

The DaVinci Opportunity

By Bishop Paul V. Marshall

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There is no such thing as bad publicity. The furor over *The DaVinci Code* is the religious right's gift to Hollywood. This kind of reaction gave the hi-brow *Last Temptation of Christ* a popular audience: what it will do for a best-selling thriller cannot be estimated.

Let's clear the deck: yes, Hollywood has been offending Christians since Joan Crawford's *Susan and God* (1940) in ways it has never focused on Islam, Buddhism, or Judaism. Yes, for a historical novel, Brown's work is ludicrously researched and full of factual mistakes that make the suspension of disbelief needed for reading fiction almost impossible. Yes, Jesus' celibacy is easy to demonstrate. Yes, it is utterly improbable that a beautiful woman whose grandfather has been grotesquely murdered would go to bed with a middle aged man with bad clothes sense just a few days later, although, as a male, I am somewhat willing to believe that one. And so on.

Pointing out the endless "errors" of the *Code* misses the point and misuses this godsend of publicity for the Church.

The real question is: why is the book, and presumably the movie, such a hit? As I travel the 14 counties in my diocese, I have heard two themes from Brown's fans.

The first is that the *Code* resonates with the belief that religious institutions have occasionally been dishonest, manipulative, and very, very rich with no accountability. There is no major religion without blood on its hands, as anyone except the unlearned or the most defensive zealots will admit.

The second and even more common response is from those women who feel themselves to have gotten a very dirty deal from the Big Three “religions of the book,” and it is certainly hard to disagree.

One woman said to me of Brown’s book, “This is the first time I’ve felt that religion could affirm me as a woman.” It would be easy to say that she should get out more, but it is more useful to say that Brown’s fiction has evoked a response that more polished religious thinking has just plain failed to get.

For Christians to take a defensive attitude towards what is, after all, a book/movie that will never be considered a timeless classic is self-defeating. The reactive stance of some of my fellow-believers suggests that they learned nothing from Islam’s public relations disaster over *The Satanic Verses*. The reactivity of some Muslim clerics unfortunately confirmed every stereotype that many already believe about Islam. Do Christians now wish to confirm Brown’s suggestion that the Church is defensive, secretive, and tolerant of violence?

If Brown is wrong in his indictment of Christianity, would it not make more sense to seize the moment when people are excited about a topic and invite them to experience the alternative reality?

Why not take the opportunity to invite people to experience institutions and structures that are transparent and accountable? Why not invite them to come to see how the feminine in all of us and in women in particular is honored?

If I had the money I would stand outside of theatres distributing copies of Marcus Borg's *The God We Never Knew* to offer just such an alternative view of the Christian message. As one writer has said of the *Code*, "We have our work cut out for us." Why not just do it?

To the extent that Brown is right about the nature of institutions and the rejection of the feminine, perhaps the best thing to do would be to change, and to do so publicly.