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## 'The Jesus Guy': What Would What's Your Name Do?

By **W. Scott Poole** 11 January 2011

If you didn't know, there is a Jesus impersonator on the loose whose travels have taken him to 47 states and 13 countries throughout the US. He is not, at least on the face of it, one of the disturbed souls who populate Eli Wiesel's novel *Twilight*, the story of a psychiatrist and holocaust survivor who treats patients who believe themselves to be biblical characters.

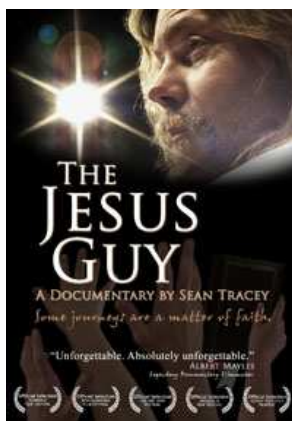
Instead, he is a deeply committed Christian who believes that he is embodying Christ for other people, eschewing material possessions and the most basic comforts to wander the highways bringing a message of God's love. He goes barefoot, swathed in standard issue New Testament robes. He takes no money and either sleeps outside or stays with followers and supporters who offer him a bed. He seeks to follow the admonition to be like Christ in a very literal way and to behave exactly as Jesus would behave.

That is, if Jesus were deeply damaged, sexually repressed, eager for media attention and possibly autistic.

This is at least the unflattering portrait of the Jesus Guy that appears in Sean Tracey's film of the same name. Although the Jesus Guy seems not to care about money, turning it down whenever offered, he certainly cares about having appeared on the ABC news magazine *20/20*. Although he has renounced most types of human connection, the film reveals him to have deep yearning for those same connections. Although preaching a message of love and acceptance, he has a very specific interpretation of religious truth that he eagerly presses on all and sundry.

The Jesus Guy does not give out his name but rather calls himself "What's your name?" He never actually explains the significance of this and the film records the bizarre "Who's on first?" moments that occur when he meets various people on his travels. Inevitably they ask him what his name is and he responds with "What's your name?" to which they respond "No, what's your name?" and so on. This leads to a fairly hilarious scene in a bar, one of the few light moments in this surprisingly grim film.

Certainly the most interesting aspect of the Tracey's effort is the reaction of those who come in contact with the Jesus Guy. The opening scene shows "Jesus" visiting a nursing home where, after several wrenchingly awkward moments talking with the receptive staff and responding to almost everything they say with a hearty AMEN, he attempts to talk to an elderly woman about her physical suffering, offering simplistic pabulum about Christian joy. What is striking is how she accepts this young person, dressed like a refugee from a Christmas pageant and mouthing platitudes, as if he had a special divine authority.



### The Jesus Guy

Director: [Sean Tracey](#)

Cast: James Joseph

(US DVD: 19 Oct 2010)

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This happens time and again as strangers tell the Jesus guy about their suicide attempts, their struggle with spiritual despair, their religious questions and their search for meaning. One of the film's strengths is that we do learn something about these desperate folks and why they might be drawn to someone at least as disturbed they are. The filmmaker shows us the deeply human face of religious yearning and, while not pretty, it nuances this story that could have been told primarily for laughs.

*The Jesus Guy* has all the making of an interesting exploration into both one individual's and an entire subculture's religious mania. Unfortunately, the film missed the opportunity to ask some hard questions about what the Jesus Guy phenomenon tells us about the nature of religion in America. Is this figure a challenge to the values of American society and of religious institutions? Or is he really some exaggerated version of the worst aspects of American Christianity? The Jesus Guy certainly shares its tendency to employ style over substance and its leaders propensity to respond to the complexities of the modern world with pronouncements from ancient religious texts.

An example of this shortcoming in the film is the brief and unexplained appearance of a Catholic Bishop described simply as "Bishop Timlin". Timlin speaks highly of the Jesus guy and Tracey has footage of them praying together in a church.

Tracey does not let the viewer know that the Bishop Timlin who appears in the films is Scranton, Pennsylvania Bishop James C. Timlin, a staunch conservative best known for refusing to attend a commencement ceremony at the University of Scranton because political commentator, and pro-choice Catholic, Chris Matthews would be receiving an honorary degree. This would seem a perfect opportunity for Tracey to explore how the Jesus Guy fits into the agonized relationship between religion and politics in the United States, but instead, pretends the issue is not there.

There are also moments when the documentary feels a bit like an apology for the barefoot evangelist's message. It seems clear that this is not the filmmaker's intention, but not as clear as it should be. Segments of the film are separated by bad, soft focus religious art and some fairly random cultural images, and include the text of a scriptural passage that seems to support What's Your Names? message and method. While I think this is sometimes meant to show irony, it simply doesn't work and confuses the audience about the documentarians' intentions.

This is not to suggest that the film fails entirely to tell the Jesus Guy's story. There are moments that show the deeply human, and perhaps the deeply troubled, side of the Jesus guy. We learn, for example, that he lived for an extended period of time with a female supporter, a significantly older woman. He admits that this became increasingly uncomfortable for him as he began to feel "the temptation of the flesh." Behind this fairly creepy admission, you can sense something of the desperation for a deeper human connection beneath the fetishization of religious imagery.

We also get the sense that "What's Your Name?" would find it impossible to interact with anyone if forced to come out from behind the religious iconography. He barely knows how to speak to the people he meets and only becomes animated when obscure theological points are being discussed. In this, he is much like the people who are attracted to him

*The Jesus Guy* concludes when one of his supporters arranges a visit from the Jesus Guy's father. We learn that his name is Carl and that his dad is proud, if understandably baffled, by his son's odd vocation. Unfortunately, the filmmaker does not take this opportunity to explain more about "What's your names?" history, something that would have fully humanized his subject and helped us to understand.

Extras on the DVD include two Q&A sessions with Sean Tracey and "What's Your Name?," now going by "James Joseph". These are, unfortunately, not very revealing, with the questions a bit more polite than you might expect. The most interesting question is directed at Tracey. An audience member asked how the making of the film had affected his own religious beliefs, a question the filmmaker effectively dodged.

The DVD also contains a commentary track that, at least on my copy, seemed not to be working.

As it stands, *The Jesus Guy* is like too many documentary films about religious faith. It seems to satiate our voyeurism, the desire to see something weird. It does little to help us understand a world of the sacred and symbolic that may be different than our own. A chance was missed here to understand how someone could be so intensely engaged with a mythic narrative that they make it the narrative of their own life.

Rating: (10 icons, 4th icon highlighted)  
Extras rating: (10 icons, 4th icon highlighted)



W. Scott Poole is a writer and an associate professor of history at the College of Charleston. He is the author of five books dealing with race, religion and popular culture in the American South. His latest is *Satan in America: The Devil We Know*, a cultural history of the concept of the Devil in American history that explores the dark side of popular religious movements and pop culture. He has worked with several documentary film projects, including the acclaimed PBS series *Slavery and the Making of America*.

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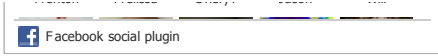
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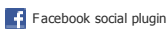
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