

Houses Of Worship
Seeking Truth at the Movies

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“Almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false,” says one of the characters in “The Da Vinci Code,” the best-selling novel by Dan Brown. It’s not clear whether this line will appear in the movie, which reaches theaters in three weeks, but some version of it probably will make the final cut. Although nobody expects Christians to riot over “The Da Vinci Code” the way Muslims did over those Mohammad cartoons, some clergymen already have announced their disapproval. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, used his Easter sermon to criticize Mr. Brown’s book for making the true story of Christianity seem “automatically suspect.” In an advertisement in the New York Times, the Catholic League compared “The Da Vinci Code” to the anti-Semitic “Protocols of the Elders of Zion.”

It turns out, however, that many Christian leaders are choosing a completely different approach to the movie. They certainly aren’t embracing “The Da Vinci Code” and its conspiracy theories about the supposed marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, the phony divinity of Christ and so on. Yet many view the film as providing an unconventional occasion -- a “teachable moment,” as they say -- to spread their faith. “It’s a marvelous opportunity to be positive,” said Josh McDowell of Campus Crusade for Christ in the Orlando Sentinel. “If you look carefully, truth will always stand.”

The movie’s tagline happens to be “seek the truth” -- a phrase that feels like an invitation to explore and think rather than a demand to watch and submit. It distantly echoes Acts 17:11, which urges people to read Scripture so that they may determine its validity. Sony Pictures, the studio behind the film, obviously hopes that millions of Christian truth-seekers will feel inspired to buy tickets. There’s no guarantee that they will: In 1988, when Christians protested “The Last Temptation of Christ” for its depictions of Jesus as lustful and confused, Mr. McDowell’s organization tried to buy the film prints so that they could be destroyed.

That controversy actually helped “The Last Temptation” to achieve not just notoriety but also commercial success -- what was once seen as an art-house film with small-time appeal suddenly became the must-see movie of the season. Having bet more than a few Sunday collection baskets on “The Da Vinci Code,” Sony isn’t looking for a fluke hit but a blockbuster.

Mr. Brown’s book is no ordinary thriller but rather a cultural phenomenon whose provocative ideas are discussed on news shows and around office water-coolers. Most of its claims, cloaked in the thinnest veneer of authenticity, are utter nonsense. For whatever reason, however, they’ve struck a nerve. They’ve also inspired a small industry of

companion books and DVDs that examine the assertions of “The Da Vinci Code” and take up Sony’s challenge to “seek the truth.”

The amazing thing is that church leaders, like those at Campus Crusade, have been among the most aggressive contributors to this enterprise. Instead of acting like the mad-as-hell crusaders of the recent past -- a strategy that probably has backfired more often than it has succeeded -- they are now assuming the role of debunking missionaries.

This marks a sea change in attitudes from a decade ago, when the American Family Association began its much-ballyhooed boycott of Disney for a variety of affronts, including its ties to Miramax, which was peddling movies such as the impious “Dogma” and the gay-themed “Priest.” (The AFA’s boycott actually ended to virtually no fanfare last September, in the wake of the Disney-Miramax divorce. Disney’s release of “The Chronicles of Narnia” also helped smooth relations with the religious.) The content of “The Da Vinci Code” is arguably more objectionable to Christians than anything that ever carried the Miramax label, but the AFA isn’t telling its flock to stay away from theaters. An article on its Web site even suggests that readers see the movie so that they’ll know how to defend their faith. The AFA is also hawkking “The Da Vinci Delusion,” a DVD produced by Coral Ridge Ministries.

Sony is encouraging such efforts. It hired Grace Hill Media, a marketing company that has promoted movies such as “Narnia” to evangelicals, to reach out to believers. One result of this collaboration is a Web site (www.thedavincialogue.com) that includes a section called “ministry resources” as well as essays by prominent religious leaders, such as Darrell L. Bock, a professor at the Dallas Theological Seminary and the author of “Breaking the Da Vinci Code,” and Monsignor Francis J. Maniscalco, who oversees film ratings for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

It’s Catholics, of course, who come in for the worst treatment in “The Da Vinci Code.” Not only is much of Christianity a fraud, according to the novel, but the Roman Catholic Church has played a murderous role in the world’s greatest cover-up. The members of Opus Dei, a conservative group of ordained and lay Catholics, are portrayed as fanatical thugs who will stop at nothing to prevent people from seeking the truth.

In the mind of Hollywood, there may be no such thing as bad publicity. To Opus Dei, however, the enormous amount of scrutiny that came in the wake of “The Da Vinci Code” was not exactly welcome -- the organization would have preferred to go about its spiritual business without having to rebut the zany allegations of a hack.

Yet Opus Dei has chosen to get ready for its close-up and make the best of an unavoidable situation. It has cooperated with reporters, including several who contributed to a recent Time cover story that was notably fair-minded. The organization’s Web site prominently features a section on “The Da Vinci Code,” including an exhortation that those who are interested in the story of Jesus should visit “the non-fiction section of the library.”

If they do, they may soon run across a book called “The Way,” by Opus Dei founder St. Josemaría Escrivá. Originally released in 1939, the book is being brought out again by Doubleday -- the publisher that issued “The Da Vinci Code” three years ago. It’s possible that Opus Dei’s members now include people who never would have learned about the organization in the absence of Dan Brown’s smear job.

When “The Da Vinci Code” began filming last year, reports trickled into the media that some of the novel’s sharpest accusations would be blunted so as not to offend the sensibilities of moviegoers who made Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ” one of the most profitable films of all-time. It’s hard to see how the movie can pull back from the novel’s most startling claims and still tap into the zeitgeist. Even so, there is speculation that Opus Dei won’t be identified in the movie -- it might be described rather than named.

Perhaps some members of Opus Dei will regard this as a minor victory. Yet others, upon reflection, may wonder if it’s a lost opportunity.

Mr. Miller is the author of “A Gift of Freedom: How the John M. Olin Foundation Changed America.”

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