

Success of Christian films lends clout to religious media

Bill Muller
The Arizona Republic

Dec. 9, 2005

Promoting the Johnny Cash biopic *Walk the Line* in Hollywood, the stars were asked some questions that fell outside the norm.

One writer spied a gold cross hanging around the neck of Reese Witherspoon (who plays June Carter) and inquired about her religious faith. Another compared a scene in which Cash (Joaquin Phoenix) drives a tractor into a lake with a baptism.

The questions were posed by Christian entertainment writers enjoying growing clout in Hollywood as studios market movies to churchgoers.

Following the runaway success of *The Passion of the Christ* (\$370 million domestic last year), studios are wooing religious writers with hopes that the faithful will swell box offices for such films as *Walk the Line*, *Yours, Mine & Ours* and the adaptation of C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, which opens today and is filled with Christian allegory.

"Obviously (studios) are going to see the power of the church movement, and they're going to go for it," Jerry Bruckheimer, producer of *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *National Treasure*, said this week during a trip to the Valley to tout his PG-rated sports movie *Glory Road* (opening Jan. 13).

"There's a whole segment of the audience that's been ignored, and you can't ignore them," Bruckheimer added.

The collaboration is a stark contrast to the days when churches considered Hollywood a sin factory, policing films with the Catholic-run Legion of Decency and the Hays Code. More recently, churches boycotted companies that produced films thought blasphemous, such as Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988).

Today, Hollywood looks at religious media as a way to sell tickets, and digging into Christian pocketbooks is growing more lucrative all the time. Earlier this month, the *Economist* called the market "booming," noting the religious products are an \$8 billion per year business. A March study by the Barna Group found that although 56 percent of Americans attend church in a typical month, even more are exposed to Christian media.

Churches increasingly are helping members manage pop culture, rather than avoid it, often using Christian media for guidance.

“There’s been a move toward trying to keep younger people in the church and in their faith,” said Erica R. Monge, executive editor of the Arizona Christian News.

“Church leaders have come to a place where they’ve said, ‘In order to keep young people, we need have to find out what they’re into. And if they’re into watching movies, great, let’s help them find movies that aren’t going to be negative influences in their lives.’ ”

‘A movie about family’

The endeavor to wed movies and religion is organized and efficient. Two public relations firms, Grace Hill Media and Motive Entertainment, have been created to pitch Hollywood movies to churchgoers.

“Their whole job is to find product that the Christians should support and then get them into theaters, and they’ve been remarkably successful,” said Barbara Nicolosi, a former nun and director of Act One, a training and mentoring program for Christians who want to work in Hollywood.

She says the efforts extend far beyond *The Passion* to such movies as *Cheaper by the Dozen* (2003), which has a sequel out this month.

”They said this is a movie about family, and they marketed it to the Christians under that pretext and the movie makes \$100 million,” said Nicolosi, co-editor of the book *Behind the Screen: Hollywood Insiders on Faith, Film, and Culture* (Baker Books, \$14.99, paperback).

A Walk to Remember (2002), “a really mediocre movie” starring Mandy Moore as a minister’s teen daughter who resists the urge to have sex, was similarly marketed, “and you suddenly make (\$41) million on a movie that the studio spent under (\$11 million) on,” she said.

Although the studios are driven by the bottom line, Nicolosi said Christians have shifted strategies away from condemnation, realizing that “boycotting is the pathetic action of people with no power.”

“So we need to stop whining and asking Hollywood to make the movies we want to see, and we need to make the movies we want to see,” she said.

Such is the strategy of Walden Media, which produced *The Chronicles of Narnia with Disney*, as well as such other family films as *Holes* (2003), *Around the World in 80 Days* (2004) and *Because of Winn-Dixie* (2005).

‘Now we get everybody’

Once Grace Hill and Motive proved they could deliver (Motive engineered the megasuccessful Passion campaign), Hollywood welcomed Christian journalists with open buffet tables.

“When we started, we’d get (to interview) maybe the director and a writer,” said Megan Basham, an Arizona State University graduate and writer/reviewer for the conservative Web site townhall.com. “Now we get everybody.”

Basham sees evidence everywhere that Christian journalism is gaining popularity in Tinseltown.

“One, there’s the fact that the studios are bringing us out,” she said. “I don’t think they’d continue to do it if they didn’t start to see some return on the investment, and I think maybe some of the box office has reflected publicity that they’ve gotten in maybe more red-state communities.

“On the other side, there’s the fact that they’re starting to hire us, some of these (religious) outlets, that they’re willing to start paying people to go out and cover movies.”

Although many religious newspapers and Web sites are happy to help Hollywood promote some films, others are starting to question the relationship, especially when movies are sold as Christian films sight unseen.

“That’s risky,” said the Rev. Chris Carpenter of Christ the King Catholic Church in Mesa, who has been reviewing movies for the Valley-based Catholic Sun for more than a decade.

“I get nervous about that as a church leader,” he added. “The appeal by these Christian or religious media PR groups and stuff . . . that this movie has Christian values, or it’s about Christ, and so you’re just guaranteed to like it and appreciate it, so turn out in droves on opening day. I think there’s potential for us to be taken for a ride.”

The Chronicles of Narnia seems a natural fit for the Christian-Hollywood connection, given C.S. Lewis’ religious background and the Christ symbolism in the story. Although Disney has been marketing the movie to churchgoers, several observers say the studio has backed off in recent weeks.

“They suddenly realized they were making (the campaign) so Christian that it was going to turn away any secular audience they could hope for, which would be unfortunate, because it really is a good story on its own,” said Jenn Wright, a writer/reviewer for hollywoodjesus.com.

Dennis Rice, senior vice president for publicity at Disney, says the studio has not retreated from its campaign to Christians, noting that *Narnia* is being marketed no differently from scores of other Disney movies.

“The source material may lend itself to a higher profile, and the size and scope of the picture may lend itself to that,” Rice said.

“But we’re really not doing anything that we haven’t been doing for a long time (with) a lot of different Disney movies, designed to try and reach out to as wide a fan base as possible, including the faith community.”

As for Christian movie critics, Wright says reviews on hollywoodjesus.com are “more positive than how we actually feel about the movie because . . . we’re not trying to steer people one way or another as far as to see or not to see, we’re just pointing out some things that did or didn’t work.”

Nicolosi, who also once attended junkets as a Christian journalist, said she was bumped off the list after she did some negative reviews.

The Christian journalists may feel pressure to write positive reviews. Most accept free airfare and hotel rooms from the studios, like some of their secular counterparts who are freelancers or work for smaller news outlets. (It’s the policy of The Arizona Republic and most larger papers to pay their own way.)

“It’s very flattering for these Christian writers . . . to get invited to these big Hollywood junkets,” Nicolosi said. “So in that sense also, I think they give . . . a slightly better review than they would normally.”

But the industry is changing with the times.

“There’s a whole new (group of) savvy Christian critics coming up now,” Nicolosi said. “Christians used to only evaluate movies on the basis of story. Does the good guy win, and does the bad guy get punished? There’s now a whole new generation that are looking at the artistry of the movie as well.”