

Indiana Jones and the Holy See

Screenplay by David Koepp

Screenplay by Akiva Goldsman

Book by Dan Brown

Directed by Ron Howard

Tom Hanks ... Robert Langdon
Ewan McGregor ... Camerlengo Patrick McKenna
Ayelet Zurer ... Vittoria Vetra
Stellan Skarsgård ... Commander Richter
Pierfrancesco Favino ... Inspector Olivetti
Nikolaj Lie Kaas ... Assassin
Armin Mueller-Stahl ... Cardinal Strauss

Robert Langdon: The Illuminati did not become violent until the 17th Century. Their name means 'The Enlightened Ones.' They were physicists, mathematicians, astronomers. In the 1500s they started meeting in secret, because they were concerned about the church's inaccurate teachings. They were dedicated to scientific truth. And the Vatican didn't like that. So the church began to, how did you say it? Oh, hunt them down and kill them.

The opening credits end with the performance of some urgent and practical-looking subatomic-particle-science at the CERN Large Hadron Collider in Geneva, Switzerland, An explosively significant amount of antimatter has been captured by a team headed by physicist Vittoria Vetra (Ayelet Zurer) and her father. The discovery, it is hoped, will pave the way for energy "too cheap to meter." Unfortunately, someone has broken into the facility and stolen the vial containing the stuff... er, anti-stuff.

For reasons that remain murky (at least for me), the malefactors — following the death of a popular pope — have deposited the vial in a battery-powered enclosure in a secret location in the Vatican City. The batteries, which shield the antimatter from the surrounding matter of the vial, will die precisely at midnight the next day. Vatican go boom! I believe I remember Vittoria stating that the explosion would be six kilotons, meaning most of Rome go boom, too! (For comparison, the Hiroshima bomb was 15 kilotons.)

At this point for a tongue-in-cheek reference to various plot difficulties, you should read the review by Roger Ebert. I particularly like Roger's comment, "This kind of film requires us to be very forgiving, and if we are, it promises to entertain. Angels & Demons succeeds." And he's right. Even for died-in-the-wool Randians[1], there's more to literary or cinematic life than "plot, plot, and plot." Not that Angels and Demons is bereft of plot; it suffers instead from a bountiful excess of plot that strains credulity—a naive, good-natured five-year-old will throw up his hands at regular intervals in "no friggin' way!" disdain.

My personal favorite is the number of rugged physical scenes the Harvard symbology professor Robert Langdon (Tom Hanks is 53) seems to glide through without much more than a mussed hairline: It seems like he's running all the time, falling into cavernous sewers, knocking over mammoth bookcases in the Vatican archives, scaling fiery platforms, eluding the young, death-dealing special-forces psycho, while never missing a single arcane, obscure clue. He would be a good candidate to replace Matt Damon in the next Bourne movie. Oh, and of course, I'm amused at how the characters drive cars at breakneck speeds through the streets of Rome at all hours... without even using their sirens!

So, all right, Angels and Demons is as mythically inclined as the Indiana Jones or the National Treasure movies. But chances are you liked those wild rides of the imagination. And I did, too. Strap yourself in and prepare for lift off. Like its prequel, The Da Vinci Code, which I reviewed a couple of years ago, A&D is somewhat cerebral... and deals with a whole lotta genuinely fascinating Catholic and anti-Catholic history. But this latter Dan Brown/Brian Grazer/Ron Howard blockbuster is much less subtle (I think they realized that the average moviegoers' interest in symbology extends no further than their ability to distinguish between Coke and Pepsi or Budweiser and Miller).

Consequently, everything the actors are about makes sense. I mean it's clear what they're supposed to be doing, once you suspend disbelief in them actually being able or motivated to do it. For an "adventure" movie like A&D, that makes life much easier: plot is going to take care of itself quite nicely, so we can focus on background matters. And, folks, background matters in this high-production-value film... whether you're a) a backslid Catholic longing for a return of "eerie majesty," b) a Sam Harris atheist witnessing a target-rich Bizarro World, or c) a spiritual seeker appreciating the deep unconsciousness of the Church of Rome.

Or someone who loves philosophy, history, and architecture.

In my review of the Academy Award winner for 2008, *Slumdog Millionaire*, I commented that while watching the poignant story of some ragamuffin young street urchins in Bombay make good, it was difficult for me to ignore the 900# gorilla of a major social problem: rank, messy, pointless overpopulation. The Quality of Life issue is so overwhelming it's impossible for me to identify with those who suffer so for lack of it:

But... most viewers I feel will not be able to shake the anxiety the movie tends to generate over the overwhelming quantity of humanity—especially in so materially wretched a state—despite occasional emergence of storybook quality. Birth control, anyone? Anyone?

Speaking of which, the Catholic Church pretty much wrote the book on birth control, with the famous "Let's Throw Caution to the Wind and Hump Constantly for the Glory of God Whether or Not the Women Survive Childbirth or the Little Ones Have Any Fun Whatsoever in Their Short Miserable Lives" method. Now that's birth control: what gets born gets controlled. The Church is not in the good, clean, responsible fun business. It's in the power and authority business, and high numbers mean plenty of good soldiers and rack operators to keep the competition at bay and propel "the central authority" into the stratosphere.

So while watching A&D I experience another Quality of Life issue, expressed something like, "Wow, consider how many centuries of how many millions of paisanos and paisanettes were brutalized, enslaved, raped, tortured, killed, or otherwise inconvenienced to enable the construction of so many hundreds of magnificent churches and cathedrals housing thousands of mostly sadistic, insecure-bordering-on-perverted old men—who knew nothing of human sex, love, or family—adorned with colorfully affected linens and glittering jewelry, and whose fulltime occupation was to cultivate blind obedience by filling minds with supernatural inanities."

Sorry, I know that's way harsh. But even in my later less-adamant, more-spiritually tolerant years, I marvel at the institution of the Church of Rome. The level of unconsciousness is so deep and longstanding, the insanity so immense—the Church, in the persons of its ecclesiastical officers, practiced ritual torture and murder upon so many human beings for seemingly unending eons—that the fact it, or any other superstitiously authoritarian religion, exists at all (and is spoken of fondly by gazillions) is proof that the human species, taken as a whole, still manifests a critical survival-threatening defect(s).

Actually, I feel I comment quite pertinently on the authoritarian, dependent nature of this defect in my book, *The Sacred Nonaggression Principle*.^[2] One noteworthy perception conveyed through *Angels and Demons* is just how up to date—rich, powerful, high-tech, and, I would add, menacing—the Church of Rome remains. A&D should dissuade anyone that the defective authoritarian impulse the Church embodies is somehow wilting on the vine of reason.

I don't think the Dan Brown/Ron Howard-specified rapprochement between the Church and science works at all. But it's conventionally appealing and avoids Medievalist wrath affecting the box office. Any philosophical meat you'll derive from the movie you'll have to bring to the table yourself; I could write for hours here. One final observation pertaining to religious experience: Through Eckhart Tolle, mainly, I've come to an extremely high appreciation of natural Jesus qua spiritual teacher. There is no remote connection between this beautiful man and the patriarchal monstrosity of this Church supposedly based on him.

(All good by people in the Church is despite the Church.)

Let me close by repeating Roger Ebert's comment: "This kind of film requires us to be very forgiving, and if we are, it promises to entertain. *Angels & Demons* succeeds."

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[1] Ayn Rand, author of *Atlas Shrugged* and many other radical, individualist works. Founder of a philosophy known as Objectivism.

[2] Sacred for me means of the highest moral/rational standing, not something ineffable or supernatural.

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Church of Rome | Dan Brown | Catholic Church | Angels & Demons | Da Vinci