

Chapter I

Introduction

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* was the surprise box office hit of 2004. Generating in its first year more than \$370 million in domestic revenue, the movie went on to garner more than \$600 million from theater attendance revenues and another \$400 million in DVD sales. Who could have guessed that a movie about the horribly torturous final 12 hours of the life of Jesus, told in Aramaic and Latin, would become one of the top ten box office hits of all time? Evidently Mel Gibson knew because he was willing to risk \$30 million of his own money to fund this picture when no one else would touch it.

Was it simply the brilliance of this cinematic masterpiece that fueled attendance and the subsequent purchasing of *Passion* products? Was it the driving hunger of the majority of Americans to see the last hours of their savior portrayed so vividly on the screen?

Actually it was neither of these things. What got moviegoers into the theaters was, quite simply, marketing. Advertising, sales promotion, and ubiquitous publicity are what got people off their couches on a Friday night and into the local multiplex. But unlike other mediocre Hollywood films, *The Passion* had several elements that enhanced its box office potential: an A-list movie star as director and spokesperson, a story with a built-in audience, and a topic—religion—that readily lends itself to controversy.

At first the controversy revolved around whether *The Passion* was anti-Semitic. That controversy was initiated and then exacerbated by the film's producers for months before the film's release. Leading up to the movie's opening on Ash Wednesday (a brilliant marketing idea—getting people to see a movie about Jesus on a day when they are most likely to be thinking about him anyway), news outlets ran stories about rabbis going to see the movie, priests going to see the movie, and pastors going to see the movie, and after having viewed the film, their providing commentary on who thought what parts of it were anti-Semitic. Of course this “debate” fueled desire to see the film on the part of ordinary citizens, so that they, too, could make an assessment of the film. Also, by framing the controversy as anti-Semitic,

the producers opened up the film to a new market—Jews—an audience that would likely have otherwise avoided the film altogether.

As this controversy began to die down, a new one appeared. This latter controversy became a question as to whether Mel Gibson himself was anti-Semitic. Mr. Gibson's personal religious beliefs are based in strict pre-Vatican II Catholicism and are therefore ultraconservative. The extent of his conservatism and possible anti-Semitism was fueled by stories about Gibson's father, who was widely reported as being anti-Semitic (he claimed that the Holocaust was mostly fiction) and was believed to have passed those beliefs down to his son. This, too, got considerable airtime leading up to the movie's release, particularly from conservative television and radio hosts like Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity.

Of course this was not the only publicity associated with the film. There were stories about Mel Gibson funding the movie himself. There were stories about how true to the Gospels the movie was. There were the typical stories about the making of the film. In sum, the publicity machine was humming in full force right up to the opening day.¹

This free publicity, which was valued in the millions of dollars, was supplemented by other traditional film marketing elements. For example, there were e-mails from Amazon.com promoting the movie to anyone who had purchased religious or spiritual books, there were appearances by Mr. Gibson on a number of television talk shows and newsmagazines, and there were the typical commercials on television and ads in local newspapers.

However it was the marketing that most people did not see that drove the ultimate success of *The Passion*. Grassroots marketing, led by Gibson himself, was developed in conjunction with local churches throughout the country. Evangelicals, charismatics, and Roman Catholics were the target markets for this film. Thirty invitation-only screenings were held for high-level church leaders and the heads of prominent evangelical organizations. The first of these occurred in Colorado Springs, Colorado, home of many of these institutions, including the ultraconservative Focus on the Family run by James C. Dobson. The leaders of these organizations, and many others, were encouraged to purchase blocks of tickets for their institutions and to suggest that the local churches do the same. More than \$3 million in advanced tickets sales were generated through this campaign.

After these private screenings, marketing materials were presented to churches through Outreach, Inc., a California-based organization that specializes in Christian marketing. Audience members were offered "door hangers, invitation cards, church bulletin inserts, Bible excerpts and study guides. In addition, in keeping with the latest trends in technology, over 250,000 DVD's about the film were mailed to minister's nationwide" (Caldwell, 2004, quoted in Maresco, 2004). There were also millions of witness cards promoting the film on one side and providing an evangelical

message on the other that were distributed and used by thousands of churches and religious organizations (Howard, 2004).

These church promotions began in December 2003—a full two months before the movie opened. The “Pastors’ Action Kit” provided churches with information via the Internet (www.passionmaterials.com) on how to tie into *The Passion*. Promotional ideas included showing trailers of the film at church, putting up banners, inviting parishioners to attend a screening, and, of course, buying out an entire theater screening and taking the congregation. Sermon suggestions corresponded with the Christian calendar, and information about what aspects of the movie to discuss in relationship to these sermons was provided.² There were also special materials targeted to the teen audience via church youth groups; Teen Mania sponsored a site that provided a DVD set to aid youth workers in running “a four-week curriculum leading up to the movie, a guide to the outreach itself, and a two-week post-outreach curriculum” (Sheahen, 2004a).

Churches were also given commercials that they could customize to tie the movie into their local church. Specifically what this meant was that a commercial was created with the first 20 seconds being footage from the movie while the last 10 seconds were left blank to be used to promote the local church. Someone seeing the commercial on television would see 20 seconds of trailer for *The Passion* and be pulled in thinking they are watching a commercial for the movie, and in the last 10 seconds they would be presented with information about attending the local church. From a marketing perspective it was a win-win—more exposure for the movie (paid for by the local church), and the local church gets to be connected with a major Hollywood hit.

Just as with secular films, ancillary products were created in conjunction with the movie’s release. These products included book tie-ins and coffee mugs like other Hollywood fare, but they also included crosses and—one of the most popular items—small and large pewter nail pendants on a leather string, which retailed for between \$12.99 and \$16.99. As with most major motion pictures, a soundtrack was created. *The Passion* soundtrack sold 50,000 units the day it was released, making it the third highest selling first-day soundtrack. Initially this product, as with others associated with the film, was distributed primarily through traditional Christian bookstores. However, products were distributed more widely as the success of the film translated beyond the initial narrowly targeted groups.

From movie tickets to books to jewelry, all things *Passion* flew off store shelves. The repercussions of this marketing miracle continue to be felt in the religious publishing and products industry years later. This is true not just for *Passion* products, but also for all categories of religious products and services. More spiritual books of all types were sold. Crosses, spikes, even Jesus refrigerator magnets grew in popularity in response to this cultural phenomenon.

Why was *The Passion* important?

The Passion of the Christ showed in the most blatant of ways that religion is a product, no different from any other commodity sold in the consumer marketplace. *The Passion* started with a defined target audience, created secondary targets through promotion and publicity, and perpetuated the product's relevance through creating ancillary businesses. And while initially the objective was to sell a film, we can see from the sustaining campaigns and comments made by the director that the ultimate objective was to promote religion itself.

Another reason why *The Passion* was important is that it furthered the notion that while religious practice is very much privatized, religious presentation and promotion has become widely acceptable within our culture. Many forms of religion are being advertised and promoted in a way never seen before. Churches advertise on billboards and in print media. Books sell us all types of religious and spiritual wisdom. Television has become overrun with religious content with no fewer than eight channels presenting sermons and faith-based programming 24 hours a day, not to mention religious content in broadcast prime time and as regular content for nightly newsmagazines.

While the intensity of religious messages is new, marketing religion is not (Finke and Iannaccone, 1993; Moore, 1994). It has been going on for centuries. When Gutenberg invented the printing press in the fifteenth century, for example, much of the early advertising was to sell Bibles. In America the need for religious marketing stemmed from the First Amendment right to freedom of religion, something the Founding Fathers believed was fundamental to the establishment of the democracy. Choosing one's religion was as important a right as freedom of speech or the right to petition the government against grievances. Establishing no state religion meant that people would be free to choose how to worship, or not to worship. With no state-mandated religion, religions had to compete for parishioners and oftentimes that meant using marketing techniques, from simple print advertising to door-to-door salesmen, as evidenced by the Jehovah's Witnesses.³

However, competing in the religious marketplace was simple in simpler times. For centuries new Americans brought religion with them from their home countries and passed that religion down from generation to generation. If Mom and Dad went to the Baptist church around the corner, so did you. Not only were religions carried across the sea, but also traditions. Weekly church attendance, Sunday dinners with the family, and singing in the church choir were all part and parcel of a simple religious life. Houses of worship carried significance in the communities where they served because they were a place *for* community as well as a place for worship. Going to church was not only about God, but also about making social connections. Churches were able to maintain their value and their numbers because social agents—

family, work, and even the congregation itself—supported remaining in a single faith throughout one’s lifetime.

This began to change as American society moved from agrarian to industrial. First, the opportunities to connect with other people presented themselves as part of daily life, particularly through one’s place of business, thus usurping the church’s monopoly on community building. Second, as the baby boom generation came of age in the 1960s, children rebelled against the older generation in myriad ways including rejecting the faith of their parents. The flexibility to choose one’s faith combined with reduced social stigma attached to not attending services meant that churches were no longer ensured a congregation. Finally, increasingly more sophisticated communications technologies—first the radio and then television and the Internet—provided alternative forms of communication that could be used for connecting with others as well as a means for distributing religious content. The church was no longer the only source of religious information—and in fact has become the least convenient one—and thus continued to erode in value.

This is not to say that religion or spirituality has diminished in acceptance. America is one of the most religious countries in the world, certainly the most religious industrialized country. Poll after poll touts the fact that 90 percent or more of Americans believe in some form of higher power, whether it is God, Jesus, Moses, Mohammed, Buddha, Krishna, or some other lesser known entity (though almost 75 percent claim to be Christian according to Simmons Marketing Research [2004, p. 124]). A 2003 Harris Interactive poll “found that 79% of Americans believe there is a God, and that 66% are *absolutely certain* this is true” (Harris Interactive, 2003). In the same survey, researchers learned that 9 percent of Americans do not believe in God and 12 percent aren’t sure.

Not only are Americans religious, or spiritual as some prefer to call it, but we readily buy products and services that relate to our faith. We do this because, as mentioned earlier, traditional religious institutions are not the primary source of spiritual sustenance for most people anymore. While nearly eight out of ten Americans claim belief in a higher power, only one out of three attends religious services on a regular basis. Specifically, only 36 percent of Americans go to church or synagogue regularly—that is, at least once a month—even though close to 80 percent believe in God. Doing the math, that means more than 60 percent of Americans get their faith from something other than a religious institution. People attend movies, read books, and participate in religious chat rooms, all of which are diminishing religious bodies’ direct influence on religious consumers. Instead of going to church, we wear T-shirts with WWJD (What would Jesus do?) or Jewcy emblazoned on our chests. We buy Christian rock albums and New Age crystals. In fact we spend more on religious/spiritual/self-help books than any other country, which makes total sense given the

size of the target market (79 percent of Americans), our faith beliefs, and our consumerist culture.

All of this is to say that religion as practiced in the United States is an autonomous, self-oriented religion. This individualized religious practice, famously noted by Bellah and his colleagues in the mid-1980s, was called “Sheilahism,” named after a nurse who created her own form of religious practice (Bellah *et al.*, 1985). Since that time other scholars have seen this pastiche of religious practice as a continuing trend (Cimino and Lattin, 1998; Roof, 1993b, 1999). More recently this “cafeteria religion” is believed to be increasingly fueled by a commodity culture (Carrette and King, 2005; Miller, 2004).

In 2003, research estimates put the market for religious publishing and products at \$6.8 billion and growing at a rate of nearly 5 percent annually. This market is subdivided into three categories: books (the largest segment, with \$3.5 billion in sales and a 7 percent growth rate); stationary/giftware/merchandise (sales at \$1.4 billion and a 4.5 percent growth rate); and audio/video/software (\$1.4 billion in sales and flat). Given the current interest in religious products which continues to be fueled by *The Passion*, experts estimate that the market will grow at almost a 5 percent annual rate for at least the next three years, reaching \$8.64 billion in sales (Seybert, 2004, p. 50).

But even this tells only part of the story. Unlike other product categories, there is no standardized means for collecting data on religious products and services. Therefore these numbers are misleading and in fact significantly underreport the money consumers spend on these products and services. In the book segment, for example, there is little uniformity in what constitutes religious or spiritual content. Some religious-oriented titles can be categorized as fiction or even science fiction in one store, as in the case of the *Left Behind* series, a fictional series based on the End Times, for example, and as religion in another. In terms of other media, these numbers do not include theatrical films like *The Passion of the Christ*, which in and of itself would add 14 percent to the total spending in the category. Nor does it include religious television, which is a viewer-supported, several billion dollar industry and growing as evidenced by the recent introductions of numerous digital channels dedicated to religious programming. These numbers do not reflect the money spent on religious seminars, lectures, or spiritual adventure travel. So from a consumer product and service perspective what is being tracked is just the tip of the iceberg.⁴

A good indication of where religious marketing is heading is evidenced by the fact that Wal-Mart, the behemoth of all retailers, has jumped on the religious retail bandwagon. In 2003 the company sold more than \$1 billion in Christian book and music titles, and they are quoted as saying that they are “looking at this as a huge opportunity for the future” (Seybert, 2004,

p. 13). With the introduction of religious content into big box stores, the commoditization of religion is virtually complete.

But let's stop for a minute. Many of these things, after all, have been going on for decades. Religion more generally has *always* had to sell itself in the marketplace of ideas. The questions that need to be asked are: Why has religious marketing become so pervasive *now*? Why now do religious institutions feel compelled to employ consultants, focus groups, and surveys to fill their pews? Why now are sales of religious items growing at exponential rates? Why now are religions and religious products branded, marketed, and promoted at a level never before seen in history?

Why religious marketing has proliferated

There are two main reasons why religious marketing has permeated our culture. First, millions of Americans have been set free to choose their religion. The ability to choose has created the *real* open market for religion. Yes, when the Founding Fathers chose not to force a particular religion on the country, they were promoting the proliferation of religious choices. However choice is no choice if the rest of society (and particularly your mother) makes you go to a specific religious institution. In addition to the elimination of familial pressure to attend religious services, there is no longer a social stigma attached to not attending church. Given the aforementioned statistics, you are more likely to see your neighbor in the local mall on Sunday than in your local church.

Second, in the last 20 years the level of media saturation in general has reached a height never imagined. In addition to cable television, we now have digital cable, with the average home having the ability to receive more than 130 channels, not to mention direct broadcast satellite with its capacity to deliver several hundred channels to the home of anyone willing to pay for them. The Internet has become a household item for many people and where this is not the case, people readily access cyberspace in their workplace or at their neighborhood library. The media beast needs to be fed with content—all types of content. The simple fact that there is more media means that there is more *religious* media.

Tied into the proliferation of media is the ubiquitous advertising that goes with it. And while I will address in some detail in this and in subsequent chapters the influence of marketing and advertising on our culture, let me briefly say here that our interactions with advertising have led us to expect certain things from marketers, specifically convenience and entertainment. These expectations have migrated to the realm of spiritual practice. Religion is no longer tied to time and place; it can be practiced any time of the day or night via the media without going to a sacred space. So traditional religious institutions have to compete not only with brick and mortar churches, but

also with religion presented in other forms. Religion is increasingly moving from pew to pixel. The Internet presents information about all aspects of religious products and activities, from Beliefnet, a comprehensive site about all things religious, to opportunities to worship through online churches—everything from the Vatican to the Church of the Blind Chihuahua. A 2004 study called Faith Online, by the Pew Research Center, found that almost two-thirds of Internet users had used the computer for religious or spiritual purposes (Hoover *et al.*, 2004).

Television presents religious programming through 24-hour cable channels, including the Inspiration Network and the Prayer Channel, and Sunday morning religious infomercials too numerous to mention. Thus seekers can receive the word of God in their homes 24 hours a day. This is not to say that the physical church or synagogue or mosque will disappear. Just as the VCR did not eliminate the local movie theater, the computer or plasma screen will not destroy the local place of worship. People like to experience events—religious or otherwise—in physical community. It does suggest, however, that traditional and nontraditional institutions have to compete with more entertaining forms of religious practice. In the same way that elementary schools have been forced to compete with *Sesame Street* over the past 30 years, religious institutions now have to compete against online churches, 24-hour religious networks, and even a recently announced 24-hour gospel music channel. If one does choose to go to church, consumers have a heightened expectation of being entertained, which is usually met with music and dramatic presentations. Moreover believers expect an experiential practice, that is, a more personal connection to God wherein they experience His presence. Sermons from on high just won't cut it for the majority of today's religious consumers.

One of the most successful segments of religious media is the book publishing industry, which in the last few decades has become big business and getting bigger. Look at *The New York Times* bestseller list on any given week and you'll see multiple religious or spiritual titles on it. For example, books by popular pastors, such as *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren and Joel Osteen's *Your Best Life Now*, have become perennials on this list. In the 1990s, large multinational book publishers began purchasing smaller, independent religious book publishers (e.g., HarperCollins's acquisition of Zondervan) or creating faith-based divisions within their larger book divisions (Warner Faith in Time Warner books). This created considerable consolidation within the industry. This consolidation has meant not necessarily more competition, but bigger competition—and not only bigger competition, but competition with considerable marketing expertise in multiple media outlets. In response to this, religious institutions have had to become savvier in their use of sophisticated marketing tools.

In sum, the severe declines in church attendance, due to everything from changing social codes to the pedophile priest scandals of the Catholic

Church, demonstrate why marketing has become necessary. While earlier polls suggested that religious attendance was closer to 40 to 45 percent, now the number is closer to 35 percent and church leaders must have seen this decline long before it appeared in any research numbers. As theologian Tom Beaudoin has said, “I think we are well past the day when the majority of American Christians have their religious identity formed in church” (Religion Surges, 2004, p. 9).

I would add that non-Christians are also finding their religious identity outside of established institutions.⁵ Attendance numbers at most traditional religious houses of worship have been declining due to increased pressure from two key sources—individuals’ freedom from religious affiliation, which means competition from other religious institutions, and significant competition from external media sources, which provide similar if not identical content as the religious institutions. People are free to find their faith whenever and wherever they choose, which may or may not be in the confines of a religious institution. We shouldn’t be surprised then that religion—whether in the form of a film or a church—is being marketed in the current commercialized culture. In order to be heard above the noise of the rest of society, religion, too, must participate in order to survive.

Religion and the modern-day consumer

While being able to choose one’s faith was a major change, there have also been changes in people’s beliefs about money and childrearing. The generations that grew up after World War II are simply different from those that came before. Baby boomers, Gen Xers, and Gen Yers (or Echo Boom, or the Millennials, as they are also called) have all grown up in a society in which prosperity reigned. Previous generations faced economic depression and uncertainty. They believed that money should be saved for a rainy day because you never knew what was going to happen. More recent generations’ money philosophies are ones of spend, spend, spend, because there will always be more tomorrow.

In addition to a life of prosperity, post-war generations have been involved in purchase decisions almost from the time they were able to talk. Starting in the 1940s and the introduction of Dr. Spock, children were consulted about how they felt and what they wanted, from what cereal to eat to where to go on family vacations. This inclusive, and more permissive, parental style became the vogue and drove these generations to have input into virtually every aspect of their lives. Today this translates into children influencing 72 percent of food and beverage decisions and teenagers being the most highly prized target by marketers in part because they spend \$172 billion annually and influence the spending of billions of dollars more.⁶ Compare this to earlier generations who were told what to wear, where to go to school, what profession they should have, and even who to marry. The post-

war generations are made up of individuals who have been catered to since birth. They expect products how and when they want them.

This consumer-focused environment is what Cheryl Russell, a former editor of *American Demographics* magazine, calls “the personalized economy.” She explains that while the industrial economy was based on mass production, the personalized economy is based on “customized products for individualistic consumers” (Russell, 1993, p. 56). We see this in multiple consumer segments, from media to packaged goods. Cable channels exist for everyone—from decorating enthusiasts to the avid golfer, with channels for specific demographic groups from women to children to gays and lesbians. *Sports Illustrated* is no longer just *Sports Illustrated*. It’s *SI Women* and *SI Kids*. The proliferation of brands in the supermarket is an area where this customization is strikingly evident; the typical store now carries more than 30,000 items (Adamy, 2005). In the orange juice section of your local supermarket you can find products with or without pulp, calcium fortified, low carb, and half the calories. Toothpaste is made with a whitening agent, tartar control, and/or baking soda and is available in gel or paste form. Even jeans can be customized to your individual specifications. Levi’s will take your measurements and create an individualized pair of jeans in 24 hours for just \$15 more than an off-the-rack pair plus shipping. Products from telephones to television, from water to weight-loss products, are created with personal preferences in mind.

To support this expanding line of products and to be heard above the noise of all the other competing products, merchandisers have to find multiple and various ways to promote their products. Advertising has become so pervasive that even going to the stall in a public bathroom has become a place of promotion. According to James Twitchell, author of *Adcult*, the only way to avoid advertising is to go to sleep. This, however, is not a realistic option. Since we choose to stay awake, we are almost continually bombarded with marketing messages.

People, on average, will see close to 200 advertisements a day, but may see upwards of 3,000 marketing messages in the same time period through branded products, T-shirts, and product placement; that’s almost 11 million branded messages per year. The level of assault by marketers has reached an all-time high. Let’s take television as an example. During prime time television on the broadcast networks, there are between 14 and 16 minutes of “non-program” content, that is, commercials. This number has been steadily increasing over the past several years and is expected to continue to climb. Don’t look for respite from the cable networks. They’re not any better, though—thankfully—so far they are no worse.

But it’s not just the commercials between shows; now the shows themselves are essentially commercials. The success of *Sex and the City* is proof of this. A shoe is not a shoe; it’s a Manolo Blahnik. *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* is one hour of wall-to-wall product placement disguised as a makeover show,

with designers showing clueless straight men the right brands to wear and the right gel to use in their hair. There is now even a Web site (www.StarStyle.com) that enables viewers to buy products they see on television shows, thus facilitating the commercial effectiveness of these programs. *American Idol* is a Coke and AT&T commercial dressed up as a talent competition, and *The Apprentice*, a reality series that pits one team against another in improving a brand's awareness, is discussed in college courses to demonstrate effective advertising practices. But whether it is in the program or in between it, the underlying messages of these shows are the same: You are great, but you could be better. You are smart, but you could be smarter. The bottom line is that you are not okay just the way you are, but if you buy this product you can be.

These commercial messages are being delivered by a ubiquitous media. The average American household watches more than seven hours of television a day, the average adult four hours per day. The only thing we do more than watch television is work and sleep. Internet use is at an all-time high, with many Americans spending more than five hours a day online. In a study published in *The International Digital Media and Arts Association Journal*, researchers found that historic media usage statistics may in fact be *underreported*. In this study, called the Middletown Media Studies, researchers asked people to track their media usage in a diary. Simultaneously the researchers observed people's media usage. What they found was that "people spend more than double (129.7 percent) the time with the media than they recall—an average of 11.7 hours of media in total" (Papper *et al.*, 2004, p. 24). That translates into almost 12 hours—or half of every day—spent interacting with media.

This proliferation of advertising and marketing has changed the way we see the world. We live in a never-ending onslaught of fearful messages—you're too fat, you're face/body/teeth aren't perfect, you drive the wrong car, terrorists could kill us all tomorrow. The list is endless. The solution to these problems, of course, is to buy something that will alleviate the fear. Buy insurance and you can protect your family. Purchase the right mutual fund and you can relax in your retirement. Use the right deodorant, mouthwash, and shampoo and you'll get the girl or the guy.

Advertising and marketing have taken hold of the American psyche and co-opted the American Dream—the embodiment of the rugged individualist—so as to distort individuality into a perversion. Individualism is no longer about making the world a better place or making your mark on the world; it's about how much you can buy and create your identity through those purchases. Advertising is narcissism. It has taught us that we are the most important thing in the world. Advertising has taught us that we should be happy, and if we are not, that we can transform our lives and that somehow, somewhere, there is a product or service that will enable us to do just that. Take the diet industry as an example. At any given time almost half

of all American women are on a diet. We know from statistics that 90 percent of dieters fail. Yet year after year millions of people buy into the latest diet craze, whether it is low-carb, South Beach, or Dr. Phil's *Ultimate Weight Loss Challenge*. What is propelling this obsession (not necessarily for the morbidly obese, but for women who think they need to lose 10 to 20 pounds) is the impact of pervasive pictures of perfectly beautiful and painfully thin women. They would not influence us, according to Jean Kilbourne (1999), "if we did not live in a culture that encourages us to believe we can and should remake our bodies into perfect commodities. These images play into the American belief of transformation and ever-new possibilities, no longer *via hard work but via the purchase of the right products*" (p. 132; italics added).

If this is true about our bodies, how much more so would we crave it for our very souls? If we can buy a new body, we should be able to buy salvation and inner peace, and we should see immediate results from our purchase. Now more than ever, religious and spiritual products are trying to convince us of just that. The personalized economy has taught us to expect immediate gratification and customized products to suit our every need and that expectation has been transferred to our religious practices.

Within this environment of being able to select your religion, or religions, combined with unfettered access to information, religion must present itself as a valuable commodity, an activity that is worthwhile in an era of overcrowded schedules. To do this, religion needs to be packaged and promoted. It needs to be new and relevant. It needs to break through the clutter, and for that to happen, it needs to establish a brand identity.

Branding to compete in a material world

Brands are commodity products that have been given a name, an identifying icon or logo, and usually a tagline as a means to differentiate them from other products in their category. Branding also occurs through the creation of stories or myths surrounding a product or service. These stories are conveyed through the use of advertising and marketing and are meant to position a product in the mind of the consumer. For example, Wal-Mart is a friendly (note the smiley face logo) discount store (dropping prices) where you can find anything you need for the whole family (notice the range of ages in their commercials); Target is a hip (rock music in their advertising), trendy (they sell Isaac Mizrahi), variety store (multiple product lines in advertising) for the budget conscious consumer. Two low-cost stores; two different ways that consumers perceive them. That's branding.

Another aspect of branding is that over time consumers don't have to intentionally think about a product's attributes. The name or the logo appears and everything that is associated with that brand comes to mind. Think of the Nike swoosh. In and of itself, it doesn't mean anything. It's a curved line. But if you know it's the Nike swoosh, for you it may symbolize the best in

athleticism, “Just do it,” or it might even evoke images of women slaving at poverty wages to produce an overpriced sneaker, depending on your point of view. These almost unconscious ideas about a product allow for split-second information to be transmitted in a cluttered media environment.

Brands also assist in creating personal identities. This idea has been popular in the beer segment for decades and is known as “brands as badges.” For example, when you see someone in a bar carrying a can of Budweiser, you might automatically drum up images of this same guy sitting at home with his beer belly sticking out watching football on a Sunday afternoon. Put a bottle of Heineken in the same guy’s hand and suddenly he is sophisticated, probably middle to upper-middle class, and at least middle management. The same idea translates to cars and clothes and cosmetics, and thus we communicate to other people who we are by the brands we buy and the products we use. We use brands for identity creation.

That religious products would turn to branding makes perfect sense in the current cultural environment. To remain relevant in our commercial culture means at a minimum being heard among the multitude of competing messages. Branding faith becomes shorthand for reaching the new religious consumer.

Branding faiths is also necessary because religion is a commodity product. The majority of religions offer the same end benefit for the consumer (salvation, peace of mind, etc.). Though packaged differently, fundamentally they are the same product, no different than buying one shampoo versus another. For a marketer, this makes things very difficult. The only way to differentiate one religion from another, or any product for that matter, is through the services provided (the added value) and the symbols that designate it. What we are talking about here is branding.

Traditionally, religious brands have been denominations. Episcopalians are the blue bloods, Catholics were the poor and immigrant class, and so on. Denominations were the identifiers for how to think about the people who attended these institutions. As well as identifying the members of the congregation to those outside the congregation, it also gave the members an identity. If you were Episcopalian, then you ran the Ivy League, the major cultural institutions, and Wall Street. You just knew that.

Today the branding of religion has changed. Churches have increasingly become nondenominational. Churches prefer the flexibility of being able to run their churches in the way they see fit, and many of them are very successful in doing so. A look at the numbers here is enlightening. According to James Twitchell (2004) in his book *Branded Nation*, “half of all churchgoing Americans are attending only 12 percent of the nation’s four hundred thousand churches. To look at it another way: half of American Protestant churches have fewer than seventy-five congregants” (p. 81). This means that a limited number of *very* large churches are providing services to the majority of religious consumers. These churches

are the so-called seeker churches, or megachurches. They were the first institutions to discover the use of marketing on a broad scale for religious institutions. What they have done is create brands that religious shoppers identify and that readily become part of their consideration set when selecting a religious institution.

But megachurches are not the only religious groups to indulge in marketing. One of the most successful religious marketing endeavors to date is Kabbalah, the centuries-old Jewish mystical tradition that has been transformed into a pop culture phenomenon. Televangelists are also making a comeback. After the scandals of the 1980s televangelism took a hit, seeing declines in contributions and viewership. Thanks to the proliferation of cable television outlets, these televised prophets have returned to the airwaves in full force and they are doing it with a combination of on-air charisma and off-air commerce. All of these—megachurches, Kabbalah, televangelists—are what I call faith brands, religious products and services that are part of a comprehensive, cohesive marketing plan to create a product that resonates with today's consumer-conscious religious shopper.

Religion and marketing: two worlds not really at war

While “culture war” is the term that has been used to describe the battle between religion and popular culture, the interaction between religion and marketing seems to be less of a war than a negotiation. Religion and marketing are not, in fact, at war. Nor are they mutually exclusive. Rather, there is a symbiotic relationship between religion and marketing. Religion and marketing are both forms of meaning making. Religion and marketing are both part of identity creation. Religion and marketing share a similar process of acceptance by their users. In all, these institutions are much more alike than they are different.

The focus of this book is not to bemoan religious marketing, as is usually done by religion scholars. This is not to say that the marketing of religion will not be criticized. As a former marketer of television and packaged goods who left that world for academia, I am readily qualified to take on the task of media criticism. Moreover, I have spent the last three years attending religious courses, interviewing attendees and marketers, going to church and synagogue, and watching hundreds of hours of religious television programming as well as reviewing church Web sites and other marketing materials. Through this analysis, it is safe to say that marketing religion likely has been a contributing factor in transforming religion into “religion lite,” and yes, religion probably is being watered down, and, no, that may not necessarily be a good thing. But I will leave it to religion scholars to assess this impact. Rather, throughout this book I will present what I have seen so

that you, the reader, can decide if you think it is a good or bad thing. Before we start, I will say that above all else, marketing religion is a balancing act—a delicate dance of how far one must go to remain relevant while at the same time remaining true to one’s faith. This is no easy task.