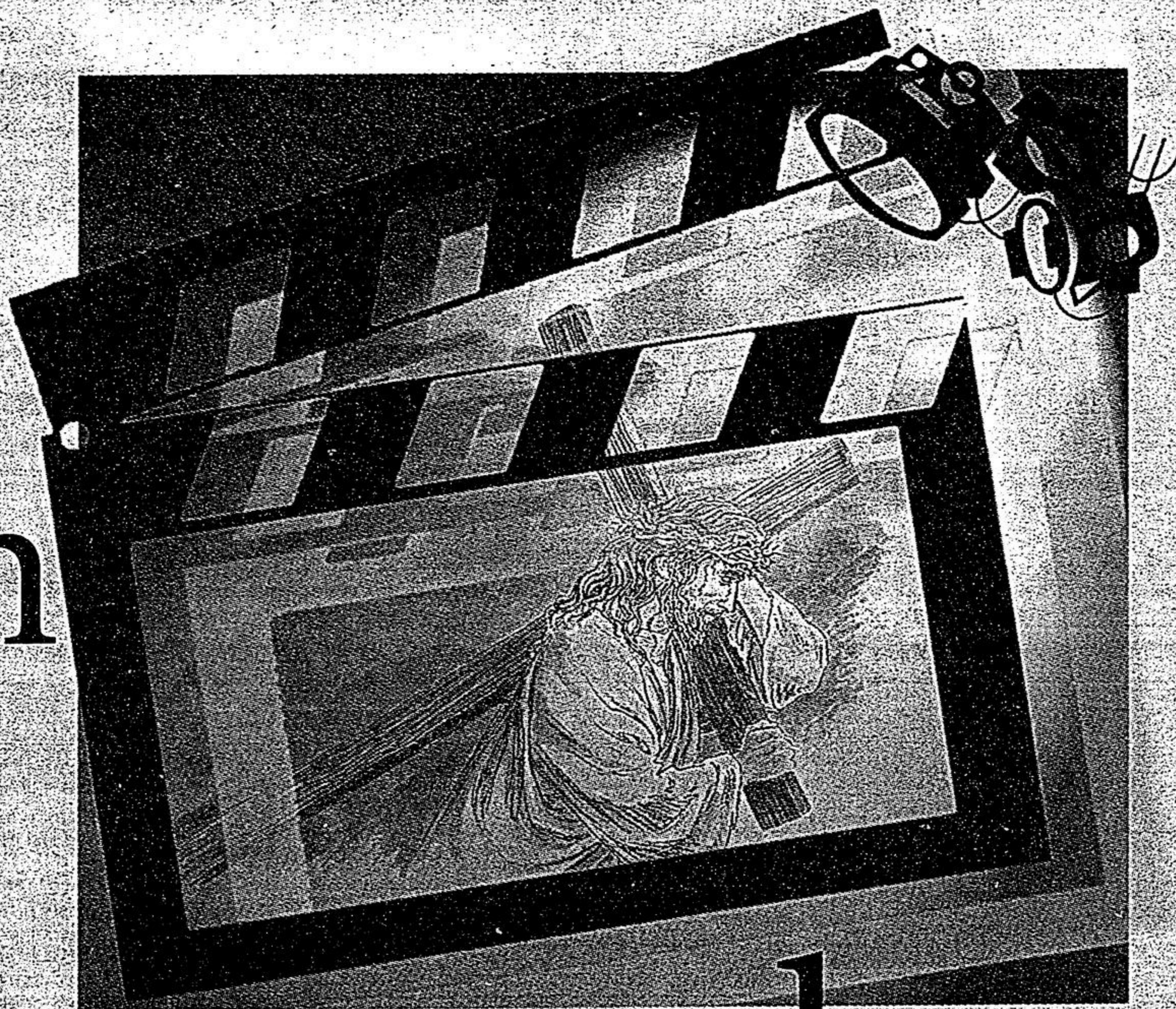


Economist &amp; Sun/Sun-Tribune

## FAITH

Faith  
goes

Holy-wood



DESIGN CONCEPT/MIKE BARRETT

Movie studios  
look for second coming  
of *Passion* box office

BY ROY GREEN  
Staff Writer

Has Mel Gibson's *Passion* kindled a new passion in Hollywood for more movies about faith, Christianity, good and evil and all things spiritual?

There's no question *The Passion of The Christ*, now the seventh highest grossing film in box office history, has gone far beyond the Christian audience, a demographic often ignored by the film industry, suggesting there is a pent-up demand for religious themed entertainment.

Or is it just a fluke?

As Bruce Newman of The San

Jose Mercury put it, "Are studio executives driving around Los Angeles with bumper stickers on their Benzes saying, 'What would Jesus watch?'"

Already, there are several Jesus films in production, including *Daughter of God*, based on a novel about a female messiah, and Mr. Gibson's own plans for a movie about Judas Maccabaeus, a Jewish warrior.

NBC has a pilot for a show called *Revelations*, based on the book in the Bible that deals with Armageddon and ABC recently aired two movies that had been on the shelf for two years — *Judas* and *Jesus* and Paul.

Ted Baehr, chairperson of the Christian Film & Television Commission, says Hollywood has discovered the Christian movie audience.

"We're happy they know it's not to be dismissed as some

ridiculous subculture within the society," Mr. Baehr said. "It's the same way they discovered the Christian music audience 10 years ago."

Ron Csillag, a Thornhill journalist/columnist who writes about religion, notes a new interest in religious themes in entertainment.

"There's been an increase in spiritual content in television with *Touched By An Angel* and *Joan of Arcadia*," Mr. Csillag said. "They've struck a chord in young people and there's a general (upswing) in desire for spiritual programming among young people."

Jonathon Bock, founder of Grace Hill Media, a public relations firm that markets to religious audiences, said Mr. Gibson's film has inspired a pop-culture fad.

"Christian is the new gay," said

Mr. Bock. "*Passion's* success is like when Ellen DeGeneres came out on TV and in the wake of that, gay characters were able to become main characters in shows. Maybe now, Christian characters can appear on mainstream sitcoms and there will be story lines that explore their journey of faith."

But Rabbi Mendel Kaplan of Thornhill's Chabad Flamingo cautions against defining film images as spiritual activity.

"Watching a movie is not worshipping God," Rabbi Kaplan said. "It may lead to it, but only time will tell. It's like a fad and once that fad dissipates, will people remain on the same high?"

He believes a general societal shift away from religion has created a need for spirituality.

"Moving away from ideas of

See *POSITIVE*, page 21.



Ron Csillag

Faith

Evangelicals  
steamed for  
good reason

They say politics and religion don't mix. That depends if you're a voter or a politician.

If you're a politician, you try to keep religion, even if it's your own, as far away as possible. The issue gets a lot of politicians tugging at their collars.

Witness Prime Minister Paul Martin's rather disingenuous statement in the House of Commons this month, in response to an accusation from a Conservative MP the Liberals were preparing to attack members of his party because of their religious faith: "Let me say that faith, religion has no room in politics. The fact is that this government would never allow that."

Whoops. Too late.

The Liberals are knee-deep in faith-related issues, almost all of their own making. In the process, even before campaigning for the June 28 vote began in earnest, they have managed to further offend a massive bloc of voters already upset with the Liberal agenda: evangelical Christians.

As if same-sex marriage, Bill C-250 (which adds sexual orientation to definitions of hate crimes, leading many Christians to fear the Bible could be banned as hate propaganda) and the availability of the "morning after" pill without a prescription weren't enough to alienate a lot of evangelicals (probably mainline Christians, too), the Liberals were caught this month polling voters on whether or not they would be more or less likely to vote for the Conservatives if you knew they had been taken over by evangelical Christians.

See *GRITS*, page 21.

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