

Hollywood wonders "What would Jesus direct?"

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Long criticized by conservative Christians for profiting from violent or sexually graphic films that corrupt the young, Hollywood is starting to see there is money to be made catering to those critics.

"On Sunday, 43 percent of America was in church," Jonathan Bock, head of a movie marketing company that specializes in religious audiences, said at a panel discussion on "What Would Jesus Direct?" at the Tribeca Film Festival this week.

"For studios to not recognize that's an audience is like them saying, 'We're not marketing movies to men,'" Bock said.

He and others on the panel, including a 20th Century Fox executive, said the turning point was Mel Gibson's 2004 movie "The Passion of the Christ," which surprised many in Hollywood by grossing more than \$370 million in the United States.

"Until two months before it was released, it was pretty much known as the least commercial property in Hollywood," said Michael Flaherty, whose production company was behind "The Chronicles of Narnia" and "Because of Winn-Dixie," both with strong spiritual or moral messages.

"There's a lot of people in the faith community who are looking for these films that are uplifting," Flaherty said.

While "The Passion" is credited with knocking down the door for religious-themed films in Hollywood, Bock said the growing interest was clearly linked to politics. He noted President George W. Bush, a born-again Christian, was elected twice with solid backing from conservative Christians.

'GODSPLOITATION'

Ralph Winter, a producer at 20th Century Fox Films, said Fox's home video department was leading the way in pushing for films for religious audiences.

"They're very interested in opening up that market so we have been making \$2 million or \$3 million movies based on (Christian) books," he said.

Winter said studios are looking for projects based on good stories likely to make entertaining movies, without being obvious efforts to proselytize and convert people.

"No one wants to be preached to in a movie theater," Winter said. "Movies that raise issues are more interesting than movies that try to give answers," Winter said.

Bock predicted religious movies would see a growth pattern similar to that of movies made by and about African-Americans.

"There were these 'blaxploitation' films made for very small budgets, then (it went) through maybe you can make a buddy comedy, and (then you) get to the point where stories of African-Americans could be out there," Bock said.

"There have been movies made that were low budget, lets call them 'Godsploitation films.' If they make money, they'll try more," he said, noting that New Line Cinema was working on a film called "Nativity" about the birth of Jesus with "a pretty significant budget."

Bock said that even the upcoming "The Da Vinci Code," condemned by many Christians for undermining their religion by saying Jesus was married and had children, was a movie that would probably be seen by a lot of Christians who realize it is better to see it and argue back than to boycott it.

"What they've come to believe is if the whole world wants to talk about Jesus, then let's be ready to have that conversation," he said.

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