

Chapter 3

The business of religion

Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, was arguably the most innovative promoter of religion of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Long before the current explosion in religious publishing, she used a number of now-commonplace marketing techniques to publicize and sell her belief system. She distributed her book *Science and Health* in a secular bookstore; she aggressively used endorsements on the cover her book; and in a particularly innovative move, she designed *Science and Health* to look like a Bible, thus marrying the attributes and benefits associated with that best-selling tome to her own (Tickle, n.d.). In terms of distribution, Eddy again showed her ingenuity. She created Christian Science Reading Rooms, quiet spaces similar to public libraries where anyone could sit and read her books for free. Some have even called the Reading Rooms the first franchise, yet another marketing innovation.

A hundred years later, the religious book market has seen explosive growth beyond anything Mrs. Eddy could have imagined. Even so, she would readily recognize many of her methods being used to sell today's religious products and services, including distribution through secular outlets and packaging a new book to look like a previous best seller. These marketing techniques, as well as others developed in the wake of mass media, have turned the sales of religious products into big business. That growth has led to considerable consolidation among producers within the industry—religious marketers buying up other religious marketers—as well as inter-industry—secular institutions purchasing religious product companies. This is particularly true in book publishing where multinational media conglomerates have bought into this category and brought their significant marketing expertise with them. While we saw in the last chapter that sociological changes increased the prevalence of religious marketing, here we will examine the effect of economic changes on this category.

It is impossible in today's religious marketplace to separate out religion from religious products because they have become so intertwined. The Saddleback Church is the megachurch itself, *and* Rick Warren, *and* his book *The Purpose Driven Life*. These elements are often promoted together just

so the success of one will drive the success of the others. For the purposes of understanding economic changes, however, we will look at the religious marketplace mostly in terms of religious products and the growth of religious consultancies, discussing the implications for religious institutions themselves when relevant.

The economics of the religious product market

The changing Christian marketplace

Changes in the religious product category, primarily books and movies, which are the largest and most visible manifestations, began in the mid-1990s. Most insiders trace these changes to the approaching millennium and its doomsday prophecies. Y2K was going to destroy our computers. ATM machines were going to randomly spit out money. An earthquake was going to devastate an entire continent. And on and on it went. Out of this madness rose a book that took the religion category by storm—*Left Behind*, published in 1996. This phenomenally successful book, and then series of books, was based on the “end times” and what would happen to nonbelievers in the event of the apocalypse: they would be “left behind” on a darkened earth while true believers would be brought to Jesus. The series was embraced by Christian consumers, many of whom already believed that the end times were near. While their secular brethren were not as immersed in the doomsday belief, they, too, readily accepted these books. According to a *Time* magazine cover story, evangelicals made up only about half of the series’ readership (Gibbs, 2002). In this same article, a Time/CNN poll found the 59 percent of Americans believe in the events in *Revelation*, a widely debated and interpreted book of the New Testament upon which the *Left Behind* series is based. Driving these apocalyptic beliefs were heightened concerns about the fate of the world, particularly in light of the events of September 11 and the subsequent anthrax scares. Sales of the series “jumped 60% after Sept. 11. Book 9, published in October, was the best-selling novel of 2001” (p. 43).

Starting out as a single book, *Left Behind* grew to include 13 books and sold more than 60 million copies, with its final title, *The Rapture*, published in June 2006. In addition to the books, there have been two movies based on the series (they have grossed approximately \$100 million), graphic novels, CDs, a separate series for children, and a board game. In late 2006 a computer game of the series was introduced that looks surprisingly like many secular violent and destructive games.¹ Called *Eternal Forces*, this game was made available for pre-sale to those who went to the *Left Behind* Web site. For \$5, fans could reserve a copy of the game as well as receive a Sneak Peek Pack, which included key codes for the game, a DVD with the promotional trailer, and a bracelet.

The *Left Behind* series changed the publishing industry in a number of ways. First, the books crossed over from the traditional Christian market to the popular book market, opening up the series to a vastly wider audience. Second, *Left Behind* was the first Christian book to be sold in big box stores and demonstrated for these retailers the revenue that was possible from the Christian market. Today Wal-Mart and Costco regularly stock the top Christian titles. Third, the series showed the level of success that could be achieved with Christian fiction, a segment not previously known for sizable sales. According to Michelle Rapkin, former vice president and director of religion for Doubleday:

The truth is that unless Christian books could get out of the ghetto of the Christian stores, very little of this could have happened [the explosion in Christian media]. The reason that *Left Behind* did so well was because Barnes & Noble stood up and took note of the fact that within the first few years, something like 50 million copies of *Left Behind* books were published just in America....So the price clubs like Costco started buying these books in massive numbers and they turned into very important outlets that reached people who did not typically go to bookstores.... They were everywhere in the country, and they were discounting them in huge numbers. Books in price clubs have quotas, and they will not be reordered and not placed on the tables unless they sell a very high number of books. And then the publisher kept adding books every other year so there was this appetite that was being fueled more and more so it became like an explosion, and now the booksellers [realized] they can make big sales and so the same thing happened with *The Prayer of Jabez*.

(personal interview, 2006)

Published in 2000, *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life*, is a small book—only 93 pages long—that espouses prosperity through devotion. According to the book, by saying a simple prayer every day and reading the entire book once a week, readers will have their prayers answered by God. *Jabez* sold more than eight million copies by the end of its first year and was *the* best-selling book (of all genres) of 2001 (Nawotka, 2006).

Jabez inspired a whole new category—prayer books. The appeal of these books from a sales and marketing perspective is obvious. First, they can be created in multiple formats, such as pocket and gift versions, which are less expensive to produce and are readily bought as impulse purchases. Second, these books can be developed to target specific audiences like women, parents, and children (there is a *Jabez* for women and one for teens, for example). And finally, religious Christians are not the only customers for these books, which is evidenced in the increase in sales of these books in general bookstores as well as via the Internet.

One other book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, built on the success of *Left Behind*, further demonstrating the broad appeal that could be derived from Christian texts in the secular market. *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* provides 40 days of “points to ponder,” “verses to remember,” and “questions to consider.” Published in 2002, this book has sold more than 25 million copies and is the best-selling nonfiction hardcover book of all time (Saroyan, 2006). Like *Left Behind* and *Jabez*, *The Purpose Driven Life* was distributed through secular retailers including big box stores and major book chains. *The Purpose Driven Life* had one other channel of distribution that contributed significantly to its bottom line: churches. While most people have heard of the book, what they do not know is that the book is the text for a church course called 40 Days of Purpose. Churches that decide they want to become a Purpose Driven church receive copies of the book at a steep discount to distribute to all their church members. This is not to negate the success of this book—25 million copies is a lot of books—but rather to show an important means of distribution. What better endorsement for a product than the local church leader?

The success of these books at the beginning of the millennium put religious titles at the top of the best-selling fiction and nonfiction lists for the first time ever (Salamon, 2003). The combination of cultural phenomena that led to heightened spiritual interest (millennial fever, September 11) and expanded distribution resulted in heretofore unseen commercial success in this category. One last thing that drove the success of these books was the rise in evangelism, which has a tradition of passing books on to others. According to Michelle Rapkin:

For devout Evangelical Christians, one of their purposes in life is to evangelize, and what better way to evangelize than to give books away. The Christian marketplace has a huge gift giving statistic....I did a book called *Travel Back to Heaven* a couple of years ago and it wasn't one of those major books but it did quite well and people would write in and say, “I read this book and I loved it and bought a dozen copies.” And you don't think that happened with *Left Behind* and *Purpose Driven Life*? You can think of a whole church worth of people. So the numbers really explode in a way. I may love a new novel, but I am not going to buy you a copy no matter how much I like it.

(personal interview, 2006)

While these three books are held up as the shining examples, they were not the only publishing successes in the religion category. The 1990s saw an overall expansion of religious and spiritual books, making it the fastest-growing adult book category. At the same time One Spirit, a spiritually oriented offshoot of Book-of-the-Month Club, became the “fastest-growing

club in the company's history" (Harrison, 1997, p. 22). One book wholesaler reported a 249 percent increase in the category in the mid-1990s.

Strong sales continued into the new millennium. While sales figures are heavily guarded by the industry, and there are mixed reports about the level of growth (one source says 50 percent, another 7 percent, another 4 percent), there is no disagreement that the category is growing. In 2004 there were more than 14,000 religious/spiritual books published, which makes it the fourth largest category only after fiction (28,010), juveniles (21,161), and sociology/economics (17,518) (Grabois, 2005). In 2004 religious books sold \$1.9 billion, up from \$1.5 billion only four years earlier, and there are estimates that the category will reach \$2.5 billion by 2008 (Dooley *et al.*, 2006). While still small in terms of the overall category (total book sales in 2004 was more than \$28 billion), the important thing to bear in mind is that the industry overall remains stagnant due to competition from alternative media sources; the religion/spirituality category is one of the few areas of steady growth in book publishing.

Religious book executives—sellers as well as industry analysts—peg this sustained interest in religion not to single book titles but to a number of cultural factors, both personal and global. According to Lynn Garrett of *Publishers Weekly*, "Religion is just so much a part of the cultural conversation these days, because of global terrorism and radical Islam. People want to understand those things. They're looking to go more deeply into the religious traditions" (Charles, 2004, p. 11). Phyllis Tickle, former religion editor of *Publishers Weekly* and author of numerous books on religion, attributes the industry's success to something more personal—people's reluctance to change their public selves. "We are especially slow to express aloud religious beliefs or visibly pursue religious patterns that are too divergent from those of our community. Books are private. Books don't tell, especially in matters of the spirit" (Harrison, 1997, p. 22). Others have attributed the success to the aging of the baby boomers. Lyn Cryderman, vice president and associate publisher at Zondervan, home of *The Purpose Driven Life*, has said, "They hit age 50 and they start asking, 'What significance do I have?' and 'What mark am I making?'" (Nelson and Garrett, 2004, p. S4). Michelle Rapkin summed up the zeitgeist perfectly:

By 2000 the baby boomers are just about fifty years old. So the biggest section of the entire population is beginning to learn about mortality. Their parents are really old, and they have to take care of them. They have to face up to their parents' mortality and their own mortality. And if that wasn't enough, the economy busts in 2000...and on top of that, 9/11 happened. So it is not just about age, it's about the fact that nobody knows what will happen. So now you have our whole country on high alert and everyone is thinking about that. And when you are getting

older and you are watching your parents fail and die, and now a plane crashes into the World Trade Center and kills 3,000 Americans on our own soil, you start thinking about God.

Segmenting categories and audiences for maximum growth

Bibles remain the leading segment in the religious category, though most of them don't look anything like traditional, staid, black books of scripture. There are more than 50 different versions of the Bible, including the *King James Version* and *The New International Version* (NIV). There are numerous translations and specialized editions created for different audiences. One of the hottest demographics, for example, is the teen or young adult market. In terms of Bibles, products for this group have been some of the most successful—and the most controversial. *Refuel* and *Revolve* are Bibles that look like teen magazines and are targeted at guys and girls respectively. They feature tips on dating next to tips on how to live your faith. *Revolve* sold 150,000 copies in the first six months of its publication, making it the best-selling Bible in Christian bookstores (Boorstin, 2003).

Teens, of course, are not the only segment for Bibles. To appeal to more harried, older adults, publishers are creating religious texts that can be consumed in a minimal amount of time. *The 100-Minute Bible* gives readers the scripture in 64 pages, and *The HCSB Light Speed Bible* covers the key points of the Old and New Testaments in 24 hours. These books demonstrate a trend readily apparent in the secular market where producers cater to consumers' time constraints. For example, Stephen Hawking has recently published *A Briefer History of Time*, Shakespeare's plays are being produced in abridged versions that run less than two hours, and we're now seeing yoga classes that last for 30 minutes (Aucoin, 2005).

Christian Living is the second biggest segment in the religious book category and an area that has shown significant growth in the last decade. Because it is seen as the venue through which to increase sales, it is generating the most interest among publishers, both religious and nonreligious alike. Christian Living covers a broad spectrum of titles, but fundamentally it is about making Christianity widely accessible by relating religious and spiritual themes in a practical way to life and relationships. Included in this category are the *Left Behind* books, *The Purpose Driven Life*, *The Prayer of Jabez*, *God Chasers*, and *The Passion of Jesus Christ*, among many others.

Beyond the subject matter of the books themselves, much of the appeal of Christian Living titles come from the fact that they are nondenominational. *The Purpose Driven Life* and *Jabez* attract a large audience because they do not espouse a particular faith tradition. Thus Christian Living titles are purchased by practicing and nonpracticing Christians alike. This nondenominationalism and wider appeal are what allow for them to be sold

through secular retail outlets, providing exposure to a large audience of Americans who would not ever enter a Christian bookstore. In addition, Christian publishers have become very savvy in how they market these books, making them indistinguishable from secular works.

The books are implicitly, rather than explicitly, evangelical. The titles don't sound religious, the colophon (the publisher's logo printed on a book's spine) has no obvious religious significance, and the only clues to the author's Christian bona-fides, such as an affiliation with a church, are likely to be buried in the jacket copy, if they appear at all.

(Nawotka, 2006, p. 2)

Because women are the primary purchasers of religious titles, Christian Living titles cater to their needs and interests, particularly in terms of family, relationships, and prayer. The importance of women to this market is evidenced by publishing house Thomas Nelson's Women of Faith division, which sponsors annual motivational conferences to further support this target audience. This group hosted close to 30 conferences attended by approximately 400,000 participants (Packaged Facts, 2004, p. 79).

A popular subgenre of Christian Living that developed in the 1990s was the "marketplace Christians" movement. According to an article in *Christianity Today*, "foremost in the minds of marketplace Christians is a vision for equipping evangelicals to be in decision-making positions of power in mainstream society" (Tapia and Stream, 1995, p. 103). This was a movement that began in the 1980s but did not start taking hold until the mid-1990s. Hundreds of book titles, including *Jesus CEO* and *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of Soul in Corporate America*, were published that address faith in the workplace. This mixture of faith and business was not limited to Christianity, however. In June 1995, *BusinessWeek* ran a story about spirituality in the workplace, outlining the increasing number of companies that were providing exposure to spiritual practices for their employees. This included a broad spectrum of institutions from such stalwarts as the World Bank and Boeing to more hippy establishments like Tom's of Maine (Galen and West, 1995). This subgenre has long-term sustainability as seen by new momentum in the early 2000s in the wake of the Enron scandal. With a focus on ethics as well as faith, Christian book publishers came out with a number of titles like *Life @ Work on Leadership: Enduring Insights for Men and Women of Faith* and *Running with the Giants: What Old Testament Heroes Want You to Know About Life and Leadership*, by John Maxwell, author of the business best seller *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*. From a business perspective, spirituality in the workplace was seen as a way to improve productivity. From a publishing perspective, it was a marriage made in heaven because business, like religion, is a growth area in publishing.

Kids have always been an important market for booksellers of all kinds. For the Christian market, books and other materials for Sunday school and for summer Bible classes are a big part of their marketing efforts. Campaigns targeting children have expanded into the secular arena due to the success of *Veggie Tales*, the first Christian children's video series to have significant crossover sales. These videos opened the door for other marketers, including book publishers, to release products targeting the "faith-based" youth market. Some of the larger publishers have special divisions, like Zondervan's ZonderKidz, which publishes the *Veggie Tales* books, and Tommy Nelson from Thomas Nelson, which publishes NIV for kids.²

While *Left Behind* did little to hide the fact that its content had a Christian orientation, *Veggie Tales* was more obtuse. Unless you knew that *Veggie Tales* books were for evangelicals, it would be difficult to determine that merely from looking at the merchandising or even by reading most of the book. It is only at the end of the books that you will find mention of God and a life lesson, but even then it would be difficult to determine the persuasion of the authors. This more subtle approach was very successful for these products and aided in their breaking into the secular kids' market—a difficult category to enter. When it comes to targeting the children's market with religiously based content, publishers are competing against general entertainment companies that are better funded and more pervasive (think Disney or Nickelodeon). Further, for religious marketers producing media for kids that will be used outside a classroom is still in its nascent stages. There are few if any religious media that specifically target kids though this is rapidly changing (Packaged Facts, 2004, p. 71). Producers will likely find success by replicating the *Veggie Tales* formula: secular formats that are familiar to children, a product that appeals to the parents as well as the children, and no mention of Jesus (Warren, 2005).

Alternatively producers and publishers can alter Christian products slightly and thereby target both Christian and secular markets. *Jay Jay the Jet Plane*, a children's television show airing on PBS, has used just such a dual marketing strategy to promote its products. *Jay Jay* was created by David Michel, a producer and holder of a master's degree in divinity who wanted to spread the good word. Michel understood the value of both the Christian and the secular markets, and he did not want to miss either one. Therefore the product, with slight variation, is marketed to the groups separately. *Jay Jay* programs that have appeared on PBS are distributed to the secular market by Columbia TriStar. Programs related to specific Bible verses are distributed by Tommy Nelson. Books and toys are also separately distributed based on their level of religious content (Salamon, 2003).

Other audiences that are new for this category are the tween, teen, and 20-something religious consumer. Research shows that these groups represent a substantial prospective market. According to a University of Pennsylvania study, religion is important to close to 90 percent of tweens

and teens, and two-thirds attend worship services. Similarly, Synovate, an international marketing research firm, “found that 92 percent of teens believe in God” (Packaged Facts, 2004, p. 70). Recently MediaVest, a major buyer of advertising in all media, did a study about the youth market. In the course of that work, it found that teens were spending their free time in Bible clubs. According to Jane Lacher, vice president and director of research at MediaVest, “They were admitting to it openly. That’s not something that would have been cool to do a few years ago...It’s cool to be religious” (Mandese, 2004, p. 10). All of this suggests that teens would purchase products if they were made available.

Offerings for this group were not readily in evidence at the 2006 Christian Booksellers Association (CBA) Retail Show, the largest international trade show for Christian retailers. Clothing—particularly T-shirts—seemed to be the primary merchandise to sell to teen consumers as opposed to books or other product options. One booth that grabbed my attention was that of C28, which I later found out stood for Colossians 2:8. The product line included goth-style T-shirts, bags, and jewelry with a logo containing the letters notw. These were far and away the hippest things I’d seen at the show. One T-shirt had the word “Blessed” emblazoned across the chest. When you got closer to the shirt you could read the rest of the text, which said, “Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered, Romans 4:7”.

The designer of the products was at the booth and I asked him what “notw” stood for, and he told me: Not of this world. “Do people in general know this?” I asked. He said no, but that when people see the designs they want to know more about it. He explained that the company started in Southern California but they had gotten so many requests for their products that they began supplying other retailers. As I was leaving, he gave me a CD. “What is this?” I asked. It was the testimony of the company’s founder, Aurello F. Barreto, a successful California businessman who became a millionaire in his thirties. When I returned home, I learned that C28 now has six stores targeted to the young Christian market. It is obvious that Barreto is bringing experience from his early success to the religious market, particularly in his knowing that he has to get his audience where they are. Says Barreto, “Our mission is to share the grace, the truth and the love of Jesus....And what better place to do it than a mall?” (Walker, 2005, p. 28).

A more difficult group to define than kids or tweens is the 20-something market. In churches, for example, there is not a specific place for them because they can be a disparate group. They are too old for youth group. They may or may not yet be married. They are becoming adults, but in many ways they have teen sensibilities. The same inability to define the 20-something market existed in the book and product category. But that is changing, in large part due to Relevant Media, a Web site and publishing company geared toward teens and 20-somethings. Their target audience is “God-hungry, mainstream-savvy 20-somethings” (Kiesling, 2003, p. 130). Relevant’s tagline is: “God.

Life. Progressive Culture.” This reflects its product line, which includes the best-selling books *Walk On: The Spiritual Journey of U2* and *The Gospel According to Tony Soprano*. The company’s magazine, *Relevant*, is a mix of articles about faith and life issues relevant to 20-somethings. A recent issue had a cover story about the punk rock/alternative group Thrice as well as articles about managing debt, the emergent church movement, and Stephen Colbert. *Relevant* is distributed through Christian outlets as well as Barnes & Noble. Cameron Strang, founder of Relevant Media, explains the need for content created specifically for this audience:

The church doesn’t know what to do [when young people question faith], they kind of freak out because their whole thing of faith is belief so, if you start to ask questions, that’s seen as doubts. But the thing is that we’re not doubting, we want an authentic faith[,] we’re seeking things, we want a relevant faith, a faith that matters, a faith that’s worth living and dying for.

(Divine Profits, 2004)

Relevant is providing for this target audience what it often cannot get at the local church—even if the services include rock music.

A number of traditional presses have created special product lines to tap this emerging market—Thomas Nelson’s Transit and Tyndale House’s Thirsty?, for example. Transit is probably best known for *Revolve* and *Refuel*, the Bibles that look like fashion magazines. Thirsty? has published a metal-covered Bible for teens as well as titles like *Walking with Frodo* and the *Degrees of Guilt* series, which tells the story of three high school students and their responses to the death of a classmate. Tyndale also published a tween version of the *Left Behind* series for 10 to 14 year olds.

Zondervan has gotten into the market by focusing on teen body image, with the titles *Mirror*, *Mirror: Reflections on Who You Are, Who You’ll Become*, and *Secret Power for Girls: Identity, Security, and Self-Respect in Troubling Times*. In a very clever marketing move, “the publisher plans to distribute copies of the book to stores that have cafes so they can scatter them around the tables—and hopefully draw the attention of young readers, ‘who are so much more visually oriented,’ said marketing vp John Topliff” (Kiesling, 2003, p. 130).

Religious book publishing and retailing has seen extensive changes in the past decade (Borden, 2007). Broadly, the category has seen more non-denominational titles, a larger array of Christian Living titles that marry religion with popular culture, and increasing distribution through non-Christian retailers. As we can see, there is considerable segmentation in the book business, with products targeting specific audiences like women, kids, and teens and young adults. Like the secular marketplace, religious book publishers reflect the latest trends and tastes of consumers. In the wake

of *Left Behind*, Christian fiction is exploding. Christian chick lit—fiction for women—is a particularly popular segment at this time. Religious diet books have also become a hot trend over the past five years. As Rapkin said, “Whatever is happening in the secular arena, it has its counterpart in the Christian arena.”

Non-Christian markets

I have focused so far on the Christian book market because it is the source of many of the faith brands. Having a book and/or a television ministry are key means of creating and maintaining a brand image. However I do not want to leave the impression that books about other religions are not popular as well or that they do not use the same segmentation strategies or target the same audiences. They absolutely do. Kabbalah, for instance, has generated significant sales and interest in the last five to ten years. New Age titles continue to have large readerships. Top authors here include Marianne Williamson, Deepak Chopra, and Neale Donald Walsch. These books, too, are heavily promoted to women, but there are also titles for parents, kids, and other defined segments. Unlike the Christian marketplace where books were primarily published by independent booksellers, most of these New Age titles have been released by major publishing houses. And as we will see, these same publishing houses have also moved into Christian publishing, changing the economic structure of the Christian marketplace.

Bigger players and increasing consolidation

The Christian book industry is an amalgam of a couple of large independently owned presses, a few multinational media conglomerates, a handful of mid-sized presses, and dozens of small independents. The two major independent religious publishers are Thomas Nelson and Tyndale House, publishers of the *New King James Bible* and *Revolve*, and the *New Living Translation (NLT)* and the *Left Behind* series respectively. The major international conglomerates in this category are Newscorp (parent of Zondervan, publisher of *The Purpose Driven Life* and the *New International Version Bible*, and HarperCollins San Francisco), Bertelsmann (Random House), and Hachette (Warner Faith, which was part of Time Warner until it was sold to Hachette in 2006). Warner Faith is home to Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, and most recently Creflo Dollar. Mid-size presses include Multnomah Publishers (*Prayer of Jabez*), Harvest House (*The Power of Praying* series, a top-selling Christian series since 1995), and Shambhala Publications (producer of a wide range of alternative religion and New Age works, which are distributed through Random House’s sales force).

New religious imprints and consolidation within the industry have occurred in response to the broadened appeal of religious products,

particularly those in the Christian Living category. Large multinationals have been buying smaller religious publishers (as well as music and film divisions), and smaller religious publishers are merging to compete in a more aggressive marketplace. The earliest example of a large corporation entering this category is Newscorp's purchase of Zondervan, which occurred in 1988. Long before *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rupert Murdoch saw the value in this underserved market. Newscorp continues to visualize growth in religious media as evidenced by its creation of a new division called FoxFaith, which was formed in 2006 to produce faith-based video products. Whether movies or books, Newscorp brings significant marketing strength and the ability to cross-promote products across its media ventures. Random House has a number of divisions devoted to religious content, including Bell Tower (sacred teachings), Three Rivers Press (religious and spiritual values), Doubleday Religious Publishing (religious works), Doubleday Image (paperbacks), and Schocken (Jewish fiction and nonfiction). It also established an evangelical division called Waterbrook in 1998. As its Web site states:

As a division of Random House, Inc.—the largest publisher in the world—WaterBrook's task is to build a major presence in the Christian Booksellers Association, competing with the top Christian publishers in our market today.... We believe that our experienced leadership team in all departments brings a level of expertise and an informed and unified publishing approach that is on par with the best—while we continually endeavor to explore new tracks to take us toward increased measures of success.

(Waterbrook Press, n.d.)

All of this suggests that major publishers enter the Christian marketplace fully expecting to compete—and beat—the existing players. Finally, in a major acquisition Hachette purchased Warner Faith from Time Warner in 2006. On the surface this might suggest a change in the industry—why would a large company like Time Warner want to divest itself of what appears to be a growing category? It turns out that Time Warner sold off its entire publishing division in an effort to streamline its businesses. This was not a comment on religious publishing but rather a strategy based on where Time Warner believes the media industry is headed. But for Hachette as well as the other media giants, the religion category appears to be a profitable one. Moreover, these multinational media giants bring expertise in multiple marketing and retail areas. Newscorp, Bertelsmann, and Hachette are all experts in publishing *and* music *and* video entertainment, allowing them to cross-promote products across divisions.

As for consolidation of smaller publishers, Thomas Nelson purchased World Bible Publishers (Milliot, 2003); Ave Maria Press purchased three

divisions of RCL Enterprises (Holt, 2003); and Baker Book House acquired Bethany House Publishers (Milliot, 2002). These companies are not as well known as the aforementioned media giants, but the point here is that smaller presses have had to merge in order to compete.

Traditional religion publishers are not only competing with large multitargeted publishers, but also with publishers that specialize in a single target market. A good example of this is the publisher Scholastic, which specializes in children's books. This company entered the Christian market in 2006 by creating the *Read and Learn Bible*, written in partnership with the American Bible Society. Scholastic brings more than 85 years of marketing expertise, including its phenomenal success in promoting Harry Potter and Clifford the Big Red Dog. Scholastic's production capabilities would lead us to expect that they will produce video or television productions in conjunction with these titles. Thus the combination of competition with specialized publishers and large multinational publishers is forcing religious publishers to become larger and more marketing adept.

An important contributing factor in the consolidation of the publishing side of the business is the changes that have occurred in Christian retailing. Whereas once this retail segment was made up almost exclusively of independent Christian booksellers, now big box stores like Costco and Sam's Club, as well as mass-market retailers like Target and K-Mart, are key elements of any marketing plan. Wal-Mart—the retail behemoth that dominates sales in the vast majority of consumer products—has discovered the Christian market in recent years. According to *Forbes*, in 2003 Wal-Mart sold an estimated \$1 billion in Christian-themed items. Wal-Mart has carried Christian-themed books and music for years, but it is only recently that the increase in consumer demand was enough to warrant additional attention and product lines. Wal-Mart's product lines vary by store, but in general the retailer has approximately 550 "inspirational" music titles and 1,200 "inspirational" books, which are primarily Bibles and best sellers. And that's just media items. According to Wal-Mart's spokeswoman Danette Thompson, "In our jewelry department, we have seen an increase in sales of inspirational jewelry such as cross necklaces and Bible charms" (Howell, 2004, p. 4).

To handle the demands of these outlets, publishers have to be larger as well.

Most publishers have established aggressive sales divisions focused singularly on the secular channel. In the mid-1990s (and before) a Christian publisher might have one or two people assigned to "work with" secular channels. It is not uncommon today to find a vice president of mass-market sales leading a large staff of aggressive sales people.

(Seybert, 2004, p. 31)

Whereas small independent retailers dominated this category even ten years ago, now their numbers are significantly reduced. These independent booksellers are members of the Christian Booksellers Association (CBA), an organization whose membership shrunk from approximately 3,000 in the 1990s to 2,370 by 2004 (Italie, 2004, p. A16). At the 2006 CBA retail show there were a little more than 9,100 attendees (CBA, 2006); this is in comparison to more than 14,000 participants in 1999 (Garrett and Tickle, 1999, p. 12).³ Paralleling these figures is the decline in sales through Christian specialty stores. In the mid-1990s, retail sales in such stores were 70 percent of the market; by 2002 they had dropped precipitously to 40 percent (Seybert, 2004). In less than a decade secular outlets had overtaken the majority of the category sales.

In addition, competition from online outlets has affected Christian publishing. *Glorious Appearing*, part of the *Left Behind* series, was the number-one fiction title on the Barnes & Noble Web site shortly after its release in 2004. Through both online and in-store sales, the company “sold more than 48,000 copies the week it was released. At Amazon.com, ‘Glorious Appearing’ was the No. 14 best seller on April 8. Not far behind at No. 18 was ‘The Purpose-Driven Life...’ (Howell, 2004). The advances of secular online retailers into this space is particularly hard on Christian retailers because online services are much more attractive to young consumers. Future book buyers are not establishing a habit of shopping at a Christian bookseller, which has long-term consequences for this industry.

No one is questioning the continuing value of religious publishing. The 1990s saw the start up of a number of Christian divisions within established companies and mergers among smaller ones. Consolidation and acquisitions continue. In 2006, Thomas Nelson was sold to a private equity company. The news at the 2006 CBA show was that Multnomah, the publisher of *Jabez*, was up for sale and the expected buyer was Random House. The industry is predicted to continue to consolidate in response to the changing retail environment. As consolidation increases, so too will competition and marketing.

Movies

The expansion of religious messages into the secular marketplace took off in the mid-1990s with the book industry. In the mid-2000s, a similar growth trend occurred in film. We are all aware of the phenomenal success of *The Passion of the Christ*. Beyond the box office revenues, which were in the hundreds of millions of dollars, the film sold 4.1 million DVDs on the first day of its release, making it the fastest-selling R-rated film in history (Hettrick, 2004). Like the book category, mega-retailers had a hand in the product’s success. For example, Sam’s Club, a division of Wal-Mart, sold bulk packs, called “churchpacks,” of 50 DVDs or VHS tapes. These were marketed to

churches, theological schools, and other religious organizations. “In light of the megaministry trend, and the majority of ministries having libraries and/or bookstores with items for resale, this is the perfect synergy,” said Sam’s Club spokeswoman Jolanda Stewart (Casabona, 2004, p. 26). Bulk packs were also offered through record and video stores like Tower Records and Blockbuster Video.

In the wake of *The Passion*, other major studios produced movies that have generated considerable consumer interest. A number of them are employing the marketing strategies used by the producers of *The Passion*. An example of this is *The Chronicles of Narnia*, produced by Walden Media, a producer of family-friendly content, and distributed by Disney:

Before the November opening of Walt Disney Pictures’ \$100 million adaptation of C. S. Lewis’ *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the studio partnered with faith-based outreach firm Motive Marketing to hit some of the same evangelical Christian markets as Gibson’s *The Passion*. Armed with an estimated \$6 million budget, the firm arranged sneak-peek religious-media screenings and launched a Web site, narniaresources.com, offering testimonials and workbooks to spur church-group discussion of the story’s biblical allegories. In addition, EMI’s Christian Music Group released a soundtrack of songs inspired by Narnia even before the film’s secular soundtrack was complete.

(Schmelzer, 2006a, p. 8)⁴

In the fall of 2006, in conjunction with Nickelodeon pictures, Walden Media released *Charlotte’s Web*, which is not specifically a religious title but one that was heavily promoted at the CBA retail show. Walden Media has a tie to the Christian community via its owner Philip F. Anschutz, who is a supporter of the Christian right. Promoting through the CBA demonstrates that the company would be using religious retailers as promotional partners for this family-friendly film. This was also in evidence in the movie’s marketing tagline: “This Christmas, help is coming from above.” The relationship between Walden Media and Christian retailers continued into 2007, when Walden released *Amazing Grace: The William Wilberforce Story*.

As mentioned earlier, Newscorp created a subdivision called FoxFaith. This division’s mission is to produce faith-based films every 18 months. FoxFaith also owns backlist titles that are appropriate for the whole family, such as 20th Century Fox musicals as well as children’s videos like the *Strawberry Shortcake* series and *Garfield* (the animated series, not the live-action one). The company’s Web site, www.foxfait.com, includes a special section for films designated for use in churches. Church leaders can purchase these films and download for free accompanying church resources like video clips and

pdf files of booklets that provide discussion guides to be used with the films. The guides include suggested Bible readings and questions for discussion.

A number of new movie companies have emerged to produce faith-based fare. Good News Holdings is a company that was created in 2005 specifically to produce “faith-based content in multimedia formats” (Fleming, 2006, p. 1). Its first significant project will be a film adaptation of Anne Rice’s *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*. Another faith-based multimedia company is TDJ Enterprises, a for-profit division of T. D. Jakes, a well-known televangelist and author. TDJ Enterprises recently entered into a three-year production and distribution deal with Sony Pictures. The first project is *Not Easily Broken*, a film based on a novel by Jakes. While Sony says it is targeting African Americans rather than a religious niche, given Jakes’ involvement it is hard to see how the two could be separated. *Not Easily Broken* is not Sony’s first foray into religious content. Sony successfully distributed and marketed *The Gospel*, a film about an R&B singer who finds faith. The bottom-line appeal of these films is easy to see. *The Gospel* was produced for \$3 million and grossed \$17 million at the box office (LaPorte, 2006, p. 11).

As in the book category, subgenres for specially targeted audiences are seen as growth areas. In the kids’ market, the undisputed leader is *Veggie Tales*. These talking vegetables, led by Larry the Cucumber and Bob the Tomato, started out as a video series for evangelical Christians. Like the *Left Behind* books, they found a larger audience—non-Christian children and, surprisingly, teen- and college-age Christians. Not stopping at videos, Big Idea—the creators of *Veggie Tales*—produced a movie for theaters called *Jonah: A Veggie Tales Movie*. Budget overruns of this film and a breach-of-contract dispute led to the company’s bankruptcy and a subsequent takeover by secular producer Classic Media in 2003, but *Jonah* was both a box office and DVD success. When the DVD was launched, “it was accompanied by a multimillion dollar marketing campaign and joint promotions with retail and merchandising partners including Applebee’s, Auntie Anne’s and Chuck E. Cheese restaurants, Sea World and Curad Bandages” (Packaged Facts, 2004, p. 58). And while *Left Behind* was a book series that branched out into movies, *Veggie Tales* reversed the process by starting as visual media and then becoming a series of books published by ZonderKidz.⁵

Another subgenre is that of specific denominations. Interestingly there now exists films for members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. These Mormon-centric films include *The Best Two Years*, *God’s Army*, and *The Singles Ward* (Leydon, 2004, p. 13). The films have a built-in audience through the LDS church, and when their religious message is more subtle, there has been some crossover to audiences outside the church.

Christian titles are not the only examples of subgenres. There is increasing interest in the New Age category. This has, on the face of it, a less organized audience base, but the success of one film, *What the Bleep Do We Know?*, spurred the possibility for expanding these types of films. The movie was

an overwhelming success at the box office and even spawned a conference. Made for \$500,000, the movie initially grossed \$10 million by February 2005 through Saturday morning screenings at traditional movie theaters as well as at New Age churches. Meyer Gottlieb, president of Samuel Goldwyn Films, says that he “sees the film as part of a worldwide interest in New Age themes that generate hundreds of millions of dollars from books, videos and conferences...There’s a sizable audience out there. We just have to do a better job of creating programming for them” (Higgins, 2005, p. 6). The film is heavily promoted at New Age expos and fairs, and because of the complexity of the film, many audience members have seen the film multiple times.

Books allow consumers to privately consume and sample various religious ideas, but it is movies that provide an entertaining means of learning about religion outside the home. One participant in a church course told me that she often uses movies to help clarify difficult religious concepts for herself, and she tells friends to see certain films if she feels she can not explain a religious concept on her own. Movies are important for a couple of reasons. First, they are heavily promoted and so religious content gets considerable exposure in the culture. Second, many religious films are produced inexpensively, and even a modest return makes these films profitable. This has attracted new producers to the category.

Music

While music is not a focus of this book, we cannot ignore the Christian music business completely due to its increased popularity over the last decade. Christian and gospel music accounted for \$845 million in sales in 2002, representing close to 7 percent of the industry, up from only 3.2 percent in 1993 (RIAA statistics quoted in Seybert, 2004, pp. 21–2). As with the book category, Christian music has been brought to the fore by the major multinational media conglomerates. Because of this, while we may or may not (depending on our age and religious inclinations) be aware of Christian music brands, it is likely that they will continue to become more a part of our culture due to the marketing presence of the larger media institutions.

The three major labels in the category are Word Entertainment, Provident Music Group, and Chordant, owned by Time Warner, Bertelsmann, and EMI respectively. Time Warner purchased Word Entertainment in 2002, and the company is a leader in music and video, with 35 percent of the Christian video market. Provident’s purchase by Bertelsmann occurred in the same year, and the company is part of RCA Nashville, which is a subsidiary of BMG music. This company, too, serves the video and audio segments of the industry as well as being a leader in children’s audio. EMI has been a leader in this category for more than a decade after it released the unexpected hit *Chant* in 1994, which sold 2.5 million copies. An album

of Gregorian chants digitally remixed for a younger audience, *Chant* was marketed to popular music retail outlets after another version of the CD had done surprisingly well on European pop charts. Chordant is the distribution division of the company and the outlet for EMI Christian Music Group (CMG) products. CMG was started in 1992 with the purchase of Sparrow, which was combined with Forefront to focus on Christian rock music. Bill Hearn, who sold Sparrow to EMI, says, "We've found that when you put this music in front of the masses, they will buy it. They just don't know it's there" (Peyser, 2001, p. 48). How right Mr. Hearn was. As marketing and promotion increased under the auspices of large media companies, so did Christian music sales.

These three producers dominate the Christian music industry. Word has a market share of 31.26 percent; Chordant has a market share of 29.92 percent; and Provident has a market share of 29.03 percent (Christian Music Trade Association, Soundscan 2002 Year-End Industry Report, quoted in Packaged Facts, 2004). These market shares are made up of several music genres (p. 55) including:

Gospel (19% share) and Adult Contemporary (18% share) ... Praise & Worship (13% share), Rock (13% share), Country (7% share), Children's (7% share), Inspirational (4% share), Instrumental (4% share) and Southern (3% share).

By the early 2000s, Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) was the fastest growing segment of the music industry. Much of CCM's success has to do with bands that have branched out beyond the sappy lyrics of old. CCM runs the stylistic gamut from alternative rock to Latin to underground. The category is defined as music with "faith-based lyrics"; the sound can be anything. This less strict definition of Christian music has made this type of entertainment a vehicle for merging the religious with the secular. The success of the record label Wind Up demonstrates this. Wind Up represents a number of artists like Creed, 12 Stones, and Evanescence, none of which are dogmatically Christian. The label promotes its artists through both Christian outlets (advertising and CD samplers of the bands in *CCM Magazine*, a Christian music publication, as well as marketing via the Inspiration Network, a religious cable network) and secular ones (heavy rotation on mainstream music channels such as VH1 and MTV). Just as in the publishing industry, music companies have found the importance of a dual marketing strategy.

Another important aspect of this industry is the concerts that promote CCM artists. Christian music festivals are popular with tweens, young adults, and parents. Church groups are bused in for these events, giving them official endorsement. These events are also huge opportunities for secular marketers. Disney sponsors "Night of Joy" and Universal sponsors "Rock

the Universe,” both CCM events in Orlando, Florida, that attract upwards of 30,000 people. A number of brands, including General Mills, Disney, McDonald’s, Target, JCPenney, Pepsi, Doritos, John Frieda, and Cover Girl, have used CCM artists to represent their products (Seybert, 2004, p. 24). This gives more exposure for CCM overall and at the same time it promotes these products to the Christian market.

And finally, not to be left out of the music download business, Christian inspiration has its own Web site, Songtouch.com. This site debuted with 15,000 songs that, like iTunes, can be purchased for \$0.99. The site was created by Howard Rachinski, founder of the Church Copyright License, an organization that lets religious groups copy and distribute music for their congregations (Cole, 2005, p. 19). This was not the first such site. In 2003 LifeWay Christian Stores, the nonprofit division of the Southern Baptist Convention, began a Christian music service that sells songs for \$0.99 per download.

The secularization of Christian music presents an interesting dilemma for evangelicals. Popular music is by definition for young people and most young people do not frequent traditional Christian retailers or listen to Christian media. Therefore this product had to be promoted in secular outlets. However, for many CCM fans, the music became their “church,” replacing traditional religious practices.

The lines between sacred and secular became increasingly blurry as the Christian music industry promoted a consumer-oriented culture that copied, even in some sense usurped, many functions of institutional religion. Concerts became worship services or evangelistic meetings. Consumer commodities (CDs, T-shirts, and other paraphernalia) became symbols representing religious faith. For some evangelical fans, social rituals, like going to a Christian concert or listening to a gospel recording on headphones, could qualify as a religious experience as much as attending a church service with a local congregation.

All this was not without effect. Turning mass recordings and rock tours into a form of “ministry” took church pastoring from the world of local, personal relationships, premised on trust and familiarity, into the impersonal world of entertainment, characterized by the market-driven terms of production and consumer choice.

(Romanowski, 2000, pp. 111–12)

As with the book market, the wide exposure in the broader culture brought CCM to the attention of the larger music industry, making the music less about evangelizing and more about business. Whether these concert goers will ultimately become churchgoers as they age is still unknown. However the trend of incorporating more rock music in the church is easily understood given the external competition.

Marketing religious products

Campaigns that target churches are a predominant form of marketing in the religious category. As we have seen, churches are a source of product and message distribution as well as being unpaid endorsers of products. This includes everything from books to films to political candidates, which will be discussed later.

The Passion's church marketing campaign, discussed in Chapter 1, was hugely successful in driving sales for that film, but its producers did not invent this technique. Peter Maresco (2004), in his article "Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*: Market Segmentation, Mass Marketing and Promotion, and the Internet," outlines a history of Bible-based movie marketing beginning with *The King of Kings* in 1927. The film was prescreened by women's groups in New York and religious groups throughout the country. Children were even given time off from school to attend the film after its opening. Five years later Paramount used a three-pronged strategy to promote *The Sign of the Cross*. General moviegoers were enticed by the spectacle of the film, direct mail and church sermons were used to inform regular churchgoers of the movie, and children were marketed to through their local school districts—a strategy that paralleled what was happening through churches. Similar techniques were used in 1965 with the release of *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. In addition to church promotion, this film relied on publicity in major publications like *Life* magazine. The difference between these films and *The Passion* mostly has to do with technology. While all the films were promoted through churches and other religious institutions, *The Passion* had the advantage of television and the Internet. These allowed for inexpensive advertising (see Chapter 1 of this book) as well as national distribution of materials, including sermons with accompanying film clips.

The Purpose Driven Life was one of the first books to be heavily promoted through churches. This was done via a strategically planned publicity campaign targeted primarily at religious organizations.

The book's launch was supported by a national "40 Days of Purpose" campaign sponsored by Saddleback Church involving more than 1,550 churches representing all 50 states and nine countries. More than 500,000 churchgoers viewed a Purpose-Driven Life satellite simulcast on October 12, which kicked off the six-week campaign. Participants read a chapter a day (for 40 days) and heard a weekly sermon based on the material. A second "40 Days of Purpose" campaign will kick off on April 13. Part of the publisher's massive marketing campaign included an e-mail newsletter to retailers, in-store displays, a "40 Days of Purpose" radio blitz, a consumer email campaign, national publicity and Web site promotions.

(Maryles, 2003, p. 60)

As with other campaigns that have tapped into churches, marketing for the product is supplemented by funds from the local church. A story in the *Los Angeles Times* told of a pastor of a 300-member church who spent \$3,500 of the church's money on copies of the book and another \$15,000 to market the "40 Days of Purpose" event (Lobdell, 2002, p. B8). Multiply that by hundreds of churches throughout the country and you have considerable marketing support paid for by someone other than the publisher. Even if they don't go that far in their efforts, churches are a common place of endorsement. According to John Sawyer, Baker Book House's director of marketing, "[A] tactic that's been popularized by the success of PDL [*The Purpose Driven Life*] is doing grassroots marketing with churches and other religious organizations. If a title becomes part of the church buzz, the impact at retail is significant" (Kiesling, 2004, p. S10).

Because of the large media institutions in the industry, cross-promotion is now a cost-effective tool. For example, it is not unusual to see Joel Osteen's *Your Best Life Now* advertised in *Time* magazine and *People* magazine because this title was published by Time Warner books. Similarly the marketing plan for Joyce Meyer's book, *The Everyday Life Bible*, included ads in *People* magazine as well as *Charisma*, *Today's Christian Woman*, *SpiritLed Woman*, and *All You*. (It was also featured for 12 weeks on Joyce Ministries broadcasts as well as on numerous cable channels.)

Publicity or public relations, rather than advertising, is the predominant form of promotion for religious products. This entails press releases and book tours or tours by stars of a film. A book tour might also include workshops, because many religious titles have a self-help component that is readily translated into an interactive experience. Moreover, because of the rise in popularity of religion as a news topic, media outlets tend to be open to stories of these types.

Creating religious brands

Like secular marketers, religious publishers are attempting to turn their authors into brands. To be effective, authors must be associated with a single topic, which could be relationships or prophecy or leadership. More and more in all realms of publishing, editors are looking for authors who already have a following. For example, "[Thomas] Nelson editors troll the lecture/speaker circuit for people with new ideas and growing constituencies" (Winston, 1999, p. 36). The more name recognition through ministry or media, the better.

Authors who are considered brands with the CBA, like Max Lucado and Philip Yancey, had considerable followings before their careers as book authors. Max Lucado is the pastor of the Oak Hills Church in Texas and was recently named America's Pastor (a title also claimed by Rick Warren). When forming his ministry, Lucado brought with him his listening audience,

as he had had a local radio show in California.⁶ Philip Yancey had been, and continues to be, a freelance writer whose articles have appeared in *Christianity Today*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *Reader's Digest*, among other high-circulation publications. These other outlets set the stage for the successful branding of Lucado and Yancey. The fact that they are also prolific is certainly helpful in their branding.

One note here: A successful brand in the Christian market does not necessarily translate into success in the secular market. For example, Doubleday tried to present Philip Yancey to the secular audience. His fifteenth book, *Soul Survivor*, was launched as a popular title. However, sales were disappointing and Doubleday released the paperback version under both a secular and a Christian imprint.

The reverse—a secular brand in the Christian market—may be more successful. One of the books heavily promoted at the CBA in 2006 was *Inside My Heart* by Robin McGraw, wife of “Dr. Phil” McGraw. Robin comes already well known to millions of viewers, having been seen on her husband’s show every day for more than four years. Planned promotion for her book entailed ads in women’s magazines like *O, the Oprah Magazine*, on radio programs including Dr. Laura and Janet Parshall, through a national publicity campaign that included a satellite radio tour in 25 markets, and interviews on national and Christian television. Most important, of course, is that the book would be featured throughout season five on the *Dr. Phil* show. Starting in the summer of 2006, Robin’s participation in Nelson’s Women of Faith tour was promoted on Dr. Phil’s Web site. While the book is obviously a mass-market title, the choice of publisher (Thomas Nelson) demonstrates its Christian roots. Further setting the stage for its success is Dr. Phil’s ties to the Christian market, in evidence when he plugged his most recent book on Robert Schuller’s *The Hour of Power* in August 2006 (with Robin prominently in the audience).

For the *Left Behind* series, branding did not come right away. Tyndale, the series’ publisher, realized it had a best seller on its hands after *Left Behind* sold between 15,000 and 20,000 copies in its first month of publication in 1996. Jerry Jenkins (the co-author with Tim LaHaye) explained that the book only covered the first two weeks of Revelation and he had close to seven years of story to go. In response Tyndale designed the book covers to be similar—black with the title in a band toward the top—and created the tagline “The Future Is Clear,” which appeared on all promotion for the series. According to Tyndale’s marketing director at the time, Dan Balow, the key to the brand’s success was the Web site, www.leftbehind.com, which “received 4.4 million hits in January 1999 alone, many from consumers and retailers anticipating the February release of *Apollyon: The Destroyer Is Unleashed*, the fifth title in the series and the first to make the general bestseller charts in addition to religion lists” (Winston, 1999, p. 37).

Having multiple products is beneficial because one product in the brand line promotes another. The *Left Behind* movie, for example, had the advantage of having the book publicity behind it. And, like *The Passion*, this film relied on churches to help spread the word. Churches were urged to promote the film in local theaters. Even more clever was the release of the video four months *before* the release of the film in theaters. The video came packaged with discounted tickets to see the film in theaters (The “Left Behind” Phenomenon, 2001).

The most successful brand in terms of its recognition and capacity for generating brand extensions is the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series. The ability to niche the series made it possible to target an endless list of audiences. Current titles include *Chicken Soup for the Scrapbooker’s Soul*, *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul: The Real Deal Challenges*, *Chicken Soup for the Mother of Preschooler’s Soul*, and *Chicken Soup for the Kid’s Soul 2* (suggesting that the first one was so successful that it warranted a second version). There are also special series within the *Chicken Soup* series, such as the *Healthy Living* series, which targets people with specific ailments like asthma, diabetes, stress, and so on.

Here, too, books are not the only products in the line. The brand has also been applied to *Chicken Soup for the Soul* pet food products, a line of vitamins, Trends International Page-a-Day calendars and wall calendars, *Chicken Soup for the Soul* CDs produced by Rhino Records, and a card line produced by American Greetings. These last items—calendars, records, and cards—are examples of licensing, whereby other companies pay to use a brand’s name or logo on a line of its products because it will help sell more of them. Since one of the goals of branding is to extend the brand name to as many product lines as possible, this is a win-win deal for all parties involved. Dan Balow, executive director of Tyndale International Publishing Services, says, “More publishers in general are creating brands, and the natural extension of that is licensing” (Raugust, 2003, p. 38).

Licensing has long been a staple in the entertainment industry so it was not surprising to see a large number of products developed after *The Passion of the Christ*. Sharethepassionofthechrist.com became a clearinghouse for a multitude of products including jewelry, mugs, key chains, and witnessing tools. These products were also available through Christian bookstores. More recently, *The DaVinci Code* movie (as opposed to the book) presented a wealth of licensing opportunities. Sony, the producer of the film, for example, “passed on a murderous monk action figure in favor of a strategic board game” (Schmelzer, 2006b, p. A15), and they also developed jewelry inspired by the film. Licensing was also used during the release of the *Veggie Tales* DVD. In this case, Veggie Tales characters appeared on Curad bandages—creating millions of opportunities for brand recognition while helping to sell more product. In addition, the *Veggie Tales* books are licensed

to ZonderKidz while the rights to produce stuffed characters, puppets, scrapbooks, and T-shirts are held by various other license holders.

Probably more than any other area of marketing, licensing causes a stumbling block for Christian producers. Embracing licensing brings into question blatant consumerism. Where is the spiritual value in a *Veggie Tales* plush toy or a *Left Behind* T-shirt? Bill Anderson, president of the CBA, has found a way to get around this nagging thought. “This [the retail convention] is largely a business gathering with Christianity being the central theme. We’re really an industry of one book, the bible, and all of these other products are to help us as customers understand what does the bible really say” (Divine Profits, 2004). Justification, perhaps, but not really an answer. Marketing—licensing or any other form—is a double-edged sword for most religious producers. On the one hand, the mission of Christianity is to spread the gospel. What better way to do that than through mass marketing? On the other hand, how do you enter these marketplaces without becoming secular? For all marketers, a fundamental issue is how to grow your audience without alienating your current users. It is an issue that Christian producers are struggling with, and one that cannot be easily answered or avoided.

My argument throughout this book is that religion has to be marketed in today’s culture in order to remain relevant. That is how today’s consumers understand what products and services are available to them. Many people no longer practice their faith within the confines of a church or synagogue, but instead get their spiritual fulfillment through interacting with religious products and events, such as books, movies, and rock concerts. For many, these things are religion, and thus religion *is* a product, which like any other product needs to be marketed in order for it to survive.

Promoting religious products—the rise of the church consultant

An area where religious products and religion itself start to blur is that of church consultancies. In helping a church to grow, consultants often come to also promote pastors, books, films, and other goods beyond the church itself.

The number of church consultancies has been growing in recent years. Since there is no formal reporting mechanism, it is difficult to put exact statistics against that statement. However *Church Executive* magazine in 2005 estimated that there were 5,000 church consultants in the United States.

The industry can be divided into two primary groups: Denominational consultants are responsible for the health and growth of many churches and have titles that include directors of missions and evangelism, church growth consultant, and director of church development. These

consultants are typically salaried....Nondenominational consultants are not affiliated with a particular denomination and are compensated by the client church/organization in the form of a project fee or hourly or daily rate.

(Gopez-Sindac, 2005)

Fees for these latter services can run from \$50 to \$250 per hour and upwards of \$3,000 a day, though some consultants provide a sliding scale for smaller institutions. It is this second type of consultant whom we will discuss here.

While most do not call themselves *marketing* consultants, that is in fact what they are. These consultants are hired to grow the ministry, and that, by any definition, is marketing. According to *The Washington Post*:

[C]ompanies in this field [consultancies] have been helping pastors incorporate multimedia technologies into Sunday services and use sophisticated marketing techniques to draw larger crowds. Some of them recommend changing the content of sermons or adding contemporary music and drama to attract young people.

(Cho, 2005, p. C1)

The marketing techniques referred to here include demographic assessments of the area surrounding the church as well as the use of surveys and focus groups to evaluate “changing religious preferences...[the level of] distaste for face-to-face evangelism, demand for intellectual challenge within the church context, and a strong tendency toward ‘contemporary’ worship styles and modern music” (Spiegler, 1996, p. 47). Understanding what the community wants from a church enables that organization to tailor its services to fit the audience. Research also helps to determine logistics, such as the parking and how to handle childcare. For megachurches, this may also include health clubs, food courts, sports events, and educational and singles groups. Consultants may also recommend branding the church in order to increase awareness and attention. Richard Reising, the president of Artistry Marketing Concepts, a company that works with churches on their marketing activities, says:

[T]en years ago it [branding] was met with extreme skepticism. The whole concept of promoting church was taboo. But there has been a growing acceptance over time. Now people realize what it means and what it doesn't mean. They see it is part of going out into the world to preach, promote and publish the gospel.

(Colyer, 2005)

Most churches are not versed (or were not until recently) in the language of marketing and branding, which is why a large number of them have turned to consultants for help. The increased use of consultants appears in part to be a response to the church growth movement, which was started by Dr. Donald McGavran and Dr. Robert H. Schuller. Dr. McGavran's book, *Understanding Church Growth*, written in 1970, was an important work in establishing the evangelical movement and the subsequent growth in American megachurches. In trying to find a way to grow churches, McGavran asked four questions:

What are the *causes* of church growth?

What are the *barriers* to church growth?

What are the factors that can make Christian faith a *movement* among some populations?

What *principles* of church growth are reproducible?

(quoted in Hunter, 1992, p. 158)

In asking these questions, McGavran was initiating marketing research. To answer them, he did considerable fieldwork to try to understand why some churches succeed and others fail. A fundamental idea behind the church growth movement was one of marketing (though again they did not call it that): use psychology, sociology, and anthropology to create a message that will appeal to your audience and you will ultimately grow your church.

Dr. Robert H. Schuller, who is probably best known as the pastor for the Crystal Cathedral megachurch in California and the *Hour of Power* television show available on local television stations and nationally on cable, claims to be the creator of the megachurch. "I launched the megachurch movement through the Institute for Successful Church Leadership in 1970," he said, referring to his annual pastors conference at the Garden Grove church. "There were no megachurches 32 years ago—we were the closest thing to it" (Dart, 2002, p. 24). While others dispute this claim, there is little doubt that his teachings have had an impact on some of today's most famous megachurch leaders. Schuller says that Bill Hybels is his main disciple. Hybels, however, says that his preaching is more serious than Schuller's—he uses the "s" word (sin) (Luecke, 1997). Rick Warren has cited McGavran as being an influence on his work, and while Schuller is often described as Warren's mentor, including most publicly by Larry King when he introduced Schuller as a guest on *Larry King Live*, Warren has disavowed any connection to Schuller other than having met him. Whether mentor or not, Warren has used ideas and techniques that were created by Schuller decades ago.⁷

It should not be surprising, then, that two of the largest consultancies are tied to these megachurch leaders. Bill Hybels's Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, has a nonprofit consultancy arm called Willow Creek Association (WCA). Membership in WCA costs \$250

per year, and more than 10,000 congregations have paid this fee. The goal of WCA is to teach other churches the Willow Creek “brand of ministry” while simultaneously maintaining the Gospel message. The organization’s executive vice president, Steve Bell, says, “We are all about values...not methods. But we do share some of the best practices that we are finding on what’s working” (Cho, 2005, p. C1). WCA also holds conferences for church leaders on a number of topics including small groups and children’s ministry as well as preaching and teaching. For congregations that cannot afford \$3,000 per day, this provides a less expensive alternative.

As for Rick Warren, remember that *The Purpose Driven Life* is the textbook for a course that aids in creating a Purpose Driven church. What is a Purpose Driven church? One that follows the principles of *The Purpose Driven Life* with the use of materials from Rick Warren. These materials include training information for the leadership team (including for the senior pastor), timelines for the program, ideas for drama and group involvement for each week, samples of Purpose Driven products including the book, the journal, and the CD, and transcripts and PowerPoint presentations for sermons. According to the Purpose Driven Web site, more than 400,000 church leaders have participated in these teachings, which, like Hybels’s WCA, is relatively inexpensive (\$395). In addition to the church course, there are a number of conferences available, including ones that focus on children and youth ministry as well as conferences for recovery and HIV/AIDS.⁸

These consultancies have themselves become brands. But Rick Warren didn’t get to be Rick Warren simply by being a best-selling author. He had the help of public relations specialist A. Larry Ross. Public relations is an important part of any marketing campaign, because news is more readily accepted by consumers than advertising and because of its relative cost structure (not that Ross comes cheaply). The effectiveness of these practitioners should not be underestimated. An example of this is the Atlanta courtroom shooting.

Take the case of Ashley Smith, the Atlanta woman who became famous last year for reading passages from “The Purpose-Driven Life” to her captor, an escaped murder suspect named Brian Nichols. A problem arose when it came out that Smith had given Nichols crystal methamphetamine. “What did everyone talk about?” Chrzan [Rick Warren’s chief of staff] said. “They talked about her drug use and her giving drugs” to Nichols. Ross helped Warren respond to this mainstream reaction by emphasizing their story, which was, in Chrzan’s words: “God can use anybody. Here, God used a tweaked-out speed freak to get a guy to realize he’d done something wrong and turn himself in.”

(Saroyan, 2006, p. 49)

What could have been a stain on *The Purpose Driven Life* turned into extensive media coverage for Warren and a cover story in *People* magazine for Smith, which included a sidebar for *The Purpose Driven Life* entitled “Did this book help catch an alleged killer?” (Hewitt *et al.*, 2005).

Publicity and media relations are another type of consultancy being used by churches. It has been dubbed Christian PR and it was started by Ross in the early 1980s. As the founder of this type of marketing, he is involved in some of the most well-known Christian marketing campaigns of late and he is arguably the most famous PR man in this area. According to a *New York Times Magazine* article entitled “Christianity, the Brand,” while Ross is not the only Christian PR consultant, there is only one other (Mark DeMoss, who has represented Jerry Falwell) who ranks in comparable status (Saroyan, 2006). There are a plethora of smaller marketing or marketing and PR firms that handle faith-based projects, such as Motive Entertainment, Grace Hill Media, BuzzPlant, and Renegade Idea Group. However, it is Ross who is most in evidence.

Ross works the way any PR person would except that he is specifically focused on Christian products and how to bring them more into the mainstream. “Ross characterizes part of his job as finding the sweet spot where faith and the culture intersect, because religion on its own often isn’t enough, as he sees it, to generate mainstream press” (Saroyan, 2006, p. 49). For example, he positioned T. D. Jakes as a businessman because of his work with underprivileged youth. This ultimately landed Jakes a front-page story in *The Wall Street Journal*. Ross trains his clients in how to deal with the press. In particular, he tells them not to use ecclesiastical language in interviews with mainstream media outlets. The objective is to get the message out and promote the product; you can sell Jesus once you get them in the door.

Similar to the marketing plans for a number of Christian products, Ross readily thinks in terms of using a two-pronged marketing strategy—one for Christians and one for the mainstream. In marketing *The Passion of Christ*, for example, Ross had several jobs: he quelled the negative press in the mainstream media; he secured stories in the Christian press; and he introduced Gibson to high-profile pastors so that they would prescreen the film. Ross even had Gibson tape a message for pastors that could be left on their answering machines when they were out—thus the pastor gets a call from a Hollywood star and it becomes a source of viral marketing, because he keeps it and plays it for anyone who will listen.

Jonah: A Veggie Tales Movie was marketed to the mainstream as a special effects spectacular; to churches it was marketed so that religious leaders would present it to their congregations.

Ross [and his former employee Lawrence Swicegood] created a marketing kit for the film that he distributed to about 10,000 churches.... “Veggie Tales” packets included inserts for church bulletins and Sunday-

school guides, a poster, a DVD of the trailer and a script for a pulpit announcement introducing the picture to churchgoers.

(Saryon, 2006, p. 50)

What A. Larry Ross and his colleagues are doing is not new. Some of the techniques Ross used for *Veggie Tales* are the same ones he used for Billy Graham 20 years earlier. And some of the more successful church consultancies have been around for more than 30 years. What has changed though is that consultants are no longer simply marketing churches; they are marketing religion to the mainstream through the use of popular media.

Conclusion

In this chapter we looked at the economic changes that have contributed to the increased level of religious marketing in our culture. Mergers and acquisitions have changed the face of the religious product marketplace. Multinational media conglomerates saw the money to be made in religion and turned their considerable marketing resources toward selling religious products. Suddenly Wal-Mart and other big box stores saw that they, too, could generate major revenue from books like *The Purpose Driven Life* and the *Left Behind* series. These distribution outlets also saw revenue in the movies, toys, and jewelry associated with these products. The introduction of Christian books, particularly, into mass merchandisers increased competition exponentially in this category.

Moreover, secular producers have no compunction about using churches as marketers for their products. From movies to books, churches are increasingly becoming spokespeople and distributors for secular products. Just as our schools have become endorsers of soda and junk food, churches have become endorsers of religious media, providing an implied stamp of approval for little or no compensation.

The increase in mega-corporations and retailers into this arena has pushed the drive for profits, moving sacred content further and further into the realm of the secular. But at what cost? The best-selling books have all been criticized as being lightweight Christianity, if Christianity at all. Their authors are accused of pandering to reach a wider audience.

Yet, this is the fundamental paradox of evangelicalism. Being an evangelical means you want to spread the good word, but—and this is the core issue—you have to spread the word to nonbelievers. In order to do this, you must reach beyond the protected walls of the church and into the secular marketplace. However, to compete against the ever-growing array of more fun, more entertaining, and less guilt-ridden discretionary leisure time activities, religious institutions have to match their message to the marketplace. That message needs to become simple and easily digestible in a short period of time. It also has to be palatable to people who may not

be at all interested in what the evangelical has to sell. So the product—the book, the music, whatever—becomes the marketing message, for example, the book is what gets people in the door of the church.

The problem is that for most people, they confuse the advertising with the product itself. Rick Warren acknowledges that not everyone who comes to his Saddleback Church is a member (see more on this in Chapter 5). While membership in Saddleback involves considerable commitments of time, money, and mission, most of the 25 million-plus people who have read *Purpose Driven Life* do not participate at that level. Thus in the broader culture what gets understood as faith is a watered-down version of the belief system. The question becomes: Is selling a diluted form of faith in order to attract an audience worth possibly diluting the practice overall?

And because the message (particularly books and televangelistic programming) has become the marketing, the product—the church services themselves—has had to change. If seekers read one thing in the book and then go to church and see the same old, tired, boring, dogmatic services that their parents went to, they will run for the door in a heartbeat. To marry the product with the marketing, churches have learned to create services based on demographics and consumer appeal, adding more and more of the secular to their presentations.