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BOOK PROFILE: *SHOPPING MALLS
AND OTHER SACRED SPACES*

A profile of *Shopping Malls and Other Sacred Spaces: Putting God in Place* by Jon Pahl. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2003. 288 pp. \$19.95 (paper).

Shopping Malls and Other Sacred Places joins a library of other recent titles on “theology of place,” or post-modern definitions of place and space. Avoiding the typical debate on whether sacredness or relevance with space is to be understood as ‘thickness,’ (a place with a ‘thick’ layering of meanings, as in Lucy Lippard’s *The Lure of the Local*), or ‘thinness,’ (a physical space where the Transcendent’s transcendence appears to the subject to be immanent, as in Robert M. Hamma’s *Landscapes of the Soul*), Pahl instead asks, “What clothing does God wear in our American culture?”

In answering, Pahl analyzes the quasi-religious nature of shopping malls, Walt Disney World (including the Epcot Center) and suburban culture. One especially insightful description is Pahl’s description of the Haunted Mansion attraction at Florida’s Walt Disney World. There, the passive consumer comes into contact with ghosts and other spooky things: a cold and harsh statement of the next life. After being subjected to some sinister images, the ride ends in a tunnel suggesting that following a ‘close call’ with consumers’ mortality, the ride provides them an escape—albeit temporary—from the horrors of Disney death. Pahl suggests that the ride’s end is indicative of a “second birth;” that is to say, the ride represents a literal glimpse into the terrors of the next life, and once educated and escaped from the Haunted Mansion, one is free once again to taste the exotic pleasures of The Magic Kingdom. (87)

Pahl suggests that Christian theology would be better suited to move away from centers of commerce and possession-obsessed mentalities to reclaim images of water, rocks, light, and trees as more modest clothing of the Divine in American culture. Since we all live in the human body and many of us live in cities, these

realities and images also provide 'clothing' for Christians to find God a little closer to home than Minneapolis' Mall of America.

A professor at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Pahl's prose is extraordinarily easy to read and may have been written for seminary students or Christian laypersons in church communities. Although he relies heavily upon the thought of Sydney Mead and René Girard, theory is not compromised in writing style for his audience. Much of this book's charm is in the overwhelming number of personal stories and pictures from his family photo album of his own struggle with these issues in his experience of responsibly bringing up children and being a good teacher and pastor.

In the end, Pahl is first making an argument for a return to simplicity in American culture, insofar as American culture is rooted in Christian theology. Perhaps the most interesting story he tells is of his former pet dog, named "Heidegger" after the philosopher (since "Heidegger" ends with grr). Pahl writes:

God can be found in playful moments with a puppy as well as in serious philosophy. In fact, clothing God in play with a dog might come a whole lot closer to the truth about God than clothing God, as the early Heidegger (the philosopher) tried, as '*Da-sein*' or 'Being-There.' Or maybe they mean the same thing.

When one searches for fulfillment at Disney World, that fulfillment cannot be a sustained or sustaining force to individuals outside of immediate gratification; why else do people keep flocking back to Disney World? Most believers, for example, only make pilgrimage to Mecca once, whereas Disney World baits and expects repeat business. Simplicity may have become so immanent that its otherness shuts it off to many of us. We do forget, Pahl writes, that "[d]ogs are pretty good at just being-there." (223)

More prevalent than the argument for simplicity is Pahl's presentation of a working methodology for future discourse on God and space or place. First, he argues for the "poetics of availability," claiming that places and spaces operate as a language for the Divine and explaining how a Godhead might be understood by those participating in the place.

Second, Pahl suggests that theologians address the "politics of necessity" for a return to a simpler lifestyle, which places human needs over commercial coveting.

Third, the “rhetoric of participation” addresses the individual human element to the question of place. (260-261) In other words, a vocabulary must be developed by cultural critics, theologians, and pastors to address the inauthenticities that shopping malls, Disney World, and suburban living each present to individuals in North American Culture.

Even if the conclusions are not the same—this treatment is very Lutheran and in some ways reflects that community’s dogmatism—Pahl has begun a conversation which deserves not to end with the unfortunate end of his book (commending the line “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” to those who disagree with his claims [262]). Many conversations could continue on “clothing” God in music, or in *agape* love, in erotic love, or even in theology. The possibilities are, as Pahl would say concerning God, endless.

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