



Hillary Warren. *There's Never Been a Show Like Veggie Tales: Sacred Messages in a Secular Market*. New York: AltaMira Press, 2005. 144 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7591-0569-0.

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Sacred Consumption in a Secular Market

In 1993, Phil Vischer and Mike Nawrocki raised money from family and friends to launch Big Idea Productions, a computer animation company that released its first full-length computer animated *Veggie Tales* film later that year. Released with little fanfare, "Where's God When I'm S-Scared?" continued to be sold direct to consumers until Word Music agreed to distribute the video in 1994. Since that time the impact of *Veggie Tales* has been enormous. By 1996, *Veggie Tales* videos claimed the top six spots on the Christian Booksellers Association (CBA) Marketplace's best-selling video list.[1] One year later, *Veggie Tales* claimed the top nine spots and had sold a combined 2.5 million copies.[2] The videos continued setting records in 1998. When the *Veggie Tales* video *Madame Blueberry* was released it sold an astonishing fifty-seven thousand copies its first week.[3] By the end of 1998, it was determined that *Veggie Tales* was selling close to four million copies per year. Furthermore, VideoScan reported that five out of the thirty-five best-selling nontheatrical releases in November of that year were *Veggie Tales* titles. The videos sold so well that the CBA president, Bill Anderson, claimed "Veggie Tales' are so strong that they are pulling up the rest of the market." [4]

By the late 1990s, the videos were picked up and sold by several wholesalers, such as Target, K-Mart, and Wal-Mart; and ads for *Veggie Tales* appeared in several general market magazines, including *Parade*, *Parenting*, *Parents*, *Reader's Digest*, *Scholastic*, *Sesame St. Parents*, *Woman's Day*, *Better Homes & Gardens*, *Child Parenting*, and *USA Weekend*. [5] The *Veggie Tales* trend shows no sign of decreasing. During the fall of 2000, the newest release, *Esther: The Girl Who Became Queen*, sold more than 170,000 copies during its first eight days of release, the highest amount ever for a *Veggie Tales* release. [6]

Veggie Tales is a computer animated children's series starring talking vegetables. Each video normally lasts

anywhere from thirty to sixty minutes and uses loosely adapted stories from the Bible to teach and entertain children. When asked why he chose vegetables, Vischer said it was "because they lacked arms and legs, which would have made for complicated animation" (p. 35). Three things set *Veggie Tales* apart from other Christian videos at the time: first, the production values and quality of the videos were much higher; second, the story lines appealed to adults and children alike; and finally, the videos did not use sectarian language and specific references to Jesus relying instead on broad moral principles like honesty, fairness, and respect that appealed to evangelical and non-evangelicals alike. These three factors, according to Hillary Warren, help account for the popularity of the videos.

Warren's analysis does not rely strictly on these three aspects (which are related to consumer demand) to fully explain *Veggie Tales*'s appeal. She also notes that the way consumer industries are structured must be taken into account to explain the shape and popularity of a cultural artifact. To explore the supply side of the equation, Warren begins by discussing the historical relationship between the church and mass media in spreading the Christian message. Eventually, Christians began their own competing media industry that has, from time to time, collaborated with the mainstream media industry when it was felt it was in their best interest to do so. It is within this context, Warren writes, that Big Idea Productions and *Veggie Tales* have found themselves. As Christian retailing stores, once the primary distributor of Christian products, began to feel the economic pinch brought on by consolidation and an increasingly competitive market, Christian producers simultaneously began distributing their products through non-Christian channels, such as Wal-Mart, Target, and Barnes & Noble.

Furthermore, more evangelical companies have been purchased by non-Christian corporations with general

market distribution networks that have been convinced of the profitability of Christian products. Warren points out that as *Veggie Tales* grew in popularity the company felt pressure to meet the demands of the marketplace. Eventually, the company began licensing *Veggie Tales* merchandise, like T-shirts, toys, and Bible covers. Attempting such diversification created strain on the company; by September 2003 the company filed for bankruptcy in order to facilitate the sale of the company to a non-Christian entity, Classic Media LLC, and to continue with product releases. As Warren notes, “major conglomerates didn’t suddenly ‘get religion’; what they got was a need for diversification so that if hip-hop sales fall, gospel might remain stable” (p. 105). This, in turn, has the ability to shape the message because mainstream companies are more likely to promote products with a broader nonsectarian appeal. In short, “the economics of merchandising and media shape children’s video—even children’s video produced for religious or evangelical ends” (p. 104).

Overall, the book is well organized, transitions

smoothly from chapter to chapter, and covers a lot of important ground. It will be useful for anyone interested in the sociology of religion and popular culture. It is a welcome addition to my bookshelf and should be given a close read by those interested in these subfields.

Notes

[1]. “CBA Marketplace’s Top 10 Best Selling Videos of 1996,” *CBA Marketplace*, March 1997, 24.

[2]. “‘Veggie Tales’ A Perfect Nine in ‘97,” *CBA Marketplace*, February 1998, 20.

[3]. “‘Veggie Tales’ Premieres Are Hottest Store Promotion,” *CBA Marketplace*, September 1998, 17.

[4]. Sarah Van Boven, Devin Gordon, and Esther Pan, *Newsweek*, December 7, 1998, 67.

[5]. “‘Veggie Ads’ Hit Mainstream,” *CBA Marketplace*, February 1999, 76.

[6]. “Simultaneous Releases Planned for Future ‘Veggie Tales’ Videos,” *CBA Marketplace*, December 2000, 22, 30.

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