

Wearing Their Beliefs On Their Chests

By RUTH LA FERLA

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A casual survey of the Internet last week, including mainstream marketers like Amazon.com, turned up T-shirts, bowling bags, belt buckles and dog tags by the hundreds bearing messages like "Inspired by Christ," "Give All the Glory to God," "I 3/5heart 4/5 Hashem" (a Hebrew term for God), "Moses Is My Homeboy" and "Buddha Rocks."

Fashions with spiritual messages are just the latest expression of religion as a pop phenomenon, one that has steadily gained ground with consumers since the best-selling "Left Behind" series of novels, based on a fundamentalist Christian interpretation of apocalyptic prophecy, turned up on bookshelves, and "The Passion of the Christ" became a box-office hit. Their popularity arrives at a time when faith-based issues, including school prayer and the debate over the definition of life, are dividing Americans, a rift reflected to some degree among those who wear the new fashions.

Whatever is driving the popularity of message-driven merchandise, it is generating robust sales. Last year sales of apparel and accessories at Christian bookstores and gift shops reached about \$84 million, according to the Christian Booksellers Association, a trade association of retailers. Teenage Millionaire, the Los Angeles-based makers of the "Jesus Is My Homeboy" T-shirt, a million of which have been sold, reported \$10 million in sales last year, up from \$2 million three years ago.

Chris Rainey, the director of marketing for **Kerusso**, a company in Berryville, Ark., that sells wristbands that say "Live for Him" and T-shirts with messages like "Dead to Sin, Alive to Christ," maintains that his wares make faith seem relevant. "We're just doing what a lot of churches have started to do, using marketing to reach a new generation," he said.