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De-coding Da Vinci: Zenit interviews Amy Welborn on her new book

First, there was "The Da Vinci Code." Now there's "De-coding Da Vinci." The latter, by writer Amy Welborn, aims to debunk the errors that permeate the best-selling novel by Dan Brown.

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Welborn is a columnist and reviewer for the Catholic weekly Our Sunday

Visitor and the author of several books, including the "Prove It!" series of apologetics books for youth, also published by Our Sunday Visitor. [See link to Welborn website at right for further information on her books and columns.]

Q: Isn't "The Da Vinci Code" just a work of fiction? Why do you think it was important to write a book like yours? Welborn: "The Da Vinci Code" certainly is a work of fiction -- in more ways than one, actually. But within the framework of this novel, author Dan Brown presents many assertions about history, religion and art. He presents them as truth, not as part of his fictional world.

For example, one of Brown's central points is that the earliest Christians did not believe that Jesus was divine, and that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married.

He puts these assertions in the mouths of scholar characters, and frames them with phrases like "Historians say" and "Scholars understand." In addition, Brown presents the titles of real, albeit unreliable, sources within his book, as well as in a bibliography offered on his Web site.

Further, author Dan Brown has repeatedly said in interviews that part of what he is doing in this book is presenting a heretofore "lost history" to readers, and that he is glad to be doing so.

So, certainly, "The Da Vinci Code" is a novel, but the author makes assertions about history within the novel, presents them as fact and widely accepted, and it is this element of the novel that has disturbed some readers and requires a response.

Q: What are the most important assertions about Christian origins that author Dan Brown makes in this novel? What seems to be disturbing people the most?

Welborn: Brown makes several assertions, none of which would be taken seriously by real, as opposed to fictional scholars.

The basis of the book is that Jesus, a mortal teacher of wisdom, was intent on reintroducing the notion of the "sacred feminine" back into human consciousness and experience. He drew followers, and was married to Mary Magdalene, whom he designated as the leader of his movement.

This was opposed by another party -- the "Peter party" -- which worked to suppress the truth, which was ultimately achieved through the actions of Emperor Constantine who

"divinized" Jesus at the Council of Nicaea in 325.

It is this suggestion that the Christian Church has been engaged in a destructive cover-up of the truth that has disturbed readers, as well as the idea -- propped up by Brown's assertions that "historians believe" -- that

Jesus was not experienced as divine by his earliest followers.

Q: How do you address these assertions? Welborn: The first thing I do is to point out the contradictions inherent in these statements. They simply don't make any sense on innumerable levels.

For example, Brown says that the "Peter party," meaning orthodox Christianity, was opposed to Mary Magdalene and demonized her.

Well, in the centuries this was supposedly happening -- the first three centuries of Christianity -- we have many examples of Church Fathers holding Mary Magdalene up for particular praise. Mary Magdalene is honored as a saint in Catholicism and Orthodoxy. How is that "demonizing"?

Further, and more fundamentally, Brown claims that Constantine basically invented the notion of Christ's divinity in order to prop up his power and unify the empire.

If this were the case, then who was, in fact, the "Peter party" of Orthodoxy which Brown claims was battling the Mary Magdalene devotees for power all of those centuries? It just doesn't hold up.

Basic to all of this is the question of sources, which I take a great deal of time addressing in my book. Readers need to understand that the sources

upon which Brown depends are mostly Gnostic writings dating from the late first century at the earliest, and most probably later.

He completely ignores the New Testament writings, which even skeptical scholars date from the first century, as well as the consistent witness of the Greek and Latin Fathers, as well as liturgical evidence from these first three centuries.

Given this, there's no reason to take anything Brown says about Christian origins seriously.

Q: What is the role of Opus Dei in "The Da Vinci Code"? What's your response to this? Welborn: In "The Da Vinci Code," Opus Dei plays the part, I believe, that the Jesuits used to play in older anti-Catholic fiction and polemic: a worldwide secret society with unique ties to the Pope that is up to no good.

Brown uses a caricature of Opus Dei in this novel, although he does cover his bases and make them dupes, rather than villains, eventually.

But needless to say, "The Da Vinci Code" is full of misstatements and mischaracterizations of Opus Dei, as well as the rather interesting figure of an Opus Dei "monk," which, in itself discounts anything else Brown has to say about the group because, of course, Opus Dei is a primarily lay organization and does not have monks.

Q: Are the assertions that Brown makes about Leonardo's art defensible? Welborn: Not at all, and it's rather shocking how blatant his mistakes are, on almost every aspect of the artist's life and work that he attempts to discuss. I have many details in my book, but I think the place to start is with the artist's name.

Brown presents himself as some sort of devotee and expert in art history. But he also consistently refers to the artist in question as "da Vinci," as if this were his name. It's not. It's the indicator of his home town.

The man's name was "Leonardo," and that is the name by which he is called in any art book you might pick up. Anyone who claims to be an art expert and refers to the artist as "da Vinci" is as credible as a person claiming to be a Church historian who refers to Jesus as "of Nazareth."

Q: Is "The Da Vinci Code" anti-Catholic? Welborn: It is, in this sense: Dan Brown holds Catholicism guilty for supposed crimes that, if he were consistent, for which he should hold all Christianity guilty.

After all, it is not only Catholicism that believes that Jesus is divine, recites the Nicene Creed, and accepts the canon of the New Testament. It is

not only the Catholic Church that played a role -- and not nearly as great as Brown claims -- in execution of witches during the late medieval and early modern period.

As a U.S. citizen, I can tell you with confidence that Catholic bishops were not in charge during the 17th-century Salem, Massachusetts, witch trials.

So yes, in that sense, "The Da Vinci Code" is anti-Catholic.

Q: Why do you think the assertions about Christian origins that Brown makes have been so eagerly received, even by self-professed Christians? Welborn: Because, unfortunately, they have not been well educated in the historical origins of Christianity. My book is essentially an attempt to do some gentle correction of that situation.

I encourage readers, in the end, to not depend on the silliness of this novel to broaden their understanding of Christian origins.

If they are interested in who Jesus really was and what he really preached and was about, there is an easily accessible way to do that, which isn't secret or hidden. It's the New Testament. It's the sacramental life of the Church. If you want to meet Jesus, I say, start there. You might be surprised at what you find.

For book purchase information, see link at right.

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