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The Keys to Dan Brown’s Inferno

11 November 2013

The Second Coming, Christ, and the Antichrist

The New Testament has long forewarned that the world will go through a time of great tribulation when the Antichrist, the satanic counterpart to Christ, arises as a false prophet and attempts to lead people astray[[1]](#endnote-1).  This is prophesied to be followed by the Second Coming of Christ, when God will send Jesus Christ back down to earth to defeat the forces of Satan.  Were Christ not to come in and intervene, the human population would face destruction.  On the other hand, Bertrand Zobrist, a character in Dan Brown’s *Inferno*, takes a Malthusian approach to the fate of the human race, believing that the human race will surely reach a carrying capacity and run itself into extinction through overpopulation.  As such, Zobrist, a firm believer in the Transhumanist idea that humans can overcome the current human conditions through technology to become posthumans, takes it upon himself to “save” the human race from overpopulation by utilizing advanced forms of genetic engineering to cause infertility in a portion of the world’s population.  Zobrist’s belief in Transhumanism, and his belief that he could be a potential posthuman, may have propelled him to assume the role of a savior to the human race, the role Christ would have in the Second Coming.  Zobrist, however, can also be seen as an Antichrist figure carrying out Satan’s will, evident given his obsession with Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno*.  Through examination of the prophecies of the Second Coming as discussed in The Gospel of Mark, The Gospel of Matthew, and John’s Book of Revelation, the characteristics of both Christ and Antichrist as portrayed in the Bible, as well as Zobrist’s character and beliefs, this essay will explore whether Brown intended to present Zobrist as a Christ or Antichrist figure, or whether Zobrist in fact encompasses characteristics of both.

**The Second Coming**

Various sections of the New Testament detail the prophecies of the Second Coming, most notably Mark 13, Mathew 24, and John’s Book of Revelation. Although there are different interpretations about the exact timeline of the Second Coming, these sources all agree that it will start when mankind deserts God’s teachings, causing social conditions to deteriorate.[[2]](#endnote-2) Then, in this moment of moral decline, an Antichrist will arise, who, as written by the Apostle John, shall “[speak] great things and blasphemies,” “make war with the saints,” and be worshipped by “all that dwell upon the earth” ([Revelation 13:1-8](http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/book.php?book=Revelation&chapter=13&verse=)).[[3]](#endnote-3) Under the rule of the Antichrist, the world will experience a period of great tribulation. Matthew notes that “nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes” ([Matthew 24.7](http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/book.php?book=Matthew&chapter=24&verse=)). Finally, the Antichrist’s reign will come to an end when he is defeated by the returned Christ, who will then “take up” with Him to Heaven the faithful “while others are ‘left behind’ to face the final judgment of God” (Schmidt 3).[[4]](#endnote-4)

One problem that is cited to cause the worsening social conditions is the development of overpopulation. According to Proverbs 29:16, “when the wicked are multiplied, transgression increaseth,” which is to say that as the population increases, so does the immorality of said population. Additionally, the author Ober reasons that with a larger population, “those in authority find it difficult to cope with and restrain the excesses of the large within their borders,” and therefore, the situation gets to a point where this large, tumultuous population is unmanageable (90). This “vast mass of humanity” is represented in the Scripture as the sea since the seas are “restless, always moving, [and] have roaring waves,” similar to the populace which is always “in commotion” and “produc[ing] a roaring” (Ober 94). As reported by the Book of Revelation, it is out of this “sea” from which the beast that represents the Antichrist will originate, and many people will mistakenly welcome his arrival when he demonstrates his ability to take control and discipline the rebellious populace (Ober 98).

**Christ**

Despite deteriorating conditions and the reign of the Antichrist, the faithful are told that they must remain faithful and anticipate the return of Christ, “who will put down evil and reign in righteousness” (Ober 109). According to the Book of Revelation, Christ is the only one worthy enough to set into motion the events that stop humanity from heading into destruction. In response to the problem of the decline of the population’s morals, God will have Christ open seals that summon seven plagues to be sent to Earth as well as four angels who are prepared “for an hour, and a day, and a month, and a year […] to slay the third part of men” who are sinful ([Revelation 9.15](http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/book.php?book=Revelation&chapter=9&verse=)). Thus, Christ’s role in the Second Coming is perceived as one of salvation for those faithful and true to God’s teachings.

In a broader context, Christ is often seen as a prophet “whose exalted ethical teaching, whose social passion, [and] whose unique personality attracted a set of devoted disciples” ([Bradshaw 426](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1199433)).[[5]](#endnote-5) These disciples and followers view Christ as a moral guide, who, as stated by the early Christian theologian Origen, set forth an example of choosing the good, loving righteousness, and hating iniquity.[[6]](#endnote-6) Although Christ was seen to have “divine compassion,” he also has “divine judgment,” and it is this judgment that will be employed during the Second Coming when He brings the faithful with Him to Heaven and leaves behind the rest of the population (Allison 4845).

Another important image often associated with Christ is the Lamb, since Christ gave up His life to atone for the sins of the faithful just as a lamb is killed in a sacrificial ceremony. From Christ’s sacrifice comes an idea that “the one who sits on the throne conquers by dying” (Schmidt 62). Furthermore, the description of Christ in the Book of Revelation when He returns to Earth depicts His robe as being soaked with His own blood as a reminder of His sacrifice ([Revelation 19.13](http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/book.php?book=Revelation&chapter=19&verse=)).

In His lifetime, Christ was said to have anticipated the trouble He would suffer with His teachings, and He “presumably anticipated suffering and an untimely death” (Allison 4852). In addition, Christ “recognized that the saints must pass through tribulation before salvation arrives,” similar to the way the faithful will have to live through a time of misfortune under the reign of the Antichrist before salvation in the form of Jesus Christ arrives (Allison 4852).

**The Antichrist**

Christ’s opponent in the Second Coming is referred to as the Antichrist, but the term “Antichrist” in fact refers to two different kinds of figures: one being the antithesis of Christ that will be sent by Satan to promote evil on Earth and the other being simply a blasphemous individual who opposes God and seeks to lead the faithful astray. It is often interpreted that many Antichrists of the latter definition arise but are quickly defeated, while the Antichrist of the former definition will be the most powerful of all the Antichrists and is the one Christ will ultimately defeat in the Second Coming.[[7]](#endnote-7) Relevant in this essay is the Antichrist from the first definition: the counterpart and opponent to Christ.

The Antichrist figure presented in the Scripture is interpreted to parody the figure of Christ. Just as Christ gets his power from God, the Antichrist will have the power of Satan vested within him. Just as Christ was resurrected from His grave after his crucifixion, the beast representative of the Antichrist in the Book of Revelation is observed to have survived a deadly wound ([Revelation 13.3](http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/book.php?book=Revelation&chapter=13&verse=)). Just as Christ is considered a prophet sent from God, the Antichrist too will present himself as a prophet, but the faithful are warned that he is a false prophet. The Apostle Mark cautions that “false Christs and false prophets shall rise” who will “say ‘I am Christ’ and shall deceive many” ([Mark 13.6-22](http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/book.php?book=Mark&chapter=13&verse=)). Similarly, [2 Peter 2](http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/book.php?book=2+Peter&chapter=2&verse=) reads, “There shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them… And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you.” Both sources warn of how the Antichrist’s mission is to deceive and exploit the followers of Christianity, guiding them away from the path of righteousness and preventing the faithful from joining the Kingdom of God. According to Fuller, false prophets would be especially successful in this deceit if they “moved in the best of circles of society and were of pleasing personality” (18). Lastly, even the two figures’ demises are parodies; the Antichrist’s end will be his descent into hell, as opposed to Christ’s ascent into heaven (McGinn 270).

Another dominant prophecy of the Antichrist is that he will come to reign as a world dictator, with the ultimate goal being to impose worship of himself upon everyone in the world. His rise to power, specifically over the Western world, is predicted to be fast and from “comparative obscurity” (Ober 39). The Book of Revelation talks about the Antichrist taking control economically by making it that nobody could do business outside the controlled market of the Antichrist ([Revelation 13.16-17](http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/book.php?book=Revelation&chapter=13&verse=)). With this economic power, he is then able to gain military might, and ultimately the worship of himself, for the Antichrist is, as stated by Ober, a “godless but religious man” (46). In addition, it is said that the society at the time of the world dictator’s reign would “be plagued by two irreconcilable ideologies,” though the two ideologies aren’t specified (Ober 45). Lastly, it is predicted that the demise of the World Dictator “will be as sudden and dramatic and awe-inspiring as his rise [and] human agencies will have no part in his destruction and the overthrow of his kingdom” (Ober 52). Interestingly enough, several of these characteristics of the Antichrist, as well as some of the characteristics discussed earlier of Christ, line up with many of the traits of the primary antagonist in Dan Brown’s novel *Inferno*: Bertrand Zobrist.

**Bertrand Zobrist**

Bertrand Zobrist is a famous biochemist seen as the creator of germ-line manipulation who, due to his success, becomes extremely wealthy and powerful in the scientific world.[[8]](#endnote-8) Zobrist goes to the Provost for his company’s services of privacy to aid him by shielding him from the public so that he can work on his project, which turns out to be a sterility plague designed to fight overpopulation. The other characters’ reactions to his actions are mostly negative, but none of them can deny that overpopulation was a problem that needed to be addressed. The novel ends somewhat ambiguously as to whether Zobrist’s actions were a gift to humankind or a curse. Therefore, through examination from multiple angles, Zobrist can be compared with both the figures of Christ and the Antichrist.

**Zobrist’s World View vs. The Second Coming**

Similar to the prophecies in the Bible, Zobrist views overpopulation as a major issue that would prevent the continued survival of humanity. His view of overpopulation is one primarily based upon the amount of resources that would be required for humans to survive on Earth while reproducing at the current rate. According to Zobrist the human race will reach extinction within the next one hundred years unless there would be “a catastrophic event that precipitously decreased global population growth” (Brown 213). Citing statisticians and biologists, Zobrist maintains that the optimal population size for the human species’ long term survival would be four billion, which is three billion less than the current population (Brown 105). The solution he presents to this problem is creating a sterility plague that would affect one third of the world’s population (Brown 438). Interestingly enough, this ratio of one in three is the same ratio of people the plagues and angels kill during the Second Coming according to the Book of Revelation. Thus, Zobrist’s sterilization of one third of the human population parallels Christ’s release of the plagues and angels that kill one third of population.

While Zobrist is primarily concerned with the aspect of survival when it comes to overpopulation, he also believes that “madness breeds madness” (Brown 6). When explaining to WHO director Dr. Sinksey the perils of overpopulation, he tells her:

“[It] will affect the very soul of man. Under the stress of overpopulation, those who have never considered stealing will become thieves to feed their families. Those who have never considered killing will kill to provide for their young. All of Dante’s deadly sins--greed, gluttony, treachery, murder, and the rest--will begin percolating...rising up to the surface of humanity” (Brown 103).

In this way, his ideas concerning the effects of overpopulation overlap with the issues brought up by the Bible about the Second Coming, specifically the deteriorating social conditions that are predicted to come. Thus, by confronting these issues, Zobrist would again be addressing the same issues Christ would resolve during the Second Coming.

**Zobrist vs. Christ**

Fitting the role of Christ, Zobrist frequently refers to his sterility plague as a gift of salvation for the human race. According to his lover and follower Sienna, Zobrist had “boundless hope for humanity” in its prospects of becoming “healthier, smarter, stronger, [and] even more compassionate” (Brown 436). Thus, he talked frequently about saving the world, saying “not only that saving the world was possible...but that doing so was a moral imperative” (Brown 436). In addition, he felt strongly against passivity, often quoting that “the darkest places in hell are reserved for those who maintain their neutrality in times of moral crisis” (Brown 163). Therefore, from his point of view, it was necessary that he enforce a solution to the overpopulation problem, which resulted in his creation of a sterility plague. In creating such a virus instead of an epidemic, he shows the mercy that Christ embodies; Sienna admits that there is “some compassion in [his] approach. There will be no hospitals overflowing with the sick and dying, no bodies rotting in the streets, and no anguished survivors enduring the death of loved ones. Humans will simply stop having so many babies” (Brown 439). Because of the goal he perceives to be noble, Zobrist repeatedly refers to his plague as salvation for humanity, which would mean that he is acting in the role Christ would have in the Second Coming. Zobrist even says he’s “seal[ing] the yawning gates of hell” (Brown 283), which is similar to another task Christ is predicted to complete when He returns and seals the pit he throws Satan into (Revelation 20.2).

Like Christ, Zobrist understood the persecution and hardships he would face due to his ideas, and that ultimately the persecution would end with his self-sacrifice. Referencing his idol Dante, Zobrist tells Sinksey that “the path to paradise passes directly through hell” (Brown 137). This hell comes in the form of persecution from government organizations and ridicule from his colleagues. According to Sienna, “Zobrist was immediately attacked from all sides—politicians, clergy, the World Health Organization—all of whom derided him as a doomsayer lunatic who was simply trying to cause panic” (Brown 213). The World Health Organization, in particular, labeled him as dangerous and looked to take him into custody, effectively causing him to be exiled. Responding to these adversaries, he referred to them as ignorant, especially Sinksey, who he called “the silver-headed devil” (Brown 74). By labeling her as a devil, he poses himself as the enemy of Satan, thereby suggesting that he is fighting on the side of God. As for his martyrdom, Zobrist actually compares his impending death to that of Christ. In his video, he addresses the audience saying, “I have forged a masterpiece of salvation, and yet my efforts have been rewarded not with trumpets and laurels...but with threats of death. I do not fear death…for death transforms visionaries into martyrs...converts noble ideas into powerful movements. Jesus. Socrates. Martin Luther King. One day soon I will join them” (Brown 283).

Similar to the martyrs, his ideas spread quickly within his fields of expertise, earning him fame, influence, and followers. Within the biomedical world, he was considered to be “staggeringly successful” and was referred to as “the toast of the medical world” (Brown 183, 214). Within the Transhumanist movement, he was seen as a dominant leader and was “quite a celebrity;” according to Sinksey, he had “no shortage of disciples who would do anything for him” (Brown 293). One of these disciples was Sienna, who saw Zobrist as her mentor (Brown 434). In this sense, Zobrist’s figure is quite similar to that of Christ, who was a beloved teacher to many and garnered many disciples through his preaching.

As for his faith, Zobrist himself actually refers to God quite a few times in the novel. Before he jumps to his death, he prays to God, asking that “the world remembers my name not as a monstrous sinner, but as the glorious savior you know I truly am” (Brown 7). In addition, he also saw himself as having power given to him by God, saying, “The masterpiece I have created is the work of God Himself...a gift from the One who imbued me with the intellect, tools, and a courage required to forge such a creation” (Brown 283). From this view, Brown suggests that Zobrist isn’t an unreligious man, and rather has some form of faith in God. Whether that faith is misguided or exploited is another story, as Zobrist’s obsession with hell cannot be ignored. Any man of any bit of faith would know that pride is a great sin and would try his best to suppress his pride. However, not only is Zobrist extremely prideful, he even openly admits to his sin, saying during his video, “Even I am guilty of the darkest of the seven—that lone temptation from which so few find sanctuary. Pride. By recording this very message I have succumbed to Pride’s goading pull...eager to ensure that the world would know my work” (Brown 283). Given that pride is the “darkest” of the seven sins according to Dante and that Zobrist is a Dante fanatic, Zobrist essentially suggests that he has a place in hell by admitting to being prideful. Additionally, Zobrist also opposes God when he says that “the beauty of a living organism--be it good or evil--is that it will follow the law of God with singular vision. Be fruitful and multiply. And so I fight fire...with fire” (Brown 283). By going against what he sees as God’s vision, Zobrist would be consciously choosing to defy God, an action that’s in line with the ideology of the Antichrist.

**Zobrist vs. Antichrist**

Just like the Antichrist, Zobrist also lives in a world of clashing ideologies. In his case, the two ideologies are the issues of overpopulation and extending human lifespan. Mathematically, survival of the human race given current rates of reproduction is impossible, and Zobrist is not the only one to reach this conclusion. Sienna points out that “Speaking from a purely scientific standpoint—all logic, not heart—I can tell you without a doubt that without some kind of drastic change, the end of our species is coming...it will be total collapse due to the number of people on the planet. The mathematics is indisputable” (Brown 214). Even Dr. Sinksey agrees, saying that Zobrist’s “assessment of the state of the world is accurate” (Brown 452). On the other hand, mankind still strives to prolong life; in some cases so desperately that it is irrational. As Sienna explains, “the longer we live, the more our resources go to supporting the elderly and ailing [...] In the US some sixty percent of health care costs go to support patients during the last six months of their lives….While our brains say ‘This is insane’ our hearts say ‘Keep Grandma alive as long as we can’” (Brown 216). This irrationality is what Zobrist opposes so vehemently that he said “he wished he could put the genie back in the bottle and erase some of his contributions to human longevity” (Brown 216).

Another trait Zobrist shares with the Antichrist is his rise to power from relative obscurity. Although he was famous within the medical world and notable in his field, his name wasn’t a household name. In fact, even in the academic world, he wasn’t well known outside the scientific fields, as evidenced by the fact that Langdon had never heard about Zobrist until after other people explain who he is. Furthermore, Sienna recounts that “only a dozen or so stalwart fans” showed up to hear him speak when there were five hundred tickets printed and advertised, which further attests to lack of universal fame (Brown 287).

As for his impact within his fields of expertise, Zobrist certainly had the advantage of a good social standing and likable personality which Fuller said would tremendously aid the false prophet in influencing others (18). Being “absurdly wealthy” and “a star in his field,” Zobrist most certainly would have been high up within the levels of society (Brown 160). In addition, he was described to be extremely charismatic and bewitching (Brown 288, 434). At one point, however his pleasing personality is described as “beguiling,” suggesting a deceitful motive behind his words and actions that would coincide with his role as a false prophet (Brown 288).

Lastly, Zobrist’s death certainly parallels the demise that the Antichrist is prophesized to face. While being pursued by members of the WHO, Zobrist climbs up Badia Tower and from there jumps to his death. His fall to death is comparable to the Antichrist’s descent into Hell. Even more interesting is his last thoughts as he jumps: that he’s taking his final step “into the abyss” (Brown 7). This abyss is reminiscent of the “lake of fire” where the Antichrist will be sent when he is finally defeated by Christ ([Revelation 19.20](http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/book.php?book=Revelation&chapter=19&verse=)).

**Conclusion**

Indisputably Zobrist’s motives and actions can be interpreted from various perspectives; in some cases, he can be likened to be acting as a Christ-like figure; in others, he can be denounced to be like the Antichrist. Depending on one’s own perspective, it can be argued that Zobrist represents one figure more than the other on both sides. Brown seems to have intended Zobrist’s character as a combination of both figures. As for Brown’s personal thoughts toward Zobrist’s actions, it seems as if Brown views them in a negative light. As reported by Burstein, Brown “signals his moral distaste for the scientist’s ‘culture of death’ by celebrating life” by starting the novel with a dedication to his parents and ending with the report of Marta’s newborn baby (Burstein 81).[[9]](#endnote-9) In spite of his own convictions toward Zobrist, Brown ultimately leaves the novel’s end ambiguous since readers with different interpretations of Zobrist’s ideas and actions may see Zobrist in different lights. In the end, the real question becomes the question Sinksey poses to Langdon, “Do you believe that the ends justify the means? Do you believe that Bertrand’s goal to save the world was so noble that it warranted his releasing this virus” (Brown 454)?

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   Oxford UP, 1995. Print. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
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