



Movie Review: Angels and Demons

The film is as fanciful as it is controversial. As it begins, we learn that the pope has just died, and a Conclave — an assembly of cardinals who will elect a new pope — is soon to commence in Vatican City. Unbeknownst to the crowds and media gathered in St. Peter's Square, however, a great evil lurks among them. The four *preferiti*, the cardinals most likely to assume the papacy, have been abducted by the shadowy Illuminati and are to be systematically murdered, one every hour starting at 8 p.m. Even more ominously, the conspirators have also stolen a canister of antimatter from the CERN particle physics laboratory near Geneva, Switzerland, and have hidden it in Vatican City along with the *preferiti*. And, once the mechanical canister's battery runs down — which is expected to occur at 12 midnight — the antimatter will cease being held in suspension, come into contact with matter, and detonate, creating a five-megaton blast that will destroy the holy city. The clock is ticking.



To help them thwart the Illuminati plot, the Vatican police decide to approach Harvard symbolologist Robert Langdon, a character played by Tom Hanks. Langdon is joined by Vittoria Vetra (Ayelet Zurer), a physicist and co-creator of the antimatter who may be able to replace the canister's battery, thus forestalling the holocaust.

Angels & Demons is a fairly fast-paced movie, interposing action scenes between Langdon's flexing of his intellectual muscle, as he analyzes ancient rites and symbolism in an effort to unravel the mystery at hand. But the film is silly and simplistic, and its runtime of 138 minutes is probably a bit excessive. It is rated PG-13, and this is no doubt because it does portray some violence and gore. As for language, the worst examples are "hell" and "b*****d," and I don't remember the Lord's name being taken in vain at all.

Despite this, *Angels & Demons*' irreverence is profound. Langdon is the character who locked horns with the Catholic Church in *The Da Vinci Code*, and he is a thoroughly secular academic who has a decidedly snide attitude toward the church. Yet this is just the tip of the iceberg, as the whole film is infused with fabrications which, it just so happens, in every case serve to impugn Christianity.

Really, though, the problem starts with the rather fanciful notion that the church would have to recruit an Ivy League symbolologist to save the day. If letters after a name are what awe you, know that there is



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no shortage of Ph.D.s at the Vatican. As for expertise in symbolism, ancient orders, and rituals, well, this is the Catholic Church, ya' know? It has only been studying such things for the last two millennia. This means for about 1,500 years before the birth of Harvard, which, incidentally, was named after a minister and founded by Puritan Calvinists for the purposes of training clergy.

Yet, at best, church officials are portrayed as well-meaning but naïve sorts who are illuminated by the products of Langdon's smoothly firing and copious secular neurons. Worse still, in what might be a metaphor for the specious idea that the church is opposed to "new ideas" (which are usually just old mistakes), some Vatican officials scoff at Langdon's brilliant insights and have to be brought kicking and screaming into investigatory enlightenment. The only exception to this is Camerlengo Patrick McKenna (Ewan McGregor), the assistant to the late pope, who actually comes up with a clever idea and appears for much of the movie as a voice of reason. But even he isn't "Ivy League."

Langdon is, though, I suppose, a very realistic modern academic, in that everything he "teaches" the religious folks is fiction. A good example is an exchange he has with Commander Richter (Stellan Skarsgård), head of the Swiss Guard, wherein Langdon explains why the Illuminati have designs on the *preferiti*:

Richter: You said they'd be killed publicly.

Robert Langdon: Yes, revenge. For *La Purga*.

Richter: *La Purga*?

Robert Langdon: Oh geez, you guys don't even read your *own* history do you? 1668, the church kidnapped four Illuminati scientists and branded each one of them on the chest with the symbol of the cross.

The problem is that such an event never happened. Bill Donohue of the Catholic League addressed this and a related misrepresentation, [writing](#), "In the movie, the Catholic Church is said to have murdered members of the Illuminati, of which Galileo was a member. In real life, the Catholic Church never laid a hand on any member of the secret society and Galileo died almost a century and a half before the Illuminati were founded. In the movie, even Church officials admit that the Illuminati have reason for revenge, when, of course, this is pure nonsense."

The movie also tells us that the Illuminati despise the church because she is anti-science. Donohue addressed this fallacy and another falsehood as well, writing:

In the movie, we learn how the Church has worked against the march of progress, when, in fact, the historical record shows the opposite: the scientific achievements and contributions to higher education made by priests are incredible. In the movie, Catholics are portrayed as believing "Stem Cell Research Is Murder," when, in fact, the Church is pro-stem cell research, save for procedures which destroy embryos. In the movie, Pope Pius IX is said to have bludgeoned the genitalia of male statues (so anti-sex was he), when, of course, this never happened. Indeed, Pius IX lavishly funded the arts.

Even when *Angels & Demons* has church officials defend the faith, it's designed to denigrate. When Langdon calls the church a corporation, a Vatican agent retorts (I'm paraphrasing) that the church is not a corporation but an entity that ministers to over a billion "lost and frightened souls," eliciting scoffing groans from some in the audience. Yet, while there is one in every bunch, that characterization doesn't describe the churchgoers I've known. They are not lost but found, not frightened but faithful. If



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such a line isn't the poorest of writing from the shallowest of minds, it's simply malicious. That is to say, it's not a defense at all and would never enter a man of faith's mind; it is, however, how many atheists explain the "phenomenon" of faith. Why else, these empty vessels figure, would people believe in "an invisible man in the sky"?

Thus, while many critics have called *Angels & Demons* "implausible" and even "stupid," if this is the greatest defect they indict it for, their review is defective. Campiness and melodrama can be defended, as there is such thing as artistic license. But if realism is your bag, you should first be concerned with propaganda, not plausibility.

And realism should concern us here. You may portray the fictional Darth Vader or Jabba the Hut any way you wish — no real reputation and understanding of history is at stake. But when depicting actual people or entities, there is a duty to be accurate with facts. If criticism is warranted, fine, but if one has to lie to demonize what he critiques, it says more about him than it does about it.

Really, Howard's effort much reminds me of Oliver Stone and his movie *JFK*, which contained egregious factual inaccuracies designed to lend his conspiracy theory credence. When asked about this, Stone justified it by claiming artistic license. But this isn't artistic license; it's artistic licentiousness. When treating real events, people, and organizations — an endeavor that *will* influence real people's grasp of them — there must be respect for reality. When you fail in this regard, you cease to be an artist and become a propagandist.

Thus, Ron Howard's [protestations](#) about how his film isn't anti-Catholic ring hollow and are an insult to intelligence. If we portrayed blacks or Jews with the most blatant stereotypes and peddled lies designed to affirm prejudices against them, would our claims of charity toward them be credible? No, moreover, it would be incredible to think that such a movie could even make it onto the silver screen.

Howard's *Angels & Demons* puts him in league with individuals such as [Andres Serrano](#) or [Chris Ofili](#). Like them, perhaps he fancies himself a "bold" artist. But he is no [Salman Rushdie](#). He would never create a work impugning Islam, and not just because he probably has more sympathy for it. He also likes his head way too much.

Yet I would encourage Howard to make that his next project. I mean, come on, Ron, you-know-who would never take out a *fatwa* on Opie, would they?



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