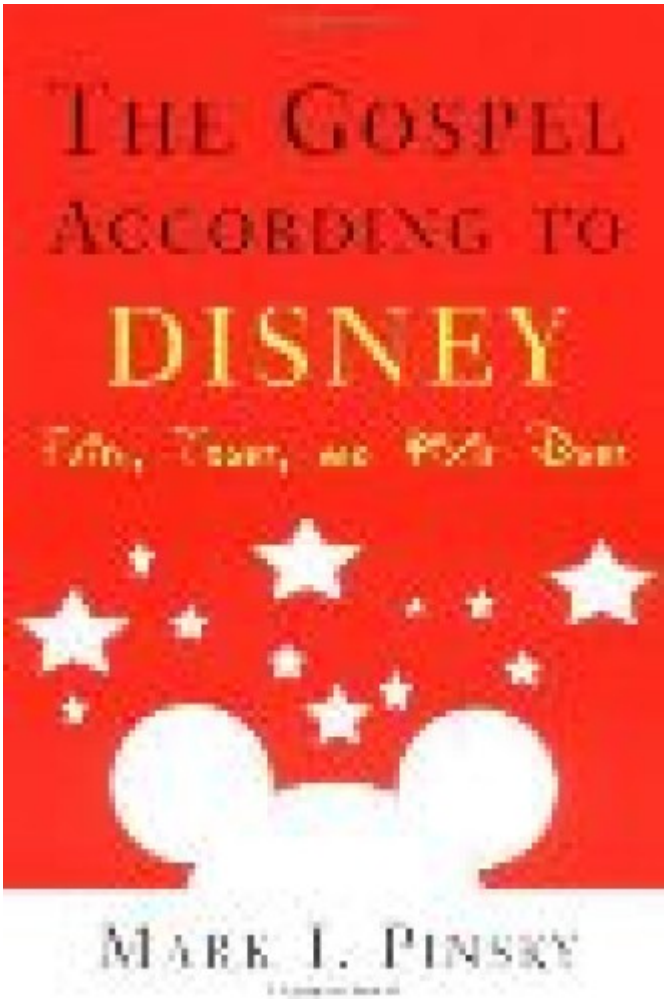
Pop pulpits

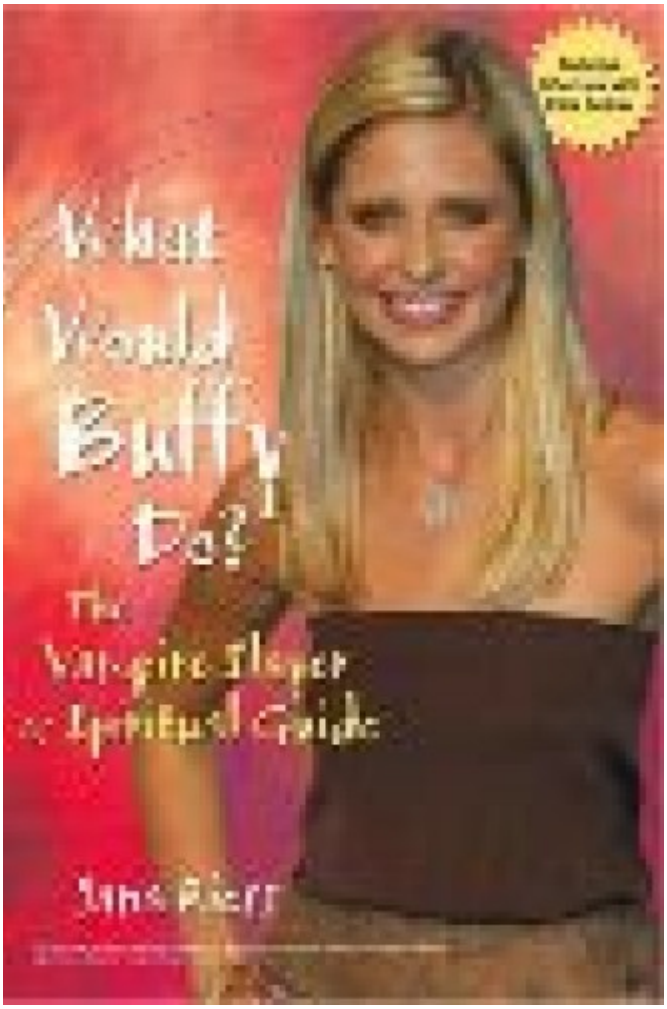
By Jason Byassee in the November 16, 2004 issue

In Review



The Gospel According to Disney: Faith, Trust, and Pixie Dust

Mark Pinsky
Westminster John Knox



What Would Buffy Do? The Vampire Slayer as Spiritual Guide

Jana Riess
Jossey-Bass

I know what it's like to be a preacher desperate for some point of contact with an otherwise inert congregation. You can't stand the thought of another Sunday facing the same blank faces, the distracted fidgeting, and the outright snoozing. As fascinating as you think the doctrine of *perichoresis* is, you know it's not likely to draw Amens. So you turn away from dusty old churchspeak toward pop culture. People love TV; they watch hours of it. Maybe if you refer to some TV shows or movies they like, or even act a little more like Letterman, they'll be right with you. Or at least not nod off this time.

I take it that pastors with such a longing to be hip form part of the intended audience for books like *The Gospel According to Disney* and *What Would Buffy Do*?

The author of the first book, Mark I. Pinsky, is a religion reporter for the *Orlando Sentinel* with a justly earned reputation for offering clear and lively commentary on the intersections between religion and popular culture. As in his earlier book, *The Gospel According to the Simpsons*, Pinsky outlines the “values” present in entertainment, values that viewers might have overlooked.

This work is more encyclopedic than the one on the Simpsons in that it methodically details the religious themes in each of some 30 films. It includes a religious biography of the Disney brothers and the recent Disney helmsmen, Jeffrey Katzenberg and Michael Eisner. Pinsky also offers brief essays on the theme parks and an insightful account of the Southern Baptist Convention’s quarrel with Disney over giving marriage benefits to same-sex employees and holding “Gay Days” at the theme parks.

Pinsky calls Disney’s faith “secular ‘toonism”—a play on the “secular humanism” that fundamentalists complain about. He argues that Disney films present “a consistent set of moral and human values” that are “identifiably Judeo-Christian.” That is not to say they are explicitly religious. There is “scarcely a mention of God” in the films, and nary a sign of “explicit Judeo-Christian symbolism or substance.” (Indeed, the more recent Disney films have drawn more on non-Western religious themes than on Judaism or Christianity.) The explicit religious motif is that of “magic”—a “far more universal device” to entertain children worldwide.

Nevertheless, there is a “Disney gospel” that amounts to this: “Good is always rewarded; evil is always punished. Faith is an essential element—faith in yourself and, even more, faith in something *greater* than yourself, some higher power. Optimism and hard work complete the basic canon.”

Pinsky has a few qualms about some details of this gospel. He is also aware that the early Disney movies were often full of stereotypes of minorities, and that even in the recent movies one finds goodness equated with physical beauty. The notion that good always triumphs, he notes, is “dangerously unrealistic.” Parents should deal with such issues, Pinsky counsels, by turning off the VCR and discussing them with children. But for the most part Disney can be trusted to impart valuable lessons about respect for differences, tolerance for others, and the basic compatibility between being good and being happy.

From the beginning there has been a vital link between Disney productions and the theme parks—the former are advertisements for the latter. When Walt Disney opened Disneyland in 1955, he announced his intention to create a place that would be “a source of joy and inspiration to all the world.” The novelist and literary theorist Umberto Eco has called Disneyland “America’s Sistine Chapel,” the place where the faithful must flock, pilgrim-like, at least once a year.

Pinsky notes that since American families tend to live far away from relatives, trips to Disneyland or Disneyworld with grandparents and cousins have come to offer the sort of happy family gatherings most of us lack but long for. He tells the story of Billy Graham complimenting Disney on his new park, “Walt, you have a great fantasy land here.” Walt replied, “You preachers get it all wrong. This is reality in here. Out there is fantasy.”

The Magic Kingdom (like the City of God in Revelation) has no churches. The Disney brothers had what Pinsky calls an “ambivalent relationship with organized religion” along with their “strong, personal faith in God.” Still, it was primarily a “commercial” decision not to endorse a single church or religion, since Disney had worldwide sales ambitions from the beginning.

The lack of emphasis on a single religion does not stop Disney from taking up a catechizing role, Pinsky notes. “In the Western world in particular, the number of hours children spend receiving moral instruction in houses of worship is dwarfed by the amount of time spent sitting in front of screens large and small, learning values from Disney movies.” Disney’s evangelistic entrepreneurship has been extraordinarily successful. Pinsky says images of Disney characters are “far more recognizable around the world than images of Jesus or the Buddha.”

Like Pinsky’s book, Jana Riess’s commentary on the TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is based on a great deal of video watching—in this case, seven seasons’ worth of television episodes. Her book is also about an entertainment icon that has been attacked by fundamentalists. *Buffy* has been assailed for championing occult figures like vampires and slayers and for its openness about adolescent sexuality. Riess is another accomplished religion writer. She has a seminary degree from Princeton and a Ph.D. in American church history from Columbia, and now edits for *Publisher’s Weekly*.

The difference between Disney and *Buffy* may be mostly generational. The latter is aimed at older teens and deals with edgier issues. Though Disney's recent films have sought to portray strong female characters, Buffy presents quite a new version of female power. She is "blonde but never a victim, vulnerable but tough as nails, sexy and sensual but also in a manner untouchable." She is "Barbie with a Kung-Fu grip."

As with any self-respecting vampire epic, the show includes the mandatory references to vampire-repelling crosses and holy water. Beyond that, the spiritual aura leans more toward Buddhism than toward Disney's Judeo-Christian montage. Buffy is a kind of lama, chosen to lead her generation—a reincarnation of previous slayers. Life imitates art as the actress Sarah Michelle Gellar, who plays Buffy, describes her own beliefs this way: "I believe in an idea of God, although it's my own personal ideal. I find most religions interesting . . . I've taken bits from everything and customized it." Spiritual, but not religious.

Riess prizes the show's unwillingness to be formulaic. It is unfailingly clever, and some of its best moments involve witty skewerings of religion. In one episode, several vampires take over a church, and one of them comments: "I've been avoiding this place for so many years, and it's nothing. It's nice! It's got the pretty windows, the pillars, lots of folks to eat. Where's the thing I was so afraid of . . . you know, the Lord?" He decides to start eating people to see whether the Lord will show up and do anything about it. At that point, Buffy strides in to kick "some dastardly derriere."

In another episode, when approached by an evangelist on her college campus, Buffy speaks to herself in fluent Californiaese: "Note to self: religion freaky."

The show even lampoons its own religious eclecticism. When one character, Xander, thinks he is near death and tries to muster a final prayer, he utters: "Now I'm not sure what I am, so bear with me here. And now I lay me down to sleep, uh, Shema Israel, uh, om om . . ." The heart of the show's religiosity is Buffy herself, whose compassionate willingness to sacrifice herself for others causes a friend to gush that he can find guidance in any difficult situation by asking himself "what would Buffy do."

The authors are surely right: these shows instruct while they entertain. They draw on the religious myths that maintain a sort of power even in their fragmentary form in

our mostly postreligious culture. Preachers, as amateur cultural observers, are well advised to learn from these books about what is shaping their parishioners' imaginations. Popular culture is itself a new form of catholicity in which untold millions of participants worldwide find something in common that saves them from being mere strangers to one another. Preachers who choose to absent themselves from this discourse risk being genuinely sectarian: so out of touch as to miss an entire language in which their parishioners are far more conversant than with their own sacred scripture.

What is most striking about these works is not that they are about religion on TV, but that the books assume specifically religious forms in their own right. Pinsky and Riess have written what amount to commentaries that are not unlike scholars' commentaries on books of the Bible or on Aquinas's *Summa* or Calvin's *Institutes*. The books are written with an eye to helping religious groups discuss them or families use them to shape the morals of their children—as scripture or catechisms were once used. Perhaps this depth of attention is well placed. Conservative estimates have Americans watching some 20 hours of television a week—more than that in the case of children. This is a rigorous form of observance in its own right, requiring time, money and discipline. Pastors barely get in 20 hours of preaching in the course of a year. Pinsky and Riess are right—film and television are where many Americans absorb their values, for good or ill.

In that light, the titles of these books are also instructive. The "Gospel According to" is of course the venerable way in which English translations of the Bible have introduced the work of the four evangelists. "What would Buffy do?" is a play on the "What would Jesus do?" campaign, with its bracelets and religious tokens. The titles are funny precisely because they substitute something light and nonreligious where we expect something sacred. These two are only the latest in what is now a long line of books with similar titles, starting years ago with Robert Short's *The Gospel According to Peanuts*, and now including Pinsky's previous work on *The Simpsons* and planned volume on *South Park*, and myriad others like *The Gospel According to Dr*. *Seuss* and *The Gospel According to Tony Soprano*. One wonders when the joke will wear thin.

Despite the shows' avowed lack of religious specificity, they bear a striking resemblance to the "organized" religions against which they try to set themselves. Pinsky's Disney represents a kind of nonspecific Protestantism, with its emphasis on tolerance, respect for others, hard work and the rewards of goodness. Its theme

parks offer the chance for a secular pilgrimage that must be engaged in as often as possible, but at least once a lifetime, lest our children be deprived of a certain cultural blessing. *Buffy* seems more like a remnant of things Catholic, with its mythical monsters and magical powers, with an element of Zen thrown in when Buffy dies and is reborn once a season. These fragments of religious ideas and practices are deeply appealing to people in a way church life often is not.

Why? Perhaps because our liturgy resembles bad television: people blankly imbibe, without laughing, and then forget what happened. Surely a pop culture reference or two would liven things up.

But what if we thought bigger? What if worship became more genuinely participatory, less like television and more like taking part in a dance or drama, in which we together make something worshipful and offer it to God?

What if, instead of encountering benign and pleasant (or benign and boring) sermons, people heard deep, demanding fare from the depths of the doctrinal wealth that calls for the sort of richly layered commentary that Pinsky and Reiss offer on Disney and Buffy? What if, instead of dodging anything too specific—Israel, Christ, Eucharist—the service concentrated on what makes the faith demanding and interesting?

The preacher stands to preach. “*Perichoresis* is the dance of delight between the Father, the Son and the Spirit, into which we are drawn this morning. . . .”