Maja Cannavo

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**Organizations in Dan Brown’s *Origin***

As in his other Robert Langdon novels, in *Origin* Dan Brown employs a mysterious and controversial organization in order to add intrigue to the plot and spark readers’ imaginations. Following his pattern of exploring religious groups, specifically Catholic ones, he discusses the Palmarian Church in *Origin*, using the organization as Admiral Luis Ávila’s inspiration for a series of murders. Even a Catholic cult inspiring murder is not a new phenomenon in Brown’s work; Ávila’s relationship with the Regent is highly reminiscent of Silas’s relationship with the Teacher in *The Da Vinci Code*. Once again, Brown capitalizes on the mysterious allure of a little-known Catholic sect to fascinate his readers and drive his plot. This time, however, Brown stays relatively faithful to the truth (at least to the degree it is available) about the Palmarian Church, without even claiming to do so.

In *Origin*, Brown describes the Palmarian Church as a small offshoot of the Catholic Church, with its own pope, that was founded by one Clemente Domínguez y Gómez in response to the Virgin Mary’s claim that the mainstream Catholic Church was misguided and guilty of heresy.[[1]](#endnote-2) This is in fact the true story of its founding.[[2]](#endnote-3) Brown declines to go into detail about the origins of the organization. However, he does employ the fictional website ConspiracyNet.com to insinuate claims about the Palmarians. In the novel, ConspiracyNet encourages its readers to investigate various “‘facts’” given by monte@iglesia.org (which turns out to be Winston) regarding the Palmarians (O, LXVIII, 304-5). ConspiracyNet’s request is interesting because it asks readers to seek out the line between fact and fiction in its posts. Brown tends to indirectly discourage his readers from fact-finding with regard to his books by providing them with a “Fact” page at the beginning of the novels defending the books’ “art, architecture, locations, science, and religious organizations” (O, 3), or some variation therein, as “real.” Although Brown generally declines to claim that his *portrayals* of organizations are accurate, his wording on the “Fact” page does not inspire the casual reader to question the truthfulness of his depictions (even though his novels are clearly works of fiction). In *Origin*, Brown pushes his readers to question facts instead of glossing over egregious inaccuracies.

Little scholarly work exists on the subject of the Palmarian Church. According to expert Magnus Lundberg of Uppsala University in Sweden, “There are very few scholarly studies and virtually no English-language literature on the Palmarian Church. To the best of my knowledge, no academic work has followed the movement from its inception until today” (Lundberg, 42). A blog (<http://thepalmarianchurch.blogspot.com)> and a Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/palmarianchurchiglesiapalmariana/)> both exist for the Palmarians, but they are not particularly professional in appearance, and it is unclear who created them and for what purpose. In order to combat this lack of documentation, Lundberg wrote an article that “fills a void in the research on new religious movements with roots in Roman Catholic tradition” (Lundberg, 42). Given the lack of information available on the Palmarians, I am forced to rely heavily on Lundberg’s work; perhaps Brown found himself in a similar position. However, given the difficulty of gathering accurate information about the group in the absence of scholarly work – Lundberg acknowledges that he had to rely in part on “sensationalist” books about the Palmarians (Lundberg, 42). The facts remain relatively ambiguous even with such a comprehensive resource at hand. This makes the organization a good candidate for Brown to use in his book, as it is difficult to claim that he strays far from the truth when the truth is so uncertain.

Even so, the origins of the Palmarian Church are fairly sure: various people began having visions of the Virgin Mary in Palmar de Troya, Spain, near Seville, in the late 1960s (Lundberg, 43). These Marian apparitions allegedly first came to four girls there on March 30, 1968, and over the next year and a half, the Virgin Mary appeared to more and more people (Lundberg, 43). Prominent among these individuals was Domínguez, an unemployed Seville insurance clerk who made nearly daily pilgrimages to Palmar de Troya and claimed to receive messages from Mary as well as other Catholic religious figures (Lundberg, 43-4). These messages at first held goodwill, but Mary later began to indict the Catholic Church for heresy, in 1971 claiming, “‘Communism and Freemasonry are preparing to make a decisive thrust and Marxism will usurp the church and sit on the throne’” (Lundberg, 44). These accusations formed the basis for the Palmarian Church to distinguish itself as the true bastion of Catholicism and the wishes of the Virgin Mary.

At first, the Palmarians existed within the Catholic Church, but a growing divergence between the two institutions culminated in Domínguez’ alleged divine appointment by Christ to the papacy as Pope Gregory XVII upon the death of Pope Paul VI on August 6, 1978 (Lundberg, 47). Accordingly, Christ also informed Domínguez that the Holy See had relocated from Rome to Palmar de Troya (Lundberg, 48). Palmarians see themselves as part of the true Catholic Church; as Ávila’s physical therapist and mentor Marco puts it, “‘I’m just a devout Catholic who believes that Rome has gone astray’” (O, XLVIII, 214). This viewpoint is key in Ávila’s recruitment, as the Palmarians provide him with a conduit through which to avenge his loved ones violently while supposedly performing “God’s work” in the process (O, LVII, 262). Brown conveniently manipulates the image of the Palmarians to suggest that they are capable of such violent acts, but no substantial evidence indicates that this is indeed the case, even though the Palmarians are fairly radical and have become only more so with time.

Over time, strict requirements for membership in the Palmarian Church led to falling membership (Lundberg, 53). On July 20, 1998, Gregory XVII decreed, “‘One cannot have one foot inside the Church and the other outside. One has to have both feet inside the Church’” (Lundberg, 53). Gregory denounced the Christian Bible in favor of a Palmarian Bible published from 1999-2000, and by 2005 Palmarians were required to separate from family members outside the organization and to distance themselves from non-Palmarian colleagues and classmates (Lundberg, 53). They were also now required to spend their entire lives serving the Church and to be willing to die for it if necessary (these duties are known as un-bloody martyrdom and bloody martyrdom, respectively) [Lundberg, 53].[[3]](#endnote-4) ConspiracyNet.com hits many of these main points in its post regarding the “‘facts’” it received from monte@iglesia.org (O, LXVIII, 304-5). These extremely stringent expectations have led Palmarian membership, seen mostly in Palmar de Troya and Dublin, to fall to very low numbers, and excommunication has been rampant.[[4]](#endnote-5) Lundberg estimates that present membership is likely under 1000 (Lundberg, 53). Such low numbers reflect the radical nature of the organization, which could be cited as evidence that it is capable of driving people to murder. However, it would also be surprising for a group founded on such dubious premises, which conflict so clearly with the mainstream Catholic Church, to have any significant number of followers.

The foundations of the Palmarian Church are clearly controversial, and even more shadows have been cast on its authenticity of late. Having recently abdicated the papacy, former Palmarian Pope Gregorio XVIII, or Ginés Jesús Hernández, has accused the organization of being “‘a set-up, particularly a financial one. They’re just using the miracle of the Virgin Mary as a front’” (Martín-Arroyo). According to Hernández, the Palmarians have been involved in various suspect financial dealings, including tax evasion (Martín-Arroyo). One person’s claims can hardly constitute evidence, but they do cast a shadow of doubt and illegitimacy over the organization, as if its basis in Marian visions were not shaky enough. Still, the question remains whether or not the Church is capable, as Brown suggests it is, of driving someone to commit murder.

In *Origin*, Admiral Ávila loses his family in a terrorist attack and descends into a life of alcoholism culminating in a suicide attempt. The influence of the Palmarian Church inspires and empowers him to take back control of his life through the pursuit of revenge. As Brown portrays it, the Palmarian Church condones violence directed toward perpetrators of evil; the Roman Catholic Church, in contrast, stresses forgiveness. Palmarian Pope Innocent XIV explains to Ávila, “‘[E]vil will swallow us whole if we do not fight force with force. We will never conquer evil if our battle cry is “forgiveness”’” (O, LVII, 261). In recent years claims have surfaced that the Palmarian Church has been involved in mysterious deaths of its members. Moreover, it is eminently clear that, as Brown reminds his readers, “[t]he Palmarians are the sworn enemy of the Vatican” (O, LVII, 259). Even so, no evidence exists to prove that the organization espouses murder as a method of justice exaction. Brown stretches the already ambiguous truth about the Palmarians in order to employ the organization in service of his plot – to serve as yet another driver of the science-religion conflict found in many of his books.

As previously mentioned, Brown’s use of the Palmarian Church in *Origin* is a clear continuation of his trend of highlighting secret organizations throughout the Robert Langdon series. In *Angels and Demons*,the first of these novels, Brown weaves an almost completely fabricated account of the legendary Illuminati and exaggerates the conflict between the Catholic Church and Renaissance scientists in order to engage his readers. In *The Da Vinci Code*, Brown paints a highly fictional portrait of the Priory of Sion, a brotherhood dedicated to preserving the bloodline of Christ and Mary Magdalene, and the associated Knights Templar, and depicts rather accurately the controversial policies of Catholic sect Opus Dei. In *The Lost Symbol*,Brown takes a break from religious organizations to shift his focus to a semi-factual portrayal of the Freemasons. In *Inferno*, Brown highlights a company by the name of the Consortium, which allegedly has basis in an undisclosed real-life corporation. Brown’s use of the Palmarian Church in *Origin* perhaps comes closest to his employment of the Priory of Sion in *The Da Vinci Code* – the Palmarians, like the Priory, worship a form of the sacred feminine and believe the mainstream Catholic Church to be misguided.

In *Angels and Demons*, Brown’s selective use of history in his depictions of the Church and the Illuminati deceives his readers by capitalizing on their limited knowledge of these organizations. Despite Brown’s partial use of facts in his portrayal of the Church, he focuses on and exaggerates the negative pieces of the Church’s history, creating a picture of the organization that is loosely factual and quite intriguing but largely inaccurate. At the core of *Angels and Demons* is the conflict between science and religion. In this vein, Brown discusses Galileo’s house arrest by the Church in retribution for his teachings, which did in fact occur.[[5]](#endnote-6) However, he also claims that “‘[o]utspoken scientists like Copernicus’” found death at the hands of the Church (A&D, IX, 39), when Copernicus actually died of a stroke (Burstein and de Keijzer, 339-40). Brown implies that the Catholic Church of the Renaissance was a murderous organization bent on destroying science, just as in *Origin*, he suggests a Catholic sect to be capable of espousing murder. He exaggerates the extent of the Church’s disagreements with scientists for the sake of a more absorbing story that seems plausible to the common reader, a goal also served by his wildly fictitious account of the Illuminati.

Brown capitalizes on the mythical allure of the Illuminati name to mislead his readers through a completely fabricated description of the organization, a far cry from his treatment of the Palmarians in *Origin*. Protagonist Robert Langdon describes the Illuminati as a group of scientists who banded together in 1500s Rome to protect themselves from the Church’s opposition to their activities (A&D, IX, 39-40). However, the Order of the Illuminati was actually founded in Bavaria by professor Adam Weishaupt and not until 1776 (Burstein and de Keijzer, 125, 131). Brown takes advantage of the existence of a Spanish society by the name of the Alumbrados, which translates as “Illuminati,” as early as the Inquisition (Burstein and de Keijzer, 125). The vast majority of readers know little or nothing regarding the true history of the Illuminati, so Brown’s assertions combine with his portrayal of the Catholic Church to paint a convincing yet inaccurate picture of the conflict between science and religion – a theme that returns in *Origin* under a different lens.

The secret societies of Opus Dei, the Priory of Sion, and the Knights Templar all play a major role in *The Da Vinci Code*. Their histories, duties, and customs pique the reader’s interest, and their apparent bases in fact serve to legitimize the novel. Brown describes the nature of Opus Dei fairly accurately (short of the fact that it does not generally espouse murder[[6]](#endnote-7)), but just as he does for the Palmarians, the author weaves a history and description of the Priory that has little sound basis in fact.[[7]](#endnote-8)

Brown’s depiction of Opus Dei, at least to the extent that it can be corroborated by empirical evidence, is strikingly accurate. Brown paints a picture of Opus Dei as a strict religious organization emphasizing self-sacrifice and suffering as a path toward a truly devout life. This is evident in Silas’s experience with the *cilice*: “The spiked *cilice* belt that he wore around his thigh cut into his flesh, and yet his soul sang with satisfaction of service to the Lord. *Pain is good*” (DVC, II, 12). Wearing the *cilice* two hours daily is in fact an expectation for Opus Dei Numeraries, as are other forms of sacrifice, such as fasting and tithing (Lunn, 116). Brown needs not venture far from what is available of the truth to make Opus Dei seem foreboding, mysterious, and fascinating. The case of the Palmarians in *Origin* is very similar; both sects suffer from a dearth of corroborated information, but Brown stays close to the (likely) truth in his depiction of each. Moreover, in *The Da Vinci Code* Silas receives messages from the “Teacher” (who turns out to be Teabing) encouraging him to commit murder in the name of God, just as a mysterious “Regent” (who turns out to be Winston) contacts Àvila, also leading him to kill supposedly for God. In each of these cases, it is actually a force outside the respective Catholic sect that provides the final impetus for Silas or Àvila to commit murder.

Brown’s treatment of the Priory of Sion and the Knights Templar is more questionable than his description of Opus Dei. In *The Da Vinci Code*, Robert Langdon describes the Priory to Sophie Neveu as ‘“one of the oldest surviving secret societies on earth’ ” (DVC, XXIII, 113). In fact, there is no strong evidence to suggest that it ever did or still does exist (Burstein, 163). Moreover, Dan Burstein suggests that the Priory may not have spawned the Knights Templar but instead that it may have actually served the Knights in a small capacity (Burstein, 163).

As for *The Da Vinci Code*’s treatment of the Knights Templar themselves, Brown presumes only that they worked to guard the secret of the Temple of Solomon (despite their ostensible goal of protecting pilgrims to the Holy Land), which Martin Lunn corroborates (DVC, XXXVII, 158; Lunn, 28). Even so, Brown likely errs in suggesting that the Priory was an influential organization that controlled the Knights Templar, as in truth the Knights were quite real, just like the Palmarians, but the Priory remains shrouded in a veil of mystery.

*The Lost Symbol* employs both fact and fiction regarding the Freemasons, taking a society with layers of both secrecy and openness and capitalizing on its rituals and allure. The entire novel rests on the quest for the Masons’ secrets, the key to which is supposedly the Masonic Pyramid. The Masons are not a religious organization, as are the Palmarians in *Origin*, but the society does have a spiritual aspect, as all Masons believe in a higher power, known as The Great Architect of the Universe, and the brotherhood also provides an opportunity for men to explore some of the existential questions that religions seek to address, including some that Edmond Kirsch also addresses in *Origin*, such as “What happens when I die?”[[8]](#endnote-9)

In contrast with the Palmarians, a wealth information is available on the Masons, although a significant portion of it is false (Beyer, 139). As Langdon points out, “Misinformation about the Masons was so commonplace that even educated Harvard students seemed to have surprisingly warped conceptions about the brotherhood” (TLC, VI, 26). However, information even about secret Masonic rituals can be found on the Internet, so Langdon’s claim that “‘the Masons are not a secret society … they are a society with secrets’”[[9]](#endnote-10) is not entirely accurate (Beyer, 135). Although Brown bases his portrayal of the Masons on facts, he does take liberties with the realities of the organization. For instance, Mal’akh participates in “a rather intense ritual” (as described by NBC’s Matt Lauer) involved in ascension to the 33rd degree of Masonry; this involves drinking wine from a skull and taking an oath (Beyer, 140-1). However, the ritual, while performed in the past, no longer takes place today (Beyer, 140-1). Moreover, the Masonic Pyramid, the quest for the secrets of which drives the novel’s plot, does not actually exist (Beyer, 86). As is common for the author, in *The Lost Symbol* Brown bases the story on the facts of Freemasonry but does not hesitate to embellish – just as countless others have done before him.

In *Inferno,* Brown features an organization by the name of the Consortium, whose services transhumanist Bertrand Zobrist employs to maintain the secrecy of his activities and whereabouts. Brown’s use of the Consortium in *Inferno* sparks readers’ interest by inviting them to speculate as to the identity of the real organization behind the pseudonym.

Before the story even begins, Brown engages his readers’ imaginations by asserting that the Consortium does exist in the real world, albeit under a different name. On the “Fact” page at the beginning of the book, he claims, “‘The Consortium’ is a private organization with offices in seven countries. Its name has been changed for considerations of security and privacy.”[[10]](#endnote-11) This statement tantalizes the reader by offering as little information as possible while still maintaining the reality of the Consortium. We learn that the company’s activities are suspect enough to warrant anonymity, but without its true name we cannot delve deeper into its real-world presence. Unfortunately, as previously discussed, pursuit of the truth regarding the Palmarians in *Origin* is only marginally more fruitful, as so little literature exists on the subject in the first place.

In *Origin*, Dan Brown once again employs a secret organization as both a plot device and a mechanism to add a layer of intrigue to the story. The Palmarian Church is perhaps unique among the organizations referenced in the Robert Langdon series (with the exception of the Consortium because it is never identified by its actual name) in that such limited documentation exists of its activities. However, it does continue Brown’s trend of using religious organizations, namely the Catholic Church and mysterious sects therein, in the series. Brown also examines once again the science-religion conflict that he first explored in *Angels and Demons* – this time in the modern world, with the debate not over heliocentrism but the very origins of life.

References to the Palmarian Church provide the perfect opportunity for Brown to blur the line between fact and fiction, as with the Palmarians no such discernible line exists. In *Origin*, Brown moves from stressing the presence of facts in his work to inviting the reader to think critically about the truthfulness of various claims they encounter through the media, in this case with ConspiracyNet.com and its potentially fake news. The author’s newest novel again showcases his skills as a master storyteller, this time with less presumption that truth is at the foundation of his work. Dan Brown knows that the ways in which we gather information and use the Internet are changing, as we receive information constantly and must decide at every turn what to believe, and his latest book reflects just that.

1. Dan Brown, *Origin*, (Doubleday: 2017), XLVIII, 214. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Magnus Lundberg, “Fighting the Modern with the Virgin Mary: The Palmarian Church,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2013, pp. 40–60, *JSTOR*, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/nr.2013.17.2.40](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/nr.2013.17.2.40). 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. In fact, a website called “Palmar de Troya Support” (<http://homepage.eircom.net/~palmardetroya/)> exists “to provide support and information to those touched or adversely affected by the Order of the Carmelites of the Holy Face, a schismatic catholic [*sic*] group based in Palmar de Troya, Spain.” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Javier Martín-Arroyo, “The Palmarian Catholic Church: A Lie That Lasted 40 Years,” El País, 26 May 2016, elpais.com/elpais/2016/05/25/inenglish/1464158613\_478208.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Dan Brown, *Angels and Demons*, (Pocket Books: 2000), IX, 41-2.

   Dan Burstein and Arne de Keijzer (eds.), *Secrets of Angels and Demons*, (CDS Books: 2004), 97-8, 105. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Dan Burstein (ed.), *Secrets of the Code*, (CDS Books: 2004), 162. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Martin Lunn suggests that Brown attempts to develop “an ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ scenario,” with the Priory representing good and Opus Dei representing evil. (Martin Lunn, *Da Vinci Code Decoded*, (Disinformation: 2004), 111.) [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Thomas R. Beyer, Jr., *33 Keys to Unlocking* The Lost Symbol*: a Reader's Companion to the Dan Brown Novel*, (Newmarket Press: 2010), 137-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. Dan Brown, *The Lost Symbol*, (Bantam Press: 2009), VI, 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Dan Brown, *Inferno*, (Anchor Books: 2014), 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)