

The Lost Symbol: Is Brown's Latest Book The Da Vinci Code part 2?

Review and analysis by Craig A. Smith

When the author of *The Da Vinci Code* writes a new book, people take notice. The marketing department at Doubleday is depending on this fact to sell Dan Brown's new novel. In fact, if you look at the back of *The Lost Symbol*, you won't find a single endorsement of the book itself. Instead, you'll see rave reviews for *The Da Vinci Code*!

Building on the success of *The Da Vinci Code* is understandable. After all, that book was an international sensation, selling more than 45 million copies. Will *The Lost Symbol* be as popular? Probably not, nor will it generate the kind of controversy that Brown's last work stirred up.

The Lost Symbol features the main character from both *The Da Vinci Code* and *Angels & Demons*: Robert Langdon, a charismatic "symbologist" who deciphers ancient puzzles and coded messages. While most of the activity in *The Da Vinci Code* and *Angels & Demons* centered in Europe, particularly in Rome, *The Lost Symbol* brings Langdon home to the United States where he turns his attention to the Masonic Order and to strange codes embedded in the architecture of our nation's capital, Washington D.C.

Like *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Lost Symbol* claims to be based on historical fact. Before the story begins, a fact page claims:

In 1991, a document was locked in the safe of the director of the CIA. The document is still there today. It's cryptic text includes references to an ancient portal and an unknown location underground. The document also contains the phrase "It's buried out there somewhere."¹

The fact page goes on to state that:

all organizations in this novel exist, including the Freemasons, the Invisible College, the Office of Security, the SMSC, and the Institute of Noetic Sciences. All rituals, science, artwork, and monuments in this novel are real.

Whether or not these claims are true is somewhat difficult to assess. No citations or references are given, so the reader must either trust Brown's claims or try to replicate his research independently, a daunting task given the number of historical claims that fill this book. Certainly some of what he claims is actually true, but it was precisely this skillful - and sometimes undetectable - blending of fact with fiction that made the claims of *The Da Vinci Code* so potentially destructive. If one presumes that all of the historical, scientific and spiritual claims of *The Lost Symbol* are true simply because a few of them are, this book has the same potential as *The Da Vinci Code*. Of course, in Brown's defense, one can say that this is a novel - that is, a work of fiction - and one would have to be quite ignorant to take all the claims of a work of fiction as fact.

But does *The Lost Symbol*, like *The Da Vinci Code*, make claims that readers are intended to evaluate as being more than simply a good story? Probably, and Christians

¹ Dan Brown, *The Lost Symbol* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), p.1.

ought to be aware of and at least a few of these, if for no other reason than they may provide an opportunity to speak Truth into the life of someone who has read this book.

Claim #1: Human Divinity

While *The Da Vinci Code* had the feel of an attack on Christian history, *The Lost Symbol* appears to be a more positive apologetic for Brown's religious beliefs. Since I read Brown's book *Digital Fortress* several years ago, I have suspected that the author's real beliefs lay somewhere in the New Age camp. *The Lost Symbol* confirms this. A pervasive theme throughout the book is the idea that we are all gods, striving to realize our true potential. This "truth" is presented as being at the core of all religions, even Christianity, though obscured by time and ignorance:

"Even the Bible concurs," Bellamy said. "If we accept as Genesis tells us, that 'God created man in his own image,' then we also must accept what this implies – that mankind was not created inferior to God.² In Luke 17:20 we are told, 'The kingdom of God is within³ you.'"

"I'm sorry, but I don't know any Christians who consider themselves God's equal."

"Of course not," Bellamy said, his tone hardening. "Because most Christians want it both ways. They want to be able to proudly declare they are believers in the Bible and yet simply ignore those parts they find too difficult or too inconvenient to believe."⁴

In the Ancient Near East, the concept of an "image" was closely related to the idea of *representation*. That is, to be made in/as the Image of God was to be made God's representatives in creation. This is quite clear when you read Genesis and see that mankind was told to "rule" creation and was given the task of naming the animals, thus taking up authority delegated by God whom we represent. This does say something quite astounding about the worth and value of humanity. However, to say that being made in/as God's Image implies equality with God is simply wrong. Similarly, the quote from Luke is misunderstood. First, this verse is Luke 17:21, not 17:20, probably a simple typo. Second, this is a misleading translation. The "you" here is plural in the original Greek, not singular as readers may be tempted to think given that the English "you" serves as both a singular and plural pronoun. The Greek word *entos* (translated here as "within") when it occurs with a plural pronoun should more naturally be translated "among". For this reason, the verse should be rendered "the kingdom of God is *among* you" or "the kingdom of God is *in your midst*." In the biblical context, what may sound like a New Age maxim is actually a statement about the kingdom of God as already present within

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⁴ *Symbol*, p.194.

the community of disciples rather than being an external political system that many of the Jews of Jesus' day were looking for.

In any event, one of the central themes of the bible is that God is God and we are not. The idea that the Bible teaches that we are equal to God is simply ridiculous.

Claim #2: Science supports New Age claims.

Not surprisingly, given the recent popularity of books like *The Secret* or films like *What The Bleep Do We Know*, Brown seeks to put this notion of individual divinity on scientific footing, claiming that modern physics is only re-discovering truth known long ago by the "Ancient Wisdom" so favored by New Age mystics:

"The scientific wisdom of the ancients was staggering...modern physics is only now beginning to comprehend it all."⁵

The Lost Symbol refers frequently to the "Noetic Sciences" and to experiments which supposedly show that human consciousness and directed thinking can alter the physical world.

One supposed proof of our ability to change the world through our thoughts is the work of Masaru Emoto who claimed that water crystals could be made to form in pleasing shapes when exposed to positive thoughts whereas they formed hideous shapes when exposed to negative thoughts. Emoto's "experiments" have been widely hailed by New Age apologists and, while Brown does not directly mention Emoto, he does have one of his characters reflect on an identical experiment, indicating Brown's awareness of Emoto's work.

What is not mentioned is the fact that Emoto's work has been criticized for lacking sufficient experimental controls⁶ and for lacking scientific rigor.⁷ Emoto himself has admitted that he is not a scientist and that the photographers who produced the images of the water crystals which supposedly prove his theory were instructed to choose only the most pleasing shapes.⁸

In short, there is little or no evidence for these New Age claims, yet Brown persists in advancing these claims as accurate and portraying "Noetic Scientists" as reliable researchers while belittling the Bible and Christian faith, except where he wants to twist them to support his own ideas. For instance, in discussing the physics theory of quantum entanglement, which he connects to Tao and Brahman, he says that:

"To this day, Jews and Christians still strive for 'atonement'... although most of us have forgotten it is actually 'at-one-ment' we're seeking."⁹

⁵ *Symbol*, p.58

⁶ Dr. William A. Tiller, another researcher featured in the movie *What the Bleep Do We Know?* has pointed out that Emoto's experiments fall short of proof, since Emoto's experiments 'do not control for one of the three key factors in the supercooling of water'. See William Tiller, 2005, "What the Bleep do we Know!?: A Personal Narrative", *Vision in Action (VIA)*, Vol. 2, Issues 3-4, pages 16-20.

⁷ See Robert Matthews, "Water: The quantum elixir", *New Scientist*, April 8, 2006.

⁸ See 2005 interview of Emoto by Ray Hemachandra, *New Age Retailer*, [here](#), page 4.

⁹ *Symbol*, p. 58.

The original Hebrew and Greek words for “atonement” literally mean “to cover over.” While it is true that Christ’s sacrifice on the cross covers over our sin and allows a restoration of our fellowship with God, it is quite a leap to say that this concept is the same as the Taoist concept of the universal consciousness and the interconnectedness of all things.

Claim #3 – America was founded as a Masonic, rather than a Christian nation.

Evangelicals persistently argue that the founding fathers of the United States were devout Christians. Brown claims that this is not true and that, at best, they were deists, who believed in a distant and relatively uninvolved God. More important than their religious affiliation, though, was their involvement with the Masonic Order, symbols from which were incorporated into nearly every piece of architecture and art from early American history.

That Masonic symbols are prevalent cannot be denied, but the role of Masonic rituals and teaching in American politics is a bit less clear. In any event, the simmering controversy over the role of Christian faith in America’s history is on the front burner these days and, while a thorough address of the issue is beyond the scope of this article, Christians should not overlook the possible impact of Brown’s claims. As Kato Mivule noted in a recent blog:

Yet still Dan Brown undercuts the political ‘Christian Establishment’ in America by linking the symbols, Masonic lodges, and all the Freemason ideologies to the founding fathers of the United States – and Presidents of the United States of America, which is a true fact despite the claims to ‘Christianize’ American Presidents by Evangelicals.

This is far the most powerful ‘Dan Brown’ blow, cleverly, subtly, and intelligently against the notion by political evangelical Americans that America was founded as a Christian Nation.¹⁰

In my own opinion, the religious history of the United States is more complex than both sides of this debate tend to recognize. On the one hand, there can be no doubt that many of the founding fathers of our nation practiced orthodox Christianity or that, where faith was involved, it was *Christian* faith. On the other hand, it also seems clear that at least some of our founding fathers were deists who were only Christian in the most surface of senses.¹¹ For example, certainly most Evangelicals would be uncomfortable with the theological beliefs of Ben Franklin who seems to have had serious doubts about the divinity of Christ.¹² Consequently, it is both true and false that America was founded

¹⁰ Kato Mivule, “Dan Brown, The Lost Symbol, and US Evangelical Myths”, <http://www.yesumulungi.com/index.php/apostasy-watch/374-dan-brown-the-lost-symbol-and-us-evangelical-myths.html>

¹¹ See David L. Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹² Franklin apparently wrote the following to Ezra Stiles, then president of Yale: “As to Jesus of Nazareth my Opinion of whom you particularly desire, I think the System of Morals and his Religion, as he left them to us, the best the world ever saw or is likely to see; but I apprehend it has received various corrupt

as a “Christian” nation. Certainly it was not a Muslim or a Hindu nation, but the Christianity of our founders was not, in every case, a matter of orthodox belief and practice.

My question is: what does it matter? Anyone who claims that America has no significant Christian roots is simply a fool. Anyone who claims that the founding fathers were, each and every one, shining examples of biblical faith and personal piety is also guilty of oversimplifying the truth. But in the end, the faith of our fathers matters very little in comparison to the faith of ourselves.¹³ The important thing is not so much what they believed, but what you believe.

In any event, Brown falls firmly into the camp that seems to want to deny the crucial role Christian faith in early America. Christians will be well-advised to have at least a rudimentary understanding of this debate if they want to be able to speak effectively with friends who read *The Lost Symbol*.¹⁴

At the end of the day, my prediction is that *The Lost Symbol* will not have a significant cultural impact. From a literary standpoint, it's a good story, but not a great one. The characters all have a decided similarity to characters in *The Da Vinci Code* and the plot development is formulaic. I will be very surprised if it sells even a fraction as many copies as *The Da Vinci Code* did. Following the formula that seemed to work so well with his last book, Brown's latest novel again tries to stir up religious controversy, but I doubt that it will succeed to any great extent. It is more interesting as an expression of the author's personal New Age leanings than anything else.

Still, even if *The Lost Symbol* were to sell only a fraction as many copies as *The Da Vinci Code*, that would still mean a lot of readers! And, while the opportunities to talk about Truth are less overt here, there are still places where Christians can expect to enter into some meaningful conversations with readers of *The Lost Symbol*.

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changes, and I have, with most of the present Dissenters in England, some Doubts as to his divinity; tho' it is a question I do not dogmatize upon, having never studied it, and I think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an Opportunity of knowing the Truth with less Trouble..."; Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1938), p. 777.

¹³ This is, of course, a bit of an oversimplification as well. Obviously, this debate is at least partially concerned with the role of Christian faith in contemporary politics and to that end, the historical role of Christian faith in America is of great significance.

¹⁴ Two excellent resources for those who wish to dig deeper into this issue are: Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997) and Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: W.b. Eerdmans Publishing Co.).