

Rescripting Wal-Mart

Theologian Walter Brueggemann uses the term “scripted” to describe the composite nature of our convictions, beliefs and social attitudes. It is a simple concept, but it is crucial for Christians to understand if we are faithfully to speak out against injustice, as many are doing in the case of Wal-Mart.

At the present, “Wal-Mart: the High Cost of Low Price”—a documentary by Robert Greenwald—is eliciting a public outcry from Christians and other Americans, both in condemnation and praise, of Wal-Mart’s business ethos and practices.

For example, a recent showing of the film at Belmont University underlined the outrage currently being expressed by Americans over Wal-Mart’s business behaviors.

Without hesitation, students and visitors alike voiced dissatisfaction with the business giant. One person echoed the hyperbolic language of the film: “Wal-Mart is the evil empire.”

The powerful visual images and compelling, well-placed testimonies of the documentary succeed in retelling Wal-Mart’s story from the underside—from the disadvantage-point of under-privilege—rather than the perspective of economic success.

Wal-Mart, a shrewd marketer of itself, is volleying back with its own script. Responding to charges of below poverty-level wages, expensive and rationed benefit plans, strong-arm managerial tactics, employee abuse, gender discrimination, deceitful hiring practices and relocation of jobs overseas, the Arkansas company has taken its story to the churches.

And why not? Wal-Mart has been written into the lives of churches for years—as it has with most rural and small-town America—because it has established itself as not only good for Americans’ consumer lives but morally necessary.

What do I mean by morally necessary?

American Christians have gotten into the bad habit of conflating America with God's Kingdom. While the rest of the world looks on incredulously, we locate God as the invisible hand of American economic success, the guarantor of American democratic liberty and the provider of the unlimited resources available to us.

In short, Wal-Mart understands that its place in the lives of American Christians is written on stone tablets, because American Christians see it as the embodiment of America.

Pentecostal pastor Ira Combs represents the sentiment well. Efforts to paint the company as anti-American don't wash with him. "Wal-Mart, to me, is very American," [he said](#). "It is manifest of the American dream."

To take Wal-Mart and its low prices, its endless supply of jobs and its local capital out of American life is to divide the house against itself, a no-no for many American Christians.

Yet, this is precisely what Greenwald's film does. It undermines the reality-creating script "sold" by Wal-Mart to the American consumer. It questions whether Wal-Mart is really good for America.

By presenting an alternative story to explain Wal-Mart's success, it examines that "most American of relationships"—the one between the worker and the employer—that fuels the American dream.

I am concerned, however, that Greenwald's script is fraught with its own dangers, especially for those Christian communities who desire to make Jesus' politics and economics their own.

In a 1988 book, [Ronald Reagan, the Movie: And Other Episodes of Political Demonology](#), political theorist Michael Rogin talked about how Reagan was a master at demonizing the political other, whether it be communists in Russia or Nicaragua. By identifying certain groups or ideologies with evil, Reagan's

America was able to protect its own political purity through a mythical script.

The byproduct of this political practice of demonization is sacredness. In a very biblical way, when things are labeled as evil, an exorcism must occur in order to protect the sacred body politic.

Reagan's America had to exorcise economic and political ideologies—not because they were actually unjust, but because they had been scripted as evil by the head of America's body politic.

“Wal-Mart: the High Cost of Low Price” uses this same kind of apocalyptic rendering.

By attacking Wal-Mart to protect the purity of a “true” American way to do business, the film appeals to the same belief in the “sacredness” of American capitalism that enabled Wal-Mart to secure its place in our social narratives in the first place.

As Christians, we must faithfully question the powerful American script of market economics, and not just Wal-Mart's version of it.

Brueggemann says in the *Christian Century* that “this script—enacted through advertising, propaganda and ideology ... promises to make us safe and happy.”

I fear that Greenwald's documentary unfortunately perpetuates this story, telling America that cleaning up Wal-Mart will make us safe and happy again.

Hopefully, though, his documentary will prod us to examine the economic axioms of our culture: unlimited growth, transient labor, individual accountability for life's goods, unlimited profits for America's business innovators, low prices, efficiency and global competition.

For this to happen, though, many American Christians will have to trust that when Jesus warned if “a kingdom is divided against itself, then that kingdom cannot stand,” he was not speaking about America.

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