



The Commercialization of Christmas: What Would Jesus Buy?

By Emily Wilson, AlterNet

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Bill Talen, known as Reverend Billy, doesn't mind making a fool of himself. He is happy to throw himself on the floor in a fit of religious ecstasy, perform cash register exorcisms or go caroling with the 35 members of the Church of Stop Shopping Gospel Choir, singing such favorites as "Fill the Malls With Wealthy People," to the tune of "Deck the Halls." He does all this and much, much more in the new documentary about him and his Church of Stop Shopping, [What Would Jesus Buy?](#)

Ten years ago Talen came to New York and, struck by the commercialization in Times Square, wanted to do something. He saw the people getting the most attention were the street preachers, so getting into his role, he bought a clerical collar to go with his white caterer's jacket, dyed his hair blonde, combed it into a tall pompadour and started preaching against overconsumption.

Now Talen is known for his protests against, among others, Disney (the "High Church of Retail"), Victoria's Secret and Starbucks. The coffee chain has banned Talen from going into any of the stores in California, and he is the subject of a memo to its employees, "What Should I Do if Reverend Billy Is in My Store?" When he decided to take his church across the country in two biodiesel buses in December 2005 to face the Christmas season head on and preach against the Shopocalypse, Filmmaker Rob VanAlkemade and his crew tagged along.

If people can change how they act at Christmas, Talen says, that could bleed over into the rest of the year. And he thinks people are ready for change. He sees it with all the emails the church gets supporting its anti-consumer message and in other ways, such as the dozens of communities across America that have successfully resisted Wal-Mart. He points to the town of Hercules, in California, which used eminent domain to take the land that the giant retailer planned to build on. In the city council's definition, a Wal-Mart store is "urban blight."

"That was creative, using eminent domain," Talen says. "And we're looking for creativity in protests. Progressive people have been protesting exactly the same way for a long, long time."

Savitri Durkee, the choir director and Talen's wife, says she is also feeling optimistic. She emphasizes that small changes are important.

"I know that people are going to shop one way or another," she says. "I just hope they'll think about what they buy and try and support local economies. Utopian ideas are really important, but if I can get 100 people to shop less, that's great."

In the movie, shoppers, the recently homeless, ministers and consumer specialists face the camera and talk about what they think about Christmas, shopping and where the products we buy come from. Both Talen and Durkee say they learned a lot from these people, and hearing their stories made them more compassionate.

Talen says the movie's producer, Morgan Spurlock, who made a documentary about his monthlong McDonald's diet, was the one who encouraged them to talk to all kinds of Americans.

"Morgan wanted us to make a movie everyone could like," Talen says. "Old progressives have these habits of division, and we need to find a way for us to have a social conscience without screaming bloody murder at each other."

Talen was surprised and gratified by the response from the Christian community to the movie, which he says has been overwhelmingly supportive, particularly from the youth Christian movement. He says the movie's message of Christmas being a time to connect with family and friends and remember what matters most resonates with them.

"With Christians half of the work is already done," Durkee adds. "They are activists. They have a value system. They know their actions have repercussions."

In a scene that Talen and Durkee call the heart of the movie, three teenage girls from the Upper East Side start to wonder about where their clothes come from. They check the labels on their shirts. "A little kid probably made that," one says to another. They do research online and read about workers in Bangladesh being forced to work overtime and getting burns from hot glue machines.

That is a moment where a connection is made, Talen says.

"We want to collapse the distance between the product and labor," he says. "Our present economy is based on alienation from products."

Because of his work as an actor and playwright, Talen sees the value in putting some theater into protests with retail interventions and songs about \$5 lattes rather than merely marching and chanting. In "What Would Jesus Buy?" a choir member talks about how excited she is to do political work in a creative, fun way. The woman, Laura Newman, came over from the other side of the counter -- she is a former Starbucks employee who first met Reverend Billy when he protested in her store.

Being with choir members like Newman gives them strength and hope, Talen and Durkee say. One scene in the movie shows them in a motel room, clearly discouraged and depressed. You can see how the long hours spent preaching at malls and Wal-Mart parking lots are wearing them down. "I just don't know if anyone hears us," Durkee tells her husband in the movie. "Or if they do hear us, they so don't want to hear us."

"That is when the value of community is so apparent," Talen says. "We have all these great people around us. When we fall down, they raise us up again."

As well seeing the value of community, Talen and Durkee say ritual is important. In the movie, Reverend Billy leads a funeral for small town America next to a Wal-Mart in Arkansas and baptizes a baby in a super mall in Los Angeles as the choir sings softly, some wiping tears away. The security guard, who has been telling Talen to leave, steps aside to let him complete the ritual.

"Oh, that felt so good," Talen says after the baptism. "Wow. That makes it all worth it. You can take me to jail now."

Talen says getting asked to perform a baptism was a powerful experience.

"That was the Christmas moment right there," he says. "That's what Christmas is about. A child is born and is supposed to grow up and teach us peace. That is Christmas. Change-a-lujah."

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