

## **Hollywood is finding Christianity sells Faith-based entertainment is growing in all forms: comedy DVDs, movies and video games.**

Joanne Ostrow, the Denver Post

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"From Hollywood, where plastic surgery is considered a sacrament."

The audience roars as Patricia Heaton, an Emmy winner for *Everybody Loves Raymond* and a Christian, introduces *Thou Shalt Laugh*, a Christian stand-up comedy tour just released on DVD.

Heaton assures the crowd that all of the comedians on the bill are people of faith: "They're all Christians, that's correct, they've all been baptized, they have all their shots!"

The intent of the DVD, from the producers of the Blue Collar Comedy Tour, is to provide clean fun for an underserved audience. And to tap revenues in this burgeoning niche.

There is money to be made in Christian showbiz.

Three years after Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* became a surprise international blockbuster, purveyors of faith-based entertainment think there is a growing demand for their product.

The number of DVDs targeting the Christian market is growing. Fox, New Line, Sony and Warner Bros. all have special divisions making "Christian" films, some theatrical, many direct-to-video. According to Grace Hill Media, the producers of *Thou Shalt Laugh* and the leading marketing firm for religious consumers, "the Christian entertainment industry has boomed into a more than a \$3 billion a year industry." Christian-themed radio and books each reportedly generate more than \$1 billion annually.

"There's no logical reason why we can't incubate entertainment within the faith-based market and migrate it into the secular market," says Tony Thomopoulos, a former president of ABC who is now president of Promise Media, creating DVDs for the Christian marketplace.

But some of the mild humor of *Thou Shalt Laugh* might not translate outside the target audience. ("I'm in a Christian bookstore," says comic Thor Ramsey. "They're selling Christian breath mints: Testamints!")

The mostly white, mostly middle-age and Christian crowd loves it. When a tour of "Thou Shalt Laugh" was scheduled to play the New Life Church in Colorado

Springs, Colo., the week after the Rev. Ted Haggard's resignation in a sex scandal, organizers initially canceled the event.

"Nobody felt like laughing," says Jonathan Bock, president of Grace Hill Media. But advance ticket sales were strong, so he reconsidered. Ultimately 4,500 people attended the show and 500 DVDs were sold.

For years, many in the Christian audience were offended by Hollywood -- and vice versa.

The Last Temptation of Christ alienated the faithful, but Hollywood saw the light once Gibson demonstrated the financial rewards with his controversial Passion. The film raked in \$612 million worldwide, opening Hollywood's eyes to the potential of the religious niche.

Since, efforts to court the religious audience have made inroads. The Da Vinci Code, despite or because of protests from believers, was the second-highest-grossing film of 2006, pulling in \$756 million worldwide. This season The Nativity Story debuted at No. 4 at the box office.

The Chronicles of Narnia is a box-office phenomenon of Harry Potter proportions. Co-produced by conservative Colorado media mogul Phil Anschutz and the Disney Co., Narnia grossed \$292 million domestically, \$737 million worldwide. The allegory about the resurrection of Christ, based on the C.S. Lewis books, is a strong home-video performer as well.

Anschutz is on record saying he wants his films to be "entertaining but also to be life-affirming and to carry a moral message." Anschutz' Walden Media works closely with Christian marketers to push its movies.

FoxFaith Home Entertainment Division, from 20th Century Fox, a branch of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp., targets the Christian audience with a line of small-scale productions based on best-selling Christian fiction, notably End of the Spear and Mother Teresa.

The label was established to target evangelical Christians. To be part of FoxFaith, a movie has to have "overt Christian content or be derived from the work of a Christian author."

The latest corner of the marketplace is video games. Left Behind: Eternal Forces, based on the end-of-the-world novels, is the first entry. Players portray evangelicals battling Satan in real-time. Although the game has received some bad reviews, it might be just a first step into a medium with a huge youth audience.

Grace Hill Media's Bock, the go-to marketer for studios trying to reach the faith-based community, aims to bridge the gap between Hollywood and people of faith. For years the two sides were "suspicious of each other. You're seeing a thaw," he says.

Thomopoulos says "it used to be, the moment you say you're a Christian in Hollywood, you're labeled politically conservative. The truth is, you can't label people that way. Don't politicize when it comes to values."

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