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Pretzels with a Purpose: The Role of Christianity in the Auntie Anne's Brand

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Auntie Anne's pretzel company began in 1988 as a single stall in a Pennsylvania farmer's market.

Founder and owner Anne Beiler grew up in a Lancaster County Amish-Mennonite community and sought to embed her religious values within the business. Once FOCUS Brands Inc., an affiliate of Roark Capital Group, purchased the company in 2010, the business maintained success through the perception that the Auntie Anne's brand had a higher purpose beyond profit. This business performs as an example of Christianbased companies that can expand successfully in the United States and abroad by projecting an altruistic image. Auntie Anne's marketing materials and employee opportunities imply that working for or buying their products contributes to ethical and Christian consumption. But the company does not clearly abide by Christian principles in all aspects of business. Instead, the benevolence of Auntie Anne's is created by its executives rather than represented through tangible actions.

Bread products are laden with religious associations. According to many scholars, "Food has long ceased to be merely about sustenance and nutrition. It is packed with social, cultural, and symbolic meanings."[1] Bread is important to Christians as the figurative body of Jesus. Muslims eat bread at the celebration following the month-long fast of Ramadan. Jews have challah for Shabbat and matzo for Passover. In this way, Auntie Anne's utilized the pre-existing connotations of bread to create spiritual significance in their pretzel product.

The history of the pretzel is somewhat mysterious but Auntie Anne's attributed its invention to an Italian monk around 610 A.D. The company history described how "these 'pretiolas,' Latin for 'little rewards,' were rolled and twisted dough resembling his student's folded arms across their chests while praying."[2] Beiler perpetuated the spiritual significance of the pretzel explaining that the three holes signify Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Additionally, in a WITF interview, she connected salting pretzels to the mention of salt of the earth in the Gospel of Matthew.[3] A common interpretation of this phrase calls on Jesus' followers to preserve the goodness in the world. Both understandings attach a sense of sacredness to this common Pennsylvania snack food which actually originated overseas. Most likely, Southern German and Swiss immigrants brought the pretzel to the United States. Coincidentally, the Swiss who settled in Pennsylvania were primarily part of the Mennonite and Amish movement.

Beiler grew up with Amish parents in Gap,

Pennsylvania. Eventually the family became less conservative and joined the Mennonite Church. She described her family as Amish-Mennonite or black car Amish. This phrase means she had some modern conveniences such as electricity, mainstream clothing, English church services, and a plain car. But her family wanted to remain in an isolated and close-knit society. According to Beiler her parents took her "to church every Sunday and taught us obedience to God and the fear of God."[4] After marrying her husband Jonas Beiler, the couple left the Mennonite Church and joined an evangelical Christian church where they served as youth pastors.

The structure of the Auntie Anne's company has a basis in Beiler's religious convictions to maintain community, be a steward of God, and emulate the life of Christ. The company first used only family members as employees when it opened in 1988. Later, Beiler hired young Amish girls to work at market locations. As John Hostetler explained, the stereotypical image of the Amish has been of Bible-centeredness, simplicity, and discipleship.[5] Employing the Amish at market stalls perpetuated the image of Beiler's benevolent Amish-Mennonite roots. Once Beiler began to franchise, she selected sisters, brothers-in-law, and cousins as the managers for her local stores. In 2005, she placed her trust and the fate of the company in her cousin by selling the company to Sam Beiler.

To Anne Beiler, the pretzel recipe and success were part of God's plan for her family. The business was a calling she felt the need to obey. In her autobiography Beiler lauded the blind faith of her father-in-law who loaned her \$6,000 to purchase her first market stand sight unseen.[6] In many interviews, she used similarly spiritually charged terms to describe how Auntie Anne's was a business miracle. Beiler ascribed to prosperity theology trusting that God would make her thrive and help her fulfill a duty to give to other people in need saying,

The spiritual aspect of it was so powerful. I didn't have high school or college degrees, so I had to rely on the Word of God. I dug into the Book of Proverbs and we based and built our business on its principles. God encouraged me along the way. I remember in June 1990, I was sitting in a church service on missions Sunday, and I saw myself rolling pretzels and Jesus standing there. It wasn't a vision; it was just a clear impression from the Lord. Jesus spoke to my heart and said, 'I want you to use Auntie Anne's as a vehicle for missions.' There was a big smile on His face

and I understood clearly for the first time God's purpose for Auntie Anne's.[7]

The original mission statement for Auntie Anne's advised workers to, "Go LIGHT your world: Lead by example, Invest in employees, Give freely, Honor God, and Treat all business contacts with respect."[8] During Beiler's time as owner, employees had the opportunity to participate in prayer time every Monday at work. A prayer opened business meetings as well. And associates had access to free faith-based counseling.[9] It was important for employees to be able to "connect to their spiritual side at work."

Beiler claimed buying an Auntie Anne's pretzel was giving back to God's work. Through this she indicated that "it matters morally how and what we eat."[10] Authors David Bell and Gill Valentine similarly depicted ethical consumerism as a sense of responsibility people feel in their purchases. Buying products that appear to aid others, positively feeds the conscience.[11] Bryant Simon found a comparable pattern of ethical consumption through brands such as Starbucks. He explained, "If we buy right, not only will the lives of others improve, but so will our lives and our self-images."[12] But Bryant was also critical of this business mentality saying, "Starbucks, that big guy, wanted the business of the people who cared about little guys, it had to convince them that it walked softly in the global order and that it made the world a better place for the people at the bottom and for its customers."[13] Auntie Anne's version of Christian consumerism could have grown out of the Amish-Mennonite belief in Gelassenheit which is a yieldedness to God's will and a concern for fellow members of the community.[14]

The phrase Christian ethical consumption is an even more complex and in some ways contradictory concept. Current Evangelicalism has come to embrace Christian capitalism by allowing their message to be accommodated to the spirit of contemporary culture.[15] The inaugural issue of the Christian Business Review supported the role of businesses in the world. Contributor Jeff Duzer argued that businesses are essential to "generate the funds necessary to sponsor God's desired activity."[16] He reasoned, "When businesses produce material things that enhance the welfare of the community, they are engaged in work that matters to God."[17] The role of executives is to be stewards or trustees, explained Duzer, businesses do not actually belong to them or any earthly owners. Beiler similarly said, "This company was not about me. It was about God and his plan."[18] The founder of the

Christian-based chain In-N-Out Burger echoed this sentiment saying, "This is God's company . . . not mine." [19] Coincidentally, Duzer uses a food related example to describe how humans act as stewards, "Human beings were created with a capacity to pool their resources (what we now call capital), to design and build an oven (technical innovation), to order and receive shipments of flour (supply chain), to bake bread (operation) . . . [and] take the bread that God intended to provide for a hungry world and make delivery on God's behalf." [20]

But Duzer absolved businesses from accountability saying they are not responsible for "green" initiatives, for example. In this way, Duzer leaned on his own understanding of the Bible rather than providing evidence from the Bible to release business owners from being stewards of the land. Duzer used the Bible to justify what had already been decided rather than to shape business decisions. He defended the separation between business and sustainability by describing how certain institutions are simply better suited for certain tasks. Duzer said he did not believe that protecting the environment would "make God's list of fundamental purposes for the institution of business as a whole."[21]

But Chik-fil-a, a popular Christian-based company, boasted of sustainability efforts on its website. The company is working to use ecological packaging, decrease energy use, conserve water, and increase recycling. Additionally, they have built their first Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certified restaurant. The company emphasized how they are called to be concerned for the environment and to be "a faithful steward of all that is entrusted to us." [22] Auntie Anne's only sustainable effort has been in donating surplus food to its community partner, Food Donation Connect.[23] Auntie Anne's cannot be held accountable for failing to attain perfection in goodness, but there is little evidence that they are continually striving or making new efforts to fully embody Christian values. The company seems unwilling to sacrifice larger profits to meet these goals.

Although the business does not follow through in the Christian mission, Christian roots are integrated into Auntie Anne's marketing. In 2006 the company added a halo above a pretzel to the logo. The logo is on all of its merchandise including posters, cups, and its website. The company also created the perception of religious grounding through a 2010 tagline, "You either know us well, or you're curious and seeking pretzel

truth. This slogan relates to the spiritual journey of discovering Jesus and the Word as truth. In-N-Out Burger, discreetly places Bible verses on their packaging. The bottom rim of their soda cups, french fry holders, and their burger wrappers feature scripture quotes. Their milkshake cups feature Proverbs 3: 5.[24] This refers to the quote, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding."[25] In this way, the franchises share their faith through mass culture.

During Beiler's time as owner of Auntie Anne's, the company sponsored two faith-based entertainment programs to help spread the word of God and increase sales. In 2003 Auntie Anne's partnered with Big Idea Productions for the DVD and VHS release of Jonah – A VeggieTales Movie. The company actively supported this children's film by offering a special deal, a half price Jonah plush toy for customers who purchased two pretzels and a drink. Additionally three million of the film copies contained a coupon for one free pretzel with purchase of a pretzel and a drink.

The plot of the film, based on the Biblical story of Jonah, focused on compassion and mercy. In this movie, the wholesome vegetable main characters proselytize Christian values. In the story the city of Nineveh, known for their Cheese Curl factory, is corrupt and violent. Jonah, depicted as an asparagus spear, is called by God to help the citizens reform their ways. At one point, Jonah's friend Kahlil explains how "the world doesn't need more people who are big and important," it needs more people who are nice, compassionate, and merciful.[26] The film seems to parallel the way in which Auntie Anne's uses wholesome pretzels as a way of spreading God's message. Auntie Anne's promoted this animated film through their product that embedded the Christian association with the company.

Beiler's faith did influence a component of charity within the business, even though fulfillment of a Christian mission has fallen short in other areas. Her overall philosophy was to have a great product, great people on her team, and a purpose greater than oneself.[27] This attitude permeated through the company, even as she allowed non-family members to manage other store locations. In 1995, Auntie Anne's employees founded the C.A.R.E.S. (Community Action Requires Employee Support) Committee. This group provided focused community assistance through time and resources.

In Beiler's autobiography she began a chapter by quoting theologian John Wesley who said, "Make all

you can. Save all you can. Give all you can."[28] She believed one should "try giving ten percent, not on what you are actually making, but on what you feel you should be making, and trust that God will help you reach that new income level."[29] This belief demonstrated a new model of stewardship of doing God's work in a novel way. Rather than being a steward of the land and people, Beiler believed it was virtuous for Christian business people only to be stewards of their personal time, talent, and money to make the community a better place.[30]

One should not discount the support Auntie Anne's has provided by partnering with two national charitable organizations, in particular. From 1999 to 2009 Auntie Anne's raised over four million dollars as a corporate sponsor for the Children's Miracle Network. FOCUS Brands has tried to build on this legacy of charitable giving since they acquired the company in 2010. In 2011, Auntie Anne's joined Alex's Lemonade Stand in the fight against childhood cancer through support of research, prevention, and treatment. During the first year of partnering Auntie Anne's raised more than \$150,000 through coin canister donations, local pretzel rolling contests, and the C.A.R.E.S. Golf Tournament. In addition, Auntie Anne's supports local communities through Food Donation Connection. This "program enables stores to donate surplus pretzel products through a hunger relief organization, such as a rescue mission or after-school program . . . to feed those in need, reduce food waste, and improve employee morale." In 2011, Auntie Anne's locally raised \$60,000 for the Lancaster based foundation, Children Deserve a Chance.[31] The company sought brand distinction through strategic philanthropy that aligns the organizations' passions for helping others. Internationally, Auntie Anne's celebrated their fifteenth anniversary in Malaysia by giving away thousands of free pretzels. The franchisor also donated \$5,500 to Precious Children's Home after pledging to contribute a portion of the profit from one month of sales. In this way, Auntie Anne's fulfilled their public promise to provide goods and services that enhance lives and to allocate business resources to community projects.

There is a connection between Auntie Anne's international expansion and the religious demographics of the areas. None of the first countries to have franchises were predominantly Protestant Christian. In Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore the majority of the population practiced either Islam or Buddhism. In some ways this franchising could be

considered "a new form of 'virtuous globalization'."[32] In 2003, Thailand had the most locations of the twelve countries in Auntie Anne's International program. The company was a form of proselytization by promoting Christian beliefs in a less obvious and original way. Professor Richard Chewning, examines how Christian businesses are called to do business in problem areas and to model the kingdom way.[33] To him, a particular approach to food is a way in which people can come to understand one another.[34]

Auntie Anne's adapted their product to cultural preferences. In Singapore, the franchise offered a seaweed-flavored pretzel. In Saudi Arabia, customers could order a pretzel with dates. One of the favorites in Thailand included pretzel sticks coated with sweet coconut and powdered sugar.[35] A global brand has to be consistent but willing to modify to meet local taste. FOCUS Brands' international efforts continue to experience momentum by surrendering some of Auntie Anne's cultural origins in order "to develop strong relationships with consumers across different countries and cultures."[36]

Although the pretzel has adapted to other cultures, part of the success of this product rests in its novelty. "The pretzel is arguably an icon of Central Pennsylvania" since Julius Sturgis Pretzel Bakery in Lititz, PA was the first commercial pretzel bakery in the country.[37] Pretzels have continued to dominate the areas many snack food companies. Eating has become a window through which people can explore an area and its people through food tourism. People from outside of the United States may feel as if they are experiencing authentic Pennsylvania Dutch cuisine through Auntie Anne's.

Within one year, Anne Beiler moved from her first stand at the Downingtown Farmer's Market to Harrisburg, Middletown, Morgantown, and finally Park City Mall in Lancaster. The first international Auntie Anne's location opened in July of 1995 in Jakarta, Indonesia. The overseas franchisees initiated contact with Beiler. But upon reflection, Belier felt that it was a natural connection. In her autobiography, Beiler explained how "an Indonesian missionary to the U.S. had led me to a more spirit-filled life way back in 1974. And now, over twenty years later, I returned to her country with pretiolas, little gifts."[38] But upon international development, Beiler felt a duty to impoverished countries. Mennonite entrepreneurs, specifically, have "accepted as an economic principle that the poor anywhere had a right to be helped by the

rich."[39] Christian American businesses, in particular, are starting to have a greater impact on Third World countries. Beiler wondered, "How could it be faith that God blessed me with so much yet seemed to leave these people in their misery . . . In the years to come, we would begin exploring how to channel some of Auntie Anne's resources into helping people like the ones I saw in Indonesia."[40] Eventually she joined Global Disciples which aids international Christian business leaders as they reach out to people in areas of the world where access is greatly restricted. Auntie Anne's became a "part of a much larger set of communications and practices through which US evangelicals are becoming increasingly aware of the poverty, social injustices, and political crises."[41]

To date, Auntie Anne's has 1,200 locations worldwide.[42] Rather than overextending through excessive and unnecessary expansion, Auntie Anne's could focus on the mission of serving a larger purpose. The company has the resources to make a physical, sustaining impact in needy communities but they continue to simply emphasize conversion as the main way to improve one's life. Philosopher Michael Novak argued that the goal of religious corporations in a globalizing world is to provide for social needs and strengthen social morality.[43] Professor Steve Rundle similarly explained how the role of Christian executives is to make their company significant for a larger purpose. Citing the Bible he explained that "we were created for good works, that we should use our resources, opportunities, and even our positions of authority in ways that benefit others."[44] Christian executives are charged to faithfully carry out the dual mission of serving investors and helping the less fortunate. But this involves inherent contradictions. They integrate both responsibilities into a single business strategy but are "trapped between the cultural expectations of the" Christian and secular world.[45]

Particularly once FOCUS Brands acquired Auntie Anne's, the company had to balance financial health with Christian values. Scholars charge that brands have responsibilities: "They are not simply money-making machines working in some kind of pure, soulless economy. They have an influence on some real issues and real people . . . In a world where brands are blamed for everything from obesity to child labor, it pays to be good."[46] Additionally, brands attempt to be highly visible, almost omnipresent. "Brands want people to have faith in what they have to offer."[47] Auntie Anne's has so much faith in their product that they have

free pretzel day once a year. The executives think once a potential customer tries one they will believe in the superior taste experience and become a loyal patron. This is a form of "Eucharistic hospitality" in that Auntie Anne's shares and cares for others and hopes their customers will reciprocate.[48]

CNBC described Auntie Anne's as the great American success story which has endured, opening on average two stores a week, even during the recession. William Dunn became the new President and Chief Operating Officer upon Sam Beiler's sale of the company to FOCUS Brands. He noted how "giving back to the communities where we work and play is one of our critical values, and we take a great deal of pride in our partnership."[49] Obamacare is not a priority included in Dunn's commitment to community. Instead the company has shown concern for employees' spiritual wellbeing. Religious "programs are just a natural part of a full and complete employee benefits slate . . . we want them to be healthy in all ways that matter, and we're here to help them. It makes for a better employee and a healthier employee."[50]

Part-time employees do not currently receive healthcare through Auntie Anne's. Yet the book of Proverbs, upon which Beiler based the mission of the company, states, "Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it."[51] Dunn explained, "We work strategically with a company that helps provide the service to our franchise partners around the country . . . our preference certainly would be for us to work with our franchise partners on the health insurance side and not have the government do that . . . we just feel as though we know our business, we know the employees."[52] Dunn emphasizes the company's self-reliance. But Chewning argues in Business Through The Eyes of Faith that,

Christians need to examine their views of government regulation of business. Many of us rather glibly suggest that the least government is the best government. That is far too simple an answer.

Government is one way that people in a country do things together. It is also a way of taking care of things that no one person or group can take care of themselves. We need to recognize the positive roles government can play in partnership with business.[53] From Chewning's perspective, it is the duty of Christian businesses to go beyond the minimum legal requirements or government standards to express justice and provide a quality work environment.[54]

Many scholars argue that there is no inherent

conflict between the pursuits of business and the basic values of religion. But this environment puts responsibility in the hands of executives to determine what actions fulfill the company's Christian mission, carry on the established value system, and are fiscally responsible. Christian business efforts to nurture and build community should precede labor and productivity. But Dunn's opinions against mandated healthcare conflicts with this effort. Dunn directly contradicts the guidelines Christian businessmen have encouraged, to "use our faith, skills, and resources to correct inequities, work toward economic justice, seek righteousness, bring hope where there is no hope."[55] Unlike Chik-fila, which closes on Sundays for example, Auntie Anne's does not put "principles before profits." [56] Dissimilarly, Chik-fil-a values the Sabbath as a time when employees should go to church and be with their family. This company sacrifices profits by closing one day a week while their competitors remain open for business. The darkened store front of a Chik-fil-a on Sundays within the landscape of a mall, for example, sends a powerful message about what the company believes is important. Park City Mall in Lancaster, Colonial Park Mall in Harrisburg, and Westmoreland Mall in Greensburg, PA feature not one but two Auntie Anne's stores.[57] It would be much easier for citizens to notice, understand, and perhaps become inspired by the company's religious founding if both were closed on Sundays.

A 2005 study found that Christian based companies are generally more successful than their secular counterparts. In particular, Mennonite entrepreneurs' self-perception of their success is attributed to their religious tradition and characteristics of honesty, integrity, dependability, and practicality.[58] One measure determined that Christian companies had a higher sales growth rate and smaller employee growth rate. This indicated that their workers were more productive than secular companies. Faith based businesses tended "to inspire loyalty among both employees and customers." Author Fred Reichheld, explained how "this loyalty effect, the full range of economic and human benefits that accrue to leaders who treat their customers, operators, and employees in a manner worthy of their loyalty, is at the core of most of the truly successful growth companies in the world today. And there is no clearer case study of the loyalty effect than Chick-fil-A." One does not technically need to be a Christian to own or work in a Chik-fil-a franchise, but the company does ask that their associates base "business on biblical principles because they work." [59]

Auntie Anne's and similarly founded businesses emphasized a determination to be loyal to their suppliers through fair and honest negotiations. The organizational cultures and the strong positive relationships Christian companies built led to these results.[60]

For Auntie Anne's, Beiler's spiritual story, image, and legacy are part of brand. This perception of the product creates an emotional relationship with patrons. Christian brands can become powerful through this attachment.[61] But Bryant is skeptical of this loyalty. Using the example of Starbucks he says, "In corporatedesigned narratives of change, the poor . . . become symbols as the buyers emerge as the main subjects. . . The 'little' people on the ground moreover, will pay us back for our generosity by liking us and maybe even embracing our values. If wealthy customers know that a luxury brand is socially responsible they will give the brand greater purchase consideration over a brand with similar quality and service."[62] But in this case businesses may not work toward a larger purpose because it is the right thing to do, but the profitable thing to do.

Auntie Anne's rolls more than five-hundred thousand pretzels every two days, enough to feed a pretzel to every person living in Lancaster County.[63] "Estimates of how many international franchises fail range from more than half to as much as ninety percent" but Auntie Anne's was able to maintain success despite diffusion to twenty-three countries.[64] This business demonstrates its religious roots through philanthropy, marketing, and employee programs. Christian-based companies like Auntie Anne's create faithful employees and customers who feel, accurately or not, as if they are contributing to a greater good by working in the company or consuming the product.

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The Harlem Renaissance: A Cultural, Social, and Political Movement

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The Harlem Renaissance was an explosion of creativity and culture within New York City's African American community in the 1920s, however, its true impact far surpassed a mere cultural movement. It was the locus for the radicalization and politicization for a disenfranchised population. The creative minds behind the Harlem Renaissance used artistic expression to prove their_humanity_and demand equality from an often hostile white America. The literal migration of southern Blacks to the North also symbolized a mental

shift, changing the previous image of the rural, uneducated African-American to one of urban, cosmopolitan sophistication. This new identity led to increased social consciousness, and endowed a population that until this time had only experienced inferiority and depravity. This movement provided a source of release of their oppression and gave them hope, faith, and inspiration to create an empowered identity. This new movement wasn't just a coincidence, however, it was driven by several key circumstances and figures, and among the most important of these was Charles Spurgeon Johnson. He, with the support of philosopher and professor Alain LeRoy Locke, guided the emergence of African-American culture into whitedominated society, and this effort was formally and symbolically launched through their orchestration of the Civic Club Dinner in Manhattan on March 21st. 1924.

Migration to Harlem

In the South, African-Americans were trapped in a sharecropping economy that hardly offered any hope for advancement. Along with these poor economic conditions, African-Americans were socially disadvantaged within the Jim Crow system that didn't acknowledge their voting rights, overlooked lynching. and disregarded unequal education opportunities. The North symbolized the opportunity to escape these horrors of the South as well as the possibility of economic prosperity.[1] New York's Harlem was among the most popular cities of refuge, and by the 1920s, Harlem_became a center of black cultural life and the center stage for a cultural and political renaissance.[2] This migration forever changed the dynamics of the nation, physically and mentally. The oppression the African-Americans were fleeing from also symbolized the cultural image they were fleeing from: slave, uneducated, ignorant, oppressed, and inferior. They hoped the North would be a haven from their oppression in the South and a place to re-establish their identity.

This presented a complex dilemma for African-Americans who wanted to embrace their heritage, yet seek a new identity. W.E.B. Du Bois addressed this double consciousness in his 1903 publication of Souls of Black Folk, stating that the Negro constantly had this "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others." He claimed that it was the Negro's "dogged strength alone [that] kep[t] [him] from being torn asunder" as he battled these two contrasting identities. [3] In the presence of this duality, a new literary theme emerged. As the African-American struggled with his