

CONSUMER HOLIDAY STRUCTURE: AN ANALYSIS OF CHRISTIAN HOLIDAY
PATTERNS AND CONSUMER RITUAL PRACTICE IN AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the rituals that reinforce American capitalist consumerism, specifically focusing on the Christian holiday calendar structure. Major Christian holidays are viewed as complex sets and repeated patterns, involving inversions and binary oppositions. A structuralist analysis is applied to explore the role of Black Friday as a new consumer holiday in a larger symbol set—one that reveals the reinforcement of underlying values and practices of consumerism. The structural comparison of the meaning of Fat Tuesday and Ash Wednesday as the inauguration of Lent as a season of non-consumption is compared to Thanksgiving and Black Friday as the inauguration of a season of consumption and shopping during Advent. Seen from a structural viewpoint, new consumer holidays take prominence in practice, re-defining seasons in relation to consumption, that previously had been defined by civil religious structure and meaning. The re-definition of civil religion as consumer civil religion, and implications for related social theories are discussed.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled “Consumer Holiday Structure: An Analysis Of Christian Holiday Patterns And Consumer Ritual Practice In America,” presented by Basil “Bo” R. Cassell, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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CHAPTER 1
THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND CONSUMERISM
IN NORTH AMERICA

“Symbolic orderings of space and time provide a framework for experience through
which we learn who or what we are in society.”

—David Harvey

In 1967, Robert Bellah wrote the article, “Civil Religion in America,” which presented a form of religious practice and set of beliefs shared by most Americans. What he described was a combination of an American-centric subset of Protestant Christianity and the “Judeo-Christian tradition” (Angrosino, 2002, p. 241), mixed with beliefs and practices related to being an American citizen. For Bellah, these include beliefs in “the existence of God, the life to come, the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice, and the exclusion of religious intolerance” (Bellah, 1967, p. 5). There is also a set of shared sacred beliefs concerning God’s preferential option for the role of America in the world—similar to the divine selection of Israel as the chosen people of God. Civil Religion mirrored the preexisting forms of Protestant Christianity in America, but focused on political documents as sacred texts (such as the Declaration of Independence, and Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address), and national holidays (such as Thanksgiving, Memorial Day, and the 4th of July) instead of specifically religious ones. Civil Religion thus adopted secular forms as ways of expressing unity and identity for the nation as a whole, utilizing Christian beliefs as a framing

underlying symbol system.

There are several implications of this much talked about article, including discussion of the role of Christianity in American culture, and the idea that solidarity in American society at that time came in part from these shared civil religious beliefs and practices.

This thesis began with an investigation and critique of Bellah's civil religion concept. It started with the question of whether or not what Bellah observed and described in 1967 still holds in 2010 and after. Is American Civil Religion, as Bellah described it, still a relevant phenomenon in the United States?

Michael Angrosino notes that Bellah himself was apparently seeing the strain on his concept as early as 1975 (2002). In his article, *Civil Religion Redux*, Angrosino points out that "The most common meaningful experience in culture religion is patriotism" (2002). However, the ideas and attitudes of American culture have had more than four decades of cultural practice in which to change. During this period, the American population has become increasingly diverse. One wonders if patriotism offers the same degree of solidarity that it once provided. Just as increased dynamic density changed society at the time of Durkheim, a new "dynamic diversity" has altered the collective conscience of American society in the new millennium.

There have been more than forty years of consumer practice that have changed the landscape of American culture since Bellah first described American Civil Religion. It is my contention that Americans no longer ascribe to a shared civil religion, in the way described by Bellah. The more recent influences of consumer behavior have overtaken civil religious influences to become a more prominent and central factor that defines what it means to be an

American. However, Bellah's work is merely a starting point. What follows is an investigation into the complex relationship between Protestant Christianity in America and consumerism—which has itself taken on a new religious form.

Vignette #1: The following appeared one week before Black Friday, on November 21, 2009, on Dealnews.com, a discount shopping aggregate web site (with the trademarked slogan “Where every day is Black Friday.”)...

[“Brian Chernick: Free ring with engagement to me \(updated\)”](#)

“For Stefanie Setlock of Atlanta, GA, only, Brian Chernick offers a free [Marriage Proposal](#) via coupon code “I DO”. Plus, you’ll receive a free [engagement ring](#) with your purchase. With free on-one-knee delivery, that’s the best deal on marriage you’ve seen from Brian in eight years. It’s also the lowest total price we’ve seen for any marriage proposal, excluding refurb.

“Features include having and holding, for better or worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, and till death do you part. No warranty information is supplied.” (Dealnews.com, 2009).

The wedding proposal followed the format and descriptions of all the usual listed discount deals found on the web site every day of the year. This updated version concluded with, “Update: Coupon code “I DO” has hit the maximum number of redemptions. SHE SAID YES! Congratulations to the happy dealcouple!” (Dealnews.com, 2009).

A man uses a shopping web site to make a marriage proposal. The sacred time of marriage is initiated via their regular routine of discount shopping (at least for the bride to be,

otherwise, we assume she would not have seen the proposal), and the couple is celebrated as a “dealcouple.” A new relationship between Christian religious sacred time, and consumer capitalism has developed in North America. It would be easy to point to an annual bemoaning of the loss of the “Christmas spirit” to forces of commercialism, but that would ignore a more complex relationship and structure. What was formerly divided into sacred and profane, holy and ordinary time, has now been brought together. The primary locus of this confluence is the practice of consumption through the Protestant holiday structure.

However, it must be recognized that Christian (and other) groups often seek to oppose the combination of Christian holidays with consumer practice. The question then arises, how do we explain the close connection between Christian holidays and consumption? How do we understand their ongoing integration, when they have historically and ideologically been in opposition to each other, and even today their co-mingling gives rise to organized resistance?

In this investigation, I will use a structuralist argument to show how the Christian holiday calendar structure has commingled with consumer practice to form a mutually reinforcing combination of consumerism and religion. I will show how the newly emerging consumer holiday of “Black Friday”¹ has developed in relationship to the pre-existing Christian holiday structure, establishing itself as a consumer holiday, yet fixed within the religious pattern. With Bellah’s civil religion as a starting point, I will argue that what has emerged is an American “consumer civil religion,” as consumption has developed in prominence and practice in the culture. In addition to the introduction of the concept of consumer civil religion, other implications for theories of consumption, and social theory will be explored. First, the implications of this consumer civil religion as a force for solidarity in

American culture will be raised. Second, the changes observed in American culture with regard to new consumer holiday structure provide an opportunity to examine how social change at the level of practice and change at the structural level are related. Third, a new combination of theories of consumption will be offered, bringing together the ideas of shopping done as an act of sacrifice and family devotion, and shopping done for sign value. The examination of the practice of Black Friday discount shopping will show how families are essentially making sacrifice on this day for other family members in order to acquire the sign value associated with goods that normally would not be affordable to members of their class.

My methodology is a structural historical approach, utilizing observations of cultural patterns as data. These observations are based on the historical research of others, news reports, and the quotations, writings, and stories of consumers from original and secondary sources. My primary interest is the cultural patterns that have developed with the rise of consumerism in recent decades. Although the underlying shared motivations of consumers will be discussed, no ethnographic interviews were conducted. Information regarding consumer motivation was gleaned from existing sources.

A Brief History of Christian Holidays and Consumerism

It is important to recognize that even though the current North American holiday structure is familiar, it has not always existed as it does at present. Much of the relationship between material commerce and Christmas was not in place until the end of the 19th century (Schmidt, 1995, p. 37). In its early forms, the Christian holiday structure was based on a division of time into religious/holy time that was separated from work time. In later years,

this key separation became blurred (Schmidt, 1995, p. 19). Schmidt notes that it was primarily the practice of merchants, who saw holidays as an opportunity for advertising and sales, that turned holy days into shopping days (1995, p. 20).

However, the historical trend to a de-emphasis of the sacredness of holidays was not solely the work of market entrepreneurs. Schmidt traces much of the change to a transition brought on by Sabbatarianist Protestants, who sought to purify and simplify a Catholic calendar crowded with saint celebrations. Sabbatarianism promoted the celebration of only the sabbath, utilizing a streamlined calendar. (Schmidt, 1995, p. 24-25). Puritan protestants, a part of this movement, desacralized Catholic holidays by going to work on those days instead of taking the day off. “Issues of profit and gain, occasions of market and trade, were sharply divided from holy time. The Puritans’ demarcation of the churches time from the merchant’s time was scrupulous and exacting, but this line no longer extended to saints’ days and other holy days: the people were not only free to labor at these times, they were positively expected to keep their shops open, to plow their fields, and to stay at the regular employments.” (Schmidt, 1995, p. 25).

This Sabbatarian movement was then joined by Enlightenment rationalists, who “made the question one of simple economic calculation: what configuration of Christian time was best for business, commerce, and civic prosperity?” (Schmidt, 1995, p. 26). Festivals and religious holidays were thus seen as subservient to the demands of commerce, and were quickly co-opted for these profane purposes. With both Protestant and entrepreneurial influence, the Catholic calendar shrunk to major holiday observances (those shared in common with Protestants), and the practice of working and shopping on holidays was

adopted.

Romanticism, Aristocracy, And Gift Giving Practice

Schmidt traces the development of a national holiday structure by pointing out the influence of romanticism—which provided an important foundation for the shift away from the traditional reasons for holiday celebration to an economic basis. Historically, much of the influence of consumer culture harkens back to the aristocratic court influence (Schmidt, 1995, p. 32). In aristocratic practices, there were many complex gift-giving rituals. Over time, these moved into acceptance among the middle class. The expansion of these gift-giving practices among the middle class in turn led the way for increased commercialization of the holiday structure. (Schmidt, 1995, p. 34). As a consequence of this expansion among the larger middle class, national common holidays overtook aristocratic, ethnic and local holiday practices.

The romanticized, aristocratic inspired gift-giving practices of the middle class at first were not solely associated with Christmas. Originally, Christmas was one part of a larger New Year's cluster of holidays, which used to be the central focus of the season. The wintertime season of December through January was a natural agricultural lull, which allowed more time for more celebration, and the cluster of holidays developed (Schmidt, 1995, p. 19). The practice of giving gifts had primarily been associated with New Year's rather than Christmas (Schmidt, 1995, p. 111, 115). Eventually, Christmas time rose in cultural significance and practice, and increasingly began to “be recast in the crucibles of middle-class consumption, religion, and family life.” (Schmidt, 1995, p. 108).²

Early Mutual Reinforcement

Historically, business operators did not merely adopt the holidays for their own use. Surprisingly, at one point in the early development of the relationship of commercial forces and Christmas, businesses provided reinforcement of Christian morals, and aided the cultural support of holiday participation. Retailers assisted the Christian holiday system by providing new expressions that moved holiday celebrations away from street carnival practices (which were considered raucous and unsafe) and toward safe, respectable family atmosphere celebrations. (Schmidt, 1995, p. 13, 18). At the same time, merchants and consumers benefited from the holiday symbolism that provided a culturally acceptable ethos for consumption—from window displays to the increasing practice of obligatory gift giving—all motivated by Christmas imagery. It is Schmidt's book *Consumer Rites* that best expresses the nature of this relationship, and how interdependence was mixed with ambivalence:

At one level, American churches happily participated in the advent of the consumer culture, and their own modes of festival often encouraged and even celebrated the new patterns of display and the new therapeutic values of relaxation and self-fulfillment.... The churches clearly profited to some degree from the new cultural prominence that the market gave Christmas and Easter; the commercial culture, after all, helped make them pervasive, almost obligatory observances and provided the relatively austere liturgical culture of evangelical Protestantism with lush new corporeal forms for celebration. Still, this dalliance with the marketplace was always problematic. The commercial culture sought to redefine Christianity and its feasts in its own promotional image. Old Christian rituals were refashioned into new liturgical forms that provided the rubrics for a consumerist gospel of prosperity and abundance (Schmidt, 1995, p. 14).

The Ambivalent Relationship Of Commerce And Christmas

Part of the complexity in this relationship between consumerism and Christian holidays comes from the tension between Christian ideology and consumer ideology. Even

though early in their development there were indications of a mutually beneficial relationship, Christian religious morality and the economic underpinnings of the market exist in contradiction.

Recent social theorists have described consumer purchase motivations in terms of devotion to family (Miller, 1998), and for the purpose of acquiring sign value (Baudrillard, 1998). These perspectives will be discussed below. For my purposes here, I am examining the ideological differences separately from the recent perspectives on consumer motivation. Logically and historically, Protestant Christianity and consumer capitalism have been shown to be in contradiction with each other. In order to understand the recent changes in American culture that have led to the combination of these entities, it is important to recognize that this integration has not always existed, nor do they combine naturally and without difficulty.

Ideological contradiction. Christian ideals include promoting giving over acquiring for self (Acts 20:35), prohibitions against using money to try to purchase spiritual qualities (Acts 8:18-20), and Jesus' own words regarding the relation of the temple to commerce, "How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!" (John 2:16). Certainly this may be considered a separation of the sacred and the profane! The New Testament also cautions against the love of money (1 Timothy 6:10, Hebrews 13:5), which is in tension with a central value of capitalism—profit motive. "[Puritan and Catholic] religious traditions saw temptations everywhere in a society where unfettered markets produced inevitable excess" (Cross, 2000, p. 113).³ This carries over to holiday practice as well, "...feasts celebrating affluence and indulgence are seen as standing the liberating message of Christianity—good news for the poor and the downtrodden—on its head..." (Schmidt, 1995,

p. 7). The moral tension, as well as the previously considered historical tensions on the ideology of the use of time can be compared as in Table 1.

Table 1. Tensions Between Christianity and Capitalist Consumerism

Industrial Capitalist Consumerism	Christianity
Work/Market time	holy time/ God time
work	cease from work (sabbath)
Affluence and indulgence	Self sacrifice, care for the poor

The Christian importance of the meaning of Christmas and the values of the market form a contradiction, which has led to attempts at disassociation. Both of the elements of interdependence as well as the attempts to disassociate commerce and Christmas find expression in the Christmas calendar organization and structure.

Historical tensions and resistance. Historically, the mercantile system is seen as being at odds with the Christian holiday system, with (as strange as it may seem) merchants seeing holidays as a hindrance to commerce and profit making (Schmidt, 1995, p. 26-27).⁴

This tension was reflected in an ongoing ideological tug-of-war over the meaning of religious holidays. On the one hand is an expression of religious idealism, where the Christian meaning of the holiday would transform the merchant (as in the redemptive conversion of Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*) (Schmidt, 1995, p. 28-29). On the other hand, there is the perspective of realism, where the merchant transforms the holiday (as is often the case with the commodification of capitalism).

The divided influences of commerce on the one hand, and traditional religious

calendrical patterns on the other, continued to persist side-by-side throughout the 19th century (Schmidt, 1995, p. 30). As holiday practices changed and the influence of reformers continued to shrink the number of holidays to be celebrated, there was at the same time a desire to recapture the sentiment previously experienced in religious holidays. However, these holidays were all too quickly co-opted by merchants (Schmidt, 1995, p. 31). Instead of the redemption idealism winning the day, “more often, when merchants rediscover the holidays, the former transform the latter, not vice versa, as merchants systematically extended the apparatus of the market into the realm of celebration.” (Schmidt, 1995, p. 29).

Of course Weber’s *Protestant Ethic* outlines one possibility of tension relief—the moral and ethical content of the religion becomes the ethos by which capitalism is driven, only to be purged once capitalism becomes predominant (Weber, 2003). Another possible way of relieving this tension is by blurring the boundaries between the sacredness of religious holidays and the profane practices of shopping and consumerism. This was done in part by making holidays more commercial. However, this contradiction is not resolved without opposition.

Current forms of resistance. As consumerism has continued to develop, pockets of resistance have also developed to the blurring of lines between Christian calendar meanings and consumer reinterpretations. In fact, this resistance has gone far beyond mere complaints about the commercialization of Christmas made by consumers—even as they are on their way to shop for Christmas presents. Recent movements of resistance against holiday consumption have been organized, and are gaining popularity among Protestant church members.

The Advent Conspiracy is one of these movements. The Advent Conspiracy is a loose confederation of Christians and others who want to see Christmas be more personal and meaningful. It was started by three Protestant pastors, and consists mostly of web site and other resources that are offered to help churches and other interested parties find ways to worship in non-commercial ways, spend less on obligatory Christmas presents, and invest money in ways that will help others—especially by providing clean water to those around the globe who don't have access to it (Biaggne, 2009). Among their resources are brochures, videos, podcasts, and posters such as one depicting a Magi encountering a woman with a shopping cart (see figure 1). The two silhouette shapes face each other in a symbolic representation of the inherent contradiction.

It is interesting to note that the Advent Conspiracy declares that its members are not “Scrooges,” and that they are not against gift-giving in general—just the over-consumption of extensive spending. They suggest buying one or two fewer presents for children, and giving personal gifts of “presence” instead of “presents” (Biaggne, 2009).

Groups concerned about losing the Christian message of Christmas are not the only ones to resist the consumerism of holiday spending. Another movement is the “Buy Nothing Day,” which was started by Kalle Lasn, who co-founded Adbusters Media Foundation, an environmental activist group. The goal of Buy Nothing Day is to preserve planetary resources by reducing needless consumption (ConsumerReports.org, 2008).

Buy Nothing Day targets Black Friday specifically as the representative day of consumer spending. Adherents participate in anti Black Friday practices such as cutting up credit cards, holding demonstrations and vigils, and doing “zombie walks,” where



Figure 1. Advent Conspiracy Magi/Shopper Poster. (Used by permission).

participants wear masks (often of the face of Jesus Christ) while slowly pushing shopping carts in a line through stores—but buying nothing. (Adbusters, 2010).

If the shadow proves the light, these resistance movements show that there has been an integration of sacred holidays with the profane practices of consumerism. The more the lines that once separated the two are blurred, the more resistance movements arise to mount their objections.⁵

In summary, it is important to remember that the Christmas gift-giving practices which are so culturally familiar to most Americans in 2010 did not always exist in their current forms. These holiday practices developed over time, changing and adapting to both Christian influences and merchant influences alike. These groups historically have not necessarily shared the same perspective on the use or meaning of the holiday patterns, but at times each has assisted the cause of the other. At other times, (and increasingly in recent years as consumerism and religious holidays increasingly commingled), movements of resistance and opposition have arisen in attempts to counter the increased emphasis on using holidays as means of consumption.

The Perspective Of Mutual Reinforcement

As described above, consumerism and Protestant Christianity have existed in contradiction on several levels. This includes tension related to the ideology and values of each, especially as it relates to the symbolism and meaning behind the practice of holidays. Capitalism and Protestantism are competing in the same space and time with regard to the meaning of American holiday structure. However, if we assume that just because the ideologies of Protestantism and capitalism are in contradiction with each other, that it must

follow that the two are also in opposition to each other in practice and cannot influence or support each other, we risk overlooking a more complex relationship.

There is another way of viewing the relationship between these two entities—that is one of mutual reinforcement. Capitalism needs the reinforcement of Protestant Christianity—especially at holiday time, in order to provide the symbolism that motivates shoppers. At the same time, Christianity benefits from, and is mutually reinforced by the participation of consumers in practices that are affiliated with Christian holidays.

Interdependency of Christianity and Capitalism. Max Weber outlined the intersection of these two, showing how the lifestyle of a particular type of Protestantism (Calvinism) promoted the development of Capitalism (Weber, 2003). From Weber’s perspective, once the hard working ethic and practice of reinvestment of profits among these Protestants got the capitalist economy moving, they no longer needed each other (or at the very least, the economy, once it started growing could feed off of itself and no longer needed a Protestant motivation to keep it going). Weber however did not have access to the recent consumer holiday practices that have developed since the 1960s in America.

What has developed is a complex interplay between the forces of consumerism and those of the Protestant holiday system—in that they utilize each other—not just in a one-way relationship, but in a mutual, interdependent relationship. Protestantism and consumerism work together to bolster the separate achievement of their needs and goals.

Enchantment. Enchantment helps perform this mutuality as well. As described by Ritzer, enchantment is the sense of fantasy and dream that disguises the cold, rational, economic realities of commercial exchange, and instead projects an image of magic and

attraction onto the process of commerce (2005). Enchantment helps religion by making people eager to participate in Christmas, thus reinforcing the beliefs and practices of Christianity. Consumers are not forced or coerced to consume, but instead they are enchanted to do so (Ritzer, 2005, p. 69). Enchantment becomes a motivational force that benefits both Christianity and commerce—it provides the fantasy desired by shoppers, while at the same time bolstering religion by encouraging participation in religious symbolism and myth.

Theoretical Perspectives of Religion and Consumption

Social theorists have problematized the complex relationship of religion and consumption in a variety of ways. I will examine those that relate to the integration of consumer activity and Christian religious forms, and in particular, Christian holiday patterns. The first of these perspectives views shopping as more of a religious ritual act, rather than an irrational act of consumption from unmitigated desire.

Shopping As Sacrifice

In *A Theory of Shopping*, Daniel Miller challenges the model of equating shopping and consumption with hedonistic materialism. Instead of the popular conception of consumers as shopaholic mall-roaming zombies of consumption chanting, “consume, consume, consume,” Miller argues that shopping is actually a sacrificial ritual of family devotion (1998).⁶ There is something more to shopping than just consumption for pleasure—it has a symbolic religious character. It is a form of religious sacrifice. Miller affirms the connection of the shopping practice to a religious context (1998, p. 20). This perspective will be treated in more detail later.

Perspectives On Sacred Time And Space

Sacred and profane time. What was previously considered sacred time has been invaded by one of the profane practices of ordinary time—that of shopping. This can be expressed through the secularization of religious celebration (for example, the commercialization of Christmas), or through the sacralization of the secular (as with civil religion, or when consumerism is utilized to seek a transcendent experience) (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry, 1989). Thus, through its identification with religious holiday in terms of the timing and use of symbols, shopping has crossed the boundary into sacred time.

This “blurring” of boundaries between the sacred and profane is one of re-determining which action can be performed at which time. What was formerly a profane practice (shopping) must be re-defined in new terms and clothed with religious symbolism (“Christmas shopping”) in order to be practiced during a sacred time (the holiday season).

Sacred space—cathedrals of consumption. The blending of consumerism and religion takes shape not only in time but in space as well. The locations of shopping have taken on religious forms and symbolism. George Ritzer calls these grand shopping centers “cathedrals of consumption” (2005). They are spectacular shopping locations which provide the fulfillment of the fantasy that shoppers desire. By enchanting an otherwise disenchanting process—that of the hard, cold economic reality of business transactions, cathedrals of consumption turn the rationality underlying shopping into something that has a “sacred, religious character” (Ritzer, 2005, p. 7). In fact, religion and consumer shopping have come full circle. Not only have cathedrals of consumption taken on religious forms, but churches have started to imitate the mall (Ritzer, 2005, p. 23).

Spectacle. For Ritzer, the important component that cathedrals of consumption offer is “spectacle” (Ritzer, 2005, p. 93). It is the mystical, magical, breath-taking experience that mystifies shoppers and keeps them coming back year after year. Extravagant Christmas window displays, or just having a department store Santa for children to sit on his lap connects shopping with holiday symbolism. Here Ritzer recognizes the connection between consumption and Christmas—and how consumption needs Christmas to be able to provide the symbols necessary to create a spectacle—a dramatic public display that will enhance the desire for consumers to connect with their sales. It is spectacle that helps enchant and keep customers shopping. Efficient economic systems aren’t enchanting or attractive—it is religion (Christmas) that makes these economic processes attractive. It is the religious element that turns necessity into a virtue.

Consumer pilgrimage. As sacred shopping locations, cathedrals of consumption creates a parallel to another religious form, that of the pilgrimage. In the same way that religious pilgrims trek to sacred holy sites as an act of spiritual worship, consumers trek to shopping malls and stores on consumer holy days as a quasi-religious act (Ritzer, 2005, p. x). The behaviors are strikingly similar—they travel to an awe inspiring location, where other pilgrims have gathered, they perform shared rituals, there is a sense of anticipation on the journey. Religious pilgrim and consumer pilgrim alike seek the spectacle that the crowds and the location have to offer.

In summary, consumerism in American has taken on new religious forms. Shopping centers have become the new cathedrals to which we make our pilgrimages. Our sense of the division of time into sacred and profane has changed as well. The boundaries that once

clearly separated when sacred and profane actions could be performed have blurred together, and shopping is now an acceptable rite for “holy days.”

Although Christianity and commercialism have a complex, and somewhat antagonistic history, there is also a sense in which they mutually benefit from their interconnection. Merchants need Christmas to provide the excuse for shopping and the symbolism that enchants and distracts consumers from the raw economic rationality of profit motivated stores. At the same time, Christianity benefits from consumer shopping being practiced on Christian holidays. Having the larger culture participate in Christian holidays reinforces the myths and relevance of the religion in the culture. This mutual reinforcement comes together primarily at holiday time. “From the perspective of modern merchandising, holidays were fraught with possibility and allure, the temporal cycle that could provide rhythm and ritual for the unfolding culture of consumption. *Time is money*. The consumer revolution gave new meaning to poor Richard’s adage.” (Schmidt, 1995, p. 33).

CHAPTER 2

A CONSUMER HOLIDAY STRUCTURAL PATTERN

One of the interesting things about ritual and symbolism is that people are not always able to explain the meaning of the symbols from their own culture. In particular, those ritual events that are separated by time are not usually seen as connected. Victor Turner makes note of this in his study of the Ndembu. "I found that I could not analyze ritual symbols without studying them in a time series in relation to other 'events,' for symbols are essentially involved in social process." (Turner, 1967, p. 20). Edmund Leach echoes this idea, providing an example from Christian European culture, where the bride and the widow are not often interpreted together as two parts of the same symbol set, because they are most often observed as separated by many years:

...when we are trying to interpret ritual performances, we are liable to forget that events which are separated by a considerable interval of time may be part of the same message.... The Christian European customs by which brides are veiled and dressed in white and widows are veiled and dressed in black are both part of the same message. A bride is entering marriage, a widow is leaving it. The two customs are *logically* related. The reason we do not ordinarily see that they are logically related is because they are normally widely separated in time (Leach, 1976, p. 27, emphasis his).

The same separation of what is otherwise related may also occur within the cultural and religious holiday calendar. Holidays that are separated in time may possess an association that is hidden by their temporal distance.

Holiday Structure

There is a logical relationship within the Christian holiday structure that is affirmed annually in practice. Every winter the birth of Christ is celebrated through the season of

Advent, the anticipation of the coming birth of Jesus Christ, culminating in Christmas. The symbols are ones of anticipation and searching—the anticipation of birth, the magi searching for the newborn king, the wait for the coming savior of the world. The commercial symbols are parallel—the searching for the right present to give, and the anticipation of opening wrapped presents which wait under the Christmas tree. This is a part of the enchantment of the magic of Christmas.

The birth of Christ is followed later in the calendar year in the spring, when the death and resurrection of Christ are re-enacted in Good Friday and Easter. This celebration is preceded by the season of Lent, which is marked by repentance. The season of Lent is usually practiced by a “sacrifice” of restraint—a voluntary “giving up” of something—usually an item of food that is intentionally not consumed during the season as a sign of repentance intended to prepare the participant for the coming celebration. With the exception of some purchasing related to Easter (Schmidt, 1995), there is little commercial practice related to this season—it is primarily one of non-consumption and sacrifice, in order to assist the participants with their identification with the coming sacrificial death of Jesus Christ.

There is a logical connection between the two seasons. However, the structure and its relationship to commerce is often overlooked because of the separation in time between the two.

Holidays of Consumption and Non-Consumption

What messages are being communicated through American holiday rituals? Much has been discussed about the consumerism of Christmas, but observing the relationship of consumption to this one holiday in isolation may miss the entire complex picture, and miss

the extent to which the entire holiday ritual structure and American capitalist consumerism serve to mutually reinforce each other. Here, I will explore aspects of the American holiday structure, observing the events as complex sets, repeated stories, involving inversions and binary oppositions. Using a structuralist analysis, I will explore the structural significance of Thanksgiving in relation to Black Friday, and the Christmas shopping season juxtaposed with a larger symbol set—that of the season of Lent and its related holidays. Taken together, these reveal the reinforcement of an underlying consumerism belief system—and how consumerism utilizes the Christian liturgical calendar and embedded Christian rituals.

If we ask an average American about the meaning of Thanksgiving, we are likely to hear about “a time to give thanks for all we have,” and something about the first feast of the pilgrims with the Native American First Nation Peoples, or something related to “a time for family,” turkey, stuffing, and the like. The cultural insider view of this ritual feast certainly contains those elements and history.

Indeed, sociologist Robert Bellah takes this interpretation of the Thanksgiving holiday, and its connection to American history as a starting point in his description of American Civil Religion. Bellah points to two central holidays that he sees as indicators of the quasi-religious celebration of “what it means to be an American”—Memorial Day, and Thanksgiving Day (and a possible third, yet less religiously connected, the Fourth of July) (Bellah, 2005). Although Bellah has correctly identified the religious undertones of these American holidays, he has overlooked the larger Christian holiday structure, and the rising consumer culture through which these holiday celebrations are practiced.

However, if we observe the behavior of this holiday ritual, and specifically its

relationship to other events over time, we may find other cultural values revealed. When behavior is observed in the “bigger picture” of the larger social structure, we find that the Thanksgiving feast takes on a different role. It then becomes possible to see that this holiday has been “co-opted,” and an additional layer of meaning has been added through newly developed consumer practices and the observation of a holiday structure related to consumption.

Vignette #2: The words of a forty-four year old, middle class female:
“I love shopping! I’m a compulsive shopper. Just ask my husband. He keeps threatening to get me one of those bumper stickers, ‘Born to shop!’ It’s my favorite activity. I’d rather shop than just about anything else.... That’s why I work. My husband makes good money, but I’m a compulsive shopper. I am!... The best part of holidays is going shopping. I really enjoy that!... The only time I really don’t like shopping is if I’m forced into buying something because I have to have something, where you’re forced to get something and there’s no time to look around.” (Prus & Dawson, 2010, p. 145).

The Structural Model: Fat Tuesday/Ash Wednesday/Easter—A Season Of Non-Consumption

To understand what has happened to the Thanksgiving holiday (and for that matter, the following Christmas holiday season), we first must understand the structural form of related ritual events that existed before. As Turner described the process, “[the investigator] must examine symbols not only in the context of each specific kind of ritual, but in the context of the total system.” (1967, p. 43). Our model comes from the Christian calendrical

liturgy of Fat Tuesday through Easter.

The season of Lent begins with Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday is a day of repentance, which is the beginning of a season of repentance and sorrow for sin. It is metonym—in the sense of “a part stands for the whole,” (Leach, 1976, p. 14)—a day that stands as a representation of the entire season that follows. On this day, participants will usually fast and attend church to have ash imposed on their forehead. The day marks the beginning of a season of fasting—often participants will “give up” something for the season of Lent, beginning on Ash Wednesday. Very often this practice involves eliminating a food item from the diet. Participants exercise restraint by fasting—ceasing to consume some food (although they may also fast some other regular habit—e.g. giving up television, etc.). The season of fasting (non-consumption) ends with the Christian high holy day of Easter.

This religious season is inaugurated with the cultural addition of what might be called a feast. This is known by the French term *Mardi Gras*, or “Fat Tuesday.” It is the inversion of Ash Wednesday. Prior to this season of repentance and fasting, there is a day to “live it up”—eat (consume) all you want before you begin the season of non-consumption. So the structure of the ritual season follows this pattern:

Inaugural Inverted Feast (Fat Tuesday)

Representative First Day of the Season (Ash Wednesday)

Season of Non-Consumption (Lent)

High Holy Day Ends Season (Easter)

This is the syntagmatic chain of events—the pattern that will be transposed, revealing additional cultural meanings.

Thanksgiving/Black Friday/Christmas—The Structural Equivalent Of Consumer Religion Ritual

If we follow the same model to examine the holiday season surrounding Thanksgiving, we find underlying consumer values that better explain the behavior patterns of Americans during that season—certainly different from an explanation that could be obtained from the verbal explanations of cultural insiders, and different from the understanding Bellah gives the holiday in terms of civil religion.

Using this model, Thanksgiving as a holiday has taken on a new role in its cultural significance and its relation to the newly developed practice of Black Friday. As Black Friday has risen in cultural participation, the role and significance of Thanksgiving as a civil religious holiday has shifted. Thanksgiving now can be seen as the inaugural feast (that paradigmatically fits the same position as Fat Tuesday). Many Americans already see this as the initiation of a season—most think of this as the beginning of the Christmas season (Black Friday history, n.d.), and often this is when radio stations start playing Christmas music. Thanksgiving is the feast that inaugurates a season of consumer spending. This is revealed in its relationship in the structure to Black Friday, the day that follows.

As previously mentioned, the day after Thanksgiving, Black Friday, is usually a holiday from work and school, and is among the biggest shopping days of the year. In recent years, it has consistently been in the top two spending days of the year (International Council of Shopping Centers, 2005). In this holiday structural model, this is the “part that stands for the whole,” representing the rest of the season. Black Friday reveals the underlying values—consumerism, shopping, spending, and that of exercising the power to purchase. Black Friday

is a ritual condensation of this spending season—condensed into one day, where “many things and actions are represented in a single formation” (Turner, 1967, p. 28). The season of consumption continues through Christmas. During this time a large number of retail transactions continue to take place (all of the rest of the top five shopping days of the year are days between Black Friday and Christmas) (International Council of Shopping Centers, 2005). Black Friday, like Ash Wednesday, serves as the condensed ritual, encapsulating in one day the “spirit” of the season. (In a sense, Black Friday is also an inversion of Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving represents the values of thanks and contentment for all that has already been received, and Black Friday represents the inverted desire to obtain all that we do not yet have through consumption.)

Vignette #3: Emily, a twenty-year-old college student, related the following when describing family traditions. “Everyone from our family piles into our home on Thanksgiving day, eats until they can’t eat anymore, and then we all nap until we can eat another meal. The real fun begins the next day though, when we all wake up at four in the morning to have a day full of Christmas shopping. My dad’s favorite family ritual takes place on Sunday mornings. My dad always wakes up early, cooks breakfast, and then at eight o’clock he wakes us all up. He doesn’t just wake us up though. He puts in the CD of Handel’s Messiah, finds the Hallelujah Chorus, turns the stereo as loud as it will go and pushes play! He always said that there was no better way to wake up on Sunday then to have a Heavenly host of angels singing the Hallelujah Chorus in your living room. These are two traditions of our

family....” (O’Neal, 2008). Emily’s family traditions are a mixture of waking up to religious classical Christmas music, a diminished Thanksgiving feast, and the day of “real fun,” the full day of shopping that begins on the day after Thanksgiving.

And so the season of consumer ritual spending and buying continues, ending on the Christian high holy day of Christmas, where all of these purchases are ritually exchanged. The economy is stimulated, jobs are made economically secure, families are united through the exchanges. Economic necessity has been made into religious virtue. And our model is recapitulated thus:

Inaugural Inverted Feast (Thanksgiving Day)

Representative First Day of the Season (Black Friday)

Season of Consumption (Christmas Shopping Season, an inversion of Lent)

High Holy Day Ends Season (Christmas)

As indicated above, this Thanksgiving/Black Friday/Christmas spending season is an inversion of the season of Lent, which is a season of fasting—non-consumption. The season of consumption viewed as a whole is a ritual affirmation of capitalist consumer values, reinforcing habits of spending, and re-affirming consumer values and the feelings of power that come from being able to purchase gifts and distribute them to family and loved ones. The Thanksgiving holiday marks the inauguration of a “season of spending,” which re-constructs the values of consumerism in the United States capitalist society. This occurs structurally in the same way that Fat Tuesday inaugurates a “season of fasting” for spiritual gain. There are several symbolic inversions between the two, and within the Thanksgiving holiday itself. A

summary table showing these relationships follows (see Table 2).

Table 2: A Structural Analysis of American Consumer Holidays

Structural Analysis	Season of Consumption	Season of Non-Consumption
Inaugural Feast	Thanksgiving Day Inaugurates (unofficially) religious holiday season	Fat Tuesday Inaugurates (unofficially) religious holiday season
Metonymic Day After Feast	Black Friday (largest shopping day of the year, where stores go “in the black”)	Ash Wednesday
Season Following (symbolic inversion)	Followed by Consumer Holiday Spending Season (excess spending, over spending); (mystified as Christmas Holiday Season)	Followed by Season of Lent (fasting, repentance)
Inverted Value	Contentment (gratitude for possessions, and the next day going out and buying in a flurry of discontent, want, desire, pressure)	Indulgence (over-consume and indulge the flesh, and the next day fast and sacrifice for spiritual reasons)
Ending Marker	Season ends on Christian Holy Day = Christmas, Birth of Christ	Season ends on Christian High Holy Day = Easter, Good Friday, Death and Resurrection of Christ
Space where worship is practiced	“Cathedrals of Consumption” (shopping mall)	Cathedral Churches
Ideology	—contentment/gratitude inversion re-enforces consumer desire/spending value —consumerism	—Indulgence inversion re-enforces (Christian) restraint value —sacrifice

Schmidt supports the development of a season of shopping, and not just shopping as individual days. He sees this development as coming not of religious origins, but out of commercial ones. The Christmas shopping season was stretched into longer and longer periods through advertising. Advertising expanded the holiday timeframe into weeks. Schmidt notes, “seeing the holiday more as the season than as the day had little or no precedent in the folklore of the occasion: it was a commercial contrivance—one that foreshadowed the eventual protraction of Christmas and Easter into long shopping seasons.” (Schmidt, 1995, p. 71).

Interpretation and Analysis

The dominant symbol here is the feast. Dominant symbols “are regarded not merely as means to the fulfillment of the avowed purposes of a given ritual, but also and more importantly refer to values that are regarded as ends in themselves....” (Turner, 1967, p. 20).

Here the metaphor of the feast is linguistically connected to the idea of “consumption,” (we consume the food) and it inherently contains (in the United States at least) the practice of eating—not for sustenance or survival, but for pleasure and desire.

For many, there is an element in the Thanksgiving feast of “over-consumption,”—eating beyond the point of being full. It is consumption for consumption sake—consumption as an end in itself. This value is then re-enacted the next day on Black Friday, only this time it is consumer goods that are consumed instead of food. Just as Fat Tuesday is a “feast” of doing all the “living” and “sinning” one can do before the season of extended fasting during Lent, Thanksgiving is a feast celebrating bounty and provision—that we have more than we

need (and more than we can eat).

But capitalist consumers cannot remain in a state of grateful contentment with all of the blessings they currently possess. They must quickly return to their consumer values—acquisition, discontent, desire, and purchasing power. The looming crisis of capitalism is an “over-accumulation,” of goods, a surplus of production that must be dealt with for the system to continue to function. So goods are put on “sale” at discounted prices, the “turnover” time for items is sped up and they are consumed faster. Consumers are encouraged to displace time by buying things they don’t yet need and can’t yet afford by buying on credit (Harvey, 1989, p. 180-184).

Thus, the feast of gratefulness for bounty celebrated at Thanksgiving is quickly followed by an extended season of consumption—the inversion of the fasting of Lent. And so, “the obligatory is made desirable” (Turner, 1967, p. 30)—the economic necessities and values of the consumer culture are celebrated, and later reinforced again through the negative binary opposition of fasting. As consumers participate in the associated rituals of Black Friday (standing in line for the store opening, searching for deep discounted items, making “a day of it” with family), what is consumed is consumption itself (Ritzer, 1998, p. 15), and the day in effect celebrates the practice of shopping.

There is also an interplay with regard to the tension of the Christian values of restraint and repentance on the one hand, and the consumer cultural values of acquisition and spending on the other. First, as just mentioned, there is a binary opposition between the two. In one season we have consumption, and in the other the “non-consumption” of fasting. As Leach points out, “the meaning of particular symbols is to be found in the contrast with other

symbols rather than in the symbols as such” (Leach, 1976, p. 59). And so the two seasons create meaning in their contrast. Second, there is a tension represented here between religious and cultural values. There are Christian religious values that have been passed down and have influenced the culture (we give presents at Christmas because it is “better to give than to receive,” and we fast during Lent to exercise restraint and control over our individual desires for the sake of spiritual growth). At the same time there are powerful consumer values that have been culturally affirmed and exist in tension with these values. The capitalist economy requires spenders and consumers, and so it must affirm the values of spending money, purchasing, and meeting one’s needs and desires with consumer goods. As we move through each season, and from one season to the next, we are bounced back and forth between these two poles (Turner, 1967). It is as if the tension between these competing ideologies and values is being acted out in the culture as we move through the calendar year.

We would not be able to see the relationship of Thanksgiving to Fat Tuesday, Black Friday to Ash Wednesday, or Christmas spending to Lenten sacrifice unless we step back to look at the structure and relation of events over time. In isolation, Thanksgiving appears to be an American civil religion holiday that reminds us of the value of gratitude. Yet it is when we apply the structuralist view and observe the rise in prominence of Black Friday with its associated symbol properties that we begin to see that the holiday structure is interwoven with “consumer religious” practices. This larger holiday pattern might better be described as the practices of a “consumer civil religion”—practices that those immersed in their own culture would find difficult to describe.

Theoretical Support

This structural pattern parallels the patterns of practice described by Pierre Bourdieu. In *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu re-creates the agrarian calendrical practices observed in his fieldwork among the Kabyle. Bourdieu's description focuses on binary oppositions found in the agrarian calendar and symbolism of spring/autumn, male/female, day/night, outdoor/indoor, and dry/wet (1977). Utilizing an "S" shaped under/over diagram, Bourdieu portrays the farming and mythical calendar cycle, with the two curves of the "S" showing the inherent oppositions and calendar rhythms. Along with these oppositions, a segmentation of times is indicated—labor time occupies autumn and early summer, and production time occupies winter and spring. Slack time occupies late summer (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 134). A simplified reconstruction is provided (see figure 2).

It may seem contradictory to quote the structure presented in a work which some have said was "written *against* ... 'structuralism,' or 'structural-Marxism,'" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. viii, Translator's foreword). Although Bourdieu does critique the structuralism imposed by theory-seeking scholastic minds, he presents detailed ritual practice organized in the form of structural models. Whether this structure is imposed by the Kabyle themselves, or imposed by Bourdieu, it is still an imposed structure. Even a structure embodied in practice is a structure nonetheless. Bourdieu emphasizes that the practices of agents should not be used to answer questions that are not posed by those performing the ritual practice (1977, p. 106). He recognizes that the various meanings of symbols do not exist at the same time as they are put into practice (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 123).

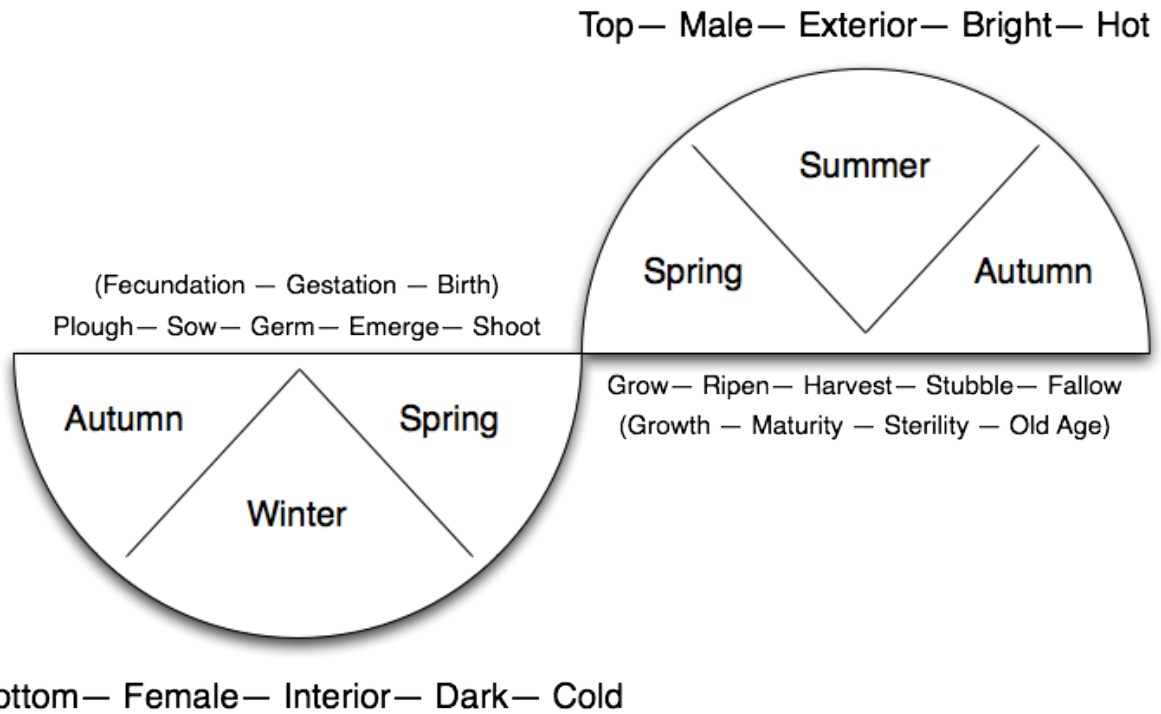


Figure 2. The Farming Year and the Mythical Year. (reconstructed from Bourdieu, 1977, p. 134).

Certainly there is a difference between the scientific study of cultural meanings and the actual practice of those living in the culture, and structuralist interpretations should bear this in mind. Bourdieu’s point seems to be that the actual agents can only know the structure by doing it—and not necessarily by the logic expressed in a structural model (1977, p. 123). However, that does not mean that the structural logic does not exist, or that the agents are thus exempt from external cultural forces that may influence their actions even unconsciously. In fact, this is precisely what Bourdieu means by the “dialectic of the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality,” (1977, p. 72), where

practice and structure come together in a mutually influencing relationship.

Although the structure presented in this thesis is an imposed one, I have attempted to base it on the actual practices of agents who by their consumer practice have created new traditions and actions that take place annually, in particular on the day after Thanksgiving. At the same time, I am attempting to recognize the influence of decades of cultural practice in the form of Catholic and Protestant calendar celebrations.

This really is a matter of the simple organization of time. In the same way that we categorize the days of the week, and provide designations for them (so that Saturday and Sunday are the “weekend,” or religiously, days of rest, and Monday is an ordinary work day), the same is true on a larger scale. There are similar designations for times of the year, weeks and months, calendar cycles, and seasons—agrarian and religious. These larger scale calendar celebrations may be structural in nature, but they are no less a part of the time organization of American culture.

Consumer behavior has increased and come to dominate American culture since the 1950s, but it has arisen in a context that includes the religious influence of Catholic and Protestant Christianity, and its related rituals and celebrations. Thus, the practice of consumerism has developed in relation to these external holiday structures. In a similar way to Bourdieu’s approach among the Kabyle, I am attempting to bring together the observed practice of American consumers, together with the calendar structure that makes up their cultural context.

Regardless of Bourdieu’s critique of structuralism, Bourdieu’s own structural outline supports the consumer holiday structure offered in this thesis. In both there is a calendrical

ordering of oppositions based on the seasons. Where Bourdieu has observed the Kabyle agrarian cultural components and their relationship to male/female and household order, I am observing the Christian religious calendar in relation to the actions of American consumers during sacred calendar seasons—specifically observing how the two are related.

This type of larger holiday pattern structure is further supported by the work of Etzioni. His elaboration of a theory of holidays affirms that “in most if not all societies holidays are repeated over time and in the same sequence” (Etzioni, 2000, p. 57). In addition, the order of these holidays is usually some type of alternating opposition—rarely are holidays immediately followed by another holiday of the same type (Etzioni, 2000, p. 53). This supports the observation of the inversions between the feast day (Thanksgiving/Fat Tuesday) and the “representative” day (Black Friday/Ash Wednesday), as well as the inversion of the season of consumption followed by a season of non-consumption.

Consumer shopping continues to be done through religious rituals that have been integrated with consumer practice as mediated through the holiday structure. The religious structure has not disappeared, it has been reinterpreted, and utilizes consumerism and is utilized by it. The relationship between the two is not one of pure antagonism, even though the basic ideologies may exist in tension. That tension is mediated, and the connection between the two must be viewed from the broader holiday structure as a whole. From that perspective, there appears a deeper integration, where newly developed consumer holiday practice such as Black Friday exists within a larger religious context which enhances its form and meaning. Within the domain of holiday time, consumer practices serve both the needs of capitalism and the needs of the Christian religion, and together they serve American society.

CHAPTER 3

BLACK FRIDAY: ITS RISE, APPEAL, AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

Key to the holiday structural pattern is the development of the consumer holiday of Black Friday. Black Friday has in fact become one of the largest consumer spending days of the year. Annual spending on this one day reached an estimated \$447 billion in 2010 (Bleau, 2010). It has also entered the cultural consciousness, to the point that retail businesses, marketers, advertisers, and consumers themselves have come to identify the day by the “Black Friday” monicker. It has taken on a role as an unofficial holiday of consumer shopping in the United States, and was observed in practice by an estimated one hundred thirty-eight million in 2010, approaching half the US population (Blackden, 2010).⁷ Yet this hardly explains how or why it has become culturally instituted as a “holiday.” Why do so many people set aside this day to spend money? Why do millions of people wake up at four o’clock in the morning just to go shopping? Why do some families relinquish comfortable time together at home on Thanksgiving in order to wait in line outside of a major retail store in the cold?⁸ What forces influenced the development of Black Friday’s own cultural significance, and its own traditions and practices?

Vignette #4: On Black Friday of 2009, around the United States, customers formed lines in the early morning outside of Best Buy and other stores. The practice of getting in line to be sure you were among the few to acquire one of the heavily discounted “door buster” deals has been going on for years. Debbie Woods and her two teenage daughters had camped out four Black Friday’s together. Explaining her motive, she said, “At this point, it’s

more a tradition than the great deals” (Castelli, 2009).

At 5:15am in San Jose, one family got up early to participate, but did not even have any particular items that they were looking to purchase. “‘I’m here just for the experience,’ said Jennifer Church, who awoke at 4:30 and drove from Los Altos with five relatives just to shop. ‘It’s fun. We do this every year. We don’t even need anything.’” (Fernandez, 2009).

Several family groups in Saint Paul, Minnesota explained that Black Friday was as much a tradition and event as it was a shopping outing. “A group of seven women at Rosedale was marking their 15th year of Black Friday outings together—sharing laughter and memories each November, as they scour the ads, plot their routes, fan out early and then reassemble to share tales. ‘Now it feels like Christmas is coming,’ said Lynn Norsten of Woodbury. By their 8 a.m. coffee break, they’d already made stops at Ultimate Electronics, Kohl’s and Northern Tool & Equipment. A visit to Target was still to come. Then lunch and a drink. They had plenty of shopping bags, but buying gifts wasn’t the only point. ‘My Christmas shopping is already done,’ said Jessica Miles of Forest Lake, one of three mother-daughter pairs among the group of seven friends. ‘I’m just doing this for the socializing.’

“At Mall of America, one visitor had a different mission. Jordan Falk of Madison, Wis., arrived at 8 a.m. and aimed to visit every store at the megamall. It took him six hours to hit the more than 500 shops, and he said he didn’t buy anything.

“In Target's jewelry department, Debbie Smolinsky was shopping with her 21-year-old daughter, Sierra Johnson. For them, Black Friday is a time to bond. ‘It's fun,’ Debbie said. ‘How often do you get to spend time with your 21-year-old daughter?’ Added her daughter, ‘And basically, I pick out my Christmas presents.’” (Webb, 2010).

Statements like these suggest that Black Friday has taken on the role of a consumer holiday—with rituals, traditions, and behaviors that function in ways similar to the holidays that come before and after. Therefore, understanding Black Friday requires that we view it as part of a larger system of relations. Let me explain.

We can observe these changes in consumer behavior, such as the increasing participation in shopping on Black Friday, and note how the day fits the holiday structure previously outlined. The interesting question that results is the same question raised by Marshall Sahlins—“The great challenge to an historical anthropology is not merely to know how events are ordered by culture, but how, in that process, the culture is reordered. How does the reproduction of a structure become its transformation?” (Sahlins, 1981, p. 8).

Black Friday is a symptom of the cultural change that has taken place among American citizens. It has developed to the point where shoppers themselves are expected (by the merchants and the media) to go to great lengths to shop on this day. What can we learn about American society from the new behaviors portrayed in the practice of Black Friday shopping? What do these practices tell us about who Americans have become as consumers? What does this cultural change tell us about the culture?

To address these questions, I will first examine what historical holiday practices

changed that led to the development of Black Friday and its place in the existing calendar structure. Second, I will discuss what makes Black Friday appealing to consumers, in order to better understand their ritual, traditional participation. Third, I will explore how the changes in Black Friday have taken religious form, and forth, I will discuss the implications with regard to our understanding of social theory on consumption.

The Rise of Black Friday Holiday Practice

Black Friday did not develop in a vacuum. It developed within a pre-existing holiday calendar structure that was predominant in the culture because of the historical influence of Christianity and commerce in America.

Thanksgiving And Merchant Influences

The development of Black Friday is intertwined with the surrounding holidays, especially Thanksgiving. Black Friday arose on the Friday after the Thanksgiving Day holiday in the United States. Although several U.S. presidents declared individual days of Thanksgiving, in 1941 Congress set the annual celebration as the fourth Thursday of November. The date, however, was not set in the absence of economic influences. When the traditional “last Thursday of November” turned out to fall on November 30th one year during the Great Depression, Franklin D. Roosevelt attempted to move the date earlier than normal to extend the Christmas shopping season (which then, as today, traditionally began with Thanksgiving) (Kelly, 2010). This was done at the urging of the National Dry Retail Goods Association, to prevent the Christmas shopping season from being reduced. The public objected to the commercialization of the holiday, and after several states decided to set their own date for Thanksgiving, congress responded by establishing the date officially as the

fourth Thursday of November as the national holiday. Despite their objections to the commercial connections of both the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays, late November was a perfect placement for American consumers. It provided a date to inaugurate the shopping season for the traditional cultural celebration of Christmas gift exchanges. It was not too close to Christmas to blur into a dual holiday or possibly overwhelm merchants, but it was also not too distant to be irrelevant to the shopping season. Thus, the national declaration of Thanksgiving was itself intertwined with commerce, and thus also, was Black Friday.

It is also important to note that Thanksgiving was set on a Thursday. When this became a national holiday, it created a *de facto* holiday on the Friday after. Wedged between a one-day holiday and the following weekend off from work, many employees and employers began to take the Friday after Thanksgiving as a holiday as well, in order to have four days of holiday time in a row. This became an interesting cultural formation—a holiday from work that had no affiliation, and at the same time, it was in position in the calendar after Thanksgiving and before Christmas. Whether or not citizens at the time objected to the commercialization of Christmas, there it was, a work-free Friday with no previous religious or nationally designated ritual—yet with Christmas following close behind. The day quickly became one of the top ten shopping days annually (Mikkelson and Mikkelson, 2006). Black Friday arose on a “holiday,” and although not officially declared one, it was a holiday in the sense of the separation of time—sacred/profane, rest day/work day, holy day/ordinary day.

The pre-existing holiday structure already in existence provided a perfect storm of timing. The determination of Black Friday was influenced at least in part by the business needs for a strong Christmas shopping season, especially coming out of the context of the

Great Depression. Then, despite religious moral resistance, the day was quickly commodified —“by the end of the century national holiday traditions had been installed, largely propelled by the expansion of a consumerist economy and culture. Merchants, recognizing the commercial potential of holiday celebrations, displayed, promoted, and in the process nationalized both holiday observances and material symbols....” (Zelizer, 2005, p. 343).

Civil Religion And Thanksgiving

This connection of Black Friday to Thanksgiving day is particularly important in light of Bellah’s use of Thanksgiving within civil religion in America. Bellah cites Thanksgiving as one of several holidays that ritualize the practice of civil religion. Thanksgiving for Bellah is a day that “serves to integrate the family into civil religion” (Bellah, 1967, p. 11).

However, Bellah has not recognized the interconnectedness of Thanksgiving with consumption, from its historical beginnings right up to its new role in relation to Black Friday and the larger calendar structure.

At this point I am expanding and elaborating on Bellah’s concept of civil religion. I would argue that Bellah is correct in identifying Thanksgiving as a day that integrates family into a type of civil religion, but that the celebration of Thanksgiving has changed in its significance. It is now a part of a larger system of relations that are connected to consumerism. Even though Black Friday developed primarily in relation to Thanksgiving, it has now begun to eclipse its predecessor. It is Black Friday that ritualizes consumerism, as much or more than Thanksgiving ritualizes civil religion. As each year more families sacrifice the Thanksgiving meal together at home in order wait in line for stores to open on Black Friday, we are witnessing the change in cultural practice that is changing the structure.

The culture has changed, incorporating mass participation in consumerism, which has come to be just as significant (if not more so) than other holidays of civil religion. Consumer holidays such as Black Friday and the Christmas season of shopping now define the new holiday structure.

Vignette #5: There are an increasing number of families willing to forego or shorten a traditional celebration of Thanksgiving in order to participate in the celebration of shopping, and the accompanying ritual of camping out in a line waiting for the stores to open.

In 2009 there were a number of reports that family members were giving up their Thanksgiving meal at home in order to wait in line for Black Friday shopping as early as possible—starting on Thanksgiving day.

In Elyria, Ohio, Kurt Kauk held a place in line for his family members. “Thanksgiving is going to be delivered to me. A couple members of my family wanted something, so I volunteered to be the line-stander.” (Castelli, 2009).

According to one report in Boston, “Alex Paez’s family wanted to make sure they were the first in line at the Best Buy in Everett so they headed to the store almost entire day before it opened. They arrived at 5 a.m. to secure their spot and spent the day celebrating the holiday outside the store. ‘I am having turkey. I’m having turkey here but I am having turkey,’ said Paez’s wife.” (Black Friday comes to a close, 2009).

As Black Friday shopping becomes more prominent, with stores opening earlier and earlier, and consumers waiting in line earlier and earlier—the meaning and importance of

Thanksgiving Day changes. It is now a day that is observed as part of a larger set of relationships in time. These changes are symptoms of a larger cultural integration of consumerism as part of the American identity.

The Appeal of Black Friday

To better understand changes in American culture through participation in Black Friday, we should explore the reasons for its consumer appeal as related to its wide involvement and cultural recognition. I will especially focus on reasons that further display how Black Friday is a symptom and indicator of the cultural change of the deeper integration of cultural consumerism, as well as those that reinforce ritual participation.

Discount Sale Prices

Black Friday attracts a large number of consumers in part because of the large number of material goods offered at discounted sale prices. Retail merchants offer goods at extremely low prices to purposefully coax shoppers to purchase Christmas gifts early—at the culturally accepted start of the Christmas shopping season, rather than waiting until the last minute. Often there are popular electronics and toys that are offered as “loss leaders—items sold at prices so low that the store doesn’t make a profit, but instead they intentionally lose money in order to draw shoppers to their stores (Kelly, 2010). Indeed, empirical studies show that consumers value immediate savings over long term savings (Weber & Dawes, 2005). These types of “door buster” offerings have proved to be an effective means of generating interest and consumer foot traffic.

The magical enchantment of the sale. Sale prices hold a mystical and magical component for the purchaser. In themselves they have a gift-like quality, in that they appear

to the buyer as though the buyer is getting something for little or nothing. At times, the discounts are offered in the form of a “free gift with purchase,” or with a “buy one get one free” provision which adds to the magical appearance of the transaction. The “magic of discounting” further enchants the consumer, disguising the economic realities of the enticement to consume through an “approved self-deception” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 6), of which they are fully aware, but choose not to recognize.

Advertising assists in the creation of a magical image of redistributed affluence through the offering of free gifts and discounts. The free gifts that are advertised with purchase as incentives to consumers are comparable to the extravagant feasts that are given at a potlatch or in the relationships present during feudal times. (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 165). In a sense, advertising covers up (on purpose) the logic of the market—it hides the redistribution of profits and makes it appear magical. This is similar to the magical appearance of cargo to the cargo cults. “The trick of advertising is precisely to *substitute everywhere the magic of the cargo cult* (the total miraculous abundance the natives dream of) *for the logic of the market.*” (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 165).

The long lines around stores on Black Friday help to serve the enchantment of Black Friday. The possibility of long lines creates pressure to get into line early. The anticipation of getting in line for “door busters” on Black Friday enchants Black Friday itself, and it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. “People seem to be animated by the presence of large numbers of other people, and that animation likely translates into increased sales of goods and services.” (Ritzer, 2005, p. 95).

Thrift

The act of thrift is the act of participating in a sale, or “saving through spending.” Daniel Miller, in *A Theory of Shopping*, suggests that thrift is “best understood not as a means toward some other end, but rather as an end in itself” (1998, p. 49). The point of purchasing an item on sale is not necessarily saving money, (after all money must be spent in order to buy the discounted items), but rather that the shopper has been able to justify their spending as they provide for their family. The important thing is not always that money was saved, but that “shoppers are able to see themselves as saving money” (Miller, 1998, p. 56). Indeed, thrift is seen as a shopping skill—that consumers “understand themselves as experts in the arts of saving money,” utilizing an “ability to find things at a cheaper price” (Miller, 1998, p. 58-59).

In Miller’s observations of the more frequent type of shopping—shopping for food and clothing for family members—the value of thrift is closely tied to providing for one’s family. There is a deeper motivation than saving money—they are saving money for a purpose. In this type of shopping, thrift is both a way to provide for family members, and an end in itself—it is a part of the life of the consumer, where those who exercise thrift are able to demonstrate their skill at saving, and discuss their ability with family and other consumers.⁹

This aspect of thrift (combined with the discounted sale prices) is part of the appeal of participation in Black Friday. It is a shared experience, and an opportunity to exercise their skill of saving money as they provide gifts for family members. Indeed, not participating in Black Friday sales may put a person in the position of being an outsider to the consumer

culture, who share together in the demonstration of their skills at thrift.

The Role Of Media And Advertising

As mentioned above, advertising and mass media play an important role in the participation of Black Friday. In addition, mass media contributes to the appeal of Black Friday shopping, and assists in the acceptance of the blurring of consumerism and Christian holiday messages.

Of course, mass media and advertising are important in terms of their influence over consumers to drive their participation in holiday celebrations. However, the power of mass media is also one of uniting a group—providing a point of contact by which the group feels connected.¹⁰ Black Friday advertising in the media creates a collective atmosphere where consumers participate in a group ceremony together—a ceremony that is promoted through advertising beforehand, and reinforced during and after through news reports about Black Friday participation.

Another component of the mass media role is that of segmenting—the way that mass media presents short soundbites and brief news reports of events. It presents life as if it were spliced together, and thus enables the a juxtaposition of diverse images. “It is in the segmenting—thanks to the technical media of TV and radio—of the event and the world into discontinuous, successive, noncontradictory messages...” (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 122). Baudrillard explains that this segmenting results in an equivocation of our news/information/history with our consumption/commercial messages/advertising. The equivalence between these two is produced by weaving the images of consumerism and all other images and information together into a consistent message.

It is the effect of this practice of segmenting that assists the slicing and dicing of intermingled religious and consumer values. Throughout the holiday season consumers are presented with stories about Christmas giving, kindness to others, and Thanksgiving—and these are intermingled with advertisements and news stories about shopping, sales, discounted merchandise, and purchasing. Consumers get used to the juxtaposition of the two, and no longer see them in terms of the ideological tensions between Christianity and commerce that may be present, but instead see segments of religion and shopping spliced together into one message.

Family Relations

Family relational connectedness is a part of the appeal of Black Friday as a shopping holiday. Participation in this annual shopping ritual is connected to the relationships between family members, through Christmas gift exchange, and (as previously mentioned), to provide for them through thrift.

The material goods being purchased are more than just commodities to the shopper. They symbolically represent family relations. They are essentially “commodified emotional connections” to the people for whom they shop (Berezin, 2005; Zelizer, 1994). Thus, even groceries are not just food items, they are often, for the purchaser, a material representation of an act of care, and often much more—they are an attempt to educate, uplift, or help the family member they had in mind when they purchase the item (Miller, 1998).

Black Friday here again is a symptom of this type of consumer activity. The Christmas gifts sought after on Black Friday are not just purchases—they are a representation of a relationship, which involves complexities such as equality of status level, and the degree

of intimacy between the giver and the recipient (Zelizer, 1994).¹¹ This relational representation is an important component of participation in Black Friday, and part of its appeal. The material items purchased will soon be wrapped as Christmas gifts with name tags bearing the names of family members and loved ones. The purchased items themselves represent people and kinship ties.

Just as Black Friday itself is a symptom of the cultural transformation in American society, the transformation to commercialized gift purchases is another expression of that same change. Shopping for family gifts during the Christmas season of shopping did not always represent family relations in the way we have just described. The idea of commercialized gifts went from being seen as profaning family relations to representing them. “As gifts multiplied and monetized, the gift needed to correspond closely to the degree and type of intimacy of a particular relationship, distinguishing among friends, different relatives, or acquaintances” (Zelizer, 1994, p. 81). Although the general public in the past may have experienced ambivalence about the commercialization of Thanksgiving and Christmas holiday time, those feelings have not kept them from shopping for family gifts on Black Friday. It may be the very nature of the type of shopping that is done on Black Friday that has allowed it to be accepted despite its intense commercialization—that the primary purchases are usually (though not always) given as gifts for family members and close friends.

Vignette #6: In the words of a twenty-eight year old female, responding to the meaning they attach to shopping and their enjoyment of shopping for loved ones: “Generally, it’s fun. Will they like this? Geez,

they're going to love this! I can't wait to give it to them!"

And in the words of a thirty-nine year old male, "As I've gotten older, I've begun to realize that when you're buying cards or flowers or something for someone, you're not just getting them a card or a bunch of flowers. You're giving them something of yourself. You're telling them something, that you love them, that you care, that sort of thing.... Before, it just seemed like a waste, but now I've begun to see the sentimental value, that sort of thing" (Prus & Dawson, 2010, p. 152).

Shoppers often cite their willingness to make sacrifices, utilizing thrift in order to make purchases for beloved family members. For example, consider the manner in which these Black Friday participants relate their shopping as sacrifice, and how it is for them connected to family relations:

"...Shelia Soto's family arrived at Best Buy in Everett at 5 a.m. Thanksgiving morning, meaning they spent a full 24 hours in line waiting for the hottest deals when the doors opened at 5 a.m. Friday. 'I'm here because I just want to get the best for my kids. So, getting the best for my kids is worth it,' said Soto." (Black Friday comes to a close, 2009).

One reporter in Florida made this observation after interviewing a mother camped out in line for Black Friday stores to open: "For camper Spring Redner, who staked out a place in front of Best Buy in Lakeland about 4:30 p.m. on Thanksgiving Day, nothing was going to stand in the way of making her daughter's 11th birthday—and Christmas—everything she hoped

it would be” (Pleasant and Stegall, 2010).

Black Friday as Religious Practice

Up to this point, I have discussed the rise of Black Friday as a shopping holiday, and the appeal that it has for the millions who participate in it each year. The question remains, how can we understand Black Friday in terms of a religious practice? Since holidays often come out of a religious context, I will examine the mutually influential connections between the American religious systems and its relationship to consumer behavior on Black Friday.

Imitation Of Pre-existing Religious Holidays

As previously mentioned, the day designated for Black Friday is set firmly in the American religious holiday structure. Black Friday itself serves as the beginning of the Christmas shopping season. Thus it takes its place in relationship to the religious ritual practice of exchanging gifts with loved ones as part of the celebration. The reason it exists is connected to Christmas, a Christian holiday, and the entangled development of consumer shopping for Christmas gifts.

It is not unusual that economic activity should have such religious connections. Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* showed that religion can be a significant force in the determination of the rise or fall of economic behavior. Weber’s famous thesis argued that the moral and ethically driven motivations to work hard and re-invest profits that came from a particular brand of Protestant Christianity had an influence on the rise of capitalism in Western Europe and North America (Weber, 2003). Thus, capitalism rose in the West and not in Eastern Asian countries (which had the foundations of a market presence, but different religious influences).

Others have pointed out that the spread of modernization through various economies occurred not according to rational economic principles, but through an “imitative process that sometimes consisted of ritualistic performance and display, like religious behavior...” (Wuthnow, 2005, p. 606). A similar process may have connected Black Friday with religious holiday ritual in consumer consciousness. There is no real “need” to have a specially named and designated day to begin the Christmas season of shopping, everyone in the culture knows that Christmas shopping begins after Thanksgiving and ends on Christmas day. However, Black Friday developed through imitation of “ritualistic performance and display.” There already existed other days designated for ritual holiday acts—the act of giving thanks had a day, the birth of Christ had a celebration day. Through imitation, the existing holiday pattern provided the organizational structure and time orientation that created a ritual “day” for shopping. As a holiday, it is essentially a religious imitation.

Shopping As Sacrifice, Revisited

As previously discussed, Daniel Miller’s study of provisional grocery shopping reveals a connection between shopping and family relations. One aspect of his study not yet detailed is the concept of shopping as sacrifice.

Miller uses a complex argument to show the connection between consumption and religious sacrifice. The kind of sacrifice he is discussing is ritual sacrifice, where an object is completely dedicated to a divine entity, usually through an act where the object is consumed—destroyed in its dedication to the deity (as in animal sacrifice where an animal was killed and burned as an offering to a deity). When an object of worship is sacrificed, it is completely consumed. Thus, consumption and religious ritual are connected. The various

degrees of ritual sacrifice “placed the whole arena of expenditure within the compass of religious devotion in making consumption the crucial intermediary by which the divine was constituted and related to” (Miller, 1998, p. 83).

What is interesting here is the connection between literal consumption (a sacrifice burned or eaten) and consumption in the form of purchases (which are consumed in the sense that they are removed from the market, and used for another purpose). Items are consumed through religious sacrifice in order to bring the worshiper closer to the divine—and to other worshipers. Miller explains that “what fascinates... is the sheer excess of consumption represented by sacrifice, the pure destruction of items that might otherwise have had mere utilitarian value. The best means to restoring... the intimate order is by destroying profitlessly that which might have been used with profit” (Miller, 1998, p. 85).

There are important parallels here between religion and the consumerism of Black Friday shopping. There are “sacrifices” made by the participant shoppers. There are items that are consumed through purchase, for the purpose of drawing closer in relationship (in this case to family members). The money spent on gift items is “sacrificed,” in the sense that it is completely destroyed from being used for profit—it is given away to friends or family. This is often done as Miller describes, in extravagant excess, in a profitless manner (where the gifts themselves have very little utilitarian value), and the gift item is sacrificed for the sake of relationship. And thus, the intimate order of love relationships is restored through the ritual of consumption.

Consumption As Salvation By Works

One of the ways in which Black Friday takes on a religious form is through its

expression of, and use by, different social classes. Through their participation in the Black Friday shopping ritual, the middle and lower classes are attempting to achieve a kind of “salvation.”

It is Baudrillard who describes consumption as having a “salvational dimension” (1998, p. 60). For the lower and middle classes, driven by the pursuit of status, salvation (for them) is achieved by consumption. Through consumption, the middle and lower classes attempt to achieve salvation (displaying their status through objects). This is in contrast to the upper classes, who can display their status by other means.

There is a class battle at work here, where the middle classes are trying to attain salvation through the sign value of commodities—thus salvation by works—but these attempts lose out to the predestination of the ascription of the upper class.

It is a class logic which imposes salvation by objects. That is a *salvation by works*, which, in its “democratic” nature, stands opposed to the aristocratic principle of salvation by grace and election. Now, in the universal consensus, salvation by grace always wins out over salvation by works. This is to some degree what we see among the lower and middle classes, where “proving oneself by objects”—salvation by consumption—in its endless process of moral demonstration, battles despairingly to attain the status of personal grace, of god-giveness and predestination. That remains, nonetheless, the preserve of the upper classes, who prove their excellence elsewhere, in the display of their culture and the exercise of their power (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 60).

Middle And Lower Class Acquisition Of Sign Value

I realize that my methodology and use of data may limit my conclusions at this point, but here is what I contend is happening among consumers. In a sense, Black Friday is the means by which the middle and lower classes attempt to acquire the sign value associated with the objects they purchase. Black Friday uniquely provides for them the opportunity to

try to obtain the prestige associated with objects of consumption, and to “save” their family status.

Here is an example of what I mean: On Black Friday, 2010, a Target store in North Kansas City opened at 4 a.m., letting in a line of waiting customers. The store sold out of television sets within six minutes of opening its doors (WDAF-TV, 2010). Certainly these television sets were discounted and of limited quantity. Yet the question still remains—why? Why did so many families want a new television set this year? Why did so many want it so cheap? Did these families not already have a television in their home? Why did so many wait in line to make sure they had access to a cheap, new flat screen TV?

If we follow Baudrillard’s reasoning, these families were performing a Black Friday ritual of the middle class (and perhaps the lower class as well). They were attempting to acquire the sign value (distinction) associated with the flat screen television. Technology has changed, the culture has changed, and the objects that differentiate the classes have also changed. A tube driven square television is no longer an object that differentiates the middle class. If you don’t have a rectangular, digital, flat screen television, you risk losing one of the signs of differences that display your social class belonging. How could you associate with other members of your class, and how could you invite them over to your home with one of those out dated model televisions? In essence, if you do not have one of these new televisions, you risk losing your status. And so, hundreds waited in line to assure that they would be able to “save” their family status.

Another example is the Christmas gifts parents purchase for their children. The children of the middle class may desire the “coolness” associated with possessing an Apple

iPod, but their parents may not be able to afford it. (At the very least, they may not be able to afford one for each of their children, if they have more than one, or they may not be able to afford this expensive brand of music player and at the same time afford to provide other “necessities” for them.) So the parent is put in a precarious position—they want to please their child,¹² provide for the needs of their child—and here’s the important point, there is also pressure for them to provide for the status and prestige of their child. In other words, the parent may feel pressure to keep their child from being the one that is “left out”—the child who at school is not able to display their achieved status through the sign value of their possessions. There is a sense that the parent wants to not only provide “essentials,” but also wants to help their child acquire or maintain their status—perhaps an upwardly mobile status that they themselves have not attained.

Through the heavy discounts offered on Black Friday, there is an opportunity for the middle and lower classes to acquire commodities that they might not otherwise be able to afford. It is an opportunity for families to provide a laptop computer for their children, the name brand “cool” music player, and the fashionable “in” brand of clothing. In other words, the middle and lower classes are attempting to “get status on the cheap.”¹³

Vignette #7: A Knoxville, Tennessee newspaper website reporter interviewed a mother who began her Black Friday shopping trip on the night of Thanksgiving, in order to get an early start. “When Lori Davis of Oliver Springs arrived at Toys “R” Us in West Knoxville at 8:30 p.m. on Thanksgiving, she found herself at the end of the building on the back side of the store.... For Davis, it's a yearly routine that's all about getting a good price.

‘When you've got five kids, you've got to get the best price possible. We usually shop all night,’ said Davis, who was out shopping with her daughter, a cousin and two of her daughter's friends. ‘As soon as we're done eating Thanksgiving dinner, we lay out the paper and figure out what we want and where has the best price.’ Davis came away with a shopping cart full of toys but not the two netbooks she had hoped to get.” (Harrington, 2010).

A Buffalo, New York news service recorded a similar story. “Mary Mitchell of Buffalo, said she's been out with the early birds during each of the last three Black Fridays. This year, she spent five hours in line at Sears to buy an XBox 360 video game console bundle for a discounted \$199 and then planned to shop for a few more hours. ‘I just have to be home by 9:30 a.m. to take my son to hockey,’ she said. ‘Or maybe I can get my husband to do it, and I can go to sleep’” (Buffalo News, 2010).

In Independence, Missouri, Ilyas Khan reportedly stood in line for his first Black Friday shopping experience. His goal was to buy a Sony computer for his daughter who was just starting graduate school. (DeWeese, 2010).

A shopper in Albany, Georgia shared her reasons for Black Friday shopping. “Janeen Griffin and her three cousins headed to the mall at 6 a.m. ‘We’ve been shopping all night!’ Griffin says. People aren’t just buying a few small items. On Black Friday, it’s about spending big money on bulk and big ticket items. Griffin knew exactly what she wanted when she went to Target: The 40-inch TV for \$298. She bought it and says she probably saved \$200 on

it. Other shoppers in line at Target on Thanksgiving Day were also after the low-priced TVs. Griffin says she spent \$500 and saved \$300 because she shopped on Black Friday. But are the deals worth getting up early for? 'Black Friday: It's worth it. Just for the appliances, the technology, gadgets, those things alone,' says Griffin." (Bleau, 2010).

Implications

I have attempted to show that the changes observed in the practice of Black Friday are a reflection and symptom of changes in the culture at large. There are two implications related to social theory that are noteworthy.

First, I am bringing together Miller's theory of shopping and Baudrillard's concept of consumption for sign value in a unique way. These two ideas are not normally used together, and may even be seen as incompatible. Miller sees shopping as an act of family devotion, essentially an expression of relationship. Baudrillard on the other hand, views acts of consumption as necessary for the system to produce sign value (1981). In essence, Baudrillard is moving acts of consumption and their objects out from the categories of symbolic exchange and relationship, and into a social logic of difference (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 64-65, 77-78), where individual "needs" are a way for the system of production to impose its true need—that it needs consumers. Consumers acquire objects not for their use value, but for the sign value associated with them, in order to differentiate themselves from others. Consumers consume for status reasons; they want the prestige and distinction associated with the objects they consume.

However incompatible these two may appear, I am attempting to bring them together.

It is my contention that what is happening in the practice of Black Friday is a combination of the ideas of both Miller and Baudrillard. Black Friday is both shopping as devotion and provision for family, and at the same time consumption for sign value. What the shopper is attempting to provide for their family members through Black Friday shopping is the sign value associated with the objects purchased. What they are devotedly trying to provide for their family is class distinction. They are essentially attempting to get the sign value associated with the purchased commodities, but with Black Friday discounts, the middle and lower classes can get “more,” or get the “right” objects that procure these class distinctions. What is unique is that on Black Friday, this is done in the context of Christmas gift shopping, which brings in Miller’s concept of shopping as an act of family devotion. Essentially these shoppers are trying to appropriate sign value “on the cheap”—not only for themselves or the family as a whole, but also as a gift they provide for their family members. This would be comparable to the shoppers in Miller’s research whose choice of goods attempts to “educate, uplift” the recipient (1998, p. 18)—to better them. In the same way, through Black Friday discount shopping, they are not merely giving gifts, but they are in essence giving sign value as a gift. The way they are providing for family is by giving the family the best signs of class distinction that they can afford.

Second, the practice of Black Friday is an example of social change that further supports the work of social theorists such as Bourdieu and Sahlins, who wish to integrate structure and practice. The rise of Black Friday is the change at the level of practice that makes the development of a new cultural structure possible. It is acted out as a holiday for shopping, which is its position in the structure. However, as I have outlined, Black Friday

would not exist without the surrounding holiday structure. Thus, the structure produces Black Friday, and Black Friday (which is the cultural change brought about by the practice of agents), in turn reproduces the structure. This relationship between the calendar structure and the practice of Black Friday participants may be an illustrative example of the relationship of structure and practice. Of course, there is opportunity here for further research.

In summary, the rise of Black Friday has changed the meaning of the Christian holiday structure, as well as the meaning of the holidays around it, such as Thanksgiving. It is the new importance and practice of Black Friday as a holiday in its own right that has changed the cultural structure and calendrical patterns. Black Friday adds to the existing Christian religious structures already present in the culture, and re-defines them in light of consumer practice. The civil religious holiday of Thanksgiving is re-positioned as Black Friday has grown in prominence. Thanksgiving has changed its relationship in the larger structure, and now is practiced in light of its position to the day of shopping that immediately follows. These changes reveal changes in the culture, that of a continual move toward the importance of consumerism in American life.

However, these changes have not developed in isolation. They have developed within the religious holiday structure, and have developed in religious forms. Black Friday is not just another day of shopping, it is a consumer holiday, with consumer rituals and traditions. It has developed in relationship to Thanksgiving before and Christmas after it. It has become the cultural equivalent of a consumer religious practice.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSIONS

It is not a new idea to equate the Christmas season with consumerism. Every year Christians and others complain that the religious “meaning of Christmas” has been lost in the midst of the hustle-bustle of shopping. However, it is apparent that the meaning has not been “lost” but instead has been transformed by the culture to purposefully, intentionally, ritually, support the practice of consumerism. Consumer behavior is integrated with the larger holiday structure, as part of a religious pattern. At the same time, consumer holiday behavior validates and affirms the Christian religion to an increasingly secular culture.

Consumer Religion

There are some interesting implications here. First, setting consumerism in this repeated religious structure opens the possibility of discussing consumerism as a religious form. If we approach the idea and definition of religion from a functional perspective, interesting questions arise. Certainly the Christmas season has been co-opted by merchandisers, but why does the structural form of this reinterpretation so closely mirror another pre-existing religious calendar form—one that exists in the collective memory of the culture?

Varul observes that between a “heroic” anti-consumerism religion and a “romantic” secular form there is a mutual supporting form where consumerism takes on some of the functions of religion, in particular, Protestantism (2008). Other religious forms, such as Islam, may also develop a consumerist expression, but they would look different from the Protestant forms because of different limitations and restrictions (Varul, 2008, p. 239).

Loy contends that capitalist consumerism is not only its own religion, but the most successful religion in history, with the “Market” as its god (1997, p. 275). He argues that any traditional major religion that does not unite with the capitalist economic system becomes irrelevant and marginalized (Loy, 1997, p. 276).

However, market capitalism does not need to be its own god when it can tie itself to existing religious forms. The integration of the Christian holiday structure with consumer practice on a level beyond “the commercialization of Christmas” affirms the idea that capitalism has united with Christianity in America. As consumer practice changes and develops, and more and more of its expressions are found in religious forms, then at the very least we have consumerism functioning as a form of religion. If capitalist consumerism in the United States continues to develop and practice holidays of shopping such as Black Friday, and as it finds its expression in its connection to the Christian holiday structure, then we may be observing the development of a “quasi-Christian consumer religion.” At the very least there is a blending of the two with regard to holiday expressions.

Solidarity

Another implication of the connection between Christianity and consumerism is the way in which solidarity is enhanced by the rise of consumerism in the culture. As the population of America changes, and the viewpoints of co-existing religious groups clash, the importance of consumerism as a uniting factor increases. Americans may be past a time when civil religion can produce cultural cohesion, especially as the population becomes more diverse (Demerath III & Williams, 1985). Commerce provides the shared cultural point of contact by which Americans can find common ground, in part because the practice of it is of

central importance to the American way of life. The association with the preexisting Christian religious history additionally provides a legitimizing effect¹⁴ so that the shared cultural practice of consumerism is not seen in hard, cold economic terms.

McCracken explains that one of the means of solidarity in society is the cultural meaning of goods. “The cultural meaning of goods was increasingly a way an anonymous society could maintain its center. As Sahlins puts it, goods allow Western societies to turn ‘the basic contradiction of its construction into a miracle of existence, a cohesive society of perfect strangers’” (McCracken, 1988, p. 19). Through the exchange of Christmas gifts, family affiliation and care is affirmed. Through the purchases of goods during the season of shopping from Black Friday to Christmas, the capitalist economy is sustained, jobs are preserved and pay checks brought home. The diverse population is integrated, and must remain so for capitalism to continue to thrive. A shared lifestyle of consumerism is a powerful common cultural denominator.

Holidays themselves can serve both to integrate a society (through shared common observance), or be disintegrative (as sub-groups are separated from the whole by holiday non-participation or rejection) (Etzioni, 2000, p. 51). Although not every American celebrates Christmas, all can share in the commercial discounts of Black Friday. Only those anti-consumer groups will find themselves marginalized to the shared experience, and fighting an uphill battle against the rising tide of capitalism, with its notorious ability to absorb even opposing forces.

The Theoretical Implications of Black Friday

Black Friday is a symptomatic change in American culture brought about by the

changes in consumer behavior. As Christmas emerged out of the shadow of New Years, took on new traditions and actions such as gift-giving, so too has Black Friday emerged with its own traditions and rituals regarding gift-purchasing.

The change in practice that Black Friday displays, combined with the larger calendar structure, together may serve as an illustration of the relation of structure and practice discussed by integrative social theorists. Essentially it is through the reproduction of the annual calendar structure that Black Friday emerged, and its emergence has re-ordered the culture. The new ritual practice of this consumer holiday has changed the religious meanings of the Christian holiday calendar. Together these have formed a new quasi-Christian consumer religious holiday structure that has now become the newly changed culture that is reproduced.

Through the practice of Black Friday, the middle and lower classes are attempting to attain class distinction with their purchases, but in a unique expression that is connected to the religious nature of the surrounding holiday season. Families are expressing sacrificial devotion to each other through the presentation of gifts—but the gifts they give are not merely intended for use, but are also intended to display their status. Black Friday provides a unique opportunity for the acting out of their class struggle. It is the unique combination of attempts to acquire sign value through discounted, purchased commodities, but those commodities are then presented as gifts to loved ones as a loving act. All of this ritual is clothed in the religious symbolism and sentiment of Christmas, and acted out through the time orientation of the advent season, which is a season of consumer shopping.

Civil Religion Redefined

Perhaps a new reinterpretation of Bellah's Civil Religion is in order. If consumption has begun to weave through religious forms to produce our common shared meaning system, has it also replaced our shared nationalism? Bellah observed this form of American patriotism and collective self-understanding as a religious structure. However, Bellah's observation came during a transition time in American culture (the late 1960s and mid 1970s). Forty years later, American culture has changed, predominantly in terms of an increase in consumer activity that has shaped the American identity and self understanding. In addition, diversification has brought a pluralism of values, viewpoints, and different levels of patriotic intensity. Americans no longer identify as closely with shared agreement on issues as they do with a shared commitment to shopping practice. Thus, Bellah's categories should be opened for re-examination in light of recent cultural trends. A better descriptor might be "civil-consumer religion." Of course, these points need further research.

As David Harvey has said, "Symbolic orderings of space and time provide a framework for experience through which we learn who or what we are in society" (1989). As we look at the religious calendrical ordering of time in American culture, it becomes clear that "who and what we are in society" is capitalist consumers—first and foremost, and perhaps religiously. It is more than just the turkey that Americans give thanks for at Thanksgiving—they give thanks that they can celebrate their freedom to consume. Then, the next day, they do just that—and annually, through their practice, they reproduce the calendar pattern of Christian holidays, morphed into seasons of consumption and non-consumption.

ENDNOTES

¹ Some have suggested the meaning of the term “Black Friday” in part describes the turning point for businesses—suggesting it is the day that most retail businesses go from being “in the red,” (operating at a loss), to being “in the black,” (operating at a profit). Others consider the term to have originated in the 1960s among Philadelphia police who were complaining about the traffic that developed from the large number of shoppers (Black Friday History, n.d.).

² Of particular interest is the connection that Schmidt makes between Valentine’s Day as a precursor to the integration of shopping during the holiday of Christmas. Schmidt reasons that Valentine’s Day is central in the transition of holidays from religious practices into commercial ones (Schmidt, 1995, p. 102). It was the perfect combination of a love-based motivation for a purchase, combined with symbolism and imagery needed to drive the advertising. Merchants also helped to transition the holiday structure away from a focus centered in community and church, to a personal relationship focus revolving around private gift-giving practice. (Schmidt, 1995, p. 103). Although it had religious connections related to St. Valentine, it was quickly re-made into a holiday for romantic love, which made it difficult for religious authorities to object to its commodification. The love-motivated purchase practices of Valentines (by the influence of merchants), soon came to be associated with Christmas as well.

By 1850, all of the groundwork necessary for the transformation of religious holidays into days of consumption was in place. Religious fasting days were becoming days when merchants worked, and consumers bought.

All this inventive advertising and decorations suggested the emergence of a new holiday drama centered on shopping.... the responsibility that retailers assumed for promulgating this feast day was evident in an advertisement of Fisher and Brother’s in 1850. Employing the diction of a fast or Thanksgiving Day proclamation, the promotional pitch took on the language of religious ritual and civic celebration for comic and commercial ends: “CUPID, *Governor* of the Commonwealth,” set apart and ordained 14 February as a “fast day of love and matrimony,” and all citizens were enjoined “to fast for fast partners, for fast life,” and to go “fast into Fisher & Brother’s fast Temple of Heart Fastenings.” The burlesque play on the word *fast* suggested in miniature the changing contours of American celebration: it evoked the larger transition from a Puritan world where a fast meant repentance, abstinence, and discipline to a consumer world where fast meant dissipation, prodigality, and speed. (Schmidt, 1995, p. 65–66).

³ Max Weber noted this tension in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Citing the writings of ascetic Puritan pastor Richard Baxter, he notes that Baxter saw the care of worldly goods as something that any good Puritan would be able to throw off at a moment's notice, like a light cloak. Recognizing the power of capitalism, Weber remarks that this cloak would quickly become an "iron cage" (Weber, 2003, p. 181).

⁴ An interesting example of merchants who viewed holidays as bad for business is found in the fictional character of Scrooge.

The relationship between disciplined enterprise and festal observance was thus routinely conceived in oppositional terms. Among the best embodiments of this widespread assumption is the fabled figure of Ebenezer Scrooge. No text was more influential in the sentimental recovery of Christmas in the 19th century than Charles Dickens's *Christmas Carol* (1843), and few exclamations were more memorable than Scrooge's holiday dismissal, "Bah, humbug!" (Schmidt, 1995, p. 28).

Scrooge thus becomes a figure that expresses both sides of this ambivalent relationship—he not only exemplifies what was happening in the 1800s—that merchants were anti-holiday—but also becomes the figure who, through his redemptive change, shows how the sentimentality of Christmas should triumph over the heartlessness of profit motivated commercialism.

⁵ Even though groups may organize to oppose it, consumer capitalism is difficult to resist. It has the ability to turn organized resistance into a commodity for consumption. For example, the phrase, "put Christ back into Christmas," can be taken and turned into a card or button that is offered for sale. (Schmidt, 1995, p. 5).

Even groups such as the Advent Conspiracy are not immune to being co-opted by capitalist practices. On closer examination of their resources, some are offered for sale—including a book and DVD video explaining the rationale behind spending less. Referred to as "the best ten dollars you will ever spend," it is explained that "some" of the money will be contributed to causes that help others around the world. (Biaggne 2009). No explanation is given regarding exactly where that donated portion of money goes, what happens with the rest of the sales money, or exactly what is meant by "some" of the money.

⁶ Both Miller and I see shopping as a devotional rite. However, it is worth noting that our units of analysis are different. Miller is observing the devotional rite in ordinary time (daily routines such as grocery shopping), while I am looking at the devotional rite in high holy time in the calendar, as a ritual of a "sacred consumer time."

⁷ If we include the entire Black Friday weekend and include online activity, participation was approximately one hundred ninety-five million in the United States in 2009, an increase of more than twenty million over the previous year (Holmes, Zimmerman, and Dodes, 2009). This would account for nearly two-thirds of the US population. However, I am limiting this examination to the ritual practice of leaving home to shop at physical stores, as a ritual, religious act. Still, these figures show that there is certainly vast participation in shopping associated with Black Friday.

⁸ There are many sacrifices and inconveniences associated with Black Friday shopping. Shoppers often lose sleep lining up at stores on Thanksgiving night in order to be first in line for the most discounted (and often limited) items. (Kelly, 2010). This also means a split of family time over the Thanksgiving holiday weekend. There is added stress from crowded stores and parking lots, lines, and frustration when items can't be found (Lloyd et al., 2009). There is a sense of great sacrificial effort on the part of these shoppers. There must also be some kind of attraction to this kind of shopping to enlist such repeated participation.

⁹ Miller further explains thrift as a shared, group cultural value by showing that it is also expressed in the act of social discourse that happens between consumers as they discuss their purchases. Miller found that consumers will discuss their purchases after the fact in terms of how much they saved, instead of how much they spent (1998). Thus, thrift is a shared cultural value that networks of consumers talk about with each other—it is part of the discourse of consumer culture. Purchases are a shared topic of conversation, and fellow consumers compliment skilled shoppers who have “saved” much money.

¹⁰ An example of this is presented by Baudrillard, who describes contestants who call into a radio quiz show program. He explains that it is their participation in a group celebration that matters, and not the content of the quiz show that is important. He describes the shared celebration of consumer culture as a new expression of religious contact via the airwaves:

They have what they wanted: Communion—or, rather, that modern, technical, aseptic form of communion that is communication, “contact.” What marks out the consumer society is not, in fact, the much deplored absence of ceremonies... but the fact that ceremonial communion is no longer achieved by way of bread and wine, which can be seen as flesh and blood, but through the mass media... in other words, communion is no longer achieved through a symbolic medium, but through a technical one: this is what makes it communication. What is shared, then, is no longer a “culture”, the living body, the actual presence of the group (everything which made up the symbolic and metabolic function of the ceremony and the feast)... but that strange corpus of signs and references, of recollections from school days and intellectual fashion signals known as “mass culture,” which we might term lowest common culture... (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 103-104).

Thus, ceremonies are now done through technical means via mass media—and this is the role that advertising and mass media play—providing the common culture around which ceremonial communities thrive.

¹¹ Viviana Zelizer traces the cultural acceptance of the representation of the value of human relations in monetary form in her study of the acceptance of life insurance as an economic industry (Zelizer, 1978). At first, the general public was not able to accept the monetary equivalence to human life that was necessary in the calculation of life insurance premiums and payments. “Our hypothesis is that cultural resistance to including certain items in the social order—namely, those related to human life, death, and emotions—into market-type of exchange introduces structural sources of strain and ambivalence into their marketing” (Zelizer, 1978, p. 593). However, through a process that involved new marketing techniques and the presentation of life insurance in spiritual language and as a social responsibility, the public began to accept life insurance with its underlying calculation of a monetary price equivalent for human life. Certainly the example of Zelizer’s study of the “successful commodification [of life insurance] requires substantial moral and cultural work” (Fourcade & Healy, 2007; Zelizer, 1978). A similar moral and cultural work goes into the representation of family relationships in the purchase of gifts.

¹² There are two sides to the parent/child relationship with regard to spending. There is the desire of the parent to give the child what they want, and there is the pressure and demand children impart to their parents. This is especially true of children pressuring their parents to purchase Christmas toys. One study observed continued negotiations (and conflict) among urban poor African-American children and parents with regard to purchases. “Parents exasperated by their kids’ unreasonable and persistent demands for spending money are pitted against children disappointed by their parents’ inability to provide them with material goods” (Zelizer, 2005, p. 338). The same can be extrapolated to other social contexts with regard to Christmas purchases. Marketing and advertising of toys often results in a single “must have” toy item that can be difficult to acquire when supplies run low (Associated Press, 2009). Parents are caught between giving in to the demands of their children (influenced by savvy advertising, and often word of mouth through their children’s network of friends), and disappointing their child.

Historically, the economic relations between parents and children changed when children were removed from the labor market. Eventually, the American public of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century stopped thinking of children as workers, and switched from valuing of them as a labor force to valuing them for the emotional connection that existed between parent and child, regardless of the child’s economic usefulness (Zelizer, 1985). “As the occupational world of children changed, so did their relationship to money. Children stopped working just as the rise in consumerism and mass advertising created tantalizing new opportunities for spending. Parents, whether they could afford it or not, were expected to train children as expert consumers” (Zelizer, 1985, p. 13).

¹³ The phrase, “getting status on the cheap,” I must attribute to my thesis committee member Dr. Jennifer Huberman. This was her summary of this topic from our discussion.

¹⁴ In addition to providing symbols, rituals and structures for imitation, religion also serves a legitimizing role. With regard to the religious ritual associated with Black Friday, a similar argument to that of Weber's Protestant Ethic can be made here.

Religion provides an ideological legitimization for economic practices. Just as Calvinist Protestantism helped to encourage the development of capitalism in the West, Christian religious morals and principles make legitimate the commercialized practices of shopping for Christmas presents.

The commercialized process of mass consumption during Black Friday benefits from the ideological association with Christian morals of gift giving. Shopping thus is bolstered by the motivation provided by the Christmas gift-giving tradition, and the Christian ideology of giving. The New Testament book of Acts presents the moral justification for gift-giving, "remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" (Acts 20:35, New International Version). This moral motivation combines with the Christmas story of the presentation of gifts by the magi in the birth narrative of Jesus gives powerful impetus for ritual gift shopping. The ideology is an important association, given that the relationship between Christianity and commercialism is ambivalent at best. This process has also been described as "value introjection," one of several processes that serve as means of producing social capital through economic transactions. Value introjection is an economically located expectation that emphasizes "the moral character of economic transactions that are guided by value imperatives learned during the process of socialization" (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993, p. 1323).

The introjection of Christian moral values is similar to the marketing strategy employed by the life insurance industry, which described its product as "an altruistic, self-denying gift rather than as a profitable investment" (Zelizer, 1978, p. 600). The commercialization of Christmas through the practice of Black Friday has taken on a similar legitimacy by its association with religion. For the life insurance industry's difficult task of connecting monetary value with human life and death, the spiritual component was essential in making the practice favorable in the eyes of the public. "Death yielded to the capitalist ethos—but not without compelling the later to disguise its materialist mission in spiritual garb" (Zelizer, 1978, p. 605). The same may be said of the presentation of Black Friday as a holiday that inaugurates the season of gift shopping—clothed in the garb of selfless "spirit of Christmas" giving.

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VITA

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While doing church work with youth, Mr. Cassell began a Master’s program at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. He was awarded the Master of Divinity degree, with an emphasis in Cross-Cultural Studies in 1990.

Mr. Cassell went on to work as a summer mission trip and service project coordinator for college students, and then as Senior Editor for Youth at a youth publishing company. In 2007, he returned to graduate school and enrolled in the Master of Arts program in Sociology at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. In the same year, he was hired as an Assistant Professor of Sociology at MidAmerica Nazarene University. Upon completion of his degree requirements, he intends to pursue a Ph.D., continue to teach, and pursue his research interests.

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