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**Starting from the Beginning**

In Dan Brown’s novel, *Origins*, history is used to explain battle between two of the largest forces on earth: science and religion. In the novel, one of the protagonists, Edmond Kirsch, claims that he successfully found the answers to humanity’s biggest questions: where do we come from and where are we going? Many world religions and scientists have attempted to answer these questions for centuries. In trying to answer the same questions, science and religion have found themselves at a crossroads that has led to severe conflict. According to Kirsch, these answers will have serious implications on the future of religion and the emergence of science in our understanding of human existence. To understand the context of the conflict between science and religion, Brown provides the history between these two major forces throughout the centuries. In reality, humanity’s two biggest questions have yet to be confidently answered by science or religion, so Brown must use science’s current understanding of these questions and create fictional implications in order to come up with a seemingly plausible answer. In presenting the history of both science’s battle with religion and technology’s advancements, Brown distorts their true impact in order to enhance the excitement of his fictional plotline.

Brown presents the historic battle of science versus religion to give context to their success with answering human kind’s two biggest questions. In the novel, Kirsch begins his presentation by stating how religion has merely been used throughout history to fill the gaps in our understanding, calling it the “God of the Gaps”. Langdon states “when the ancients experienced gaps in their understanding of the world around them, they filled those gaps with God… As the gaps in our understanding of the natural world gradually disappeared, our pantheon of gods began to shrink” (Brown, Origins, 83). Kirsch uses this to argue that as humans continue to get smarter, science is going to replace religion as our form of understanding the world around us. The problem with that change from religion to science, as Langdon points out, is that “spiritual beliefs are etched deeply on our psyches at a young age by those we love and trust most – our parents, our teachers, our religious leaders. Therefore, any religious shifts occur over generations, and not without great angst, and often bloodshed” (83). This means that violence is usually synonymous with widespread change. Brown includes multiple references to scientists whose groundbreaking discoveries were shadowed by religions like the Catholic Church’s oppression. This is seen when Kirsch states that famous scientists who made groundbreaking scientific discoveries, such as Charles Darwin and Nicholas Copernicus, faced violent oppression for their discoveries. Though Kirsch claims that outspoken scientists like Copernicus found death at the hands of the Church (A&D, Brown, 39), in reality Copernicus actually died of a stroke (Burstein, 339-40). So while there was backlash from the Catholic Church against famous scientists, Brown distorts the church’s impact on science in order to exaggerate the conflict between science and religion.

Following Brown’s theme of presenting a religious cult, Brown presents the Palmarian Church and its relation to the Franco symbol as a motive in fueling Admiral Luis Ávila’s murder of Edmond Kirsch. According to Brown, the Palmarian Church is a small offshoot of the Catholic Church that still practices far-right values. It was founded by Clemente Dominquez Gómez in response to the Catholic Church’s continuously more liberal-minded changes (Brown, Origin). Though this historical presentation of their founding is factual, their history with the Franco symbol seems misguided (Lundberg). Brown claims that the Palmarian Church has the ability to release their followers from prison after being arrested. Brown states that “if [Ávila] was captured, the Regent assured, all he had to do was make his palm visible to his captors, and within hours, he would be released (Origins, 62). On his palm is the symbol of Franco, which is used to represent the ultraconservative dictatorship of General Francisco Franco. Brown claims that he was a brutal dictator who advocated for “nationalism, authoritarianism, militarism, antiliberalism, and National Catholicism. Risen to power through military support of Nazi Germany and Mussolini’s Italy. During the Civil War and well into the first years of dictatorship, those who dared oppose him disappeared into concentration camps” (Brown, Origins, 169). While there are “very few scholarly studies and virtually no English-language literature on the Palmarian Church” (Lundberg, 42), there was no evidence that the Franco symbol has any relation to the Palmarian Church or that it has the power to release a Palmarian member from prison (Politico). While Brown accurately includes historical references of the Palmarian Church and the symbol of Franco, Brown exaggerates their influence is society in order to make his plotline more exciting to the audience.

Brown discusses the historical significance of the Miller-Urey experiment in order to come to a conclusion about the origins of life. In the novel, Brown depicts the Miller-Urey experiment as an attempt of scientist Stanley-Miller in 1953 to create life from inorganic matter. He combined a series of electrical charges “through a flask of a chemical solution of methane, ammonia, hydrogen and water” (PBS). The results found several organic amino acids that formed from those inorganic raw materials. Though amino acids are the building blocks of life, they are not necessarily life itself. Brown claims that these results failed to prove the origins of life, as there must have been a crucial step that turned atoms into organisms. In the novel, Kirsch uses Miller’s failure and runs a simulation through a supercomputer to discover that after thousands of years of virtual simulations, life does in fact grow from the flask. The idea of a supercomputer that can process the reactions of trillions of atoms and simulate over thousands of years is obviously fictional. Though artificial intelligence has been rapidly advancing, technology today is still nowhere close to being able to process that much information in order to help Kirsch discover the origins of life, and later answer the question of where we are going. Brown continues the theme of taking factual history, in this case of the Miller-Urey experiment, and exaggerating its true impact to drive his plotline.

While the history in the novels *Origin* and *Angels & Demons* are distorted to drive their respective plotline, *Angels & Demons*’ specific historical references are centered on religion while *Origin’s* history is centered on science. In both novels, the historical references are true in the sense that the events and groups mentioned existed at some point in history; however, Brown exaggerates their true impact to the plotline to advance his fictional story. For example, in *Angels & Demons* Brown creates a conspiracy that Illuminati members have penetrated the rankings of the Catholic Church in order to ultimately cause their demise. He creates this conflict by stating that Illuminati members were arrested, tortured, and murdered by the church. There is, however, no evidence of physical conflict between Illuminati and Church. While there were Illuminatist who “were arrested in 1780s… they were arrested not by church authorities, but by governments. As for terrorist response to oppression, the Illuminati didn’t develop one” (Burnstein, 135). While Brown claims that the Illuminati have had century-long conflicts with the Catholic Church, there is no historic evidence that supports his claim. Similarly in *Origin*, the antagonist Avila gets a tattoo of the Francoist symbol on his palm. In the book, Brown distorts the history of the Francoist symbol by claiming that if Avila showed that tattoo to any officer who arrested him, he would shortly be released. This idea has no factual basis to it (Politico). Distortions to historical references are numerous in both novels and play an important role in making the fictional plotline believable to the reader.

While the novels are similar in that the implications of historical references are distorted in both books, the actual history referenced is very different. *Angels & Demons’* plot revolves around the battle between two historically mortal enemies: the Catholic Church and the Illuminati. Most of the historical references Brown includes relate to the Catholic Church and how it relates to the Illuminati. In *Origin*, one of the only historical references referring to the church is in describing the Palmarian church. Other than that, most historical references focus on recent advances in technology that allowed Edmond Kirsch to ultimately answer the two big questions of our generation. These contrasts between the historical references of *Angels & Demons* and *Origin* align very similarly with *The Da Vinci Code*.

In *The Da Vinci Code* and *Origin*, both of the novels’ historical references are distorted to influence the reader into believing Brown’s fictional plotline. To make Brown’s plot more believable in *Da Vinci Code*, Landon tactically states that most of our modern interpretations of the historical references mentioned have become distorted over the past several millennia. This makes Brown’s personal interpretation of the facts appear more believable to the reader. In the movie, for example, Langdon explains that the image of “The devil’s pitchfork” is really Poseidon’s trident, and the “Madonna and child” sculpture actually depicts the Pagan God Horus and his mother Isis, which appeared centuries before its modern-day interpretation. Brown uses this tactic to ultimately lead the reader to believe that the Holy Grail is not a chalice, which is what many believe today, but Mary Magdalene and her royal bloodline (Brown, DVC, 244). Since many readers assume that our interpretation of Christianity has likely morphed over the years as Brown states in the book, it is easy to believe these fictional implications of the facts.

While *Da Vinci Code* is similar to *Angels & Demons* in the sense that the historical references revolve around a secret group, in this case the Opus Dei, and their historic struggle within the Catholic Church, *Origin* is very different. In *Origin*, the struggle is between a single fictional character, Edmond Kirsch. Brown does not have the ability to distort history so that the reader believes there is a plausible conflict between one person and the religions of the world. Instead, the historic struggles Brown mentions are not two groups, but two ideas: religion and science. While both novels discuss the historic struggles between two things, the nature of the struggles differ greatly.

The type of historical references in *The* *Lost Symbol* splits drastically from the previous novels in that its focuses on the Masons instead of the Catholic Church, but still continues the theme of distorting historical facts to fit into Brown’s fictional plotline. In the *Lost Symbol*, the plot develops around Peter Solomon, a Freemason, and the secrets of his group. The Masons are a secret fraternal organization that had nothing to do with the Catholic Church (Freemason). In fact, the Catholic Church had a long history of objection to Freemasonry “based on the allegation that Masonry teaches a naturalistic deistic religion which conflicts with Church doctrine” (Freemason). For that reason, much of the history cited refers to secrets of the Masons and mentions very little of the Catholic Church, which is very different from *Angels & Demons* and *DaVinci Code*. One of the only other times Christianity is brought up is when Solomon shows Langdon the Ancient Mysteries, explaining that the Mysteries were actually a copy of the Bible buried in the capstone of the Washington Monument. Unlike *Origin*, *The* *Lost Symbol* only really contains one historical reference to science. Solomon’s sister, Katherine, is working on Noetic science, which “focuses on bringing a scientific lens to the study of… the ways that consciousness may influence the physical world” (Huffington Post). Instead, the historical references continue the theme of secret organizations as with Brown’s other novels.

Brown’s distortion of historical fact and fiction in the *Lost Symbol* aligns closely that in *Angels & Demons*. This is because the Masonic organization contained as much secrecy in their history as the Illuminati. Playing on people’s lack of knowledge on the subject of these secret organizations, Brown was easily able to make his own interpretations of these organizations and relate them to his plotline. This is seen in *The* *Lost Symbol* when Brown makes the argument that the Masons are hiding the Ancient Mysteries, also known as the Lost Word, in the Masonic Pyramid. The secrets that this pyramid contains could supposedly change life as we know it. Though the Masons are a real organization, there is no evidence that they contain any higher knowledge that they are hiding from the rest of mankind (Handwerk). By playing off the reader’s lack of knowledge, Brown is able to twist convincing historical references to make the reader believe that there are hidden secrets held by the Freemasons.

By the novel *Inferno*, Brown’s historical references completely shifts focus from Christianity and move to science, but still continues the theme of distorting historical “facts”. By Brown’s fourth novel, he seems to have exhausted the prospect of a mystery or secret behind the Catholic Church. While Brown’s previous plotlines were focused on the Catholic Church’s distorted history with Mary Magdalene and the Illuminati, Christianity as a whole appears to be secondary to *Inferno*, similar to *The Lost Symbol*. While it is true that the central historical reference to Dante’s *Inferno* is about sin and hell, two Christian terms, there is very little interaction with the Catholic Church itself. The history, instead, focuses more on the ethics of science based on scientific data and philosophical theories rather than the mysteries of the Catholic Church. For example, the history of Transhumanism is referenced to explain why the villain, Bertrand Zobrist’s, desires to make a portion of the human species infertile. Transhumanism is the intellectual movement aiming to have an ongoing improvement of the human species (Brown, I). Dan then uses this philosophy and a number of scientific historical references to make an argument for infertility. He references multiple modern historical sources like the Population Apocalypse Equation that argues that we are approaching the upper limit of people that the earth can sustain (Beyer, 22/7). Additionally, the Principle of Population predicts on the basis of ever growing population the inevitable onset of poverty and famine in a world incapable of sustaining that uncontrolled growth (Beyer, 22/7). To solve this problem, Zobrist’s proposed solution to overpopulation relies on modern technology, a vector virus, which relies on historical research documented by the biologists Fouchier and Yoshihiro Kawaoka (Beyer, 22/7). So much of the historical references are used to further and argument rather than create a fictional conflict between a secret society and the Catholic Church.

In many of these historical references, Brown continues his theme of distorting their true impact in order to make the arguments and plotline more convincing.

This is seen when Brown distorts historical facts about overpopulation and the Black Death in order to create a realistic argument for sterilization. The book claims that the Renaissance followed the Black Death to prove that death is followed by birth and justifies Zobrist’s desire for mass human sterilization, but that claim is simply not true (Brown, I). One of the most major epidemics of the Black Death, The Great Pestilence, occurred after the Renaissance had already begun (Charney). In addition, Brown’s claims on the overpopulation epidemic is grossly misstated. Zobrist claims that historical records show our population to have been growing exponentially ever since we have been on this earth, and by the mid 21st century we will have a widespread food-shortage among other things due to overpopulation (Brown, I). When comparing the world population from 1750 to today, one can clearly see that the population reached an inflection point in 1999 (Exponential Growth). Brown’s loosely based “facts” deceive the reader into reading a persuasive argument on the need for sterilization and contribute the excitement of his plot.

The novel *Origins* continues Brown’s shift in trend to emphasize the history of science over religion. As seen in the progression of Brown’s novels, Brown gradually made a shift from focusing on the history of the Catholic Church to the history of technology. In *Angels & Demons* and *Da Vinci Code*, the historic mysterious surrounding the Catholic Church were the basis for the novels’ plotlines. In *The Lost Symbol*, the historic emphasize shifted slightly away from the Catholic Church and more toward the Freemasons. In *Inferno* and finally *Origins*, the historical references were almost entirely focuses on science and technology.

While the historic references gradually shifted throughout Brown’s novels, he continued to incorporate a secret organization in each novel and distort its history to contribute to the storyline. In each novel, a secret organization is incorporated into the novels in order to add mystery to the book. Since most readers are unfamiliar with the history surrounding secret organizations, such as the Opus Dei, Illuminati, and Palmarian Church, the Brown’s historical references easily appear factual. This gives Brown the ability to distort fact from fiction regarding these organizations in a way that will contribute to the excitement and mystery of the novels.

In *Origins*, history is used as a way to answers humanity’s biggest questions. In doing so, Brown must present the reader with context to the battle between two of the largest forces on earth: science and religion. He does this because many world religions and scientists have attempted to answer these questions for centuries, but none has succeeded. In order to successfully find the answers, Brown relies on distorting the historical facts based on technology and science’s current understanding of these questions. In presenting the history of both science’s battle with religion and technology’s advancements, Brown presents answers to the two questions, and if true, the answers would surely have serious implications on the future of religion and the emergence of science in our understanding of human existence.

Though the type of historical references might change throughout Brown’s novels, history is used in all of the novels as a vehicle to drive Brown’s plausible and thoughtprovoking conclusions. The history Brown references requires careful consideration before it can be deemed as fact. Through Brown’s uncanny ability to blend fact and fiction into a gripping novel, he is able to leave the reader questioning what is really true.

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