CHRISTIAN KITSCH AND THE TRIVIALIZATION OF GOD

The present author had the opportunity to accompany two Eastern European university students into a Christian bookstore in Louisville, Kentucky. One of the two, Andrei, was a Christian who wanted to visit the store while in America to purchase some Christian music. The other student, Sasha, was an admitted atheist who was merely along for the ride. While Andrei went to a "listening station" to peruse the latest D.C. Talk album, Sasha and I walked around the store, looking at such products as "Bibleman" videos and "Testa-mints" candies. It was then that the atheist Sasha made an observation that is particularly damning to the contemporary evangelical subculture. He said, "Christians in America market God just like everything else. In my country[1], Christians take God more seriously." I couldn't help but sadly agree with him, and I could offer no defense.

Atheists, of course, are not always the best qualified to critique Christianity, but Sasha offered a perspective that is nearly impossible to refute. Christians in the United States do market God, beside whom there is no other, like everything else. Bookstores and internet sites that carry the adjective "Christian" are rife with tasteless kitsch that is deemed harmless by much of the evangelical establishment. This paper will show that such Christian kitsch trivializes the God of the Bible and makes him subservient to the popular culture of the age. It will examine the origins and recent escalation of this trend within the church, how this trend does indeed

[1]Sasha and Andrei were from Belarus, a former republic of the Soviet Union.

trivialize God, and will posit some possible routes of escape from the dangers the trivialization of God presents.

## Honk If You Love Jesus: What Is Christian Kitsch?

### Kitsch Defined

The *New Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines kitsch: "Shoddy or cheap artistic or literary material[2]." One need not look very far in the United States today to find shoddy or cheap artistic material. Popular culture contains no shortage of it. What is alarming is that the prevalence of such material is no less in the evangelical Christian subculture. In fact, if one were to examine only the microcosm of the Christian bookstore, it could even be argued that Christians have forfeited higher culture altogether, leaving only kitsch to define Christian culture.

### The History of Kitsch in American Christian Culture

The emergence of the religious artifact dates back a long time. Returning crusaders sold relics from the Holy Land which were said to have religious value.[3] While certainly not the same as modern-day kitsch, the ancient practice of the religious artifact is an important precursor to the modern-day fare. The Catholic Church in America has traditionally used religious artifacts—very commonly statues of various saints were used as reminders of the sacred in a profane world. The production of such statues greatly increased in the late 1800s to early 1900s.

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[2]Frederick C. Mish, ed., *The New Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, (Springfield: Merriam-Webster Publishers, 1989), sv. "Kitsch."

[3]See Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984), 299.

This art was able to be mass-produced, but it was regarded by most Catholics as "technologically modern and sophisticated."[4]

Protestantism, especially of the Reformed flavor, was less eager to start down the road of religious iconography, due in no small part to the influence of the Calvinist avoidance of representative imagery[5] and the general backlash against the extravagances of the Catholic church. But, as time progressed, Protestant art began to express itself in various ways. The Bible actually became, according to McDannell, a fashion statement.[6] Large, decorative, family bibles were common in Britain and the United States. These bibles included much more than just the Biblical texts. McDannell comments, "The actual text of the scriptures became almost secondary to the illustrated Bible dictionaries, treatises on ancient coins, …illuminated parables and the Lord's Prayer, and chronologies."[7] Family records and wedding certificates also became commonplace in the publishing of Bibles.

**The Rise of Modern-Day Christian Kitsch**

In recent times, Christian kitsch has reached far beyond the realm of Jesus statues or designer family bibles. Those items could be said, whether validly or not, to have at least *some* spiritual value. Today, it is hard to find in the marketplace an item that does *not* have a representative with the adjective "Christian" applied to it. There are Christian bumper stickers (with messages such as; "Honk if You Love Jesus," and "In Case of Rapture, Car Will Be Vacated"), Christian food items (mints with Bible verses on the wrappers called Testa-mints),

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[4]Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 169.

[5]Ibid., 5.

[6]Ibid., 87-98.

Christian clothing (T-shirts with Christian messages, including "Turn or Burn," and an entire line of WWJD material), Christian music, and Christian videos. This list is by no means comprehensive. There is nary an area into which such marketers will not delve. American Christians are marketing God, and are pulling no punches.

**Creating a Marketplace: The Christian Bookstore**

If one were to look for a common gathering point for Christian kitsch, one need not look beyond a local Christian bookstore. In fact, even the title of bookstore is becoming passé. Lynn Vincent notes, "The product mix has changed so radically that some organizations have even changed their names. Family Christian Stores, the nation's largest Christian retailer, used to be called Family Christian Bookstores."[8] Family Bookstores was not the only chain to change its name. Baptist Bookstores became Lifeway Christian Stores, and many others have followed suit. The Christian Store today is the one-stop shopping place for Christians to buy books, cards, art, music, entertainment, and apparel.

Christian bookstores, though they were certainly around before then, began their rise in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the "Jesus" movement. Hal Lindsey's book, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) had over 9 million copies in print by 1978.[9] The success of this book and others like it showed that books with a so-called Christian message had the ability to be profitable. As bookstores grew in number over time, the amount of actual books sold in the stores decreased. In 1978, 68 percent of sales in Christian bookstores were for books and other

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[7]Ibid., 89.

[8]Lynn Vincent, "Trinkets or Truth? How bumper stickers, stuffed animals, and retail kitsch are squeezing the books out of Christian bookstores," *World*, July 1, 2000 [on-line], accessed 16 April 2003, available from http://www.worldmag.com

printed literature.  In 1993, that number had declined to 49 percent.[10]  By 1997, books only made up 28 percent of the typical Christian bookstore's sales.[11]

The trade association for Christian booksellers, CBA (the group dropped the former identity of Christian Booksellers Association in 1996 because of the expanding cadre of extra-bibliographic merchandise[12]) is very influential in putting storeowners with suppliers.  The CBA's annual conference draws over 13,000 and showcases all the latest material that Christian storeowners can buy.[13]  Mark Galli writes of the CBA convention, ". . . no one—not even the attendees and Christian marketers—denies that the overall impression is one of Christian kitsch run amuck."[14]

Of the increasingly few books that are sold in Christian bookstores, the relationship to things Christian in the content of the books is on the decline as well.  Vincent writes about a recent trip to Family Christian Stores:

> Aisle after aisle featured theologically robust content: Works by Augustine and Spurgeon sat alongside the writings of contemporary authors like J.I. Packer and Billy Graham. But a trip through a section labeled "Spirit-filled Living" turned up weasels in the woodpile: at least six titles by "word of faith" preachers Benny Hinn and Kenneth Copeland.[15]

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[9]Mc Dannell, *Material Christianity*, 248.

[10]Ibid., 259.

[11]Gene Edward Veith, "Whatever Happened to Christian Publishing?" *World*, July 12, 1997, 2000 [on-line], accessed 16 April 2003, available from http://www.worldmag.com

[12]Vincent, "Trinkets or Truth."

[13]Diana S. Frazier, "Musings on Commerce: A Review of the Christian Bookseller's Association Convention," *Modern Reformation*, January/February 1999, [on-line] accessed 16 April 2003, available from http://www.modernreformation.org.

[14]Mark Galli, . "Behold the Power of Cheese: A dispatch from the Christian Booksellers Association." *Christianity Today*, July 10, 2000 [on-line].  Accessed 16 April 2003.  Available from http://www.christianitytoday.com.

[15]Vincent, "Trinkets or Truth."

The quality of books available is often limited to what will sell well. McDannell notes that books "have bigger print, more white space, and are shorter."[16] She continues, "In order to sell books to an increasingly pragmatic Christian population, publishers carefully follow secular trends."[17]

Christian kitsch is not only mass-produced in innumerable forms, it is now widely available through the network of Christian stores. Not unlike the secular marketplace, the Christian market is segmented into age groups and other niches. And like the secular market, demand is often created as much as it is satisfied.

## God is My Co-Pilot: Kitsch and the Trivialization of God

**The Issues**

The prevalence of Christian kitsch raises many issues, not least of which is just how good such fare is for today's Christians. It could be argued (and has been by the CBA) that kitsch is harmless. To attack it is mere elitism. One man's kitsch is another man's Rembrandt, right? This is not exactly the case. Ken Myers has shown, quite adequately, that the mere *form* of pop culture in itself can have detrimental effects on society.[18]

Christians must ask themselves exactly what purposes kitsch is used for, and evaluate these purposes in light of Scripture. Christians must also inquire as to whether or not Scripture speaks to the subject directly or not. Many go on the assumption that because something is labeled "Christian," it is inherently good. Finally, Christians must ask if the benefits (perceived

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[16]McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 259.

[17]Ibid., 260.

[18]See Ken Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 1989).

or not) outweigh the dangers—a case study of one particular form of Christian kitsch—the WWJD phenomenon—will be examined.

**"I Just Witnessed to Thirty People, Without Even Saying a Word!" –The Uses of Kitsch**

Christians who purchase and use kitsch do not do so in a vacuum. In a study done among young evangelical purchasers of Christian products, the users of such products said that Christian branded products made them feel a part of a larger group.[19] In this sense, Christian products perform the same role as secular branding; it creates an identity to which a group can surround itself and claim commonality with. Indeed, Romanowski tells of one Gospel Music Association artist manager who argued "the goals of ministry and business are 'exactly the same—market share.'"[20]

In this sense Christians who use kitsch are using it to compete with all the other messages which assault American citizens daily. Following the long tradition of Christians replacing pagan things with things Christian (one thinks of holidays in particular), many modern Christians wish to build upon what is already in the world, and to christen the worldly things. Out of such thinking "Coca-Cola: The Real Thing," becomes "Jesus Christ: He's the Real Thing"[21] (written in a similar typeface to Coca-Cola's logo). "Reebok" becomes "Reeborn," and "Gold's Gym" is christened "Lord's Gym."

Many also see the use of such products in evangelism. The study of young evangelical users of Christian products also found that "the functionality of the product changed

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[19]Eric Haley, Candace White and Anne Cunningham, "Branding Religion: Christian Consumers' Understandings of Christian Products" in *Religion and Popular Culture: Studies on the Interaction of Worldviews*, Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum, eds., (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 2001), 285.

[20]William D. Romanowski, "Evangelicals in Popular Music," in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan, eds., Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 119.

once it was branded 'Christian'…its [a bracelet is in discussion here] function grew from one of adornment and self pleasure to one of fulfilling a religious mandate."[22] Respondents stated that the vehicle of Christian products for the gospel was less pushy than other methods.[23] To be fair, most of the respondents did qualify this by not endorsing Christian products which were mean-spirited, but the criteria for how they determined this is unclear.

**Taking His Name In Vain?: The Bible and Christian Kitsch**

While the motives discussed above may be indeed be sincere and good-hearted, the Bible admonishes Christians to examine everything in the light of Scripture.[24] While it may be good for Christians to identify itself as a group, the wearing of sloganeering T-shirts may not be the biblical way to go about it. Christians are certainly called to bear witness to the gospel, but does giving someone a Testa-mint really perform that role adequately?

A good place to begin our examination of the biblical texts is with the Decalogue. Exodus 20:7 tells us "*You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.*"[25] Generally Christians today take this to mean that "God" or "Jesus" should not be invoked when cursing one's broken lawn mower. While this is certainly true, the implications for the third commandment are much broader, and if bracelets, T-shirts, and bumper stickers can at any time be considered vanity, a serious problem arises.

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[21]See McDannell, *Material Christianity* for multiple pictorial examples of this phenomenon.

[22]Haley, "Branding Religion," 285.

[23]Ibid., 283.

[24]An excellent example of this admonition, among others, is found in 1 John 4:1-3.

[25]Scripture is from the NASB updated edition.

A name that is to be revered is much different than a name that is branded. A brand name is created for the expressed purpose of being taken in vain. The brand is both subservient to and a representative of a certain group. That is something quite different from a God whose name should not be taken in vain. It is to this God—and his name that *we* are subservient. Furthermore, he is by no means a representative of us—rather it is by his grace that we are privileged to be representatives of him. To simply throw the name of the LORD around lightly, without any semblance of the weight that it carries is an affront to God; his name becomes the latest buzzword and it is taken in vain.

Another pertinent verse to the discussion is Romans 12:2: "*And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect*." The problem here is that many purveyors (and users) of Christian kitsch do explicitly seek to conform to the world. R. Laurence Moore observes that the Christian commercial culture's promoters in Orange County, California decided to publish its own version of the Yellow Pages, because, he writes, "That was the only way to distinguish the Christian product from the competition."[26]

When one conforms to the ways of the world, whatever was Christian about something is often jettisoned in lieu of conformity. Thus, the "Reeborn" T-shirt looks exactly like the "Reebok" T-shirt except for the clever switching of two letters. With such conformity to the world, little is left to witness to Christ (how can it if it looks like all the other shirts?) and much is left to be ridiculed by the world (Christians can't come up with their own designs—they must copy others—what kind of God do they serve?).

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[26]R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 255.

Questionable also is the effectiveness of kitsch as evangelistic material. It is indeed not pushy, but biblical evangelism is rarely, if ever so passive. T-shirts and bumper stickers have too little space to effectively share the truths of the gospel—especially in our postmodern culture that has such a high rate of illiteracy. It is plausible that such items might serve as an entry into an evangelistic conversation, but in a world where thousands of secular T-shirts and bumper stickers compete for one's attention, this is extremely unlikely:

> Some retailers don't like the gift and apparel trend. John Cully is concerned that Christian stores' increasing emphasis on non-book products is misdirected. "It's not the coffee cup or the praying hands or the picture of Jesus on the wall that changes lives," said Mr. Cully, who owns Evangelical Bible Bookstore, a 30-year-old family business. "It is God-honoring literature that changes people's thinking. We've seen many people shift their theological positions because of good literature."[27]

Laziness or fearfulness in witnessing might also be a motive for someone to use kitsch for their witnessing efforts, but the gospel will be offensive to many, and kitsch is not an acceptable crutch, else mission boards would merely have to put a T-shirt on missionaries and send them on their way.

**WWJD: A Case Study**

One of the more ubiquitous examples of Christian kitsch is the WWJD movement. WWJD stands for, of course: "What Would Jesus Do?" The four letters are most commonly found on bracelets worn primarily by Christian teenagers. The impetus behind the movement is based upon Charles Sheldon's century-plus year old work, *In His Steps,* now updated by his great-grandson.[28] The chief notion is that if Christians wear the bracelet at all times, when

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[27]Vincent, "Trinkets or Truth."

[28]Frazier, "Musings on Commerce."

presented with a difficult situation, they can simply look down at their wrist to see a reminder.

The Christian can then ask himself, "What would Jesus do in this situation?"

The Bible does tell us in Deuteronomy 6:8 regarding the words of the LORD, "*You*

*shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead.*" We

must keep in mind, however, that W.W.J.D is not the word of God. It is an ethic based much

more in liberal Christianity than in the revealed word of God.[29] It is in this respect that many are

misled, either intentionally or unintentionally into fallacious thinking.

A person, by wearing the bracelet thinks that they are doing a good thing, advancing in

sanctification, when in reality, it may be holding them back. Consider the response of one young

evangelical:

> I love it when somebody asks me about my W.W.J.D. bracelet. I'm not good at going up to
> people and just talking about Jesus. It makes me feel good to tell them that it means, "what
> would Jesus do." I don't ever say much more than that, but still, it makes me feel good to
> know that I'm doing what I should do.[30]

This person has been lulled into complacency and reluctance to share the gospel because he or

she thinks that the bracelet is doing the job.

The W.W.J.D movement passes the test of not conforming to the world in that it does

not mimic another established brand directly. However the emergence of W.W.J.D. as a brand if

not in law (the name has not been copyrighted) but in practice betrays conformity to the world.

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[29]Ralph C. Wood, in an article entitled "In Defense of Disbelief," 1998 *First Things* 86 (October 1998), rightly observes of the theological weakness of this movement: "Those who have turned the WWJD acronym into a fashion item—donning decorative wear that asks What Would Jesus Do?—ignore this fundamental distinction between Christ's objective work and our subjective appropriation of it. As the Son of God slain for the sins of the world, Jesus has a life qualitatively different from ours. To ask what Jesus would do is to assume that we are his qualitative equal."

[30]Haley, "Branding Religion," 281.

It not simply a bracelet that has the initials, but every advertising specialty product imaginable has been imprinted and sold.

As for taking the name of the LORD in vain, an argument could be made. After all the name of Jesus is commercialized and mass marketed in the same way any other trend would be handled. The mighty God who spoke and the world came into existence is reduced to a simple slogan that evangelical youths are reminded of when they look at their wrists.

Another danger that comes with such ubiquitous marketing of kitsch is the unintended consequences that develop. Though these are not always the fault of the Christians who market items such as the W.W.J.D. bracelet, caution should be taken. Neuhaus reports on a group of teens in Southern California who adapted W.W.J.D. for their own purposes, calling it "We Want Jack Daniels!"[31] This could be compared to the ever-present cross that strikingly anti-Christian rock stars wear. The danger is that something becomes so familiar that it loses any significance whatsoever. In the case of W.W.J.D., it is not so far removed from the world that has any staying power. Popular culture is trendy and changes with the tide, and so even now (2003), the prevalence of the bracelet is diminishing.

## Turn or Burn: What Are We To Do With Christian Kitsch?
**First Things**

To begin with, we must keep the first things *first*. Anything that does, in an evident manner, take the name of the LORD in vain we must distance ourselves from. Like Jesus overturning the marketers in the temple, Christians should also demand that God be revered. Of

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[31]Richard John Neuhaus, "The Public Square," 1999 *First Things* 97 (November 1999) [on-line] accessed 16 April 2003, available from http://www.firstthings.com.

course, this must be done in a manner that reverent to God, and must be done in humility and not with an elitist attitude.

Likewise, overt conformity to the world must be deplored.  We must put away any objects that attempt, intentionally or not, to make Christianity a brand, on par with Coca-Cola, Nike, or Reebok.  We must also be wary that we do not become "of the world and not in it,"[32] as the church has tended to do at some points.

**Hit Kitsch Where It Hurts**

Because Christian kitsch is primarily market-driven, Christians can also speak back with their wallets.  If kitsch is not bought, it will rot and not reproduce.  Gene Edward Veith rightly observes:

> The revival of Christian publishing must be, above all, a spiritual revival, for which Christians should be praying. In the meantime, the church can still hold the publishers of its Bibles and its ideas accountable. The power of the marketplace can exert a positive as well as a negative influence. Christian retailers can become more selective about what they stock. Christian book buyers can be better stewards, spending their money not on spiritual junk food but on what is true to the Bible.[33]

Denominations like the Southern Baptist Convention can exert a certain amount of control over the contents of its Lifeway Christian Stores, but much more will have to be done at the grassroots level in churches to raise the bar to a higher standard.

**Going In The Opposite Direction**

Pastors must also teach reverence for God's name.  We must not forget the third commandment. God should not be trivialized in worship services, but exalted.  A right understanding of the

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[32]Ibid., Wood is quoting Ken Myers here.

[33]Veith, "Whatever Happened To Christian Publishing?"

nature and doctrine of God will go far in heading off the production of kitsch before it even begins.

## Conclusion

Christian kitsch is not a new concept; after all, there is nothing new under the sun. But in recent years it has seen unprecedented increase due in large part to the Christians increasing affiliation with pop culture. The number of Christian bookstores has increased dramatically in the past decades, and with them the production of Christian items for every part of a Christian's life.

Christians use kitsch for different purposes, but chiefly to make them feel more a part of the group, and to make them feel good about promoting Christianity. The dangers here are that believers can be lulled into thinking that their products are living out their lives for them.

The truth is that kitsch does trivialize God. It is a taking of his name in vain that makes the label "Christian" just another brand name on par with any other. Rather than being transformed, Christians who use kitsch conform to the world by marketing God in the same way that the world does.

I often wonder if my conversation with my atheist friend Sasha in that Christian bookstore would have turned out if the bookstore were devoid of such kitsch. Would he have said, "American Christians have a great reverence for God, as is evident from all of the serious materials in this store," or something like it? God only knows.