Spirituality as Resistance: What would Jesus buy?

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Abstract

There are several frames of resistance mediated through popular cultural visual texts; like spirituality, civil action and so on - we must note that these would not fall into the category of direct political action. Now, resistance is as much a patch work of methods, as it is filammented. Resistance is both interpretative (reactionary, arising as a response to stimulus) and subversive (progressive and pro-active), in relation to authoritarian processes and metanarratives. For instance, in Bill Talen’s political theater, we see how he and his colleagues mediate their Leftist Christian views through pastiche- they rely on parody, dystopia, and theoathanatology, inversion of the conventional performance theatre, inscription and inversion of liberation theology.

Keywords: Political Theater, Post Colonialism, Spirituality, Stand-up Comedy, Postmodernism, Civil Society

What Would Jesus Buy? is a 2007 documentary directed by Rob VanAlkemade. It is a self-reflexive attempt by ‘thinking Americans’ to conscientise Americans about their neo colonialism. What Would Jesus Buy? follows Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping Gospel Choir as they go on a cross-country mission to save Christmas from the Shopocalypse: the end of mankind brought about by consumerism and over-consumption. In addition to featuring the Reverend’s sermons, the documentary has excerpts

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from interviews with historians, psychiatrists, authors, therapists and the clergy besides shoppers.

The Church of Stop Shopping later began to be known as The Church of Life after Shopping and is a registered non-profit organization. The group draws inspiration from Reverend Sidney Lanier—a cousin of Tennessee Williams. This group constitutes performance activists. Bill Talen assumes the stage name of Reverend Billy. The character of Reverend Billy is a hybrid of a street preacher and a televangelist. The reverend’s prime preaching spot is the Times Square where he strategically positions himself in front of the Disney Store. Disney, according to these activists, encompasses the Seven Deadly Sins. The Reverend and his Choir dissuade shoppers from excessive, conspicuous and unnecessary indulging of themselves. Reverend Billy and his colleagues are frequently arrested on charges of disrupting public life. Most of these arrests form footage of the documentary.

Reverend Billy uses Biblical analogies to re-evaluate contemporary American lifestyles. He thus characterizes hell as eternal debt. He tries to retrieve the Christ figure that was eventually replaced by Santa. Santa—also read the spirit of Christmas, especially in USA now stands for inconceivably expensive gifts and credit shopping. It is interesting to note that size zero Santa is now being promoted by health insurance companies and food cartels as the new spirit of Christmas. In this archeological-spiritual endeavour of tracing the Christ figure, Disney in general; and more specifically Mickey Mouse is set up as the Anti-Christ.

Compulsive buying during Christmas and on other occasions is attacked severely by these evangelists. The reverend and his choir say that supporting Disney in its shopocalyptic enterprise are Wall mart and Starbucks. The premises for the ideological attacks launched by the group on corporate chains are: displacement of local small businesses, unfair labour practices including union busting and their role in creating what Talen calls a fake Bohemia. This Bohemian life is not even genuine— it is an overrated imitation.
Tytel (2005) in a report on AlterNet entitled *The Reluctant Religion of Reverend Billy*, comments on the manner, method and commitment of these performance activists:

> Whether this is theater or religion remains an open question. I have come to see a man expound a moral truth to a crowd of believers while his choir sings hymns from the dais behind him -- in a church no less. So how is that different from any religion? If the preacher is a fake, but he preaches his sermon sincerely to a crowd of authentic believers, is it an act or is it conviction?

We might ask if performance activism is spirituality at all. I think this kind of conscientising initiatives (as those undertaken by Bill Talen) assert their political commitment more profoundly than other misleading religious cults who hoodwink their followers into feel-good bubbles. Bill Talen has faith in his message and he is more a mode of expression that a character. Dee (2004), who profiled Rev. Billy in The New York Times magazine, writes:

> The whole Reverend Billy experience, born in parody, was becoming less and less distinguishable from an actual church service- a reaffirmation, in a realistic setting, in a common core of spiritual values.

What Reverend Billy and his choir are doing is manifold. They are working towards reassessing the goals that churches and religious organizations should set for themselves as responsible, thinking believers; they are attacking the capitalist ways of large multinationals, they are identifying the role that America is playing in uncritically promoting and supporting corporates, they are reviewing the American capitalist viciousness in relation to other advancing countries, they are setting up a civil society response to an unthinking Government and unreformative Governmental policy; and they are attempting to recover the spirit of Christmas (which is not unmeaning gift-giving but a regard for critical thinking and frugal living). A similar interaction between the Government and Civil Society is discussed further by Sudipto Kaviraj.
Reverend Billy’s sermon is material and spiritual at the same time. There is no professional glamour in Bill Talen’s activism theater. The Reverend hails Jesus the peasant revolutionary, Gandhi, Dr. King and Cesar Chavez. The Choir concludes by singing "democracy is not for sale," and with a sung version of the first amendment. The First Amendment to the United States Constitution is part of the Bill of Rights. The amendment prohibits the Congress from making laws "respecting an establishment of religion", impeding the free exercise of religion, infringing on the freedom of speech and infringing on the freedom of the press. Reverend Billy has only one agenda- “Stop Shopping! Changeallujah!” By “stop Shopping”, Reverend Billy does not mean a rigid boycott of all buying. He wants shoppers to answer a few questions before shopping- as the therapist in the documentary puts it- questions about need and affordability.

Reverend Billy is thorough with his performance. He sets up confession booths at shopping complexes for compulsive shoppers to confess their shopping sins. A 2009 movie shares this theme and title- Confessions of a Shopaholic. American compulsive consumerism seems to peak at Christmas. A few days before Christmas, Reverend Bill and his team interview a salesperson at a mall. This salesperson reveals that she was spit at when she informed an old lady (who wanted to gift her grandchild an Xbox for Christmas) that they were out of stock. We also hear a mother yelling in the background - “I don’t care if I’m broke, it’s for my kids”.

As they travel across USA, the members of the Church of Stop Shopping note that there are no sidewalks on most American highways. This implies that the country is divided into two kinds of spaces- residential and commercial. All space is claimed and there is no longer a sense of free space. There has been an obvious malling of America. This insight is followed by the protests of the group at the Mall of America.

Reverend Billy is then shown buying a sweater in a local store. He has a chat with the owner who admits that small stores have been knocked out of business by retail chains. The Reverend notes, after
the fashion of Malcolm X that one must look for the ‘Made in America’ tag, if one wants to save America from the Shopacolypse. He also crusades against brand names promoted by celebrities. America is shifting its locations. This is the observation that Jameson had made about Multinational Capitalism. In the era of Late Capitalist Postmodernism, it is all the more difficult to encounter because in this phase, it is decentered and dispersed. If a consumer buys at chain retail stores, it is only a redundant choice between low prices as pitched against low wages for local workers. The temptation of lower prices is only setting in motion more vicious gyres of economic collapse. The choice is also one of placing a local American worker against the third world sweat shop worker. The documentary also shows a few American teenage girls being told by these activists about sweat shops. They are then seen making a phone call to Wall Mart to check where their products come from. The operator is unable to answer them. So extensively outsourced are the supply chains that they are beyond trace. These concerns began to be discussed by popular movies of America as early as 1940- *The Shop around the Corner*. The theme remains relevant even now- revived intermediately by movies like You’ve Got Mail (1998).*Walmart destroys the American Dream*. This can be seen happening in Bangalore too. Mr. Shanbhog of Premiere book store on Church Street had been displaced in the same manner as Fox Books displaces the shop around the corner in the 1940 movie with the same theme.

As Christmas approaches, there are increasing traffic gridlocks caused by shoppers. Christmas Eve is the worst. The Reverend and his team, travelling in a large bus, get stuck in the jam as they travel to Disney Land for their Christmas protest. The framework of the documentary is almost Baudrillardian. The documented narrative follows the team on a guided tour of Disney Land just before they are about to launch their protest. Disney land is compared to the yellow brick road as in the Wizard of Oz where there is nothing behind the curtain. Mickey Mouse- the Reverend’s Anti Christ figure is depicted as Lady Liberty at the Disney toy outlets. Disney Land’s image as the happiest place on earth is inverted by the documentary by focusing a series of shots on weeping and unhappy kids on the Disney rides.
This Disney Land innuendo is accentuated when we realize that all the titles of the subsections in the documentary are in Disney fonts. The peaceful protestors- Reverend Billy and his choir begin their singing and demonstrations, as the annual Disney Christmas parade begins. All of them are then seen being taken into custody. In his 1995 book Simulacra and Simulation, Baudrillard sketches how a sign reaches a stage of emptiness in a series of steps: (1) the sign represents a basic reality (2) the sign misrepresents/ distorts the reality behind it (3) the sign disguises the fact that there is no corresponding reality underneath (4) the sign bears no relation to any reality at all. Simulacrum is an identical copy without an original. A simulacrum is a superfluous sign. Simulation is the generation by models, of a real without origins of reality. In hyper-reality, the distinction between the real and the simulation implodes- the real and the imaginary collapse into each other. For Baudrillard, Disneyland stands for representation as reality.

“Let’s take the magic back to America” declares Reverend Billy while staging the Disney Land demonstration along with his colleagues. They differentiate between the main streets of America and the surreal streets of Disney Land to point out that America needs the magic touch of awareness, conscience and commitment. They also rightly ask: “how would you wrap Christmas?” Through the narrative of the documentary, it is not hard to see that Reverend Billy and his choir are completely exhausted and disappointed by the responses they got so far. The last fifteen minutes of the footage of the documentary show Reverend Billy exorcizing Wall Mart to rid it of capitalist evil. As always, the mall security asks the Reverend and his colleagues to leave the premises. One member of the security staff, however, congratulates Bill Talen for his political commitment and takes his picture. Also, as he and his team are being led away by the police, a by-stander at the mall requests Reverend Billy to baptize his child. After performing the baptism, Bill Talen acknowledges that he has attained fulfillment by that one gesture of support and all his tribulations have been worthwhile by that one act of favourable response from the American people-reaffirming a belief in the cause of political commitment and economic rejuvenation.
There are many streams of politically committed attacks on capitalism and neocolonialism. Spirituality and stand-up comedy are two such unconventional modes. Bill Talen potently combines both without diluting the political commitment aspect. He also explores the earlier strands of the Christian Left. The Christian left is a term originating in the United States, used to describe a spectrum of left-wing Christian political and social movements which largely embraces social justice. The term often specifically refers to Christian beliefs and can be interchangeable with the term Religious left. Subsequently, the term has been used to describe groups and persons from countries outside the US. It is the counterpoint to the Christian right, a spectrum of right-wing Christian political and social movements which largely embrace social conservatism. However, I feel that the documentary does not adequately explore the question of third world dependencies on US economy. Bill Talen asks for *Made in America*. Boycotting third world sweat shop products will not abate the neocolonial oppression of USA on third world countries. The dependence cycles have already been set in motion. The effects of the neocolonialist retreat will be as severe as the colonialist retreat. We wonder if boycott is a desirable method for negotiating neocolonialism. Reverend Billy’s ideas seem to have originated from the thoughts of Thoreau and Gandhi.

Notes

1 Confessions of a Shopaholic is a 2009 film adaptation of the Shopaholic series of novels by Sophie Kinsella.
2 Disney fonts are fonts that are designed to look like the magical fonts used in the various Disney animated films.
3 Source: Beginning Theory by Peter Barry.

References