

Secondhand Sacred is an ongoing research project in the critical study of religion. The central question it asks is: how does Christian material culture circulate through secondhand economies?

From September 2024 through June 2025, Secondhand Sacred is partnering with the Marty Center for the Public Understanding of Religion to curate three exhibitions. Each exhibit showcases materials that have been divested by previous owners: cast off as sacred waste, vestiges of lived religion.

We invite you to linger and explore each display case carefully. Examine how you respond to individual objects and to the set as a whole. What do you recognize as familiar and what is unknown to you? What memories, emotions, and evaluations are evoked? What questions do these objects raise for you?

We would love to hear your feedback on this exhibit! Scan this QR code for a short survey. If you have additional questions about the project or the Martin Marty Center, please contact Dr. James Bielo, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Northwestern University (james.bielo@northwestern.edu) and/or Dr. Emily Crews, Executive Director (emilydcrews@uchicago.edu).



Secondhand Sacred

an exhibition series

September 2024 - June 2025

Fall: Wearing and Carrying

Winter: Ephemera in Circulation

Spring: Domestic Devotion

The University of Chicago Divinity School
Swift Hall, 1025 E 58th St., Chicago IL 60615



Northwestern

Wearing and Carrying

September 2024 - June 2025

The objects displayed here are both personal and public. They highlight the intimate relationship between religion and embodiment, and encourage us to reflect on the social work that is performed when bodies become religious sites. Diverse Christian traditions, devotional uses, and physical designs are represented.

“Wearing and Carrying” features 185 objects. These materials were sourced from second hand sellers in Chicago, southwest Connecticut, and on eBay. Sites include 7 estate sales, 8 antiques shops, 4 Goodwill outlets, 3 Savers outlets, 2 St. Vincent de Paul stores, and 3 independent thrift shops.

You will discover a diverse range of material genres across the two display cases. Clothing items like a hat, t-shirts, and neckties sit among accessories, such as a watch and watch fob, a scarf, a bracelet, purses, necklaces, earrings, belt buckles, and 58 pinbacks. There are a variety of Catholic devotional objects, including 10 pocket shrines, 14 scapulars, and 5 prayer cloths. There are also 31 medals depicting different saints, from Jude and Flora to Dymphna and Gerard. And, there are 15 rosaries, including several from Marian apparition pilgrimage sites, such as Lourdes, France and Fatima, Portugal.

Consider a few of the objects and stories on display:



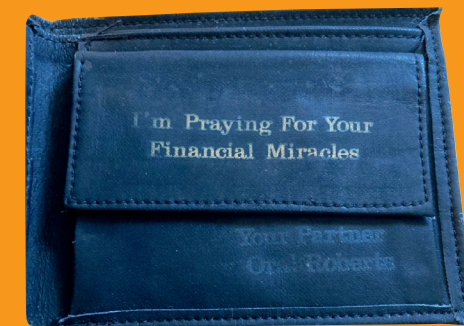
An antiques shop find...

The “My Shield of Prayer Locket” was made in 1943. The black and white photo is pasted on the inside below a printed prayer, “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph protect...” The inside cover reads “Carry this shield as your defense. Put it into action every day for home and loved ones.” In black ink, the back bears a handwritten inscription: “To Billy From Mother.” This Catholic prayer book was very likely carried by a soldier at the close of World War II. I bought it in February 2024 from an antiques mall in Stratford, CT.



An estate sale find...

In May 2024 I picked up the “Jesus Heartbeat of the World” belt buckle from a home in New Fairfield, CT. A “Made in the USA” stamp is on the back. The household was a curious mix. There was a wealth of prosperity gospel materials: books by the likes of Morris Cerullo and Robert Schuller, and vinyl records from Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker and Jimmy Swaggert. There were also traditional Catholic materials: an Our Lady of Lourdes plaque perched above the kitchen sink, crumbling Marian chalk ware statues in the basement. Perhaps the 94-year old woman who died converted from Catholicism? Perhaps the latter were family keepsakes, memories of a parent? Perhaps her husband who died 10 years earlier had been Catholic?



An eBay find...

“I’m praying for your financial miracles.” So reads a wallet produced by Oral Roberts ministries, based in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Preacher, author, televangelist: Roberts (1918-2009) was widely influential as a charismatic Christian who taught the prosperity gospel, a theology that proclaims heavenly riches should be reflected in worldly riches. This wallet may have been sold at one of Roberts’ many revivals or been a ‘gift’ in return for a ministry donation. It embodies prosperity teaching, materializing theology with everyday functionality. I purchased the wallet in December 2023 for \$14.50. The seller purchased the wallet at an estate sale in Montgomery, Alabama.

A thrift store find...

The Wonder Bible™ is full of promises... “Listen to the Bible... Anytime, Anywhere!” “Perfect for kids of all ages!” “Lasts up to 10 hours!” “Listen on the Go.” Released in 2017 by Allstar Products, the Wonder Bible is an audio version that includes the King James translation of the Protestant Bible, as well as 10 “meditation music tracks.” While it retails for between \$30-40, I bought this copy in July 2024 for \$2 at a Goodwill store in Oxford, CT.

