

General Topics :: Screwtape on The DaVinci Code

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by Eric Metaxas

My dear Wormwood,

I trust this finds you as miserable and coarse as ever. I am pleased to take a respite from our usual tutorial and venture into something a bit broader, but vastly instructive for our larger purposes. To wit: I shall today croak a paean of praise to a particular work of middlebrow non-fiction. The genre has been particularly good to us, Wormwood! Do you remember The Passover Plot? Or that excellent hoax by Erich von Daniken, In Search of Ancient Astronauts? You may s now, but in its day even that harebrained rant proved helpful to our cause. As did most of the books on The Bermuda Triangle and "UFO's". And don't get me started on Out on a Limb! Oh, but Wormwood. Those books were mere types and shadows of the one that has in these last days transported me to ecstasies of embarrassing intensity. It is a type of "romantic thriller" (penned by someone under the unwitting tutelage of an old crony of mine from the Sixth Circle); it is titled The DaVinci Code.

I surmised it should be well worth the trouble of familiarizing you with it, inasmuch as it contains such a precariously towering heap of our very best non-thinking that it is quite dizzying! It has the genuine potential to mislead, confuse, and vex millions! Indeed the mystical sleight-of-hand involved in shoehorning so many cubic yards of gasbag clichés, shopworn half-truths and straight-faced howlers into a single volume simply beggars belief; and if I didn't know that the author had had unwitting "help" from my former colleague, the venerable Gallstone, I simply shouldn't believe it could have been done at all!

Now, Wormwood, before you object to my calling this book "non-fiction"-- since it is technically classified as "fiction"-- let me say that it is essentially non-fiction, at least as far as our purposes are concerned. That's because it's principle delight for our side is that in the tacky plastic shell of some below-average "fiction" the book parades as "fact" a veritable phalanx of practical propaganda and disinformation that would make our dear Herr Goebbels (Circle Eight, third spider hole on the right) jade green with envy! Souls by the boatload are blithely believing almost all of the deliciously corrosive non-facts that are congealed everywhere in it, like flies in bad aspic, and it is that precisely which most recommends this glorious effort as worthy of our dedicated and especial study.

But where to begin in describing to you its myriad delights? First, a brief synopsis of the plot: a museum curator is murdered by a fanatical albino Christian bigot (nice opening, no?); the curator's granddaughter and an American "symbolologist" (don't ask me, I haven't the time) try to find the real killer and are launched on a wildly implausible and fantastically cryptical search for the proverbial Holy Grail, all the while chased by angry gendarmes and the aforementioned unhinged albino. In the process they (and the lucky reader) discover that: the Church is murderous and evil; the Bible is a hoax; Jesus is not divine, but merely a married mortal and an earnest proto-feminist (!); there is no such thing as Truth; and oh, yes... is the truest kind of prayer. Can you stand it? A virtuoso performance, no? It's as if the author's somehow squeezed all of hell into a walnut shell. And oh, yes, one more historical "fact": Leonardo DaVinci's homosexuality was "flamboyant"! Do tell.

But that's just the irresistible plot, Wormwood. It's the author's technique in so many other areas that is particularly worth our attention. For example, there is the manner in which the book seduces its reader with naked flattery, holding out the carrot -- or should I say apple -- of "inside knowledge."

Make note of this, Wormwood; it worked wonders for us in Eden and works for us still. The author trots out the ageless fiddle-faddle about a parallel "reality" beside the "official" one everyone's been sold. You know ... the moth-eaten, bedraggled idea that all of history is a grand "conspiracy" conducted by some hidden elites! But wait, the lucky reader is to be let in on it all, and for the mere price of purchasing this book! He'll learn the "real" story behind the "official" story that all the other saps have been buying for lo! these many centuries. Heady stuff, eh, Wormwood?

Transparent as it might seem to us, this temptation has always been too great for the humans to bear. They ache to be part of that "inside" group that knows what's "really" going on, and they fall for it every time. It's not so different

from their craving for gossip or "dirt"; only better, since there isn't the pesky nuisance of guilt to deal with. They cannot help themselves; they simply swallow it without a thought. That's the key, Wormwood, for if actual thinking can be prevented, the humans are under our control.

There's something about a crackpot conspiracy that makes my brown scales twinkle, Wormwood. There's nothing like a grand conspiracy to twist truth round and round -- until the shape of the thing one ends up with is unrecognizable from that with which one began. I remember when I was young, in an immature display of rakish pique I bewitched an inept sausage-maker such that the next time he applied himself to the sausage-maker's art he became almost instantly entangled in the entrails with which he was working. That image reoccurs to me now as I recall this great book, Wormwood. You see, this book is that hopelessly intestine-entangled sausage-maker's writ large, I tell you! The reader will become snarled in the vile, greasy entrails of its thousand half-truths and will die before he extricates himself! What could be better?

But don't let's digress. I was speaking of the employment of flattery. Understand, Wormwood that the successful devil -- and this devilishly clever author -- well knows his audience, and then tells that audience precisely what it wants to hear. As long as what one puts out is vaguely plausible, they'll buy it by the yard, and at retail prices! Trust me, Wormwood, these gullible dullards are even likely to thank you for the privilege of being your customer!

I particularly admire the writer's way of tapping into the widespread disaffection and resentment so many modern women feel toward men. This emotional woundedness is a veritable Mother Lode (pun intended) of destructive possibilities, and it is as profitably mined here as ever it has been. The author winds up his female readers by informing them that they've been getting the short end of the stick ever since Eve was kicked out of the garden for her assertive sassiness! History has cheated them! The Church has oppressed them and they deserve better! And he supports this wall of custard with a thousand most excellent pseudo-facts!

Really, Wormwood, the author's pretense of taking the feminine side of things is extraordinary for he has cleverly substituted the *au courant* idea of femininity for the thing itself. According to this version of things we must only know one thing about women, and that is, first and foremost, that they are hideously oppressed. Once alerted to this central fact of their identity throughout all of history, and especially of "Church" history, they'll believe they needn't bother about much else.

Revealed to the readers is the "fact" that in the interests of keeping power in the hands of men the Church murdered five million women in the middle ages! Don't laugh, Wormwood. This author delivers this screaming absurdity with a deadpan that would make Buster Keaton envious. Never mind that it isn't close to being even one percent true by any conceivable historical standard. The point is that it sounds true, at least to the ever-expanding herd of sheep that are grazing madly upon this ripping, dreamy, peachy excuse for a book! It sounds true and therefore it must be true! Every woman who has been wounded by a man will be vulnerable to this excellent stratagem. Whenever and wherever possible, Wormwood, fan this outrage vigorously.

The ersatz "her-story" of the Church's vicious oppression of women is seasoned with great steaming lumps of balderdash about Nature and "Mother Earth." It's a brilliant connection. Men and women alike invariably eat it up with a spoon because it gives them a heady sense of being somehow "spiritual" without the annoying necessity of adopting all of those patriarchal "rules"! Never mind, Wormwood, that in this Nature goddess silliness they are worshipping deities that don't exist! The only thing that matters is that they are not worshipping the deity that does! How we accomplish that doesn't matter a fig! And if we can give them a sense of their own superiority, a recognition of their sober respect for Mother Earth and against all senseless violence, and against all war and for peace and harmony and tolerance and recycling, well, all the better!

I ought to mention, too, that what passes in this book for perhaps the main "argument" in favor of those pagan goddess religions is that they predate Christianity. Behold the genius of this, Wormwood! It suggests that because pagan goddess worship is older than Christianity it is somehow more pure, closer to the source of "true" spirituality. But where is the logic in this, Wormwood? A horse predates a motorcar, but who would prefer it? Monarchy predates democracy! A jockey predates an elderly "roo! What of it?? Brilliant!

Before I go on, let me say that I have seen some execrable parodies of this book, my very least favorite being *Bring in the Da Vinci*, *Bring in Da Funk*, a filthy piece of "can't not to be read" under any circumstances -- and I mean it, Wormwood. Don't give me any humbug about how it will help you see how the Enemy thinks and therefore aid you in defeating him. The fact is, my callow dunderhead, that some things have the ability to corrupt the cynical likes even of you. You might

ht well take these corruptions at face value and start having qualms about working against our enemy above, so ixnay o n at-thay ook-bay, et it gay? IÂ'm ot-nay oking-jay!

Now then, another extremely admirable facet of this book is the author's intimate knowledge of his audience's skyscraping ignorance, which he exploits to devastating effect. One must ever endeavor to capitalize upon ignorance, Wormwood. This is one of the chiefest weapons in our arsenal, and let me observe -- and not without some glee -- that the ignorance of contemporary Western Society in matters of history and theology both, is of an absolutely unprecedented greatness. Never before have so many known so little about so much of great importance.

Ask your average fellow in the street the slightest detail of a daft sitcom of forty years ago and he will move heaven and earth to supply you with the answer, and then will likely prate on with other similarly inane details -- as if knowing who lived at 1313 Mockingbird Lane was his very passport to the Elysian Fields. Ha! But ask him to tell you about the Nicean Council, or ask him what are the Synoptic Gospels and you will suddenly find yourself in the presence of a weather-beaten cigar store Injun! But then go ahead and ask him who played drums for The Monkees, or the name of that blasted itinerant peddler on Green Acres and you will think yourself in the presence of a very Voltaire! Our television executives Down Under have been awfully successful!

As I say, this book exploits the ignorance of its readership with an exemplary élan. One particularly daring example claims that the Crusades were principally concerned with gathering and destroying information! This is bold and laughable twaddle, but it fits so nicely into the "ye olde" conspiracy theory -- that the powerful religious hypocrites want to keep the "truth" out of the hands of their powerless subjects. And what do readers of this book know of the Crusades?

Then there's that double whopper with cheese, about how the Emperor Constantine "invented" Christianity in the fourth century! Never mind that people had believed it for all those years before it was "invented." And in the same masterstroke, the author undermines the authority of the Bible by declaring that what it contains arrived on a strictly "political" vote. All of those wonderful "Gospels" that didn't fit with the "patriarchal" version of things were cruelly -- always "cruelly" -- suppressed and rejected; the oppressive messages it now contains were slipped in to fit Constantine's political agenda! Who among this book's readers will know that for three centuries most of those same Gospels were already considered a part of the scriptural canon? Who among his dough-headed readers even knows the meaning of the word "canonical"? My nostrils flare in admiration.

And at the creamy center of the story is the swaggeringly wild idea that Mary Magdalene (whom, incidentally, a cousin of mine once possessed briefly, only to be rudely evicted) would have married Our Chief Enemy! Oh, fatuosity! But again, it shrewdly plays into what the reader so wants to believe: that Jesus was not divine, and that all the demands that go along with his divinity may be conveniently ignored. And, perhaps most cunningly, it does not dismiss Jesus entirely, but patronizingly reduces him into a toothless sage, a veritable "nice guy." Naturally the author has added that requisite whiff of subversive sexuality. And oh, yes, hold onto your horns, Wormwood: Mary Magdalene is the Holy Grail! You see, her womb... oh, never mind! It's just too rich!

As singularly brilliant as our colleague is in what concerns us most, the writing is -- alas and alack! -- scandalously slipshod and often pure giggle-fodder. I mean, the detail of a hulking albino ascetic! Named Silas! Silas! I'm wheezing with laughter this minute! Honestly, it's too much! I'm almost surprised the author did not simply make him a drooling simpleton named Benji! "Must kill!" The unintentionally comic monkeyshines of this character almost spoiled my appreciation of the work. But again, it's decidedly not the fictional elements, however ghastly, that matter here, Wormwood! Most readers won't notice the thick prose or wafer-thin characters anyway. For many of them, paperback "romances" are like mother's milk! What does matter is passing along cunning and doubt-sowing falsehoods as smoothly as possible. The rest is merely the narrative butter, as it were, that helps the nasty gobbets slide down the gullet all the more easily. But really, Wormwood -- an albino ascetic! Why didn't he toss in a vicious freckled humpback? Or some cheerful peasants with goiters? I must stop.

Well, Wormwood, there we are. If you can slither past the Early Reader prose and the over caffeinated, goggle-eyed plot I think you'll find that you've a veritable textbook on your hands, one that will reward you again and again as you stagger forward and downward in mastering the grand and ignorable art of leading souls, one by one, toward a fathomlessly bleak eternity. Cheers.

Your affectionate Uncle,
Screwtape **

Eric Metaxas is the author of the much acclaimed Everything You Always Wanted to Know About God (but were afraid to ask