



**Flea Market Jesus: Popular Religion and American Individualism (RS-620)**  
**Winter/Spring 2006**

This course will examine the mixture of folk beliefs and 20th century fundamentalism practiced by so many Americans today, paying special attention to the religious and spiritual underpinnings of hyper-individualism. We will consider the theological and ideological roots of: distrust of leadership, including clergy; conspiracy theories about government and big business; the end of the world and its effect on current events; and supernatural intervention in everyday life.

**Meeting Day, Time and Dates:\***  
ONLINE

*\*Note: This course is scheduled to begin January 30th. Registered students will receive an email from Dr. Scott Thumma by January 29th with instructions on how to access the private web site.*

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[Course Syllabus](#)

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[Course Web Site](#)

**Texts:**

**Required**

Goff, Phil and Paul Harvey, ed. Themes in Religion and American Culture. UNC Press, 2004.

Sample, Tex. Blue Collar Ministry: Facing Economic and Social Realities of Working People. Judson Press, 1984.

**Course Description and Objectives:**

For the past two years, the instructor has used a grant from the Louisville Institute to interview flea market vendors about their resistance to participation in religious, political, or traditional economic institutions. Flea Market Jesus provides an opportunity to think about popular religion, especially the kind that exists outside of denominations or congregations. Many people outside the traditional church/synagogue boundaries still hold very conservative, literal views of scripture and also experience God's presence in remarkably real ways. We will consider what this means for organized religion, for politics and for American culture more generally.

Although we will focus primarily on non-participation, we will also use Tex Sample's book on Blue Collar Ministry as a foil against which to measure the beliefs and attitudes of a similar group within organized religion.

This course will equip students to think about the relationship between individualism and community commitment in everyday life. It will provide new perspectives on such popular intellectual issues as social capital, red state/blue state politics, and religious membership (or non-membership) in the US.

**Course Requirements**

Contributions

This class is meant to be an online seminar involving the regular participation of all members. Students will be evaluated on their general contributions to our ongoing discussion and their specific contribution of new resources as well as their final paper.

Depending on class size, each student will be asked to summarize two or three relevant resources that he or she has found independently. Where possible, students will provide links for other class members to follow. Where necessary, students will outline and summarize written material.

In addition to the weekly readings and the resources provided by students, the instructor will provide pieces of (anonymous) interviews conducted during his field research in flea markets in the Midwest. Students will be asked to consider these in light of the readings and resources we accumulate.

As in most seminar classes, we will be working toward a final paper in which each student chooses and then analyzes a topic related to the course.

### **Class Rules**

In general, Flea Market Jesus should be an engaging class in which people feel free to contribute their ideas and interpretations. So long as discussions revolve around the readings and the data, no one should feel constrained by fear of political correctness.

However, certain rules must always govern academic discourse:

-Ideas are fair game, individuals are not. While it is always permissible to question or criticize others' ideas, it is never permissible to criticize others personally in class discussion. Put another way, good people can have bad ideas and bad people can have good ones. God deals in intentions; this class deals in evidence and interpretation.

-Deadlines are firm. Late papers will be penalized 3 percentage points a day. Students who fail to make regular weekly contributions or who are unprepared to provide external resources for the assigned periods will also be penalized for tardiness. The success of online courses depends on each of us treating one another's time as though it were as valuable as our own.

-Plagiarism is unacceptable. Period. The instructor in this course views plagiarism as the unforgivable academic sin. If participants cannot be trusted to say what they mean and distinguish their own ideas from those of others, intellectual discourse is impossible.

Plagiarism is the use of the work of others without credit given to the source of the ideas, words, and sentences. This is not about the technical ability to cite sources correctly; that is simply a matter of learning an academic skill. The "sin" involves intentionally trying to pass someone else's work off as your own.

Students who quote or use information directly from academic books or articles without citing the source will receive an "F" for the assignment. The error will be described to the student, who will then have an opportunity to re-do the assignment and have the new grade averaged with the "F." A second offense will lead to an "F" in the course and the possibility of further seminary sanctions.

In the unlikely event that a student knowingly turns in someone else's work (such as a paper) with the intention to deceive, she or he will fail the course and be recommended for academic discipline.

### **Grading:**

This course follows the Hartford Seminary Grading Guidelines. "B" is the appropriate

grade for solid, engaged work that shows evidence of course reading and a goodwill effort. "A" goes beyond this and shows excellence in several areas as outlined in the guidelines. "C" is for work that fails to meet the standard criteria for a "B" and, of course, "D" and "F" are for students who show little or no evidence of engagement in the course. This class assumes, as the Guidelines assume, that students are going to the expense and trouble of taking the class because they are interested and willing to be engaged.

## **Course Schedule**

### **Week 1:** Introduction to "Flea Market Jesus"

Readings:

- Material from original research proposal
- General Social Survey statistics on belief, attitudes toward Bible, worship attendance

### **Week 2:** What is God like, What is the World Like?

Readings:

- Theologies by Weaver-Zercher in TRAC
- Cosmology by Zarasco in TRAC
- Student-found resources on popular theology/cosmology

### **Week 3:** Supernaturalism

Readings:

- Supernaturalism by Chireu in TRAC
- Ch 2: A World of Wonders in Hall's World of Wonder, Days of Judgment (Reserve)
- Student-found resources on supernaturalism

### **Week 4:** Fundamentalism and Biblical Inerrancy

Readings:

- Ch 1: North American Protestant Fundamentalism by Ammerman in Fundamentalism Observed (Reserve)
- Student-found resource on fundamentalism, inerrancy, literalism

### **Week 5:** Religious Individualism

Reading:

- ???? on religious non-attendance
- Ralph Waldo Emerson on "Self-Reliance" (Reserve)
- Ch 6, Individualism, in Bellah et al's Habits of the Heart (Reserve)

### **Week 6:** Religion and the Working Class I

Readings:

- First half of Sample's Blue Collar Ministry

### **Week 7:** Religion and the Working Class II

Readings:

- Second half of Sample's Blue Collar Ministry

### **Week 8:** Considering the Data

Reading:

- Selection of interviews from flea market religion project
- Student-found resources on religious individualism

### **Week 9:** Red State, Blue State: Religion, Government, and Individual Liberty

Reading:

- Farnsley draft essay on the relationship between fundamentalism and politics
- The State by Sullivan in TRAC
- Student-found resources on religious individualism and government.

### **Week 10:** Everyday Magic

Reading:

- Farnsley draft essay on the difference between rational and supernatural worldviews in American life.
- Student-found resources on religious individualism and supernaturalism

**Week 11: Student Papers Consideration and Critique**

Each student will be asked to submit an outline of her or his paper along with relevant sources and preliminary interpretations.

**Week 12: Differences by Region**

Reading:

-Diversity and Region by Goff in TRAC

**Week 13: Wrap-up and Review**

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