on one's knees, yoga practices, and the like. St. Francis of Assisi affectionately called his body "Brother Ass" because our physicality can be so mulish and so obstinate when we try to follow Jesus. St. Francis Borgia, SJ, may have drawn blood in his penitential practices; he never imposed such enthusiastic use of the discipline on others.

Magical Machinery

- I can't believe that the assassin had only one bullet in his gun (4) or that he had emptied all the rounds but one while chasing Saunière through the museum. Brown needs to have a wound inflicted on the curator that will kill him in fifteen minutes (5), allowing him just enough time to compose riddles, visit two Da Vinci paintings in another area, strip himself naked, draw a circle on the floor around himself, and write four lines of text on the floor in invisible ink. I've handled guns since I was a boy, and I know that the first thing we gun toters do is to fill our magazines to the full--all the movies about us gun nuts love to pump up the volume as our hero slams the clip home and chambers the first round.
- I also refuse to believe that the guards could not lift the gates for fifteen minutes. That's not the way security systems work. Brown fantasizes this detail because he needs this gimmick to set the rest of the plot in motion. Museum security guards won't twiddle their thumbs for fifteen minutes while someone is ripping paintings off the wall!
- Invisible solar-powered transmitters that can broadcast across Europe.

Odd or Mistaken Etymologies

"In fact, so strong was the Church's fear of those who lived in the rural *villes* that the once innocuous word for 'villager'--*villain*--came to mean a wicked soul."

It is insane to attribute all developments in language to "the Church." The Church has no control over how language changes. Note that the fear of country folk endures in our secular society: the backwoods people in *Deliverance*; "Mammas, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys" (Willy Nelson); and our cultural derision of outlaws, hicks, rednecks, and jocks. In the Dark Ages (Western Europe, ~476 AD to around 1000 AD, towns and cities were much safer at night than the surrounding countryside because of walls, gates, and guards. The development of "villager" into "villain" is understandable because of these tensions between town and country.

Other Noxious Elements

I feel sorry for albinos (12). Has there ever been a sympathetic albino in contemporary movies? Our culture seems to take great pleasure in making the "whitest of the whites" into the blackest criminals. Brown slavishly adopts this image from the visual symbols of recent films. Someone should form an Albino Defense League to protest these cultural stereotypes.

... to be continued.

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dumb attitude towards symbols: one meaning each. Anyone who uses a similar symbol has to fight with other image-makers for the right to the single coded meaning.