

Did Michelangelo have a hidden agenda?

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Special to *The Wall Street Journal*

Vatican City

NEVER MIND the Da Vinci Code—what about Michelangelo's secret messages? On the 500th anniversary of the artist's first climb up the ladder in 1508 to paint the Sistine Chapel ceiling, a new book claims he embedded subversive messages in his spectacular frescoes—not only Jewish, Kabbalistic and pagan symbols but also insults directed at Pope Julius II, who commissioned the work, and references to his own sexuality.

First published in an English version in May by Harper One, "The Sistine Secrets: Michelangelo's Forbidden Messages in the Heart of the Vatican," coauthored by Vatican docent Roy Doliner and Rabbi Benjamin Blech, is already in its second edition in Italy. It will be translated into 16 languages and released in the coming months in Spain, Portugal, France, Poland, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, the Czech Republic and the Netherlands.

A religious Jew who has guided visitors through the Vatican for nearly a decade, Mr. Doliner says his book is neither fiction nor an attack on the Catholic Church, but rather an attempt to reveal the universal connections between Christianity and Judaism. He says Michelangelo's frescoes also convey the tumultuous rivalry between the rulers of Florence and the Roman church at the time of their painting.

Mr. Doliner believes that Michelangelo, whose unconventional education at the court of Lorenzo de Medici included the study of Judaic and Kabbalistic texts, meant the 1,100-square-meter ceiling of the chapel as a mystical message of universal love—a bridge of understanding between the two faiths.

When Mr. Doliner visited the chapel after its restoration was completed in 1999, he discovered through a pair of binoculars that two characters on the ceiling were the Hebrew letters aleph and ayin rather than the Greek alpha and omega, a symbol for Christ, that they previously appeared to be while obscured by centuries of grime. He then noticed the puzzling figures of two Jews in "The Last Judgment"—the work behind the altar completed by Michelangelo nearly 30 years after he finished the ceiling. Curious about the findings, Mr. Doliner began a six-year investigation that took him to sources in Florence and Rome as well as countless libraries.

The idea for the book came in 2005, after Pope John Paul II invited 160 rabbis and cantors from all over the world to the Vatican under the auspices of the Pave the Way Foundation, an international organization of clergy and lay members whose aim is to promote cultural exchange between the Christian and Jewish worlds. Mr. Doliner says the visitors, led by Rabbi Blech, immediately saw the familiar imagery and started asking questions that the Vatican guides couldn't answer.

We met up with Mr. Doliner in the Sistine Chapel, where he talked about his controversial findings, and gave us his unusual tour.

Q: As a religious Jew, how did you end up being a guide at the Vatican?

I grew up in an Italian Catholic neighborhood in suburban Massachusetts. So I went to mass with my friends more often than I went to Hebrew school. And obviously spending a lot of time in Italy, I am passionate about art and architectural history, Western civilization, church history and of course the Talmud and the Torah, Kabbalism and Jewish history. If you study all of this stuff you see how it all is interwoven.

Q: Some people think you are simply cashing in on "The Da Vinci Code" phenomenon. How do you respond to that?

No, this is not cashing in. I was doing the research long before his books came out. [Dan Brown] is a great novel writer; they are wonderful thrillers. But this is historical fact. Mostly the people who make that accusation have not read one word of my book.



Q: When did you start to systematically research this whole theory?

I was the biggest skeptic in the world. When I first started spending time in the Sistine Chapel about seven years ago I saw a lot of stuff in Michelangelo's works that looked like coincidences to me. And I said, "No no no, I'm just imagining this; it can't be true." But Michelangelo himself, little by little, started convincing me with the overwhelming amount of symbolism in his works. After that I started doing private research and found out who his teachers were in Florence, and who the rabbis were that taught his teachers. It was like pieces of a puzzle all coming together.

The genius of Michelangelo is like the genius of the Talmud, with several layers of meaning, one on top of another. So you can interpret it in terms of Christianity and Judaism, sociologically, historically and artistically. We are just adding one level that has either been ignored or covered up over the centuries.

Q: So these images aren't exclusively Jewish?

What Michelangelo was doing was trying to remind Rome five centuries ago that Jesus was a Jew, he came from Jews, and that Christianity is based on Judaism. Florence in his time was proud of that connection, whereas Rome was not only trying to separate the two religions but to negate in great part its roots in Judaism—and even forcibly separate Jews and Christians. There were many Papal bulls outlawing fraternization and friendship between Jews and Christians, whereas in Florence everybody was partying together.

Q: Was Michelangelo simply promoting the Florentine agenda in Rome?

Absolutely. In his poems he complains about the abuses of power and hypocrisy of the church. It's not us imagining it; it's in his own words and work. This was not somebody who was thrilled about working for the Vatican on a ceiling. The walls were prestigious fresco work, not the ceiling; these were all done by top Florentine fresco painters of their

A new book co-authored by Vatican guide **Roy Doliner** (left) examines Jewish imagery and other secret messages in the Sistine Chapel; above, 'The Fall of Man & Expulsion from Eden,' from the ceiling fresco; below, the **Cumaean Sibyl**, in which two angels appear to be making a rude gesture.

day: Botticelli, Perugino, Ghirlandaio. This was part of the conspiracy against him. He had never done professional fresco painting in his life before being forced to paint the Sistine ceiling. He hated painting; he had to paint or die. You didn't say no to Pope Julius II. His nickname was Il Papa Terribile, the scary pope. So even these other Florentine artists hated him and his whole family, the Della Roveres, and hidden in all the panels are little insulting little messages to give a slap in the face to Pope Sixtus IV, the uncle of Pope Julius. There are secret insults to the Della Rovere family, to the Vatican and to Rome hidden throughout the side panels. So Michelangelo is not inventing the idea.

For example, Della Rovere means "over the oak tree." So here [on the northern wall in Botticelli's panel "The Temptations of Christ"] is the devil being unmasked and jumping into an oak tree. So it is saying he is linked to the oak tree family, the Della Roveres, the family of Pope Julius.

Q: What are those two mischievous-looking angels doing behind Pope Julius's head?

The putti [small angelic figures] on the ceiling are directional signals for Michelangelo's hidden messages and vendettas. Here they are "making the fig"—sticking the thumb between the index and middle fingers—the most obscene gesture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, mentioned even by Dante in his *Inferno*. So Michelangelo is "giving the finger" not once but twice to Julius II: above the entrance where he was commissioned to paint Jesus but instead painted the pope and in the panel with the Cumaean Sibyl at the northern edge of the



ceiling. Of course, in order to protect his career (and probably his life), the artist made the gestures small, and a bit dark and blurry as well. If you look at any close-ups of these panels, these insults—which were pointed out by previous historians without a single reaction from anyone—are unmistakable.

Q: You also write that he includes references to his sexual orientation in "The Last Judgment." How did he do that?

We've got naked boys making out like crazy among the Male Elect, whereas in previous versions they are chastely placing hands on each other's shoulders at most. Dante is looking disgusted at the sodomites in his midst: They got up into heaven with him, and he's not happy. This was publicly condemned in the 1540s when it was unveiled. And Michelangelo never gets a woman's nude body correct; he never used a female model in his entire 89 years.

Q: I notice there are Stars of David all over the floor.

The floor was made 30 years before Michelangelo started the ceiling. The whole design is based on that of Florentine architect Baccio Pontelli, who made the Sistine Chapel a copy of the Jewish holy temple of King Solomon. So the floor is a very good example of where there are two different layers of meaning at once. It shows the path of the mass that you do in the chapel, where you swing the censer, where the pope would kneel. On the other hand it's a Kabbalistic meditational device. The tree of life is embedded in it, the ten spheres and also symbols of the Kabbalah. The seal of Solomon appears throughout the floor. In the 15th and 16th centuries it was considered the key to all ancient mystical wisdom in the universe. Today we call it the Star of David.

Q: How was Michelangelo able to conceal what he was doing? The pope was watching him pretty closely, right?

Michelangelo constructs this amazing flying bow bridge that presses against the side-walls so he won't block up the pope's chapel with a lot of wooden scaffold supports. He puts a big drop cloth under it and tells the pope, I don't want to drip any paint on your beautiful outfits. The real reason is so the pope can't look up through the arches and see what's going on. He broke the contract on day one. We know that all the giant images around the edges of the ceiling are seven Jewish prophets. You've also got five women who are not Jewish or Christian but pagan. They're sibyls from Greek and Roman mythology. In the middle, where the pope wanted a geometrical pattern and his crown, Michelangelo put what he thought really rules the universe: the five books of Moses—[holy] for both Jews and Christians. And the central strip is from the book of Genesis. He told Julius and his advisers, I am showing how everything in the ancient world, Jewish and pagan, leads up to the coming of Jesus, the Messiah. So that's how he got away with it.