

Reflections on Materialism, from Jehovah to George Carlin

(Text of presentation by Dane Smith, at Unity Church on Black Friday celebration, Nov. 25, 2011. Actual transcript deviates from text slightly at points.)

You've all heard the news all week. Now our grandiose temples of conspicuous mass consumption are opening at 10 p.m. on Thanksgiving Day, or at least Wal-Mart was, and in an experiment in Denver, the Target stores were open yesterday from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., thus blowing past that midnight barrier and opening the way to a brave new Thanksgiving Day in the future, perhaps becoming a national day of praise and thanksgiving for retail profits

So I guess the good news is, you could actually have shopped all night, a whole 12 hours, and gotten lots and lots of unnecessary plastic material goods for yourself and your loved ones, before arriving here to reflect properly on Black Friday. God bless this crazy country, the place where we are assured that you and I can have it all, must have it all, should strive to have it all, and yet somehow, we end up with the highest poverty rate of the wealthy democracies, a place where an ungodly number of God's children not only don't have it all, but do not have enough. And don't you just love that certifiably insane hyperkinetic blonde lady in the red gym suit in the latest Target ad, which cleverly mocks the insanity while promoting it.

But bless our own Unitarian Universalist Twin Cities social justice activists, who led the way and made headlines in Minnesota this week in delivering thousands of signatures to retailers, seeking relief from this inexorable encroachment on our national day of thanks. This little movement we started four years ago is having a real impact. Our service this morning was previewed in a very positive story on WCCO-TV this week. And when the Business section of the local newspaper can run a spread like this, "Putting the Brakes on Black Friday," you know you just might be getting somewhere.

But let me share with you another extreme, from my own personal experience.

Among the most vivid memories of my childhood was going door-to-door, on Thanksgiving Day and Christmas morning, with my parents or others in my faith, armed with pamphlets explaining the absolute truth, a truth understood by we Jehovah's Witnesses alone, of Jehovah God's plan to restore paradise and eternal life on earth for Jehovah's Witnesses, after He destroys all the people who reject our invitation to believe in our truth. Like our Unitarian ancestors, and the Pilgrims at Plymouth who originated our American Thanksgiving, we JW's did

NOT celebrate in any way the myriad idolatries in errant Christendom's holiday of Christ-mass, rooted in the pagan winter solstice tradition of the northern European barbarians, or any other unBiblical holy days or national holidays, or even birthdays or July 4, for that matter.

Standing outside on the porches, as the householder was trying to figure out a way to be less rude on Christmas morning, I often could peek inside the door and see all the other boys and girls my age ripping joyously in to their new train sets and Barbie dolls and BB guns and other fabulous new stuff. And here I was outside in the cold and snow with nothing but a stack of Watchtowers in my bag, hoping nobody I actually knew would see me, and envying all that new stuff.

Well, boo-hoo. Most of us actually love to have people feel sorry for us and all of us have some deprived childhood stories, and as we get older the stories get better and the deprivation more desperate. I'm leaving out that I really lacked for nothing material in my childhood, and my wonderful parents made a point of gift-giving to supplant Christmas.

But the secret is that I also I rather enjoyed the martyrdom, it's helped me develop a very useful persecution complex that I still carry with me, PLUS there was the delicious conviction that I and my little band of spiritual tribespeople possessed the entire truth, and I believed then that I would live forever in God's favor in a paradise on earth and all these other temporarily delirious kids would disappear in Armageddon, quite possibly leaving their toy soldiers and BB guns behind, for me. I understand the fundamentalist mindset and sympathize with it. It can be very satisfying.

But the seriously good thing about this extremely dogmatic religious upbringing was a rather constant theme that materialism was a seriously wrong "ism," another very false religion, or certainly not enough by itself. We actually had a textbook that explained the falseness of all other faiths, chapter by chapter, all the others theologies and ideologies, Catholicism, Protestantism, communism and Marxism, Nazism and nationalism, Zionism, Buddhism and Confucianism and Hinduism, and for that matter, capitalism and corporatism, and business-of-America-is-businessism (which was, after all, a first cousin of materialism, and which we generally understood to be too much concern with acquiring possessions, or the heedless pursuit of money and property).

We were schooled in the Old Testament Biblical stories that told: of King Solomon's downfall due to too much wealth and hedonism and materialism, of ancient Israel's tradition of the Jubilee in which property and wealth was redistributed every 50 years, and of the fact that every time Israel and Jerusalem was laid low and conquered, it seemed to have something to do with worshipping that golden calf. In the New Testament, even more dismissive of the material world and commercialism, there were the dictates by Jesus to give it all away, the

warning that rich folks had about as much chance of getting to heaven as a camel passing through the eye of a needle, and the fact that one of the very few times when Jesus got really angry and physically aggressive was when he assaulted all those bankers and stockbrokers and chased the money-changers and presumably bargain-hunters and gold-buyers out of God's temple. And all this anti-materialism got everybody nodding in agreement, in large part I think, because there were almost zero truly wealthy or even affluent people in our church.

I escaped from that sect at the age of 17. And now I rather enjoy a fairly typical American celebration of Christmas and gift-giving, with a reasonable rein on excess and extravagance, blessed to have a wife and family who see it for what it is. I like the unexpected gift, especially if it has batteries. I still don't quite get the whole holiday spirit, though, and some have suggested to me that my lack of spirit is a way to be less giving, a critique I accept.

But I'm deeply thankful today to have found a religious community that doesn't even decorate the evergreen trees that stand up here in the winter solstice celebration, a faith in which simplicity and prudence and a kind of primitive Protestant thrift and forbearance is honored and extravagance is not, that has the conscience and courage to make this kind of Black Friday statement. And I take great comfort in our own faith's deeper intellectual and spiritual understanding, *despite* our relative prosperity and wealth, about the dangers of materialism and consumerism and worshipping the golden calf. We all take great comfort in our embrace of the loving human heart and loving human kindness, and thankfulness for the benevolent universe and creation force, as our strongest values. As we teach our kindergartners, it's three things, six words _ loving hearts, helping hands and open minds _ these three things are our trinity. We specifically work at the deeper thanks and deeper giving by setting aside this whole `nother day for Thanksgiving and I hope many can join us after this service for a lively further conversation, in the Arthur Foote Room, about those specific ways we can go deeper and broader with our thanks and our giving.

Lest we get prideful of any spiritual superiority or uniqueness with our disdain for materialism, let's understand that almost everybody is worried about this and has been for a long time, maybe since the first human communities acquired a surplus of anything. Conservative faith leaders are often more censorious than progressives about materialism and shopping and the commercial secularization of holidays meant to celebrate a truest spirit of Christianity and human loving kindness. And if this weren't broader concern, we would not have become media darlings this week. Yes, Unitarians as media darlings, it will pass, believe me.

Worries about materialism overwhelming our spiritual selves also pervade all the other great faith systems, most notably exemplified perhaps by the teachings of the Buddha and the spirit of asceticism, and the very idea that desire itself is to be avoided or overcome, and this theme is present in many eastern religions.

Secular critics of commercialism and materialism and buying-and-selling as a primary way of life can even be found in the dismal science of economics, which is the study of buying and selling, and how we compete for allegedly scarce resources, and which tends to celebrate supply-and-demand and materialism and the allegedly free marketplace as some glorious divine mechanism, the center of it all and the answer to everything that ails us.

Among my favorite of these secularist economists is Thorstein Veblen, and if you don't know about Thorstein Veblen, look him up, he's a treasure and a local one at that. He grew up a Minnesota farm just south of here, wrote the seminal book "A Theory of the Leisure Class" documenting and predicting the rise of a new kind of "commercial culture" in the United States, and he might be viewed as one of the first anti-consumerists. To this day, among economists, a "Veblen good" is a luxury product, stuff with designer labels for instance, for which the demand actually increases as the price rises. Veblen actually coined the phrase "conspicuous consumption," and in general built a refreshing new framework of economics and sociology that suggested that a consumerist economy was a wasteful economy, and that humans as economic animals were NOT built around seeking and spending or hoarding money per se, or naturally predisposed to conspicuous consumption, but on a sense of craftsmanship and workmanship and a desire to produce something of beauty and lasting value in their lives.

And finally in our review of great anti-materialists, there's that late great philosopher, George Carlin, who cleverly disguised himself as an entertainer, and who made the entire nation squirm with discomfort in the 1970s as he described our obsession with... "stuff" and how it gets us to obsessing about me, rather than we and the other. His "stuff" routines are readily available on YouTube and they are priceless. I'll paraphrase: He describes how we view our stuff with absurd reverence, describes how from an airplane our world is just a vast expanse of little houses, which are really just piles of stuff with covers on them, how we leave our houses mostly to get more stuff, or to work longer hours so we can get more stuff, how we move from smaller house to bigger house because we need more room for our stuff, how we have a growing national storage industry built on the fact that people have too much stuff, how when we travel we neatly put away our stuff and discover that we have more space than stuff in the room, and so we rush out and buy more stuff. All this was said in the 1970s, just a few years after the term Black Friday was popularized by the Philadelphia police, as a way to describe the mayhem caused by hordes of downtown shoppers between Thanksgiving and the Army-Navy football game.

And so from the Buddha, to the pilgrims and our Unitarian ancestors, to witnesses for Jehovah, to George Carlin, we ask the great question, made immortal by Peggy Lee, "Is that all there is, my friend?"

And we say no. BUT. BUT. BUT. That's not quite enough either. I love our faith's grounding in reason, and its way of stopping and saying, "on the other hand."

And on the other hand, I'm guessing that all this anti-materialism sermonizing is profoundly unsatisfying for millions of people in a nation where poverty rates are climbing and the one percent are getting a bigger and bigger and bigger pile of stuff. Getting more of the right stuff in the hands of those who don't have enough stuff, and of the right good stuff, is a key objective of progressive policy and social justice folks. Part of the culture and cycle of poverty is materialism, and obsession with less important material baubles, and breaking that cycle has to do with getting more of the right stuff, which is education and intellectual and spiritual goods that deliver a real and more satisfying prosperity. But too many Americans actually need more material stuff and more money. As the late great Paul Wellstone said, too **many** people have too **little** power and wealth, and too **few** people have too **much** power and wealth, and it IS THAT SIMPLE.

We do live in a material world, and we are all material girls, and material boys, as the great poet Madonna observed of her suitors, "They can beg and they can plead, but they can't see the light, that's right, cause the boy with the cold hard cash is always Mr. Right, cause we are living in a material world, and I am a material girl." Love that song. So naughty, so defiant, so scary in its truthiness. And so here's the big irony. Extremism in the cause of anti-materialism can also be a false religion. We are physical specimens living in a material world, and it's not evil for girls to be material or to want to have fun. We actually do need some stuff. Very few humans actually choose to live entirely the life of the mind, or the spirit.

And let's remember this about materialism and anti-materialism. Much atrocious oppression of humanity was aided by an anti-materialist philosophy, pushed by self-serving kings and their priests, who urged people to go without, do without, to wait for the afterlife, to be content with their meager lot and lowly economic status belongings, and to passively accept the fact that kings and priests had all the stuff. It was the humanist, democratic, Unitarian, free-market, and free-society spirit of the American Revolution that threw off the kings and priests and said every individual actually had a right to religious freedom and economic liberty and to govern ourselves and to pursue their own happiness, to seek on their own as much stuff as deemed appropriate. So the striving to reach one's fullest human potential includes a healthy measure of economic freedom and reasoned materialism. The market deserves a healthy dose of respect for the abundance and innovation and technological advances it helps produce, and business and government working together in a balanced social contract have been remarkably successful in creating lives that last 20 years longer on average, where the quality of life has mostly improved.

But we need a better distribution of the grossly unfair redistribution that has occurred, from the many to the few, over the last 30 years, and this is about the material world.

Overwhelmingly, progressive and mainstream policy advocates these days favor restoring our historic reasonably higher taxes on the top 1 percent, so that the 99 percent, but particularly the bottom half, have enough new resources for extremely valuable public stuff, much of which is more valuable than most private stuff. This public stuff includes: first-class education, universal health-care, low-cost access to first-rate transportation and sanitation systems, libraries and free parks, and free access to our beautiful natural resources, and this last shopping item is very expensive, a measure of economic and health-care security for old age or those who run in to misfortune, which is most of us, actually.

All this is a very materialistic battle and it has to be fought and in my humble opinion, we can't retreat from it with spiritualistic contemplation and even a benign neglect for other people's material needs. I find complete sympathy with the ascetics and spiritualistic among us and those who say communities should work together and tap their potential to be self sufficient, if we just could assemble neighborhood block clubs and work together and not rely on government to fix our troubles. Go for that, all for that.

But in the real world of public policy today, we have every right to ask and demand more from what Madonna called "the boy with the cold hard cash." And from those who haveso much stuff.

Today, it's the apologists for the economic elites and capitalist extremists, who like those old kings and priests, wag their fingers at the poor and the middle-class and urge THEM to not be so materialistic, or dependent, and who make a dirty word of the great principle of human entitlement to God's abundance, even as they refuse to part with a penny more of THEIR stuff.

And now we come back around to the worst thing about materialism and consumerism and obsession with MY or YOUR stuff. It's the way it centers our attention on ourselves and our nuclear families and our local retailers, and crowds out the obligation and responsibilities to our brothers and sisters in our city, our nation and our world, to have a more equal share of the stuff God has given all of us. The more we focus on our personal shopping needs, the less sympathy we have for that fundamental social contract, which says we sacrifice for the good of the tribe and our own good, and the more likely we are to resent paying any more in taxes for public needs.

Deeper thanks and deeper giving should involve resolve and commitment to more equitable policy and politics at every level, from the park board to the United Nations, not just retreating in to austere lifestyles and spiritual contemplation, or even increasing contributions to my personal favorite charities, or yours.

The deeper thanks and the deeper giving will come from embracing this universal and timeless truth: that we all do better, and even I personally and you personally will do better, when we ALLLLLLL do better.

AMEN. And now let's do a *little* shopping.