



Pilgrimage to the Mall of America

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If a pilgrim is half tourist, a tourist is half pilgrim.

—Victor and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Cultures*

In August 2001, with the help of some research funds from the Association of Theological Schools, I embarked upon a pilgrimage to the self-described “mother of all malls,” the Mall of America outside of Minneapolis, Minnesota.¹ I took along with me, as my research associates, my wife, Lisa, and our children—Justin (15), Nathan (13), and Rheanne (8).

The mall trip was inspired by my long-standing interest in American sacred places and was intended to complete the research for the chapter on malls in my forthcoming book, *Shopping Malls and Sacred Spaces: Clothing God in Place* (Brazos Press). I have, over the years, led a number of pilgrimages to local malls, primarily with classes of college undergraduates or church youth groups. From this research and from my reading I had an idea of what to expect about the behemoth in Bloomington.

¹See 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.

The Mall of America contains a “Chapel of Love” for weddings but no “Chapel of Death” for funerals. Might this fact represent both its attractive promise and its ultimate failure?

TYPICAL PATTERNS

Mall architects have tended to follow some common patterns, in efforts to design buildings that will function as cathedrals for the religion of the market.² For instance, malls often use water—in the form of fountains or reflecting pools—to symbolically “wash” consumers of any filth that the lucre associated with the place might suggest.³ And indeed, the Mall of America contains its own aquatic zoo, “Underwater Adventures,” featuring over 3,000 living sea creatures in a huge aquarium. Malls also often feature light that symbolically “energizes” visitors, through the use of skylights and various other ingenious forms of illumination. In this regard, too, the Mall of America does not disappoint. It contains a virtual light show, between the huge skylight over “Camp Snoopy,” the indoor amusement park that is the mall’s most famous feature, and the millions of neon and incandescent lamps throughout the place. Mall architects also tend to reinforce a theme of “abundant life” through the strategic use of trees and plants. Camp Snoopy alone has over 30,000 of them, although of course all of the trees in the mall are evergreen, even if they are deciduous. Nothing dead endures long in a mall. And, finally, malls typically promote visions of an ideal human body—always young, always slim, and always happy. Nothing I saw at the Mall of America contradicted these traditional ways in which malls across the United States (and, increasingly, around the globe) draw pilgrims to participate in the most sacred rite of the religion of the market, shopping.

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But I did find some surprises on this particular pilgrimage, best told through a narrative of the day’s experiences. After a fitful night’s sleep in a local hotel, morning broke, and by 9:30 the research team piled into the van for the short drive to the holy place. Predictably, we got lost on the expressway system, but eventually we found our way onto Harmon Killebrew Drive, from which we turned into the mall’s south parking lot. I expressed delight at finding a parking place almost directly in front of the main entrance to the huge, brown, windowless building. It was a Monday, and the mall was just opening. As I stepped out into the sunny August morning, I could not help but exclaim, “God, it’s ugly,” as I snapped a few pictures. Most malls contain their visitors in a windowless environment that looks like a bomb shelter from the outside. Once inside, visitors enter a disorienting labyrinth, since mall designers universally eschew the grid pattern that city planners tended to

²See David R. Loy, “The Religion of the Market,” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65 (1997) 275-290.

³I explore each theme in this paragraph in fuller detail in my book. For a general history and analysis of malls, see William Severini Kowinski, *The Malling of America: An Inside Look at America’s Consumer Paradise* (New York: William Morrow, 1985).

employ. Without this grid, pilgrims tend to wander—thus rendering themselves susceptible to an impulse purchase. Fully forty percent of visitors to a mall do not intend to purchase anything. Only ten percent manage to resist temptation.⁴

I had acquired a map of the mall interior the night before at the hotel registration desk (hotels in the area are well prepared for pilgrims). From careful study of this map, which is anything but clear, I had plotted what I thought would be a good strategy for a short (and inexpensive) visit. We had eaten only the hotel's meager continental breakfast, so our first destination was to be a food court. As I interpreted the map, this meant we would have to ascend two stories. On the way, I noticed that my associates seemed susceptible to the temptation to wander—especially as we passed the “Lego Imagination Center.” I, however, was ruthless in my self-appointed role as pilgrimage director. We purchased nothing.

THE FAMILY THAT EATS TOGETHER...

Now clearly on a mission, we ascended the two long escalators to the South Food Court. “Where are we going?” our son Nathan complained. “I want to go to Camp Snoopy!” cried our daughter Rheanne. I was stunned—not only by the energy with which my children had suddenly been possessed, but also 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 thunder of water on rock nor the soothing sound of a river rushing by. I heard music, of course, of the piped-in kind, but also machines indoors. A roller coaster rattled over its rails. Arcade games beeped weirdly. And I heard 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. We found the food court at last, and I watched as my family scattered to various vendors to order whatever “convenience foods” happened to suit our moods. We even began to eat at separate tables, although eventually I gathered us all together around a table near the balcony railing that looked out over Camp Snoopy.

The view we “enjoyed” is hard to describe. Across the expanse of the indoor park, which was filled with natural light from a translucent dome, we could watch the Knott's Camp Snoopy ferris wheel gently spinning riders up and around. Trees were everywhere on the floor of the park—all of them green and (apparently) growing, as part of the “largest indoor planting” in the world.⁵ Advertising was ubiquitous. Huge cereal “boxes” for products of General Foods, one of the mall's corporate sponsors, adorned the far wall. A gigantic soda spigot and Pepsi cup—probably twenty feet long—was hanging from the rafters above us. Neon lights glittered and beckoned. And the noise was ceaseless: the roller coaster rattled, the

⁴This fact is drawn from the theoretically limited but still useful work by Ira G. Zepp, *The New Religious Image of Urban America: The Shopping Mall as Ceremonial Center* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1986) 15.

⁵Goss, “Once-upon-a-Time,” 9, cites www.mallofamerica.com for this fact.

flumes of the log ride splashed just below us, and various songs competed with our conversation for attention. Garish colors were everywhere: pinks, purples, oranges, and greens—all just one shade short of fluorescent. It was a bewildering display for which the cliché “assault on the senses” is not inaccurate.

After wolfing down their food, the children were ready to move on. The night before, as I scanned the map of the mall, our first destination (after breakfast) became clear to me. From my research, I had learned that a number of couples every year made the mall the scene of their marriage. This struck me as odd, and I wanted to find the scene of these crimes, if possible. From the map’s list of more than five hundred possible attractions or vendors, I noted that site number E345 bore the promising name “Chapel of Love Wedding Chapel.” So, I told the kids and Lisa that we were heading for the mall’s wedding chapel. The complaints from Nathan and Rheanne erupted almost immediately, but I proceeded undeterred. Lisa seemed willing to be a good sport, and Justin looked at me knowingly.

THE CHAPEL OF LOVE

Three days before had been Lisa’s and my nineteenth wedding anniversary, which we had been unable to celebrate because I was travelling and Lisa was working. It had been difficult for us to be apart, because the last two years had been the most difficult of our partnership, due largely to lingering damage that followed what is euphemistically known as the “male mid-life crisis.” While in Wisconsin prior to our pilgrimage to the mall, I had purchased (with advice from the kids) an antique diamond ring for Lisa. I had intended to find the right moment to give her the gift, and depending upon what the chapel looked like, I thought that it might be the appropriate venue to surprise my wife. Justin had intuited my intention. The ring was in its case in my pocket.

As we approached the chapel, I stifled a laugh. “There it is,” I announced, “the Chapel o’ Love!” The “chapel” in fact appeared 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. It was strange. The clerk working the store was on the phone, and while I waited for her to look up or otherwise acknowledge our presence, the children had wandered into the chapel proper, divided from the store by a single partition. The clerk never did look up. I guess she could tell I was not in the market for a tux. So, I simply grabbed Lisa’s hand and followed the children into the chapel. “Come here,” I said, as we walked past a few rows of white pews toward the front of the little room, where a couple of large white plastic pillars, wrapped in fake ivy, formed a quasi-gazebo. I set down the camera, which Nathan immediately picked up. All of the kids now seemed aware of the purpose for our visit. Nate and Rheanne gathered in the first “pew.” Justin lurked near the back. I faced Lisa, knelt down, and asked, tears in my eyes: “Would you be my partner for the rest of my life?” I opened the case and slipped the ring onto her finger. It fit perfectly. By now, Lisa was crying, too. “I love you,” I said as I stood up,

just as Nate snapped a picture (appropriately “soft” focused). Lisa hugged me tightly. I looked my partner in the eyes and we shared a smile, while the kids laughed and played around us. Only hours later, standing in line at a coffee shop, did she sidle up to me and whisper, now catching me by surprise, “Yes.”

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The ritual was meaningful, although of course one can ask whether the Chapel of Love was the best place for it. It was not. But the reason why people might choose such a venue became apparent to me from this brief recommitment ritual, just as it also became clear to me why the place must finally fail to satisfy our deepest longings. On the one hand, the mall provides a “free” space where even the most intimate and human behaviors can be celebrated and remembered. We cried there. Some people, whose vows would not be recognized by church or state, or who for whatever reason resent state or ecclesiastical power, could celebrate a commitment there under the freedom of the market and in the eyes of family and friends. On the other hand, without the narrative here, the ceremony between Lisa and me would have been only a private family confession and promise—made in the anonymous and vast expanse of the Mall of America. The clerk on the phone had no clue to what had transpired, as we left her store arm in arm, wiping away the tears of both sadness and joy. Such anonymous intimacy is the closest one can get to authentic depth in the place.

For the Chapel of Love is, finally, a pretty pitiful excuse for a religious shrine, surrounded as it is with the cacophony of the market and adjacent as it is to a crass and impersonal Bridal Shoppe staffed by an inattentive clerk. It is the perfect kind of place to imagine Jesus “cleansing” in jealous rage as he tumbled plastic pillars, tossed around mannequins, and tore up tuxedos. But despite its tacky profanity, the Chapel of Love also provided us with a brief respite from the mall’s efforts to sell us something. There we created in the midst of the chaos a moment of tenderness that recognized both human failing and the possibility of transcendence. Geographer Jon Goss explains, in the best study I have found of how the mall works: “The critic’s task is not to rudely wake up the consumer to the reality outside of consumption, but to ourselves 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.”⁶ It is a primary purpose of ritual and of sacred places to remind us of authentic living and to motivate us to live collectively meaningful lives.⁷ We create sacred space, or clothe God in places, to orient us toward

⁶Ibid., 8.

⁷The literature to support this claim is vast. See especially David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal, *American Sacred Space* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), and the works of Belden C. Lane, especially *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (New York: Oxford, 1998).

those patterns of behavior and those ideals that truly inspire and give life.⁸ Even on pilgrimage to the Mall of America one can find such reminders, although the overwhelming intent of the place is neither to remind us of fragility nor to orient us to transcendence, but first of all to stimulate our desire to consume “experiences” and commodities.

“I WANT TO BUY SOMETHING”

The rest of our pilgrimage naturally oriented us in the way the mall intends. We spent most of our time at Camp Snoopy, where we purchased daily passes for the various amusements. As a family we rode together the log ride, where we fell seventy feet into a splashing pool of water, and the roller coaster, which was fun but tame. Rheanne chose to ride the bumper cars and giggled gladly as she bumped into her older brother and frequent nemesis, Nathan. Justin opted out of Camp Snoopy for a while to enjoy the relative quiet of Barnes & Noble. Nate jumped on the “Super-Tramp,” a bungee-cord contraption that sent him flying and spinning twenty feet into the air. “This place is cool,” he offered in the highest praise a thirteen-year-old could utter. At lunch, after about three hours of “fun,” it was Rheanne who offered the most telling observation about the spirit of the place. As we sat at a table together in the North Food Court, Rheanne simply blurted out, as if possessed: “I want to buy something.” She repeated the phrase about three times, nearly melting down emotionally in the process. The object didn’t matter; she simply wanted to *buy something*. Her young mind and senses had been captured, and she had come to the conclusion that her happiness could only be realized by the purchase of a commodity. Food fortunately calmed Rheanne a bit, and we completed our pilgrimage with a complete circumambulation of the space, and walked out into the sunshine after only five hours. 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.⁹

Steven L. Shepherd, though, describes why the spiritual lure of the mall is an illusion, in terms that help explain Rheanne’s experience. “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.”¹⁰ Geographer Goss puts it more

⁸It is this theological matter of “clothing” God in place that I develop throughout the book, due out in November, 2003. The metaphor of “clothing” is an updating of Luther’s conception of the *larvae dei*, or the “masks of God.” In brief, I seek to develop a theology of the cross that shifts emphasis from event to place, or from time to space.

⁹See Simon Coleman and John Elsner, *Pilgrimage Past and Present in the World Religions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

¹⁰Steven L. Shepherd, “Mall Culture,” *The Humanist* 58 (Nov/Dec 1998) 41.

technically and with greater nuance, but his point is the same: “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.” In other words, the mall “dislocates” God, if by “God” is meant the source and goal of authentic life and the location of goodness, truth, and beauty, among other attributes. In the place of God at the mall are put manufactured commodities or “experiences” of “fun” that can be sold to pilgrims as simulations of “happiness,” “love,” or any other value that advertisers and designers choose. As Goss puts it, at the Mall of America visitors invariably experience “the enchantment of objects.”¹¹

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Basically, this process of enchantment proceeds as we are encouraged by a visit to the mall to shift our attention from needs to wants. At the mall, our desires can be mobilized, attached not to objects or relations that satisfy, but attached instead to commodities that meet desires created by the mall or its tenants. Desire shifts, most dramatically, from sociability to possession, from relations with real people, ideals, or practices, to the acquisition of objects. Goss again: “The Mall incorporates distant places and times associated with the imagined possibility of authenticity, but its visual and verbal rhetoric displaces desire from its ‘natural object’...onto commodities, which then stand as souvenirs of the dreaming experience.”¹² Rheanne’s blunt demand put it starkly. She wanted to “buy something” to remember her dream time at the mall. In fact, Rheanne also claimed, shortly after entering the mall, that: “I want to live here.” Such a dream would, inevitably, be deferred. The best she could hope for was a token, sign, memento, or fetish of her experience in the American consumer paradise. Of course no real presence was possible. But church leaders who fail to realize the lure of such dreams fail to reckon with the most alluring idol in the American cultural pantheon.

“TRUE SHOPPING?”

My daughter was deluded. Given that she was eight years old at the time and that she is in all likelihood blessed or cursed with having to live with me for the next ten years, I expect she’ll grow out of it. Many people in America, however, including folks in church pews and pulpits, never do grow out of this dream. The mall’s promises imprison people in a system of symbols that exploits our economic and

¹¹Goss, “Once-upon-a-Time,” 19.

¹²Ibid., 38.

political power and traps us into patterns of shallow and despair-driven living. We are all susceptible.

At times, though, the system reveals its own contradictions, such as in a T-shirt I noticed at one of the Mall of America gift stores. 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 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 only sense I can make of that slogan is that it answers the question posed at the top of the T-shirt, and describes what supposedly goes on at the Mall of America.

“there is no ‘Chapel of Death’ in the Mall of America”

Such a description is, of course, nonsense. As Goss concludes, the big lie of the mall is that “images of the good life...live in goods.”¹³ But, of course, as it hangs on a rack, there is no “life” in this T-shirt, and there is no truth in the mall. Goods don’t “live,” and shopping isn’t 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 more than that, and unless a consumer buys such a truth*. In the case of this T-shirt, that exchange would cost the buyer \$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 screaming absence at its core.

All in all, then, there is no “true shopping” going on at the mall. There are only befuddled pilgrims, so bewildered by (post)modernity and so lacking in orientation by churches or deep traditions, that they imagine that they might live in a fantasy world of readily available commodities and amusements upon which limits

¹³Ibid., 4.

will never impede. This is understandable for an eight-year-old. It's a problem for grown-ups, who ought to be more critical about such superficial promises, who need comfort when they are possessed by the law to "buy something," and who are convinced that they are worthless if they cannot. One simple fact can clinch the witness the church can offer against this corporate con-job: the Mall of America does not provide funerals, and neither does any other mall in the country that I know about. There is no "Chapel of Death" in the Mall of America. Merchants may indeed want you to "shop 'til 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 that you truly need to know. ⊕

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