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**A California court bans performance activist Reverend Billy from preaching at Starbucks**

## No More Coffee Talk

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Exile from the latte kingdom: Bill Talen  
(photo: Robert Yager)

**F**our years ago, theatrical provocateur Reverend Billy launched his crusade against Starbucks. The New York-based performance activist told *The Village Voice* ("**Rage Against the Caffeine**," April 25, 2000) that it was his intention to preach against corporate greed in Starbucks cafés all across Manhattan. In response, the company issued an internal memo to its NYC stores, establishing a protocol on how to handle one of the Reverend's "interventions."

Bill Talen, a/k/a Reverend Billy, has delivered on his promise, having done hundreds of political pieces inside the chain's many locations worldwide. But Starbucks, at least for the time being, doesn't have to worry about any more of

Talen's impromptu teach-ins of the Tazo set.

A California brew-haha led to the Reverend's temporary exile from the latte kingdom. On April 19, 2004, Reverend Billy performed his usual Starbucks ritual upon entering one of the chain's locations on Reseda Boulevard in Northridge, California. He prayed for the healing of the store's computerized cash register, asking for the bills that lay safely locked inside to make their way into the pockets of the families who work for low wages to harvest the coffee beans. One can rest assured that he was not praying for more of that money to go to the corporation's billionaire founder, Howard Schultz, or to aid its union-busting operations, or, in all probability, to help the chain reach its goal of expansion to 30,000 stores worldwide.

In a recent phone interview, Talen described how, as he prayed with "one hand in the air, and one hand on the thing that needs to be healed," he was grabbed from behind by an aggravated Starbucks customer, who witnesses claim was an ex-marine. Some say he was "tackled"; Talen himself describes it as a "bear hug." Either way, the Reverend was going down. After a few chaotic minutes, both Talen and the computerized cash register came away anything but healed. Talen walked away with a bleeding palm, which he and his Church of Stop Shopping choir dubbed the "Cash Register Stigmata," and the cash register's plastic guard was apparently torn.

Talen has made a career out of provoking strange scenes in chain stores. As early as 1999, he was agitating with his crucified Mickey Mouses and evangelical gesticulations at the Disney Store in Times Square. His message then was one of communal salvation: the preservation of neighborhood uniqueness and spontaneous culture in the face of what some members of the Reverend Billy project call corporations' "colonization." According to one Church of Stop Shopping choir member, "It's not usually an upsetting experience for the customers."

Nothing in the past has come close to the response that Reverend Billy and his choir received on

Reseda Boulevard. Aside from being jumped for his theatrical antics, the reaction was unusual in that a police report was filed with the LAPD, resulting in the first ever trial by jury for Talen (slated to begin in a Los Angeles criminal court on November 1).

In addition, the court issued a temporary restraining order on Talen, stipulating that he refrain from coming within 250 yards of any of California's over 1,500 Starbucks. He is also barred from entering any Starbucks in the U.S. until this injunction expires in July of 2007. Ironically, the first judge assigned to the case had to recuse himself from the upcoming trial because of his shareholder status in Starbucks Corporation.

Talen was arrested for his theatrical protests during last November's Buy Nothing Day festivities in New York, though he was dismissed without charges. (For Talen, a night in the Tombs in defense of free speech is nothing to be ashamed of.) But the misdemeanor charges filed against him in California—destruction of property and obstruction of business—are something totally new.

Art Goldberg, Talen's attorney from the Working People's Law Center in Los Angeles, says that the security camera tape of the event is in Talen's favor: "After seeing the video, [it was clear that] he didn't disrupt much. The other person was an aggressor."

Professor Tony Perucci, who had invited Talen to teach his communications students at Cal State Northridge, was also at Starbucks that day. He feels that the prosecution of this activist could only happen "outside the spotlight of New York, where he's so well known."

While Starbucks is not bringing the suit against Talen, as would happen in a civil case, it is the corporation that is named as "victim" in the proceedings. Ever alert to corporate ironies, those in Reverend Billy's camp are quick to point out that the "victim," in their reading of the temporary restraining order, is the "computerized cash register itself."

Talen hopes to use the trial as a springboard to air the concerns of Starbucks workers, and to highlight the company's lack of real commitment to fair-trade practices. Though he has difficulty seeing the cash register as a victim, he still would like to heal it.