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Posted: 03 May 2007 19:39 Post subject: May 2007: The Desire to Acquire

Welcome to the Religion and Culture Web Forum's public discussion board for May 2007. In this thread you will find the invited responses from Peter Childs, James Farrell, Vincent Miller, and James Wellman.

To leave your own response to Jon Pahl's essay or to another posting, choose "post reply." In order to submit a comment, you must register with a personal user ID and password.

Debra Erickson
Editor, Religion and Culture Web Forum

Anonymous

Posted: 03 May 2007 20:08 Post subject: James Wellman's reply to Jon Pahl

Jon Pahl's "The Desire to Acquire: Or, Why Shopping Malls are Sites of Religious Violence" hits close to home. I too am in the middle of raising two young teenage daughters and their "desire to acquire" has been finely tuned by the American market. When in doubt (that is, in boredom), shop—we live in one of the most beautiful places on earth—the Pacific Northwest—in the presence of vast waters, the Olympic Mountains, a National Forest—but is that tempting to my young girls? No. What tempts them is the mall—in all its banality—and the "shit-like" trance it produces in them on cue. So, as Pierre Bourdieu would say, their dispositions (or "habitus") is socially constructed and produced—they are fish swimming in a sea of consumer desire, reproducing the market logic whereby "desire is displaced onto and condensed within an object."

Perhaps the most evocative example in my experience is my daughters'

desire to buy \$200 "True Religion" jeans. One daughter used her own money to purchase this item; to the second daughter, we said "No." Jeans are jeans are jeans—and, of course, enchantment of objects is arbitrary. Nonetheless, the market subtly constructs these "truths" to entice the consumer to displace "desire from natural objects into substitute objects that appear innocent." But this innocence is hardly without a cost. In Pauline terms, parents make a "living sacrifice" to this world of desire. A world that is deluged by the onslaught of wanting "more"—it is a terrible burden that makes one work to buy what one "needs." As Pahl says, this mimetic desire calls for a cruel sacrifice, one's very soul, and demands in its place well-dressed zombies, willing, as Pahl alludes, to support an empire that dominates in order that broader markets will be served.

Perhaps the most frightening aspect of this cultural sea is that it is "normal." We're informed by some of our friends in the social sciences that market economies work this way. Human beings are cost/benefit maximizers with stable preferences and desires for objects that are our non-moral goods. These theories sanctify this picture with the patina of scientific complacency—why worry, the markets are going up. We can lose a war, while destroying hundreds of thousands of innocent lives, and the markets still rise. What is the problem?

But is there an alternative to this nightmarish world? My sense is that many Americans are awakening to the sense that there is a problem. The answer is not when in doubt, shop. We are realizing that our refusal to see ourselves as a part of the natural ecological order is a problem. Our constant claim to innocence in the War on Terror is not only a problem but a lie. Our preoccupation with buying "shit" is hardly the answer when we are attacked as a country. To say humans are "merely" rational actors and cost/benefit machines is less objective science than a description of a "culture," which at times reduces the human spirit to an "empty suit"—what business people frequently call each other. □

I doubt that Professor Liviu Librescu, the Virginia Tech hero who survived the Shoah and the totalitarian regime of Romania, did a cost/benefit analysis when he blocked the door to his classroom and saved the lives of his students while losing his own. Librescu had a habit of self-sacrifice and care. Bourdieu argues that primary dispositions can only be overcome by alternative dispositions—another habitus—desires, preferences, and feelings molded by social constructions that value, as Pahl argues, the nurture of one's relation to the natural world and that encourage engagement with civil society, which takes responsibility for others and the body politic.

I read this short response to my daughter. She said, "I don't think what I do is wrong. I feel that my love of fashion is a form artistic expression; an art form that is creative. I don't believe in spending my money frivolously." I said, "Well, I just want you to think deeply about these things. I want you to think about your character, spirit, and mind

first before you think about how you look." She agreed and said she would. But just as I write these words, her friend calls her to go the mall. Well, I say to myself, fine. But dread creeps into my mind—the dispositions of consumption are hard to fight. Pahl has it about right. Becoming aware of the sea in which we swim is the beginning of wisdom, a necessary first step. Building a set of alternative dispositions is just a critical—I look forward to how Pahl suggests how this might be done.

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James Wellman
University of Washington

Anonymous

Posted: 07 May 2007 21:39 Post subject: Peter Childs' response to Jon Pahl

Jon Pahl's fascinating essay offers one reading of the mall's place in Western society, and I cannot do justice to its many arguments in a short response. I will thus employ some quotations from the essay to contextualise my own take on this cultural phenomenon.

"[T]he mall offers community" is for me a convincing point, just as is the observation that the mall delivers no community. The mall is a substitute for community but offers garish yet pale imitations of the social institutions it replicates, from the eating-houses to the chapels to the stores. But the mall does not aspire to the sacred. It imitates and sanitises the facets of a collective memory of bygone societies (or a fantasy of exotic ones). Water is not there at the mall to cleanse and purify but to imitate the market fountain. This perversely serves to persuade consumers at an unconscious level that they are outside in the market square; as does the bright light; as does the music.

All of which suggests how the mall imitates not the church but the largely lost village center. Hence, too, the market-center allusions implied by "the carnivalesque atmosphere of the mall": a statement that a Bakhtinian reading would probably endorse, seeing the coming together of everyone at the mall as the implied opportunity for interaction and spontaneity of a kind that might result in subversion. Yet, of course, there is none, as there is no community. The mall offers what it does not give.

The mall also, for me, commits epistemological rather than religious violence inasmuch as it yokes together disparate places and ages, spaces and times, to present the shopper with a buffet of cultural snacks. This parallels the colossal department store aspect of the mall, which brings together so many different goods as an avatar of the main street or the village square.

To me, the clearest place of worship in modern life is the rock venue, with massive stadia substituting for cathedrals. The Who portrayed this

so depressingly in their rock opera [u]Tommy[/u], where drugs, sex, and consumerism are all revealed as temporary forms of solace. But, it is to rock shows we should go to see worship, idolization, iconography, salvation and sermonizing.

The best way to protest against the effects of malls, if we wish to, is to avoid them as much as critique them. Yet, as long as they offer a pleasant experience, a place for people to shelter and shop in comfort, and an opportunity for families and friends to meet and spend time together, shoppers will patronise them, as they did the medieval market square or village center. As for me, to whom malls do not offer a pleasant experience, I'll buy online.

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Peter Childs
Professor of Modern English Literature
University of Gloucestershire

Anonymous

Posted: 07 May 2007 21:47 Post subject: James Farrell's response to Jon Pahl

[b][i]Shopping for a Better World[/i]/[b]

Like his book [i>Shopping Malls and Other Sacred Spaces[/i], Jon Pahl's "The Desire to Acquire" asks us to think twice about the connections between shopping and religion, not just the denominational religion of American churches, but the religion of everyday life. In this essay, he suggests that shopping centers tell (and sell) sacred stories. Shopping centers market stuff, but they also market meaning, and many of those meanings promise us "product salvation," the redemption of our boring, inadequate lives by the purchase of indulgences and other cool things.

I like Pahl's broad definition of religion. According to Pahl, religion isn't just doctrine or belief, but how we ultimately orient ourselves in the world. It's the principle by which we actually lead our lives. If this were a Christian culture, Americans would lead lives of justice and compassion. But because it's what Thomas Merton called "a post-Christian culture," we live lives of comfort, convenience and (too often) callousness. Our expressed values are noble, but our operative values conform to the expectations of the god we call the market.

The word "religion" comes from the Latin verb "religare,"—"to bind together"—and it is meant to bind people to God, people to each other, and people to God's creation. Sadly, American religion doesn't always do this. Over time, our religious stories have been adapted to fit the secular needs of people who worship other gods—including the idols of consumer culture.

Pahl contends that shopping malls are violent spaces, not because

you're likely to be assaulted there, but because you're sure to be morally mugged. Shopping centers deflect our human search for meaning, identity and solidarity into commercial channels, distracting us from the serious ethical challenges of our culture. Malls are designed to produce a conversion experience, using sacred symbols and structures to enhance worship—the worship of superficiality and the self.

But Pahl goes beyond this critique of the mercantile manipulation of individuals to the more substantial institutional effects of malls: they don't just trick us into buying things but into buying into a culture that idolizes things; with costs for the self, for people who can't afford the goods and gods of the marketplace, and for a society that spends its money on private satisfactions instead of public goods. Pahl's emphasis on this structural violence—or what Pope John Paul II called “structural sin”—reminds us that we're responsible not just for our own shopping, but for our shopping culture.

Even though Pahl describes many problematic aspects of the religion of the market, I would add two others as well. Pahl focuses on the way that the religion of the market violates the humanity of human beings. But it's also true that our I-dolatry wreaks violence on all other life on the planet. The shopping center is the showplace of an environmental disaster, hiding the ecological impacts of our consumption behind the beckoning commercial art we encounter there. It uses aesthetics to cover up an ethical catastrophe, in which “the good life” threatens the good life of God's creation. Like God in the Book of Genesis, we shoppers appreciate the creation, except that we say “It is very goods.”

In addition to consumerism's “de-creation” of Creation (the term is Bill McKibben's), there's also the marketing of religion, and the malling of sacred spaces. When a non-denominational mega-church opened near my home—with its theatrical worship space, sports complex, restaurant and coffee bar—one newspaper headlined “The Church That Thinks It's a Mall.” In addition, Americans buy into this conception of religion as commodity—we often talk about what Richard Cimino and Don Lattin call [i]Shopping for Faith[/i].

As early as 1999, [i]American Demographics[/i] reported that “religion and spirituality have become just another product in the broader marketplace of goods and services.” In her 2000 “State of the Consumer Report,” marketer Myra Stark suggests that “spirituality is a growth industry.” Noting that 69 percent of Americans say that “I feel the need to satisfy the spiritual hunger that is in me,” Stark suggests that advertisers and retailers can capitalize on this consciousness. They can still promote “the luxury experience” and “the fun of acquiring in a money culture.” But brand managers “also need to recognize the consumer's increased ethical and spiritual consciousness and to an ethical/spiritual audit of our brands to respond to this new consciousness.”

At its worst, of course, this is blasphemy or idolatry—or both. But as Stark suggests, there are other ethical possibilities as well. In the chapter on “Shopping for a Better World” in *[i]One Nation under Goods[/i], I suggest that shopping is always the art of putting our money where our values are, and it could be a way—but not the only way—of persuading corporations to do business in a way that respects human dignity and the sacramentality of creation.*

As consumers, we can change the market with boycotts and “buycotts,” putting our money on things that enhance the dignity of human beings and the fertility of the earth. But we can also use our power as citizens to modify the market itself, putting limits on the daily desecrations of the malling of America. Both individually and collectively, we can transform the violence of the market by creating institutions that make it easier to be good. Such shopping would be counter-cultural, of course, but then so are most religions.

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James Farrell
St. Olaf College

Anonymous

Posted: 07 May 2007 21:57 Post subject: Vincent Miller's response to Jon Pahl

All of us who have, in the press of holiday shopping, felt viscerally that “mall” must somehow be derived from the verb “maul,” owe Jon Pahl thanks for calling attention to malls’ not-so-secret function as religious sites. Pahl challenges us to take these society-anchoring institutions seriously as competing cathedrals that have their own symbols, beliefs, and initiation rights, where paths to salvation fundamentally at odds with Christianity are offered. His consideration of architecture, symbols, slogans, and rituals provide ample fodder for pastoral reflection on the problem. I have a slightly different analysis of the situation, and I offer the following in dialogue with Jon Pahl’s useful critique.

This issue of pastoral response raises a helpful question. Where does the church stand vis-à-vis the mall? Is it simply a matter of competing spaces and ideologies? It’s easy enough (we hope!) to contrast our communities with the shallow kitsch of storefront wedding chapels, but once we swim through the calculated disorientation, find our way to the mall exit, and drive to our churches, are we really somewhere else? Unfortunately not. The problem lies deeper. The same economic system that produces the mall has culture-wide effects.

This has profound consequences for our efforts to respond. It is not simply a matter of going elsewhere and acting otherwise. Malls are simply the purest symptoms of a broader illness—the pox that manifest an infection of the entire body. Consumer culture covertly sets rules that turn every space into a mall, and all of us into confused and distracted shoppers. Thus, the problem is not merely one of awakening

to the seductions of the mall and going elsewhere, but of recognizing and responding to these deeper dynamisms, and working against them so the Church can function as the vanguard of the Reign of God, rather than a respectable anchor store in the Mall that is America.

The deepest characteristic of the mall is invisible to us because it is everywhere. Malls are centers not for the consumption of things in general, but of commodities. Commodities aren't so much special things, but things seen a certain way—as objects of exchange. They appear to us as if from nowhere, calling out to us to desire them, but telling us nothing of where they came from or how they got there.

Critics since Marx have used religious metaphors to describe commodities: “fetishes,” “virgin born,” “descended from heaven.” Because they come with no stories or meanings of their own, marketers must supply them to pique our interest. This is what brands do. We know nothing of the producers themselves, so we trust in brands. Brands stabilize the flux of endless possible commodities. We can't consider 53 different pairs of jeans, shirts, socks, etc. each time we buy something. Brands simplify things for us.

Of course brands do more than denote quality. They are pitched to (and create) cultural niches. They give meaning to mute commodities by associating them with larger needs and stories—status, sensuality, independence, security, family, community. In a culture built upon the shifting sands of depthless commodities, brands provide systems of relatively stable meaning. The added benefit for retailers is that our desire for meanings is much more sustainable than desire for the basic functions that commodities address. Once we're warm, we don't desire additional clothing, but status needs persist, so a designer shirt or two will do nicely...and why not some shoes to go with them? They're on sale!

The mall is a spatial analogue of the brand. It provides spaces and practices to give meaning to commodities and their consumption. Malls are crystallizations of commodity culture. Thus, it's not so easy to escape their workings. Turning to our “real” bodily needs in the food court (or even at our kitchen table) is no way out. Food is served up instantly, telling us nothing of the undocumented workers slaving on dangerous butcher lines where animals are turned into meat; of the feedlots where cattle stand by the thousands, knee-deep in excrement on land slashed and burned from rainforest. □

And here, behind the veil of the commodity (or the door to the stockroom), we catch a glimpse of the hidden violence of the mall. A moment's reflection on the amount of labor our goods require and their shockingly low price should tip us off. But if Eichmann was protected by a few layers of bureaucracy from the genocidal evil he administered in his own country, how much more effectively do five-thousand-mile commodity chains insulate us from the true cost of our goods.

Systematic ignorance renders even our most extreme avarice banal. This blithe disconnect permeates our moral imaginations on every scale from relationships to warmaking as we confidently and delusionally choose goods, untroubled by the consequences and evils that necessarily accompany them.

Commodity acquisition is not “in itself religiously neutral.” Our consumption of commodities has profound effects upon religion as we bring consumer habits to our traditions and beliefs. Our hundreds of daily acts of consumption teach us to not consider the origins of things. Thus, our imagination focuses on surface appearance, what can be readily evaluated, not on deeper connections and contexts. As a result, we’re trained to assume all things are fungible, extractable, and individualizable. We avow our respect for traditions, but their holistic logic is strange to us. We expect to be able to pick and choose, and can’t see why some combinations just don’t match.

Perhaps this too is a form of “religious violence.” These habits deprive us of the ability to relate to our traditions as coherent worldviews and forms of life, leaving us bereft of guidance about our deepest needs and how to fulfill them. We face all this a time when marketers are systematically confusing us by associating our real needs with commodities that can never fulfill them. We are all confused and frustrated, and terrorists are not the only ones responding with anger.

How to respond? I’ve written much about this elsewhere [1]. Jon Pahl is certainly right that we must recognize the pernicious theologies of the mall, and question more deeply if some defect in our own traditions undergirds them. But, in addition to this, we face the problem that religion is forced to function on the same level of the brand and the mall—on the shifting sands of commodified culture. Thus, our response must go further and engage what consumer culture does to all beliefs.

If commodities teach us the habits of abstraction, part of the answer must lie in developing counter-habits of mindful consumption—seeking to know the origins and full costs of what we consume—not simply as an ethical practice, but as a meditative reformation of our imaginations. Our religious communities must become more intentional about teaching their distinctive methods of textual interpretation, symbolic imagination, ritual, and ethical practice. In a culture that dissolves traditions, religious traditions face with new urgency the need to become intentional. Not simply to preach something different, but to form their members in the skills necessary to live otherwise, and thus to help them create spaces where more authentically Christian forms of life can flourish.

1. See “Stewarding Religious Traditions in Consumer Culture,” the final chapter of my book [i]Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture[/i] (New York: Continuum, 2004).

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Vincent Miller
Georgetown University

Anonymous

Posted: 29 Jun 2007 15:34 Post subject: The Desire to Acquire & "Pulpiteering"

Dear Forum participants:

Had originally posted an unrelated essay on this Forum, and then, realizing the rules of engagement only allow commentary on the writings of the featured columnists, I had attempted to "disguise" the essay as commentary on Pahl's recent feature. I feel guided to "come clean" about this, and have removed some spurious "reportage" on affairs around Livingston, Montana... the bulk of the original essay. Sorry for using the forum in such an underhanded manner, and thanks for bearing with me... anyway, out of the process, some authentic commentary on Pahl's ideas came forth:

Regarding "The Desire to Acquire: Or, Why Shopping Malls are Sites of Religious Violence" - I agree that Mall culture may indeed seem frighteningly troublesome... though, frankly, in this rural Montana town, I occasionally wish we had a large shopping complex, for the lack of legal outlets for satisfaction of distractive craving have left a dangerous void in our town... a void being filled with the scourge of methamphetamine abuse.

Can we see that some unhealthy behavior patterns (or addictions) are more dangerous than the teenage (and adult) fascination with paltry baubles and, I daresay, perhaps even more dangerous than the sophisticated covert manipulation of those "American" desires?

For example, in addition to conventional drug addictions, there appears a compulsion among successful scholars, businessmen, and artists directed toward "expanding personal territory" - regardless of what particular game or playing field we may be involved with. Realizing that we are all hopeless addicts to some form of "game" need not lead to inconsolable despair. Perhaps, with good humor, the best we can do for now involves repeatedly choosing "healthier addictions" over "unhealthier" ones, hoping that the track set up may guide us homeward. □

May I confess from the outset: I am addicted to experience, argumentation, and "my" sense of individuality. Perhaps confronting the bottoming out experience be best left to hopeless drug and alcohol addicts, for Divinity School scholars and Forum-posters may be too satisfied with the quality of the "juice" available to us "pulpiteers."

Hoping this post doesn't sound overtly negative, for my own

fascination involves surrendering the tragicomic nature of our interactions into "something" we may reflect humorously with... sometimes, though, the pain seems just too great, and then the sword that cuts our attachments seems the most compassionate medicine.

I thank that this forum can indulge some disjointed digression, for here in Livingston, as mentioned earlier, we have some pretty stinky fish to fry... and yet Faith helps me smile internally in the face of me and my friends addictive behavior and general "craziness..."

David M Boie

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