



What Would Jesus Buy?

By Amy Goodman, King Features Syndicate

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"Black Friday" is the name retailers have given to the day after Thanksgiving in their attempt to make Christmas synonymous with shopping. On Black Friday, Americans are expected to flock to the malls and shopping centers, eager for discounts, armed with plastic. Business analysts fill the airwaves with predictions on how the fickle consumer will perform, how fuel prices and the subprime mortgage crisis will impact holiday shopping. Black Friday is followed by "Cyber Monday," a name coined by the retail industry to hype online shopping. Listening to the business news, one would conclude that the future not only of the U.S. economy but of humanity itself depends on mass, frenzied shopping for the holidays.

Rev. Billy is the street preacher played by Bill Talen, a New York City-based anti-consumerism activist who is the subject of a new feature-length documentary hitting theaters this week, "What Would Jesus Buy?" The film is produced by Morgan Spurlock, who gained fame with his documentary "Super Size Me," in which he showed his physical and emotional decline while eating only McDonald's food for breakfast, lunch and dinner for a month.

In the movie, Talen and his amazing Stop Shopping Gospel Choir cross the country in two biodiesel buses, holding public faux-Gospel revivals denouncing the "Shopocalypse," our crass, corporate, credit-driven consumerist culture and its reliance on sweatshops abroad and low-wage retail jobs at home, while celebrating small-town, Main Street economies, the strength and value of fair-trade shopping, and making do with less.

"We are here today, 28 days before Christmas," Rev. Billy intones at the outset of his tour, to his home congregation in Greenwich Village, "behind so many layers of billboards, with supermodels looking down on us in their Christmas lingerie, billboards covered with fake Dickensian gingerbread lattes -- we're going to go out across this shopping-addicted country." He added later, "We will sit down and defeat the bulbous yellow feet of the most famous corporate logo in the world, and the one that has chosen to steal our children's imaginations for 80 years, the devil, Mickey Mouse."

En route to Disneyland from New York City, the reverend and his flock stop by the Mall of America in Minnesota, Wal-Mart's world headquarters in Bentonville, Ark., and numerous Starbucks shops and big-box stores like Target and Staples -- educating and engaging, confronting and confounding, with creative street theater and direct action. In Traer, Iowa, we meet Michael Reuman, whose clothing store has been open for more than 100 years: "Wal-Mart is killing small-town America.

We've got two sons, and I have not encouraged either one of them to come back to the store. There's no future here."

This week, Charles Kernaghan of the National Labor Committee, standing in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, released a stunning report on the sweatshop conditions in which crucifixes are manufactured in China. St. Patrick's, Trinity Church in New York and the Association for Christian Retail all sell crucifixes traced to the Junxingye factory in Dongguan, China. There, women as young as 15 work seven days a week, 14 hours a day, and earn only 9 cents per hour, after room and board are deducted from their pay. What would Jesus buy, indeed.

Black Friday is also "Buy Nothing Day" -- a global boycott of shopping and consumerism. Started by Kalle Lasn and his colleagues at Vancouver-based Adbusters magazine, Buy Nothing Day seeks to place the ad-fueled and news-media-supported shopping frenzy in a global context. He says, "Driving hybrid cars and limiting industrial emissions is great, but they are Band-Aid solutions if we don't address the core problem: We have to consume less."

The fair-trade movement is growing -- focusing on safe, organic products made locally, by people earning not just the legal minimum wage but a living wage. Networks of sustainable businesses and nonprofit organizations are forming, linking producers with consumers, cutting out the corporations and the middlemen, allowing the people who make the items to get a larger share of the sale price. From clothing to chocolate to food to flowers to fuel, it is becoming increasingly easy to shop ethically. Heifer International features a selection of farm animals that you can sponsor, which the organization will deliver to a poor family in need elsewhere in the world.

This holiday season, spend time with family and friends -- it's worth more than money. Shop locally, or find a fair-trade store or Web site. Before walking into that big-box store, ask yourself, "What would Jesus buy?"

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