

The Cult of Consumer Capitalism and Black Friday, or the Evening Greenness in the West

Christopher Miller

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Richard Walsh
Department of Philosophy and Religion

What Is Black Friday?

Rituals, and the myths that rituals express, undergo persistent change. The modern ritual associated with consumer capitalism is no different. Black Friday has taken on a variety of meanings depending on the era in which the term has been used. For instance, in 1869, Black Friday referred to the day the stock market crashed due to Jay Gould and Jim Fisk's attempt to corner the gold market and devalue American "greenback" currency.¹ More recently, in the 1980s, Black Friday has been appropriated to refer to "the day of the year when retailers hope to go from being in the 'red' (i.e. losing money) to being in the 'black' (i.e. making money)."² In what can be viewed as economic alchemy, retailers, marketers, and consumers coordinate in an attempt to transmute leaden losses into golden profits and create order from the previously associated chaos.

Thanksgiving, the day Americans gather with family and friends to give thanks by way of excessive feasting, has become a precursor to the day that the sales begin. However, these are no ordinary sales. In fact, these sales bring to life the metaphorical rat race that supposedly leads to a realization of the American Dream. In the wee hours of Black Friday, sleep-deprived shoppers jockey for position in line among throngs of other faithful shoppers as they await store openings. Once the doors open, a scene ensues that is reminiscent of *los toros bravos* thundering through the streets of Pamplona as the faithful crowd surges inside to fight, claw, and even kill to lay hands on the deeply discounted goods. If taken at face value, a possible conclusion is that Black Friday shoppers are only trying to obtain items they could not afford the rest of the year, albeit doing so in a frenzied manner. However, a closer look reveals that Black Friday shoppers are

¹ Donald P. Morgan and James Narron, "America's First Black Friday: The Gold Panic of 1869," *Financial History* no. 117 (Spring, 2016): 28-30. <http://ez-proxy.methodist.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/ez-proxy.methodist.edu:2048/docview/1803530333?accountid=12408>.

² Jane Boyd Thomas and Cara Peters, "An Exploratory Investigation of Black Friday Consumption Rituals," *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management* 39, no. 7 (2011): 522. doi:10.1108/09590551111144905.

ritualistically reaffirming the use of objects (TVs, laptops, gaming consoles, automobiles, etc.) to express status and wealth.



Black Friday, 28 November 2013. Photography by Powhusku. <https://commons.wikimedia.org>

Civil Religion

What does it mean to be an American? In his article “Civil Religion in America,” Robert Bellah describes common beliefs that appear throughout the United States in a quasi-religious manner.³ To support his idea, Bellah highlights similarities between the constructs of recognized religions and those of his civil religion. Among these correlations, he notes that the civil religion is supported with cherished documents, such as the *Constitution*, and ideals like the veneration of freedom, the military, family, and individualism.⁴ Bellah explains that these tenets are overtly expressed on national holidays such as the Fourth of July (freedom), Memorial Day (the military), and Thanksgiving (family). Bellah does not address the American obsession with purchasing power as one of the key aspects of the civil American religion but does connect the preoccupation to a cultural display of utilitarianism in “Is There a Common American Culture?”⁵ Yet the excessive acquisition and display of material wealth seems to be too tightly interwoven into the American way of life to be considered a side effect or general expression.

³ Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 134, no. 4 (2005): 40-55. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20028013>.

⁴ Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America."

⁵ Robert N. Bellah, “Is There a Common American Culture?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66, no. 3 (1998): 614. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1466136>.

Instead, consumer capitalism, complete with its own ritualistic day of observance known as Black Friday, deserves to be more properly positioned within the realm of civil religion.

The Good, the Bad, and the \$acred

Bellah states that “[o]ur cultural understanding of the world is shaped every time we enter a supermarket or a mall.”⁶ If Bellah’s claim is considered in conjunction with Mircea Eliade’s notion that the sacred gives shape to the world, it follows that American shopping centers are associated with something sacred.⁷ The apparent connection between shopping centers and the items housed in the shopping centers may lead to the conclusion that the items themselves are the sacred. However, in a country that focuses on the stock market, credit scores, and the holy word as echoed through the voice of profits, “the only thing more sacred than money is more money.”⁸

Considering Richard Walsh’s concept that “cross-culturally [the sacred is] the source of power and meaning,”⁹ one can begin to understand that money is power, that money greases the wheel and does, indeed, make the world go ’round. To have it is to be blessed; not to have it is to be damned. But regardless of status, one must acquire more money (or at least make everyone think, with all the nifty items purchased at a discount on Black Friday, that one has an abundance of money) in order to prove one’s value and place in society.

Thorstein Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* describes the measure of one’s worthiness as an effective tool for generating societal strata, i.e., creating a desirable in-group (the haves) and an undesirable other (the have-nots): “The concept of dignity, worth, or honour, as applied either to persons or conduct, is of first-rate consequence in the development of classes and of class distinctions.”¹⁰ Veblen also notes that such distinctions drive a love/hate relationship between the classes despite the conventional quest to obtain that fabled deluxe apartment on the East Side¹¹: “The possession of wealth confers honour; it is an invidious distinction. Nothing



Black Friday, by KERBSTONE. Creative Commons non-commercial license. <https://pixabay.com/en/black-friday-shopping-sale-discount-1042311>

⁶ Robert N. Bellah, “Is There a Common American Culture?,” 614.

⁷ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, translated by Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), 11.

⁸ Robert N. Bellah, “Is There a Common American Culture?,” 622.

⁹ Richard Walsh, “Part 2: An Anatomy of Religion,” *Walsh, Religion 404: Myth in Human Culture Course Documents* (Fayetteville, NC: Methodist University), accessed September 15, 2016, 1.

¹⁰ Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class* (Auckland, NZ: The Floating Press, 2009), 9.

¹¹ Reference to the theme song from the television show *The Jeffersons*, which ran from 1975 to 1985 and portrayed the socio-economic ascent of an African-American family from a poor neighborhood in Queens, New York, to the upper-class island (both literally and figuratively) of Manhattan.

equally cogent can be said for the consumption of goods, nor for any other conceivable incentive to acquisition, and especially not for any incentive to accumulation of wealth.”¹² This love, hate, and envy cocktail drives people to great extremes to avoid slipping into a lower class by constantly updating, upgrading, and displaying goods that symbolize their wealth. Rather than associating good deeds with holiness, the members of this sect strive to achieve holiness through the Almighty Dollar. The driving force to emulate and idolize a higher state of being comes to life in George Ritzer’s description of Black Friday as an “annual pilgrimage” for those seeking absolution within the hallowed “cathedrals of consumption.”¹³

The Power to Purchase Compels Them: Sing a Song of Mythic Significance

The purveyors of any religion or belief system worth its salt are aware of music’s mind-altering capabilities. Evidence of such knowledge is seen in the repeated use of hymns, chants, mantras, and more to implant and reinforce messages in the minds of a community. Just as Orpheus plucked his lyre to bend the minds of the gods in his favor¹⁴, modern musicians are used to sway the minds of consumer capitalists in the United States. In order to provide context and purpose, the musical message is passed through a “cultural system of signification,” an intermediary that “inculcate[s] community members with the proper code and meaning” of that message.¹⁵ The packaged “proper” meaning places a heavy focus on elevating social status and transcending suffering through economic expression.

The commercial music and advertising industries in the United States (and worldwide as consumerism spreads) persuade the buying public by coupling popular music with their products. Take, for example, Janis Joplin, whose voice is intertwined with the 1960s’ U.S. counter culture. In her song *Mercedes Benz*, Joplin prays, “Oh Lord, won’t you buy me a Mercedes Benz. My friends all drive Porsches; I must make amends.”¹⁶ While Joplin may have co-written *Mercedes Benz* with a thick layer of sarcasm, the Mercedes Benz advertisers undermine the song’s original, sarcastic tone by using it to sell cars in a 2011 television advertisement.¹⁷ Once the song has been given its new, “proper” meaning, *Mercedes Benz* attributes a person’s material wealth and social standing

¹² Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, 14.

¹³ George Ritzer, *Enchanting a Disenchanted World: Revolutionizing the Means of Consumption* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2005), as quoted in Basil Cassell, *Consumer Holiday Structure: An Analysis of Christian Holiday Patterns and Consumer Ritual Practice in America* (MA Thesis, University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2010), 17.

¹⁴ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, translated by Mary M. Innes (London, England: Penguin Group, 1955), 225-228.

¹⁵ Richard Walsh, “Procrustean Mythographers,” *Walsh, Religion 404: Myth in Human Culture Course Documents* (Fayetteville, NC: Methodist University), accessed on September 15, 2016, 14.

¹⁶ Janis Joplin, Michael McClure, & Bob Neuwirth, *Mercedes Benz*, Janis Joplin (Hollywood, CA: Columbia Records, 1971).

¹⁷ “Mercedes-Benz—Welcome—2011 Super Bowl Commercial Ad,” YouTube video, 1:01, Mercedes Benz automobile advertisement Feb 6, 2011, posted by crazycommercials4you, November 20, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSQCbWmJ8kU>.

to an act of divine intervention. Such an interpretation endorses the existence of a heaven-bound path that bypasses “the eye of the needle.”¹⁸

Not only do these consumer capitalist hymns encourage a compulsion to purchase (or pray for) and display status symbols, they also remind the listeners of their proper place in society based on the professions typically associated with their level in the pyramid of purchasing power. Thorstein Veblen describes a division of labor based on material wealth distribution as a “distinction between exploit and drudgery,” and he points out that “[s]uch employments as warfare, politics, public worship, and public merrymaking, are felt, in the popular apprehension, to differ intrinsically from the labour that has to do with elaborating the material means of life.”¹⁹ This same idea is echoed eighty-six years later in a catchy tune repeatedly broadcast on a television channel responsible for spreading the consumer society myth to the young minds of Generation X and beyond. In the critically acclaimed song *Money for Nothing*, Mark Knopfler, Dire Straits’ lead vocalist, belts out a tune lauding the media outlet MTV while simultaneously vocalizing the working stiff’s disdain and jealousy toward those who do not have to “work” for their posh lifestyle:

Now that ain't workin' that's the way you do it
Lemme tell ya, them guys ain't dumb
Maybe get a blister on your little finger
Maybe get a blister on your thumb.
We got to install microwave ovens, custom kitchen deliveries
We got to move these refrigerators; we got to move these color TV's.²⁰

These songs, and near countless others like them, reinforce the dominant mindset that wealth is the saving grace and deciding factor for one’s position in the have/have-not hierarchy. Once community members have been repeatedly bombarded with this story, the story becomes that community’s reality or “commonsense.”²¹

Let the Ritual Begin!

*Every time a bell rings, a consumer capitalist gets his things.*²²

Once the community members are on the same page, one need only provide a signal to elicit a Pavlovian response. The signal notes the beginning of a ritual and is important for transforming normal, everyday activities or items into sacred elements. For example, Walsh mentions the Catholic tradition of ringing a bell to signal the beginning

¹⁸ Matthew 19:24.

¹⁹ Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, 6.

²⁰ Mark Knopfler & Sting, *Money for Nothing*, Dire Straits (Montserrat: Warner Brothers Records, 1985).

²¹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, translated by Anette Lavers, (New York: Hill & Wang, 1972). Barthes discusses multiple methods of myth dissemination and its part in creating segments of society through a shared interpretation of that myth.

²² This is a play on the phrase "every time a bell rings, an angel gets his wings" from *It's a Wonderful Life*, Frank Capra (director) (Culver City, CA: Liberty Films, 1946).

of communion and to transform wafers and wine into the body and blood of Christ.²³ The enactment of the Black Friday ritual is no exception. Days, sometimes even weeks, prior to the sacred sales, consumers are inundated with advertisements (some with recognizable songs as mentioned above) and reminders that the official holiday shopping season will soon begin. The fervor builds in anticipation of the approaching day—a holy version of the profane scavenger hunt for status symbols. In front of sacred shrines, the faithful crowds assemble and wait. The bell tolls, and the bulls burst through the corral.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the ritual known as Black Friday echoes the American focus on wealth to distinguish social status. To indicate superior class as well as the extent of one's worthiness, one must consistently adorn oneself with the latest, greatest products that symbolize wealth. Expressing wealth through the excessive consumption of goods seems to indicate a materialistic attempt to create an earthly version of heaven. However, to gain entry to this divine community, one needs an extensive collection of goods that have been purchased with the Almighty Dollar.

Bibliography

- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Translated by Anette Lavers. New York: Hill & Wang, 1972.
- Bellah, Robert N. "Civil Religion in America." *Daedalus* 134, no. 4 (2005): 40-55.
Accessed November 3, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20028013>
- , "Is There a Common American Culture?" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66, no. 3 (1998): 613-625. Accessed November 3, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1466136>.
- Boyd Thomas, Jane, and Cara Peters, "An Exploratory Investigation of Black Friday Consumption Rituals." *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management* 39, no. 7 (2011): 522-537. Accessed November 1, 2016. doi: <http://dx.doi.org.ez-proxy.methodist.edu:2048/10.1108/09590551111144905>
- Cassell, Basil. *Consumer Holiday Structure: An Analysis of Christian Holiday Patterns and Consumer Ritual Practice in America*. MA thesis. University of Missouri-Kansas City. 2010. <http://ez-proxy.methodist.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.ez-proxy.methodist.edu:2048/docview/837437396?accountid=12408>
- Capra, Frank (director). *It's a Wonderful Life* (movie). Culver City, CA: Liberty Films, 1946.
- Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, translated by Willard R. Trask. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959.
- Joplin, Janis, Michael McClure, and Bob Neuwirth. *Mercedes Benz*. Performed by Janis Joplin. Hollywood, CA: Columbia Records, 1971. mp3 audio.
- Knopfler, Mark, and Sting. *Money for Nothing*. Performed by Dire Straits with Sting. Montserrat: Warner Brothers Records, 1985. mp3 audio.
- McCarthy, Cormack. *Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West*. New York: Vintage, 1992.

²³ Walsh, "Part 2: An Anatomy of Religion," 9.

- “Mercedes-Benz—Welcome—2011 Super Bowl Commercial Ad.” YouTube video, 1:01 (Mercedes Benz automobile advertisement Feb 6, 2011). Posted by crazycommercials4you, November 20, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSQCbWmJ8kU>
- Morgan, Donald P., and James Narron. "America's First Black Friday: The Gold Panic of 1869." *Financial History*, no. 117 (2016): 28-30. Accessed November 9, 2016. doi: <http://dx.doi.org.ez-proxy.methodist.edu:2048/10.1108/09590551111144905>
- Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, translated by Mary M. Innes. London, England: Penguin Group, 1955.
- Veblen, Thorstein. *Theory of the Leisure Class*. Auckland, NZ: The Floating Press, 2009.
- Walsh, Richard. "Part 2: An Anatomy of Religion," *Walsh, Religion 404: Myth in Human Culture Course Documents*. Fayetteville, NC: Methodist University. Accessed September 15, 2016.
- "Procrustean Mythographers," *Walsh, Religion 404: Myth in Human Culture Course Documents*. Fayetteville, NC: Methodist University. Accessed September 15, 2016.