

GOD-SIGHTINGS, AND POST-COMMERCIAL COMPLEXITY

by Bill Talen, aka Rev Billy, of the Church of Stop Shopping

Lifting your hand from the product and backing away from it, a bright, unclaimed space opens up. Consumers think it is a vacuum. (But really it is only the unknown, and full of suppressed ocean life, glitterati from Bosch, DNA twists, childhood quotes that remembered would burn down the Disney Store.) Many Americans consider this withdrawing gesture a dark thing, like a mid-eastern beard. Officially, it is absurd, an anti-gesture, like an American who didn't go west, who didn't go into space, who had sex without a car.

In the Church of Stop Shopping we believe that buying is not nearly as interesting as not-buying. When you back away from the purchase, the product may look up at you with wanton eyes but the product dies quickly back onto the shelf and sits there, trying to get a life. The product needs you worse than you need it, remember that.

An American who lifts the hand from the shelf, and pulls that hand back into the aisle, and backs away from a product and carefully moves toward the door, feels turbulence deep in the muscles' memory of the grab, lift, swipe of plastic, the receipt question and bagging for the road. The ex-consumer can easily lose his or her footing, buffeted by all those ghost gestures. You discover that in fact by not-buying you are consuming so much more, but that now you are no longer *being* consumed.

Not-buying is a brave thing to do. It may induce vertigo, identity-weirdness and a need for an unwanted pregnancy, for instance, but most often --- a new believer will have an abnormal kitsch-acquisition fit. The first response to the break in buying may be a huge sucking sound in your hands -- you want to buy something, ANYTHING. You are headed for a relapse, a spree. My pastoral advice is -- steer clear of Ralph Lauren or Kenneth Cole or one of the fashion designers who is trying to anticipate the non-buying revolution by copping a look of weatheredness, off-handedness, or lack of manufacture. Their design and sales department think all day about your escape, admiring it and blocking it. They study you from their easy chairs in the surveillance cameras, pulling on their chins, going to their meetings.

No, escape the rag-shapers and follow your divinating hands into a nearby thrift store. As a guiding principle, ask yourself if what is before you is a sweatshop product, and if it is new. If you buy it new, then you not only buy the product, you also support the moral economy that brought it to that shelf. (Garage, thrift, flea-market and many non-chain stores are not regarded as dens of buying in our sin system).

But now you are in motion. The sad little product recedes into the background. You have gone all the way to the pure barter. You give energy and are allowed passage into the unknown. Into the gaudy infinitude above, into the hilarious depths within. Absurd. Nothing purchased. What is an American to do? You can make your way to the breathtaking evening sky. Go in Peace, unsponsored, unmediated. Sanctified oddness is what I wish for you now, children.

so very hard to do

In another time in the world, long long ago, you could go ahead and have a life without shopping. But now life without shopping is something that takes years of practice, since shopping is now so virulent and ubiquitous that mothers are ultra-sounding their wombs with Mozart so that their privileged fetuses will score higher on their SAT's. Now everything from the most intimate disease to daydreaming is a pretext for the avant fascism of Convenience, Comfort, and Closure.

Now real ordinary life is something that we must try to re-admit into our designs. We wonder -- how much of real life hasn't made it into our fully mediated consumption. We have long-ago made a thousand purchases where a thousand doors closed behind us and we walked farther into that big, big sale. The dumbstruck laughter and awe that is felt by those who remember how to live ordinary life—this must now be re-introduced in the most remedial way.

In our strange worship at The Church of Stop Shopping we recently took a shiny Sunbeam toaster and put it in the center of the altar. A young man named Jonah walked up the aisle of the church for his baptism. He walked toward the Sunbeam and his obvious admiration of it, competing with his faith in the potential of his own buylessness, was clear to the sinners in the church that Sunday. The congregation prayed that he would somehow not grab that little chrome bread-heater and not walk toward a cash register of the mind. I placed my hand on the forehead of this shaking soul, and channeled hope from the Kingdom of Odd. The poor sinner pleaded with us, "Oh I don't need your help, I'm just BROWSING!" How could we possibly blame him for the bald lie? We had placed the Sunbeam deluxe beautifully on a red velvet table-cloth...

As the sinner reaches for the product, we pray hard. The choir hums an encouraging harmony. The deacons move forward and lay hands on the craven consumer, and the devil pulls the begging fingers toward the toaster. "Oh! I smell toast and butter. Oh my God! Black current jam on the butter, oh, OH!" The cry is hideous. But alas! – Jonah the lost sinner suddenly jerks with life, it's the arrival of regular life, life from before the great white sale that bedeviled his sucker's soul.

Jonah's hand flies free, back, back, and that eternal gap opens up there, glittering with mystery. The parishioner runs around the church with that free hand held aloft by the preacher, shaking with the new freedom, oxygenated, unburdened. The Stop Shopping Gospel Choir is now swaying with the power of a receiptless God-Goddess which surpasseth all valuation.

The object looks cheated, cuckolded. Finally, the Sunbeam deluxe toaster is fucking junk.

the old gods haws their wares

The most powerful church in the world is the Church of the Stupified Consumer. This is a fundamentalist church run by famous telegangels. Recent leaders of this church have included Jerry Falwell, Michael Eisner, George Bush, Thomas Friedman of the New York Times, Starbucks' Howard Schultz and his buddy Ariel Sharon, and Osama bin Laden.

The common strain here is the extreme top-down enforcement by the powerful. You know what class you belong to by how psychically exhausted you are. This is the Church of the Dictatorial God whose details are distributed to consumers as prayers, objects and arbitrary demands on behavior. The consumer-believer is expected to fetishize a vast array of gadgets, foods, and rags – and, of course, when the President needs votes, we buy bombs.

transnational corporations are what, exactly?

In recent years, the newest denomination of the Church of the Hypnotized Consumer is the transnational corporation. This new branch of the church has taken notes on the successes of Catholicism and other imperial god-systems and has done very well with their little confession booths called Texaco, Starbucks, and the Gap. The first responsibility of their \$10 Billion a year permanent advertising campaign is to persuade the believers that to buy these products is an act of freedom. "Democracy," the word and its rituals, is pulled over the phrase "racist hate" by the force of ten thousand million dollars. Of course these unholy men would deny that what

they do is anything like a church, or superstition, or outright hypnosis.

This Church of the Final Consumption promises us, like all religions, a full, rich life – and the trained actors who are paid to grin happily on the packages and flickering screens are sexily persuasive – but it turns out that the opposite is true. Products actually compete with real life. America’s most famous product is the car. It is generally sold with the promise of sex with a rich tall thin white woman. In fact, not since the ’64 Corvette, with the possible exception of the ’67 Cutlass Olds – did the automobile bring its passengers to a really memorable orgasm. The upwardly mobile orgasm, or yuppiegasm, promised by the current ads, is not an orgasm worth gasping.

not-buying, and into that reverse gesture, that new space, comes...

Our parishioners, in the first weeks and months of not-buying, have started seeing the Odd Goddess God big time. People start sending me emails reporting bizarre experiences in the first weeks and months of buyinglessness. We decided to call these reports -- God-sightings, after the phrase Elvis-sightings. In the Stop Shopping Church we hold in high regard those who experience Godsightings in a nondiscriminating way, as in, you know, all the time. In our system, The Supreme Personality of Divine Godhead will go down that bumpy road of miraculously Odd encounters. Could be weird. Amen.

We prefer the God-Goddess of that Egyptian Gnostic sect who believed in a new god every day. They said, “I wake up and know that today I will duet with the mystery, and we will make God together.” Yes, the portable, renewable superior being. Sounds much safer. Although, speaking of bumpy weird roads, that Gnostic sect was butchered by the early proto-catholics. Well, let’s keep trying.

godsightings

But before I offer examples of these god-sightings, children, let me make a few observations.

First, I would like to emphasize: the shift in actual buying patterns among our parishioners, in many cases, was not really that radical. Some Stop Shopping believers were swinging over to a state of not-buying from daily trips to the mall, that’s true. It’s also true that others seemed to come alive politically, smiling as they came with us into Starbucks and Disney Stores and Wal-Marts, interrupting the flow of sweatshop items with inspired foolishness. They found the embarrassing moment that is revelatory. They ascended to the State of Sanctified Oddness. They have discovered a better America, a landscape of the imagination that became real.

But for many the shift was more subtle. For this second group of not-buyers, the utopian future that advertising promises with each purchase became a bit of a joke. (When seduction fails, it becomes funny very quickly. The woman in the car is batting her eyes, we say no, and she looks suddenly like Buster Keaton.) Many of these not-buyers never consumed much anyway, but now cultivate a new independence from the things they feel they are forced to buy, like computers and cellphones. Certainly many of us have been over-connected and under-experienced.

unexpected communities

Those of us who started this “church” didn’t know that we would need this community not only to come down from the drug of that great anti-depressant, *shopping*—but also, to confess to each other our godsightings. If the gathering together of our church dates more or less from the Seattle-WTO winter of ’99 – ’00—by late that Spring the not-buying was changing us more generally than, say, new clarity in our political opinions. Believers began pulling me aside and explaining that backing away from the product made them experience a new kind of privacy.

A new kind of privacy? Ironically, that is what made it necessary to support each other in a church, a community. We had to help each other with the carnivale of memories, so vivid we described them as highly produced, technicolor by deluxe, with sensurround, arriving in the brain with almost a ferocity. And using movie words as I have here to describe these visions doesn't seem quite right, these are only stand-ins for our own words. What was happening to us was replacing product-visions like Hollywood, fashion, etc. We apparently always had these broadcastings on our own, waiting in our bodies.

Now they flood up into us as dreams, unexpected kinds of intelligence, or come at us from the outside world in the form of coincidence, beauty, patterns of cooperation in elements that were thought to be chaotic, talking birds, laughing fits and visions of Peace.

let's take a wisdom break

And now the reading of the word, from The Book Of Thomas, evicted from the New Testament by the male honchos in the Palestine Screenwriters Guild. This is a quote from Mary's star monologist, the Andy Kaufman of his time, Jesus of Nazareth.

*If you bring forth that which is within you, that which you bring forth will save you.
If you do not bring forth that which is within you, that which you do not bring forth will destroy you.*

So it seems. We want to travel from the second of those conditions toward the first. The product-centered life, we now believe, keeps the stuff stuffed. In this case we would also argue that products block, or as the academics say – mediate – the things that we would bring forth from the world outside. God-sightings have come from both directions, from the inside and the outside, following the withdrawal of the product fetish with unexpected quickness, the way that a river seems to clean itself up so quickly when the pollution is stopped.

In sum: We are continually surprised how closed and shut experience becomes when life is lived through the mediation of products. We are led to believe through advertisers that we will experience life in a very special way -- through products. And the implication or even threat inherent in our daily ad bath is that a life without products is no life at all. Such a notion would be eccentric. That would be the way Time Magazine has painted life in Cuba for the last 40 years... unlivable because the food isn't processed and the medicine is free and the cars are old. But our surprise at the completeness of Consumer World is fully measured only through not-buying, by looking back at that way of living from an increasing experience of "God-sightings."

And so, really – this book is made of godsightings, sometimes it's a quick hit and then it's a long campaign to get to it and then assessments to come down from it. The "it," the elemental thing – is always in that unclaimed space when the hand lifts from the product.

godsightings

I will try to go to the field often in the book; I'm not the theorist. When in doubt go back into the store, find your *true embarrassment*. Get your bearings by going back to the product and backing away from it. And so our book will offer tear-away dramatic scripts -- designed for the stage of the store, or the street. Which for this first chapter means examples of god-sightings from folks who have been buying less. These constitute the tear-away political action recipe for this chapter. I hope it encourages us to "bring forth" ourselves, and call me if you get arrested, because we've got to work free of the imagination industries that would pull our hand back to the tchotchke on the shelf, and this whole enterprise is unpatriotic, bad for jobs, bad for the Bushes, and illegal.

These innocent findings that follow aren't making that sort of claim as to legality, effectiveness, or even

coherence. But they have arranged themselves on my desk as somehow replying to the hopes I've expressed in this sermon (this Introduction) today. In some of the sightings you can see the products trying to retake the stage in opposition to characters that originate from another (the private) source. The products will re-appear as misunderstood villains, as the story within the soul is plotting toward a change.

Note: These believers did offer permission to do this, but it is true that many sightings cannot and should not be shared. We don't subscribe to the world of frenetic confession, a social inflammation that we also identify with that outmoded time when everything was appraised for its value in a sale. There are more god-sightings posted at the church website Revbilly.com and we invite you to send a sighting or three with your first name and the place on the earth where it came up.

Reverend:

I have a sighting. I was sitting in a chair behind a man in a blue windbreaker. He was angled so he was looking up at a large window. This was at the unemployment office. I looked up because I felt deep strong sorrow, from him, from his back and the back of his head. He was, maybe, 60 years old or so. He didn't move for a half hour at least. I made myself not be in a hurry and I sat there behind him. His blue jacket became a like a screen and I saw several loved ones' faces there, one after the other, and some of them dead a long time. When I left I put my hand on the man's shoulder, very lightly, and he turned and smiled that kind of sorrow smile.

Doreen, Sante Fe

Dear Rev:

Well, I was minding my own business, driving down the New Jersey turnpike, doing the speed limit, when I checked my rear view mirror before changing lanes and Behold! There was the Lord smiling at me. She said, "Stay in this lane and get off at Exit #11." I followed her instructions and ended up finding my true love at a rest stop."

Susan, NYC

I saw this 4 x 4, a boxy shaped car, on TV. It swam down a waterfall, somersaulted over a forest and leapt up a cliff; it didn't seem to have a driver, this was the 4 x 4 itself doing all this. It was doing what a salmon does, then a monkey, then a mountain goat. It lands on a pinnacle of rock under an Arizona sunset. That was the dramatic helicopter shot. Then I turned and my mother was standing behind me. She has Alzheimer's. She was looking at me with a smile like the Cheshire cat. Down at her feet was a little circle of jars with the tops screwed off. They were different kinds of spreads, jelly, peanut butter. She arranged them in a circle and the tops were gone and we looked down at that and back at each other a couple times and then were started laughing so hard.

John, Illinois

Dear Rev:

I had backed away from the product, as you say, for a while, about three or four months. I had this dream. Tell me what you think. I was watching an old Disney classic from the 40's. A Mickey Mouse short. Back from when his face looked different. And he was bouncing around the screen, very very happy. Then I woke from the dream and realized that I really was at my pad and this stuff was on TV. I fell asleep and I was dreaming what I would've seen if I had my eyes on the TV. You following this? So I

laughed and I sat up. Now I'm watching Mickey on TV and Mickey stops, he's standing in the middle of the screen staring at me, like he busted me. I'm feeling ashamed that I would ever want to leave him. He wants to be liked. He's standing there looking at me and he's not happy now. So, I guess this isn't one of your god-sightings. If I had a dream and Mickey isn't smiling any more, than I must be closer to seeing god.

Brad, Sebastopol

Dear Rev:

I remembered when I was about ten, I was at the neighbor's swimming pool, and there was this bead of water on the tile. The sun was making rainbows in it and I never saw this before. I watched that bead of water with all those colors for a long time, until a foot squashed it. It's my aunt Joan, who's saying something up there, but then I saw another bead of water on her toenail, and that made me laugh. Her toes had lots of colors, in the sun, but she didn't know. Ever since, I always wait to see the colors when the sun shines on the water.

Louise, Camden, Maine