

Dan Brown and the Palmarian Church, Or What is this Thing Called Research?

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A religious group known as the Palmarian Church or more formally the Holy Palmarian Catholic Church plays a quite prominent role in Dan Brown's most recent book *Origin* (2017.) I am entirely sure that most readers of the book have never heard about this church founded in 1978, which has its headquarters in Spain. That is most understandable and certainly not a sign of a lack of education. Even the vast majority of religious studies scholars and theologians have not even heard the name, let alone know anything about it.

The Palmarian Church is a small group. Today, there are somewhere between 1,000 and 2,000 members (of which some 30 are clerics, and 40 are nuns,) though the membership was somewhat bigger a few decades ago. A salient feature of the Palmarian Church is that they claim that they are the only true Catholic Church and that their leader is the true pope, not the man in Rome. In fact, in their view, the Holy See has moved from Rome to the small Andalusian town of El Palmar de Troya, located between Seville and Malaga, where the Church has constructed a huge cathedral.

I am Professor of Church and Mission Studies and acting Professor of Church History at Uppsala University, Sweden. Without any unbecoming self-boasting, I am the scholar who has devoted most time to researching the Palmarians, and probably the outsider who knows most about them. It is not that difficult, as few have investigated them. My interest goes back twenty years, and I have recently published a book about the church as well as several articles and blog posts (see below for details on these freely available publications.)

With this background, I was thrilled to hear that one of the best-selling authors of the world included the Palmarians in his new book. However, to be honest, I was quite concerned, too. I have read a couple of Dan Brown's earlier books, many of which deal prominently with religious issues, and throughout the years I have devoted quite some time to convince students who believed more in Dan Brown's stories in the *Da Vinci Code* and other of his books than in the course literature. Still, I read *Origin* as soon as it appeared.

Though Dan Brown's *Origin* is a work of fiction, as in earlier works in the Robert Langdon series, he claims that the book is based on thorough research. Just before the prologue to the book, Brown explicitly writes "FACT [upper case in the original:] All art, architecture, locations, science and religious organizations in this novel are real." What he means by "science" is "real" is not clear to me, but it is neither my area of expertise nor my intention to figure that out. That "religious organizations" mentioned in the book are "real" is, of course, of much greater interest to me.

Origin ends with several pages of "acknowledgments." There, Brown gives thanks to a long series of people working at publishing houses, but also to friends and others who have supported him in different ways. As the book was published in many languages at virtually the same time, he also acknowledges other international publishing houses, editors as well as translators. This is nothing extraordinary, but an integral part of such a chapter.

Still, what interests me in the chapter of acknowledgments is what Dan Brown says about his preparations for the book. A key sentence is the following: "Over the past four years, a wide array of scientists, historians, curators, religious scholars, and organizations generously offered assistance as I researched this novel." It is a remarkable and informative statement. Evidently, the preparation took four years and involved many contacts with experts in different fields.

As for the Palmarian case, he mentions an organization calls the Palmar de Troya Palmarian Church Information and Support Group, which he thanks "[f]or additional assistance in research." It must be a reference to an internet site, whose latest piece of news was posted in October 2006. If he, indeed, has been in contact with the person behind the site, it is ok, but it is not the most

evident source of information. The problem is that the person behind that site says he was never approached.

As Brown has high pretensions, it gives the reader the impression that this is an extraordinarily well-researched work. Few authors have that time and such resources at hand when writing a novel. Given these pieces of information, which we find at the very beginning and the very end of the book, I find it important to look closely at the factual claims he makes about the Palmarian church, especially as *Origin* is most readers' first and probably only encounter with the Palmarians. It should be underlined that I do not intend to make any general observations about the book or any factual claims about anything else than the Palmarians; that is for others to do. I have tried not to be too verbose, but I need some space to critically assess what Dan Brown writes about the Palmarians and discuss some of the errors.

The reader might ask, why make such a fuss about this? It's a work of fiction, deal with it. Don't be such a pretentious intellectual snob. My answer to this reader would be that I believe that the questions which I will discuss are important and that one should not handle factual claims carelessly, but not least because the real Palmarian Church is a serious thing. It has affected and still affects the lives of a great number of people, both members, ex-members and their families and friends. Many of the ex-members testify to very bad experiences of the church and have seen their families torn apart forever and their money drained. That reason alone calls for some caution.

Moreover, it is evident *Origin* is a book that has been and will be read by millions of people throughout the world, and that the author himself makes very clear claims that it is based on a serious investigation. If the reader who takes what Brown himself writes about research seriously, he or she might trust the factual claims he makes about a "real religious organization," namely the Palmarian Church. It is Dan Brown who gives an air of seriousness around the book, and it is he who opens up for a critical assessment of his claims.

In this text, I will first give a very short introduction to the history and teachings of the Palmarian Church to know what we are talking about. Then, I will say something about what "research" is or can be, before I turn to my appraisal of Dan Brown's claims about the Palmarian Church in *Origin*.

Thus in the text, I will not discuss the story told in *Origin* and the Palmarians' central role in the plot, but that much can be said that he gives individual, fictional characters violent roles. To deal with that matter has to wait.

A Very Brief Introduction to the Palmarian Church

One of the twentieth century's most important religious events was the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), when all the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church met during four long sessions, to discuss the teachings of the church and how they should be presented and reformed to meet the needs of the modern world. At least, that was the effect, if not necessarily the original intention. One might discuss how radical the changes were, but the way of writing about the Church's teachings was new, and the conciliar documents opened up dialogue with the "religious other:" non-Catholic Christians and non-Christians. Moreover, for the first time, the Roman Catholic Church subscribed to the idea of religious liberty as something more than the right for the Roman Catholic Church to work freely.

While many Catholics were happy or indifferent to the reforms that the Council led to, others were decidedly against them or at least bewildered. They felt that the church changed so dramatically in the last years of the 1960s and the early 1970s that they did not recognize it anymore. Large groups did not embrace the new uses and teachings with any enthusiasm, not least that the Mass now was said in the vernacular, not in Latin as before, and in a different way, and that many traditional forms of piety became less central in this era, as a direct or indirect effect of the Council. They felt that the church had adapted too much to the modern, secular world.

Still, criticism of this kind was quite prevalent even before the Council as the official church mainly through local bishops opposed the wave of purported apparitions of the Virgin Mary that emerged throughout the Catholic world, particularly from the time of World War I onwards. Many ordinary Catholics believed that the Virgin resolutely entered human history to convey urgent messages to the Catholics and humanity at large. The messages usually encompassed warnings about the coming end of the world and divine judgment

and pleadings for repentance, prayer, and penance as ways to escape the divine wrath. Many of these Catholics felt that the church hierarchy did not listen to the messages from heaven and that they, indeed, counteracted them.

One such series of reported apparitions took place on a field just outside small Spanish town of El Palmar de Troya (Andalusia) from 1968 onwards, where several people claimed to receive visions, heavenly messages, and other mystical phenomena. However, the messages that the seers recipients of the messages conveyed were soon denounced by the local bishop, the archbishop of Seville who saw the stories and the subsequent cult at the location as the effects of mass psychosis and superstition.

Though not among the first seers, in 1969 a 23-year-old office clerk called Clemente Domínguez stepped into the Palmarian scene, and together with his friend, lawyer Manuel Alonso, they gradually started to dominate the apparition site. As a result of very active fund-raising activities, the group around them were finally able to acquire the field in 1974, where they first constructed a chapel that with time would grow into the huge basilica that we see today.

Though the local Roman Catholic authorities were very critical and forbade clergy to attend the apparition site, the Palmarian movement became more institutionalized, and pilgrims and adherents came from many countries. They were very critical of the recent developments in the Roman Catholic Church which they explained was the result of the influence of freemasons and communists. They also managed to attract groups of traditionalist-minded priests from several countries. In 1975, Clemente Domínguez founded the Order of the Carmelites of the Holy Face that included friars, nuns, and laypeople.

A definitive split with the official Roman Catholic Church came when the Palmarian movement managed to convince the Vietnamese Roman Catholic Archbishop Thuc, who lived in European exile, to ordain some of them to the priesthood and very soon after that to ordain some of them as bishops in 1975-1976, including Clemente Domínguez and Miguel Alonso. After the first ordinations, the Palmarians could consecrate bishops of their own, and that occurred at a very rapid pace; almost a hundred bishops were consecrated

between 1976 and 1978. Such a development was unheard of in Catholic history.

Directly after the death of Pope Paul VI in 1978, Clemente Domínguez claimed that Christ had appeared to him and named him pope, placing a papal tiara on his head. As pope he took the name Gregory XVII. He also claimed that from that moment Christ moved the Holy See from Rome to El Palmar de Troya. A new period in Church history had begun as Rome had fallen, and El Palmar had risen. Now began the era of the One Holy Apostolic Catholic Church.

In the beginning, the teachings promoted by the Palmarian movement was fairly similar to traditional Roman Catholicism, though with a clear focus on private revelations, mainly modern Marian apparitions, that were not authorized by the Roman Catholic Church. Since the foundation of the Palmarian Church in 1978, however, the popes (to date four) have established many changes that have made the church's teachings increasingly different from official Roman Catholicism. The vast majority of these doctrinal changes took place during the pontificate of Gregory XVII (1978–2005). He is the only one of the four popes, who have claimed to receive heavenly messages.

The Virgin Mary has an unusually central place, for the Palmarians, and among other things they believe that both Christ and the Virgin are present in the consecrated bread and wine. When the Church was founded, the priests/bishops said Mass according to the traditional Latin rite, the so-called Tridentine Mass. However, by the early 1980s, the Palmarian Mass was transformed into a very brief ritual (less than five minutes long), and the clergy started to say series of Masses, sometimes a dozen or more masses.

By the turn of the millennium, the church took an even more dramatic step. The ordinary Bible editions were forbidden, and a Palmarian Bible replaced them. This Bible was not a new official translation, but very different from the traditional Bibles, as it was based on the purported revelations to Gregory XVII. In his view, the texts of the traditional Bible had been corrupted by the “enemies of Christ,” mainly freemasons and Jews, who had introduced many errors. Only with the apparitions to Pope Gregory, the true meaning of the Holy Scripture was re-established.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Palmarian church spread to all continents of the world, but it was never big. It is hard to say how many members the church had at its zenith, but it was certainly less than 10,000, and after that, the decrease has been continuous. The Palmarians had few church buildings, and the most common outside of El Palmar de Troya and Seville was that worship took place in home chapels, which clerics visited regularly or irregularly. During its heyday, there was a Palmarian presence in several countries with the largest groups in Spain, Ireland, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and Nigeria but also in the United States, and Canada, as well as in several Latin American countries, Australia and New Zealand.

Despite being a relatively small group, the Palmarian church has always been very wealthy. They recruited people of influence with several very affluent people who donated enormous sums, and all members had to contribute, and in their wills, leave as much money and property to the church as legally possible. Living and dead members' real estate is currently the biggest source of income. With all its money, they could construct a huge basilica in Palmar de Troya, filled with costly ornaments and established a hierarchy with a curia and large groups of bishops.

The construction of the cathedral, the acquisition of other buildings, ornaments and the running of the convents is one aspect of their wealth. Another aspect of the spending of the donations was that a select few of the hierarchy lead a very luxurious life, which included prolonged journeys, stays at first-class hotels, fine dining, and not least heavy drinking. Still, the majority of the clergy, as well as the nuns, have lived in a very simple way. For them, the religious ceremonies were virtually unending, and many suffered from serious sleep deprivation, which affected their physical and mental health.

It is also well-known that there were more or less voluntary sexual contacts between the pope and various bishops and between bishops, as well as cases of outright sexual abuse. In a published sermon from the early 2000s, Pope Gregory XVII even admitted that he on many occasions had sinned against the vow of chastity.

Pope Gregory XVII died in 2005. Before his death, he had chosen his old friend Manuel Alonso as his successor, and he took Peter II (2005–2011) as his name. During his pontificate, the Palmarians became an increasingly closed group, and this development became even more evident during the subsequent papacy of Gregory XVIII (2011–2016). These two popes included many, increasingly hard line rules, the so-called Palmarian Norms.

Many of them have to do with establishing means that hinders the communication between Palmarians and Non-Palmarians, and an absolute line of demarcation between Palmarians and apostates (that is, former Palmarians,) the practice is generally known as shunning. These rules have, for example, meant that parents have broken all contact with their children or siblings with each other, or that children are not allowed to play with children not belonging to the church. During this period, for example, people could be excommunicated for making a birthday cake or for wearing the wrong type of nightgown.

In 2016, the Palmarian Church saw very dramatic changes. In April, Pope Gregory XVIII, who had been the leader for five years suddenly, left the papacy and the church. He moved into the house of a woman he had met. In interviews, a few days later in the Spanish media, the ex-pope stated that he had lost faith and that he had discovered that the Palmarian church was a scam. The new leader of the Palmarian Church accused the ex-pope of having brought lots of money and several precious stones with him as he left. He also brought the pope-mobile with him: an expensive BMW.

Gregory XVII was succeeded by a Swiss bishop who took the name Peter III (2016–). Though he has modified some of the rules that his predecessor introduced, we can certainly not talk about a general liberalization or reform.

The latest chapter in the Palmarian story is quite extraordinary. In June 2018, the ex-pope and his wife crawled over the high wall that surrounds the Palmarian church compound. Their faces were covered, and they were armed. The plan seems to have been to rob the church. However, they were discovered, by a bishop, and in a subsequent fight, the ex-pope was severely hurt by his own knife, while his wife and the Palmarian bishop who intervened

received less severe injuries. At present (September 2018), the couple awaits trial, accused of armed robbery.

Much more can be said about the Palmarian Church, but this is an attempt to present a basic story. For those interested in a more substantial study of the Palmarians and the Palmarian Church, I refer to my book [*A Pope of their Own: El Palmar de Troya and the Palmarian Church*](#) which is freely available in digital form. It does not presuppose any deep previous knowledge of church history or religious studies. For those who are interested in a summary of the Palmarian history and teachings, I refer to [my recently updated group-profile that forms part of the World Religion and Spirituality Project](#). The reader who becomes fascinated with the subject will also find a great number of [texts by and on the Palmarians on my website](#).

However, now we will take one step forward towards our assessment of what Dan Brown says about the Palmarians. As he states that he bases his book on research, I will say something about this concept can mean.

Research in Different Forms

It is quite obvious that the history of Palmarian could be transformed into a good story. It almost calls for a novel and a movie (and there was a Spanish comedy made in the mid-1980s). The story has strange, amazing and heart-breaking ingredients. Dan Brown obviously found the church interesting and chose to include it in the plot of *Origin*.

As we have seen in the introductory part, Dan Brown claims that his book is based on thorough research, and we could assume that includes the parts devoted to the Palmarian Church. Of course, “research” can mean different things in different contexts. It can be anything from formal academic research to school children doing research, trying to find out everything they can about, say, hedgehogs.

For a university teacher, in my case within the field religious studies, the main way of presenting research results are academic books, articles, and maybe more popular syntheses summarizing the topic at hand. As a (church)

historian, the common way of research is finding and reading published or non-published sources. In that respect, the case of the Palmarian Church is very complicated, as virtually no church publications are found in research libraries, and you cannot get them from the church directly. You have to acquire the documents in other ways, and from personal experience, I know that that this is both complicated and time-consuming. Apart from official church publications, for my studies, I have used interviews and correspondence with former members, both laypeople, and clergy. To write about the church, I have also consulted what other researchers have written on the Palmarians and related subjects, such as Spanish (church) history, Catholic traditionalism, new religious movements, etc.

An integrated part in a historian's work is to assess the sources you use and not take things for granted. You have to be a bit suspicious: and ask what kind of source this is, when it was written, who has written it, with what intentions. Have others written about the same matter similarly or differently.

Some things, even within the area of religious studies, can be described as unproblematic facts. For example, when was the founder of the religious group born? When was the group officially registered? When were the bishops ordained and who were they? Other things are less straightforward, for example, how to interpret an event, a process, or the causes or effects of something. Often, we have to weigh or at least present conflicting or differing views on a matter. A basic requirement for the academic historian is to present the sources in an as correct way as possible, give arguments for our interpretations and use an exact language. A scholar must also include references to sources and literature in a historian's case most often in footnotes so that the reader knows on what the author bases his or her claims.

Scholars and students write research texts, but journalists can do substantial research for an article or article series, too. In the case of an investigative journalist, his or her work might not be entirely different from a researcher at a university, even if the written form is different. For example, if a journalist suspects that a politician is involved in a corruption scandal, he or she has to identify sources, whether documents or interviews.

To be able to publish a real and credible scoop, the journalist must devote quite a lot of time to reading different kinds of documentation and to interviews with many different people. However, we can also take the case of a journalist writing an ambitious feature article. There are, for example, several very serious articles about the Palmarian Church that has appeared in the last years. In these cases, many journalists have done good or even excellent research on the matter.

Still, an article in a newspaper or magazine is and should be, different from formal academic works. There are generally no footnotes or exact references in journalistic pieces, but it is often important for the journalist to state what kind of documents serve as proof for an important statement and who said what in an interview or refer to witnesses who want to remain anonymous. Thus, research is not something that is restricted to universities.

What about a work of fiction? Most authors of novels do some research when writing. It can be observations of places, reading of other literary works, biographies, letters, etc. In the case of ambitious historical novel, such research can be substantial, though professional historians may disagree with the results or become irritated with the mixture between fiction and facts. But an author of a novel should, of course, be able to include fictitious events or persons. Most writers do not say much about this preparatory stage; that is an integrated part of the writing process. However, Dan Brown says much about his thorough research process.

Dan Brown's Palmarians

After this quite long, but in my view necessary background, I now turn to the critical assessment of the factual claims that Dan Brown makes about the Palmarian Church in his book *Origin*. I will start with statements that, indeed, are correct. I will then continue with some examples of assertions that are wrong, half-wrong or very questionable. I have tried to make benevolent interpretations, but there are many errors in the texts, and I try to understand why Brown has fallen in several into several traps that he would have spotted if he had done his homework.

What is the common denominator of all the correct factual claims that Dan Brown makes about the Palmarians are that they are readily available through the most basic types of online sources, such as Wikipedia. Personally, I am a great fan of Wikipedia. It is a very useful aid, even for professional researchers and students, but, of course, it should be used with caution, not least when dealing with a highly controversial group as the Palmarians. Some people might have an interest in including their, loosely founded “facts.” For some reason or another, others might, want to plant errors in such articles. As a reader, you have little knowledge about the authors’ identities and their competence in the field. The same is true for many websites and many books as well. If we want to do research or, indeed, discover fake news or factual errors, we must read texts critically.

The factual claims on the Palmarian Church are found in several parts of *Origin*, as it plays a quite important role in the plot. As there are so many editions and translations of the novel, in the following I will not refer to page numbers, but to chapters. However, as readers of Dan Brown’s books know his chapters tend to be short and many (in this case 105 plus a prologue and an epilogue), so this way of referencing should not be a problem for readers who want to check what I write.

We find the main factual claims about the Palmarians in chapters 48, 62, 68 and 101. Apart from the first, they have the form of news reports. Chapter 57 describes a religious service in the Palmarian cathedral in some detail and other, more dramatic Palmarian-related events take place in chapters 66, 75, 78 and 82, but in those five chapters, there are few things that I would consider factual claims or at least not factual claims that have not been made before.

Let us start with chapter 48 and with the obvious. There is a Palmarian Church, and there is a Palmarian cathedral in the small Andalusian town of El Palmar de Troya, of which Brown gives a fair description, though they do certainly not announce their existence by putting “Iglesia Católica Palmariana” on a sign outside the wall, as Brown claims. However, that is, of course, a detail. As we have seen, it is also correct that the Palmarians denounce the Roman Pope as an antipope. To them, he is not a Catholic at all,

but a forerunner of the Antichrist. That their first pope Gregory XVII died in 2005 is accurate, too.

If we proceed to Chapter 68, it is true that Pope Gregory XVII lost his eyes in a car accident in 1976 and that they were crudely stitched together for a long period. That he claimed to receive the stigmata is correct, too. It is true that Palmarians are prohibited from communicating with ex-Palmarian family members and friends. Still, that is a benevolent interpretation of what Brown actually writes as he states that “Palmarian Church members are forbidden from speaking to their own families.” There is no general rule against talking within the family. Still, that is what he explicitly writes. He is only partly accurate when he states that Palmarians are forbidden to read books, written by Non-Palmarians. At least in Spain, their children usually attend ordinary schools and read the course literature, although parents should censor schoolbooks beforehand.

The “fact” presented in chapter 68 that Palmarian are prohibited from attending Non-Palmarian churches and religious services, including, for examples, burials of Non-Palmarian relatives, is correct. Likewise, they are prohibited from attending public pools, dance places and so forth. They also believe that the Antichrist was born in the year 2000. In chapter 101, Brown states that the third Palmarian pope left the papacy and the church in April 2016 and that he, in Spanish media, described the church as a “sham from the beginning.” That is correct. Though parts of many of the factual claims I have mentioned include some ambiguities, with a generous interpretation, they are reasonably accurate.

However, now we turn to some of the things that Dan Brown gets wrong. The common denominator is that most of these errors are to be found in the most easily available online sources and that it would require some critical reading and some extra work to realize that the claims are erroneous. I could include several minor errors, too, but I think that the following examples will suffice to show a pattern that also seems to include a careless reading of even the most easily available sources.

In chapter 57, a person known as the Admiral is brought to the Basilica in El Palmar de Troya, the Palmarians’ headquarters, where he hears Pope Innocent

XIV preach. A pope with that name has not existed in the history of the Palmarian church. Why Brown uses the correct name for the first pope (Gregory XVII), and the correct name of the third pope (Gregory XVII) and a fake name for another (or the same?) pope is a mystery to me. There seems to be no rational explanation. In fact, as Brown claims that Pope Innocent was “a decorated military officer” before entering becoming a Palmarian bishop, it is fairly obvious that he refers to Pope Gregory XVIII (2011–2016). The second pope, Peter II, certainly did not have such a background.

Brown wants to make a case of that both the Admiral and the pope are military officers and that they, therefore, are well connected. And, indeed, many easily available texts reiterate the claim that Gregory XVIII was a military officer before he became a Palmarian bishop in the mid-1980s. Nevertheless, that is not true, and as some more thorough research would show that. Though the future pope did his military service, his ordinary job was as an electrician. Moreover, in chapter 68 Brown states that all Palmarian popes had a military background. In fact, none have.

I must confess that even before starting to read the book I was almost sure that Dan Brown would claim that the Palmarian Church had canonized Adolf Hitler, and he does (chapter 58). They have, indeed, canonized the Spanish leader Francisco Franco, but that is quite understandable due to their traditionalist Catholic background, and that they see the Spanish Civil War as a crusade against Communism and in defense of the Catholic faith. But to canonize Hitler would be another matter. To realize that they did not canonize Hitler would, indeed, require some serious research, but if you as Brown claims have a group of experts, assistant and plenty of time, it would not be that hard.

On Wikipedia and the first pages that turn up when you google “Palmarian Church” or the Spanish equivalent “Iglesia Palmariana,” you will get to know that the Palmarians canonized the German dictator. I know first-hand that at least one Wikipedia contributor is interested in keeping this Hitler myth alive. On a few occasions I have tried to correct the assertion on the Wikipedia page, but it has always been changed back by someone.

Though the rumour existed before, an important part in the construction of a canonized Hitler is a website that claims to be run by a group of Palmarian bishops who have left the authority of the Palmarian pope and instead affiliated with the Remnant Church, led by Argentinean pope Alexander IX. However, this church and this pope is a (quite intelligent) hoax. The church does not exist in reality. One must admit that those who the invented Remnant church has had its greatest success to date when one of the world's best-selling authors used their site as a source.

Though I would agree that it is not evident that the Remnant Church is fake, someone who claims to have done thorough research into all matters in the book would perhaps note that the list of saints on the group's website includes not only Hitler but also, for example, Evita Perón. For a traditionalist group, it would be somewhat unexpected to canonize Evita, as the Perón administration was increasingly at war with the Roman Catholic Church.

Even if one does not know that much about Argentinian church history, the foto of Evita, which is found in this list of saints on the website should cause some suspicion that something is strange. It is not one of the official pictures of President Perón's loyal companion Evita, where she is portrayed as a Virgin Mary-like Mother of all Argentineans, but a photo of a young Evita, wearing shorts. To put it mildly, it would be quite surprising for a church who have a general ban against women wearing pants to show one of their female saints in shorts. To uncritically accept the story about the canonization of Hitler is yet another sign of insufficient research. Once again it seems to be the result of a very casual Google search without any critical assessment. It shows a lack of rigour in research.

Dan Brown's penchant for surface research is shown in a passage, where the Admiral says that he remembers having heard about the Palmarians through a TV-documentary called "Iglesia Oscura" (chapter 48). Why a person in our time should refer to a documentary broadcasted in 1991 on a regional TV channel is unclear. Or, in fact, it is very clear. He could very well have seen it on Youtube, as it is one of the first things you will find there when searching for the "Iglesia Palmariana" and that is probably what Dan Brown (or his assistants) have done. However, to claim, as Brown does through the Admiral,

that this documentary gives testimony of a growing church, is not true. If you have seen the documentary and you know Spanish, you will see that it does not support that claim, rather the opposite. Once again, Dan Brown's reference is another indication of very superficial research. It is something someone searching on Youtube will find within minutes, if not seconds.

Another error that Dan Brown includes is a bit more unexpected as it implies, not only a lack of research but a misunderstanding of the most readily available web sources. Brown asserts that the Palmarians are/were sedevacantists (chapter 48). Sedevacantism is a minority position among Catholic traditionalists. It means that you think that the modern Roman popes have departed so far from orthodox Catholic faith that there is no longer any true pope. The most common position among the Sedevacantists is that the Holy See (*Santa Sede* in Latin) has been vacant from the death of Pius XII in 1958 onwards.

That the Palmarian church was ever sedevacantist is simply not true. They believed that Paul VI was the true pope until his death in 1978, but that he was threatened or drugged by the Curia so that he would make modernist statements or even that the real Paul was imprisoned and that an imposter played his role in public. Palmarian Pope Gregory XVII claimed that God elected him pope just after the death of Paul VI and that he was the true successor of him. In fact, for the Palmarians, Paul VI is among the great martyrs in Church history. It is one of the things that distinguishes the Palmarian Church from many other traditionalist groups. It is difficult to believe that Dan Brown, or any other author of his type of literature, would miss the opportunity to deal with a story about cardinal-freemasons drugging a pope, or putting him into a Vatican dungeon.

This error is not only the result of too superficial research but of misunderstanding a central concept and central Palmarian belief. Still, in chapter 57 Dan Brown seems to have forgotten about what he wrote about in chapter 48 and states that "the Palmarians ... recognized the legitimacy of every pope up to Paul VI who died in 1978."

In chapter 62, Dan Brown claims that Gregory XVII, the first pope "claimed to have had a vision in which he was crowned by Jesus Christ Himself." That

much is correct, but quite amazingly Brown gets the year wrong. He writes that it was in 1975 and not in 1978. Not to get such a central date right is almost unbelievable.

After these examples of evident factual errors in *Origin*, I will note a few things that perhaps can be understood as part of the fictional story and not as factual claims. At the same time, they illustrate the problem by stating that an organization you write about is “real.” Does that only mean that such a group exists or is it an indication of that the author will give an apt description of the organization?

Analogously, in his initial explanation Brown states that all “art” and “architecture” he mentions in the book are real. Does this only mean that a piece of art or a building exists and has a certain title or name, or does it allow him to state that a certain painting which is distinctively green, in fact, is red, or that a house has a tower when it does not. These last examples are not found in Brown’s book, but they illustrate the problem when writing that things exist.

One thing that Dan Brown wants to convey in his book is that the Palmarian Church is very strong and steadily growing. In his description of the church compound in El Palmar de Troya, he states that it is filled with cars; that there are members from all over coming there from all over the place. He even writes “the entire area was jammed with parked vehicle, hundreds of them” (chapter 48). If you look at any of the available images of the church compound their Vatican if you will, one of the most obvious facts that confronts you is the complete absence of great crowds.

In reality, a few vehicles pass through the gates on any given day, and some people living in El Palmar de Troya walk there. On major celebrations more people attend. We should know that there are only between 1,000 and 2,000 Palmarian worldwide. On the compound around 70 members of the religious order, quite evenly divided between bishops and nuns live. Not even on the big, obligatory holidays, the cathedral is filled anymore.

In the same line of thought, Brown wants to present the Palmarian church as actively missionizing, steadily searching for new members. He tells us about

clerics who go to Seville for missionary purposes (chapter 75.) He also states that there are what he calls “recruitment houses” in the USA, Canada, Germany, Austria, and Ireland (chapter 68). That there is any Palmarian activity in Canada at all is unknown to me, and in most cases, there is not a single Palmarian bishop permanently living in any of these countries.

The Palmarians are certainly interested in keeping members, which church is not, but they have few, if any, real outreach activities. Even if you for some reason feel the urge to contact the Palmarian Church to join them or at least get information, you will need some quite thorough research even to find a telephone number, email address or even the postal address.

Dan Brown also claims that there should be many secret Palmarians among the Spanish Roman Catholic clergy and that they provide them with a lot of money; they are “quietly funneling money” to the Palmarian Church (chapter 48). I do not see this as a factual claim. It is yet another way to include more mysteriousness and conspiracy to the story. Integrated with Brown’s assertion that the Palmarian Church is strong is that the Roman Catholic Church is actively counteracting them: “the Vatican has been spreading disinformation about the Palmarians” (chapter 48).

But there is also an individual who fights the Palmarians more than others through different means, including lawsuits, “threats bordering on blackmail” and “huge donations to anti-Palmarian ‘watchdog’ groups.” (Chapter 75.) In the printed edition I have seen these “watchdog” groups were explicitly mentioned: “Palmar de Troya Support and Dialogue Ireland.” In the new editions the second organization’s name has been deleted. Now (September 2018) [defamation proceedings have been issued](#) on behalf of Dialogue Ireland Trust against Random House Group, the Publishers of Origin by Dan Brown.

Of course, the Roman Catholic Church is hardly enthusiastic about a Catholic-looking church that has a pope of their own. But you have to look hard to find much evidence of any public denunciations from the Roman Church. In 1970, the archbishop of Seville denounced the purported apparitions at El Palmar de Troya. In 1972, he reiterated his denunciation. As in all such apparition cases, the initial investigation and assessment of reported miracles were handled by the local bishop. Only, infrequently Rome is involved in such decisions. In this

case, the archbishop chose to make a clear statement at an early point, while the most common reaction is silence; apparitions are not mentioned. In those cases, “the Vatican” did not say a single word about the case.

The Vatican, or perhaps more correctly the Holy See did, however, react rapidly when Archbishop Thuc consecrated five Palmarian bishops on New Year’s night 1975/76. Almost immediately, the Archbishop of Seville and the Apostolic Nuncio (the Vatican’s ambassador) to Spain suspended them, and a few months later the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith in Rome, denounced Archbishop Thuc’s ordinations at Palmar de Troya, declaring them illicit and devoid of any value.

After that time, one would have to look in vain for official “Vatican” reactions to the Palmarian Church. When they had a pope of their own, there was not any reason for actively counteracting the church. People would know that the Palmarians were something else. Still, I would not consider what Brown writes a false factual claim, but a part of the story, as he wants to present an ongoing continuous war between two strong groups.

I will end my discussion of Brown’s claims about the Palmarians with a brief note of a somewhat different kind. Brown asserts that the Palmarian Church has been accused of having “responsibility for several mysterious deaths” (chapter 48). In this context, he does not mention any other person by name but an elderly Irish woman who died in 2015. Her case received quite a lot of attention in Irish media, and the story about her also gave rise to a media interest on the Irish branch of the Palmarian Church more generally.

I find it at least morally questionable to name this woman in a book where the author so liberally blends fiction, fact, and factual errors in an unsavoury mixture. The circumstances surrounding her death are tragic. She had been a long-time member of the Palmarian Church but was excommunicated shortly before her death, evidently for not wanting to bequeath her home to the church. Her excommunication meant that she, as an ex-Palmarian, could not be visited by any Palmarians and she had not been in contact with Non-Palmarians for a long time. Therefore, she was alone and lay dead in her home for several months before she was encountered.

By Way of Conclusion

Before ending this text, I would like to remind the reader that these half-truths, errors, and misunderstandings appear on relatively few pages in a 638-page-book. I hope that they are not representative for the book as a whole, but my assessment of the factual claims about the Palmarians does not give the impression that those parts of *Origin* is the fruit of thorough and serious research. Instead, it is the result of a very superficial compilation of very easily available data, found on the internet, and most often on the first sites that you encounter when you search for “Palmarian Church” or “Iglesia Palmariana,” using Google or similar search engines. Some errors are simply astonishing.

To put it bluntly, Brown does not include any data that a person searching for “Palmarian Church” on the internet would be able to compile in less than an hour and then he manages to misunderstand several important things. Therefore, many commonly repeated errors enter the book. There is nothing that indicates any individual research on the matter, let alone any thorough investigation of any kind.

I find it hard to believe that the author would actively choose to mix some straight-forward correct factual claims with erroneous factual claims. The most obvious explanation is that Dan Brown has taken the most comfortable road and simply compiled some easily available data on the Internet, without questioning them. Of course, I do not mean that *Origin* should be assessed as if were an academic text, but on the other hand, Dan Brown has very high pretensions and his main-character, Robert Langdon often explains common knowledge in a way that gives the impression that they are mentioned for the first time.

In short, I would hardly call what he has written on the Palmarians a result of research. If I were a school teacher and one of my pupils handed in a report on hedgehogs (one of my earlier examples) which included so many errors as Dan Brown’s has managed to press into his texts on the Palmarians, he or she would not pass.

Still, Dan Brown apparently does not care about this. Therefore, my final question is: Why? Is the Palmarian Church such a strange group that it does not matter if he presents them correctly or not? Is religion in general such a bizarre thing that it does not matter how we deal with factual claims about it? Or does he think that we buy his claims and books anyway and that nothing else matters? And we generally do, so his mission is accomplished.