

Pop Culture Gets Religion

**Whether Reverent or Ironic,
Christianity Has Become Cool;
'Homeboy' T's Speak to Teens**

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A pink T-shirt with a cartoon kitten purring, "jesus loves me" isn't the kind of thing Jaye Hersh usually sells at her trendy West Los Angeles boutique, called Intuition.

"I'm Jewish...and a lot of my clientele are hip, upscale Jewish women," says Ms. Hersh, who nonetheless is selling the shirt, along with leather cuffs and belts stamped with the Ten Commandments. "A year ago, I probably wouldn't even have looked at it," she adds, "but right now it's a trend."

From tank tops to toe rings, secular fashion with a Christian message is pushing into the mainstream and grabbing the attention of finicky teens and others with a sixth sense for fads. Madonna, who is devoted to a form of Jewish mysticism, has been spotted wearing a "Mary Is My Homegirl" T-shirt. So has Pamela Anderson.

Some of the merchandise works on two levels: fun fashion for the faithful, irreverent commentary for others. Either way, Christian apparel is enjoying a moment of hip legitimacy.

"You don't have to be hard-core Christian to think Jesus is my homeboy," says Samantha Lee, a 19-year-old who bought a shirt so emblazoned at the Steve Madden store in Beverly Hills, Calif., after seeing it in magazines.

The homeboy shirts' maker is Teenage Millionaire, an apparel company previously known for shirts with the slogan "Hot Punk." The new religious references are ironic, but the purpose isn't to shock, says Doug Williams, creative director at the Los Angeles company. "It's 2004. People have been shocked to where it doesn't work anymore," he says. "T's can be thought-provoking, and I hope these T's make people think."



Christian T-shirts from Kerusso and Datomana

A few major teen retail chains such as [Urban Outfitters](#) Inc. and Journeys are carrying the homeboy shirts, but some others are taking a pass. Mall retailer [Hot Topic](#) Inc. caters to trendy teens with T-shirts and music from Christian rock bands such as Blindside and Payable on Death. The stores won't sell merchandise with religious references or symbols, whether Christian crucifixes or pagan pentagrams. "We have a general rule," says Cindy Levitt, general merchandise manager for the 518-store chain, based in City of Industry, Calif. "If someone who isn't familiar with our store walks by our window display and is offended by what they see, we won't carry it."

Some believers like the T-shirts. "The shirts are cool," says John Peterson, a youth pastor at the New Beginnings Christian Fellowship, in Brick, N.J. "It might have been started as a joke, but it could still have spiritual significance for people. It could also be a means of identification for a Christian kid."

Christian themes, often marginalized in the past, now are increasingly present in pop culture. Most noticeable has been Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ," which since its February opening has sold more than \$360 million in tickets and ranks No. 7 in terms of all-time U.S. box office. "Joan of Arcadia," on [Viacom](#) Inc.'s CBS, about a high school girl who talks to God, won a People's Choice Award for best dramatic series this year. Meanwhile, [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer](#) Inc.'s United Artists is planning to release "Saved!", a subversive comedy about a girl named Mary at a Christian high school who gets pregnant by her gay boyfriend.