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Q and A with the Rev on Hawaii's consumer culture

August 28, 2007

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Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping are spreading their message of deliverance from rampant consumerism around the world. From Times Square to Disneyland, from Iceland and Argentina to Main Street, USA, Reverend Billy proselytizes unabashedly to consumers against the entrapments of over-consumption. Earlier this month, divine intervention (or just really good timing) brought contributing writer Jon Letman together with Reverend Billy during his first, and to date, only sermon in the Hawaiian islands. In the shadow of luxury resorts and cruise lines off-loading big box consuming tourists, the Reverend Billy spoke up about local issues facing Hawaii. Aloha-lujah!

JL: What do you see here in Hawaii that merits the attention of potential stop-shoppers?

RB: To be an American consumer in Hawaii is really to forcibly turn your back on what this extraordinary place is. On Kauai, I've seen people getting off a cruise ship and into shuttle buses to go to a windowless big box called Wal-Mart. To consume here is to willfully deny a paradise offered to you. The generosity of this earthly paradise needs to be understood and explored and you can't do that at a place like Wal-Mart. Resistance to consumption is all about being local. In Hawaii you have such a generous environment, so much is given to you here. Turn away from that strawberry that was flown 2,000 miles to your table. You've got amazing fruit here.

JL: Despite the big box anti-sentiment by many in Hawaii, many others welcome them for their variety and (sometimes) lower prices. How do you convince the head of a household with five kids working two or more jobs that Wal-mart is not the way to go?

RB: We don't judge anyone, but let's find a way to slow down our consumption. You help me and I will help you. It has been proven that multi-nationals depress the local economy and their employees make much less per hour. But in the need to clothe and feed their families, people have to go back to trans-nationals and buy sweat shop products. It's a cycle. Each area of the world has its own local power that offer doorways out of that trap, that big box. Let us work toward native, local solutions and get out of the entrapments of processed food and expensive medicines. It takes work and discipline to shift what you enjoy, what you make time for and that's not easy. People make confessions and email revbilly.com and we try to discuss situations people are in. We are contacted by people who want to change.

JL: Do you see connections between the huge military presence in Hawaii and patterns of corporate consumption here?

RB: It is clear from the Iraq war, if it already wasn't clear from previous

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colonial wars, that big companies like Bechtel, Alcoa and other large energy and weapons companies have direct ties to stores like Wal-mart and Home Depot. For years you'd always see Bush posing at a Home Depot. Wal-mart was the biggest donor to the GOP in the last election cycle.

The military is very much in bed with the idea of a consumer economy. Keep the people stupid, don't let them be radical Americans like the kind that started this country. Let them be consumers because consumers will put up with sweat shops. Consumers don't ask questions.

JL: There is a strong anti-development sentiment in Hawaii and yet the developers seem to be winning. Isn't development, even gradual development, inevitable?

RB: Absolutely not. It is true they may have incredible momentum and they will come back and try to get even a single "yes." Once they are here, it is hard to dislodge them.

Developers have stolen the idea of prosperity, the idea of future, and have copped the idea of growth, and people get waltzed into believing them. Now we know, and it has been proven, their idea of future is deadly. Their approach concentrates income in the hands of a few, it's false advertising. We have to build up our dream so when they come, we're not just protesters. We have to be able to know what we are, that we have a sustainable economy, don't want GMO, don't want big boxes. It's not so much a question of their power as it is of ours. Do we know how to develop our own language of a future that is working?

JL: Increasingly, Hawaii is becoming gentrified, communities where people are either very wealthy and can afford beautiful homes on huge properties, they work constantly just to get by, or else they are forced to move off island. What do you say to locals who have watched their islands turn into the new Aspen of the Pacific?

RB: Gentrification is the absence of god. It is just another form of the same force I am talking about – GMO agriculture, chain stores, big boxes. The defining characteristic is the same mono-culture. I have seen the same thing in New York, in Northern California. For example, there is a small town north of San Francisco called Bolinas that reminds me of Kauai. Orville Schell, the dean of the graduate school of journalism at UC Berkeley wrote a book about Bolinas called *The Town That Fought To Save Itself*. The town had to be very creative to keep out the people that were trying to buy their way in. They denied water licenses, permits for new structures and severely curtailed new homes. They also kept tearing down the "Bolinas" sign the highway department put up. Money was not always the mayor, not always the future.

In Hanapepe (on Kauai), I've seen wonderful local artwork. I witnessed a wonderful community center with a peace garden in the back. I've seen people who are devoted to the town building up local culture which is a way to build the local economy and you always get more power by believing in your local community.

"What would Jesus buy," a feature length film that follows Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping Gospel Choir as they travel the nation by bio-diesel fuel bus encouraging consumers to temper their consumption during the Christmas season will be released this November. The film was directed by Rob Van Alkemade and produced by Morgan Spurlock ("Super Size Me").

<http://www.wvjbmovie.com/>

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Jon Letman

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