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Belief in the Best Sellers
Martin E. Marty, "Sightings"

Don't believe the celebrators of "the good old days" in American religion, when "everyone was religious and religion was all over the public place."

And don't believe the denigrators of "the good new days" who sulk because government will not do the church's work by allowing and providing for the worship of God(s?) in public schools and in courts. There is now more evidence of religion in public media and non-governmental institutions than before. And in the "free market" of ideas and markets, religion never had it so good in recent or semi-distant memory. I thought of that when scanning the New York Times Book Review best-sellers list.

First, fiction. I am happy to see that the author of "The Da Vinci Code" in court had to call his book fiction. It's delusional to look for and claim to find factual or evidential bases for much of anything in it.

Equally hokey -- but, remember it is fiction -- is Steve Berry's "The Templar Legacy," which shares the ethos of the "Da Vinci" enterprise. So does Javier Sierra's "The Secret Supper." Authors and publics can't get over "the Holy Grail," though it is pretty much beside the point.

As for nonfiction, two of five on the list are worth taking seriously. Kevin Phillips, in "American Theocracy," worries about the takeover of the religious right, fearing it might become a privileged, dominant force. I also take very seriously a refreshing book by Newsweek editor Jon Meacham. "American Gospel" probes the faith of American founders and their legacy.

Next comes a silly one, Michael Baigent's "The Jesus Papers," one of the authors of "Holy

Blood, Holy Grail" argues that Jesus survived his crucifixion." (And the moon is made of greenish cheese -- a proposition on the same level of "nonfiction" as the Baigent book.)

Add to these: "The Gospel of Judas," about which too much has already been said, and Bart D. Ehrman's "Misquoting Jesus," whose author has discovered and is informing us that we do not have original gospel documents and that those we have are of diverse quality and display variants -- something even fundamentalists freely learn from the footnotes in the Greek New Testaments that they used in seminary.

Still, nine of 30 best sellers in the sales by 4,000 godless bookstores and wholesalers are religious in content, as bannered for everyone to see. Don't look for much of anything canonical or orthodox in those that relate to biblical life and times. G. K. Chesterton once said that when people stop believing in God, the problem is not that they do not believe in anything but that they believe in everything and anything. That's made clear with "everything and anything" showing up as religious on dust jackets, covers, title pages, and in texts.

More and more we read editorials or letters in humanist magazines and elsewhere: Can secularism survive? It'll do all right in the marketplace and the marketplace of ideas; one need not worry about that.

Were I a worrier, I'd be more inclined to worry about those who are taken in by everything and anything that is sensationally marketed as potentially replacing classic religious texts or more cautious and profound new ones. Still, the books are likely to sort themselves out, while they gain a huge hearing right now.