

The Truth Behind "The Da Vinci Code"

Carl Olson Analyzes the Controversial, Confusing Best Seller

EUGENE, Oregon, MARCH 13, 2004 (Zenit.org).- It's a work of fiction, but many readers think that they are finding "truth" in Dan Brown's "The Da Vinci Code."

Christians are getting duped, too -- many thinking that is a harmless book that enriches their faith. That's why Carl Olson is writing a book with Sandra Miesel called "The Da Vinci Hoax" (Ignatius), due out this summer.

Olson, who is editor of Envoy magazine, shared with ZENIT how his book exposes and critiques the numerous errors in "The Da Vinci Code," and analyzes what the novel's success indicates about America's cultural and religious landscape.

Q: Why do you feel compelled to decipher "The Da Vinci Code"?

Olson: Last August a friend called and told me, in a rather agitated tone, "You have to read this novel." He had been given "The Da Vinci Code" as a birthday gift; as he read it, he recognized it was full of error and had a strong bias against the Catholic Church.

Because of my work in apologetics, he thought I should be aware of the novel, since it was receiving critical acclaim and selling so well -- now more than 6 million copies.

When I looked at the sales figures and began reading reviews, I saw his point. The novel was -- and still is -- generating a lot of controversy and confusion. Although a work of fiction, it is being touted by many as a historically accurate, factual portrayal of early Christianity and the Catholic Church. So I bought a copy, got out a red pen and went to work.

At this same time, medieval historian and journalist Sandra Miesel sent me a copy of her excellent review of "The Da Vinci Code" for Crisis Magazine.

I also began receiving e-mails from Envoy readers about the novel: Should they read it? How could they respond to it? Is it accurate?

So I asked Sandra if she would work with me on some online articles and on a book, which became "The Da Vinci Hoax."

The goal is twofold: to expose and critique the numerous errors in "The Da Vinci Code," and to present the truth about the early Church, Catholicism, medieval history, and a host of other topics. We also analyze the success of the novel and discuss what it indicates about the cultural and religious landscape.

Q: What are the primary theological problems with "The Da Vinci Code"?

Olson: The novel is based on a variety of esoteric, neo-Gnostic and feminist beliefs that are in direct opposition to Christianity. Much has been made of the novel's claim that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married, but that is just the tip of the iceberg.

Beneath the surface are belief systems teaching that Christianity is a violent and bloody lie, that the Catholic Church is a sinister and misogynist institution, and that truth is ultimately the creation and product of each person.

Dan Brown, the author of the novel, has readily admitted in interviews that most of the ideas in "The Da Vinci Code" are not original to him. The intellectual, ideological and spiritual heritage of "The Da Vinci Code" can be traced back many decades, even centuries.

The novel is hardly as innovative or cutting edge as some readers think it is. As our articles and book demonstrate, Brown has taken the majority of his ideas from a handful of recent, popular books that are filled with conspiracy theories, skewed depictions of Catholic theology and often outlandish and unsubstantiated claims about historical events and persons.

In the end, what Brown has accomplished is the creation of a popular myth that distills and presents statements of belief in a way that is not demanding, but entertaining and attractive.

This myth works on more than one level, being a mystery novel, a romance, a thriller, a conspiracy theory and a spiritual manifesto, all at once.

One attraction is that it promises a sort of gnosis -- or secret knowledge -- about a number of topics and suggests that subjective individualism, not traditional religion, holds the real answers to life's big questions.

The sad irony is that some Catholics think the novel is a wonderful work of literature that can somehow help them explore and understand their faith better. But the novel is based on the belief that Jesus was a mere man, that Christianity is a despicable sham and that all claims to objective religious truth are to be avoided.

Q: The novel features an opening page titled "Fact," which states: "All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate." You have found many things in this book that are not accurate by any means. What are the foundations of these errors? What are their dangers?

Olson: The widespread acceptance of most of Brown's claims is rather amazing, especially since many of them won't even pass what we call the "desk encyclopedia test."

For instance, the novel states Leonardo da Vinci's "The Virgin of the Rocks," which in the Louvre, is "a five-foot-tall canvas," even though a quick check on the Internet or in an encyclopedia shows that it is actually six-and-a-half feet in height.

Normally, this sort of detail could be chalked up to artistic license. But Brown's insistence that his depictions of artwork are accurate -- and that his wife is an art historian -- indicates that he is not being careful with the truth.

This becomes a far more serious problem when he makes claims that prior to the Council of Nicaea no one believed that Jesus was divine, that the Catholic Church burned 5 million women at the stake in the medieval era and that all of Christianity's major beliefs have been stolen from pagan religions.

These sorts of assertions appear to be based in a sincere dislike of the Catholic Church -- the novel never mentions Protestantism or Eastern Orthodoxy -- and in a desire to challenge accepted understandings of events, persons and beliefs.

The danger is that many readers are apparently taking the novel's claims as substantiated fact and believe they have discovered the Church's Achilles' heel.

This becomes even more difficult when those people won't even consider rebuttals or answers to "The Da Vinci Code." There again is the appeal of a supposedly secret insight: once a person has it, they don't think they need to consider arguments or facts to the contrary.

Q: Why do you think that so many people, including Christians, are attracted to this book?

Olson: The novel mixes together elements that are quite appealing within a postmodern culture: a relativistic attitude toward truth and religion, conspiracy-based claims, radical feminism, dislike for religious authority and the implicit belief that reality is malleable and can be customized, so to speak, to each person's wishes.

However, the book is based on a standard formula used for romance novels, and despite all of its talk of bizarre sex rituals and androgyny it has a fairly traditional love story at its core.

Another factor is that the novel reads much like a made-for-television movie script, with short chapters, curt conversations, little character development and sparsely constructed backdrops.

There is an overwhelming emphasis on the characters' emotions. So while the novel contains claims that might be strange to readers, it maintains a certain comfort level as well.

Q: Although "The Da Vinci Code" is clearly a novel, it has provoked many in the media and the general public to put in doubt the veracity of the Gospels and elements of Church teaching. Is contemporary society losing the ability to distinguish between pop culture and reality?

Olson: Sadly, for some people, pop culture is reality -- or at least the only means by which they will interact and cope with reality.

It's not that all of pop culture is bad or that pop culture doesn't have some good to offer. But pop culture is largely based on providing people with what they want to hear or see or feel, regardless of its truthfulness.

It also simplifies and sensationalizes topics that are complex and demand careful study. And since much of pop culture is a youthful, rock 'n' roll culture, it thrives on challenging authority and accepted ideas, often without any reason except for the thrill of rebellion.

However, it should be noted that many of the key ideas in "The Da Vinci Code" first came into prominence in the realm of higher education, including the challenges to the content and dating of the Gospels, as well as challenges to Church teaching on a host of issues.

This is also the case with the radical feminist messages in the novel. They have been popular in universities and colleges for decades, but the novel has put them into a fictional format that millions, not just a few hundred, will absorb.

Q: How can the Church and its members dispel the myths of "The Da Vinci Code"?

Olson: There has to be recognition that novels such as "The Da Vinci Code" are not "just fiction." They are means for conveying ideas and beliefs to large groups of people, often without readers fully appreciating what they are consuming.

My interest is not in telling people to not read the novel, but to encourage them to analyze and carefully assess what it is saying and to consider why it was written.

The errors and false ideas of the novel need to be addressed point by point. Our book does that in great detail. While refutation is invaluable, solid catechesis is just as important.

It shouldn't take an advanced degree or decades of study to recognize the factual and logical problems that are strewn throughout "The Da Vinci Code." Good catechesis will go a long way in inoculating Catholics to error and provide them with an understanding of Church doctrine, practice and history.

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