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HOLLYWOOD HERESY: Marketing “The Da Vinci Code” to Christians

Reportaje publicado en el New Yorker, el 15 de mayo de 2006.

15/06/2006

In the three years since the publication of Dan Brown’s “The Da Vinci Code,” a best-selling suspense novel with pretensions to serious scholarship, the work has inspired a vast literature of refutation, including dozens of books and

numberless essays disputing the story's core contentions. The Internet, intrinsically hospitable to such a purpose, has grown a busy marketplace of "Da Vinci" debunkers, anticipating the big-budget film version of Brown's tale, now arriving in theatres. Prospective moviegoers who have spent time at a Web site called The Da Vinci Dialogue, the most polished of these efforts, have been informed that the story is deeply anti-Christian, a pseudo history "fraught with inaccuracies" and "spiritual tripe." They have been offered the opinion that, of its type, the book was only "moderately engaging," attracting fans who were easily gulled and perhaps just a bit dim.

What is striking about these assertions is that they are part of a marketing project paid for by Sony Pictures Entertainment, the studio that has invested more than two

hundred million dollars in producing "The Da Vinci Code" and distributing and marketing it worldwide. When Sony acquired the rights to the book, in June of 2003, it was the property that Hollywood most dearly coveted, a certain blockbuster with sequel potential, and the reported six-million-dollar deal that Sony made with Brown was seen as a triumph. The article in Daily Variety announcing the deal suggested no hint of possible religious controversy in the "Da Vinci Code" story, describing it as a murder mystery with "clues to a 2,000-year-old conspiracy encoded in the paintings of Leonardo Da Vinci." John Calley, the Sony executive who made the deal, described the book as a "page-turner" and a "thrill ride" that seemed to have been written for the screen.

If, in retrospect, Hollywood seems to have been oblivious of the risk of the

film's arousing religious ire, it was only reflecting the attitude that had greeted the publication of the book. Reviewers had generally praised the novel, calling it a brainy entertainment and, as sales piled up, marvelling at its broad appeal; somehow, the provocations at its heart were almost uniformly overlooked. Brown's puzzler plot proceeded from a thesis that Christianity as we know it is history's greatest scam, perpetrated by a malignant, misogynist, and, when necessary, murderous Catholic Church. "Almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false," one of the book's main characters declares.

Two developments soon brought that aspect of "The Da Vinci Code" into sharper focus, and changed the dynamic of the Sony project. One was the realization by Church leaders that Dan Brown's legion of

fans included many of the Christian faithful, and that a large proportion of them believed that some—or, perhaps, even all—of the book's assertions were true. The other development was unfolding just a few miles west of the Sony studios, in an editing room in Santa Monica, where Mel Gibson was fashioning an early version of his sanguinary vision of Christ's Passion.

There is nothing outwardly ominous about the building at Lexington Avenue and East Thirty-fourth Street, a handsome seventeen-story red-brick-and-limestone tower, that is the American headquarters of the Prelature of Opus Dei. But when I asked a nearby shopkeeper about the place he grew apprehensive. "Opus Dei, dude—I'm scared of those people," he said. "In all honesty, I read something in 'The Da Vinci Code' that disturbed me as a Christian. This self-mortification, this

self-mutilation, where they tie this band around their thighs and hit themselves in the back with a rope. You know, that shit's crazy, dog."

Such a comment suggests that the Catholic Church and other Christian leaders might be justified in their concerns that readers of "The Da Vinci Code" are taking the book too seriously. The shopkeeper's comment referred to a character named Silas, an albino Opus Dei "monk," whose zealous piety expresses itself as sadomasochism and a willingness to kill (even a nun) for God. It is through Silas that Brown introduces his readers to the practice of corporal mortification—self-inflicted pain as an avenue to deeper spirituality—and the devices employed to achieve it, a barbed belt worn around the thigh (called a cilice) and a knotted rope (the discipline). In one scene in the book, Silas, preparing for a night of doing God's dirty work, strips

naked and cinches his cilice until it cuts deeper into his flesh, then repeatedly whips himself until, “finally, he felt the blood begin to flow.” Then he goes out and vandalizes a church and commits another murder, for the cause.

Brown employs the Silas character to convey an impression of Opus Dei as the cultish, invisible hand within the Catholic Church, a view that is held by many, both inside the Church and out. Opus Dei is a unique community, begun in 1928 by a Spanish priest named Josemaría Escrivá, who envisioned a world made holier by a cadre of deeply pious laypeople committed to expressing their spiritual devotion through their everyday work in the secular world. That, Escrivá believed, was truly God’s work—opus dei. Members undertake rigorous theological and spiritual formation, something like that of candidates for a religious

order, with a critical core (about twenty-five per cent) pledging celibacy and living together in gender-segregated Opus Dei centers, such as the building on Thirty-fourth Street. (The women's portion of the building is entered from Lexington Avenue.) Opus Dei now has eighty-seven thousand members worldwide, with about three thousand in the United States. (Its traditional rival, the Jesuits, an order of Catholic priests and brothers, claims about twenty thousand.) A little more than half the members are women, and the great majority, called "supernumeraries," are married and, apart from the intensity of their devotion, lead conventional lives.

A sizable proportion of Opus Dei members, under the guidance of a spiritual director, voluntarily take up the practice of corporal mortification, wearing the cilice for

two hours most days and using the discipline. (Both items are produced in monasteries.) Father William Stetson, who runs the Catholic Information Center, in Washington, D.C., and who joined Opus Dei in the mid-nineteen-fifties, when he was at Harvard Law School, says that he learned the larger meaning of corporal mortification the first week he joined. “I understood that what was being demanded of me was an ascetical practice,” he says. “Not just the cilice and the disciplines but an austerity of life, living in the middle of the world.” Stetson and others frequently point out that corporal mortification, which may seem a throwback to medieval mysticism, was not uncommon even among recent exemplars of spiritual piety. Mother Teresa of Calcutta wore a cilice and used the discipline, telling her Sisters, “If I am sick, I take five strokes. I must feel its need in order

to share in the Passion of Christ and the sufferings of our poor."

Pope John Paul II particularly favored Opus Dei, and in 1982 accorded the community the status of "personal prelature," a sort of worldwide jurisdiction unbounded by the geographical lines that define a diocese. Members are extremely loyal to the Pope, and to Church orthodoxy. Dan Brown's novel portrays Opus Dei as a powerful force for regression, which is exactly how the prelature is seen by Vatican II-era progressive Catholics, whose hopes for reform (such as the admission of women into the priesthood and a more liberal policy on contraception) have long been frustrated. As John Paul neared death, Father Richard McBrien, of the University of Notre Dame, a consistent liberal voice, said that one of his complaints against John Paul was his affinity for Opus Dei. "Opus

Dei is as close to a fascist organization [as there is] in the Catholic Church," he told me last year. "They're a very, very definite, militant, ultra-conservative group in the Church, who are basically trying to undo the work of the Second Vatican Council. In this Pope, they had a willing ally, because there was a quid pro quo. They gave him a lot of money and a lot of support for his efforts, going way back, to support the Solidarity movement in Poland. And they had a great influence in John Paul's pontificate."

That deeply critical view of Opus Dei is reflected by Brown in "The Da Vinci Code," except that Brown's quid pro quo involves an Opus Dei bailout of the Vatican bank, repaid, in part, by fast-tracked sainthood for Father Escrivá. (The Vatican canonized Escrivá in 2002.) Opus Dei insists that the "Da Vinci Code" portrait of the group is malicious nonsense, but the

larger worry is how much of the rest of the book readers will take as gospel. “The distortions that ‘The Da Vinci Code’ has in it about Christ, the Church, Christianity in general are a source of deeper concern than any misrepresentation of Opus Dei,” Peter Bancroft, the group’s national communications director, says. “The Church won’t stand or fall on whether Opus Dei exists or not. But whether Christ is divine is central.”

The premise of Brown’s story is that Jesus of Nazareth was, in the words of a “Da Vinci” character, “a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless. A mortal.” The Brown theology—asserted, lecture style, in speeches by two of his main characters, both scholars—holds that Jesus was a proto-feminist married to Mary of Magdala, his favorite disciple and the mother of his offspring. This Jesus preached a message that was in harmony with

goddess worship, and the early Christians practiced a life-affirming faith devoted to the "sacred feminine" until, in the fourth century, a Catholic power play replaced this true Christianity with the patriarchal, sin-and-atonement version. According to Brown, the softer Christianity's books were burned by the Church, as were five million of its more assertive women —"female scholars, priestesses, gypsies, mystics, nature lovers," and the like. Even so, this original Christian Church could not be wiped out, and left clues everywhere telling of the sacred feminine—not only in Leonardo's work (the artist was in on the secret) but even in church architecture. (The entrance of a Gothic cathedral, one of Brown's characters observes, is like a vagina, "complete with receding labial ridges and a nice little cinquefoil clitoris above the doorway.")

While secular critics and Hollywood producers plainly saw Brown's story as a mystery that happened to have some religious material in it, the Church saw the book as an anti-Christian (and, particularly, anti-Catholic) polemic disguised as a beach read. As church leaders, Protestant and Catholic, increasingly heard questions from their congregants about "Da Vinci" postulations, book sales skyrocketed—to date, more than sixty million copies have been printed, in forty-four languages—and Sony set out to make the movie. The Christians were broadly united in their opposition to the book, and to the movie, but badly divided on the question of how to deal with it.

Mainstream Hollywood has an orthodoxy of its own, upheld in some quarters as insistently as that of any church, and by the fall of 2003 Mel Gibson had come to be regarded as a

deeply misguided, perhaps even dangerous, heretic. His movie about the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Christ was still in the cutting room, but Hollywood already knew more than enough, from accounts of a bootlegged screenplay, to render judgment. Gibson's vision of Jesus' last hours, reflecting what he considered a literal reading of the Gospels, offended progressive Christian scholars, Jewish groups concerned about anti-Semitism, and secular opinion writers. For people in the film business, an even greater offense, perhaps, was Gibson's putting his own money into the film —one that used relatively unknown actors, speaking lines written in dead languages. This seemed the act of someone who had truly lost his bearings, and Gibson began to feel the sting of ostracism in a community that had once given him a Best Picture Oscar. Major studios shunned the project; producers were

quoted anonymously as saying that they wouldn't work with him again; and he was snubbed at his Beverly Hills cigar club.

But it was still the movie business, which meant that somewhere in all the negative publicity there was a marketing opportunity. Gibson seized it, through the services of a man named Paul Lauer, a Catholic who sensed that opprobrium aimed at Gibson by the press and by Hollywood people could be leveraged to Gibson's advantage. Lauer worked the Catholic network, arranging private screenings of "The Passion of the Christ" for friendly archbishops and Knights of Columbus chapters, personally attended by Gibson. Lauer urged Gibson to reach out to evangelical Protestants, who had long felt estranged from popular culture, and who now embraced the Hollywood star for standing on their side of the culture divide. After

Gibson showed clips from his film to a convention of Pentecostals in Anaheim, members of the crowd laid hands on him and prayed for his success. Gibson's film became a Christian cause, and when it opened, on Ash Wednesday, 2004, church groups that had bought ticket blocks filled the theatres; some houses were sold out for several days. "The Passion of the Christ," scorned by critics and rejected by establishment studios, provided Gibson with a revenge that spoke clearly to Hollywood—a domestic box-office return of three hundred and seventy million dollars.

Eight months after "The Passion" arrived, the born-again President was reëlected over Hollywood's candidate, greatly helped by the alliance of evangelicals and Catholics who had flocked to Gibson's film. Suddenly, people like Paul Lauer and A. Larry Ross, the publicity man for

Billy Graham and Rick Warren, who helped with “Passion,” were getting calls from producers, asking their advice on how to market their films. Scripts were vetted for content that might offend Christians, who had become the hot new market segment. Producers began using terms like “Christian values” without irony.

It was at this moment, in November, 2004, that Sony moved toward production on “The Da Vinci Code.” The studio had hired Ron Howard to direct the film and Tom Hanks as its star, safe choices who were not likely to botch the project’s blockbuster inevitability by going arty. But the environment had changed dramatically since Sony acquired the property. Dan Brown’s best-seller was now under steady assault, its theology attacked by a series of books bearing titles such as “De-Coding Da Vinci” and “Breaking the Da Vinci Code,” which deconstructed

Brown's scholarship and convincingly refuted many of his key claims (such as Christ's divinity having been decided by the fourth-century Council of Nicaea, on a close vote). Brown's art scholarship was also broadly assailed. The Times published a critique of "The Da Vinci Code" by the Renaissance art expert Bruce Boucher, who gently mocked Brown's "shaky" grasp of the historical Leonardo (pointing out, for example, that the artist's name was not "Da Vinci"). Boucher concluded his article by suggesting that "The Da Vinci Code" might make a better opera than a film, offering the old advice that "if it's too silly to be said, it can always be sung."

Such confutation was notable, because the ostensible veracity of Brown's history, if not his theology, had been part of the book's allure. Brown had asserted this veracity both implicitly (through the device of

assigning historical exposition to his fictional scholars) and explicitly (beginning the book with a "fact" page that erroneously asserted, for example, that his shadowy Priory of Sion—"a European secret society founded in 1099—is a real organization"). Book reviewers had praised his research, and Brown, in promoting the book, vouched for its validity; he told Charles Gibson, on "Good Morning America," that if the book had been nonfiction his factual assertions would not have changed.

Meanwhile, Sony's fortunes seemed to have taken a downward turn. In 2003, its Ben Affleck–Jennifer Lopez movie, "Gigli," had tanked embarrassingly, and two big-budget sequels, "Bad Boys II" and "Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle," had not met expectations. The whole movie industry was entering a prolonged box-office slump. Sony needed "The Da Vinci Code" to be a hit, and it

could not predict how an angry and motivated "Passion" constituency might affect the film's fate.

Sony decided not to take any chances. As it began to devise its marketing strategy for "Da Vinci," it hired the services of Sitrick & Company, a public-relations firm that specializes in reputation salvaging. The firm, whose unofficial slogan is "If you don't tell your story, someone else is going to tell it for you," worked with Rush Limbaugh after his revelation of prescription-drug addiction, and with the comedian Paula Poundstone when she was charged with child endangerment. Sony wanted Sitrick to manage any potential "Da Vinci" fallout. "It's not that big studios don't like controversy," Allan Mayer, Sitrick's managing director, told Variety. "What they fear is a controversy that gets out of control. And controversy gets out of control when people start

using a movie as a tennis ball in their own match."

Darrell Bock, a research professor of New Testament Studies at the Dallas Theological Seminary, was on sabbatical in Tübingen, Germany, last summer when he received an e-mail from a Sony representative wishing to discuss a project connected to "The Da Vinci Code." This seemed odd, because Bock was the author of "Breaking the Da Vinci Code," the attack on Brown's scholarship, which had also reached the Times best-seller list. Bock agreed to meet with the Sony representative when he returned to the U.S. that fall.

The Sony strategy, following the Sitrick model, was to try to turn the controversy over "The Da Vinci Code" to the film's advantage. There was no way to stop a Christian critique of Brown's ideas, but, if leading Christian voices could

somehow be coaxed into an association with the “Da Vinci” movie, the criticism might seem less like an attack and more like engagement. Many in Hollywood remembered the passionate reaction to Martin Scorsese’s “The Last Temptation of Christ” (1988), which proved to be a public-relations nightmare for Universal. It was better, to paraphrase Lyndon Johnson, to have the Christians inside the theatre, discussing “Da Vinci,” than outside, picketing.

The man Sony chose for the task of shepherding Christian leaders to the Sony cause was Jonathan Bock, of Grace Hill Media, one of the new breed of faith-oriented consultants now thriving in Hollywood. It was he who had got in touch with Darrell Bock (they are not related) last summer, and with several dozen other such leaders. Jonathan Bock, a former studio publicist, had a

demonstrated ability to translate Hollywood to the Christian faithful, and to explain Christians to movie people. He had a sophisticated understanding of the relatively small and interconnected circle of Christian opinion leaders, especially those in the new media. Where a studio executive might reflexively equate "Christian leader" with Jerry Falwell, Bock knew that, in important ways, this is a post-televangelist era; a few well-regarded Christian bloggers or scholars, fully conversant with popular culture, can have as much impact as any broadcast Jeremiah.

Christian critics, meanwhile, had yet to come up with a unified, coherent strategy to protest the movie. On Palm Sunday, a powerful cardinal urged a boycott of the film, saying that the book was "full of calumnies, offenses, and historical and theological errors," but there has

been no official Church endorsement of his call. Bill Donohue, the president of the Catholic League, and a usually reliable volunteer in the culture conflicts, decided early on that he was not going to participate in any boycott of the film. “First of all, it’s a useless exercise,” he says. “The movie’s going to be a box-office extravaganza the first weekend or two. After that, if it’s a good movie it’ll continue; if not, it’ll fail.” Donohue says that he is galled by Dan Brown’s insistence on the book’s factuality, and that he has asked Sony and Ron Howard to add a disclaimer to the film, labelling it as fiction. He says, “I have to be prudent. I want to win. This book has sold forty million copies. It’s got Tom Hanks, Sony behind it, Ron Howard. To the extent that we can get the word out—‘Look, go and be entertained, this is good fun, but this movie is a fable’—to that extent, that’s about as good as I can get.”

That ambivalence made Jonathan Bock's job—framing the dispute over the film on Sony's terms—much easier. In February, Bock launched The Da Vinci Dialogue, which contains some forty-five essays by religious leaders and Christian scholars questioning and correcting, in civil tones, various of Dan Brown's assertions. Opus Dei declined to participate in the site, but evangelicals have been eager to be heard. Darrell Bock, perhaps preëminent among the "Da Vinci" debunkers, contributed two essays to the site, and says that the Christian participation in the project reflects the community's growing sophistication in dealing with popular culture. "The Christian response this time around has been different," Bock says. "Rather than simply whining and complaining, although there are still elements that do that, there is a substantial group that says, No, on this one we're going

to engage. So we're not going to talk boycott. We're not going to protest, we're simply going to take the facts that were presented in this novel and we're going to engage them, and we're going to try to show people that there's a good, substantive reply to what's going on here."

The theme of engagement has come to define the Christian response to "The Da Vinci Code" well beyond the Sony discourse. Ministers across the country have arranged discussion groups and courses of instruction tied to the questions raised by Brown's work, and even Opus Dei leaders now speak of it as a "teaching moment." Sony is undoubtedly pleased by this outcome. If Christian leaders are speaking of "dialogue" and "engagement," they are not saying, "Don't see this film." In the realm of damage control, that may be a serviceable definition of controlling the controversy.

That is precisely what annoys Barbara Nicolosi, a screenwriter and an influential Christian blogger, whose friendship with Jonathan Bock has been strained recently. She says that when she first heard that Bock was working with Sony on “The Da Vinci Code” she was optimistic. Bock’s connection with the project suggested to her that Sony wanted to mollify Christians, and Nicolosi urged her friends and readers to withhold judgment on the film; perhaps Ron Howard and his screenwriter, Akiva Goldsman, would not use the name Opus Dei, and would make the assertions about Jesus and Mary Magdalene seem more speculative and less factual. Then, she says, someone slipped her a version of the screenplay, and she realized that the studio’s effort to engage in a dialogue with the faith community would be limited to the Da Vinci Dialogue Web site created by Bock. Nicolosi felt that Christians

had been sold out, as she proceeded to make clear on her blog. "Christians being coaxed into writing anti-DVC pieces on a stupid web site . . . are meekly accepting that they are being given 'a seat at the table' in some grand cultural discussion," she wrote. "Duped! There is no seat, folks. There is no discussion. What there is, is a few P.R. folks in Hollywood taking mondo big bucks from Sony Pictures, to deliver legions of well-meaning Christians into subsidizing a movie that makes their own Savior out to be a sham."

Nicolosi says that those participating in the Sony project are debating "on Hell's terms," and she refers to the Web site's contributors, some of whom are her friends, as "useful Christian idiots."

"I think that was actually applied to me," Craig Detweiler, a professor of mass communications at Biola

University, an evangelical college near Los Angeles, says. Detweiler has written for the Dialogue site, and has spoken admiringly of Dan Brown's book—publicly posing the question "How can forty million readers be wrong?" Detweiler acknowledges that the Christian community in Hollywood is divided over the film. "I think there are just very differing levels of offense taken at the novel," he says. "Some are able to sort it out and say, 'You know what? It's a novel, it's fiction.' And I believe that the average moviegoer and reader can figure that out." He also says that the different responses suggest a Catholic-Protestant divide. "The accusation that Jesus might have been married—to many people, that's kind of an interesting notion. It doesn't affect their faith significantly, one way or the other. To someone who's taken a vow of celibacy and put on a collar, that is a very large foundational challenge. So it's

understandable why that has maybe crossed a line for certain members of the Christian community."

Nicolosi, who is Catholic, says that the divisions among Christians prove her point about Dan Brown's book and the Sony movie. "It's demonic," she says. "I've seen so much evidence, in the fact that people who were friends five months ago are now totally at each other's throats." Nicolosi may yet have the last word; she has written a screenplay about the life of the Opus Dei founder, Josemaría Escrivá, and she would be helped by a "Da Vinci Code" success.

If the movie is not the blockbuster promised by the book's performance, it will not be the fault of Sony's marketing campaign. The studio has certainly deflected, or mitigated, direct criticism of the movie, which, by all indications, follows the book closely. The Catholic League will not

get its disclaimer, and Opus Dei will be prominently, and darkly, represented. One measure of how well the campaign worked is that by last week Sony's television ads for the movie carried the tagline "The most controversial thriller of our time."

As it happens, the "Da Vinci Code" experience has provided Opus Dei itself with a valuable marketing tutorial. After initially considering a lawsuit against Brown or Sony, the prelature decided instead to take advantage of the publicity. The red brick building at Thirty-fourth and Lexington has been opened to reporters, and so many tourists stop by that the prelature began leaving recruitment literature by the front entrance. Opus Dei redesigned its Web site, making it more user-friendly, and has posted a list of "Da Vinci Code" corrections. (Regarding Opus Dei "monks," such as Silas, the

prelature notes, “Like all Catholics, Opus Dei members have great appreciation for monks, but in fact there are no monks in Opus Dei.”) The Web site has received more than three million visitors, and Peter Bancroft, Opus Dei’s national communications director, says that some of the curious have now become members. The Silas wannabes are generally screened out.

“It’s odd, really,” Bancroft says. “Every once in a while, we get an e-mail from somebody who’s really fascinated by the cilice and the discipline, and says he would like to join up if he can use them. And that’s not the kind of person that we’re looking for.”

PETER J. BOYER // New Yorker