

HOLLYWOOD

Why so many Hollywood celebrities just don't understand Jesus

By Mark A. Kellner

The appeal of motion picture and musical celebrities — indeed, that of media “stars” of all stripes — is easy to understand: They’re seen on the big screen and the small screen, read about in *People* or *InStyle* magazines, and watched on *Oprah*.

Add in their “tell-all” books and Barbara Walters/Larry King interviews, and we sometimes believe we know people who in real life wouldn’t recognize any of us from three feet away.

That’s why celebrity endorsements are so esteemed: If you like a given entertainer, you may trust his or her advice about hair color, hardware stores or which stock brokerage to use.

Yet, many celebrities are ignorant when it comes to who Jesus is and what He taught. It’s one thing to listen to an actress talk about a makeup brand or a diet program; it could be disastrous to accept her

counsel about taking up a far-out religious practice.

Grammy-winning soft rock musician Sheryl Crow, reportedly a one-time Christian youth group leader, today embraces a broader religious view: “I believe in God,” she told the *New York Post* in September of 2005. “I believe in Jesus and Buddha and Mohammed and all those that were enlightened. I wouldn’t say necessarily that I’m a strict Christian. I’m not sure I believe in heaven.”¹

Of course, that flies in the face of what Jesus said about himself: “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6, NIV).

Such “exclusiveness” is alien to many in and around Hollywood. During a discussion of New Age worship practices on her show, Winfrey — who shot to stardom with her appearance in *The Color Purple* and has also co-produced several movies and television films — dismissed a Christian audience

member’s repetition of Jesus’ claim.

She retorted: “There couldn’t possibly be only one way. ... Does God care about your heart or whether you called His Son Jesus?”²

According to God’s Word, He does care that we follow only Jesus. The concept of a “jealous” God, according to one observer, suggested weakness to Oprah.³

As with any other group of people, those in front of and behind the camera in Hollywood won’t get it right if they don’t have a full grasp of what Jesus really taught. Some treat Jesus’ teachings as a theological buffet: Select this or that principle, but leave other components aside.

Director John Woo, noted for action thrillers such as *Mission: Impossible II*, says he was influenced by Lutheran teachers as a boy growing up in Hong Kong. Once considering the ministry, Woo said that his ultraviolent

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— James Hirsen

films may project understanding, but not sympathy for the bad guy: “I am influenced by Jesus’ philosophy, which says love your neighbor, love everybody,” he told the online publication *Salon* in 1997.⁴

Martin Sheen — a popular movie and television actor whose seven-year run on *The West Wing* ends this year with the show’s demise — has his own definition of what he calls himself, a “radical” Roman Catholic: “That is someone who follows the teachings of the nonviolent Jesus and takes the gospel personally, and then pays the price. I fall into that category.”⁵

Of course, Jesus wasn’t always nonviolent, as author Ray Comfort points out in his 2004 book *What Hollywood Believes*. Christ angrily threw the moneychangers out of the temple, venting His indignation on those He believed were corrupting God’s house.⁶

And, nonviolence is not the only aspect of Jesus’ life and teaching: Repentance from sin and turning towards God are at the center of His theology.

There are entertainers who disdain any notion of God or Jesus, with Beatle John Lennon famously declaring once that the rock band was “more popular than Jesus now,” which provoked a backlash around the world.⁷ Lennon dabbled with Christianity before his 1980 murder by a crazed fan.⁸

Others continue to embrace the image of Jesus while seeming to reject His values: Rap artist Kanye West and radio shock-jock Howard Stern have had themselves depicted with crowns of thorns, evoking the signature image from

The Passion of the Christ, Mel Gibson’s 2004 blockbuster movie.

West may or may not profess a Christian faith — he reportedly charged \$30,000 to appear at the Ebenezer AME Church in Fort Washington, Md.⁹ — but his attitude as expressed in a *Rolling Stone* magazine interview suggests some potential conflicts between his worldview and that of Christ.

Stern, on the other hand, told author Camille Paglia, “I’m sickened by all religions. Religion has divided people. I don’t think there’s any difference between the pope wearing a large hat and parading around with a smoking purse and an African painting his face white and praying to a rock.”¹⁰

Why don’t celebrities understand the truth about Jesus? Many may not have been exposed to it. Some may have had highly negative experiences as children. But it only points out the need for a gospel influence in Hollywood.

From cults to misunderstandings and squishy-soft sermons about what Jesus did, or didn’t, teach, it’s easy for people to be confused if they don’t have a solid grounding in what the Bible actually says.

At the same time, says author James Hirsen, the entertainment world is largely populated by people who have a common — and nonbiblical — outlook. In books such as *Hollywood Nation* and *Tales From the Left Coast*, Hirsen details the outrageous views of some in Hollywood. An attorney, he also teaches media law and related subjects at Biola University and writes for *NewsMax* magazine.

“The vast majority of decision-makers and creative types in Hollywood share a similar worldview,” Hirsen said in a telephone interview. That philosophy “places [the] values of tolerance and diversity at such a high level and a distorted level that they disregard things like logic and common sense.”

This means, Hirsen said, “New Age Eastern mysticism and some alternative faiths are treated with higher esteem than traditional theology, such as orthodox Judaism or Christianity.”

Because of that view, believers in reincarnation — such as Shirley MacLaine or Scientology devotees John Travolta and Tom Cruise — are tolerated more readily than a staunch evangelical might be.

Hirsen said some celebrities are struck by a disease he calls “adult-onset narcissism,” where one’s own views are deferred to at the expense of reason: “Celebrities are drawn to unconventional forms of worship, because [these] are teachings that allow for self-absorption,” he explained. “Christianity tells you to turn to He who is greater than yourself, and to humble yourself. The teachings of Christ are the opposite of self-worship.”

There are some outspoken Christians in Hollywood, Hirsen says. Christian actors such as Stephen Baldwin and Patricia Heaton are making films and television specials that are having an impact, as well as witnessing to their faith in Jesus.

Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* earned more than \$300 million at the box office, while the first *Chronicles of Narnia*

movie in 2005 earned more than all the films nominated in 2006 for “Best Picture” at the Academy Awards. (*Narnia* wasn’t one of those nominees, however.)

Some Christians in Hollywood are praying that this kind of artistic presentation of the gospel will catch the interest — and reach the souls — of those who worship at the altar of fame and fortune. **tpe**

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¹ Source: *iWon.com* cache of a New York Post article at http://entertainment.iwon.com/celebgossip/pgsixceleb/id/09_25_2005_1.html, viewed Feb. 4, 2006.

² Source: “The Gospel According to Oprah,” *Watchman Fellowship of Alabama*, viewed online at http://www.wfial.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=artNewAge.article_1 on Feb. 4, 2006.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Source: “Gentleman with a Gun,” *Salon*, June 27, 1997, viewed at <http://www.salon.com/june97/entertainment/woo970627.html> on Feb. 4, 2006.

⁵ Source: “Martin Sheen Interview,” by David Kupfer, *The Progressive*, June 2003, viewed online at http://www.progressive.org/mag_intvsheen, Feb. 4, 2006; also in *Ray Comfort*, *What Hollywood Believes*, Bartlesville, OK: Genesis Publishing Group, 2004, p. 139.

⁶ *Comfort*, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

⁷ Source: “How Does a Beatle Live? John Lennon Lives Like This,” by Maureen Cleave, *London Evening Standard*, March 4, 1966, viewed online at <http://www.geocities.com/nastymcquickly/articles/standard.html>, Feb. 4, 2006.

⁸ Source: *Comfort*, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-58.

⁹ Source: New York Daily News, “Rush and Malloy” column, Aug. 23, 2004; viewed online at <http://www.nydailynews.com/front/story/225176p-193343c.html> on Feb. 4, 2006.

¹⁰ Source: *Comfort*, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21, as quoted from the “Celebrity Atheists” Web site, http://www.celebatheists.com/w/index.php?title=Howard_Stern, viewed Feb. 4, 2006.

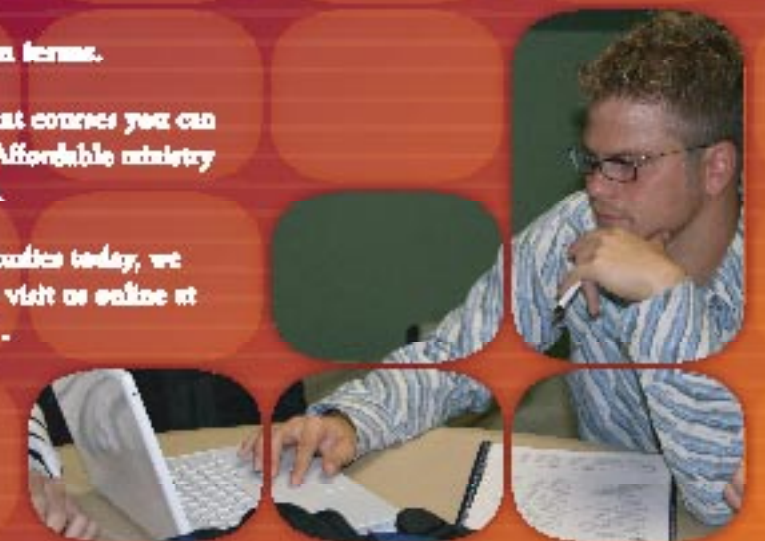
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