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Reverend Billy's Unholy War

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On a Monday morning in Los Angeles, in a half-empty strip-mall Starbucks on Reseda Boulevard, two young women are declaring their love for each other.

"I can't keep it to myself any longer," says the one with the two-toned hair -- who, judging by the frowns and squeamish stares from the other customers, has made little enough effort to keep it to herself at all. She stands up. "I love you!" she says joyfully. "Brought to you by Monsanto!" Her companion blanches. The standing woman, it emerges, has obtained an endorsement deal for their love. Her lover, not surprisingly, has reservations, and an argument ensues.

In truth, these two women are not a couple at all; they are putting on a play, one of several being performed simultaneously inside the store. But this has not dawned yet on the legitimate customers. All they know is that their Starbucks routine has been hijacked somehow. They turn to each other, friends and strangers alike, with variants on the same question: Is this for real?

Enter, from the parking lot, Reverend Billy.

He is 6-foot-3, impossible not to look at in his white suit, clerical collar and dyed-blond pompadour. He is also not a real minister -- he is a New York-based performance artist and activist named Bill Talen -- but it

generally takes people a minute or two to figure that out, and this confusion over the exact derivation of his authority is the space in which he thrives. "Hallelujah!" he shouts through a white cardboard megaphone as he bursts through the door. "This is an abusive place, children! It has landed in this neighborhood like a space alien! The union-busting, the genetically-engineered milk, the fake bohemianism! But we don't have to be here, children! This is the Good News!"

The "actors" -- many of whom are members of the choir of Reverend Billy's church, the Church of Stop Shopping -- get up from their chairs and surround Talen, hands in the air, shouting, "Amen!" The manager of this particular Starbucks outpost is officially beside herself. She may not know what's happening, but her first instinct is to try to prevent people from taking pictures of it.

Talen (pronounced TAH-lin) makes his way to the counter, where he tries to lead the congregation in a laying of hands on the cash register. "We must exorcise this cash register," he shouts in his best Holy Roller cadence, "of the evil within it!" By this time -- as almost always happens -- one customer has taken it upon himself to come to the corporation's defense; he wrestles briefly with Talen, who, in trying to vault the counter (he is an athletic 52, but 52 nonetheless), gashes his hand on the register. Things are threatening to spin out of control, and Talen, who is on a tight schedule while in Los Angeles, has promised his wife and collaborator, Savitri Durkee (who is somewhere in the crowd), that he will stop short of being arrested.

"Let's leave now, children!" he says. "Starbucks is over!" Followed by the choir members and a few other acolytes, he exits onto Reseda Boulevard and strides toward his next engagement. As the adrenaline subsides, he looks down at the palm of his hand, which has now bled onto his white suit. "Stigmata," he smiles.

What has he just accomplished? The one person you can be sure will never again cross the threshold of the Reseda Boulevard Starbucks is Talen himself. (In fact, a subsequent court order enjoins him from coming within 250 yards of any of the 1,481 Starbucks franchises in the state of California.) But the proper measure for any street preacher is not the number of souls he saves; it is the purity of his example. The road is long and hard for an evangelical, even a fake one.

Can true activism be funny? Talen's performance would have to be categorized more as guerrilla theater than as activism; to the extent that the expansion of a business like Wal-Mart (another of Reverend Billy's *betes noires*) is ever successfully opposed -- as recently happened in Inglewood, Calif., via public referendum -- that opposition comes from unions and grass-roots political organizations, not from Brechtian street performers with self-described "bad Elvis hair."

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