

# religion dispatches

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## Reverend Billy For Mayor; Is He For Real?

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“How about a blessing?” says a woman, sitting on the steps of her house in the Windsor Terrace neighborhood of Brooklyn. “I need it.” Reverend Billy never passes up the chance to talk with a neighbor.

The performance artist and anti-corporate activist is running for mayor of New York City on the Green Party ticket; the platform of his campaign, a plea for the sanctity of neighborhoods.

“Are you in trouble?” he asks.

“Yes I am,” she replies, frankly. She looks it.

Billy is wearing his “costume,” a white preacher’s collar, black vest front, and bright blue suit. His hair, combed into a pompadour, is dyed blond with dark roots showing. The more she speaks, the more he drifts out of character, into an earnest gentleness. “I’m sorry. I’m your neighbor, I live down the street.”

“Is there a church that goes with you?” she demands.

“I’m a church person.”

Suspicious, she gives up and turns away without her blessing. “Nice speaking to you.”

“You also,” says Billy. Continuing on down the street, he whispers, “She’s hurting.” He glances upward. “Look at those clouds!”

Is Reverend Billy—aka William Talen—for real? As a man of God? As a politician? Or is he “only” a performer?

He’s hardly the first public figure to ape religious faith for political ends. And he’s not the first actor to run for high office in this country—though Ronald Reagan left his costumes in Hollywood.

Running against Republican/Independent Mike Bloomberg and his daunting lead in

the polls, even Democrat Bill Thompson's campaign seems little more than symbolic. Having fallen short of both the fundraising and polling quotas, election rules didn't allow Talen to participate in the first mayoral debate. (That didn't stop him from disturbing the event by shouting "Eight is enough!" at Bloomberg from the audience, referring to Bloomberg's successful campaign to extend the term limit of a New York City politician from two to three 4-year terms.) But for some who have long supported Reverend Billy's exorcisms of Starbucks cash registers and revival meetings in Wal-Mart parking lots, running for mayor is going too far.

"I've been really disappointed in how narrow people's picture of what politicians are," says Savitri Durkee, producer of the Church of Life After Shopping—part theater troupe and part activist community. She is also Talen's wife, four months pregnant with their first child. Durkee speaks of "the tyranny of the practical": even their most radical friends ask, "But are you *legitimate*?" Amidst rising rents and sea levels she replies, "Is this whole situation legitimate?"

In the wake of George W. Bush's dangerous self-assurance, the rhetoric of "realism" has found renewed currency in American politics. Pundits were relieved to learn about Barack Obama's admiration for theologian and social critic Reinhold Niebuhr, an influential convert to Cold War *realpolitik*. Mike Bloomberg himself operates as an independent, having already broken with both major political parties in the past. Despite being the incumbent, he asks voters to "reject the culture of politics as usual" and choose the practical managerial savvy that made him the country's eighth-richest person.

"The fact of Bloomberg's money is actually the biggest advertisement of all," says Michael O'Neil, media coordinator of the rev's mayoral campaign. "It is a larger advertisement than what his money can actually buy in terms of advertising."

Talen points a finger at the city's development policies under Bloomberg, arguing that its support for big business and gentrification is ruining New York's real treasures, its neighborhoods. These policies are not inevitable good sense, Talen insists, but intrusions of corporate power. People's willingness to accept the status quo is a failure of imagination that he hopes to remedy.

For more than a decade, the Reverend Billy act has commandeered religious tropes to subvert the penetration of corporations into daily life. The ubiquity of consumer culture represents a cataclysmic "Shopocalypse." Mickey Mouse is the antichrist. Such language has the imaginative scope to reach outside the here and now, while also the familiarity to make it feel like it might, in fact, be true.

"If Bloomberg wins in New York City, it is the triumph of corporate capitalism in New York City," says Durkee. But, with his collar on, Reverend Billy describes the mayor more bluntly: "We're going to cast out this devil, children!"

**"Fake" healing post 9/11**

Both Talen and Durkee had alienating experiences with religion growing up. Durkee describes her father as a “fundamentalist Muslim,” though she was raised mainly by her mother on a commune in northern New Mexico that exposed her to Sufism, Buddhism, and Native American spirituality. She was taught to respect all religions and, when she met Talen in 2000, bristled a bit at his satire of Christian preaching. But, already an accomplished performer and theater director, she made what would become the Church of Life After Shopping part of her own work and spiritual practice.

Billy Talen comes from a Dutch Calvinist family in Michigan, the son of an agricultural banker. Early on, he acquired “a special antipathy for predestination,” which he understands to mean that “a Republican CEO-type God will decide whether you’re going to heaven.” He says he was always rebellious, and as a teenager he began hitchhiking around the country to escape home. By the mid-1980s, well into his thirties, he finally settled down as an actor, writer, and producer in the San Francisco theater scene.

It was there that Talen met Sidney Lanier, an Episcopal minister whose own antics were dramatized in the play-turned-film *The Night of the Iguana*, by his cousin, Tennessee Williams. At the time, remembers Lanier, he was “mostly traveling in the opposite direction from the Church.”

After seeing Talen perform, Lanier took him out to lunch and said, remembers Talen, “We need a new kind of American preacher.” Lanier convinced him that in order to speak relevantly to American politics and society, one has to understand its religion. They watched sermons together and studied “existential Christianity”, the historical Jesus, ancient Gnostics, and Continental philosophy. They learned the styles of televangelists like Billy Graham and Jimmy Swaggart. “Gradually I relaxed out of my fear of all things Christian,” says Talen, “and started regarding it as a force.” Over the course of years, they formed a close friendship, moved to New York, and, in the process, created a character.

Reverend Billy’s debut came in the late 1990s with sermons in the Times Square Disney Store. Soon, he had an ad-hoc choir, a crusade against corporatizing culture, and a “theology”: God is odd, an Unknown that appears precisely in the spaces where the predictability and packaging of big business is not. He called people to turn away from chain stores and toward each other, allowing themselves to see the miraculous “Godsightings” of ordinary life. Talen says he is not a Christian, but he came to look enough like one for theologian Walter Bruegemann to declare him a modern-day prophet in *Sojourners*.

During the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attack, Reverend Billy began to cross the line from performer to actual pastor. This happened not in an official sense—“I think it would be a mistake for Reverend Billy to be ordained in organized religion,” says Talen—but through an organic process. While many turned to

traditional religion in that period, those who felt outside of it gravitated to Billy. “People whose New York journey to spirituality had been irony, or the arts, or sex, or something, something after religion,” says Talen, “they gathered with us after 9/11.” Reverend Billy’s church set up shop in the city’s theaters, many of which had closed their doors in the wake of the disaster.

“There were a lot of people who were not religious, who didn’t have a community per se, and didn’t know how to heal,” remembers Savitri Durkee. Many of the people who came were Gen-Xers who instinctively questioned authority. “Billy was perfect in that moment because he’s a fake leader,” Durkee says. “Because he’s not a real leader, we can go for it. We can trust the situation somehow.”

Durkee too became a leader in the community and sometimes even finds herself expected to play the role of the old-fashioned preacher’s wife. “It’s an incredibly demoralizing and demeaning position,” she says. “I try to reject it as much as I can and insist on a different kind of collaborative presence.” While the volunteer choir rehearses, Durkee is the one up front, orchestrating their movements, while Talen drifts in the back, checking that everyone is well and putting forth an occasional suggestion.

The community that has formed around Reverend Billy is a spiritual *smorgasbord*. Choir member Greg Ostrom regularly goes to Catholic mass and was a Christian Brother for twelve years. One of the choir’s youngest members, Oliver Rizzi Carlson, grew up Catholic but now cites Neale Donald Walsch’s *Conversations with God* books as a major influence. Will Tucker, a writer from Harlem who hosts a radio show for the mayoral campaign, was raised Unitarian Universalist and is now a Baha’i. He thinks of Talen’s candidacy as part of the age of Baha’u’llah, a “cosmic domino effect” that began in 1863. Campaign manager Danny Valdez, on the other hand, says he has no religious background at all.

With an ironic take on televangelist religion and a vigorous social conscience, Reverend Billy and the Church of Life After Shopping have become icons for the growing community of people who think of themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” This phenomenon, which many observers have dismissed as self-indulgent and apolitical, reveals itself in this case to be anything but.

## **F the Fare Hike**

It certainly isn’t unheard of for a successful preacher to find his way into politics. In the early 1980s, Jerry Falwell changed the face of the Republican party with his Moral Majority. Pat Robertson ran for president in 1988, as did Mike Huckabee in 2008. Aspiring beyond the merely pastoral therefore seems very much within the purview of Reverend Billy’s act.

“It’s the occasion for speaking in a visionary way,” says Talen. When the Green Party approached him and Durkee about running for mayor over a meal at a Windsor

Terrace bistro, they saw it as not so different from the performance-based activism they'd already been doing for years. "We thought that the city government of New York in 2009 was a lot like Wal-Mart was in 2007 and Starbucks in 2005," he says.

The campaign's biggest push was in the summer, when volunteers flocked to help secure the 7,500 signatures required to get on the ballot (the Naked Cowboy, another Times Square fixture, was overwhelmed by the paperwork and withdrew his own bid). Since then, the team has winnowed down to a smaller and more committed core. They keep busy with benefit parties, rallies, and performances. On Halloween, just before the November 3rd election, they will lead the "Zomberg Rampage," a parade with, they hope, "thousands of rampaging Bloomberg zombies."

To reach out to the masses, Reverend Billy, Durkee as Sister Savitri D., and a handful of green-robed choir members, take to the city subways for a series of whistle stop tours. Like panhandlers or mariachi bands, they stay in each car for only a stop or two, giving a short spiel, singing a song, and shaking hands before moving on to the next one. The tours take their theme from the trains they're on, like "F the Fare Hike," "Neighborhoods on the N Train," and "2 Train for 2 Terms."

Talen insists that he is serious about presenting himself as a prospective mayor, though he has so far done little of the hobnobbing with power brokers requisite for winning broad support. He hasn't met, for example, many of the city's leading religious leaders, even though one might expect Reverend Billy to find in them potential allies.

The campaign has kept its distance, too, from political circles. finds their attitude toward winning elections "really boring." "It's like hanging out with people who just want to make money," she says. "I don't appreciate being in a group where the motive is so clear."

The framework of a mayoral campaign has put some constraints on the group's normal way of operating. They've had less time for the choir's usual theatrical work, for instance, and Durkee gets frustrated working within the limits of the political system. "I'm [more] aware of the liberation of performance and activism, the value of being an outside agent," she says.

For the most part, though, they're using the campaign to do more of what they have done for the past decade: reaching out to people on the streets and "talking," says Talen, "about the homemade spirituality of a funky, fascinating, messy democracy." Gesturing toward a world beyond the Shopocalypse, Reverend Billy calls out the unquestioned perversity of consumer culture. The beyond he points to is not a celestial afterlife, but a neighborhood, and we need only act like neighbors.

"We're trying to get people to flex their citizen muscle a little bit," adds Durkee. "Don't roll over. No."

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