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A Catholic Reflects on Faith in Our T

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Angels and Demons

The *Da Vinci Code* stirred more controversy and sold more copies, but *Angels and Demons* is the better book, and a better movie.

I first read *Angels and Demons* in 2001, before *Da Vinci* made headlines. After seeing the movie last week, I read it again. It resembles *Da Vinci* in its turgid prose and tin-eared, preachy dialogue, but there's more action and less talk. The difference shows on screen, where characters spend more time moving instead of just spouting lectures. Movie director Ron Howard could skip his dubious *Da Vinci* remedy, resorting to sepia-toned faux-historical flashbacks to illustrate the cringe-worthy lectures.

But *Da Vinci* earned its notoriety. The myth of a lost "feminine" Christianity appealed to millions, and the theme of re-starting Christianity fresh after twenty corrupt centuries proved too sexy to resist.

Angels and Demons plays a different, less sexy theme: the conflict between science and religion (specifically, between cosmology and Catholicism). But it uses the same instruments: a withering but well-whisked blend of fact, history, twisted tales, misinformation, anachronisms, and downright fabrications.

The sheer weight of details creates a sense of documented history, so readers/viewers might mistake the far-fetched fable for a true description of Catholicism, much as many mistook *The Godfather* for a mafia portrait or saw *Citizen Kane* for a Hearst biopic. In his power to persuade the gullible, Brown is heir to the Orson Welles who broadcast *War of the Worlds*.

So *Angels and Demons* has naturally provoked reactions (Amazon offers at least six books of analysis). With the movie on our screens and the DVD due within weeks, Catholics may need to wade through this story too, to separate

Brown's fiction from the facts. I find four areas worth unpacking.

Religion Against Science: The book claims science and religion have conflicted "since the beginning of history." Of course, neither modern science nor Christianity is that old; Brown actually dates the conflict from Copernicus's "*heliocentrism*": his 1543 claim that the earth revolves around the sun, not vice-versa.

Angels' leading scientist claims Copernicus was "murdered" for his views, but historians say Copernicus died from a stroke. He was, in fact, a Church cleric with a doctorate in canon law who had already presented his theory to Pope Clement VII, passed his treatise to Bishop Giese for printing, and dedicated it to Pope Paul III.

Copernicus was wary his new worldview would provoke scientists as well as churchmen. Indeed, while Martin Luther rejected heliocentrism because "Joshua commanded the sun to stand still and not the earth," astronomer Tyco Brahe also opposed it because the stars "appear" fixed in the sky!

Yes, a century later Galileo suffered house arrest for promoting heliocentrism, and it took the Catholic Church 400 years to apologize. And scientist Giordano Bruno *was* burned at the stake for heresy—but not for scientific ideas about an alien-filled, infinite universe. Bruno was a Dominican priest condemned for promoting magic while denying Jesus' divinity and suggesting Jesus deserved to be crucified.

The book presents modern conflict between the Vatican and the Swiss nuclear physics lab CERN. But CERN's chief scientist recently rejected the book's claims about CERN's scientists:

The point of view represented by the head of CERN in the book was very popular in the 1950s and 60s. Not for the first time people believed then that science was close to completion; that technology would save the world...For sure there are many people working at CERN who believe in God and their work actually confirms their convictions. There are also those who do not believe in God but believe in science...I am sure that science does not contradict faith. One person may say that he studies the laws of nature, another one that he wishes to understand how God initiated

or created our world. In my opinion it is the same. Both are doing the same even if they believe in different things.

And Vatican Cardinal Giovanni Lajolo recently visited CERN, where he told the AP:

The Church never fears the truth of science, because we are convinced that all truth comes from God ... Science will help our faith to purify itself. And faith at the same time will be able to broaden the horizons of man, who cannot just enclose himself in the horizons of science.

In fact, as Brown himself admits, it was a Belgian priest, physicist Joseph Lemaitre, who first conceived the "big bang theory" now regarded as key to understanding the origin of the universe.

Papal Conclaves: The plot of *Angels and Demons* unfolds during a papal conclave, where Brown gets a lot of facts wrong.

Brown calls the papal conclave (which elects popes) "one of the oldest traditions in Christendom," though it dates from the twelfth century -- less than half of Christian history.

He claims that "unwritten" rules require the conclave elect a pope between 65 and 80, and one 79-year-old character is "too old." In fact the book came out under John-Paul II, elected at 58, and the movie is out under Benedict XVI, elected at 79.

Brown claims that conclave is not a real election. The outcome is known before, since certain cardinals are "*preferiti*," preferred candidates whose election is near certain. The real term is *papabile*, "able to become pope"-- but in the 1959 and 1978 the *papabile* list never included the men elected: John XXIII and John Paul II.

Brown heightens tension with all-night balloting, but the conclave allows two morning ballots, two afternoon ballots -- and adjourns for the evening. He diminishes the conclave's media coverage by depicting CNN's infrequent sound-bites, when in fact cable news stations covered the 2005 conclave live and nearly round-the-clock.

Brown depicts a "*camerlengo*" (Pope's chamberlain) not eligible to vote or to be elected. Actually Paul VI abolished the position; there is a "Chamberlain of the Vatican," a

cardinal who *is* eligible *and* votes. Brown also depicts a "Great Elector" who runs the conclave but is ineligible. But no such position exists. The conclave is run by the Dean of the College of Cardinals. In 2005, the Dean was Joseph Ratzinger -- the man elected Pope Benedict XVI! The book claims only cardinals are eligible, but in fact *any* Catholic man can be elected Pope (even a layman, who must be ordained priest and bishop before installation).

General History: Brown uses "history" to hook unwary readers. His villains -- the fanatical "*Illuminati*" depicted plotting Galileo's revenge under the direction of sculptor Bernini -- were actually founded a century later. "*La Purga*," when the Church slaughtered four *Illuminati* members, never happened.

Holy Communion couldn't be "borrowed from the Aztecs"—1200 years before Aztec history began.

The Christian God is not "always pictured" as Zeus-like; other images in Christian art are Christ, the "hand of God", the dove to depict the Holy Spirit, the triangle symbolizing the Trinity.

"God grant me strength to accept those things I cannot change" is not the "Prayer of St. Francis" (Reinhold Niebuhr wrote it).

Besides Church history, there are random secular clunkers. Scientists couldn't debate the "big bang" in 1918, since it first appeared in 1927. The dollar bill's pyramid was created, not by FDR's Vice President, but by founding father Charles Thompson in 1782, and Brown miss-translates the motto. The word "Satan" comes from Hebrew, not Arabic. Winston Churchill was not Catholic.

Geography: My 2006 *Da Vinci* lectures mapped the bogus geography Brown needed to refit the city of Paris to his story. Happily *Angels and Demons* is kinder to Rome, keeping the key monuments, churches, and squares where they belong—he even supplies maps.

But one map-point is off. As part of the religion/science conflict, Brown describes the day when "Harvard Divinity School marched on" Harvard's biology labs to protest their research.

As a former student and teacher, I should set the record straight. Harvard's biology labs face the rear of the Divinity School's Divinity Hall, separated by a volleyball court. Aside from the fact that no such protest ever occurred, any "march" organized by the Divinity School would run out of quad space before it took the first step!

All in all, we can count the *Angels and Demons* as entertaining but confusing fiction, precisely because (like *Da Vinci*) its fiction comes camouflaged as fact.

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