

Seminar Three:

HOUSEHOLD GODS

Here's a bird's eye view of what we have discussed so far.

When I was a kid, I had a strange dream. In it, an alien invasion took place -- an invasion, that is, which nobody noticed. Either this invasion was so otherworldly that it COULD NOT register on our mental radar or it was so subliminal that it passed UNDER our mental radar.

I was intrigued by the idea of an invisible extra-terrestrial coup d'état and, as a movie fan, I kind of wished someone would make a movie about it. Unfortunately, the alien invasion films I saw never quite hit the mark -- although John Carpenter's "They Live" was remarkably close.

Then, quite unexpectedly, I stumbled across my alien invasion -- in a book of nonfiction. In this book, titled "Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture," Vincent Miller examines "commodification" or how we are all changed by the tendency to shop for happiness.

This clicked with my dream in this way:

The items we buy -- commodities -- are designed to push certain details forward and shove other details to the background. How the product will transform us for the better is pushed forward, while any details that might upset or challenge or offend are sanded and buffed away.

The product is, as Miller puts it, "disciplined for market." Details like where the product came from, who operated the machinery to manufacture it, and under what conditions of labor are simply invisible. And this blankness, it turns out, is rather powerful. Since the real origins of the object -- which tie it to particulars of people, place, and culture -- are all missing, other qualities can be projected onto the commodity's shiny, self-contained anonymity. Passions. Anxieties. Hopes. Cars and trucks can appear to possess a rugged individualism which

they confer to their drivers. Fast food possesses the therapeutic power to reunite busy families. An iPod possesses a personality, a vibe, a mystique.

Doesn't sound like an alien invasion yet? Hang in there.

In fact, instead of seeing the actual product, we see, superimposed over it, it's media double -- instead of seeing an mp3 player, we see an iPod, a media personality we've come to know through TV ads, magazine articles, and chatter on the web. Populate the human imagination with a few hundred thousand of these abstract media doubles and you create an entire mental landscape, a commodified mirage roughly the size of Antarctica. According to Guy Debord, these abstract media-driven doubles not only supercede the actual products, but genuinely have a life of their own. They comprise "...a world-view that has actually been materialized, a view of a world that has become objective... When the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings -- dynamic figments that provide the direct motivations for a hypnotic behavior." Debord calls this state "the spectacle."

Did you catch a whiff of alien invasion?

This, then, is the subliminal invasion of my dream. The human imagination becomes occupied territory. As Debord puts it, "The spectacle is the stage at which the commodity has succeeded in totally colonizing social life. Commodification is not only visible, we no longer see anything else; the world we see is the world of the commodity."

And what kind of world is that? A reality made up of commodities is basically our own passions, anxieties, and hopes "writ large" -- after, of course, a little commodification. A person who spends his formative years in the spectacle, who, in Debord's phrase, embraces "the dominant images of need," finds himself trapped in a glorified, mass media celebration of his own sorriest desires and impulses.

How do we experience this in day-to-day living? In my own experience, I found that shopping becomes more and more a reaching for happiness. Commodities seem to possess the wholeness and vitality we lack. So we keep buying and searching and buying and searching. The act of shopping becomes overwrought, weighed down by profound human needs, since the commodities cannot actually deliver the social, psychological, and even spiritual qualities we associate with them.

It is difficult to find a way out, because our instinct for the authentic has been rewired. The fake is preferred over the authentic. The media-created double is preferred over reality. And the spectacle is in business 24/7.

So what can we do? How can we fight back?

Take that left turn. Now drive down that alley. Flash your headlights three times. Step out of the car. Go to the blue door. Knock seven times. Wait. Now three more knocks. When the man says, "I don't feel good. Why don't I feel good?"; you reply, "The more the spectator identifies with the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own life and his own desires." Step through the door and allow yourself to be searched for weapons. When you are done, go to the room at the end of the hall where we all will be waiting.

Welcome to the Resistance.

Meet actor and activist, Bill Talen.

He belongs to the Resistance.

Bill is out there on the front lines, making his way through the rubble of commodification. "I'm standing in the thickest vortex of corporate logos," he says over the squawk box. "The power is greater than any historical monarch, stronger than any villain with an army. But the power I want to speak truth to is completely amorphous. It pretends it isn't there while it controls your life."

Bill Talen fights back in this way: He dresses up in the heavily sequined sports jacket of a TV evangelist, calls himself "Reverend Billy," and, with the aid of a black gospel choir, steps into a local Starbucks

to create a brief, entertaining apocalypse. You know -- the sort of apocalypse that shakes everything until only what is unshakeable remains.

For example, an historic and beloved local diner in a trendy New York neighborhood is run out of business by a Starbucks eager to snap up the prime location. This Starbucks receives one of Reverend Billy's "interventions."

In preparation with his co-conspirators, Reverend Billy stands outside the building and prays. "Oh, children, let us pray to the God that is not a product. We ask that our message go straight into the sky, past the logo-barnacled walls, up past Cindy Crawford's lip mole. And we ask to be protected and blessed by those whose stories are buried beneath this overlay of logos. The long-ago dead left us these sculpted lionesses and snakes and angels -- and they watch over us and we say thank you for this. And... we ask for the blessing of the family that ran the Astor Riviera Diner -- evicted from this corner by the speculator lawyers of Starbucks. And... we ask for the power from the old impatient waiters in their bad tuxes. Amen."

Then the Stop Shopping Gospel Choir enters the Starbucks to belt out a chorus of "Put your latte down!" -- their hands raised and moving in syncopation. The deacons weave thru the crowd, handing out invitations to go elsewhere for coffee.

"A political statement is ringing in the air, in the form of simple joy," Talen writes in his book, "What Should I Do If Reverend Billy Is In My Store?" "Things make so much sense after the singing starts. Heads are tilted up and arms are open -- you can't really argue with this. I believe that this will deprogram a consumer in the middle of a pseudo hip sip."

Then Reverend Billy begins to preach.

"I COME BEARING GLAD TIDINGS: YOU ARE NOT REALLY BUCKHEADS! YOU'RE JUST IN HELL, THAT'S ALL -- Hell defined as sitting here fibrillating on minor drugs surrounded by fake avant-garde wallpaper. Is there anyone here, children, is there anyone here who is not SICK TO DEATH OF GOOD GRAPHICS? Look at these walls, these impossibly hip earth tones. Is it Jean-

Michel Basquiat? Well, not... NOT QUITE. But he used to live in this neighborhood! ... No, this is LIKE the neighborhood, it is IN the neighborhood, but it IS NOT the neighborhood. It's Starbucks, and where is that? Where is Starbucks? It's NO PLACE... In fact, we are tourists in our own lives; there's a disconnect. Our words have a barely discernible echo. We have the same relation to living real lives that these art school Starbucks graphics have to the real artists who lived on this street. WE'RE IN THE FAKE CAFE, AND WE CAN'T KNOW THE REAL COST OF THAT LATTE!"

Some patrons clap and sing along. Some avoid eye contact, taking a long, deliberate sip of their latte. Some, who were already on their cellphone anyway, face the opposite wall. The manager cranks up the muzak to no avail and, eventually, calls the cops. Reverend Billy goes to jail -- a reverberating, life-altering challenge to some, a goofy New York oddity to others.

Bill Talen, aka "Reverend Billy," is a one man army corps of what can be done to resist commodification. His primary message is that something natural and human has been lost and we should fight to recover it. He points to the lived-in, bemused pragmatism and comraderie of a local diner, of the thousand human particulars of place and history that cling to neighborhood stores. Starbucks or The Disney Store -- each store repeating the same contrived, corporate veneer -- are, in contrast, "NO PLACE."

This brings into sharp relief the peculiar loneliness of commodified living. As Guy Debord points out, a system that began with a kind of deliberate isolation -- the soulless, "scientifically managed" assembly lines of Frederick Taylor -- tends to manufacture products -- television, cars, iPods -- which engender "lonely crowds." Reverend Billy puts it this way: "That's the thing that makes us suspect that the devil is in our midst, children. That flattening of [the local diner's] natural hot chatter into white noise and big ads is evil. When you walk into the Starbucks at Astor Place there is no recognition; no one shouts 'Yo!' or calls out your name. This is evil. There is a narrowing of the kinds of language that are shared in public, a regularization of gestures. It happens so gradually as a neighbor-

hood dies that people only notice an untraceable emptiness, a certain dullness."

Resistance to commodification involves, then, active support of unofficial local institutions, places that seem to cultivate "...our brilliant banter... the trusting teasing that we offhandedly tend toward when we're together. In a ho-hum way we build a sneaky bouyancy in the room." Marketing executives hope to capture that liveliness, that spontaneous comraderie and somehow link it to fast food -- "I'm lovin' it" -- or spaghetti sauce or credit cards. Muzak versions of easy familiarity and ecstatic banter enter our social spaces via billboards and ever present TVs, and somehow stifle the real thing. Thus, we have the difficult task of building a natural, unaffected sense of community in the middle of an emotional parking lot.

Talen also points out that simply saying "NO" to commodified reality leads to what he calls "Godsightings." Godsightings happen when one simply refuses to engage the consumer impulse. The spectacle recedes and reality begins to reassert itself. But it happens mysteriously, as a kind of epiphany.

Testifying to a Godsighting in a letter to Reverend Billy, John in Illinois wrote, "I saw this 4X4, a boxy-shaped car, on TV. It swam down a waterfall, somersaulted over a forest, and leapt up a cliff; it didn't seem to have a driver, this was the 4X4 itself doing all this. It was doing what a salmon does, then a monkey, then a mountain goat. It landed on a pinnacle of rock under an Arizona sunset. That was the dramatic helicopter shot. Then I turned and my mother was standing behind me. She has Alzheimer's. She was looking at me with a smile like the Cheshire cat. Down at her feet was a little circle of jars with the tops screwed off. They were different kinds of spreads, jelly, peanut butter. She arranged them in a circle and the tops were gone and we looked down at that and back at each other a couple of times and then we started laughing so hard."

Commodification reroutes creative impulses into acts of consumption. Speaking for myself, I can't tell you the number of times my desire to write and draw comic books has sent me NOT to the drawing board, but to Michael's art supply. There I purchase

pens and ink which I never put to use. Godsightings occur when creative impulses -- inspirations, if you will -- are not rerouted to stir up consumer desire. They remain themselves -- essentially mysterious, intuitive, whimsical, godlike.

Talen also advocates a return to history -- that is, to an acknowledgement of how people's stories sanctify still existing places and objects. Trendy apartments -- which Talen describes as "silent boxes of stylish air" -- utterly lack this sanctified power. Historical preservation is, then, part of the fight against commodification. Talen, for example, joined with local preservation organizations to save the Greenwich Village residence where in 1845 Edgar Allan Poe penned "The Raven." The attempt failed for the most part -- Poe's residence was reduced to a small tribute room in New York University's new law school. But, hey, they tried.

People's stories can sanctify the products we buy, as well. Naturally, beloved toys fall into this category. But there is sometimes a hidden history which, once it is brought to light, has the power to "desanctify." If Edgar Allen Poe's personal history can sanctify a rather plain Greenwich Village building, then one girl's story of hardship in a Chinese toy factory can desanctify "Mr. Cuddles" -- a teddy bear on a shelf in Wal-Mart. Commodification suppresses these stories -- they just don't stick to the anonymous, self-contained commodity. However, if by some miracle such a story does come to light, even the most obsessive shoppers will drop Mr. Cuddles like a hot rock.

Product history, then, is the perfect foil of commodification. It dissolves the commodity mystique, evaporates the media double. Assembling a product's history, however, can be quite difficult. Tracing subsidiary companies and contract work can rival the complexities of the Human Genome Project. Somewhere in the past, however, are thousands of stories belonging to thousands of workers. As Miller reports in "Consuming Religion," one such person was Li Chunmei. A nineteen-year-old factory worker, Li Chunmei fell prey to "over-work death" after months spent frantically making teddy bears at the Bianen toy factory in the Chinese enterprise zone of the Pearl River Delta near Hong Kong.

Reverend Billy takes commodification's ability to function as an unnoticed, invisible, axiomatic mode of being -- and drags it out into the clear light of day. Through theatrical "interventions" and Godsightings and unearthed product history, he deflates the spectacle -- causes its omnipresence to appear thin and brittle and mediocre, its centrality in our lives to seem pompous and controlling. Basically, he sticks his hands in the air and makes shadow puppets on the surface of the spectacle.

Bill Talen does not, however, point us toward an alternative to the spectacle. Granted, his tongue-in-cheek Reverend Billy persona seems to be a real calling. Certainly, his courage is real! And, wielding the proto-authority of this persona, he does a fine job of railing against what is wrong. But if and when he begins to describe what is right --- well, he's the kind of guy who, when speaking about God, might quickly insert "or goddess!" just to keep everything pleasantly wide-open.

Ironically, this means his Reverend persona is something of a commodification. Reverend Billy is a spiritual leader minus any beliefs, symbols or practices that might offend his generally leftward-leaning fellow resistance fighters. Minus any creed. In other words, "disciplined for market."

And, really, there is only so much time one can spend soaking up the uncommodified atmosphere at Talen's beloved local diner. As honest and consoling and inspiring as that comradeship may be, it isn't enough. To really fight commodification, to fill the gaping hole left by a discredited and rejected spectacle, we must turn to even deeper, even more profound resources.

So we attempt to escape the cult of the commodity, to go cold turkey on consumer desire. Growing up in a consumer culture, however, has led us to develop deep habits. When we want to feel better about ourselves, a reflex sends us shopping. When we have a creative inspiration, an impulse sends us shopping. When we want to express our support of some political movement, we end up buying a book or cd that supports the cause. There is an

ontology at the heart of all this -- a perspective on life that casts us in the role of a consumer always hungering after the next new thing. And this ontology is constantly reinforced by the dumbed-down, commodified imagery of the spectacle. This isn't a creed which we have willingly adopted. It is a way of living. To defeat this, then, we must establish a different ontology. And this ontology must find expression in a different set of habits, in a different way of living.

Here is how we are going to establish this different ontology.

What I would like you to do is to grab the day before Christmas in your left hand. Now take the day after Christmas in your right. Grasp them firmly. Now pull them hard in both directions until Christmas is stretched wide enough to cover the entire year.

Now you can behave the rest of the year just as you do at Christmas. Now each day possesses what I like to call "domestic gravitas."

I don't mean you're going to shout "Merry Christmas" on Lincoln's Birthday. What I mean is -- if hanging up all sorts of Christian symbols is good enough for Christmas, it's good enough for the rest of the year. If standing up little statues of Joseph, and Mary, and the Wise Men helps bring the Christian story to life at Christmas, then it's fine to tell the REST of the story during the REST of the year -- with a statue of the apostle Paul, or of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, or of Christ ascending.

Remember, people's stories have the power to sanctify still existing places and objects. The story of Joseph, and Mary, and baby Jesus has that same effect on the Christmas Season. Their history sanctifies a set of days and nights that come round every year. Each day and night is pleasantly haunted, in a sense, by events that took place two thousand years ago. And that Christmas spirit influences us, informs our actions, changes us for the good throughout the Season.

There is an ontology at the core of the Christmas Season which finds expression in habits and routines which we call "traditions." Ironically, of course, we are talking about the biggest shopping season of the year. But everyone knows that isn't

what Christmas is about. Thanks to Charlie Brown, everyone recognizes that the commercialization of Christmas is the invasion of a different, even opposite ontology.

So take Christmas and stretch it to cover the rest of the year. Make that oddly appropriate mixture of solemnity and celebration into a lifestyle, a culture, a set of habits which operate below cognitive radar, beneath thought, even prior to choice.

There are, after all, other events in the Christian story. In some corners of Christianity -- Methodism, Episcopalianism, Lutheranism, the Catholic Church -- allowing these personal stories to sanctify our days and nights is called celebrating the liturgical year: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, the Easter Vigil, Easter morning, Pentecost, Corpus Christi. Recognition of these events with prayers and devotions, family traditions and feasts, creates a culture of Christianity. Participation in this culture each and every year forms us in a lifestyle. The Christian story in all its mystery is made present -- bringing the eternal into history, the infinite into the finite -- each day. And this, pursued in spirit and in truth, changes us with subtle currents of grace.

It may seem strange to focus so much on the events in a story. Why not simply focus on the truths of Christianity, the point blank teachings of Christ duly recorded by his Apostles, and leave it at that?

Remember, though, commodification is not a creed. It is not a set of teachings. It belongs to a different sphere -- a side of life that is not deliberate and calculated. There are currents of culture that flow around us like a river -- and we tend to be swept along with them. This mysterious, subtle aspect of life is not addressed effectively by creeds. A story, however, can convey both sides of life, the plain, discursive truth and the mystery.

Think of it this way. God the Father reveals himself to us in Christ. This ultimate effort at self-expression is not limited to the teachings of Christ. The Father has revealed himself through ALL OF CHRIST'S LIFE -- his words, his deeds, his miracles, his pain, his laughter, the very pattern the events traced, that which he did and that which

was done to him. The full revelation is in Christ's personal history, his story. Only a story can express both the prosaic truth and the poetic, even sometimes paradoxical mystery.

This is why story figures so powerfully during the Christmas season. The Christmas story is "writ large," projected onto the clouds for all to see. Our lives are affected in large ways and small, in conscious ways and in ways that operate below cognitive radar, beneath thought, even prior to choice. The Christmas story becomes, in a strange sense, the air that we breathe.

When this happens all year long, when various Christian symbols and personages and events are handled with a two thousand year old gravitas, "habits of interpretation and use" develop which ground a person in the eternal. Rather than moving in sync with the flickering imagery of the spectacle, we join fellow pilgrims on a journey that keeps us ever mindful of the One who went before us.

I should point out that, since becoming a Christian in 1984, I have spent most of my life in non-denominational, evangelical circles. My family doesn't own stock, in other words, in traditional, old world, liturgical Christianity. I became Catholic seven years ago. But part of me still observes it all with an outsider's severity. All this -- liturgy and sacrament and holy days and ancient devotions -- is simply, to my mind, Christian culture. It's the shape of day to day living given two thousand years of Christian influence. And it is this time-tested quality that puts commodification to shame. It is the preternatural GRAVITAS of the Lord's Prayer or the Nicene Creed -- spoken by generation upon generation upon generation of Christians -- that reveals commodification's fragile, frenetic casuistry. It's like standing in the turret of a two thousand year old castle and staring down at a small strip mall that was put up in the late Eighties and has now fallen into disrepair except for the Wendy's franchise which is still valiantly hanging on. One structure was built to last for a span of ten or twenty years, the other to last until the end of time.

For someone like myself, the liturgical year and ancient devotions and gracious sacraments are still, like commodification, an intrusion, an invasion. It

doesn't come natural. But I am a person who grew up as a consumer. That, unfortunately, IS what comes natural.

So I welcome this second invasion. To my great relief, the two thousand year old castle launches an attack on the Eighties strip mall in my mind. Those capital "G" Goods -- so often mentioned in Seminar #2 -- return in an ancient, uncommodified form. During the season of Advent, family returns in the example of Joseph, Mary and Jesus. Community returns in the Body of Christ and the events we share throughout the year. History and heritage as markers of identity figure strongly throughout the year, but especially in the attention we pay each Spring to the detailed historical events surrounding the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ.

Of course, you have to be careful. Commodification can turn anything into a product, including revered Christian traditions. There are marketing execs out there who would like nothing better than to establish a traditional "Easter tree" and, along with it, a billion dollar Easter ornament industry. Ditto for Halloween.

With that possibility in mind, let's change gears altogether.

Those of you who have attended parts one, two and three of this seminar -- assuming there is anyone out there who has attended parts one, two and three of this seminar -- will recall how much time was spent mulling over the significance of that alien invasion dream I had. In particular, I wanted to see this "alien invasion that nobody noticed" properly fleshed out in a motion picture. I went on and on about it. None of the alien invasion films were good enough. Not even John Carpenter's "They Live" -- which actually came pretty darned close.

We never did arrive at a film to match the weirdness of that dream. But don't give up hope. As a special treat, here is a plot treatment for Lint Hatcher's "They Live."

- As the film begins, a young Asian girl walks through a poor village carrying a letter to be mailed. We see from the signage that this is a foreign coun-

try, probably China. The young girl is thin and frail. Placing the letter in a large "community mailbox," she turns back to the road and begins walking away from the village. The road travels over a hill ahead. As she approaches the hill, a structure which stands in the distance looms on the horizon. It is a huge, forbidding, windowless factory.

- Back in America, a young man, Daniel, pays a visit to his psychiatrist. The landscape he drives thru is remarkably different from the village we just saw. In particular, there are advertisements everywhere -- signs, billboards and posters. The doctor has put Daniel on two meds, Verticor and Horizontalin. Verticor helps with guilt and loss of purpose in life. Horizontalin helps with relationships with friends and family. These meds, unbeknownst to Daniel or to his psychiatrist, are interacting strangely with Daniel's daily glass of grapefruit juice.

- This drug interaction is causing the young man to become hypersensitive to the multitude of commercial messages that come at him each day. Billboards, radio commercials, TV advertisements, movie ads on the side of potato chip bags, etc. Whole displays of items -- the Lego aisle in Toys R Us with its colors and packaging and logos and product shots -- are almost intolerable. He can barely keep his sanity just standing in the parking lot of Best Buy, a.k.a. "The Loud Store."

- One thing he finds particularly offensive are "netsuke" -- the various figurines on sale in most stores for shoppers who have joined the Celebrationist church or who would like to sample the Celebrationist "style of worship." These small statues, figurines and sculptured symbols serve as decorations in the home church of each individual Celebrationist.

- This new religion -- the first to be formed with "total commercial accessibility" in mind -- is quite popular. The Celebrationists do not meet as a group; rather, each individual member of the church worships alone in his or her home each Sunday for a period of their own choosing at a time of day of their own choosing. Of course, if Sunday is inconvenient, this also is negotiable. Celebrationists are united by their belief that the greatest good is the attainment of individual peace, happiness, and

spiritual self-actualization. Thus, each Celebrationist's home church -- a room or corner of a room set aside for this purpose -- is accessorized with figurines and symbols which best represent the Celebrationist's aspirations.

There are, of course, pre-arranged sets one can purchase -- introduced to the public during a huge marketing push at the religion's inception. For example, the Personal Peace set includes a book of comforting excerpts from the Bible, a "cross of joy" (with the horizontal bar curved upward at each end), a scented candle, and netsuke of Jesus, Buddha, Gandhi, John Lennon and Della Reese of "Touched by an Angel." The Personal Success for Women set includes a copy of "You Go, Girl! : Personal Affirmations for Women on the Move," and netsuke of Madonna, Princess Diana, Hillary Clinton, and Della Reese. And the Personal Spiritual Abundance set includes the book, "Everything I Needed to Know I Already Learned in Kindergarten in a Past Life," and netsuke of Robert Schuller, Jesus ("Personal Ascension" edition), Buddha, Tony Robbins, and Della Reese. There are, of course, variations which express Personal Spiritual Abundance through gods and goddesses or through various endangered species. These and the ideals they represent are "celebrated" in loose ceremonies which emphasize the truths which, according to Celebrationist theology, "all religions hold as worthy of celebration."

- There is a Celebrationist show on the Home Shopping Channel. Also, there are limited edition netsuke which only the very rich may browse.

- Our hero, Daniel, stares with consternation at a netsuke display in Target during a well-attended 20% off sale. "What is a 'netsuke' anyhow?" he says. "It sounds Japanese. Does anybody know?" He asks several people, but nobody knows. One lady replies, "Maybe it's some kind of feng shui thing?"

- Daniel sees a young woman off at a distance, staring at the Celebrationist sale. He poses his question to her. She replies, "Netsuke were, at one time, worn on the sash of the kimono. You could hang things from them -- like a purse or a pouch or a pipecase -- because kimonos don't have pockets. They were little sculptures, usually of characters

from well-known Japanese legends.” Daniel replies, “So you must really be into Celebrationist stuff to know all that.” She grimaces. “Are you kidding? I’m a Christian. In fact, I’m on my way over to St. Joseph’s with these art supplies. I’m trying to learn how to paint icons.” She explains that this was once a highly specialized art form requiring years of apprenticeship, but she can’t find anyone to teach her -- so she has to figure it out for herself.

- The young woman’s name is Naomi. A relationship develops. Daniel complains that he used to fill his free time browsing thru books and movies and feels rather lost and restless now that his “condition” prevents this. He used to go straight to the dvd section at Best Buy after work, for example. Naomi invites him to swing by her apartment at that time for tea and conversation.

- During one of his visits, Daniel asks Naomi why she bothers to put so much work into her icon of Jesus when there are plenty of netsuke Jesuses out there. She replies, “If you go to a Celebrationist Jesus and ask him a question, he’s just going to tell you what you want to hear. If you go to this Jesus, he will tell you the truth -- the unvarnished truth.”

Daniel pauses a moment, then says cautiously, “You don’t actually pray to this... this picture. Do you?”

This earns him another grimace from Naomi. “What? Do I look like an idiot or something?” she says. Then her tone shifts. “But, you know, it’s funny. When I am painting an icon, it does feel like I am praying. In a way. But no, I do not worship images. Only God. That’s it.”

- Daniel also meets Naomi’s sister, Nicki, who is very heavily involved in Celebrationism.

- There is a highly publicized break between the two men who began the Celebrationist franchise. Maximillian Eckhart is now denouncing the movement as dangerous --- as a “deliberate and insidious effort to occupy humanity’s spiritual void.” Just who or what is trying to occupy this void is not clear. Taylor Fredrickson, the partner who remains a thorough Celebrationist, says the only void is between Eckhart’s ears. Eckhart persists. “It is an alternate sacramental system,” he says. “But it does not impart grace. It imparts something terrible.”

- At the same time, Fredrickson takes advantage of the surge of publicity to announce the upcoming release of Pantheon One. The press release reads, “This limited edition set of netsuke represents,” reads the press release, “a spiritual leap forward. These are ‘new gods,’ assembled by a group of the greatest spiritual experts of our time. Each god is a synthesis of the best of previous deities. And, because they point toward an Actual Spiritual Reality (or ASR), these are the first netsuke that invite real worship! Ra, the Egyptian sun god which dies and is resurrected, the mythical phoenix and Jesus, the Christian savior, all share the same pattern, all point toward the same spiritual ‘force’ or ‘dynamism’ of death and resurrection. This narrative has been ‘retold’ by our panel of spiritual experts in the new and improved god, Tet --- which is improved in the sense that it is androgenous, is not tainted by the blood of religious wars, and avoids the exclusivity which Christians attach to Jesus. Thus, a person may actually worship Tet guilt free, without complicating his or her life with the typical demands of religious institutions.”

- People set up in tents and sleeping bags outside of department stores just to be sure they get their own Pantheon One. A media circus develops, ranging from lengthy, somber interviews with religious experts to short soundbytes from what is described as a “mere handful of fundamentalist naysayers, usually limited to evangelical Christians, devout Catholics, and orthodox Jews.”

- Daniel and Naomi attend a lecture by Maximilian Eckhart at the World Harvest Cathedral Nondenominational Suburban Megachurch. Eckhart denounces the netsuke as a “trivialization of truth” and a “particularly odious marriage of narcissism and moral relativity.” During the question and answer session, Naomi stands up and says, “I have a question about Pantheon One. Are we talking about real worship here? I mean, are people expecting these ‘new gods’ to answer prayers?” Eckhart replies, “Yes. And, unfortunately, they may get what they ask for.” He refuses to elaborate. Later, when Naomi attempts to purchase a signed copy of Eckhart’s book, he apologizes for not providing a clearer answer, explaining that he has not slept for six days and is keeping himself alert with large doses of caffeine and pizza. (Here I am thinking of

the enigmatic comic book character Mr. X, created by Dean Motter and the Bros Hernandez. Mr. X designed a city meant to confer peace and wholeness simply through the psychic influence of its architecture. Sort of a reverse Hill House. But someone twisted the designs and the city has become deranged. Mr. X scrambles about, trying to undo the damage he unwittingly caused.) With a strange intensity, Eckhart tells Naomi, "You are a remarkable young woman. I can see that. Here, I want you to have this copy of my book. Please accept it as my gift." Naomi is embarrassed and a little creeped out, but she takes the book.

- Across the street from the church is a tall La Quinta hotel. Naomi and Daniel eat a late supper at the Denny's next door. Daniel glances out the window and, to his shock, sees pale translucent figures ten stories tall walking across the landscape of fast food franchises, oil change outlets, and Kwicky Marts. They move like giant ghosts, not disturbing the buildings at their feet, and they all seem to converge on the La Quinta. Naomi can't see the figures, but finds herself believing Daniel.

- The next day, Eckhart is found dead in his La Quinta hotel room. His body is sprawled across the floor, crushed like a Dixie cup. His right hand points to a desk where a pristine set of the Pantheon One netsuke sits facing Eckhart's lifeless body. On the carpet is written in blood "They Live." The manager says the netsuke were delivered to Eckhart's room while Eckhart was presenting his lecture.

- News of Eckhart's death spreads quickly. At her house, mournfully glancing thru her copy of Eckhart's book, Naomi discovers that the entire index and bibliography section is hollow -- a big square is cut out of the center. Here she finds several cocktail napkins covered with tiny notations and an envelope containing a letter and a photo of a young girl. The letter appears to be written in Chinese, but a translation has been included.

- Meanwhile, Nicki comes in flushed with excitement. She managed to get a Pantheon One set! While Daniel watches, Nicki rushes to her home church -- sort of a corner fitted baker's rack -- and rather rudely pushes Della Reese and friends off their shelves. In place of these, she carefully erects

six statuettes. They appear angular and modernistic and silver plated. While Naomi reads the cocktail napkins, Daniel observes Nicki as she takes out an instruction manual and proceeds to worship. After maybe three minutes, all the lights in the house suddenly and briefly dim. But during that short moment, Daniel sees (in a scene reminiscent of "The Testament of Dr. Mabuse") a tall, translucent figure emerge from one of the netsuke. It moves toward Nicki. Daniel yells, "Nicki! Look out!" but she doesn't move. The translucent figure does, however, turn its head to stare with round, unblinking eyes at Daniel. Daniel alerts Naomi, but she cannot see what he is describing. Only Daniel can see the figure as it steps INTO Nicki, turns round, and sits -- so that it's position matches her own. Then the thing shrinks, disappearing, it seems, into Nicki. The girl looks up. "Quiet, Daniel!" she says. "Can't you see that I'm worshipping?"

- Daniel insists that Naomi and he should relocate to Naomi's room. There Naomi reads him what she has found written on the cocktail napkins and in the letter. Judging by the signature on the book, the napkins are in Eckhart's handwriting. They explain that he intended to pass someone this material because he felt his life was in danger. The letter is from a young girl in China named Su-Chen and the translation is from her aunt in San Diego who first received the letter and forwarded it, translated, to Eckhart. The letter contains the horrific details of life in a netsuke factory in the free enterprise zone near Hong Kong. As Su-Chen's voice narrates the letter, we follow her through a typical day. At one point, Chunmei collapses to the floor of the factory. A note from her aunt in San Diego adds that Su-Chen died from "over-work death." This happened during the push to manufacture Pantheon One netsuke in time for the release date, when the already inhumane labor conditions were made even worse. The aunt implores Eckhart to make Su-Chen's story public.

- Naomi and Daniel decide to get the story out through various blogging sites. Before they can begin, however, the power suddenly goes out. The door to the bedroom swings open and Nicki is standing there. Naomi sees her sister. Daniel sees the outline of the alien superimposed over Nicki. "I have been instructed," Nicki says, "to burn that let-

ter." She steps awkwardly into the room. "Not quite sure how to work this yet," she mumbles. Then she shrugs, grabs a chair and throws it at Naomi. A fight ensues in which the alien-controlled Nicki attempts improbable attacks due to the alien's lack of familiarity with domestic details (brandishing a salt shaker as a weapon, swinging an extension cord like a whip, turning on the sink and threatening to splash them which will "render your clothes extremely heavy," etc.) Nicki ends up clinging desperately to a float in the backyard pool.

- Daniel and Naomi manage to get Su-Chen's story, her photo and scans of her letter onto the blogosphere. Within eight hours the story is everywhere and Taylor Frederickson can be seen on CNN, expressing his great surprise and moral outrage at the story, etc. Within twelve hours, memos and photos have emerged which confirm Frederickson actually micromanaged the plant in recent months to ensure the Pantheon deadline was met, promising "sleep rewards" to the most productive laborers.

- One week later -- Daniel, Naomi and Nicki are sitting in a gazebo in Naomi's backyard. Daniel and Nicki are reclining at a table, while Naomi sits at an easel, painting. "So, you only managed to get maybe a thousand, ten thousand through?" Daniel says. Nicki is frowning. From Daniel's point of view we see that he is conversing with Nicki's alien occupant -- who is, apparently, still in there.

"Maybe twenty thousand," the alien replies. It takes a swallow from a Diet Coke. "I dunno. Now they're saying that the instructions were too complicated or else we would have gotten a million through before you guys screwed things up."

Daniel interjects, "We'd rather be referred to as 'those meddling kids.'"

Alien Nicki doesn't smile. "Ha, ha," it replies. "A Scooby-Doo reference. Ha. Ha." It continues. "Like I was saying, you had to get the worship done just right to activate the whole process -- and a lot of people just wing it, you know?"

Daniel replies, "What was the whole point of the invasion? I mean, what were you guys going to do?" "Hang out," Nicki sighs. "Experiment. Amass great wealth. Start a few wars."

Naomi speaks up. "Have you ever painted before?" We see that she is working on another icon. This one is of Mary and baby Jesus talking with an icon version of Su-Chen. Mary seems to be saying, "Go ahead. You can hold him."

The alien replies, "We have no need of the arts where I come from. Oh well, Nicki says she wants to switch again. It's time for her soap opera." Suddenly, Nicki is back. "I'll be glad when he's outta here," she says and jogs to the house, taking her Diet Coke with her.

Daniel and Naomi watch her and then, from inside the house, we hear the TV blaring. "All netsuke are 75% off in this incredible sale! We're practically giving them away!" Daniel and Naomi smile at each other.

THE END