

The Desire to Acquire:
Or, Why Shopping Malls are Sites of Religious Violence

Jon Pahl

Professor of the History of Christianity in North America
The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia

The gap that separates sublime beauty from the excremental space of trash (leftover) is gradually narrowing, up to the paradoxical identity of opposites. . . . Is not every element that claims the right to occupy the sacred place of the Thing by definition an excremental object, a piece of trash that can never be 'up to its task'? This identity of opposite determinations (the elusive sublime object and/or excremental trash) [coincides with] the ever-present threat that the one will shift into the other, that the sublime Grail will reveal itself to be nothing but a piece of shit.

--Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*



Big Bil-Bored, Nancy Rubins, 1980 [destroyed, 1998]

The public work of art known as *Big Bil-Bored* existed, briefly, in Cermak Plaza, which is an expanse of asphalt parking lots, fast food restaurants, and shops across Harlem Avenue from North Riverside Park Mall in Chicago's western suburbs. I stumbled across this beautiful monstrosity in 1987, just as I was beginning my research on sacred places in American culture and when I was an earnest graduate student at the Divinity School. That was also a good fifteen years before I published *Shopping Malls and Other Sacred Spaces: Putting God in Place* (Brazos, 2003), in which I briefly profiled and interpreted the sculpture as an artifact. So I can be excused, perhaps, for feeling a little nostalgic about it.

Big Bil-Bored was, basically, a thirty-feet high by thirty-feet wide by three-feet deep triangular wedge of busted home appliances and other commodities that had been discarded by residents of Berwyn, Illinois, only to be collected and welded together and plopped on a pedestal by UCLA sculptor Nancy Rubins.¹ I laughed out loud when I first noticed it. It was sublimely ugly, not only because it contained a ridiculous conglomeration of broken toys and car parts and toasters and hair dryers, but because the pigeons found it a delightful perch, and used it as a drive-by outhouse. The sculpture physically pointed away from the mall, but I took it spiritually to point to the mall's ultimate significance: here is what a trip to this kind of a "sacred place" will get you—stuff that will break or grow obsolete, or that you will eventually grow bored with and throw out anyway. The sculpture was destroyed in 1998, less because of outrage at its aesthetics or politics (although there were those who "got it" and hated it), than because the welds started rusting and things began to fall off.

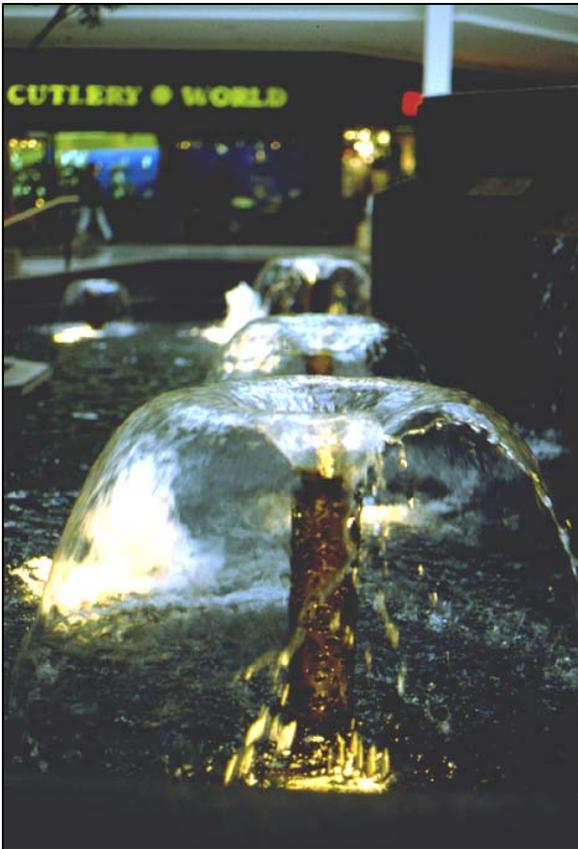
More prosaically speaking, the argument of *Shopping Malls and Other Sacred Spaces*—which emerged gradually from my teaching and through a series of church-basement slide shows after which I always, as a historian, felt slightly guilty—was that shopping malls are cathedrals of commerce in a religion of the market.² This religion, whose history I am happy to blame on the Puritans (contrary to most historians who largely ignore them these days in noble efforts to create more “diverse” narratives of American history, thereby ignoring precisely the religious factors that have led us to our current imperial impasse), has long been the unofficially established public religion in the United States, and increasingly dominates the globe. Malls have achieved their lofty status as temples in an empire of markets, I suggested, primarily because they stimulate the desire to acquire.³ Any visit to a U.S. shopping mall—and I suspect you have made one or two if you are reading this—will confirm that a mall presents a broad expanse of commodities in an architecturally distinctive environment that consumers are invited to imagine, and often willingly embrace, as enchanted.⁴ Such enchantment, as Max Weber intimated, Mircea Eliade understood, and Rene Girard and Hannah Arendt can help us to clarify (with a slight nudge from Freud and a few other friends), is produced when matter is evacuated of its materiality and desire displaced onto and condensed within an object contained within the confines of the mall, or even within the “experience” of the space itself. The mall thus becomes a parody or exaggeration of real presence, a hyper-real compression of the spontaneity and contingency that any real presence suggests, in what is in fact a micro-managed and carefully controlled utopian project. At every mall, in other words, there is no “there, there,” as Gertrude Stein once observed (to her later dismay) about Oakland, California.⁵ More directly, malls *disorient* visitors to trigger

desire, using natural and religious symbols to effect the function of a labyrinth, and then *reorient* pilgrims toward the fulfillment of desire through the acquisition of an enchanted commodity or experience.⁶ To be blunt, then, and as President George W. Bush preached repeatedly in the aftermath of September, 11, 2001, in America today, shopping not only produces pleasure: shopping is supposed to save us.⁷

Disorientation-Reorientation

Shopping malls, like other sacred spaces, use a common formula to produce their enchanting effects.⁸ Malls generally lack windows to the outside world, so once we enter the sacred confines our attention is focused entirely upon our experience of the place. And in the place, mall architecture makes possible experiences of water, light, trees, words, food, music, and bodies that, when combined with the labyrinthine design of the concourses, invariably makes one feel entranced, dazed, disoriented, and, finally, as if one is lacking something. To feel lost is the customary, indeed intended, feeling. I suspect more than one reader has joined me in being unable to locate a vehicle in the parking lot after even a brief visit to a mall, or in finding the mall's maps singularly unhelpful in discovering where in the hell you are in relation to where you want to go (theology intended). Thus vulnerable, a soul can sell itself to the nearest, if not always the lowest, bidder. According to historian of religions Ira G. Zepp, among the first to map this terrain for its religious significance, fully forty percent of visitors to the mall do not intend to purchase anything. Only ten percent get out without lighter purses or wallets.⁹

One of the ways malls work this disorienting magic is through their use of water. Religions around the world of course use waters symbolically to dissolve boundaries and purify devotees, among other purposes. Any mall worth a pilgrimage will also feature



waters of some kind or another: fountains, waterfalls, reflecting pools and so on. The functions of these aquatic installations vary from place to place, and their meanings no doubt vary from pilgrim to pilgrim. Often, even frequent shoppers simply do not notice them. But given the historic functions of water as purifier and solvent, and the importance of water to human existence, it is hardly a stretch to imagine that at least unconsciously, the mall's waters symbolically cleanse

pilgrims of lucre's notorious filthiness and salve consciences so consumers can "go with the flow" of shopping. Water in malls has no utilitarian value—nobody actually bathes in it or drinks it—so it makes sense, at least, to suggest that the mall's gushing fountains, coursing waterfalls, quiet pools, and flowing streams instead serve poetic or political functions that at least approximate the religious, seeking to initiate visitors into an experience that is designed to be "more" than an ordinary shopping trip.¹⁰

Just as malls use water to appear to be something "more" than an ordinary place, so too do malls abound with distinctive uses of light, yet another vital religious symbol. Neon light is used to beckon with its peculiar glow, especially in the signs above the entries to mall attractions. Natural light is also a prominent feature of most mall designs. At the center of many malls, as Zepp notes: "You can usually find . . . a huge skylight or

a colorful and often circular series of lamps shedding such bright light . . . that you know you are in a space set apart (56).”



Along with water and light, the powerful symbols of the tree and vegetation are commonly employed in mall designs. Growing things are honored in almost every religion, and many traditions have stories or myths about trees of life or gardens of human delight. The inclusion of growing things in shopping malls is, again, more than a utilitarian decision by mall developers to help keep interior air clean. For, significantly, none of the trees in the mall ever die. The trees in malls are all evergreens, even if they are deciduous. Life—abundant, even eternal—is the message. The constantly green trees whisper to us just that message, if we only have ears to hear: “don’t count the cost.”

More directly, malls advertise themselves in words and music that promise us unity, devotion, love, happiness and other phenomena that were once the benefits of

traditional religious practices. Every mall is replete with liturgically-appropriate music tailored to the expectations of the “target” market, and Zepp catalogs dozens of advertisement slogans and catch phrases that clarify the point. Thus the mall offers community: “You’re a part of us,” one intimates. And the mall promises us devotion. It’s a place “devoted to eating, shopping, and the pursuit of happiness,” offers another. The words cascade together in a barrage of religious meanings: “You are going to *love* the experience.” “We want to touch your life!” “We can identify with all your needs! (12-3, 67-8).” Really? Of course not. There is no “we” there. But clothed in such promises, and covered up by soothing music, the naked reality of the mall as a place to turn a profit is concealed, and we are enticed to partake in the sacred rites. The mall cloaks its profit-driven purpose in a poetics of promise.

In any event, malls in America today function as sacred places—as disorienting labyrinths through which consumers are reoriented to the desire to acquire. The desire itself is not the problem: without such desire, human beings do not eat, think, love, work, or play. Acquisition in itself is religiously neutral. The desire to acquire can, however, quickly veer into violence, and the record of the shopping mall on this score can at least be interpreted, as we shall suggest shortly, as somewhat less than ideal. Still, many senior citizens walk in mall corridors to exercise because they find malls to be sanctuaries of civility in an otherwise uncivil society. And in comparison to many traditional sacred places, malls do keep better hours. As Zepp concludes: “The shopping mall, open almost every day from 10 A.M. to 9 P.M. . . . is a more inclusive and egalitarian center [than] most churches (80).”

But malls do not, in the end, remain religiously neutral. They are, instead, sites of religious violence in at least three ways. First: malls lie. Every mall exaggerates its significance, and the significance of the products it holds. For instance, malls universally boast high ceilings that are designed to make visitors feel small—in vestigial evocation, perhaps, of Gothic cathedrals. Similarly, as we have already suggested, discourses associated with malls try to invoke transcendence for the place. One particularly overt example that I uncovered was an ad for the department store Macy’s, one of the “anchor stores” in the Mall of America. Its advertisement ran: “Macy’s Means More: More Vision, More Real, More Mix, More New, More You.”¹¹ More you? Now, this may be a fine fantasy, but in fact if you left Macy’s with more of anything, chances are you also left behind some of your cash. The mall exaggerates its own significance, and downplays the crass exchanges at its core. Indeed, the Mall of America’s web page at one point even compared the place to heaven. Apparently in a segment of the Drew Carey Show, heaven was described as “the only place other than the Mall of America that actually lives up to the hype.” The Mall, of course, dutifully recorded this flattering comparison.¹² Needless to say, and as we shall see in more detail shortly, such hype associated with the Mall of America outdistances the place considerably—at least compared, say, to eternal life or the resurrection of the body—neither of which, so far as I know, can actually be purchased at Macy’s. Malls lie.

A second way malls fail as sacred places is in their function as diversions. Malls are disorienting, not only in the temporal experience of the place itself, but in the more serious matter of shaping values and ethical attachments.¹³ Malls advertise themselves as “open” and “civil” places where people can feel secure. But this security comes at a cost.

On two separate occasions when I've taken groups of students to explore a mall, I have almost been arrested. The first was in 1992, when I took a group of undergraduate students to a mall in Northwest Indiana. After about fifteen minutes of surveying pilgrims, asking them questions such as: "So, do you think the mall is a sacred space?" the students and I were stopped by security guards, who told us: "You can't ask people questions in here." More recently, in the summer of 2004, I took a group of sixteen Swedish pastors who were visiting the U.S. on a visit to Philadelphia's Gallery Place Mall. Again, the security guards stopped us on three separate occasions to inquire about our "suspicious" activities—such as taking pictures. People expect a mall to be a public place. Of course, it is not. It is a privately owned enterprise that can establish its own rules about who is in, who is not, and on what terms—and can enforce them with whatever means of control it chooses. One is tacitly conditioned to trust in this security—until one challenges its parameters. Then one realizes that the mall's "safety" is founded on a coercion that is masked by the diversionary strategies of the place and its disorienting appeal. This may, in fact, be a synecdoche for how much of American culture is perceived globally these days.

Finally, though, and we will also explore this point more fully below, the failure of any mall to provide what it promises stems from a deficit of grace. The place is about economic exchange: a form of dutiful, even sacrificial, relationship in which victims are enlisted in banal rituals and processes that bind them to one another in promoting profits for corporate stakeholders. The mall's success depends, in short, upon any visitor coming to feel a fabricated sense that somehow she lacks something that only the mall, as a cathedral of the market, can provide. The mall thus presents a banal version of human

suffering, and a banal version of salvation, that distract visitors from attending to the more enduring causes of suffering, and the more grace-filled sources of salvation, in the world. The mall's promise of salvation (or even pleasure) is, finally, empty, because it originates in a closed-system of production-consumption where the value of objects is rhetorically exaggerated, in which agents participate only to the level of their ability to purchase an object whose utility or function is irrelevant, and in which the political system is guided by no ethical criteria other than the "laws" of the markets themselves. But the appeal of this system is undeniable. It is packaged in such a way that souls continue to climb this stairway to heaven, when it is really an escalator, leading nowhere.

True Shopping? Pilgrimage to the Mall of America

If there is a religion of the market, and malls are sacred places, then the Mall of America outside Minneapolis, Minnesota is surely the holy of holies. In August 2001, with the help of some research funds from the Association of Theological Schools, I embarked upon a pilgrimage to this self-described "Mother of all malls."¹⁴ I took along with me, as my "research associates," my wife, Lisa, and our children, Justin (15), Nathan (13), and Rheanne (8). We arrived on a Monday morning, just as the mall was opening. As I stepped out of our van and into the sunny August day, I gazed at the South entrance of the windowless building in front of me and couldn't help but exclaim: "God it's ugly!" After I snapped a few pictures, we walked into the behemoth and I was immediately stunned by the noisiness of the place. Only one other time in my life have I been so taken aback by unexpected sound—and that was on our honeymoon visit to

Niagara Falls. The roar of the Mall of America, however, was neither the rhythmic crash of water on rock nor the soothing sound of a river rushing by. I heard music, of course, but also machines indoors: a roller coaster rattling over its rails, arcade games beeping, and the muffled thunder of thousands of voices murmuring. It was a cacophony, and my children's level of energy and discourse quickly adjusted to match as we ascended the escalator to a food court for some breakfast. At the food court, we looked out over "Camp Snoopy," the indoor amusement park at the center of the mall. The view we "enjoyed" is hard to describe other than as an assault on the senses. Advertising was ubiquitous. A



gigantic soda spigot and Pepsi cup—probably 20 feet long—was hanging from the rafters just above us. Neon lights glittered and beckoned. Garish colors were everywhere: pinks, purples, oranges, and greens, all just one shade short of fluorescent. And the noise was ceaseless.

Hoping to find an island of tranquility, I eventually directed my research team to the "Chapel of

Love Wedding Chapel." Three days before had been Lisa's and my 19th wedding anniversary, but we had been unable to celebrate because Lisa was working in Pennsylvania while I vacationed in Wisconsin with the kids. Nevertheless, I'd bought my wife a diamond anniversary ring, and now that we were reunited, I thought I might give it to her in the chapel. I eventually did, but let's just say I discovered in the mall's chapel the tackiest excuse for a religious shrine I could imagine. The sanctuary seemed to be just another store. The entrance to it was shared with the Mall's "Bridal Shoppe," where one

could, presumably, rent or purchase everything one would need for the “perfect” wedding. The pillars were plastic. In the chapel, as I knelt down and offered Lisa her ring under a little white plastic gazebo with fake ivy, we created a moment of



tenderness that recognized human frailty and commitment. But the moment was a more-or-less spontaneous creation, in contrast to the spirit of the place, which ordinarily operates according to strict market values: you get what you pay for.

Geographer Jon Goss helps explain, in an excellent study of the Mall of America, that the task for pilgrims is not only to wake up to the world outside of consumption, but also to “awaken to the potential of the dream inside of which we shop, and so to reveal the traces of ideals of collectively meaningful life that are so vulnerable to forgetting (8).” The problem with any mall is that it actively encourages us *to forget any ideals of collectively meaningful life beyond those that the market creates*. The mall creates no enduring community, rests upon no tradition, and promotes no values beyond those determined by corporations to whom consumers are all but anonymous units or marks. We are united by the place only in the hierarchy determined by our ability to consume. It is no coincidence that this hierarchy—where the rich get more and the poor get the door—also dominates American economic life at present.¹⁵ The Mall of America thus accurately replicates a fragmented vision of our collective future, driven by an illusion of

limitless and constantly shifting “loves.” Lasting commitment is contrary to the mall’s spirit. Our brief ceremony at the Chapel of Love felt like an act of civil disobedience. It was surely a trespass.

The rest of our pilgrimage oriented us in the way the mall intends. Namely, we enjoyed a few hours of expensive diversion through thrill seeking and shopping. We spent most of our time at Camp Snoopy, where we dropped some money on daily passes for the various amusements, such as the log-ride, bumper cars, and roller-coaster. At lunch, after about three hours of “fun,” it was eight-year old Rheanne who offered the most succinct and accurate observation about the spirit of the place. As we sat at a table together in the North Food Court, Rheanne simply blurted out: “I want to buy something.” She repeated the phrase several times, nearly melting down emotionally in the process. “I WANT TO BUY SOMETHING!” she bawled. The object didn’t matter; our nice, usually civil and polite young daughter wanted to **BUY SOMETHING! I** naturally concluded she’d been possessed.

Steven L. Shepherd, writing in *The Humanist*, describes this process of possession quite accurately. “The malls,” Shepherd writes, “are temples of our culture, and going to the mall is in truth an initiation rite . . . part of the relentless and powerful seduction of our children by that portion of our culture that accords human beings no more value than the contents of their wallets. It is part of the initiation into a life of wanting that can never be sated, of material desires that will never be satisfied, of slaving to buy and to have, of a life predicated upon unhappiness and discontent.”¹⁶ Rheanne’s exorcism was accomplished simply: we fed her.

Basically, the mall seeks to shift our attention from a basic need to the limitless desires for commodities. Geographer Goss puts a more technical spin on this process, but the point gains in clarity: “The modern megamall is a dreamhouse of the collectivity, where fantasies of authentic life are displaced onto commodities The shopping mall brings together the archetypes of the ‘good world’ with the world of goods, presenting the world of commodities apparently innocent of the commodification of the world (18).” Theologically speaking, in other words, the mall gives us an idol as a replacement for some real presence. The mall clothes God, if one will forgive the metaphor, in some tacky outfits, obscuring the source and goal of authentic life, and the location of goodness, truth, and beauty, in objects that advertisers want to sell to us. It’s not that God can’t be found at the mall. It’s rather that the way god is presented there confuses and befuddles pilgrims about what is truly satisfying in life. As Goss puts it, in a fitting conclusion that reiterates my thesis: at the Mall of America visitors invariably experience “the enchantment of objects (19)”.



A T-shirt that I noticed at one of the Mall of America gift stores can perhaps provide one final example of this point. The shirt was bright red, and contained on its chest three silk-screened slogans. The first, at the top, was a large set of capital letters, spelling “WHASSSSUP?!” The second, smallest slogan, in the center of the shirt, was the corporate logo of the Mall of America—a red, white, and blue

“wave” over a star. The third was another set of smaller capital letters, all in white, that

read: “TRUE SHOPPING.” Now, this is a fascinating piece of clothing that I can’t imagine anyone would actually wear.

The big “WHASSSSUP” on the T-shirt was borrowed from a popular television commercial for beer aired in the late ‘90s, in which a bunch of guys greet one another with the phrase, uttered in guttural and generally drunken tones. The logo, of course, is self-explanatory, although I find significant that it was the smallest of the signs on the souvenir—as if the corporate character of the place was the least significant fact about it. But the bottom slogan is the one that is most interesting to me: “TRUE SHOPPING.” What does this mean? The slogan is an attempt, of course, to provide an “answer” to the question posed at the top of the t-shirt, and to describe what supposedly goes on at the Mall of America.

Such a description is, simply, nonsense. As Goss concludes, the big lie of the mall is that “images of the good life . . . live in goods (4).” As it hangs there, headless on a rack, there is rather obviously no “life” in this t-shirt. Less obviously, but more importantly, we need to ask: how would one know whether shopping is really true, or not—and what does such an assertion do to our sensibility that there just might be a difference between truth and falsehood, the good and goods, the beautiful and the crass? Just as goods do not live, shopping is not a proposition that can be determined to be either true or false. Shopping is an economic exchange. This is obviously the case *unless a merchant tries to make it something more, and unless a consumer buys such a truth*. Such an exchange would provide ironic confirmation of Bunyan’s depiction of Vanity Fair, where Pilgrim’s tempters proclaim: “We buy the Truth.” In the case of this t-shirt, that exchange would cost a pilgrim \$14.95. Now, I guess that’s not a bad price for “truth,”

although at the Swarthmore Goodwill I buy far more clever and attractive t-shirts for \$2.95 that I would not, furthermore, be embarrassed to wear in public. In any event, when merchants and consumers collude to imagine that shopping might be “true,” both have succumbed to a falsehood, to which the T-shirt’s other message is most appropriate: “WHASSSSUP” with that? The t-shirt offers an unwitting testimony to the contradictions of the place, and the headless absence at its core.

All in all, then, there is no “true shopping” going on at the mall. There are befuddled pilgrims, bewildered by (post)modernity, and so lacking in orient from enduring traditions or practices (even democratic ones) that we imagine we might inhabit a fantasy world of readily available commodities and amusements upon which limits will never impede. It was my daughter, again, who put it well, near the beginning of our visit to the Mall of America: “I want to live here,” she said. This is an understandable fantasy coming from an eight-year old. It’s a problem for grown-ups, who ought to be more critical about such utopias—given what we have come to know about the fragile status of places and environments over the past few decades. At the same time, critique will never be enough. For whenever pilgrims are tempted to sate their desire to acquire by “buying something,” and who are convinced that they are worthless if they can’t, critique will only make them feel even more worthless. That this is the case for so many of the world’s inhabitants, in comparison to the exaggerated abundance to which we might attach ourselves in the Mall of *America*, is exactly the problem. And the remedy is basically the one we offered my daughter: it’s about food, about real bodies, and about what kinds of “places” bring bodies fulfillment—or at least a modicum of peace. Yet the critique is also crucial, because the tendency to hoard and withhold—to always want more and more, is

also real. One simple fact can clinch the witness we might offer against this corporate con-job: there is no “Chapel of Death” in the Mall of America. Merchants may indeed want you to “shop ‘till you drop,” but if you do really drop, you can be sure you’ll be transported elsewhere. That’s the only truth about the Mall of America as a pilgrimage site you truly need to know.

We completed our pilgrimage with a complete circumambulation of the space, and walked out into the sunshine after only five hours. It felt to me like a liberation. We’d spent a little over a hundred dollars. As far as the rituals of affliction and sacrifices often associated with pilgrimages go, this was pretty easy. The sacrifices I was asked to make were, in fact, banal—and it is precisely the mall’s banality as a sacred place that makes it not only an amusingly ironic kind of postmodern pilgrimage site, but a rival to enduring traditions, including those of secular democracy, to be overlooked with peril. People shrivel when we “buy the truth” that the good lives in goods. For the good—like the true, the beautiful, and the divine—finds its home in human interaction with the natural world and civil society, where we take responsibility for our images and practices, not to mention our communities, institutions, and the Earth. Or, as Genesis 1:28 puts it, the image of the only living good worth worshipping is found in the male and female—that collection of water, energy, and other earthy-stuff that takes on flesh in a unique, discrete, located-in-time-and place, symbol-making, contingent, unpredictable, active, fragile, and really-present body.¹⁷

The Desire to Acquire and the Violence of Banality

To turn, at last, to an explicitly Girardian interpretation of the mall, we can conclude that manifestations of the desire to acquire such as are fostered at the mall both

direct attention *away* from the source and objects of some desires (e.g., food, shelter, community, intimacy, commitment, and so forth), and direct attention toward “the sacred,” that is, toward substitute objects which can be multiplied and consumed, if not “scapegoated” and “sacrificed,” in Girard’s favorite terms for the process.¹⁸ The mall is thus a classical sacred space, in that it exists to *create* and *multiply* desires, but then to compress those desires into “suitable” sacred paths, or toward suitable scapegoats.¹⁹ Something must be negated, consumed, expunged, excreted, or sacrificed to keep the escalating desire from producing social chaos. But because the mall is not, ordinarily, recognized as a sacred place (it is “just” a mall), the religious violence through which desire is torn from its “natural” objects and displaced onto a substitute appears to be innocent of or even to transcend the processes of human creation. Such a substitution appears merely “normal,” or part of a “free” market in which all are united in the rituals of shopping. In shopping, then, one is tempted to imagine that one can possess the sacred. The mall “works” as a sacred place because it redirects desire away from the most basic objects of need (over which competition could escalate endlessly), and toward artificial *constructs* which are malleable and expendable. That this process can be repeated, controlled, and mutated into manifold forms and niche markets is of course the dynamic on which late capitalism depends.²⁰

Presuming to possess the sacred is, however, a rather risky enterprise. Long ago, Saint Augustine recognized this process at work. “The only things which evil people count as evil are those which do *not* make people evil;” he contended, “and they are not ashamed that when surrounded by the ‘good things’ which they approve, they *themselves* are evil, who approve those ‘goods’; and they are more disgusted by a bad house than by

a bad life, as if a human's highest good was to have all one's possessions good—except one's self.”²¹ The desire to acquire, in other words, can lead the self to lose itself—no small accomplishment—as well as to violate the other. When one imitates the banal desires of another, whether generated by advertising or otherwise, one's own desires wither, get lost, or are distorted. In such circumstances, even the most inhumane behaviors become possible, perhaps even “normal” or “necessary,” no matter how coercive they might be. As Girard has argued, under the sway of mimetic desire, as in the thoughtless behavior of a mob, even genocide is possible. Most chilling of all, of course, is when this process is given the sanction of religious discourses and practices, when myths and rituals justify as “normal,” virtuous, or at least innocent and justified, the killing.

Such a process, as Hannah Arendt suggested, has occurred in history before. As is well-known, in her classic, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Viking, 1963), Arendt contended (contrary to popular desire and expectation) that

The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and of our moral standards of judgment, this normality was [and is] much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together, for it implied [implies] . . . that this new type of criminal . . . commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong (253).

In careful, if controversial, analysis, Arendt showed how Eichmann was enlisted as an architect of the Final Solution through carefully controlled language rules by which “duty” was exaggerated, through euphemisms that served to mask violence and distract attention from human suffering, and through disorienting diversionary practices that drew victims into support of their own victimage.

Arendt's point, and here she and Girard are in complete agreement, was that the fall into violence in Nazi Germany was contagious even for the victims—even as it was also utterly and completely preventable. She explains: “Evil in the Third Reich had lost the quality by which most people recognize it—the quality of temptation (134).” Had people recognized that they had a choice to make (and a small number continued to make good ones throughout the war), they might have paused before joining in the “ubiquitous complicity” with which the world let the Shoah happen. Eichmann put it well, describing his own entry in the Nazi party: “[I was] swallowed up . . . against all expectations and without previous decision. It happened so quickly and suddenly (29).” Violence is contagious; the result, primarily, of the mimetic desires that keep one from thinking, acting, and being with integrity.²² In imagining that they could possess the sacred, as architects of the utopian project of the Third Reich surely did, they wound up possessed themselves. Lies became truth, illusions became reality, and murder became success. This was and is the violence of banality: the fact that one gets “swallowed up” in temptation when one fails to recognize it as such.

In my current research, tentatively entitled *An Empire of Sacrifice: The Religious Origins of American Violence*, I explore some of these constructs in American cultural history—ways in which domination in America has, repeatedly, been rendered as innocent. My argument is that there are ostensibly secular processes that have carried a religious patina of purity, or at least of inscrutability, in ways that have left a trajectory of destruction and bloodshed that can be traced all the way back to those first Englishmen who settled in Boston, and who brought with them smallpox, “free” markets, and the hangman's noose. The longer it takes me to write this book (and I have been at it for

about ten years now), the more I also realize how completely these trajectories extend quite directly to current events in Bush's Baghdad. In short, an American empire of sacrifice has been built not only through devotion to sacred places like malls, Walt Disney World, and the suburban home; but also through even more durable yet malleable constructs of age, race, and gender which render some citizens suitable for "sacrifice." More accurately, I will be arguing that systems of compression and displacement in American history, embedded especially in discourses and practices that cut across sectors of society in peculiar hybrids, function *religiously* as the cultural equivalent of biological systems of elimination to exclude some citizens from full participation in civil society or in the exercise of collective power based upon consent.²³

But this historical process of innocent domination, evident at the mall and with roots among the Puritans, is increasingly open to scrutiny given global realities. Put succinctly: malls have become targets of terrorist attacks, and the religion of the market is being recognized as the idolatrous generator of religious violence that it is. In Israel, Bali, and elsewhere, the contagion of religious violence fostered through marketed desire has produced repeated incidents of backlash through acts that Mark Juergensmeyer has dubbed "performative violence."²⁴ Terrorists, as Juergensmeyer and Scott Appleby have both helped to clarify, tend to be disgruntled participants in modernity who feel dishonored or marginalized.²⁵ Because they do not, fortunately, have access to established militaries, terrorists target symbolic centers of "innocent" commerce (including individuals) for attack. Such violence, as Bruce Lincoln has shown, is evidently "religious." But religious violence is manifest not only in dramatic explosions of holy terror. It is also manifest in the violence of banality when the holy simply bores

us to death, in the vanishing line between the sublime and the excremental. There is something demonstrably “religious,” in short, about what goes on at malls, and across consumer cultures, against which terrorists have reacted. This is not to justify terrorism. It is to try to understand the context in which an act of blowing oneself up at a mall OR an act of “worshiping” at a mall can make sense to another human being.

And yet, understanding that context is impeded by the disconcerting recognition that if malls *are* in some sense sacred places, then there is something more important than simply uttering a commitment to separate “church” and “state” to consider when it comes to protecting the free exercise of religions, and when it comes to preventing political agents from falling prey to delusions of salvific significance. More bluntly: the failure of the U.S. government and legal systems effectively to separate religion from politics in practice, as opposed to in theory, stems from a way of defining “religion” that privileges the history and sociology of institutions, as opposed to the history of discourses and practices.²⁶ This equation of institutions with “religion,” with religion thereby encapsulated in tidy systems of Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, and so forth, obscures how constructions of authority and power, and warrants for the use of force, interact *across* sectors of societies in stunning hybrids like the religion of the market—or civil religions—whose energies to mobilize, displace, and destroy are as potent as any found in “traditional” religions.²⁷ Violence, in other words, continues to be one of religion’s specialties—not accidentally or epiphenomenally, but woven into the very fabric not only of traditional religions, but even more of civil or cultural religions that have at their disposal militaries and marketing budgets that dwarf anything that any one stream of traditional religion could muster.

It is, then, more precisely to realize and respect, on both sides, the distinctive modes of religious and political association that will get us beyond our current imperial impasse. Religions exist, we might suggest, as the cultural equivalent of biological systems of elimination, to compress and displace (insofar as possible) violence. They fail to do so when religious agents have any illusions of using the weapons of states, as opposed to what we might call weapons of the spirit, to coerce conformity, whether overtly or covertly, through official or merely sanctioned discourses and practices.²⁸ And politicians, for their part, fail to protect the integrity of states when they depend on religious discourses or practices to prop up their failures to include as fully as possible in the construction (and benefits) of civil society the range of individuals, communities, and institutions represented in any given collective.

What makes the mall so perilous as a sacred space, then, is that precisely on the level of spirit, in relation to matters of persuasion, motive, discourse, and behavior, malls do their most violent work. And yet I suspect that most people, given the chance, can recognize that our lives are richer—in all senses, when we not only “sacrifice” for this or that or consume goods offered to us by the market (even those of the mall, from time to time), but when we participate in taking responsibility for communities and institutions that endure beyond the four score and ten years allotted to the individual life span. That we can do so through a religion of “America,” or a religion of the market, goes without saying. Yet we must first recognize how these constructs operate religiously, before we can begin to understand whether they are operating well or poorly.

Now, for a historian like me to attempt to articulate exactly what forms these communities and institutions ought to take, of course, is rendered suspect, if not taboo, by

the so-called intellectual “rigor” conventionally demanded of scholars who are still expected, by and large, to separate ourselves into either descriptive or normative disciplines, which when it comes to religion, means “secular” or “sacred” vocations or departments. Such “rigor,” which manages to prevent consideration of how constructions of the sacred and the secular depend upon one another in the production of power, and to leave unquestioned the sacred sources of secular domination, in fact often stems from profound timidity, if not bad faith. Until we develop methods for the study of religion that overcome the usual fear of crossing the secular-sacred and descriptive-normative divides, and that comprehend the slipperiness of religious constructions across sectors of societies, we will continue to perpetuate huge zones of incomprehension about how religions produce violence not only in episodic spasms of terrorist reaction, but through policies and practices that systematically produce damage to human beings and natural environments.²⁹ That these zones of unarticulated religious violence just happen to allow scholars at work in the U.S. to remain comfortable while living and working in an empire—and shopping at malls, is no coincidence.

To turn, then, one last time to Augustine and his rendering of the pertinent passage from I Timothy 6:6-10: “Those who wish to become rich fall into temptation and into a snare, and into many foolish and harmful desires, which plunge men into death and destruction. For acquisitiveness is the root of all evils; and those who have this as their aim have strayed away from the faith and have entangled themselves in many sorrows (Book I, Chapter 10, p. 17).” The problem is not that any object at the mall, a mall itself, or even the desire to acquire is inherently “evil.” The problem is that at the mall—and in the religion of the market more generally, human beings settle for the sacrifice of some of

our cash in exchange for the “salvation” of possessing an enchanted commodity. This is a problem because, as Albert Schweitzer perceived, so much of life cries out for reverence, and so many people really suffer in a way that possession of an enchanted commodity cannot possibly satisfy. Indeed, “the real tragedy of life,” asserts a quotation often attributed to him, “is what dies inside a person while still living.”

Caught up in contagious processes of worship at the mall, or at Walt Disney World, or in our own comfortable suburban homes with their immaculate lawns and stainless-steel kitchens, many citizens of the United States today resemble nothing more vividly than the mall-bound characters in the film “Dawn of the Dead,” where it is sometimes hard to tell the difference between the mall’s mannequins, the real humans, and the walking dead.³⁰ Possessed by the abundance of our possessions, we might find hope that the parody of real presence that is the mall has become itself an object suitable for parody in the cinematic and other arts. Unfortunately, *policies* that would indicate an American awakening to the futility of mimetic desire and its violence, whether as State- or church-sponsored sacrifices, await a more enlightened and—dare we even say, more Christian—or Buddhist, or Muslim, or Hindu, or Jewish, culture. In light of such a culture, in which religious truth would be recognized as something beyond a commodity and instead as the collective responsibility of the people to promote peace through a nonviolent vision of fulfillment in keeping with Torah, or Sharia, or the Four Noble Truths, or Dharma, or the Kingdom of God; the policies and practices of current rulers that call for “sacrifice,” and the practices of pilgrims to the Mall of America, will be evident as little more than the sorrowful sounding of gongs and clanging of cymbals, if not the worship of pieces of shit, that they are.

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¹A brief description of the origin and significance of the sculpture can be found in Thomas J. Schlereth, “The City as Artifact,” in *The Encyclopedia of Chicago History*, available at: <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/288.html> (accessed 8 January 2007).

² The language of the “religion of the market” is drawn from David R. Loy, “The Religion of the Market,” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65 (Summer, 1997): 275-290, and is available online courtesy of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, at: <http://www.bpf.org/tsangha/loy-market.html> (accessed 8 January 2007).

³ See here my forthcoming essay, “Founding an Empire of Sacrifice: The Quaker Martyrs of Puritan Boston, 1659-1661,” in *Belief and Bloodshed: Religion and Violence across Time and Tradition*, ed. James K. Wellmann, Jr. (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 97-116. For an analysis of political culture that accords well with my argument here, see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). Within the next year, you should be able to check out “It’s a Mall World,” a full-length documentary film on the global spread of shopping malls. The film is being directed by Helene Klodawsky and produced by Ina Fichman and Luc Martin-Gousset for Instinct Films and the CBC, among others. For a brief promo, go to <http://www.instinctfilms.ca/home.html>, click on “Productions,” then “Present,” then “It’s a Mall World.”

⁴See, for this line of inquiry, John Fiske, “Shopping for Pleasure: Malls, Power, and Resistance,” where shopping at the mall becomes an act of political resistance by women against the constraints of both patriarchy and wage-labor. There are, to be sure, pleasures aplenty to be experienced at the mall in shopping’s manifold choices, but every choice is presented TO a consumer, not produced by her, thereby rendering her passive and contained within the confines of the place and its system of production and exchange. So, for instance, when Fiske suggests that for working class women, “riding the escalators...becomes a concrete metaphor for social mobility,” cultural analysis has descended to the level of sheer fantasy. I have no desire to replicate Christian anti-pleasure polemics that perpetuate patriarchy and abuse by denying the subjectivity of women, but I suspect that an affirmation of feminist agency is hardly enough to subvert the profit motive that drives mall presentation and construction. Practices may offer limited freedom within hegemonic structures, but the structures endure and reap their alienating effects on consciousness in any event [in *The Consumer Society Reader*, ed. Juliet B. Schor and Douglas B. Holt (New York: New Press, 2000): 306-228. The excerpt is from Fiske’s fuller work, *Reading the Popular* (London: Routledge, 1989)].

⁵ Stein’s comment, made in an interview upon her return to the Oakland of her childhood, was meant to indicate that the places of her childhood no longer existed. But the statement has taken on a life of its own to point to the vacuity-in-the-midst-of-plenty of some sub/urban spaces in American culture. See Gertrude Stein, *Everybody’s Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1937), 289.

⁶ The language of orient draws on Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, tr. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1958), as modified by Jonathan Z. Smith, *To*

Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), and David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal, *American Sacred Space* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). I discuss the difficulties in defining a “sacred place,” and offer my own conclusion, in Chapter Two of *Shopping Malls and Other Sacred Spaces*.

⁷ In a speech in Atlanta on November 8, 2001, Bush took pride in the fact that in America “people are going about their daily lives, working and shopping and playing, worshipping at churches and synagogues and mosques, going to movies and baseball games.” This is, to be sure, a selective list—and Bush also contrasted the America “he knew” with an image of Americans as “shallow, materialist consumers.” But the gist of his message—repeated in many variations, was that “getting on with daily lives” included “working and shopping and playing,” with a smattering of traditional religion thrown in to justify the rest. See the helpful website, “September 11 News,” for similar pronouncements. The specific quote comes from <http://www.september11news.com/PresidentBushAtlanta.htm> (accessed 4 January 2007).

⁸ The language of the “sacred” does not, of course, refer to a reified essence, but a product of the human imagination. See for the classic statement, Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Enquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine...*, tr. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1926).

⁹ For this claim see Ira G. Zepp, *The New Religious Image of Urban America: The Shopping Mall as Ceremonial Center* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1986), 15.

¹⁰ I argue that sacred places function on at least three levels: poetic, political, and personal. The three correspond, roughly, to Aristotle’s categories of poetics, politics, and rhetoric. For a theological examination of some key water symbolism, see Catherine Keller, “No More Sea: The Lost Chaos of the Eschaton,” and Barbara R. Rossing, “River of Life in God’s New Jerusalem: An Eschatological Vision for Earth’s Future,” in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 183-198, 205-224.

¹¹ *Mall of America; A Guide to Fashion, Food, and Fun*. Mall Newspaper/Advertising Hand-out, August 2-August 15, 2001, 8.

¹² This claim appeared on the “Mall of America—History,” segment of the web page, at http://www.mallofamerica.com/about_the_mall/moa_history.aspx (accessed 10 June 2005). The link has since been changed or aborted.

¹³ For the kind of values I envision, see Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

¹⁴ Jon Goss, “Once-upon-a-Time in the Commodity World: An Unofficial Guide to the Mall of America,” *The Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 89 (March 1999): 3, cites this phrase from the Mall of America web-page, at www.mallofamerica.com.

¹⁵ See, for instance, the careful analysis of the spreading gap between rich and poor by Kevin Philips, *Wealth and Democracy: A Political History of the American Rich* (NY: Broadway Books, 2002).

¹⁶ Steven L. Shepherd, “Mall Culture,” in *The Humanist* 58 (Nov/Dec 1998): 41.

¹⁷ See Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (NY: Oxford, 1985), and also the trenchant analysis of Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). I explore the salience and contours of these “sacred places,” namely “living waters,” “the light of the world,” “one body,” and other biblical metaphors for divine presence, in the second half of *Shopping Malls and Other Sacred Spaces*.

¹⁸ I have a profound appreciation for Girard, but also a strong critique that I develop in my current research. See especially, among his many works, *Violence and the Sacred*, tr. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore/London:

Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977). The best introduction to Girard's work, which also includes a good bibliography, is *The Girard Reader*, ed. James M. Williams (NY: Crossroad, 1996). On the one hand, I admire greatly Girard's analytical insights, as I admire Girard himself as a gentle and intelligent Christian. On the other hand, I disagree with some of the implications drawn from Girard's work, especially his reductive emphasis on sacrifice, and his assertion of Christian uniqueness and superiority to other traditions on the matter of violence. Sacrifice is undoubtedly crucial to religions, but dependent upon broader processes of compression and displacement, and the conclusion of Christian exceptionalism is empirically unwarranted and theoretically unnecessary. Such a conclusion actually scapegoats other religious traditions, which ironically contradicts Girard's theory itself. Christian distinctiveness does not equate to superiority.

¹⁹Here, Jonathan Z. Smith's critique of Eliade is crucial. Sacred places are typically contested places: they "take" place, as Smith puts it, under the sway of discernible interests. See note 6.

²⁰ See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

²¹ *The City of God*, Book III, Chapter 1, tr. Henry Bettenson (NY: Pilgrim, 1972), 89.

²²See Stephen L. Carter, *Integrity* (NY: Basic Books, 1996).

²³On the distinction between force and consensual power, see Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (NY: Harvest Books, 1969), 56. See also, the helpful outline of these ideals as they might be put into practice as articulated by Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*.

²⁴See *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 3rd ed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 124. That malls and markets are increasingly backed by U.S. military might for reasons that are apparently unconscious, or at least inarticulate or incoherent, among recent Administrations goes without saying.

²⁵See most notably R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, CO: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

²⁶See here my article, "Nationalist Religious Broadcasting: The Case of the 2004 U.S. Presidential Nominating Conventions," in *Political Theology*, 8 (January 2007): 33-61.

²⁷See here the recent work of Harry S. Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2006), who helpfully directs historians' attention to the "civil religion" as a source of "sacrifice." If the nation (or empire) is the macro-institution that benefits from hybrid religious constructions, the family (and sexuality more generally) is the micro-institution where these new forms of religion tend to get applied. See, for instance, the recent and largely successful efforts to regulate human sexuality by defining "marriage" in heterosexual terms. Such efforts originate, as Ann Pellegrini and Janet Jakobsen have shown, in constructions with discernibly religious roots, but have mutated into distinctive hybrids that cut across institutions, denominations, and cultures. See *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

²⁸ I explore these prospects in *An Empire of Sacrifice*. In the Introduction, I rethink conventional definitions of "violence," "religion," and their relation in American history in a critique and reconstruction of leading theorists, including Girard, Appleby, Regina Schwartz, and Lincoln, among others. In the Epilogue, I trace the history of religions in the twentieth-century not primarily as the history of either secularism or fundamentalism, but rather the emergence of normative religious nonviolence, in what I call "a coming religious peace."

²⁹This is the salient point (unfortunately overgeneralized and largely misapplied) of Russell McCutcheon's various critiques of the "discipline" of religious studies. See most notably *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press,

1997).

³⁰The original was released in 1978; a remake in 2004 reiterated the point that consumption can consume consumers. See the trailers and release information for both films via the Internet Movie Database, at <http://us.imdb.com/title/tt0077402/> and <http://us.imdb.com/title/tt0363547/>, respectively (accessed 7 January 2007).