



Is Reverend Billy a Prophet?

By Isaac Alderman

The Old Testament scholars Walter Brueggemann and Sibley Towner have very useful criteria for what identifies an individual as a prophet. The prophet:

- has a dramatic form, is a performer;
- uses rhetoric, expresses passion and rhetorical force;
- has a place in society and appeals to a certain audience;
- delivers a true message that is rooted in God and is enacted in society.

In order to teach these criteria for prophetic identity, this activity examines how they are applied to the performance artist and activist Rev. Billy.

Rev. Billy is the subject of the documentary *What Would Jesus Buy?* (Rated PG). Although he is not an actual minister, Rev. Billy has adopted the persona of an evangelist and travels with his Church of Stop Shopping choir performing revival-like events in order to spread his anti-consumerist message. People find him funny, ridiculous, meaningful or perhaps even a bit sacrilegious. For example, his choir sings anti-consumerist gospel hymns while Rev. Billy exorcises demons from cash registers, uses a megaphone to warn against the coming “shopocalypse,” and appropriates other religious jargon and imagery to convey his message. While this can be very funny, it can also be uncomfortable, as I am sure he intends.

The class can watch the movie or, in the interest of time, watch an interview of Rev. Billy and the filmmaker, which includes extended clips of the movie (I, in fact, show the interview instead of the movie). As usual, the movie can be purchased or found in some libraries, but it can also be streamed on Netflix for those with a subscription. The interview can be seen by following the link below.

After watching the video (movie or interview), the students can either be taught Brueggemann’s criteria or they can be assigned his article as homework (link below). Brueggemann believes that Rev. Billy fits the criteria for prophetic identity. This then leads to an in-class discussion about whether the students agree with Brueggemann or not. Is Rev. Billy a prophet? The best aspect of this activity is that almost all of my students reject the identification of Rev. Billy as a prophet even though he fits the criteria; this allows us to have a conversation about the preconceived notions of what a prophet ‘should be.’

One of the objections students might raise is that Rev. Billy’s actions are ridiculous. This gives the opportunity to return to the prophets of the Hebrew Bible and examine their ridiculous actions such as Ezekiel eating bread cooked with dung (Ezekiel 4), Isaiah walking naked around Jerusalem (Isaiah 20), or Hosea marrying a promiscuous woman (Hosea 1). Another objection might be that Rev. Billy is simply a political activist. This gives the opportunity to examine the economic and political messages of prophetic literature such as Amos’ concern for the poor and criticism of lavish lifestyles (Amos 2) or Elijah’s condemnation of the abuse of political power (1 Kings 21).

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Links:

Brueggemann's article is found at:

<http://www.revbilly.com/press/2008/12/what-would-jesus-buy>

The What Would Jesus Buy website:

<http://wwjbmovie.com/>

The video of Amy Goodman's interview with Rev. Billy is found at

http://www.democracynow.org/2007/11/21/what_would_jesus_buy_as_holiday

or

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HzSKpfeNN-8> pt 1 of 3

<http://www.youtube.com/user/freedomlost2007#p/search/2/uL9MBhQk25c> pt 2 of 3

http://www.youtube.com/user/freedomlost2007#p/search/3/f_SPOeM8OEw pt 3 of 3

The video of Glenn Beck's interview with Rev. Billy is found at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4wxjl2ERhnl>