

Christianity at the Movies

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What was the last movie with a central biblical or Christian theme nominated for a Best Picture Academy Award? Or how about for Best Director? Even for a movie buff, these questions can test the memory.

In fact, for almost four decades, Hollywood has not exactly been friendly to Christianity. And I don't mean just assaulting the values that we hold dear and often share with other faiths – although that's bad enough. It even goes beyond the occasional hostility to Christianity itself that pops up on screen. Hollywood has simply chosen to ignore Christianity for the most part.

But could that be changing? A few, isolated examples in recent years provide a very tentative answer of “maybe.”

But before we get to those points offering some hope, let's consider where Hollywood has been relative to Christianity in recent times. Make no mistake, there's certainly been a long hiatus for biblical or other Christian films at the Academy Awards. The last movie to be nominated for Best Picture involving a Christian theme was “Chariots of Fire” in 1981. It also

won the Oscar. That's almost a quarter-century ago. Then you have to go back another 15 years to "A Man for All Seasons," which was nominated and won in 1966.

On the Best Director front, Hugh Hudson also received a nomination for directing "Chariots of Fire." Then you once more have to go back to 1966 for Fred Zinneman's nomination and win for "A Man for All Seasons."

Although, that's not technically true. In 1988, Martin Scorsese received a Best Director nomination for "The Last Temptation of Christ." However, that was sacrilegious rather than Christian. Though Mr. Scorsese would no doubt disagree, from a traditional Christian perspective, "The Last Temptation of Christ" would fall into the category of being hostile to the faith.

But how about popular success at the box office? After all, the movies picked for Academy Award nominations are not necessarily the most popular films. In fact, many would argue, including myself, that sometimes – if not often – Oscar-nominated films are not the best movies artistically either. Prior to 2004, when was the last time a biblical or Christian-themed movie cracked the top five at the box office?

We have to go back to 1966, when "The Bible" came in at number two at the box office, and "A Man for All Seasons" at number four.

**Films With Biblical/Christian Themes Nominated for Best Picture Academy Awards,
1938-2004**

<u>Year</u>	<u>Best Picture Nomination</u>
1938	Boys Town
1941	One Foot in Heaven
1943	The Song of Bernadette
1944	Going My Way*
1945	The Bells of St. Mary's
1947	The Bishop's Wife
1951	Quo Vadis?
1953	The Robe
1956	The Ten Commandments
1959	Ben-Hur
1965	The Sound of Music*
1966	A Man for All Seasons*
1981	Chariots of Fire*

*Winner

**Films With Biblical/Christian Themes Nominated for Best Director Academy Awards,
1938-2004**

<u>Year</u>	<u>Film</u>	<u>Best Director Nomination</u>
1938	Boys Town	Norman Taurog
1943	The Song of Bernadette	Henry King
1944	Going My Way	Leo McCarey*
1945	The Bells of St. Mary's	Leo McCarey
1947	The Bishop's Wife	Henry Koster
1959	The Nun's Story	Fred Zinneman
1959	Ben-Hur	William Wyler*
1963	The Cardinal	Otto Preminger
1965	The Sound of Music	Robert Wise*
1966	A Man for All Seasons	Fred Zinneman*
1981	Chariots of Fire	Hugh Hudson

*Winner

**Biblical/Christian-Themed Films Landing in Annual Top Five Box Office Earners,
1939-2004**

<u>Year</u>	<u>Film</u>	<u>Box Office Position</u>
1943	The Song of Bernadette	Fourth
1944	Going My Way	First
1945	The Bells of St. Mary's	First
1949	Samson & Delilah	First
1951	Quo Vadis?	First
1951	David and Bathsheba	Fourth
1953	The Robe	Second
1956	The Ten Commandments	First
1959	Ben-Hur	First
1961	El Cid	Fourth
1965	The Sound of Music	First
1966	The Bible	Second
1966	A Man for All Seasons	Fourth
2004	The Passion of the Christ	Third

But is this recent history of the Academy Awards and box office numbers truly different from what came earlier? The answer is: Absolutely.

Let's first look at Best Picture nominees. Over the nearly 30 years from 1938 to 1966, 12 films with biblical or Christian themes were nominated for Best Picture. Over the same period, 10 such films received Best Director nominations.

So, during that period, we averaged a Christian-linked film getting a Best Picture nomination once every 2.4 years. Best Director nominations averaged one per 2.9 years. But after 1966, we get one Best Picture nomination in 38 years, and the same for Best Director.

As for the box office winners, from 1943 to 1966, for example, 13 Christian-linked films landed in the top five grossing movies. In fact, seven of these films ranked as number one box office draws.

So, before 1967, films with biblical/Christian themes scored among the very best both artistically and financially. For good measure, there were a host of other notable movies produced rooted in the story of Christianity,

So, one might ask, what the heck happened?

Well, there was a changing culture. The late 1960s marked a time of tremendous cultural upheaval. And while there certainly were real and significant problems that needed to be challenged in our country, along the way, the baby too often got thrown out with the bath water. Traditional values were thrown overboard by many, as was faith.

At the same time, though, it wasn't as if faith and morals suddenly disappeared. There were still lots of Christians around, as was the case prior to 1967. Indeed, for all of the problems we face today, the U.S. probably ranks as the most religious country in the industrialized world – especially when compared to Europe – and still overwhelmingly Christian.

Truly radical change was exhibited far more among what might be called the cultural elite. That most certainly included Hollywood. Specifically, in 1966, an industry restraint was

eliminated, and much of what has spewed forth ever since from filmmakers is quite far from Holy Scripture and Christianity.

Michael Medved explained much of this in his fine 1992 book *Hollywood vs. America*. After 1930, the Hays Production Code placed restrictions on matters like obscenity, sex, violence, drug abuse, and religious ridicule. It was a self-policing effort undertaken by the industry in response to public demands, and to avoid government censorship. In 1966, the industry decided to dump the Production Code in favor of the rating system we basically have today. Filmmakers were set free from any kind of standards.

Not only have we subsequently witnessed a broad assault on traditional values by the movie business, but also this radical secularization of Hollywood.

Well, perhaps until very recently. Glimmers of hope can be detected over the past three years. It might even be the start of a trend.

I'm thinking about five films in particular that have been released since 2002.

- In 2002, a movie called "Signs" was released. It was a science fiction film about an alien invasion. But the story really was about faith in God's plan for us. Mel Gibson starred as an Episcopalian priest whose wife dies in a car accident. He walks away from his calling and from God altogether, even declaring to his children that no prayers will be said before dinner. But his confrontation with one of the aliens reveals God's purposes, and he returns to his calling. "Signs," by the way, came in at number six at the box office, earning \$228 million.

- Also in 2002 was the release of “Jonah: A VeggieTales Movie.” We’re big fans of Veggie Tales in our house, and this motion picture told the story of Jonah in amusing fashion through computer-animated, talking and singing vegetables. This film earned a solid \$26 million, while being shown in a limited number of theaters.
- The following year, the film “Luther” was released, which turned out to be an excellent and respectful portrayal of the leader of the 16th century Reformation.
- But it was Ash Wednesday 2004 that may have signaled a dramatic moment of change in the movie business. That was when Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ” hit movie theaters. Long before the film was released, Gibson came under all kinds of attacks, including some anti-Christian criticism from within the business. But he was vindicated when the movie opened. It turned out to be a moving masterpiece of Christ’s suffering on Good Friday. After seeing this film, I will always have with me a visualization of the vastness of Jesus Christ’s passion - in both the original sense of the word, that is, suffering and agony, and in the modern usage of strong love and affection. I know I am not alone because it was a wild commercial success for Gibson, who risked his own money to make the film. I believe he invested about \$35 million, and the box office take topped \$370 million.
- Earlier this month, a movie titled “The Gospel” opened, and it is an unabashed Christian celebration in many ways. The story is a modern-day version of Jesus Christ’s parable about

the prodigal son. It has been a commercial success, especially given the number of theaters it has been shown in – surprising many in the movie business.

So, is this a trend? Maybe. Could it be driven by some kind of re-birth of Christianity at movie studios? Well, one can certainly hope and pray. But in the end, any trend will be more about the bottom line.

For decades, Hollywood has allowed ideology to trump smart business. Medved reported in his book that in 1967, the first year that Hollywood was unshackled from the Hays Code, American movies drew an average weekly audience of 17.8 million, which was down from 38 million the previous year. Medved noted that it was by far the largest one-year decline in the history of motion pictures. The movie business alienated more than half of its audience, including, no doubt, many Christian moviegoers and their money.

Independent filmmakers have tried to fill this void, including with “Jonah” and “Luther,” among others. But it took the formidable star power, talent, risk-taking, faith, conviction and success of Mel Gibson with “The Passion of the Christ” to raise the possibility of change. After all, it’s hard for businessmen and women even in Hollywood to ignore a box office tally of more than \$370 million.

Many, though, are so captured by their ideology that they will not be able to embrace the idea of making religious films once more.

Others will ignore that Gibson's success in great part was due to his obvious respect for the material, that is, for Jesus Christ and Holy Scripture. They will try to offer watered down, meaningless fare and try to sell it to the Christian audience.

But other filmmakers and studios, hopefully, will get it. Even if they don't embrace Christianity, perhaps more will embrace the Christian audience. They might stop ignoring this market, and instead start meeting the obvious demand for movies that respect, embrace and celebrate the faith of Christians.

A much-anticipated test comes on December 9 when Walden Media and Disney release "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" in theaters. That, of course, is the new film based on C.S. Lewis' novel for children that is so rich in Christian allegory. If the filmmakers present the story as Lewis wrote and intended it, then I have no doubt that Christian, along with non-Christian, moviegoers, will make this one of the all-time box office successes.

Walden Media has creative control, and the company's president, Michael Flaherty recently told "Christianity Today": "I'm confident in saying that people should have properly high expectations that this will be the faithful adaptation they had hoped and prayed for." If that is the case, I expect that Walden and Disney could then go on to make some or all of the other books in Lewis's Narnia series. And there will be added incentives to bring more Christian-based films to the public.

As an economist, I find it hard to believe that Hollywood will continue its dysfunctional ideological ways by ignoring such a significant market. Opportunity beckons. As a Christian, I hope Hollywood will stop ignoring Holy Scripture and the rich history of Christianity that offer such compelling, beautiful and profound stories for the silver screen.

Thank you, God bless, and I look forward to your questions.