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Nathalie Dupont

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## Hollywood and the American Christian groups: a business partnership

Nathalie Dupont, ULCO

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The arrival of the Pilgrim Fathers in Cape Cod area in 1620, together with Massachusetts governor John Winthrop's famous *City upon a Hill* sermon in 1630, have long established America, and then the United States of America, as a Christian nation. Therefore, when commercial cinema developed in the U.S.A., it did not come as a surprise to see silent reels showing scenes inspired from the Bible. But the American film industry rapidly came under scrutiny by Christian groups (whether Protestant with the Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians.... or Catholic) that saw the potential of films to teach the Gospel and to attract people to religious services (Lindvall 81, 87, 103), but that also denounced the perversion, moral depravation as well as the corruption of young minds supposedly brought about by Hollywood films (Lindvall 76, Portes 250). Those Christian groups, and particularly the Catholics, became very vocal in the fight for the creation of a federal censorship. It was gradually averted by Hollywood thanks to the adoption in 1927 of the *Don'ts and Be Carefuls*, and then of the Production Code or Hays Code in 1930; some Catholic personalities like Father Daniel A. Lord contributed to both codes (Crafton 472-474; Miller 50-51; Portes 263-274). The Hays code pacified most Hollywood Christian critics and was effectively enforced between 1934 and 1966 (Gomery 175).

The post-WWII years then saw many changes in America. For Hollywood, the 1950s meant the arrival of television in American homes and the subsequent decline in cinema audiences.<sup>i</sup> Trying to fight back, the studios resorted to new inventions such as CinemaScope or Cinerama while scenarists further used the Bible as a source of inspiration. It gave birth to some lavish films such as *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1956) that allowed directors to make the most of the technical inventions, but they did not stop the decline in audiences.<sup>ii</sup> Moviegoing ceased to be a family outing and teenagers gradually became the dominant film audience for the studios—their importance as an audience was revealed by the success of films such as *Blackboard Jungle* (Richard Brooks, 1955) or *Rebel without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955) whose themes also heralded a changing society.

Films inspired by the Bible were less numerous in the troubled 1960s, thus partly reflecting the growing desecularization of a part of the American society. The troubled 1960s, with the Vietnam war and the student movement, initiated many changes in American society as well as in Hollywood whose audience and structure were gradually modified. The 12-to-24-year-olds were confirmed as the dominant film audience while the old 'Moguls' lost control of their studios, taken over by various conglomerates. The new studio executives, educated in business schools, implemented a way of doing business that lasted well into the 1980s and 1990s.

At the end of the 1990s, those modifications, together with changes in the American political and religious landscapes, led Hollywood to once again pay some interest to Christian themes. The 1970s and the 1980s had already witnessed the return of the Christian religion to the forefront of the American political scene with the elections of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan to the American presidency. That return was later confirmed in 2000 and 2004 with the election of G.W. Bush to the White House. For Hollywood, the renewed visibility of the Christian religion on screen was made possible by the success of *The Passion of The Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004) that definitely proved that there was a market for those films.

Therefore, in the context of a more religious America, the present paper is going to focus on the reasons that have led the studios to pay greater attention to films with visible Christian themes, and on the way those studios have done it, finally showing the strong—albeit with limits—distinct business interest that links Hollywood to the American Christian groups.

### The changes in Hollywood

In the 1960s and 1970s, most Hollywood studios were taken over by various media and non-media conglomerates whose boards of trustees have kept demanding better results for the shareholders they represent. That increased pressure on studio executives has led them to give the priority to blockbusters characterized by quick-paced entertainment, special effects and stars, and that have targeted a young audience of 12-to-24-year-olds. Those teenagers, mainly male, have represented the bulk of ticket sales at

the American box office, often watching those films several times and then buying the by-products displaying the films' logos. That formula has worked for a very long time, and even if many films have failed, the success of one blockbuster has been enough to make up for the other losses.

Over the last five or six years however, more films developed to be blockbusters have dramatically failed at the American box office and have only broken even thanks to the foreign box office, such as for example *Poseidon*.<sup>iii</sup> Apart from the inner flaws of those films, one of the reasons explaining some of those failures also lies with the target audience. Although the 12-to-24-year-olds had so far sustained the production pattern of the studios, that audience group has now started to decline



*Movie Attendance Study*, <<http://www.mpa.org>> accessed in May 2008. <sup>iv</sup>

The main reason for that downward trend is that many of those young people have started switching to other modes of entertainment, mainly the digital world such as chatting via the Internet, downloading music, exchanging music and film files, etc. As the quantity of free time is not expandable, that new form of leisure has developed to the detriment of movie going.

What eventually triggered action from Hollywood executives is that the anxiety entailed by that decline has been fanned by other problems related to profitability.

During the deregulations of the Reagan years, the studios were allowed to own theaters again and started buying or building new ones. At the end of the 1990s, it led to such a wide discrepancy between a stable

number of moviegoers and an ever-increasing number of screens that some theaters had to close down, and the studios are aware that it could happen again.

The other problem is that over the last few years, the ratio between the average production/marketing costs, that have kept increasing,<sup>v</sup> and the average box office per film has mostly shown that many films have had trouble returning a profit.

Although the latter problem has been recurrent in the movie business, its impact has been made more visible by the now declining young audience that used to sustain most Hollywood successes since the 1970s. That is why Hollywood has decided to react.

Thus, the studio executives have started paying even greater attention to the foreign market while they have also gradually realized that they have to widen their mainstream audience. For example, they have started paying more attention to the more mature and growing '50+ audience', catering for its taste with for example *Seabiscuit* (Gary Ross, 2003) that "drew a 40% over-50 crowd in its first weekend" (Kay 23).

In their search for a widened audience the studios have also hit upon a 'niche' revealed by the unexpected success of *The Passion of The Christ* in 2004. In Hollywood, Mel Gibson's film was first been seen as a star's whim and a challenge in which few believed at the time of its production and distribution, especially as Americans supposedly do not like subtitled films—the subtitled *The Passion Of The Christ* was shot in Aramaic and Latin. Nevertheless, the film's \$125 million box office in its first five days, and then its \$370.3 million total box office gross in America, i.e. 61% of its global box office, represented quite a feat for a \$30 million production.<sup>vi</sup> Those financial results propelled the film in the category of the blockbuster while attracting new moviegoers who had so far laid in the limbo of the film audiences, having retreated from film entertainment many had branded as too violent and immoral.

### The Christian niche

Some of the devoted Christian followers have an important income, which is interesting for the Hollywood studios. Indeed, they are looking for moneyed moviegoers who represent an important part of

their audience: according to the Motion Picture Association of America's study for 2007, the income of 58% of the frequent moviegoers was \$50,000 or over, a percentage that has even increased from 52% in 2002.

The American Christians are numerous (about 80% of America's 306 million population is Christian<sup>vii</sup>) and have long been part of the mainstream cinema audience. However, since the success of *The Passion of The Christ*, the studios have been particularly interested in the "[...] 200 million religious Americans do go to church at least once a month, according to faith market experts" (Hazelton 4). If those devoted Christians went to the cinemas at least once a month, which is the current definition of a frequent moviegoer for the MPAA, Hollywood could thus partly make up for the declining 'frequent young audience'.<sup>viii</sup>

Those devoted Christians also represent a family audience that, if properly convinced, would probably go to the cinema as they go to church, i.e. as a family. Thus they would add themselves to the families with teenagers who represented 32% of the frequent moviegoers in 2006 and 26% in 2007, the highest percentages among frequent moviegoers by household composition. The Christian community is well aware that such an enlarged audience could be attractive for the studios as Cal Thomas, a Christian conservative syndicated columnist, expressed it while recommending the viewing of *The Chronicles of Narnia: the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Andrew Adamson, 2005): "Make these companies [the studios] a huge profit and they will make more of these types of films. It's all about supply and demand. If we show by our ticket purchases that we have demand, they will supply"<sup>ix</sup>.

Then, the American Christian market is now a revived and a booming one: for example "Twentieth Century Fox claims that [the faith market] already has a \$200m retail business for faith-related products"(Hazelton 4), "[r]eligion is listed #1 among the top 16 categories of consumer book market revenues"<sup>x</sup> while "[s]hares of Thomas Nelson, which publishes Bibles and other Christian-themed books, were up more than 10% in 2005, outperforming mainstream book publishing stocks such as Scholastic and Pearson" (La Monica 2).

So, it is no wonder that, following the example of publishing companies such as Warner Faith for Time Warner or the Christian music labels, Hollywood has turned an interested eye and wants to tap into that

audience (Schofield Clark 25), all the more so as some overtly Christian-themed films have become hits among that community without even having been shown in cinemas, but only in churches. This was the case of the films based on the *Left Behind* series of novels<sup>xi</sup> that were released on 3,200 screens mainly located inside megachurches (Fath 106).

The American Christian groups, and particularly the Evangelical ones, are also very active as far as proselytism is concerned and constantly try to expand the number of their followers. Some, such as the Southern Baptist Convention or the Presbyterian Church in America, have also sent missionaries abroad to make new converts (Fath 95). Those newly foreign converts represent a growing congregation that could be relied on locally to amplify the marketing of a film approved by their American head church. This could be another advantage in a globalised world of cinema where competition for market shares is strong.

Finally, the American Christian groups have the potential of an expanding congregation of devoted followers often supporting the New Right and the Christian Right and who, once involved in a cause, advocate it faithfully and very efficiently. The most conservative ones scored several successes such as obtaining, through the 'Stop ERA' campaign, the non-ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment Act by the required states in 1981 (Ben Barka 52 & 73; Young 626). They also took an important part in both elections of professed born-again R. Reagan and G.W. Bush to the presidency (Lacorne, 196) and in the election of many sympathizing Representatives and Senators to Congress in 1994. In the field of cinema, that efficiency was revealed by the controversy around Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1988. The Evangelical Right spearheaded protests against the film, organizing demonstrations in front of Universal studios that had produced the film or in front of "the home of Lew Wasserman, chairman of parent company MCA" (Miller 234). Bill Bright, a southern California Evangelical leader and the founder of the Campus Crusade for Christ, went even further, « offer[ing] to reimburse Universal Pictures for all the money the studio had invested in the making [of the film] in exchange for all existing prints of the film, which he promised he would destroy" (Lyons 165, Miller 234). However, the tactics backfired on their proponents as they brought a lot more publicity to the film and enabled it to achieve a greater box office gross, i.e. \$8.37 million, than it would have under normal circumstances for a \$7 million

production eventually released on 123 screens.<sup>xii</sup> Nevertheless, that event proved the conservative Christian Right could make itself heard and thus, conversely, could possibly be efficient when promoting a film that suited its taste. A sign of this is the fact that Mel Gibson contacted them, together with other Christian leaders, when promoting his film. He knew that if he convinced them, they would then efficiently encourage their members to go and see the film, which was eventually the case.

#### A business partnership

As is usual in Hollywood, the unexpected success of *The Passion of The Christ* logically triggered a search for similar films that could attract the same kind of box office. That search gave birth to the production of, among others, *The Chronicles of Narnia: the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Andrew Adamson, 2005),<sup>xiii</sup> *Facing the Giants* (Alex Kendrick, 2006), *The Gospel* (Rob Hardy, 2005), *The Nativity Story* (Catherine Hardwicke, 2006) or *One Night with the King* (Michael O. Sajbel, 2006). The overtly Christian themes in those films are, for example, the death and resurrection of Christ in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the use of faith to battle fear and failure in *Facing the Giants*, a modernized Prodigal Son story in *The Gospel*, the events leading up to the birth of Christ in *The Nativity Story*, and the story of Esther, the Biblical queen of Persia, in *One Night with the King*.

Sometimes the studios are not involved in producing or co-producing those films but only in distributing them, and in the wake of *The Passion of The Christ*, overtly Christian-themed films have now joined the bandwagon of productions the studios are willing to distribute. Such was the case with *Facing The Giants* produced by the Sherwood Baptist Church and Samuel Goldwyn Films, which was released through Sony Pictures Entertainment that also handled the release of *The Gospel*, a Screen Gems production.

Twentieth Century Fox has even created FoxFaith, a label for the Christian audience as is clearly expressed on its Internet site:

*FoxFaith is a new branded distribution label from Twentieth Century Fox, created to house and distribute its growing portfolio of morally-driven, family-friendly programming. To be part of*



*FoxFaith, a movie has to have overt Christian content or be derived from the work of a Christian author.*<sup>xiv</sup>

Apart from releasing DVDs in retail stores, FoxFaith “will also release at least six faith-based films a year theatrically in the US (through niche theatrical distributor A Bigger Picture), with marketing spends of around \$5m each” (Hazelton 4).

The fact that the Hollywood studios have now turned an interested eye to films with overtly Christian themes not only means that those films now usually benefit from a bigger production budget but they also get the American release of a ‘normal’ film in terms of marketing and screens, thus getting a wide exposure. *The Chronicles of Narnia* was released on 3,616 screens as it was thought to be a potential blockbuster (as a comparison, *Harry Potter & the Goblet of Fire*—Mike Newell, 2005—opened on 3,858 screens) and *Prince Caspian* (Andrew Adamson, 2008) opened on May, 16, 2008 on 3,929 screens, just before the summer holidays, being thus positioned as a true blockbuster. *The Nativity Story* opened one month before Christmas 2006 and also got a wide release on 3,083 screens in America<sup>xv</sup> so as to take advantage of the holiday timing. At a lesser but still average level, *The Gospel* was released on 969 screens and *Facing the Giants* on 441 screens. Even *One Night with the King*, though not distributed by a studio, was released on 909 screens.<sup>xvi</sup>

In America, the studio marketing of overtly Christian-themed films has also reached the level of mainstream films with the added advantage of being also supported by devoted Christian groups that are well organised and efficient. Thanks to the Christian radios, TV channels and now web sites, that marketing is more cost-efficient as it is tailorfitted and targets like-minded people, and not the average and very diverse-minded crowd that is often difficult to reach. This explains why “Disney has partnered with Christian products company Outreach [for the marketing of *The Chronicles of Narnia*] as its ‘official church resource provider’, offering ideas of Narnia-related church events, preview screenings for its clergy members and more” (Mitchell 1). Disney also partnered with Motive Marketing whose founder Paul Lauer wants to show Hollywood “that movies with a strong faith message will be well received.”<sup>xvii</sup> The Christian companies handling the Christian marketing of the film worked with the conservative

Evangelical Protestant communities such as Campus Crusade for Christ or the National Association of Evangelicals via the relatively closed Christian channels.

The studios, as well as independent companies, thus know that if they want to reach the usually Hollywood-wary American Christian family audience, they have to work hand-in-hand with the Christian network. Thus, the “Walt Disney Company [held] private screenings of *The Chronicle of Narnia: the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* for religious leaders [in 140 American churches] before the film’s general release” (Ivry 1) and the same was done before the release of *Prince Caspian*. The efficient network of megachurches, which had already contributed to the success of *The Passion of The Christ*, was particularly useful (Fath 107).

Samuel Goldwyn Films president, Meyer Gottlieb, knew he had to adopt a similar tactic when his company launched *Facing the Giants*:

*‘The one thing we know about this audience is they want an honest campaign and they trust Hollywood very little. So we went out in the newspapers and magazines they read. We also adopted a grassroots approach and worked with a company called The Provident Group to organise leadership screenings for pastors and ministers who would then talk about the film to their congregations’ [...] Gottlieb says exit polls have been incredible. ‘People said they would recommend the movie 100%, and most people said they found out about it through their pastors’*  
(Kay, October 2006 37)

Finally, to court that Christian audience, the type of films produced has also changed when compared to other Hollywood productions. The studios have taken into account the fact that some among the most conservative Christian audience were previously reluctant to or simply refused to go and see films they would qualify as the work of the Devil because of their increasing levels of gratuitous sex, violence and profanity. Indeed, for a long time the studios hoped the MPAA would give their films PG-13 or even R ratings rather than G to attract the teenage audience.<sup>xviii</sup> However, to attract the Christian family audience, the Hollywood studios now realize they have to tone down the level of violence of their films so as to

only get a PG rating, or a PG-13 rating as a last resort, but not an R. One can argue that *The Passion of The Christ* was successful with that audience of believers in spite of its violence and gory details that earned it an R rating for graphic violence, but those who went to see the film did not take their children with them.

Now Hollywood targets the whole American Christian family, just like the old pre-television days of cinema going, that is why the level of violence has to be toned down. Thus for example, in the PG-rated *Chronicles of Narnia*,<sup>xix</sup> when the White Witch lethally wounds Edmund at the end of the film, we can see his pain, but no blood and a few minutes later, when the final battle is over, another shot shows the boy lying on the ground while suffering enormously, but no spilling blood has tainted the grass.

In that business partnership, the American Christian communities, and particularly the most conservative ones, may seem to side with the Devil. However, that partnership is a good example of their adaptation to a more secular 20th-century world whose modern communication systems such as the radio, television and the Internet have enabled them to develop their own identities.<sup>xx</sup> Therefore, they have fewer qualms about cooperating with Hollywood as they too find that partnership interesting: “ ‘the church is increasingly recognizing that film has become a major way, if not the major way, of telling our stories as a society’, says Rob Johnston, professor of theology and culture and co-director of the Reel Spirituality Institute” (Cohen 6). Various Christian groups have already proved it through the numerous Narnia Internet sites they created, where they constantly mingled quotes from the Bible with the plot and dialogue from the film.<sup>xxi</sup>

There are several reasons for such an odd business partnership between various conservative American Christian organizations and Hollywood:

the films supported by those Christian organizations are the adaptations of an ‘episode’ taken from the Bible, such as for example *The Nativity Story*, or echo the Gospel in their story line, such as for example *The Chronicles of Narnia* where we can mention the image of the fox/John the Baptist who, in a world deprived of Christmas, heralds the coming Aslan/Christ with the words ‘Aslan is on the move’. The latter then sacrifices himself to save Edmund, as Christ sacrificed himself to expiate the sins of mankind, before

resurrecting after a big earthquake at dawn, under the amazed eyes of Lucie and Susan. Both girls are an echo of Mary Magdalene and her friend Mary learning about Christ's resurrection from an angel after a big earthquake in front of Christ's tomb in Matthew 28.<sup>xxii</sup>

Thus, those films are good Christian entertainment and have to be advertised as such, so as to have the widest possible audience among the various Christian communities and possibly beyond. That is why the Teacher's Guide from the narniaresources site expressly states as an aim for "[p]rincipals, superintendants, and school association leaders to [...] encourage families to show Hollywood their support for family entertainment."<sup>xxiii</sup>

The small companies Hollywood studios associate themselves with also have a clear agenda as far the values conveyed by the films are concerned. Thus Walden Media, which negotiated with C.S. Lewis' estate to get the film rights to *The Chronicle of Narnia*, was launched in 2001 thanks to a Republican billionaire and Evangelical Christian called Philip Anschutz, also owner of Regal Entertainment Group, one of the largest movie theatre circuits in America, who said: "Four or five years ago I decided to stop cursing the darkness—I had been complaining about movies and their content for years—and instead to do something about it by getting into the film business" (*The Economist*, November 26, 2005 78).

He agreed to finance Walden Media as he shared the co-founders' aim of making family-friendly films that would "[combine] timeless storytelling with educational materials" (Kay, December 2005 8). Walden Media then went to Disney to co-produce the film for a total estimated at \$150 million, with costs and profits being shared on a 50/50 basis.<sup>xxiv</sup> Likewise, Temple Hill Productions, which says on its website that it is aimed "at developing and producing films that exemplify the values embraced by the American heartland"<sup>xxv</sup>, co-produced *The Nativity Story* with New Line, currently the property of Time Warner. The latter also distributed the film in America.

The Christian groups hope to be able to have some kind of influence on Hollywood. For example, "Southern California Christian colleges such as Biola U.—which formerly banned its students from watching movies—and Azusa Pacific now have film programs and are sending aspiring professionals to Hollywood." (Cohen 6)

Those films and their now wider distribution pattern have also become another way of preaching the Christian religion and confirming believers in their faith. This was especially the case with *The Chronicles of Narnia* and its worldwide distribution pattern for which foreign Christian groups worked hand-in-hand with Disney, as was for example the case in the U.K.: “Manchester cathedral got in on the act in October [2005, the film was released in December], when hundreds of children attended its Narnia workshops and day of celebration, while organization Methodist Children is spreading a children’s service related to the Narnia story for use during the [Christmas] holidays” (Mitchell 1).

For the Evangelists, films can be used as a popular medium to preach personal conversion in America as well as in the rest of the world, which is one of the tenets of their creed. So, in a time of globalisation and visual media, films could become a modern way to tell the miracle of the birth of Christ among men and maybe to convert them while mayhem seems to reign on earth, under the form of 9/11, and heralds the possibility of a coming Armageddon.

Advertising those overtly Christian-themed films thus does not seem a bad idea to the American Christian groups that have, after all, long adapted themselves and their message to secular culture and modern times, as exemplified by a passage from the Internet site advertising *Facing the Giants*: “Jesus knew the power of using stories to touch hearts and give people a glimpse of heaven. *Facing the Giants* is a modern-day parable on fear and faith told in a language that our culture speaks fluently....media.”<sup>xxvi</sup>

The Hollywood studios and the American Christian groups have thus found an interest in their partnership. However, all the films mentioned are mostly co-productions, showing that there is some circumspection on both sides.

#### A successful albeit limited partnership

Both the Christian and the secular audiences went to see the films mentioned, which were quite successful at the box office during the first week-end of their release. For example when *The Chronicles of Narnia* opened, it reached first place with a \$65.56 million box office for a \$18,130 per-screen average. *The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian* (Andrew Adamson, 2008) also reached first place when it

opened with a box office of \$55.034 million and a \$14,007 per-screen average. *Facing the Giants* opened in twelfth place on \$1.3 million for a \$3,047 per-screen average. *The Gospel* opened in fifth place on \$7.5 million for a \$7,764 per-screen average. Even *One Night with the King* managed to open in ninth place on \$4.1 million for a \$4,518 per-screen average (boxofficemojo.com). Those figures are quite good, especially the per-screen average,<sup>xxvii</sup> when compared to a studio film such as *The Flag of our Fathers* (Clint Eastwood, Paramount, 2006) that opened in third place at \$10.25 million on 1,876 screens for an average of \$5,461 per screen.

So, whether they are co-producers or mere distributors of Christian-themed films, the studios have so far been quite satisfied when handling them. But it does not mean that the Hollywood studios have entirely embraced those films and their devoted audience, up to the point of openly advertising those films as being overtly Christian films. An example is that of *Evan Almighty* (Tom Shadyac, 2007), the sequel to *Bruce Almighty* (Tom Shadyac, 2003), whose:

*official website [...] provides links to sites about environmental conservation and global warming, [but] does not include any mention of Universal's outreach to religious groups [...] 'to take the general secular site and to have a link to a specific faith strikes me as awkward, bordering on inappropriate' [says Adam Fogelson, the president of marketing for Universal] (Ivry 2)*

For the time being, marketing films as overtly Christian ones is the job of the American Christian communities and their networks, not that of the studios' marketing divisions. The latter's job, as intended by Hollywood producers, is about adding a 'niche' audience to an old one that may be on the decline but must not be antagonized by a marketing that would be too overtly Christian. In that case, it would lead to a bad word-of-mouth and the studio's strategy to widen its audience would come to nothing.

Such a balance is not easy to find as the conservative Christian audience wants "the theology to be right, not to be made fun of, and for their values to be upheld in the storytelling" (Hazelton 4) while the core of the average mainstream audience just wants to be entertained and not to be preached to. For example during the marketing campaign of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, "only 5% of the film's marketing budget [of

\$120 million] has gone on outreach to churches” (*The Economist*, November 26 2005 78). At the same time, there was also another more open mainstream marketing campaign for the general public that included trailers in cinemas, alongside TV, radio and newspaper adverts. There were also the traditional premieres in the U.S.A. and Europe during which even the actors promoting the film were actually cautioned against talking about religion. As Tilda Swinton, who plays the White Witch, declared in an address at the San Francisco Film Festival in 2006:

*Last year [...] in the process of promoting two fantasy films [The Chronicles of Narnia and Constantine] for different Hollywood studios, I was advised on the proper protocol for talking about religion in America today. In brief, the directive was, hold your hands high where all can see them, step away from the vehicle and enunciate clearly, nothing to declare.* <sup>xxviii</sup>

Those premieres being usually widely featured in newspapers, TV and radio news to people who are no particular readers of the Bible, the studio did not want to antagonize them, as that mainstream audience could nevertheless enjoy a film also featuring lay themes and characters derived from Northern European tales, like the giants or the dwarfs, or from Greek mythology, like the centaurs, minotaurs or fauns such as Mr. Tumnus.

The fact that the studios associate themselves with minor companies, even for relatively modest-budgeted films they could easily finance by themselves, or only choose to distribute films is another sign that Hollywood remains cautious about the Christian subject. The studios are not yet totally convinced that the now renewed cinema-going among the most devoted and conservative Christian audience will become a lasting trend, and as Jeff Jordy, FoxFaith vice-president of marketing, said in 2006: “The Major Studios simply recognised that there was a hugely underserved audience and seized the opportunity to provide them with high quality entertainment that reflects their values” (Hazelton 4).

Thus, overtly Christian-themed films have managed to carve themselves a niche in Hollywood for the time being, but it may be a passing fad.

New Line saw *The Nativity Story* “bomb at the box office“ (Rosin 9), and in spite of a good first week at the box office, the 2008 summer release of *The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian* was not as successful as initially expected, notably because of competition from *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* (Rob Cohen, 2008) and *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (Steven Spielberg, 2008). Moreover, the final disappointing box office results of *Prince Caspian* in America and abroad,<sup>xxix</sup> together with the expected high production cost of the third movie called *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, led Disney to put an end to its *Chronicles of Narnia* partnership with Walden Media at the end of 2008. Walden Media eventually signed an agreement with Twentieth Century Fox to co-produce and distribute *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (Michael Apted) scheduled for a 2010 release (Eller 1; Siegel 1).

The young audience may be on the decline but it is still able to create an overnight success like that of the gory *300* (Zack Snyder, 2007),<sup>xxx</sup> which is not exactly a film for the Christian family audience, even with its theme of self-sacrifice, and whose unforeseen success will probably initiate another copy-cat reaction from the studios.

Moreover, apart from *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the other films were not very successful abroad, where *Facing the Giants*, *The Gospel* and *One Night with the King*, were not even distributed. Hollywood is still cautious about the foreign distribution of overtly Christian-themed films as the studios cannot antagonize the foreign mainstream market. That foreign market, and more particularly the European market,<sup>xxxii</sup> is important to make up for possible losses of big budget-films in America. But it is also a different market where the place of Christian religion has changed, even if those countries have Christian cultures and civilizations. Thus, when *The Chronicles of Narnia* or similar films are distributed abroad, the Christian themes are not emphasized in the marketing aimed at the foreign audience so that the latter does not think Hollywood has become even more ‘preachy’.

As for the Christian groups, and more particularly for the conservative ones, they have contributed to the promotion of those overtly Christian-themed films and enjoyed watching them, but it does not mean they have stopped criticizing Tinseltown’s productions. Indeed, there have also been the quite successful *Constantine* (Francis Lawrence, 2005) and *Ghost Rider* (Mark Steven Johnson, 2007)<sup>xxxiii</sup> that



are not exactly films for the devoted Christian audience with their references to, and images of, the Devil and his minions having made a kind of pact with the heroes.

To those films we must add the worldwide success of *The Da Vinci Code* (Ron Howard, 2006) “[that] deeply offend[ed] Christian sensibilities” (Rosin 8). Christian groups did not call for a boycott, they had learned their lesson with *The Last Temptation of Christ*, but for example:

*in a sign of how religious groups are learning to beat Hollywood at its own game, [Karen] Covell [director of the Hollywood Prayer Network, a grassroots prayer organization for the Christians working in Hollywood] advise[d] making a statement by buying a ticket to another movie. In the case of ‘Code,’ she [said] offended parties should opt for Over the Edge, Dreamworks’ family toon that open[ed] the same weekend (LaPorte 12)*

Finally we can also think of the adaptations of the *Harry Potter* books that became enormous box office successes, with a few others still to come, but that have received mixed responses from Christian groups. Some have condemned the books and the films for advocating witchcraft and other themes linked to the occult while others have talked about their redemptive themes.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

In our modern world where the question of beliefs and religion has intensified, especially since 9/11, the relationship that links Hollywood to the American Christian groups is thus a distinct one, and the success of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, for example, shows that there is more to it than simply believing in children’s tales. In fact, the paper has shown that the collaboration between Hollywood and the American Christian groups is particular and paradoxical: it links seemingly antagonistic entities whose motives differ—financial for Hollywood and spiritual for the Christians—but whose methods and goal eventually fall under the same heading, i.e. that of business strategies and market-oriented decisions adopted to conquer a wider market. The paper has also shown that instead of mainly dwelling on censorship as was the case in the 1920s and 1930s, the relationship has evolved into a distinct and

pragmatic business partnership that, even if limited on both sides, has so far satisfied them in what has become their search for a widened audience in a globalized post-secular market that has affected both key players.

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<sup>i</sup> Though television is not entirely responsible for that decline. We have to take into account the time devoted to more affordable leisure activities such as golf or tennis, as well as tourism favoured by cheaper and better means of transport.

<sup>ii</sup> In 1960 weekly admissions stood at 30 million moviegoers, down from 80 million moviegoers in 1946 (Bordat & Etcheverry, 203-204).

<sup>iii</sup> The production budget of *Poseidon* (Wolfgang Petersen, 2006) reached \$160 million, but the film only earned \$60.67 million in America, i.e. 33.4% of its box office; the remaining 66.6%, i.e. \$121 million, came from abroad (<<http://www.imdb.com>> accessed in June 2008).

<sup>iv</sup> At time of publication the Motion Picture Association of America had not released any similar data for 2008.

<sup>v</sup> In 2007, the average production cost reached \$70.8 million, while the marketing cost stood at \$35.9 million for the MPAA members (<<http://www.mpa.org>> accessed in June 2007). At time of publication the Motion Picture Association of America had not released any similar data for 2008.

<sup>vi</sup> <<http://www.imdb.com>> and <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com>> accessed in May 2008.

<sup>vii</sup> In 2007, the Christians represented 78.4 % of the adult population in America; the various American Protestant denominations represented 51.3% of that population while the Catholics represented 23.9%. <<http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/cats/population/religion.html>> accessed in May 2009.

“The single largest religious group in the United States is the Roman Catholic Church, which had 67 million members in 2005. The Southern Baptist Convention, with 16 million members, was the largest of the Protestant denominations. The United Methodist Church was the second-largest Protestant denomination with 8 million members. In third and fourth positions were the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, known as the Mormon church, with 6 million member, and the Church of God in Christ, a predominantly black Pentecostal denomination, with 5.5 million members” <[http://www.hirr.hartsem.edu/research/fastfacts/fast\\_facts.html#largest](http://www.hirr.hartsem.edu/research/fastfacts/fast_facts.html#largest)> accessed in May 2009.

<sup>viii</sup> In 2007, frequent moviegoers represented 54 million people and 77 % of the admissions by frequency. They also accounted for 1.1 billion out of the 1.47 billion total admissions. The 12-to-24-year-olds

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represented 41% of those frequent moviegoers (36% in 2006). *Movie Attendance Study*, <<http://www.mpa.org>, > accessed in May 2008.

<sup>ix</sup> <[http://www.outreach.com/print/articlef.asp?article\\_name=p-narnia4testimonials](http://www.outreach.com/print/articlef.asp?article_name=p-narnia4testimonials)> accessed in April 2007.

<sup>x</sup> *The Demand*, <<http://www.moviemarketing.biz/faithmarket.html>> > accessed in May 2007.

<sup>xi</sup> *Left Behind* is a series of 16 novels written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, which deal with the end of the world and the second coming of Christ.

<sup>xii</sup> <<http://www.imdb.com>> and <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com>> accessed in May 2008.

<sup>xiii</sup> A financially interesting series of books such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* series (C.S. Lewis) sold more than 100 million copies in 29 different languages since the first book came out in 1950. Ironically, it is News Corp., owner of Twentieth Century Fox and a rival of Disney, which owns the publishing rights via its subsidiary HarperCollins, and thus benefits from the increase in the sales of the Narnia books after the film's success.

<sup>xiv</sup> <<http://www.foxfaithmovies.com/aboutus>> accessed in May 2007.

<sup>xv</sup> It was also the first film to get a world premiere at the Vatican, with the benefits going to the building of a school in a village not far from Nazareth (R. Mitchell 41).

<sup>xvi</sup> The film was however launched according to the old system of platform release, that is to say that it opened in just a few towns with an important Evangelical population so as to create a good word-of-mouth before then widening the release to other locations. It was not the case with the other films, especially *The Chronicles of Narnia*, which benefitted from the now traditional saturation release, i.e. the booking of as many screens as possible across the U.S.A. for the first weekend of distribution.

<sup>xvii</sup> Allie Martin, "Marketing Exec: Hollywood Warming to Faith Films' Box Office Successes", <<http://www.wdcmedia.com>> accessed in May 2007.

<sup>xviii</sup> The different American ratings, given by the classification and rating administration, are G for general audiences (all ages admitted), PG for parental guidance suggested (some material may not be suitable for children), PG-13 for parents strongly cautioned (some material may be inappropriate for children under

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13), R for restricted (under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian) and NC-17 for no one 17 and under admitted <<http://www.mpa.org>>.

<sup>xix</sup> The film was rated PG because of its battle sequences and some violent scenes, among which the night scene showing Aslan's sacrifice, which can be quite impressive for young children.

<sup>xx</sup> Among 20th-century Christian preachers using modern means of communication, we can mention the famous radio preacher Charles E. Coughlin or the televangelist Billy Graham.

<sup>xxi</sup> The <<http://www.narniaresources.com>> website, accessed in April 2007, offered the possibility of downloading many different types of guides, from leader's guide and parents' guide to children's guide, while giving advice for 'launch promotion week of 11/27' before the 12/9 release of the film. Many other sites often used 'Aslan is on the move' as a quote to make the transition to the Gospel.

<sup>xxii</sup> When they watch over Aslan's body, Lucie and Susan also look like mourning women in religious paintings.

<sup>xxiii</sup> <<http://www.narniaresources.com>> accessed in April 2007.

<sup>xxiv</sup> One of the reasons that led Disney to accept the deal was that the project fitted its policy of film-making as explained in 2006 by Mark Zoradi, president of Walt Disney Pictures Group: "We're defining Disney-branded movies as having a wide appeal. We're going to stay away from movies with bad language and movies with sexual content that make mum and dad feel uncomfortable" (Kay, November 2006 8).

<sup>xxv</sup> <<http://www.templehillent.com>> accessed in April 2007.

<sup>xxvi</sup> <<http://www.providentfilms.org>> accessed in June 2007.

<sup>xxvii</sup> It matters to all distributors when they look for a potential success.

<sup>xxviii</sup> <[http://www.sf360.org/features/2006/05/the\\_2006\\_san\\_fr.html](http://www.sf360.org/features/2006/05/the_2006_san_fr.html)> accessed in December 2007.

<sup>xxix</sup> The production budget of *The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian* reached \$225 million, the film earned \$141.62 million in America and \$278.03 million abroad, once again proving that the foreign market is important to make up for American losses <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com>> accessed in May 2009.

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<sup>xxx</sup> The film, rated R because of its violence, was produced for about \$65 million and earned \$209.9 million in America, i.e. 47.1% of its box office. <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com>> accessed in June 2008.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Dan Glickman, chairman of the MPAA, said in 2006: “Europe is the most important worldwide market outside North America” (Michtell R. 1).

<sup>xxxii</sup> The production budget of *Constantine* reached \$100 million, the film earned \$75.97 million in America; the production budget of *Ghost Rider* reached \$110 million and the film earned \$115.80 million in America. <<http://www.imdb.com>> accessed in June 2008. However, some religious-themed films that generated controversy among the Christian community have not been successful. Such was the case of *The Golden Compass* (Chris Weitz, 2007), an adulcorated adaptation of Philip Pullman *Dark Materials* series, that flopped in America with a \$70.11 million box office for a \$180 million production budget.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> For more on that subject, see for example *Harry Potter and the Bible* by Richard Abanes, *Looking for God in Harry Potter* by John Granger, “Redeeming Harry Potter” by Russ Breimeier <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/movies/commentaries/2005/redeeminharrypotter.html>>, “Latest ‘Harry Potter’ book meets cautionary response from Christians” by Art Toalston <[http://www.cesnur.org/recens/potter\\_044.htm](http://www.cesnur.org/recens/potter_044.htm)>, “is *Harry Potter* Harmless” <<http://www.christiananswers.net/q-eden/harrypotter.html>> or “J K Rowling's Harry Potter: a Christian parent's nightmare?” <<http://www.facingthechallenge.org/potter2.php>>, websites accessed in November 2008.

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