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The Christian Media Counterculture

Evangelical Christians are using the new media environment to promote their own worldview and protect their traditions from what they see as a secular onslaught.



By Henry Jenkins
[Digital Renaissance](#)
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Senator Zell Miller was spitting mad about the Super Bowl. In his "Deficit of Decency" speech, the Georgia Democrat compared watching the broadcast to driving over a skunk—"the scent of this event will long linger in the nostrils of America." Miller claims the event embodied the "culture of far left America" as served up by "Value-Les Moonves" (that

would be CBS Television president Leslie Moonves) "and the pagan temple of Viacom-Babylon." Miller's speech is a classic example of "culture war" rhetoric, which pits Christians against Hollywood, as if either could be understood in such simple and monolithic terms.

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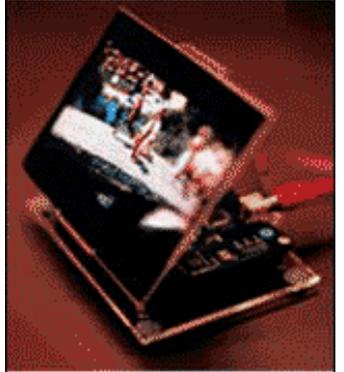
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This same culture war rhetoric has helped to frame the release of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. Fundamentalists (both Protestant and Catholic) crow that the movie's \$125 million opening weekend gross represents the triumph of the Christians over Hollywood, while media pundits scratch their heads and wonder how this film can double or even triple the industry's estimates of its likely box office yield.

Over the past several decades, (hyperventilation about cultural alienation) has served both to estrange evangelical Christians from the American cultural mainstream and to blind liberals to just how many people are consuming Christian media. Just dropping the word "Christian" in many online discussion lists sends some people into a frenzy and others running for the exit. Many liberals act as if the

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complex history of Christian debates about the relationship between spiritual and secular matters can be reduced to a glib dismissal of Jerry Falwell's "campaign" against the Teletubbies. But not all conservative Christians wish to censor others. Many want simply to protect and promote their own traditions in the face of what they see as the onslaught of contemporary media.

Call it the Christian Counterculture. Rather than rejecting popular culture outright, a growing number of Christians are producing and consuming their own popular media on the fringes of the mainstream entertainment industry. Still others are gathering in church basements and living rooms to promote their own brand of media literacy—seeing commercial culture as a "window" into the culture of unbelievers. What we see here is consistent with what media scholars have found within other subcultural communities—a desire to make and distribute your own media and the desire to challenge and critique mainstream media.

While many Christians have felt cut off from mass media, they have been quick to embrace new technologies—such as videotape, cable television, low-wattage radio stations, and the Internet—that allow them to route around established gatekeepers. The result has been the creation of media products that mirror the genre conventions of popular culture but express an alternative set of values.

In *Shaking the World for Jesus*, to be published next month, media scholar Heather Hendershot offers a complex picture of the kinds of popular culture being produced by and for evangelicals. Frustrated by network television, cultural conservatives have created their own animated series and sitcoms distributed on video. They have produced their own science fiction, horror, mystery, and romance novels, all of which can be purchased online. And alarmed by contemporary video games, they have produced their own—such as *Victory at Hebron*, where players battle Satan or rescue martyrs.

The emergence of new media technologies has allowed evangelicals some degree of autonomy from commercial media, allowing them to identify and enjoy media products that more closely align with their own worldviews. Technology has also lowered the costs of production and distribution, enabling what remains essentially a niche market to sustain a remarkably broad range of cultural products. Of course, as "niche markets" go, this one may be astonishingly large. According to a recent ABC News poll, 83 percent of Americans consider themselves to be Christians, and Baptists (only one of the evangelical denominations) make up 15 percent of the nation.

As commercial media producers have realized the size of this demographic, the walls between Christian and mainstream popular culture are breaking down. *VeggieTales* videos are finding their way into Walmart, Focus on the Family's *Adventures in Odyssey* records get distributed as kids' meal prizes at Chick-fil-A, the *Left Behind* books become top sellers on Amazon.com, and Christian pop singer Amy Grant breaks into top 40 radio. In the process, some of the more overtly religious markings get stripped away. Network television has begun to produce some shows, such as *Touched by an Angel*, *Seventh Heaven*, or *Joan of Arcadia*, that deal with religious themes in a way designed to appeal to the "searchers" and the "saved" alike. Predictably, some evangelicals fear that Christianity has been commodified and that Jesus is becoming just another brand in the great big "marketplace of ideas."

And it's in that context that we need to understand the staggering success of *The Passion*. The Christians knew how to get folks into the theaters to support this movie. Taking lessons from the blogging community and MoveOn.org, one website, Faith Highway, urged local churches to raise money to sponsor local television advertising for the movie. Many churches loaded up school buses full of worshippers to attend screenings. Some church leaders have acknowledged backing this film in the hopes that its commercial success will get Hollywood to pay more attention to them.

Despite the presence of such a diverse alternative media culture, evangelicals do not live in some kind of protected bubble, sealed off from the rest of popular culture; the residue of popular culture enters their homes even if tainted videos do not. How do they prepare their kids to confront a world where Janet Jackson's fetishwear is just one strong tug away? Some evangelicals have organized to offer their own ratings of contemporary media products based on what they see as Christian principles (see, for example, Christian Spotlight on Entertainment).

In some cases, these ratings are purely negative, helping families filter out profanity, nudity, violence, or content tagged as occult or new age. In other cases, groups such as HollywoodJesus.com promote works that they feel raise spiritual and philosophical questions, even if they do not necessarily adopt Christian perspectives. Increasingly, such sites are encouraging what they call "discernment." One such group, the Ransom Fellowship, defines discernment as "an ability, by God's grace, to creatively chart a godly path through the maze of choices and options that confront us, even when we're faced with situations and issues that aren't specifically mentioned in the Scriptures." The discernment movement draws inspiration from a range of Biblical passages that speak of people who maintained their faith even when living as exiles or captives in an alien land. Christians, they argue, are living in "modern captivity," holding onto and transmitting their faith in an increasingly hostile context.

In "Pop Culture: Why Bother?," Ransom Fellowship founder and director Denis Haack advocates engaging with popular culture, rather than hiding from it. Discernment exercises can help Christians to develop a greater understanding of their own value system, can offer insights into the worldview of "nonbelievers," and can offer an opportunity for meaningful exchange between Christians and non-Christians. As Haack explains, "If we are to understand those who do not share our deepest convictions, we must gain some comprehension of what they believe, why they believe it, and how those beliefs work out in daily life." Their site provides discussion questions and advice about how to foster media literacy within an explicitly religious context, finding ideas worth struggling with in mainstream works as diverse as *Bruce Almighty*, *Whale Rider*, *Cold Mountain*, and *Lord of the Rings*. The site is very explicit that Christians are apt to disagree among themselves about what is or is not valuable in such works, but that the process of talking through these differences focuses energy on spiritual matters and helps everyone involved to become more skillful in applying and defending their faith.

Somewhere between the production of new forms of popular culture and the discernment of values within existing commercial media lies a movement to adopt live action role-playing and computer games as spaces for exploring and debating moral questions. The Christian Gamers Guild (which titles its official e-zine "The Way, The Truth and The Dice") emerged in the midst of strong attacks from some evangelical leaders on role-playing and computer games. As the group's collective statement explains: "Role-playing games allow people to make choices, to make wrong choices, and then watch them unfold into the painful consequences, without ever taking any real risk. In this way it gets players to ask the important moral

questions, and weigh the answers—and all in the context of having fun." There is even Project X, a Christian effort to develop games with overtly Christian themes. And Christian gaming groups, such as Men of God, go into military or shooting games and witness on the virtual battlefield. They are, to borrow the name of another group, "Fans for Christ."

Confronting the proliferation of cable channels, the diversification of media content available on video and DVD, and the sheer expanse of the Internet, we all struggle to make decisions about what kind of popular culture we want to bring into our homes. We can respond to that challenge with fear or with courage, with minds open or minds closed. The culture war rhetoric closes off discussion: its metaphors of sewage, pollution, or dead skunks imply that some forms of expression are indefensible (and it is easy for this contempt to get directed against the people who consume such media). What I respect about the Christian discernment movement is that it is educating people to make meaningful choices and giving them a conceptual framework for talking about what kinds of ideas get expressed through the media they consume. These folk have been willing to defend popular media against others in their same religious denominations who would denounce them. They hold firm in their own beliefs and they have not renounced their desire to see such beliefs become a more powerful force in our culture, but they have created an approach that respects diversity of opinion and civility of expression.

Henry Jenkins is director of the Program in Comparative Media Studies at MIT.

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