

# Contents

<b>Foreword</b> <i>David Carrasco</i>	ix
<b>Preface</b> 1997	xi
<b>Preface to the First Edition</b>	xiii
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	xvii
<b>Introduction</b> <i>David Carrasco</i>	3
<b>1. More Than a Marketplace: The Religious Nature of Shopping Malls</b>	
<i>What Is Religious About Malls?</i>	
<b>2. From Bel Air to Lenox Square</b>	17
<i>Saturday Night in Bel Air</i>	17
<i>The Malling of America</i>	25
<b>3. The Shopping Mall as Sacred Space</b>	33
<i>The Nature of the Center</i>	33
<i>Center as Source of Power</i>	36
<i>Center as Celestial Echo</i>	38
<i>Center as Sign of Order</i>	50
<i>Symbols at the Center</i>	53
<i>Water of Life</i>	57
<i>Cosmic Tree</i>	60
<i>Human Activity at the Center</i>	64
<i>Community at the Center</i>	65
<i>Community Services for the Whole Person</i>	68
<i>Community as Meeting of Persons</i>	70

<i>High Touch of Shopping</i>	72
<i>Community Outreach</i>	73
<b>Transition: James Rouse — Mahatma of Malls</b>	81
<b>4. Mall as Sacred Time</b>	95
<i>Festival Marketplace</i>	95
<i>Nature of Play</i>	99
<i>Types of Play</i>	102
<i>Ceremonial Center</i>	107
<i>Ceremonial Meal</i>	118
<i>Mall as Secular Cathedral</i>	124
<b>5. Concluding Observations: From Lenox Square to Bel Air</b>	143
<i>An Attempt to Retain the Personal</i>	143
<b>6. The Mall Is Not Over</b>	151
<i>The Call of the Mall</i>	154
<i>The Megamalls</i>	159
<i>Traditional Religious Presence: Ministry to the Mall</i>	164
<i>Mall-Lingering</i>	166
<i>Mal de Mall</i>	170
<i>Mall Parks and Mall Ports</i>	176
<i>Art at the Mall</i>	183
<i>Myth of the Mall: Malls 'R' Us</i>	188
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	194
<b>Notes</b>	195
<b>Selected Bibliography</b>	201
<b>Index</b>	205

# Introduction

Mircea Eliade, the distinguished historian of religions, wrote in the opening chapter of *Patterns in Comparative Religions*:

We must get used to the idea of recognizing hierophanies absolutely everywhere, in every area of psychological, economic, spiritual and social life. Indeed we cannot be sure that there is anything—object, movement, psychological function, being or even game—that has not at some **time in** human history been somewhere transformed into a hierophany . . . it is quite certain that anything man has ever handled, felt, come in contact with or loved can become a hierophany. . . . We know, for instance, that all the gestures, dances and games children have, and many of their toys, have a religious origin — they were once the gestures and objects of worship. In **the same** way musical and architectural instruments, means of transportation, (animals, chariots, boats, and so on) started by being sacred objects, sacred activities. . . . In the same way **too**, every trade, **art**, industry and technical skill either began as something holy, or has, over the years, been invested with religious values. This list could be carried to include man's everyday movement (getting up, walking, running), his various employments (hunting, fishing, agriculture), all his physiological activities (nutrition, sexual life, etc.). (pp. 11–12)

These observations appear in a chapter entitled "Approximations: The Structure and Morphology of the Sacred which lays out some general patterns **by** which human actions and natural objects are transformed into "hierophanties" or manifestations of the sacred. As the quote reveals, the history of religions teaches us that *anything* can become sacred or at least be imbued with sacrality.

The present book, written by Ira Zepp, a theologian and phenomenologist of religions, explores the different ways in

which those large, massive, labyrinthine, commercial, architectural and festival places called malls appear to be organized spatially by cosmological principles and serve as containers for a number of objects and actions imbued with sacrality. In a real sense, Zepp's book is an "approximation" of the sacred morphology of malls which contain a multiplicity of hierophanies and religious structures. It can be said that Zepp has taken up Eliade's dare; if anything man touches, walks on, builds or plays with can become sacred, then why not EMACs (Enclosed Malls Air Conditioned), especially when they are organized by principles of quadrupartition, operate on festival, calendrical time and are full of symbolic objects?

In Zepp's engaging interpretation, malls, like the objects of Eliade's landscape, are "more," much more than what they appear or even claim to be. As Zepp clearly states, the malls are basically economic centers, compact worlds of capitalism in America. As one other study, *The Malling of America*, has suggested, America has become a Mall. From Zepp's perspective, the moreness of malls, or rather the "otherness" of malls resides in their similarity to the religious, ceremonial centers of traditional civilizations of the ancient world which have recently attracted the careful and continued attention of historians of religions and urban geographers.

In general terms, Zepp's work on the ceremonial order of malls is about a twentieth-century pattern of human, symbolic "orientation" in America. Zepp's pedestrian research (he has literally walked hundreds of miles through American malls as well as exhausted the literature) has revealed the ubiquitous nature of shopping malls in the United States. Communities, large and small, and within their various quarters and sections, are being reorganized around or in relation to various types of shopping malls. Statistical studies of mall-goers have revealed that they spend their largest amount of time (after home and job) in malls. This national trend of commercial and community orientation is a profound but little under-

stood development of American social, commercial, and symbolic life. Zepp's basic question about the magnetic quality and pervasive nature of malls is: "What is the cultural and religious significance of this pattern of social and symbolic orientation?" His strategy to deal with this question is to combine his previously established sensitivity to theological elements in American life with his more recent studies in the hermeneutics and phenomenology of religions and the discoveries of urban geography and ecology. At the center of his eclectic approach are two principles of human orientation found in the spatial and ritual worlds of malls, *i.e.*, the principle of the "symbolism of the center" which is an expression of *homo religiosus*, and the principle of ritual regeneration which is an expression of *homo ludens*, the human as player. This complex mode of orientation combining reverence for a center-oriented world with the human need for play and regeneration is, according to Zepp, imprinted on the physiognomy, scheduling, and activities of malls. As his remarkable chapter on the entrepreneur-Christian-founder of malls, James Rouse, demonstrates, the planning of **some of the malls** included cosmological and soteriological purposes from the beginning.

Zepp has taken a risk in turning his religious studies scholarship onto the complexities of malls. His work is the first to raise the question of cultural and symbolic patterns and meanings in these great roadside attractions. As the reader will discover, Zepp's heartfelt reflections on places such as Lenox Square, Park City, Fox Hills, White Marsh, and Galleria come in three voices. While he is constantly striving to gain an interpretive edge on the phenomena of malls, he is also painting a world of hope and finally expressing a lament for a bygone geography of human community. In order to understand the complex crossings of Zepp's three voices, a few words about his interpretive approach will prove helpful. Whether the reader agrees with his perspective or not, one

will learn a great deal about this pattern in American culture as well as gain a positive interpretive stance from which to think about **EMACs**.

Some of the theoretical background for Zepp's approach is derived from Mircea Eliade's conception of the "Symbolism of the Center" and Paul Wheatley's study of "ideal-type ceremonial centers" in traditional cities.<sup>1</sup> Both scholars emphasize the human tendency to organize all modes of human life around ceremonial centers which derive their authority from celestial archetypes that are replicated in cultural conceptions of space and time. In Eliade's broad comparative studies, "reality is conferred through participation in the symbolism of the Center: cities, temples, houses become real by the fact of being assimilated to the 'center of the world.'" In the history of religions, human beings organize their lives around sacred centers such as mountains, temples, cities, and ceremonial precincts which acquire the prestige of being an *axis mundi*, the axis of the world which joins supernatural and human forces together. These sacred centers, found everywhere in human history, serve to orient not only symbolic maps in a society, but also architecture, mental constructs, patterns of economic exchange, ritual pilgrimages and conceptions of the soul.

Paul **Wheatley** utilized a number of Eliade's discoveries in his study of the origins and character of pristine urban societies in the seven areas of primary urban generation. **Wheatley** discovered that in Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, the Indus Valley, Africa, Mesoamerica and Peru, that is, where cities were invented independently, a threefold symbolism which he calls "cosmo-magical" thought served to organize the so-

1. See Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965); Eliade, *Patterns In Comparative Religions* (New York: Meridian Books, 1967), and Paul Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters* (Chicago: Aldine Press, 1971), for elaborate discussions of the model which Zepp is utilizing.

cial and ecological complexities of society. Besides the a) ever present and powerful symbolism of the center, **Wheatley** identified b) the pattern of dividing ceremonial precincts into four quarters which surrounded a central ceremonial precinct. This pattern of cardinal axiality was often highlighted by c) the practice of symbolic parallelism in which certain buildings or ritual precincts were dramatic **images** in stone of cosmogonic myths or dramatic celestial archetypes. These "brick thoughts" were architecturally constructed to dramatize the connections between celestial influence and human life. What is interesting for Zepp's study is that both Eliade and **Wheatley** were impressed by the world-wide tendency of ancient urban dwellers to organize their worlds on the basis of cosmological models dramatized in ceremonial centers.

Some of **the** big questions that must be asked of Zepp's work are, has he accurately gauged the similarity between the symbolic patterns of traditional ceremonial centers and the contemporary shopping malls? Has he, in fact, uncovered the remnants of a discarded model of spatial organization which are surprisingly coherent in these grandiose centers of exchange? Has he clearly seen a religious world camouflaged by twentieth-century technology? Can we see what he sees?

We see Zepp's exploration of this ancient/contemporary parallelism in sections entitled "Cosmic Tree," "Symbols of the **Center**," "**Water** of Life," "Festival Marketplace," and in chapters on sacred space and time. One of the most convincing arguments for the religious character of malls appears in his startling chapter, "James Rouse, Mahatma of Malls." We discover that the vision, financial activities, and plans of Rouse are illuminated through Zepp's use of the idea of a religious "founder." If the scholar of religion and psychology, Peter Homans, is correct that "origins cue structure," then the structure of many American malls is decisively religious because the founder of the finest malls in America had an

elaborate religious purpose in building them in the first place. It is surprising to learn just how intertwined the notions of city, festival, sacred space, cosmological parallelism and religious values were in James Rouse's life and mall dreams. For **Rouse**, malls were part of the co-creativity of God and people in America. This chapter alone gives truth to Zepp's claim that religious symbolism and values are imprinted on the history and character of American malls.

This interpretation is framed in the book by chapters of nostalgia and lament. In the opening chapter, "Saturday Night in **Bel Air**," Zepp reveals that he had something like a religious experience growing up in Maryland, especially on those Saturday nights when he traveled the long, winding road from his family's isolated farm house to go "uptown" to the town of **Bel Air**. This periodic journey opened up new feelings of human community and created a long-lasting sense of orientation in his world. As he recalls the space, the characters and feelings of human connection, we see the ghosts of humorous, decent, frail human beings who, like the unique characters of *Winesburg, Ohio*, have been left behind by the establishment of new centers of American life. In the book's final chapter, "From Lenox Square to **Bel Air**," Zepp faces squarely the limits and disappointments of this massive shift to the great shopping malls.

Zepp's readable, humane interpretation of the worlds of **Bel Air** and Lenox Square is a special act of understanding. He has raised some important human questions in an optimistic, intriguing way.

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