

REVIEW ESSAY

Breaking the Consumerist Trance: Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping¹

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Reverend Billy & the Life After Shopping Gospel Choir & the Not Buying it Band (May 21–June 1, 2009), The U.K. Shopocalypse Tour 2009.

Rob Van Alkemade, director, *What Would Jesus Buy?*, Artefact Films, 2007.

Reverend Billy & the Stop Shopping Gospel Choir & The Not Buying it Band, *The Shopocalypse*, stopshopping music, 2008.

Bill Talen, *What Should I Do if Reverend Billy is in My Store?*, The New Press, 2003.

Mickey Mouse in baby's bed
Big eyes, big ears, a bursting head
When baby screams the money flows
When baby dreams a soul is sold

—Bill Talen, “How Can You Raise a Child?,” Track 5 on *The Shopocalypse*

Like crack cocaine or membership of the National Rifle Association, shopping is an annihilating addiction that must be slowed down to be stopped. Or flooded with new and different light. But people, please—*do something!* Think of something quick. The research phase is over. How many times do we have to hear that seven percent of the world's population is taking a third of the world's resources? How many neighborhoods need to be malled?

—Bill Talen, *What Should I Do if Reverend Billy is in My Store*, p.xiii

Consuming less is the single most effective and immediate response an individual can take to immediately halting the climate crisis.

—<http://www.revbilly.com>, 2009

The Reverend Billy struts his stuff across the front of the stage. He's about six foot tall and cuts a striking figure in what I later realize is his hallmark outfit—dyed blonde hair sprayed into an improbable coiffe, white suit and dog-collar set off by black shirt and boots. Moving with the extravagant gestures of a Southern, born-again, televangelist, his showmanship is reminiscent of Billy Graham, Jimmy Swaggart, Johnny Cash or even Elvis. Behind him, dressed in shiny green robes, the nine member Life After Shopping Gospel Choir is belting out an anthem accompanied by three black-clad musicians. Their message is clear and direct: Stop shopping! Break your addiction! Resist that product! Reduce your consumption! Throw away your credit cards! Liberate yourself from debt! Walmart, Starbucks, Disney and the other big retail corporations are destroying local neighborhoods—as well as the planet. Their products are based on slave labor. Their employees are paid peanuts. Stop buying, start loving! We don't need products to mediate love! Change-a-lu-ya! Welcome to the Church of Stop Shopping!

¹ I'd like to thank Valerie Fraser and Sandra Moog for their comments on drafts of this essay. Conversations with Sandra about U.S. consumerism and social movements were especially helpful.

I had laughed and felt intrigued when my local arts center summer program came through the door and I read that the Church of Stop Shopping was coming to Colchester, my home town, during their 2009 U.K. *Shopocalypse Tour*. My first thoughts: what a brilliant idea, this one can't be missed! Yet although I'd been looking forward to the show, it far outstripped my expectations. I'd anticipated parody and humor, but not such a slick professional outfit or such an impassioned performance. Somewhere in my mind lurked an equation between political protest and musical amateurism. I'm not sure where it came from, given my familiarity with the powerful traditions of protest song in both the U.S. and Latin America. But maybe it's grounded in a specifically British experience: the deliberate roughness of early punk; the cheerful whistles and drums of the skiffle bands that accompany marchers along city streets during demonstrations; and the fact that it's fairly common for self-deprecating, leftist comedians to pick up a guitar and strum along to a satirical song—the grit of the act lying in the bite of the words rather than the music.

Whatever the case, there was nothing rough and ready or amateur about the music in this show. It was stunning: high energy Americana at its best, which fused gospel, soul and jazz-funk, and literally reached a high point when Laura Newman hit and held (and held, and held) the top notes. As I later found out, the singers all perform on a voluntary basis, but most could have pursued commercial careers. Commitment to the Church and its activities, one chorist explained to me, often means living on a shoe-string, taking second and third jobs to fund their activism, but it's worth it. Listen to their 2008 album, *The Shopocalypse*, and you'll understand why. It covers the same anthems as the show, including, for example, Back Away (from the Walmart); Push Back (the Starbucks); and Beatitudes of Buylessness. But it's a studio album, so it has different qualities from a live performance. Listening at home you'll get the benefit of the full-strength 35-member choir and nine piece band, as well as the late-night remixes at the end. You'll also be able to hear and appreciate the creative synergies that underpin the musical arrangements. This is a group of performers revelling in each other's talents, playing around with harmonies and forms, and passing on the soloist role—in the spirit of black Gospel music.

Still, on that Sunday afternoon, sitting in a deconsecrated Church, I did feel a bit uneasy when the show started and I realized it would take the form of a service. (I'm agnostic most of the time but can become a rationalist atheist if confronted by religious fervor, even parody). Then the effects of the music kicked in, and my unease only resurfaced briefly when Reverend Billy exorcized our credit cards. Although this show walks a rather ambiguous line between caricature and conviction, it definitely veers on the side of conviction. So having railed against the evils of consumerism for several years myself, it was actually quite a relief to hear someone else do so with much more wit and style. I also enjoyed the pantomime used to puncture the charisma invested in commodities by corporate ad men. And while Reverend Billy is certainly on a mission and has all sorts of evangelical exhortations in his repertoire, he knows when to shift register and how to talk to people. His opening remarks dramatized how they'd been thrown out of Tesco in Norwich, performed an exorcism at Margaret Thatcher's birthplace in Grantham, and other memorable moments of the tour. In contrast, his sermon was darker and more reflective: the old forms of protest aren't working.² Maybe the economic crisis has

² As the sermon went on to stress, the 2003 protests against the Iraq war all around the world were ignored by Bush and Blair: “‘Bush spoke to newsmen on the Monday after the protest and said. ‘Well

opened up a crack in the system by revealing the corruption of political elites (so perhaps the duck houses³ have done us a favor)... The earth is speaking back in tsunamis, hurricanes, freak storms ... We can't shop our way out of this crisis.

When we came out after the show and congregated for a chat in the warm May sunlight, there was a slightly self-conscious sense among us secular Brits that we'd been to Church (albeit an alternative one) and affirmed our shared beliefs despite ourselves. Several wondered whether this was a case of preaching to the converted, and would anyone who hadn't read *No Logo* really get what it had all been about? At the same time, I was ready for us all to march down to the high street, into the shops, and start singing and disrupting. Although disappointed that the choir had to leave for their evening show in Cambridge, I came away feeling quite exhilarated. And that's the whole point. This show is designed to inspire anyone who already knows all the awful facts to get out there and *do* something, individually and collectively. For anyone less familiar with the facts, it can be a starting point to go and read Naomi Klein, George Monbiot, or anyone else who documents global commodity chains, environmental degradation, and unfree labor. Just as importantly, its effect is to re-energize tired activists—including, perhaps, the performers themselves given the more hostile places where they take to the stage. Additionally, both the exaggeration and the catchy rhythms of anthems like *Back Away* serve a further political purpose. They stick in the mind ready for recall when you're tempted by the next cute/chic/shiny/ingenious object that you really don't need, or if you start thinking about giving in to the bargain-basement, sweat-stained prices of clothes and household goods in Tesco, Walmart or their local equivalent. Put differently, this is political performance that has been honed with care and practice over time.

It's about fifteen years since actor/writer Bill Talen first took to the streets in the guise of a preacher—driven by anger and despair at the corporate takeover of the central New York City neighborhood where he lived. The journey that ensued is recounted in *What Should I Do if Reverend Billy is in My Store?* Talen's book tells the story of how he came to inhabit the persona of Reverend Billy, the early days of the Church and choir, and the thinking behind their mission. It is also full of insights into shopping as a cultural form, and the ways the communication industries play on individual desires and vulnerabilities to induce conformity to the soul-less commercialization they legitimize. This is a rolling collage of a book, constructed from anecdotes, observations, and reflections as well as the occasional sermon, and held together by an acute sensibility and the force of irony. At the core is the contrast between the times before and after Reverend Billy was joined by the church and choir. But as Talen stresses,⁴ he had no grand plan in mind when he first set out with a dog-collar and portable pulpit to express his moral outrage. In fact, having rejected a religious upbringing, initially, Talen didn't even like the idea of the preacher project. It was, he suggests, really the brainchild of his friend Reverend

that was a focus group and they were examining the products and they didn't like them. But I like them." (He actually used that metaphor.)"

³ In the U.K., the 2008 financial crisis was followed by a public scandal about the expenses claims made by Members of Parliament. The claim for the reimbursement of £1,645 for an ornamental duck house by one MP was the most notorious and came to symbolize the corruption pervading the Parliamentary expenses system.

⁴ Bill Talen, *What Should I Do if Reverend Billy is in My Store?*, (New York: The New Press, 2003), chapter 2.

Sydney Lanier (whose turbulent career inspired Tennessee Williams' play, *The Night of the Iguana*). Lanier not only argued for the character and challenged Talen's prejudices by explaining the gospel of the poor, he found Talen a job as a live-in stage manager at St. Clements Church, which at night doubled as a theatre. It was there, during months of insomnia and existential turbulence, that the idea took hold and Talen was finally compelled to give the experiment a go.

Going against the current is never easy. But New York in the late nineties was a tough place to launch a personal crusade against the rising tendency of late capitalism. Wall Street was booming, the triumph over Soviet "communism" was still recent, and around the U.S. there was little visible street protest. Talen's descriptions of his efforts during this period when he railed against Mickey Mouse the Anti-Christ and exhorted shoppers to go home empty-handed are written with black humor. Yet they graphically convey the loneliness of learning to preach in the "vortex of corporate logos"⁵ with 50-foot supermodels staring seductively down from high buildings. They also give real insight into the technical difficulties of street performance. Initially, just projecting his voice, stringing together coherent sentences, and overcoming embarrassment were a struggle. Later, when he ventured into stores for "retail interventions," there was the question of dealing with ejections by security men and NYPD cops. Not only were his efforts to get shoppers to stop and listen largely ineffectual, even NGO activists handing out leaflets backed away from his "right-wing costume."⁶ Still, in the countdown to the millennium, there were plenty of seasoned preachers out on the streets to watch and emulate. And at times of doubt, there was Gandhi and a host of other non-conformists from Joan Baez to Johnny Rotten who had persisted with non-violent protest against the odds. They would later be consecrated as saints of the church. Back in those early days—as Mayor Giuliani's project to cleanse the city center for tourism proceeded—their example inspired Talen to keep going; it also informed the "philosophy of oddness" he devised to counter the material homogeneity and social conformity colonizing the streets and squares around him. In this way, Reverend Billy gradually came into being. But it was during the "Seattle-WTO winter of 1999-00" when "public space bravery became inspiring again" that he acquired a Church and choir.⁷

What Should I Do if Reverend Billy is in My Store? was published in 2003. So it was written at a time when Talen's memories of his solitary experiments were still fresh, but after the preacher project had been vindicated by the formation of the Church and he'd found a soulmate and partner, Savitri Durkee. The standpoint is that of someone looking back at the struggles of an earlier self from a more secure place, able both to sympathize and see the comedy of it all. Conversely, Talen's relief at finding a set of people sharing his political convictions and his excitement about the formation of the church and choir are palpable. Apart from the more sombre and moving last chapter about 9/11 and its aftermath, an exuberance pervades his prose, even when he's upset and angry. He writes with the confidence of someone who is no longer mimicking the televangelist style, but is enjoying the liberating effects of inhabiting the form to convey a different set of beliefs and convictions—safe in the knowledge that the performance really works. In this regard, it seems that the choir and band were not just an addition to the act. Talen's enthusiastic

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

descriptions of the ensemble's early collective actions suggest that they completed it, transforming the creative possibilities of performance.

Devising songs and dance routines, experimenting with new formats for direct action and the show, and collaborating in the grassroots campaign that stopped the demolition of Edgar Allan Poe's house must have made the first few years an exciting time for anyone involved in the Church of Stop Shopping. Moreover, there can be little doubt that the musical backing increased the effectiveness of performance. Consider the difference in impact of even the simplest retail intervention. It's easy to dismiss some guy in a dog collar who starts shouting in the store where you're browsing or the Starbucks where you're drinking coffee with a friend. When security haul him off, you can conveniently conclude that he was caught shoplifting or was just another homeless guy with mental health problems. The happy shopping/cafe muzak will resume and so will your browsing/drinking and you'll probably forget the incident ever happened. If the same guy starts speaking loudly as other customers strip off their coats, stand tall in choir gowns, and burst into gospel harmonies while handing round flyers about sweatshop labor or the pittance paid to small coffee farmers, there's an unfolding drama that's impossible to ignore. This drama, in turn, generates a potentially win-win scenario. On the one hand, anyone who finds disturbance distasteful may think twice about returning to that particular store/café. On the other, as store security will invariably head straight for the preacher, anyone with a streak of curiosity in their temperament can turn to one of the singers to ask who they all are and what they're protesting about.

Yet, however exhilarating the early months or years of convergence in a creative project like the Church of Stop Shopping may be, it takes stamina and good organization to keep such an outfit going. Moreover, although the dramatic expansion of the choir and band (from about six to 35 chorists and from one to nine musicians) can be seen as a sign of success, such changes in scale are notoriously difficult to manage. The fact that the Church (constituted as a not-for-profit organization) is still on the road today seems testimony to the work of director Savitri Durkee and choirmaster James Solomon Benn, whose strengths seem to have complemented Talen's fearlessness and charisma. Under their coordination, the Church has pursued a core repertoire both at home in New York and on tour around the U.S., Canada, Africa, Europe, and Latin America. This repertoire includes performances to reach shoppers on the streets, in shops, car parks, and malls; scheduled shows for more interested audiences in arts venues, festivals and theaters; and support for grassroots campaigns and community organizations. Additionally, the Church can be hired to officiate at weddings, baptisms, and funerals. Talen has also experimented with other activities: monthly columns on the back page of *The Ecologist*; Sunday broadcasts on the internet; and in 2009 he stood as the Green Party candidate in the New York Mayoral elections (coming in fourth with about 8,000 votes). However, perhaps the most notable experiment was the feature documentary produced by Morgan Spurlock, which was released in December 2007.

What Would Jesus Buy? was written and directed by Rob Van Alkemade, and is complemented by a book of the same title by Talen.⁸ This 91-minute documentary follows Reverend Billy and the Church on their December 2005 U.S. tour. Starting

⁸ Bill Talen, *What Would Jesus Buy?* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007). I only came across this book late in the writing of this essay because, curiously, it's not listed on the Church's website and was not promoted during the U.K. tour.

from rehearsals in New York and culminating with the Reverend's arrest in Disneyland on Christmas Day, it tracks the highs and lows of their efforts to save Christmas from the Shopocalypse. But this is not really a film about a group of political performers, their ideas, ethos, and strategies—although it gives some insight into these (and underscores the fact that “it takes guts” to go on a mission).⁹ Like many novels of the same genre, it's a picaresque that uncovers the state of a nation.¹⁰ In other words, the tour undertaken by the central characters is a vehicle for showing the viewer key social sites around the country. We visit the scary Mall of America in Minnesota with its four miles of shop fronts, amusement park, university campus, Church, funeral parlor Next, we call in at Traer, Iowa, with its boarded up shops and deserted Main Street, emblematic of small towns across the U.S.¹¹ Then it's off to Walmart headquarters in Arkansas, before heading down to Texas and New Mexico, on to Las Vegas, and finally Los Angeles. Along the way, as with any picaresque, we also witness the central characters' encounters with a range of social types. Through the *vox pop* interviews, we meet Americans of different ages, occupations and ethnicities, as well as hearing from clergymen, historians, psychologists, addiction therapists, and trade unionists in the more standard expert interviews.

Like Spurlock's 2004 documentary, *Supersize Me*, this is a film with momentum and style. It is organized in eleven episodes, each focusing on a different theme loosely mapped on to a stage of the tour: New-Born Bling; Nation of Consumers, Santa for Sale, and so on. You can sense that a lot of fun was had in its making (not least in the comic sketches of the Reverend in a street confessional absolving the sins of shopping addicts). It combines skilful camera work and creative inventiveness with masterful editing of a rich range of visual and audio materials. In the opening sequence, for example, the collage of images and sounds becomes almost kaleidoscopic. Queues of shoppers, cash-registers, interiors of warehouses and stores, are intercut with footage of TV anchors, as the voiceover reels out a list of shocking figures: “60 percent of Americans are in long term debt on their credit cards”; “it is estimated that 15 million Americans may be clinically addicted to shopping”; “three-quarters of Americans now view Christmas with more dread than anticipation, yet [they] will spend half a trillion dollars on Christmas goods this year and create five million tonnes of extra waste.” Elsewhere the effect is quite surreal: the camera ranges over New York shop windows to the soundtrack of *Happy Holidays*. But in the close-ups, the smiling Santas, Rudolfs, and Miceys take on a baleful, sinister aspect.

The portrait that emerges is of a nation in thrall to consumerism and molded by corporate power. Kids swamped by presents, parents in debt; shop assistants threatened, cursed and spat on if the latest computer gismo is out of stock; the iconography of stable and crib displaced by Disney characters in red robes; TV anchors acting as cheerleaders for the grotesque binge—“Just 30 days of shopping

⁹ As an African American standing outside a Methodist Church put it on meeting three members of the choir, “You're on a mission? That takes guts!” Rob Van Alkemade, director, *What Would Jesus Buy?* (New York, Artefact Films, 2007).

¹⁰ The significance of the picaresque novel in documenting and portraying the state of a nation was illuminated by Benedict Anderson in Chapter 2 of his seminal book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991 revised edition).

¹¹ As one of the remaining small shopkeepers tells us, [Before they opened the Walmarts 20 miles in each direction] “Saturday nights everybody came into town, and we'd be busy. We'd be busy until eleven, twelve o'clock at night.”

until Christmas”; “Buy Now, Pay Later.” In this commercialized landscape and culture, the efforts of Billy and the troupe seem no more than Lilliputian pinpricks. Moreover, the incomprehension they face and their difficulties in making any impact leave the viewer in no doubt about the scale of change needed to put U.S. society on a more ethical and sustainable basis. This isn’t just a question of confronting shopping addiction, changing social norms, or even breaking the power of the large corporations. Reclaiming everyday life from corporate consumerism will also involve redesigning much of the urban infrastructure. As one interviewee points out, many U.S. towns and cities have no sidewalks. Yet, despite presenting a damning indictment of the state of contemporary America, *What Would Jesus Buy?* is not heavy-going. It’s a documentary suffused by contrast, irony and humor, which succeeds in making the familiar strange. So it’s both entertaining and compelling to watch.

If the Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping came into being during a period characterized by the rise and consolidation of consumer capitalism, their message is just as relevant today. Despite the financial crisis, there is no sign that political elites are rethinking the model of the growth economy or the over-consumption on which it depends. Rather, the goal is to make temporary adjustments in order to restore growth. “Belt-tightening” is likely to deepen the exploitation of labor and natural resources, further exacerbating inequalities and ecological degradation while enabling the large retail corporations to expand their control of the market. The easy credit that fuelled the boom is more scarce, and poorer households are being forced to cut their spending (widening the gap between aspiration and reality). But even some reduction by the middle-classes will nonetheless leave their consumption at levels unthinkable 30 years ago. Moreover, everyday life continues to be saturated by multiform messages enticing and exhorting us to go out and shop. Even on the green, left, and liberal wings of the mainstream media, there is still a lot of obfuscation around consumerism and an amazing reluctance to face the issue squarely. In other words, the crisis has had little impact on consumerism as the core modality of social integration and the dominant cultural form shaping orientations, habits, practices, values, and desires. So, counter-hegemonic messages and grassroots campaigns are crucial; and performance-based organizations have a special role to play because they can generate fresh languages of contention, reach a wide range of people, and provoke media attention.

The particular achievement of everyone involved in the Church of Stop Shopping is to have developed a direct, energizing form that fuses wit, humor, and analysis while fostering alternative conceptions of the good life.¹² This fusion makes the productions discussed in this essay valuable pedagogical resources suitable for people of different ages and backgrounds. The acute observations in Talen’s book and the graphic portrait provided by the film mean they are well suited for BA and MA teaching, complementing more academic texts on contemporary culture, consumption, globalization, and the environment. Showing the film may also be helpful as a catalyst for generating discussion about ethics, personal consumption, and the environment in high school classes, youth and community groups, or even in more informal settings among family, friends and neighbors.¹³ The Church’s

¹² The recent change of name to Church of Life After Shopping reflects this emphasis on the good life.

¹³ In this regard, the U.S. focus doesn’t restrict its relevance. Although levels of consumption in the U.S. make it an extreme case, the trends will be familiar elsewhere given that many countries have

productions also lend themselves to less direct, more anonymous ways of generating reflection and spreading the message. The Church website suggests taking the *Shopocalypse* CD along to parties and slipping it on the CD player when nobody's paying attention. But numerous other possibilities and experiments come to mind. If you've got some spare cash, for example, you could order extra copies to leave on the train, bus, or park benches with a note asking people to email their responses before passing them on. Conversely, if you've more time than money, there's a wealth of pithy phrases in the lyrics of the anthems and Talen's book that could be put to good use in producing flyers and posters to distribute in public space, or in a graffiti campaign. Most of us don't have the talents to go out onto the streets to perform, or the resilience to do so for years on end. But we can all do something—anything that disrupts the consumerist trance, gets people to pause, think, and STOP SHOPPING (at least so much)!

experienced similar transformations over the last fifteen years. Moreover, extreme cases are often very useful as a point of comparison.