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Evangelicals miss the big picture

By William Romanowski

In the late 1980s, an evangelical leader offered to buy the prints of *The Last Temptation of Christ* so he could destroy them. Less than two decades later, evangelical and other church leaders bought blocks of tickets for *The Passion of the Christ*, helping to make it one of the top-grossing films in 2004.



Evangelicals can influence Hollywood, but their efforts would be more effective and better received if they focused on cultural discourse, not religious conversion, says Romanowski.

By Sam Ward, USA TODAY

The Passion's numbers were an eye-opener for Hollywood. Now, movies with clear religious themes such as *Constantine*, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* and *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and even those without any sort of explicit Christian connection, such as *Cinderella Man* or *The Greatest Game Ever Played*, are being pitched by studios to reach the "Christian" market. More specifically, the target is those evangelicals who embraced *The Passion* with such enthusiasm. And evangelical organizations are helping out. SermonCentral, an online resource company for pastors, sponsored a promotional sermon contest for *Narnia*. The winning pastor won a trip to London and \$1,000.

Consumers are spending hundreds of millions of dollars on religious books and Christian-themed music. The film industry wants to cultivate this market. The problem Hollywood faces as it seeks to maximize this potential audience is that "evangelical" Christians are not easy to define. But one thing is certain: The major portion of that market no longer thinks that only films rated G or those based on Bible stories are appropriate for evangelical consumption. There is a market for more wholesome fare, with or without a religious theme, and it needn't be just for children.

A mainstream appeal

A recent MarketCast study co-sponsored by *Variety* magazine found religious and non-religious people "nearly indistinguishable in their attitudes" about moviegoing, according to a *Variety* article reporting the results. In fact, these religious folks seem to have a penchant for the sentimental, the melodramatic and the violent (of course that puts them pretty much in the mainstream of American taste in entertainment).

People of goodwill ought to be concerned with the cumulative impact of a steady diet of American movies that often exalt self-interest as the supreme human value, glorify violent resolutions to problems, make finding the perfect mate one's primary vocation and highest destiny, and offer material prosperity as the most reliable source of meaning and satisfaction in this life. Such a value system arguably runs against the grain of most religious traditions.

Of course, filmmakers claim they're only giving people what they want. Critics complain that in deference to its bottom line, Hollywood makes too many movies that are mediocre at best, lacking creativity and depth in story, theme and characterization.

Family-friendly films in particular — the kind many evangelicals advocate — tend to depict a world where all issues are plain and simple. Evil-doers are destroyed, the virtuous rewarded. The "good" characters have within themselves everything they need to secure their destiny and only have to come to that self-realization.

That's the theme of countless films from *Rocky* to *Cinderella Man*, *The Wizard of Oz* to *The Incredibles*. Sometimes, characters get a little magical assistance from a divine source, as in *The Legend of Bagger Vance* or *The Family Man*.

Were more evangelicals to think about movies in terms of their faith beliefs, they would actually have an opportunity to not only buy tickets, but also to begin to shape the entertainment industry.

For instance, the Judeo-Christian tradition maintains that all people have dignity and worth because they are created in the image of God, but that they also have a tendency to do evil. Redemption comes from experiences that make people aware of their own brokenness and insufficiency. Films such as *Magnolia* or *The Apostle* resonate with this kind of perspective. The characters have a moral ambiguity that fits with real life and makes for good drama — and interesting movies. Both are intended for adults.

The best motion pictures transform the real world into an imaginary one with ideals, values, attitudes and assumptions woven into characterizations and storylines.

Culture, not conversion

Evangelicals can influence Hollywood when they think of the cinema as an arena for cultural discourse but not a place for converting members of that culture to a specific Christian orientation. In other words, evangelicals' goal for the movie industry should be to encourage discourse, not merely evangelizing.

Last year's Oscar winner *Million Dollar Baby* sparked debate about euthanasia. This year, *Crash* deals with racism; *Good Night, and Good Luck* probes the role of the news media in keeping politicians accountable to the people; *Syriana* touches on geopolitics and oil; *A History of Violence* explores the potential presence of violence in all of us; *Munich* the perpetuation of bloodshed. Religious audiences can engage these films by reflecting on the perspective they represent, yet applying their own religious context.

But old habits die hard.

Representatives of evangelical groups said they resisted boycotting *Brokeback Mountain* only because they did not want to draw attention to the critically acclaimed film about gay love. And evangelicals are divided over *End of the Spear*, an evangelical production based on a real-life missionary story. Some leaders are encouraging people to see this film about forgiveness, while others are campaigning against it because it stars an openly gay actor.

So what do evangelicals want from Hollywood anyway? Help converting the masses? If so, movies don't seem as if they're the most effective forum. Despite all the evangelistic hype for *The Passion*, a survey by The Barna Group showed that less than one-tenth of 1% of those who saw the movie accepted Jesus Christ as their savior as a result of seeing the film. Likewise, don't expect a jump in the size of the gay population because of *Brokeback Mountain*, however much it might foster the national conversation.

Only when evangelicals agree to look at Hollywood not just as an evangelistic tool, or a harmless entertainment provider, but also as an important participant in cultural discourse will they understand that as a major share of the movie market, they are in a position to shape that vital discussion.

William Romanowski teaches film studies at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich.

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