



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on November 30, 2009

Black Friday: Materialism in America

It's ironic that Black Friday, which has a negative etymology and connotation, should have become one of the more anticipated days of the year. And it's sad that the holiday meant to be devoted to thanking God for what we have should be followed by — and increasingly subordinated to — a day devoted to seeking what we do not.

The day after Thanksgiving seems to have been [dubbed](#) “Black Friday” in 1965 by the Philadelphia police, who lamented the traffic jams and congested sidewalks the day brought. Earlier still, the term referred to an 1869 [financial crisis](#).



Now it has come to represent a materialism crisis.

We've all heard the stories. This year a woman was [trampled](#) by a frenzied, bargain-hunting crowd at a Clarksville, Tennessee, Toys R Us and suffered a fractured knee. Worse still, a year ago on Long Island in New York, a Wal-Mart security guard was [trampled to death](#) after rapacious shoppers broke down the store's doors five minutes before opening and made a mad dash for merchandise. Fights broke out at other stores as well that year, and *The Seattle Times* provides [this example](#): “At a Wal-Mart in Columbus, Ohio, Nikki Nicely, 19, jumped onto a man's back and pounded his shoulders when he tried to take a 40-inch Samsung flat-screen TV to which she had laid claim. ‘That's my TV!’ Nicely, 19, shouted. ‘That's my TV!’”

Such a story sounds like it belongs on TV, like the *Seinfeld* episode in which the Frank Costanza character spoke of what inspired him to create his own holiday and said, “Many Christmases ago, I went to buy a doll for my son. I reached for the last one they had but so did another man. As I rained blows upon him, I realized there had to be another way.” There certainly does have to be another way, but it doesn't involve a departure from traditional holidays (and, more importantly, holy days) but, rather, a deeper understanding of why they exist.

In reality, we departed from them — that is, from their true meaning — a long time ago. Thanksgiving is not primarily about turkey and stuffing, and Christmas isn't mainly about adorned trees and presents. Yet you wouldn't know it observing today's America. How many people thanked God over last Thursday's dinner or are mindful of Jesus' birth most of all during the yuletide season? Oh, don't misunderstand me, traditional holiday trappings are fine as far as they go; they're the spice of the celebrations. But what is spice without the dish it is meant to enhance? It is then just window dressing without the window, Thanksgiving without the thanks, Christmas without the Christ. It is the superficial without the substance.

Of course, some will say I have it backwards, that we've simply departed from the “myth” of holy days and that the substance is what is left. This is the materialist view. It won't recognize God as real because we can't see or touch Him; only things such as turkey and presents — material things — are



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thought real.

But to unthinkingly accept this atheistic perspective is to live an unexamined life. Why do we celebrate? Are these holidays simply a time to get together and party? Is there any “there” there?

Moreover, even though there’s nothing in this implicit materialist creed stating, “Thou shalt trample thy fellows for a widescreen TV,” should we be surprised when a materialist philosophy ultimately yields rampant materialism? Obviously, if the material world is all you see, the most important thing to you in the world will be the material.

An atheist may counter that it’s the people, not the things, in his life he cares about most. But, in reality, if there is no spiritual world, we have no souls and are then just material ourselves; we are but a few pounds of chemicals and water — organic robots, if you will. Caring about “something more” is predicated on the idea that there’s something more to care about.

Whether we are religious or not, however, it should be obvious that happiness cannot be found in the accumulation of “stuff.” I myself was more of a materialist at one time; when I was a child, I always looked forward to the next toy. But I was blessed enough to eventually learn that its pleasure was ever fleeting. Sure, there’d be joy when I raced downstairs and found what I pined after under the tree or when I’d finally saved enough money for it. Yet the story was always the same: It might provide some fun for a spell, but then I’d set my sights on the next material conquest. And I realized that one’s ambitions might grow with his body and the toys would become more expensive, but the pattern could never change — unless I did.

As for happiness, G.K. Chesterton once said that “thanks are the highest form of thought,” a lofty thought in itself. The thankful person counts his blessings and not his curses, and he views the former as a bonus and not a birthright. His thinking is ethereal because he understands that, as Chesterton also said, “All goods look better when they look like gifts” and that being a sinner he deserves nothing but being a loved sinner he receives much.

And, again, religious or not, we instinctively view a spirit of gratitude as a thing of beauty. Do we like seeing a spoiled brat who throws a tantrum when he doesn’t get what he wants and acts entitled to what he does get? Don’t we much prefer the grateful child who asks for little and, upon getting it, acts as if he has received much? There is a reason why we instruct our children to say “thank you.” And to the thankful person, every day is Christmas or his birthday and every item — from the water he drinks to his shoelaces to a pencil — is manna from Heaven.

Viewing material things as such isn’t wrong, either; we aren’t to be [Manicheans](#). After all, shouldn’t we have the greatest appreciation for God’s gifts? Why, I believe materials can even be sacred. Yet the inordinate attachment to material things we call materialism is quite different all together. In fact, I believe the following is true: The materialist doesn’t love material things.

He lusts after them.

It is much like the difference between a faithful husband and a philanderer. Does the man who always needs another conquest truly love women? That can only be said of one who cares enough to see them as individuals and not interests, of one who doesn’t want to hurt them. The man who loves women is he who truly appreciates the one he has been given and who won’t use them purely for pleasure.

Likewise, if the materialist truly appreciated material things, he would not continually feel the need to replace them or bury them under new additions. He might feel a healthy sentimental attachment to his



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car and not desire a fleet. He would not need a harem of possessions; he would not be a philanderer of goods.

We've gone from holy days to holidays to Black Fridays, when what we need is more Good Friday. If we don't want times for the more heavenly things reduced to commercial conquest, to stores opening in the morning's wee hours and shoppers camping out in pajamas, we need to ponder why we celebrate. It makes no sense to complain of commercialism if we've dispensed with spiritualism, if we've reduced the holy to tinsel and wrappings and empty trappings, to a box and a bow with nothing inside.



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