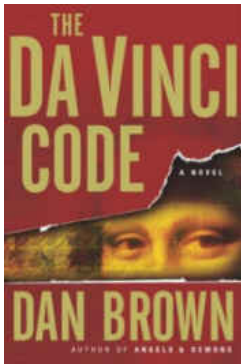




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## The Cardinal and the Code The Truth Behind "The Da Vinci Code"

by CARL E. OLSON



Don't count among the many fans of *The Da Vinci Code*.

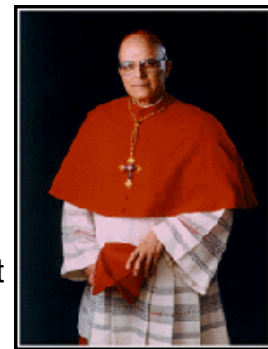
In his Dec. 7 column for *Catholic New World*, the newspaper of the Archdiocese of Chicago, Cardinal George addressed the popularity of the novel, which has been a publishing phenomenon since appearing in April 2003.

He wrote, "The Church through the ages bumps into a lot of words about Jesus that are untrue at best and demonic nonsense at worst [*The Da Vinci Code* is] evidence of what happens when stories about Jesus stem from imaginative reinterpretation of some document, historical or fictitious, rather than from the authentic witness to Christ given by the Church that Christ himself founded to speak the truth about him until he returns in glory."

### Just a Novel?

If Dan Brown's novel is just an entertaining work of fiction, as many fans insist, why is the cardinal so concerned? His response, given in an interview in the *Chicago Sun-Times* (Jan. 9), is blunt: "I resent the book, because it does undermine people's faith."

He explains that he read the book not for entertainment but out of pastoral concern. What he found was a clever work that attacks central teachings of the Catholic Church.



"*The Da Vinci Code* has the advantage of explaining Jesus in terms that seem sensible to many," he wrote in his December column, "by playing on ever-popular biases against the Catholic Church and advancing an esoteric form of feminism. For the price of one book, you get two theories that pander to prejudices today."

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Although those theories and others in the novel have been around for years, they have benefited tremendously from *The Da Vinci Code's* success.

Published in April 2003 by Doubleday, Brown's fourth novel debuted at No. 1 on the *New York Times* best-seller list. Today, more than 40 weeks after its publication, it still tops that best-seller list, there are more than 5.5 million copies in print, and it is being translated into 40 languages.

Described by the *Times* as a "riddle-filled, code-breaking, exhilaratingly brainy thriller," the novel garnered effusive reviews. *The Library Journal* raved, "This masterpiece should be mandatory reading" and the *Chicago Tribune* marveled that it supposedly contained "several doctorates' worth of fascinating history and learned speculation."

Critics noted how "smart," "intelligent" and well-researched the novel appeared to be, a point that surely pleased the author, who insists his thriller is thoroughly researched and factual in all respects. In addition, the novel features an opening page titled "Fact," stating: "All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate."

The immense success of *The Da Vinci Code* and its bombastic claims about Jesus, Mary Magdalene and the Catholic Church have resulted in substantial controversy, even among Catholics. One agitated reader recently wrote to me, saying:

"I own a Catholic bookstore. We are getting bombarded daily by people who are buying into the garbage in this book. You cannot believe how many people have been exposed to this book. We even had an elderly aunt talking about Opus Dei tonight and yelling at us that the book is true or it couldn't be printed."



Another Catholic openly admitted that *The Da Vinci Code* has raised doubts in his mind

"Honestly, [reading the book] shook my whole faith. I realize that the book is fiction, but much of what he wrote about seemed like it was based on historical facts aside from the characters. If Christianity is nothing more than a big accommodation, it becomes relegated to a lifestyle choice and not a religion, which I do not want to believe."



Sadly, this sort of confusion highlights the generally poor state of catechesis and religious education among Catholics. A doctorate should not be required to know that the New Testament and the early Church did believe that Jesus was divine, that Jesus was not divinized by the Emperor Constantine and that the so-called "gnostic gospels" were written much later than the canonical Gospels, are full of spurious nonsense and are about as historical as a Looney Tunes episode. In fact, it is difficult to find much in the novel that is accurate, it is so filled with misinformation and baseless claims.

Although readers might not know much about early Christological controversies, medieval history or Renaissance art, the novel's glaring internal flaws should stand out.

The book is a mess of contradictions. It contains lectures about the silliness of religion but advocates goddess worship and depicts the main character entering an ecstatic state at the alleged grave of Mary Magdalene. Jesus is said to be a "mortal prophet" but is still important enough to marry the goddess Mary Magdalene, apparently because she needed a male to elevate her to a position of leadership. Readers are told that nobody believed Jesus was divine until the Emperor Constantine "made" him God in 325 A.D., even though Constantine is presented as a lifelong pagan with no interest in the Christian God.

Leonardo da Vinci is described as a modern man of reason and science who is oddly devoted to "the darker arts," hidden messages and goddess worship. Brown also claims da Vinci lived in constant fear of being persecuted and killed by the Church but also states this didn't stop the artist from living the lavish life of a "flamboyant homosexual," hardly a good way to avoid negative attention.

### **The Facts**

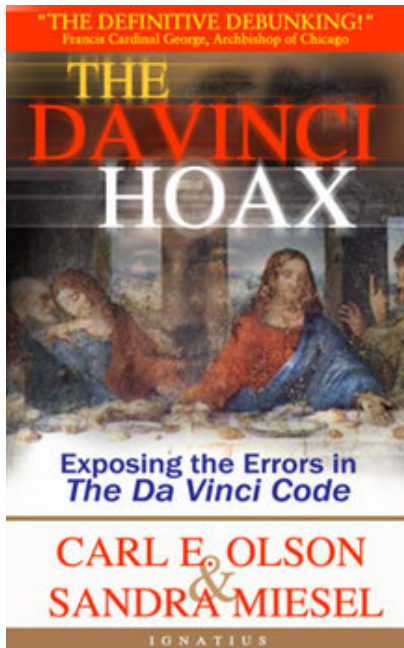
The facts - *or lack of them* - are important and should be addressed, but the greatest danger of *The Da Vinci Code* is that it reinforces relativistic, irrational attitudes by pretending to satisfy the mind while manipulating emotions.

In his *Touchstone* article "Fantasy Faith," (November 2003), Dr. James Hitchcock notes, "Millions of people read *The Da Vinci Code* not because they necessarily believe its absurd story but because it creates a myth that serves certain emotional needs and allows them to be 'religious without submitting to any of the demands of faith.'"



This is evident in remarks made by the main character, Robert Langdon, who talks about "faith" as being built upon "fabrication" and beliefs for which no proof exists. Such notions have an obvious appeal and they free people from any sense of obligation or discipline, allowing them to perceive reality as they wish, according to their self-absorbed desires.

Equally appealing is the novel's implicit promise of secret knowledge. Readers' comments bear out how thrilled they are to "discover" an abundance of hidden truth in *The Da Vinci Code*. The novel offers secret insights and an alternative view of history open to those daring enough to believe and to risk going against oppressive institutions and faceless authority figures. Having read the book, readers feel they have been initiated into a forbidden, dangerous world where the truth behind the façade called Catholicism is revealed in all of its shocking ugliness.



The main reason for the book's popularity, states Philip Jenkins, professor of history and religious studies at Pennsylvania State University, is "a fundamental suspicion of traditional claims to authority, where they conflict with contemporary ideas and standards, especially over sex and gender. It mainly illustrates a broader suspicion about orthodoxy generally and the idea that the truth is out there" (Gary Stern, "Unraveling the Myth," *Gannett News Service*, Dec. 27, 2003).

Catholics enamored with *The Da Vinci Code* or who think it is harmless entertainment should reconsider the impact of the novel and re-examine its claims that Christianity has been a long, bloody lie based on the dark aspirations of a murderous, male-dominated Church. And then they should seriously ponder the question put forth by Cardinal George: "If

Jesus is only what is presented in *The Da Vinci Code*, why should we even care?"

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Carl E. Olson is editor of *Envoy* magazine and author of *Will Catholics Be 'Left Behind'?* His website is <http://www.carl-olson.com>.

*The Da Vinci Hoax: Exposing the Errors in The Da Vinci Code*, by Carl Olson and Sandra Miesel, available in June from Ignatius Press. Forward written by Cardinal George who describes *The Da Vinci Hoax: Exposing the Errors in The Da Vinci Code* as "the definitive debunking" of Brown's novel!