

Buy Nothing Day

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Just this past week I received an email reminding me that Friday, November 26th--the busiest shopping day of the year--is "Buy Nothing Day." Peculiar concept, I thought.

Then I remembered Barbara Brandt's book, Whole Life Economics. Brandt introduced me to another peculiar concept, "Economism." Like other "isms", (e.g., Protestantism, Buddhism, Puritanism, Communism), economism is a way of thinking--a way of interpreting the world. Economism, according to Brandt, is a belief system that has as its core premise the idea that the reason we are put on earth--our purpose in life--is to work to make money which, in turn, offers us access to material goods which then will bring us happiness.

In these times of rapid growth and consumption, it strikes me that economism has become a kind of pseudo-religion for us. Increasingly, we have come to equate the goals and well-being of our **businesses** with the well-being of society as a whole. Under economism, we are no longer citizens, but merely consumers. Our new purpose is to enthusiastically consume the products of **business** and to teach our children the skills they will need at work so that our **businesses** can remain competitive in the new global economy. Meanwhile, the role of our government is to promote policies that will help **business** flourish; and, of course, the purpose of the natural environment is to provide the resources that can be turned into more products to be sold by **business**. Economism has taken root so firmly in our psyches that none of this seems peculiar to us.

But this pseudo-religion fails to provide moral guidance. "Whatever generates the greatest profit" has become the criterion for a "false" morality. The criteria is no longer "Is this right or wrong?" but more often: "Will this make money?" "Will it bring the highest return on my investment?"

Religions, of course, have deities. What about economism? What is it that we believe will save us from future peril? Many among us would answer: science and technology. Technology supported by science has, to a certain extent, come to represent the all-powerful "god" that we trust in for earthly salvation. No matter how grim the future may look, we console ourselves in the belief that our scientists and engineers can always solve our problems.

If economism is our pseudo-religion and science/technology is our pseudo-deity, where might our church lie? Where do we go to hear the gospels of economism? Could it be television? Aside from sleeping and working, watching television is the leading activity in most consumer societies. And all television advertising--and even the content of most programming--seems to be saying one thing: "Satisfaction in life comes from material possessions." This, of course, is the message of economism.

Finally, just as surely as most conventional religions have commandments, so, too, does economism. These commandments have become so institutionalized that we hardly notice them: Work with fervor to achieve happiness (earthly salvation); genuflect at the altar of technology; attend television (church) daily, and so on. Adherence to these modern cultural norms can leave us alienated from each other, from the natural world, from our home places, and even from our very selves.

There is a sad irony in this metaphor. Religion, properly understood, is a belief system that summons up that which is most noble in us; it lifts us up, appeals to our highest and best selves and inspires us to be kind, courageous and loving. Economism, our modern belief system, is a shoddy substitute for true religion because it often appeals to our lowest selves--drawing out our greed, fear, and small-mindedness.

Barbara Brandt, of course, recognizes that business is essential to our livelihood, but in Whole Life Economics she reminds us that the drive to acquire more and more stuff is not the highest expression of what it means to be human. True wealth lies not so much in financial assets as in social relationships, healthy environments, cultural legacies, political rights, and spiritual development.

I am left thinking that maybe *Buy Nothing Day* isn't such a peculiar notion, after all. Indeed, such a day could be just the holiday tonic required to satisfy our "true needs."