

## Religious Views on Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2013): Reader Response Theory

Wahyu Unggul Widodo<sup>1)</sup>

### ABSTRACT

*The research's purpose is to analyze cultural reader response strategies which are used by the reader to respond Dan Brown's the Da Vinci Code novel. The objectives of the study are to know how readers respond religious views in the novel. This study is a qualitative study, the primary data source of the study is the responses from amazon.com customers and the guest who drop responds to the Da Vinci Code novel in amazon.com. The responses are from the paperback version and the secondary data sources of the study are books, internet, journals or any information related to reader response strategy. In analyzing the data, the writer employs descriptive analysis. The outcome of the study shows the readers are against with the idea about religion views in the novel, some are agreed with the idea and the others have neutral views. The dominant issue which is raised by the reader is a debatable problem in the novel dealing with Jesus marriage and having children, there is a great possibility it becomes a problematic because Brown's initial statement in the beginning of the novel, "All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate."*

**Keywords:** *Cultural Reader Response, Richard Beach, The Da Vinci Code*

#### Correspondent Authors;

1) Lecturer of Universitas An Nuur, [wahyuunggul@unan.ac.id](mailto:wahyuunggul@unan.ac.id)

### INTRODUCTION

The line between fiction and real life today is less distinct. Many writers, directors bring a real-life story into their works that make them seem to be the miniature of real life that is visualized in a form of drama, movie, novel etc. parts of real life the artists bring into their works are vary. Many issues are grounded the creation of their work. They can be political, sociological, religious, humanism or something else. One of works that portrait a real-life phenomenon in a complex way in

its content is a novel. A novel could reflect one, two or more real-life phenomenon in its content.

One of notable novel which raises more than one issue is *the Da Vinci Code*, written by Dan Brown. The novel tells us about Harvard symbolist Prof. Robert Langdon and cryptologist Sophie Neveu after a murder of Louvre Museum's curator in Paris, when they become involved in a disagreement between the Priory of Sion and Opus Dei about the possibility of Jesus having been married to Mary Magdalena.

They managed to unveil the mystery of the murder, in which by doing this they found the fact from many symbols, which told them that there is possibility of Jesus marriage.

The saga about Jesus's marriage is totally denied by both Catholic and Christian. Jane Tooher, who lectures in Ministry, New Testament and Church History at Moore Theological College said that there is no possibility of real debate, because there is no ancient text which presents Jesus as in a romantic relationship with Mary Magdalene. However, there are also some people who see this phenomenon as a thing that should be investigated deeper. Karen King, Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts states that Christian tradition has long held that Jesus was not married, even though no reliable historical evidence exists to support that claim. King also said the fragment, unveiled at the Tenth International Congress of Coptic Studies, provided the first evidence that some early Christians believed Jesus had been married. These kinds of opinions also appear among the reader of *The Da Vinci Code*. Some of them are disagree with what Brown writes in his novel and the others are agree.

In viewing the literary works, Mario Klarer in his *Introduction to Literary Studies*, proposed that there are four

theoretical approaches to literature one of them is Reader-Oriented Approach. Reader-Oriented Approach focuses on the reader's point of view. It does not focus only on a single objective text, but it assumes that there are many texts' interpretation which are done by the readers (Klarer, 2005). Reader-oriented approach or reader response theory, is an interesting approach since it seems giving the readers chances to do everything with the text. One text or one phenomenon could produce many interpretations that they could be against from one to each other. Richard Beach (Cultural reader response strategies focus on how readers 'cultural roles, attitudes, values, or historical context shape responses. (Beach, 1993) in his *Teacher's Introduction to Reader-Response Theories*, proposed five strategies of reader response, they are textual, experiential, psychological, social, and cultural.

The writer is interested in exploring responses to part of the story dealing with Jesus's marriage in *The Da Vinci Code*, because the responses vary according to readers point of views. Cultural Reader-Response has accommodated the need of this exploration, since it covers the response of the reader dealing with readers' cultural roles, attitudes, values, or historical context in shaping responses. (Beach, 1993) and in this research the writer discusses how readers respond the phenomena in the novel

based on a value, specifically religious value.

## RESEARCH METHOD

In this study, the writer applies qualitative research. The data sources are library and literature data. The subject of the study is the responses from amazon customers and the guest who drop responses to the Da Vinci Code novel in amazon.com. The responses are taken from the paperback version. The data are taken from group of readers, which have religious views about the novel. Collecting the data from a certain group have the benefit of generating information on collective views, and the meanings that lie behind those views. They are also useful in generating a rich understanding of participants' experiences and beliefs (Morgan, 1998).

According to Berg (2001), Qualitative research refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things. In contrast, quantitative research refers to counts and measures of things. After collecting the data, the next step is analyzing. In analyzing the data, the writer applies interactive model proposed by Miles observed that qualitative analysis comprises 'three concurrent flows of activity: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. (Miles et al, 2014)

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As stated previously, the purpose of this study is to determine how religious views applied to The Da Vinci Code novel. The responses are taken from amazon.com, by using filtering responses to paperback version of its novel. There are 266 responses that was collected. There are 26 responses dealing with religious values, and can be categorized, as responses that against the story that dealing with religion, responses that agree with religious value presented in the novel, and neutral responses.

### 1. Findings

#### Responses that against the story that dealing with religion

R. Donahue (#1 RN 6) against a phrase, in a page of the novel, that someone who understand about Christian, should see the story, i.e. Virgin Mary is a metaphorical. Donahue denied that Christianity based on something figurative, it based on facts.

#1 RN 6

Quote: "Those who truly understand their faiths understand the stories [i.e., Virgin birth of Jesus] are metaphorical." p. 342 .  
Response: This is not true. Christianity is not based on metaphorical stories with hidden meanings. It is based on historical facts.

Kevin Z (#6 RN 39) supported Donahue idea, *Kevin* strengthens *Donahue's* statement, by stating that something, which is said to be historical and scientific in the novel, are inaccurate. Since it is, the historical fact presented in the novel, cannot be used to support the author idea, based on *Donahue* and *Kevin* responses. Further, *Kevin* also argues that the novel is just to attack Christian belief.

#6 RN 39

The conspiracy fiction has faced massive opposition as an attack on the Roman Catholic Church and has been relentlessly attacked for historical and scientific inaccuracies.

Sue (#7 RN 47) stated a short, simple but clear about a relationship between the novel and the bible.

#7 RN 47

If you are looking to Dan Brown for Biblical Truth then DO NOT BUY THE BOOK!

Furthermore, Ann (#11 RN 106) states the same idea with *Kevin's*. Brown just hates the Catholic, he will do anything to undermine Catholic and everything that is taught by the church. Ann also supposes if the book is about Mohammad, the book will of course be annihilated.

#11 RN 106

History will show though that he just hates the Catholic Church and will write anything

to undermine the church's teaching and her real history. He even calls it entertainment. I guarantee you if he wrote this book about Mohammad he and his books would have been massacred. But alias one can write lies about Christ and the church and get away with it.

In other place Trey (#12 RN 117) used a verse of the bible "...let God be found true, though every man be found liar." to connect to the Dan's Da Vinci Code Phenomenon. The man be found liar, according to Trey, is of course Dan Brown, while Trey absolutely believe that everything comes from bible is always true, so when what Dan write in his novel is in the contrary to what is written in the bible, the true one, according to Trey is that from the bible.

#12 RN 117

"... let God be found true, though every man be found a liar..." The above verse includes the speculations of Dan Brown towards God. There is what the Bible teaches and then there's what 'man' teaches. At the end of the day, "let God be found true" and everyone else .. A LIAR.

The denial also comes from The Risen (#21 RN 166). The Risen didn't talk about the liar, but he didn't agree that Da Vinci Code is written based on the bible.

#21 RN 166

Dan Brown Da Vinci Code is a book based on the Gnostic Pagan work not the Bible.

Dan falsely claims it to be from the Bible, misleading millions. Dan uses the Gnostic Gospel's were named after known bible characters to justify "Gnostic" doctrines

There is also hikegirl (#13 RN 119), who seems to deny what the novel presented, not because she finds it in the contrary with the real fact or bible, but because she is a Catholic and also her family, and for her and also her family to say that Jesus was married or something similar (i.e. has offspring) is kind of a forbidding action.

#13 RN 119

the reason I say taboo is because my family is Roman Catholic and to them, to say Jesus was married, with children was, well, preposterous

### **Responses that agree with religious value presented in the novel**

Some readers, in the contrary with the previous response's type, are agree with what presented in the novel. *Ruthie Rochford* (#2 RN 13) stated that she seems to be helped by the existence of the novel. She explained that Catholic have destroyed families. She also talked about the hypocrisy she found when she was child, and the novel have given her an answer.

#2 RN 13

God, I loved this book..... Being a child of catholic school, catholic church, nuns, priests, as well as the hypocrisy that I

spotted at the age of 12, .....watched people destroyed by the catholic church. I watched families destroyed, for generations

*Education Guru* (#5 RN 36), in a metaphorical way, said that the book has shown how to view religiosity. By saying so, he/she goes with the content of the novel. The novel offered a different way to see the religion, in this case is about how to deal with the term related to Jesus, in which this way is in the contrary with what the bible says. In a short, he/she argued that the way the novel views the religiosity is true and the others is wrong.

#5 RN 36

This Book reveals a poignant truth about how to view religiosity. Religiosity is important because it revolves around cultural standard

In line with *Education Guru* (#5 RN 36), *Rambo* (#16 RN 126), connecting the novel, with, according to him, the lie of the bible.

#16 RN 126

a great book that breaks down the lies in the bible

*Carol Hartman* (#18 RN 140) connecting the novel to the history of Catholics. Implicitly, He say that by reading the novel, someone will find a history of the religion, it means, by saying

this, Carol had an argument that history of the religion in the novel is true. He will not guarantee the reader finding the history, if he argued the history of religion presented in the novel is false.

#18 RN 140

It will satisfy some of your curiosity about the history of religion.

### Neutral Response

In this type of connecting responses to religion, the readers seem to be neutral. They do not judge the bible is totally right while the novel totally wrong. Another sense of this response is the readers try to position themselves in an equitable place, or give a narration to other responses.

Taylor (#3 RN 19), in his response, he explained why the novel become a debatable object, especially related to the religion. He connected the story of the novel with the value belief of religion, Catholic, and he concluded the root of the debatable matter.

#3 RN 19

why start a book review by discussing the Roman Catholic Church? Because the crux of The Da Vinci Code centers around a “secret” cache of material intimating that God and Christ’s original plan was to set up a male/female vision of religion that featured Mary Magdalene as a co-prime mover with Christ

In other place Moon Shim (#4 RN 23) goes with Taylor opinion of connecting the story and the religion, he/she understood why the novel upset the Catholic without any curse for the novel, Moon positioned him/herself moderately.

#4 RN 23

I do not blame those who think the book is inappropriate in a way that it sort of crosses the Church. I am not a believer of catholic myself, but I do know their founding beliefs and from what I can tell, this book's main theme was everything that offsets those core beliefs.

Buzz (#14 RN 120), connecting the novel with anti-Cristian and anti-Catholic term, moderately. Buzz said the novel is well written and it gives the Cristian and Catholic critique or sarcastic.

#14 RN 120

A well-crafted, suspenseful novel with decidedly anti-Catholic and anti-Christian leanings. Nevertheless it is well-written and delivers quite a "punch"

Tony G. Antunes (#28 RN 247) is at the same perception with Buzz. He said the novel is in the contrary with what Cristian had taught, he also argued that the novel is not good or not recommended for those who have a little understanding about their belief.

#28 RN 247

The novel was against Christianity and said that Jesus was just a man and nothing else. I wouldn't recommend this novel to anyone with little faith or to someone who is easily swayed. Over all, this book was interesting. I would recommend.

SSL (#25 RN 198) admitted, he/she does not have enough understanding about the concept of Catholic, so he can not exactly connect the story with the bible other than he/ she just said that it is difficult to know whether it is fact or not.

#25 RN 198

OK book, but was not an easy read for me as I am not familiar with Catholic concepts/practices. Hard to separate fact from fiction. I'm curious what his source is for the bit about Jewish priestesses

## 2. Discussion

Readers connect some scenes of the novel with the doctrine in Catholic and bible. The main theme that makes the novel become a controversy in the church is that Jesus got married and have children and off course it will be denied by most Catholic or Christian, by explaining what the bible says about it, how the ancient manuscript denied it, etc.

If we outline the Catholic or Christian values and bible say about things contradict the Da Vinci Code main themes, we will get major issues, as the writer stated before, which be debatable problem debated among

the readers. Some readers accused Brown as a liar and through *the Da Vinci Code*, he wanted to undermine a certain religion. However, there are also some readers who agree with what presented in the novel. They say that people have been destroyed by the Catholic Church and the novel had shown people how the Church really is, another say that the novel is kind of alternative way how to see the truth of the religion and another one say that the novel had broken down the bible lies.

The base belief of Christian and Catholic is Jesus is god and he had no wife and children. Then if this belief is "attacked" by such literary work the followers of the religion will, of course, counter that attack. But there are also the people of these religions who are hesitant about what the bible says, then they find the novel, they feel the novel gives them some true facts, and they reveal it to the public. This will lead to a debate and the debate itself will make the novel gets its popularity. Some readers who are against with the main theme of the novel, give proofs that what presented in the novel is wrong by citing some verses from the bible, other readers who agree with the novel say that the bible also contains some wrong statements, and it seems this is a such condition expected by the author to shape the cult of his work.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

Based on the finding that have been discussed, the writer comes to a conclusion readers who drop responses about the Da Vinci Code novel, paperback version in *amazon.com* who used cultural strategy and religious values as its indicator. Some readers are against with religious views reflected in the novel, some are agreed and others are trying to see the novel as a literary work so they have neutral responses. A point which become a debatable view in the novel related to religious view is that Jesus had been married and had children, which Catholic and Christian strongly rejected

## REFERENCES

- Abanes, R. (2004). *The truth behind the da Vinci code*. Eugene, Or: Harvest House Publishers.
- Abrams, M. H. (1999). *A Glossary Of Literary Terms*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- Baigent, M., Leigh, R., & Lincoln, H. (1982). *The Holy Blood And The Holy Grail*. London: J. Cape.
- Baldick, Chris.(2001).*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*.New York:Oxford University Press
- Beach, R. (1993). *A Teacher's Introduction To Reader-Response Theories*. Urbana, Ill: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Berg, Bruce. L.(2001).*Qualitative Research Methods For The Social Sciences*.4th Ed.Toronto.Allyn & Bacon
- Brown, D. (2003). *The Da Vinci Code: A novel*. New York: Doubleday.
- Disher, G. (2001). *Writing Fiction: An Introduction To The Craft*. Crows Nest, N.S.W: Allen & Unwin.
- Ferris, S. (2005). *The Key To The Da Vinci Code*. Chichester: Crombie Jardine.
- Klarer, M. (2005). *An Introduction To Literary Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Leavy, P. (2014). *The Oxford Handbook Of Qualitative Research*.New York:Oxford Univeristy Press
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*. 3rd Ed.Los Angeles.Sage Publications
- Morgan D L.(1998).*The focus group guide book*. London: Sage Publications
- Pituro, Vincent .(2008).*The Audience And The Film: A Reader-Response Analysis Of Italian Neorealism*.Dissertation, University of Colorado
- Shelton, Jeremiah Adam.(2009).*A Comparative Reader-Response Analysis Between The Stranger And Crime And Punishment*.Thesis, California State University
- Yin, R. K. (2011). *Qualitative Research From Start To Finish*.New York : The Guilford Press
- <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-religion-jesus-marriage->



[idUSBRE88H1CM20120918](#)

Retrieved on January 25, 2019

<https://www.sbs.com.au/topics/voices/culture/article/2018/03/28/was-mary-magdalene-married-jesus-and-why-does-it-matter> Retrieved on January 25, 2019