

Conspiracies and Religion in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*

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Introduction

Conspiracy theories permeate our lives, especially in what many call a “post-truth” world in which facts are less influential shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. Since the 1990s, conspiracy theories have emerged as a ubiquitous feature, coursing through the Internet and social media around the world, fueling imaginations and empowering many to question their most cherished institutions and practices, including religion. Conspiracy theories (CTs) are narratives “tied to ‘special’ claims to knowledge about hidden power and agency” (Dyrendal et al. 26). They “reveal hidden, massive power structures, while promising. . . that one can ‘regain individual agency by seeing through the lies of others’” (41). As David G. Robertson argues in “The Hidden Hand: Why Religious Studies Need to Take Conspiracy Theories Seriously,” “conspiracy theory, like religion, is difficult to define. You can point to specific features, essential ideas, or common functions, but there will be significant exceptions” (6). Even if religion and conspiracy theory can be shackled by complex social-cultural contexts, both are grounded at their core in notions of a battle between “good” and “evil,” which underscore deep-seated beliefs, actions, and needs.

Dan Brown’s 2003 novel, *The Da Vinci Code (DVC)*, offers an important artifact to explore how CT and religion operate in popular culture. In *DVC*, Brown constructs a CT narrative that “presents and constructs knowledge; it promotes questions, and counters specific constructions of reality” (Dyrendal et al. 33). The power of drawing on CT stems from the idea that narratives “explain the past . . . predict the future . . . and deduce motives” by those in power, while articulating “social tensions” and “ideological” power (Bratich 13). Given its complexity, it is important to employ a heuristic structure to better understand the relationship between CT and religion in *DVC*.

In this chapter, I explore three questions outlined in “Conspiracy Theories and the Study of Religion(s): What We are Talking About and Why it Matters”: 1) The conspiracies addressed and the author’s motives for narrating the conspiracy; 2) The dispositions of the readers and; 3) The broader socio-cultural contexts that help one understand the significance of both the behaviors and the effect of the narrative (Dyrendal et al. 25). During tumultuous times that greeted a new century, Dan Brown drew upon CTs to construct a traditional “quest narrative,” (i.e., “thriller” or “murder mystery”), that provoked readers to interrogate their own desire for meaning and agency, giving rise to a restless spiritual hunger entrenched in cynical times.

***The Da Vinci Code*, Conspiracy Theory, and Dan Brown’s Narrative Intentions**

On the threshold of a new millennium, in 2003, Brown’s release of *The Da Vinci Code* (*DVC*) tapped into the collective angst and interest of his readers, as the librarian in the novel states: “Everyone loves a conspiracy” (qtd. in Smith). Maintaining piqued interests of readers into December 2019, Brown’s website introduces the following synopsis of *DVC*: “The Greatest Conspiracy of the Past 2000 Years Is about to Unravel.” Even today, the book remains a cultural phenomenon, having sold more than 80 million copies worldwide, making it the one of the best-selling English-language novels in the twenty-first century (Sage and Bishopric) and catapulting Brown to fame. A 2006 movie adaptation, directed by Ron Howard and starring Tom Hanks, sustained the book’s popularity, having earned more than \$758 million worldwide by 2012 (“*The Da Vinci Code* Box Office”). Even if the book and film have been replaced by more recent popular culture phenomenon, one cannot dismiss the significant influence of *DVC* and its propagation of CT.

In “Mary Magdalene and the Politics of Public Memory: Interrogating *The Da Vinci Code*,” Tammie M. Kennedy summarizes the book’s central conspiracy theory as follows:

The central argument in Brown's plot is the claim that Jesus and Magdalene were married. Pregnant at the Crucifixion, Magdalene later escaped to France, known then as Gaul, in order to bear his child. Therefore, Magdalene, rather than some inanimate chalice, is the real Holy Grail because she carried the royal bloodline. According to Brown's thesis, the Catholic Church has spent the last 2,000 years trying to cover up these facts in order to diminish the role of women in the early Church—the "lost sacred feminine"—and to deny that the bloodline still exists in France today. In essence, he contests one of the central tenets of Christianity: that Jesus was mortal as well as divine . . . and obliterates one of the most prominent images of Magdalene in public memory—that of repentant whore. As one character says in the movie, "What if the world discovers that the greatest story ever told is actually a lie!" (126)

Brown's CT interrogates deeply held, fundamental Christian beliefs and practices, such as: Were early Christian beliefs radically different than what has been taught? Was Mary Magdalene really a prostitute? Did the church conspire to restrict women from church leadership roles? Were Gospels left out of the canonical Bible that reveal women's leadership in Christianity? Was Jesus Christ fully divine, or a fully human (married) man, or both? Did a secret society of famous scholars, clergy, scientists, and artists dedicate their lives to preserve or erase ancient secrets for a thousand years (i.e., The Priory of Scion)?

Understanding Brown's reasoning for taking on such an enterprise is complicated. While easier to summarize the conspiracy theories that inform the novel, it is more difficult to articulate Brown's motives for writing *DVC*. From a commercial perspective, the marketing journal *Strategic Direction* postulates that Brown's career as a musician had reached a dead-end, when suddenly he was struck by fate or luck in discovering two well-researched, controversial alternative histories of Jesus ("Breaking the Boundaries of Literary Convention"). Immersed in the story lines, Brown's imagination was ignited by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln's *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* and Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince's *The Templar Revelation: Secret Guardians of the*

True Identity of Christ. Brown envisioned that he could translate the information he culled from these two books into a formula for a bestseller. However, this “Aha!” moment led to a lawsuit in 2006 in which the authors, Baigent and Leigh (Lincoln did not participate), charged Brown with copyright infringement. Ultimately, the court sided with Brown, ruling that the author had the unequivocal right to draw on historical works in creating “fiction” (“Brown Wins”). Even so, Brown has always credited both books as foundational research for *DVC*, allowing him to sell the book as historical fiction “based on fact.”

In his early interviews, before *DVC* became a smashing success, Brown lamented the fact that his earlier work lacked public appeal. *Angels and Demons*, for example, sold only 20,000 copies before *DVC*’s global success (Feloni and Flanagan). Returning to the keen interest he held in art history, the notions of good and evil, and the hierarchies in the Vatican, Brown thirsted to open the drum-tight lock on perceived Vatican secrets:

I first learned of [Leonardo] Da Vinci’s affiliation with the Priory of Sion when I was studying art history at the University of Seville. One day, the professor showed us a slide of *The Last Supper* and began to outline all the strange anomalies in the painting. My awareness of Opus Dei came through an entirely different route and much later in my life. After studying the Vatican to write *Angels & Demons*, I became interested in the secrecy of the Vatican and some of the unseen hierarchy. Through that, I also became interested in Opus Dei and met some of the people in it. . . I am fascinated with the gray area between right and wrong and good and evil. Every novel I’ve written so far has explored that gray area. (qtd. in Morris)

Brown claims one aspect of his intention for writing the book was to incorporate learning into his works:

When you finish the book—like it or not—you’ve learned a ton. I had to do an enormous amount of research. My wife is an art historian and a Da Vinci fanatic. So I had a leg up on a lot of this, but it involved numerous trips to Europe, study at the Louvre, some

in-depth study about the Priory of Sion and Opus Dei and about the art of Da Vinci. (“The DaVinci Code”)

As *DVC* dominated the *New York Times* Best-Seller list for more than two years (Wyatt), it continued gaining traction; wanting to know what all the fuss was about compelled people to read it. The publisher produced sophisticated marketing practices to accompany the book, including a slick, official Dan Brown website, which provided audiences with more information about the book, including a reference list to Brown’s research (removed after the lawsuit), and the conspiracies exposed (now called “Bizarre Facts” on his 2019 website).

The *DVC* website content has changed over time; however, during the wake of the book’s early success in 2003, Brown explained his motives this way: “Many historians believe (as I do) that in gauging the historical accuracy of a given concept, we should first ask ourselves a deeper question: How historically accurate is history itself?” (Brown, *The Official Website of Dan Brown*). Furthermore, even though *DVC* is labeled “fiction,” Brown includes a “Fact Page” before the Prologue of the novel that states: “All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.” He also vets the legitimacy of his claims by sharing “Resources for Researchers” on his website (Brown, *The Official Website of Dan Brown*). In short, this approach suggests the kind of reliability and credibility we expect with scholarly research despite *DVC* being a fictional account of the “lost sacred feminine.”

From the book’s inception and release, Brown drew on the power of CT to spark debate about important personal and public issues steeped in religion. Once *DVC* became a bestseller, Brown was interviewed more about his intentions and his insights into why the book resonated so strongly with readers. In the 2004 *Secrets of the Code*, he told editor Dan Burstein he was surprised at the book’s success, but surmised, “It was the type of thing that people were just ready to hear” (311). He also imagined that readers, like himself, were interested in “ancient mysteries and codes and that sort of thing” (312). Furthermore, he speculated that readers were

also fascinated by “secrets” understood to be “out there” (313). He draws a more explicit connection between CTs and spirituality in the interview that appeared on his website during that time (Brown, *The Official Website of Dan Brown*). He explained he was worried about terrorists long before 9/11, and after the attack on the Twin Towers, upon returning to writing *DVC*, he felt that a book based upon religion, supported by historical evidence, would help his country by “giving people release from the pain of reality and (offering) some recreation.” He also thought the book might serve as a catalyst “for people to discuss the important topics of faith, religion, and history” and to overcome “religion’s true enemy—apathy. . .” (Brown, *The Official Website of Dan Brown*).

Disposition of DVC Readers

Brown’s hindsight about *DVC*’s popularity precisely reflects the disposition of his countless readers. After many people heeded Prince’s call to “party like it’s 1999,” a new threat emerged—the Y2K Bug and the widespread fear of computer issues related to the formatting and storage that the programming “bug” might cause. People feared not only that they would lose the data stored on their computers, but also all telecommunications, utilities, and even their money. For example, officials such as John Hamre, U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense, proclaimed, “The Y2K problem is the electronic equivalent of the El Nino and there will be nasty surprises around the globe” (qtd. in Jowitt). Although it may seem ridiculous now, this “scaremongering,” as many experts call it, was only the beginning of an onslaught of CT that served as a backdrop to many people’s quests to make sense of their perplexing worlds.

Most Americans could not have expected a more terrifying end-of-the world scenario than what happened on September 11, 2001, when Osama bin Laden’s Islamic extremist terrorist group, al Qaeda, jetted into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. In the wake of that fear, citizens grew accustomed to stricter security standards for flights (e.g., restricted liquids and no more guests waiting with you at the gate before your flight), as well as the USA Patriot Act, which allowed the government to investigate individuals without a

Conspiracy: Not Just a Theory in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction

M. Katherine Grimes

Singer Linda Ronstadt quotes José Abreu, founder of a Venezuelan youth orchestra, as saying, “Music is a conspiracy; it’s a conspiracy to commit beauty.” Ronstadt adds, “The word conspiracy comes from the Greek word *conspiro*, which means to breathe together. So when you’re singing with somebody, you’re breathing with them, so you form a conspiracy” (qtd. in Scott).

Not every action by two or more people is a conspiracy, of course. Detectives working together on a case are not conspiring. When Huck and Tom sneak out of Aunt Polly and the Widow Douglas’s house, they are not truly conspiring. A group of friends hanging out at a ball game probably are not conspiring. The action of the conspirators must be for a purpose and almost always involves secrecy.

The word “conspiracy” has multiple meanings, but its usual connotation is negative: people conspire to break the law or overthrow a government. In fact, however, real conspiratorial groups in history have also planned actions that might be considered positive, or at least motivated by a desire to improve a situation. Conspiracy can also mean working together on something that is neither good nor bad. A third definition is more complex: people can conspire to perform an illegal act but one that is morally right, such as working to help enslaved people escape, hiding Anne Frank and her family during the Holocaust, or leaving water for people coming from Mexico into the southwestern United States desert. As Martin Luther King, Jr., writes in “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” “there are just laws, and there are unjust laws. . . . A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law, or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law.” Thus, a conspiracy to create or uphold an immoral or unjust law, such as one that would take from the poor to give to the rich, is an

evil conspiracy, while a conspiracy to disobey such a law is morally right.

As in real life, conspiracies in young adult fiction can be either good or evil. However, they are different from real life in that the evil fictional conspiracies are usually fomented by adults, while the good ones almost always involve teenagers, with or without adult assistance. In the real world, most conspiracies, both good and bad, are formed by adults, some of whom are defeated, but some of whom win, often taking power themselves.

In young adult fiction, conspiracies very rarely involve children's parents. Sometimes the parents are literally absent, often sick or dead. For example, in *The Hunger Games*, Katniss Everdeen's father is dead, and her mother is ill; in the Harry Potter series, the parents of both the title character and the evil Voldemort are dead; in *The Book Thief*, Liesel Meminger lives with foster parents; in *All the Light We Cannot See*, Werner Pfennig is an orphan, and Marie-Laure LeBlanc lives with her great-uncle; and in *Children of Blood and Bone*, Zélie's mother has been killed, as has her father by the end of the novel. Sometimes children form the conspiracies unbeknownst to their parents, as do Jacob Portman in *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* and Walter and Josie Burke in *Bombingham*, but even though the Burke children have parents, their mother is ill, and their father, alcoholic. Exceptions exist, as in *Number the Stars*, but they are rare. Absent parents leave children and teenagers both vulnerable and free, making their plights more treacherous, their courageous actions more heroic, and their need for co-conspirators more urgent.

Young adult novels that include conspiracies have a variety of settings and situations. Frequently the books are set in a post-apocalyptic future, as in James Dashner's *Maze Runner* series, or a malicious person or conspiracy has orchestrated a takeover of a land, as in Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* series. Some, however, are set in historic times; Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars*, Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*, Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See*, and *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* by Ransom Riggs are set in Europe during the time of World War II.¹ Anthony

Grooms's *Bombingham* is set in Birmingham, Alabama, during the Civil Rights era. Others involve science fiction, such as Veronica Roth's *Divergent* series and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy. Some involve magic, including J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series and Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone*. Others rework mythological subjects, such as several of Rick Riordan's series, including *The Kane Chronicles*. While the settings in time, place, reality, and fantasy vary, what almost all contemporary young adult novels involving conspiracies have in common is being set in dystopias, which are basically hells, such as the Panem of *The Hunger Games*. Although most dictionaries define dystopias as fictional and often futuristic, others recognize that dystopias can exist in the real world and the present day, as well.

In her essay "His Fordship in the Capitol and Big Brother in the Districts: The Hunger Games and the Modern Dystopian Tradition," Amy Sturgis explains two types of dystopian literature. The first follows the theme of Aldous Huxley's 1932 novel *Brave New World*, in which people trade freedom for "security and entertainment, until we are as helpless and dependent as children" (88). The other is in the strain of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, published in 1949. It shows us with "our freedom torn from us by force, leaving us prisoners in our own homes, always watched, captive, and afraid" (88). The Huxleyan form appears in some young adult dystopian fiction, such as Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, but much more of it is Orwellian, as we see in the *Divergent* trilogy, *The Maze Runner* series, and Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone*.

As Crystal Wilkins points out in her essay "Moral Ambiguity in Authority Figures in *Divergent*, *The Hunger Games*, and the Harry Potter Series," many scholars connect the current proliferation of dystopian young adult literature to the 2001 attacks on the United States (100–01). The conspiracy that caused the attacks seems to have created in young people a fear that adults cannot protect them; therefore, adolescent readers need to live vicariously through characters who conspire to protect their lands from harm, giving readers some hope that they can protect themselves. Todd Ide's essay "The Dark Lord and the Prince: Machiavellian Elements in Harry

Potter” asserts a connection between uneasiness, even despair, in the political arenas of both the United States and the United Kingdom and the cynical portrayals of governments in J. K. Rowling’s series. Readers can see that possibility in other series, such as *The Hunger Games* trilogy. And in a 2010 *New Yorker* article “Fresh Hell,” Laura Miller asserts that adolescence, especially the part spent in high school, is itself a dystopia, especially for teenagers who are not rich, athletic, or attractive. Thus, the appeal to teenagers of a group of friends working together to repair a broken society seems obvious.

Historical Novels

Works set in Nazi Germany or other European countries during World War II remind us that a real dystopia is possible. Many high school students have read *The Diary of Anne Frank* and realize that people their age suffered and died in the Holocaust. They probably wonder what would have happened to them and their families and friends had they lived in Europe during the early 1940s. Four recent novels pose that question.

High school readers know Lois Lowry for her dystopian novel *The Giver*, but Lowry also wrote a historical novel for younger readers, *Number the Stars*, about a Danish girl, Annemarie, whose Jewish friend, Ellen Rosen, and her family are in imminent danger of being captured by Nazis. Annemarie’s sister, Lise, had been killed by Nazis for participating in the Danish Underground. Lise’s friend Peter smuggles the older Rosens out of Copenhagen, and Annemarie helps her family take Ellen to Denmark’s coast, where fishermen are ferrying Jewish Danes to Sweden. The conspiracy of Annemarie’s family and Peter to save the Rosens reflects the much larger—and historical—conspiracy of Danish fishermen and Danish Underground to save thousands of their countrymen. The book shows young readers that, despite their fear, even children can work for the good of those they love. In *Number the Stars*, adults and children conspire together, as they often do in World War II era novels.

Australian author Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief* also involves Europeans conspiring to protect a Jew. These saviors are German,

the Hubermanns, and their foster daughter, Liesel. In World War II a Jewish friend saved Hans Hubermann's life. Therefore, when Nazis are rounding up Jews and other victims, the Hubermanns hide Max Vandenburg, the son of Hans's friend. Liesel takes books from the library of the mayor's wife and from piles of books the Nazis are burning and reads them to Max in the basement. Although Rosa Hubermann is gruff and ill-tempered, she grows to love Liesel and Max. Once, Max falls terribly ill, and after days of hovering near death, he begins to recover. Rosa goes to school ostensibly to yell at Liesel for using her hairbrush but actually to tell her the news. As in *Number the Stars*, adults working for the government have created a dystopia, but children and other adults work together to mitigate suffering.

Again, in Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See*, the young and the old work together against Nazis. In France Marie-Laure LeBlanc, who is blind and not quite a teenager when Germany invades her country, lives with her great-uncle, Etienne; they are involved in the French Resistance, using a hidden radio to transmit messages and music. One of their listeners is a German boy, Werner Pfennig, who is charged by the Nazis with helping to trace the radio's signal. Injured in an attack, Werner hears the music and sets out to find the radio, but for his own sake and not for the Nazis. A plot about a stolen gem winds through the story, and by the end Werner has saved Marie-Laure and the diamond, which she has returned to the ocean, where it must stay to evade a curse. Werner has been killed. The conspiracy to protect the jewel symbolizes the conspiracy to protect France, and even Germany, from Hitler's regime. The music played on the radio reminds Werner and the reader of a shared culture more valuable than national loyalties.

Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children by Ransom Riggs is science fiction, with time travel, magic, and supernatural elements. It is set partly in the present and partly during World War II. When Jacob Portman's grandfather is killed by monsters but nobody except Jacob believes it, the teenager goes to Wales to find the place where his grandfather grew up. He finds a school that Nazis bombed to rubble in 1940. But then he travels back in time to the day before

the bombing, a day that the headmistress loops over and over so that the bomb never falls on her and her charges, children with unusual abilities, such as creating fire with their bare hands or levitating, or strange traits, such as eating in the backs of their heads or having bees in their stomachs. We learn that Miss Peregrine and others like her who can change into birds and make time loops tried to achieve immortality but instead created beings called HollowGasts who eat peculiar children and turn into Wights, people with white eyes. When HollowGasts capture Miss Peregrine, the children conspire to save her and restore order. They are unable to save Miss Peregrine in time for her to set the loop, so the school is bombed. However, the children have learned of other time loops and leave to find one, knowing that Jacob will probably never return to the present. Thus, children are first saved by an adult but then must conspire with one another against evil. *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* is the first book in a series that became a trilogy, then grew into a longer series. The first book exhibits many characteristics of young adult fiction with conspiracies: fear; feelings of being unusual, whether the uniqueness is special or odd; the idea that the world is out of sync, dystopian both in the real past of World War II and in the present time; and the need of children to conspire to save themselves, as they cannot count on adults to save them.

Historical novels about the Civil Rights Movement are not as plentiful as those about World War II, but they share some of the same characteristics when they are written for adolescent readers. A recent example is Antonio Grooms's *Bombingham*, a novel about a family living in Birmingham during the standoff between police commissioner Bull Connor and Civil Rights activist Martin Luther King, Jr. The story is told in retrospect by Walter Burke, while he is serving in Vietnam. He and his sister, Josie, had participated in the Children's Crusade in 1963, despite their parents' refusal to join the bus boycott and marches. Their mother's illness and father's drinking problem often leave the children on their own. Thus, the secrecy in their conspiracy with other Civil Rights activists is somewhat easier than it would have been had their parents been more involved in their lives but also more likely to