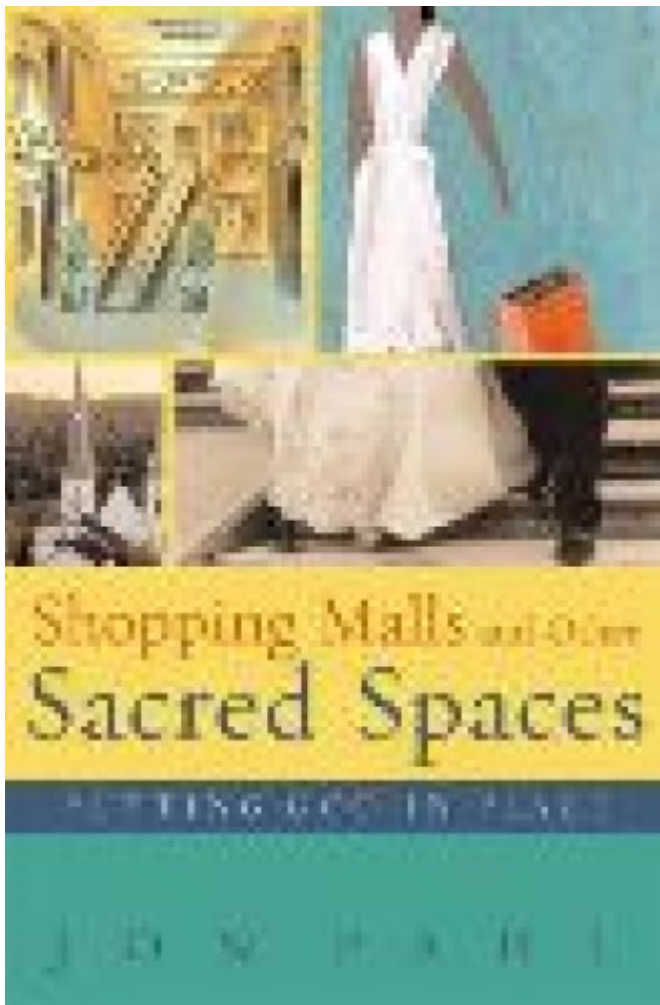


# Shopping Malls and Other Sacred Spaces

reviewed by [Marcia Z. Nelson](#) in the [March 9, 2004](#) issue

## In Review



## Shopping Malls and other Sacred Spaces: Putting God in Place

Jon Pahl  
Brazos

The places where Americans spend their time and treasure are where their hearts are, notes Lutheran theologian and religious historian Jon Pahl. In examining the theological significance of today's popular places—the mall, Disney World, the suburban home—Pahl draws upon church historian Sidney Mead's thesis that place functions for Americans as time did for older cultures. This idea fits America, with its relatively short history compared to the cultures and histories of Europe, Asia and the civilizational crossroads of the Middle East. Pahl's fascination with how space can be sacred and his facility with popular culture also come from his days as a student of Martin E. Marty, trainer of many a cultural interpreter.

Pahl is keen on metaphor—on understanding perceptions as ways of “clothing” or imagining God. He analyzes the sacred “clothing” available in malls and Disney World, destinations for pilgrims whose yearnings for the sacred make them good consumers of products that promise to satisfy their longings but, of course, don't. And the suburban home—the huge, bedecked, be-lawned and above all private single-family dwelling—is more than a mere shrine. It is “the predominant idol in modern America,” demanding devotion and money in exchange for functioning as one's private Eden, where death and crabgrass have no dominion.

These critiques of American obsessions are not new, as Pahl's footnotes acknowledge. But Pahl's analysis is systematic, and he has done his fieldwork in malls and Disney World, as well as his own suburban back yard. His understanding is not only empirical but draws on the Bible and theological history.

Pahl goes beyond critique in offering alternative “clothing” for imagining God. He uses elements from nature—water, rocks, light, trees—but his alternatives are made up of more than these all-natural ingredients. People live in bodies and in cities, and these, too, offer ways and metaphors for an embodied theology that has the appeal of the here-and-now, of a tangible and earthly place created by a generous God of grace.

Except for its eye-taxing type size, *Shopping Malls and Other Sacred Places* is easy to read. A faculty member at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and formerly at Valparaiso University, Pahl, a married father of three, relates episodes from his life which illustrate his points, sometimes literally—he supplies relevant photos from a family album. What he's saying is thus grounded in real experience, though that experience is limited to the perspective of a white, male, midwestern-

born-and-bred Lutheran. The result is honest and concrete without being self-absorbed. The book demonstrates its author's conviction that personal stories are relevant and trustworthy, and that theology is necessarily practiced by mistake-prone humans whom God has redeemed by wearing mortal flesh.

This valuable, clearly written and provocative book comes from a publisher specializing in engaging popular culture for its theological significance. Pahl's analysis of the subtle reorientation intended by shopping-mall planners seeking to direct appetite toward consumption helped me to understand why America's 20,000 malls always smell of fresh-brewed coffee and scented candles, offerings a devotee might make to the chief deity of commerce. Shopping isn't like religion—it *is* religion, providing rules, ritual, meaning, community and plenty of icons to take home in a bag.