

## A Pulpit Online for Critics of 'The Da Vinci Code' Film

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At a time when conservative Christian groups have been particularly quick to strike back at Hollywood fare they find offensive, Sony Pictures faced a predicament with its coming film "The Da Vinci Code."

Should the studio try to mollify the critics who say the "Code" is blasphemy, with its plot describing a church conspiracy to cover up the truth that Jesus married and never rose from the dead? Or should it ignore the complainers, sit back and watch the controversy boost ticket sales?

Instead, Sony has decided to hand a big bullhorn to the detractors of "The Da Vinci Code."

The company is putting up a Web site today — well ahead of the movie's release on May 19 — that will give a platform to some of the fiercest critics of "The Da Vinci Code" by Dan Brown, the book that is the movie's source.

The site, [thedavincialogue.com](http://thedavincialogue.com), will post essays by about 45 Christian writers, scholars and leaders of evangelical organizations who will pick apart the book's theological and historical claims about Christianity.

Among the writers are Gordon Robertson, the son of the television evangelist Pat Robertson and co-host of their television show, "The 700 Club," who is writing about how early Christianity survived; and Richard J. Mouw, the president of Fuller Theological Seminary, a leading evangelical school in Pasadena, Calif.

Dr. Mouw, who contributed an essay on, "Why Christians Ought to See the Movie," said: "It's going to be water cooler conversation, so Christians need to take a deep breath, buy the book and shell out the money for the movie. Then we need to educate Christians about what all this means. We need to help them answer someone who says, 'So how do you know Jesus didn't get married?'"

The idea for the site originated with Jonathan Bock at Grace Hill Media, a company that helps studios market movies to religious audiences. The site will provide links to online discussions. The writers will not be paid.

"We believe this is unique and perhaps can set a tone for others," said Jim Kennedy, a spokesman for Sony Pictures. "We've all seen how some movies can evoke great consternation in society in the past, and I think many people want to move towards a more educational and uplifting dialogue."

Among those who will write for the Web site are Hugh Hewitt, host of a conservative radio talk show; Darrell L. Bock, a professor of New Testament studies and the author of "Breaking the Da Vinci Code"; and George Barna, founder of a polling and research firm that focuses on evangelicals.

Mr. Barna said it was a "hard call" for him to agree to Sony's offer. But, as he wrote in his essay, "Heresy rightfully gets Christians upset, and responding is necessary." Although Roman Catholics in particular have objected to the "Code" book, which refers repeatedly to "the Vatican" as the source of the conspiracy, few Catholic writers are on the Web site's lineup, though more are being asked to join. Grace Hill Media talked with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and Opus Dei, the conservative Catholic group depicted in the book as a murderous force, about their participation, but as the list stands now, they are not included. Charles Colson, the convicted Watergate figure and now a leading evangelical voice, is expected to write about Catholicism.

Despite the fact that it is based on a best-seller, Sony and the movie's producers have been unusually secretive about "The Da Vinci Code," allowing no journalists on the set during filming last summer, keeping all script copies under close supervision and declining to comment about the film in detail.

Sony executives have privately expressed concern over ruffling religious sensitivities with the film, especially since the studio has simultaneously been courting the Christian niche audience with films like "Left Behind: World at War," the straight-to-video evangelical thriller it distributed last year.

Sidney Sheinberg, the former president of MCA-Universal, which released "The Last Temptation of Christ," the 1988 film by Martin Scorsese, was skeptical that a Web site would satisfy those who found "The Da Vinci Code" insulting to their religion.

"That suggests that people who have an opinion are going to put the opinion where you tell them to," he said.

Mr. Sheinberg spoke from bruising experience. "The Last Temptation," which depicted Jesus, while on the cross, doubting his faith and fantasizing about a more prosaic life, ignited a firestorm of protest against the studio, and Mr. Sheinberg received death threats, hate mail and even a pig's head mailed to his home at the time.

The former studio chief said he had appealed to various Christian groups before that movie's release but did not succeed in quelling outrage from others. In his experience, he said, the most intense outrage often comes from those who do not bother to read the book or see the movie.

John C. Green, a senior fellow with the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, said that the Web site is an intriguing strategy for an industry often denounced by Christians.

“In some sense it gives evangelicals and other religious people a forum and a degree of legitimacy because they’ve been asked to give a critique,” he said. “On the other hand, you could see this as a modest amount of co-optation, like Sony is saying, ‘You guys are getting your say, so leave our movie alone.’ ”

*Sharon Waxman contributed reporting for this article from Los Angeles.*