Pious pulp Da Vinci on screen: *Da Vinci* on screen

by Jason Byassee in the June 13, 2006 issue

That a mosh pit of reviewers would fall over each other to pan the ***The Da Vinci Code*** is puzzling. It's not a great film, but then it isn't a great book. If you want car chases, go see *Mission*: *Impossible III*. If you want a whodunit, don't turn to a novel so widely discussed that even those who haven't read it know who the bad guy is (and where the "sacred feminine" is buried). If you want a profound, subtle meditation on faith, then a story with a self-flagellating, murderous albino monk is probably not your bag.

On the other hand, if you want lots of sitting around and ham-handed talk about theology and church history, this is your film. The book's facile theology is more obvious on screen than in the book. Look—the Star of David is made of two superimposed triangles, "just like the pagans would have wanted." Look—a bulge and a space. It must mean a phallus and a womb!

The film's vitriolic anti-Catholicism is epitomized by the self-castigating and murderous Opus Dei monk Silas (Paul Bettany), who is dispatched around the world by a cynical cardinal intent on maintaining his power. For Brown, the more devoted a Catholic one is, the more disgusting a human being one becomes.

The representative of the good guys is "symbologist" Robert Langdon (Tom Hanks), who runs around Europe with French detective Sophie Neveu (Audrey Tautou) looking for clues to the meaning of the universe. Lucky for Langdon, Neveu is a descendant of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and we presume that he will eventually get together with her and produce more little Jesuses (they may need a miracle for that: not the faintest spark flies between Hanks and Tautou). Langdon is also as understanding about human nature as Dr. Phil, which is good, since his (and Neveu's) repressed childhood memories are as crucial to the plot as anything the church has hidden. Like paintings, scriptures and history, people too must be decoded.

The film closely follows Brown's novel, and both hew to an old Protestant storyline: Jesus was really great, but the church hijacked his message in favor of institutional power and then turned to killing its opponents. If people could only get back to what Jesus said and did (including, for Brown, Jesus' refined sexual pursuits), everything would be much better.

Though Brown misunderstands and misquotes the gnostic gospels, his vision is properly gnostic: he denies the goodness of the body (it's only there for "sacred" ritualistic group sex), and suggests that *real* faith depends on a secret body of knowledge that those saps at your church haven't told you about. The film is just as mindlessly pious about its alternative Christianity as traditionalist Catholics are (in this lampooned version) about their faith. The pagans were sweet and innocent, their celebration of the sacred feminine and of libertine sexuality was clearly liberating, and the merry few who guarded this secret Christianity were patently heroic. The opponents are very very evil—which is obvious because they lash their backs, burn witches and are either albinos or cardinals.

Code-breaker Leigh Teabing (played by the film's one great acting light, Ian McKellen) shouts at Langdon at one point, "You would deny every pilgrim the chance to kneel at the grave of the Magdalene!" *Au contraire*: Langdon himself is moved to kneel and pray at her grave as the film closes. *Da Vinci* is as convinced of its worldview as the fundamentalist protesters are of theirs.

Why does Langdon kneel? Early Christians knelt at Jesus' name and sacramental presence because he was raised, not because they were in the presence of his bones. In fact, it was precisely veneration of the risen Christ that caused them to resist the cult of the emperor and accept their own martyrdom. If they held that Jesus was "just a man," as Brown's characters insist, why would they have challenged pagan civil religion to the point of sealing their own death? Nor can Brown explain why myriads of early Christians voted with their feet against Constantine, making for the desert to pursue ascetic (and passionate) monastic lives in reflection of Jesus.

Those who spend time among living, breathing Christians know that there is no secret narrative hidden in Christian scripture or art that Christians are trying to keep from the world, no monk hit men with which to dispatch enemies of the faith (though some days we might wish . . .). All we have is the "old, old story of Jesus and his love," and of the difficult things he calls his followers to do.

A more powerful critique of Christianity would be to ask why Jesus' followers so rarely actually follow what Jesus said and did. That challenge would quickly lead to a conversation about sin and grace and the nature of the church. In short, it would lead to real theology, not in a way that creates heroes and villains, but in a way that names Christians as sinners and enemies as blessed. It may be harder to sell that as entertainment, however; you can get it in churches around the world, for it is taught openly, universally and "catholically."