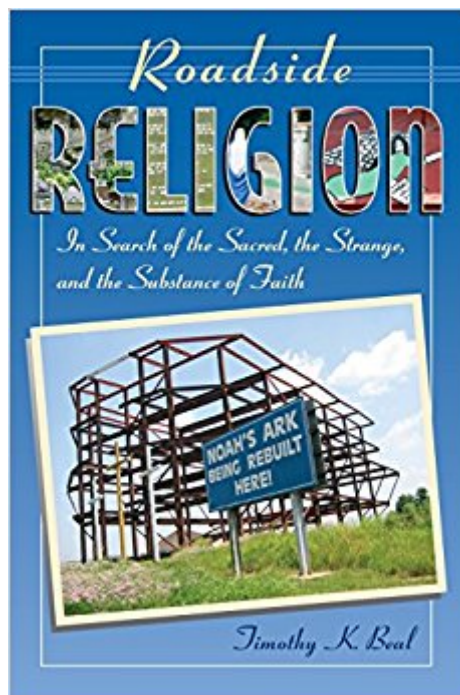




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# Roadside Religion: In Search Of The Sacred, The Strange, And The Substance Of Faith



## Synopsis

In the summer of 2002, Timothy K. Beal loaded his family into a twenty-nine-foot-long motor home and hit the rural highways of America in search of roadside religious attractions-sites like the World's Largest Ten Commandments and Precious Moments Chapel. *Roadside Religion* tells of his attempts to understand the meaning of these places as expressions of religious imagination and experience, and to encounter faith in all its awesome absurdity.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Beal, a religion scholar who took his family on a summer RV tour of some of America's oddest religious sites, explores the varieties of religious experience while daring to be vulnerable and personal about his own faith. Whether he's tackling the popularity of biblical mini-golf courses or Precious Moments figurines, *Beal (Religion and Its Monsters)* uncovers serious questions about religion and its sometimes highly singular practitioners. It's clear that the sites he finds most compelling are those whose creator has stepped out of the mainstream to carry out a quixotic personal vision, like the Maryland man who is building a gigantic replica of Noah's Ark to the size specified in the Book of Genesis; or the quiet Alabama Catholic who discovered his life's calling in transforming throwaway items (lipstick tubes, broken china) into sacred grottoes and replicas of biblical and historic sites. (Beal doesn't have as much patience with the slick Orlando theme park Holy Land Experience, which he calls "a fundamentalist Magic Kingdom.") The book is full of gentle humor and clever observations, such as when Beal notes that the World's Largest Ten Commandments site, in rural North Carolina, makes "a graven image of the prohibition against

graven images." Although he can be critical, Beal is never cynical or snide, guiding readers to an informed understanding rather than simply proffering these sites as case studies in a religious freak show. (May 15) --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Beal chose to discover religion in contemporary America by traveling with his wife and two children in a rented 29-foot-long motor home to visit roadside religious attractions. He reports about 11 of those, such truly unusual places as Holy Land USA in Bedford County, Virginia; Golgotha Fun Park in Cave City, Kentucky; Biblical Mini-Golf in Lexington, Kentucky; and God's Ark of Safety in Frostburg, Maryland. The book is full of good humor, and Beal doesn't patronize the creators of these attractions but accords them respect and dignity. He takes the attractions seriously, as unique expressions of the religious imagination and examples of "outsider religion." Part of his purpose in writing the book, aside from slaking his own curiosity, lay in discovering not only what kind of person would go to such lengths to display personal faith so publicly but also, and more important, why. Why write the Ten Commandments in five-foot-tall concrete letters on the side of a mountain? Why use miniature golf to tell the Creation story? Entertaining, quirky, and surprisingly thoughtful. June SawyersCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This book was ok. It is not my typical read, but rather class material. The author was effective in his goal of a thoughtful and reflective summary of many trips to various American Christian roadside attractions. It can make you think, if you allow yourself to be reflective.

A bit too scattered for a fully effective presentation of the weird stuff in American rural religion but a fun read nonetheless.

Entertaining and yet respectful look.

I enjoyed reading this book - funny as well as inspiring. Having been to three of the places in this book I felt this was a well written account of those interesting home grown, religion influenced spots. The Ave Maria Grotto in Cullman, AL is my favorite!

couldn't get past a couple chapters. author's insistence on use of the words "religion" and "religious" in every other sentence, ruins it. very liberal bias about every aspect, just not shared. cover makes it

look like a fun read, but the parts I read were hugely focused on criticism, sometimes severe, of the places visited. very heavy handed. we non-religious "scholars" just don't get it, i guess.

This journey account by Timothy Beal is an incredible expedition with his family throughout the United States. A search for "... the sacred, the strange, and the substance of faith". It all started outside Prattville, Alabama with a sea of crosses and signs of doom and the rewards of a sinful life. The Cross Garden is more than just an amalgamation of wooden objects and words but a statement of faith by the man who, with a vision from God, started its construction, his wife who supports him and the visitors who wander by. Like the journeys of Bill Bryson throughout Great Britain; but these in search of the God experience behind the images, Beal brings us from The Holy Land Experience, to a Disneyesque theme park in Orlando, and onto a Biblically themed Golf Course, followed by a man who is building Noah's Ark in Frostburg, Maryland, to the largest Ten Commandments in the country in North Carolina, to the Ave Maria Grotto in Cullman, Alabama and countless attractions in-between. I thoroughly enjoyed this travel log complete with RV and family. Each stop indicated a struggle and a creation out of some grief in life. The most unique of the visits I felt was the one to the Precious Moments Chapel in Carthage, Missouri. Each of the figures is a precious creation of its artist Samuel Butcher. Fashioned like his Precious Moment figurines that are popular collectables, each of the biblical scenes is populated by Precious Moment children. Interesting enough, however, the only figure that is not fashioned like the children is the figure of Christ. Like many of the sites visited, this one was born out of the pain of the death of a Son. Almost cathartic in nature, this site is a work of love and a way of dealing with loss. The response from the visitors often is one of identification and empathy. Some also are able to deal with their own loss as a result of the experience. Over 400,000 visitors come each year, one of the most popular of these types of sites. In this and many other sites, Beal tries to find meaning and a relatable religious experience. I was impressed by his ability to uncover, even in the most bizarre of "theme parks", something worthwhile. It almost makes you want to go out of your way to visit some of these sites.

Four years ago, Timothy K. Beal and his family were driving through the Appalachian Highlands of Maryland when they saw a steel girder framework for an upcoming building, incongruously set in a grassy field. A large sign said "NOAH'S ARK BEING REBUILT HERE!" They drove on by, but Beal, a professor of religion, started keeping a list of roadside religious attractions all around the country, and in the summer of 2002, the family rented a mobile home and hit the highways of the Bible Belt to get to see the Ark in progress and many other religious sites constructed out of piety, inspiration,

or enterprise. In *Roadside Religion: In Search of the Sacred, the Strange, and the Substance of Faith* (Beacon Press), Beal gives a report on what he saw, and what he thought, and especially how he felt. Skeptics like myself probably would be happier with a book that conveyed amusement and incredulity at the sights, and Beal's book does have such a tone in many places. Indeed, Beal started out with a plan of a book of "witty and wry observation," but although it is funny in many places, it is altogether more respectful, sympathetic, and understanding of these very odd shrines than he originally expected. Near Mammoth Cave in Kentucky are plenty of roadside attractions, but on Beal's list is Golgotha Fun Park, a miniature golf course which is described in a chapter wittily titled "Stations of the Course". Bizarrely, the name comes from the Aramaic for "the skull" and is the name of the place where the gospels say the crucifixion happened. Some fun. There are some ceramic skulls on the sixteenth hole: "Although they don't pose much of a putting challenge, they *are* rather creepy and distracting." The eighteen holes tell the story from creation to Resurrection. At hole four, Moses parts the Red Sea to let your ball pass, and on the back nine, representing the New Testament, Mary and Martha kneel prayerfully on either side of the putting green assigned to them. The eighteenth hole has a statue of the risen Christ, encouragingly looking on as golfers take their final shot, and it is the easiest hole on the course. "It's not easy to venture a theological interpretation of Golgotha Fun Park," Beal assures us, but he is compelled to try anyway, interpreting the obstacles (any good miniature golf course needs obstacles) as not only athletic, but theological - believers conquer smaller ones on the way to the big one, the belief in the risen God. Beal is content to be instructed by these roadside visions, but he is not uncritical. At the Fields of the Wood near Murphy, North Carolina, is the world's largest Ten Commandments, concrete letters five feet high on a hillside. The intent here, Beal says, is to inspire religious awe "in the face of a sacred law that is overwhelmingly, *ineffably huge* in a most literal way." It's not what the words say, but how big they are. This is, Beal concludes, "the Word of God as image, and I dare say idol." The commandments, including the proscription against graven images has been turned into the "World's Largest" graven image. There are plenty of others; the worldly Beal is surprisingly affected by the cutesy Precious Moments Inspiration Park in Missouri, or dismayed by the End Times ideology of The Holy Land Experience in Florida, where there is a daily crucifixion, weather permitting. Anyone who has driven America's highways has seen billboards for this sort of attraction, and many will be amused by the descriptions of what Beal has found; he has actually paid his money and gone so that the rest of us don't have to. More importantly, this is a personal book, a religious book by an intelligent thinker who has picked some seemingly unpromising subjects to describe and learn from. As he openly shares his learning and self-reflections with us, it's just the sort of generosity he

admires in the makers of these strange visions.

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