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Offensive? Probably. A dud? For sure

Despite the hype, the year's most-awaited film is unlikely to win any Oscars

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As a cradle Catholic and a member of Opus Dei for 30-something years, I was not disposed to like *The Da Vinci Code*. But after watching it, I can say, “Relax, chill out. Stow the tomatoes and just give it a big raspberry.”

Director Ron Howard’s version of the novel is a tepid succession of mini-PowerPoint presentations

punctuated by narrow escapes. It's no blockbuster.

The crux of the film is unveiling “the greatest lie ever told”, “a secret so powerful that if revealed it would devastate the very foundations of mankind” -- that Jesus Christ is not God and that century after century the Catholic Church has brutally suppressed this subversive truth. Powerful stuff.

It happens in a church basement. Does the earth quake? Does lightning strike? No, the custodians of this epoch-making secret stand about sipping cups of Earl Grey tea with the last lineal descendant of Jesus Christ. How very British, what? How anti-climactic.

Without a doubt, for believing Christians, *The Da Vinci Code* is literally, deliberately, explicitly blasphemous. We're not just talking about dethroning Jesus Christ as the

Son of God, either. At the root of this cultural cancer is monotheism: “As long as there has been one true God,” says Holy Grail expert Sir Leigh Teabing, played by Sir Ian McKellen, “there has been murder in his name.”

The film’s theology is a tad murky, but it seems to be promoting worship of the sacred feminine, whatever that is. Well, the last time what has become the Western world experimented with worship of fertility goddesses, it ended up with ritual prostitution and infant sacrifice. So I’m not sure whether we’ll gain a lot by knocking down clotheslines and setting up shrines to Astarte, Aphrodite and Ishtar in our backyards.

Sophie Neveu, played by Audrey Tautou, doesn’t behave like an avatar of feminist spirituality, either. Most of the time she’s a modest awestruck

lass goggling at Harvard symbologist Robert Langdon, played by Tom Hanks, as he gives her PowerPoint presentations. Would a real descendant of Mary Magdalen spend time massaging poor Robert's temples to take away that nasty little headache? I think not.

So while Ron Howard and Dan Brown have tried hard to be blasphemous, it's not full-blooded and visceral stuff. I found the film offensive and painful, but rather like a cranky four-year-old stamping his foot and shrieking "f*** off!". At Cannes, the reviewers giggled. So did I.

Naturally, I was curious to see how Howard would deal with Opus Dei, which had complained politely, but persistently, of being defamed in the book. He responded, all right -- by turbocharging the defamation. Not only is the masochistic Silas the Mad

Monk Assassin a member of Opus Dei, but Howard made the sadistic cop, Bezu Fache, one as well.

Apparently we've a complete range of S&M in our outfit.

I felt like raising my hand to explain that Opus Dei is normal men and women, mostly married, just trying to do everyday things for the love of God. Unhappily Ron Howard beat me to it: he inserted a scene in which an Opus Dei bishop (also mealy-mouthed, two-faced and vicious) says precisely that to a reporter. Any similarity to real persons or institutions is unintentional, say the credits at the end. Well, that gets my vote for the greatest lie ever told.

And the most cowardly, as well. You might remember last year's film *The Constant Gardener*, in which the villain was the pharmaceutical industry. An evil drug company sends out assassins to knock off

whistleblowers. Which drug company? Pfizer? GlaxoSmithKline? AstraZeneca? None of them, of course. The producer would have been taken to the cleaners. But Ron Howard and his producer Sony knew that the Catholic Church can't fight back and he could tip garbage all over Opus Dei without losing a cent.

There are countless historical errors and distortions in The Da Vinci Code. They offer a great opportunity for Christians to explain what their faith is all about. We have nothing to fear or hide, for the story of Christianity is based four-square on demonstrable facts, not -- like Dan Brown's -- on 1066 and All That. In particular, I'm going to be highlighting a core theme in Opus Dei, that love of God is a 24/7 affair which should fill your whole life, not just church on Sundays. In other words, you should bring your faith to work with you.

Dan Brown and Ron Howard & Co must be nice enough guys in real life. But if so, there's a chasm between their personal values and their work values. In the publicity lead-up to the film's launch, Paul Bettany, who plays Silas, told the London Telegraph: "There's something nice about being able to leave your sense of morality at the door when you come to work in the morning and just be cruel to people all day." If you want to define what *Opus Dei* is all about, it's the precise opposite of that flippant remark.

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