Spirituality in Origin

*Origin* continues the interplay between science and religion found in the previous novels in the Robert Langdon series. However, in this novel Dan Brown takes a different approach to this debate. In the central plot of the novel, the protagonist Edmond Kirsch has made a discovery which will shake the foundations of religion to its core. He believes that “the age of religion is drawing to [a] close, and the age of science is dawning”. Essentially, he believes that he has discovered something that will completely disprove organized religion. Kirsch will do this by answering two of the most fundamental questions humanity has been asking itself since the dawn of religion, “Where do we come from?” and “Where are we going?” By focusing on answering these two fundamental questions Kirsch believes that he will “employ the truth of science to eradicate the myth of religion” (Brown 106). Rather than primarily discussing a particular religion, in *Origin,* Brown focuses more intently on the potentiality of religion being scientifically disproven. Brown develops the relationship between science and religion in his novel in order to explore the fundamental ways in which the two interact.

Brown incorporates a more brazenly modern approach to spiritualty by using his characters to progressively go from simply questioning religion in his previous novels to completely rejecting all religious faiths in *Origin*. Kirsch’s claims that religion is a form of “mass delusion” make the reader question their own particular form of spirituality. From the beginning of the novel, the reader gets the impression that Brown is stating that faith is effectively becoming an increasingly irrelevant aspect of the modern world — a concept which isn’t explored as significantly in his previous novels in the Robert Langdon series.

On the other hand, Kirsch’s ridicule of religions tends to oxymoronically solidify certain characters’ faith rather than debase it. This relates to the three main religious leaders to whom Kirsch first shows his presentation: Bishop Valdespino, Allamah Syed al-Fadl and Rabbi Köves. Valdespino is initially the individual who calms down his spiritual brethren from the shock of seeing Kirsch’ presentation by reminding them that this is all “God’s Plan” (Brown 69). Köves and al-Fadl accept this based on faith and agree that internal reflection on how to best deal with the issue at hand is necessary. This shows us how faith at its highest form may reach a place in which it can become beyond doubt regardless of empirical evidence to the contrary.

However, there are certain aspects of the novel which aren’t completely antagonistic to religion. It is the belief of Father Beña, the priest of the Sagrada Familia, that religion “must stop rejecting the discoveries of science” (Brown 881). He talks about religion becoming a spiritual partner of science, creating a synergistic environment where a “moral framework” that aims for unification can be established. From the epilogue, we can see how these two polarized views could be compared. This is observable through Langdon’s interpretation of the last line of *The Complete Works of William Blake* “the dark religions are departed and sweet science reigns.” From the viewpoint of someone as anti-religious as Kirsch, that line could seem like a utopian society in which there would be no forms of organized religion based on anything relating to the divine. It is Kirsch’s view that wars fought over religion are pointless and have been harming humanity for millennia. However, this could also be a utopian society for someone like Beña or Langdon where science and religion come together in a fashion that promotes the ideals of both, allowing religion to flourish. This is because they think that science and religion are two ways of speaking about the same phenomena, as a result fighting over whose language is better is irrelevant as both serve their purpose in society. Amidst all this doubt shed on organized religion and the presence of God, Robert Langdon still finds himself unwilling to completely reject the idea of a “consciousness behind the universe” (Brown 845). By including that dialogue in the epilogue, Brown is able to give a more balance argument to the debate between science and religion, showing the reader that he isn’t as antireligious as most people who read his novels assume. Furthermore, through Robert Langdon’s unwillingness to completely abandon his faith, the reader is still instilled with a sense of hope for religion’s continued existence.

The Palmarians form the most significant religious group discussed in *Origin*. The Palmarians are an “ultraconservative, secretive Christian sect” (Brown 544) founded in the 1960s in Palmar de Troya by Clemente Domínguez y Gómez (later known as Pope Gregory XVII) after four schoolgirls claimed to have been visited by the Virgin Mary near a tree just outside town. Domínguez claimed that all Vatican pontiffs preceding Paul IV are the antipope (Lundberg 44). Domínguez then took this title for himself claiming the true papacy is found within the Palmarian church since he was the ‘true’ Pope not by virtue of a vote of the conclave but through as a result of divine intervention from one of his “visions” (Lundberg 6). It is after the death of this ‘New See’ and the preceding Pope that our current timeline coincides with *Origin.* The most recent Palmarian pope, Pope Gregory XVIII resigned because he claimed that the church was a front for a money laundering scheme. However, verifying this claim is difficult because of the current levels of secrecy that exists with the Palmarian Church. This adds fuel to the conspiratorial flame surrounding the Palmarians. As a result, the Palmarian ideals that are perpetuated in the novel are shadowed in this secrecy, giving Brown free reign to discuss the relationship between science and religion from the Palmarian perspective in a manner which he deems fit. The Palmarian villain Avila further enforces the idea that many religions or religious individuals are vehemently against science.

Although throughout the novel it seems as though Dan Brown is painting the Palmarians in a more negative light by drawing an association between the villain’s actions and their faith, towards the end of the novel it is mentioned that “in actuality the Palmarians had been innocent” (Brown 873). Dan Brown incorporates this to avoid similar criticism by the Palmarians as experienced from the Opus Dei as a result of *The Da Vinci Code*. After *The Da Vinci Code*, the Opus Dei was more than willing to open its doors to any interested individuals in order for them to obtain a correct understanding of their faith. This in a way discredited Brown’s fanaticized portrayal of them as all-being corporeal-mutilating, closed-mindedly-brutal individuals while the majority tend to be very kind and generous people, few of whom use the cilice. By including an area mentioning the “innocence” of the Palmarians, Brown is able to protect his claims, made through Avila, against potential Palmarian retaliation.

Throughout the novels there is this concept that science is catching up to the claims made by religion. It seems as though these two ideologies are in a perpetual race with one another with one side continually claiming the other is wrong. One concept, however, which differentiates *Origin’s* take on this issue is how Edmond Kirsch makes the science itself into a religion. According to Langdon “Edmond wanted to build a new religion based on science” (Brown 865). By becoming a “martyr for science”, Edmond ensured that his message would be taken more seriously. Langdon comes to this realization that Kirsch’s presentation was delivered in a way that resembles the formation of a new religion as it “systematically checks all the boxes” which Langdon believes all religions share. The first is that “new religions provide fresh answers to life’s big questions” namely the two largest life questions “Where do we come from?” and “Where are we going?” Secondly, new religions, “condemned their competition” which Edmond does by debasing all religions when he states that “we exist with or without God” (Brown 775)”. Thirdly, religions “promise a better future”, which Edmond does by laying out the benefits that the new “Seventh Kingdom” could bring about to the world. It leads him to the realization that Kirsch’s death is actually Winston’s doing. This seems to support the idea that both Kirsch and Winston thought that the best way to deliver Kirsch’s presentation and dismantle religion is by forming another ‘religion’ based on science. This concept is intriguing because it appears to be an effective way in which to present the information found in Kirsch’s presentation to people who tend to be more religious. These religious individuals will likely be the hardest for Kirsch to convince because the devout tend to look “past vast amounts of scientific data and rational logic in defense of their faith”. In response to this, if the presentation is provided in a seemingly religious format in which they can easily understand, may affect his concept’s acceptance through use of a replacement method which doesn’t seem as radical.

In both *The Da Vinci Code* and *Origin* religion is used to provide an excuse for villainous acts. In *The Da Vinci Code*, the main spiritual body represented is the Opus Dei. This group is a “Vatican prelature” meaning that it is an organization which exists with the blessing of the Vatican. Palmarians in Origin are different from the Opus Dei since they have been completely excommunicated by the Vatican. However, the way in which Brown portrays these two groups from the different novels seems to be relatively similar. They both contain a villain from each particular faith which is being portrayed. In *The Da Vinci Code* the villain is Silas, a former prisoner, arrested for killing his father, who ends up getting rescued by Bishop Aringarosa. Because Aringarosa saves his life Silas pledges his undying allegiance to him and the Opus Dei. This compares to Admiral Avila in *Origin*, who is brought back from the brink of depression by his physical trainer Marco who introduces the Palmarian Church which rejuvenates his faith in the Almighty. Both these characters are easily influenced by the direction and opinions of the individuals they believe ‘saved’ them. For these characters, the extreme hardship faced followed by their subsequent liberation strengthens both their faith in their believed autonomous access to the divine, and their resolve to defend against all those who may be harmful to their particular faith. This is because their faith holds such a place of importance to these individuals, that any threat against it is a threat against them. In many cases things which go against the basis of the faith such as murder are justified in the minds of these characters as they believe that they are just giving sinners their due punishment for attempting at discrediting their faith using science. For both Silas and Avila, their own spirituality played a main factor in how religion was portrayed in the novels. Using such unstable and violent individuals as the lenses through which the reader observes various religious sects, does a disservice in the depiction of the potential positive attributes which that particular faith may have. This allows Brown to show that acceptance and understanding between science and religion may not necessarily go hand in hand.

Furthermore, Dan Brown correctly displays one common trait found in these faiths and subsequently these characters: obedience. Most if not all faiths in the world have some kind of level of obedience which must be observed particularly obedience to a higher power. For Silas and Avila this power was in the form of the ‘the Teacher’ and ‘the Regent’. This is particularly true for the religions Brown incorporates into his novels, especially within the Opus Dei. *The Way* is the written rules of how one should act to be in compliance with the Opus Dei. *The Way* promotes *“*tolerance and understanding towards the defects of others; intolerance towards his own” (Escriva). Opus Dei’s ideas are completely antagonistic to Silas’s actions which were wrong even if in defense of his faith. However, because he was obeying the commands of the Teacher he didn’t understand what he could’ve possibly been doing that wasn’t religiously justified. This increases the amount of controversy between science and religion in *Origin* and simultaneously increases the tension. This underlines a significant difference between science and religion in that science may depend on evidence whereas religion is based on faith and trust.

There is a trend in Brown’s works with using locations of religious significance for nonreligious purposes. *The Da Vinci Code* features the Saint-Sulpice Church, *Angels & Demons* incorporates St. Paul’s Basilica and the Churches of Illumination, *The Lost Symbol* uses the House of the Temple, however, the one which is the most significant in connection to *Origin* is the Hagia Sophia which appears in *Inferno*. The Hagia Sophia was first a pagan temple, next an Eastern Orthodox cathedral, then a mosque and it is currently a secular museum. The history of the Hagia Sophia shows how it can combine all these radically different religious views in one place. There are elements of all these faiths that remain in this one building. Similarly, the Sagrada Familia is a way of interweaving two distinct things through architecture: “the Christian message and nature” (Geometry - Sagrada Familia ). Kirsch was of the belief that the Sagrada Familia was secretly conceived as a “mystical shrine to science and nature.” These locations reinforce Brown’s attempt at combining science and religion throughout his novels because the locations the characters visit in setting of the different novels have clues which relate to both.

As the series progresses there seems to be a trend towards modernization, affecting how both science and religion are depicted. *The Da Vinci Code* and *Angels and Demons* predominantly deal with history without relating it as significantly with the present. This gives a sort of detachment to the concepts explored in those novels because while these concepts affect the present, they are predominantly related to history. *The Lost Symbol* was the first to bridge the gap simply because of the political and social prominence that many Masons have in the world today making this idea more relevant. *Inferno*, however, completely crosses over into modernity, in that it was about a modern issue (overpopulation) which was solved in the novel by using a scientific method (the release of the virus). *Origin* seems to continue this overall trend by not just looking at the present but the future as well. The questions “Where do we come from?” and “Where are we going?” tie together the past, present and future. In addition, by making Kirsch a futurist with an uncanny amount of accuracy in his predictions, he is able to give a credibility to the character. This causes the reader to give more value to Kirsch’s scientific and religious opinions. In this increasingly secular world, it is necessary for Brown to find a method to ‘modernize’ religion to be relevant with today’s readership. In the present time, it seems that people tend to be practicing a more liberal form of many of the world’s main religions such as Christianity, Judaism and Islam. As a result, Brown’s continuous interplay between science and religion within the series has come to a point in *Origin* where science is starting to absorb religion.

In conclusion, Brown focuses on the relationship between science and religion to show us that it is possible for both to disagree yet exist harmoniously. By incorporating both extremely spiritual and extremely secular characters he gives the reader a better understanding of both arguments which opens up discussion by inducing mutual understanding. Understanding both opinions is important in allowing his readership to accurately decide for themselves where they wish to be placed in the spectrum. In addition, this interaction allows him to increase the tension in the novels between these two antagonistic views. It keeps the reader’s attention because they want two know how the two polar opposites will resolve themselves in the end.

# Bibliography

Brown, Dan. *Origin*. n.d.

Escriva, Josemaria. *The Way* . New York: Scepter Publishers, 1965.

*Geometry - Sagrada Familia* . n.d. 23 10 2017. <http://www.sagradafamilia.org/en/geometry/>.

*Inside Spain's Right-Wing Rebel Catholic Cult*. 14 07 2016. 20 10 2017. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/inside-spains-right-wing-rebel-catholic-cult>.

Lundberg, Magnus. *Fighting the Modern with the Virgin Mary: The Palmarian Church* 17 (2013).