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Religion and Migrants in the Golden State

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In the late 1930s, the activist and journalist Carleton Beals reported on the religious lives of recent migrants to California. His observations of these destitute new arrivals showcased the prejudices of the era and displayed his Menckensque style:

> The bulk of the present [migrants] are Pentecostals – the Church of the True Gospel. Their squalid camps bear names such as The Angel, The Burning Bush, The One God, and The Crusaders. The Pentecostal folk are a combination of Shakers, Holy Rollers, and Hard-Shell Baptists, and their emotional orgies often put an extravagant Negro sect in the shade.
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> The Pentecostal pastors circulate among the labor camps in Packard automobiles daubed with the words Jesus is Here. Few of the harvest communities, despite their shifting population, are now without a small Pentecostal church. Weedpatch, Nipomo, Brawley, [and] Holtville harbor such churches. Elsewhere the itinerant pastor, the Moses of the migration, sets up a large brown tent that serves as a temple. (Beals, American Earth, 401–402)

Two new, extraordinary, and timely books, by Jonathan Ebel and Lloyd Barba, explore the understudied religious worlds of poor, misunderstood, and denigrated migrant laborers in California in the first half of the 20th century. Barba focuses on Mexican Pentecostals, while Ebel looks at Dust Bowl refugees from the Great Plains. The latter, the subject of Beals's work, made the arduous trek to California, fleeing drought and an environmental disaster. Many of these Great Plains and Mexican migrants shared a holy ghost faith and were subject to pity, scorn, and ill-treatment by local whites, journalists, and government officials. Barba aims to tell "a story about Mexican Pentecostal farmworkers attempting to make meaning and orient themselves in an otherwise vertiginous world of migrant agricultural labor." (28) He also wants to recover, and place at the center, the manual labor and church work of women. Earlier accounts of Mexican Pentecostalism hid or passed over the critical roles women played and, in a sense, reflected the chauvinism that existed within the movement itself. "I maintain," writes Barba, "that a material history of Mexican Pentecostalism evidences a robust record of women's history and agency, given that rendering a material history of [La Asamblea Apostólica de la Fe en Cristo Jesús] is by and large an exercise in women's history." (24)

Ebel, as well, highlights a largely ignored or understudied era and topic. As Ebel puts it: "Historians of religion in America have not taken the full measure of the Great Depression's effects on religions as lived, practiced, and institutionalized in the United States." (11) Ebel describes the "religious dynamics at work in … migratory farm labor camps, which the federal government operated in rural California between 1935 and 1943." (2) Ebel also zeros in on how "New Deal officials … engage[ed] in long-term projects to redeem Dust Bowl migrants from life patterns and cultural practices …" (3) Such redemption and assimilation efforts were met with strong resistance. Ebel describes the interaction between government officials and liberal Protestants on one hand and migrants on the other as a kind of push and pull. Barba considers the ways that the focus on white Dust Bowl migrants has overshadowed the story of Mexican migration and religion. His book, he writes, "asks readers to interrogate the assumption of how the Okie story became embedded as an American migration epic, while little has been understood about farmworkers beyond the fact that they worked in conditions of exploitation to feed a nation. Indeed, the national narratives and representations created around the Okie problem obscured the longer (and deeper) struggle of Mexican farmworkers." (251)

Both Barba and Ebel think about how religious groups sacralized space and how such communities on the margins of society lived out their faiths in what was typically a hostile setting. I am reminded of standard academic treatments of Pentecostalism in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1937, for instance, William A. Clark, director of the School of Education at Tuskegee Institute, wrote in *Social Forces*: "Psychologically, the communicants of sanctification fall into two general classes: neurotics, and mentally retarded. The first group consists of persons suffering from a variety of many forms of neuroses… . Sanctification offers a refuge and parental protection for childminded types as well as for those with sick minds. It requires no thinking." (Clark, 546). In a 1940 issue of the American Sociological Review, John B. Holt argued that the holiness movement and Pentecostalism appealed to emotionally disturbed individuals. The culture shocks and deprivations of the modern world – with its urbanization and new economic arrangements – led to a kind of religious revolt, Holt claimed. Not understanding larger forces beyond their control, they channeled their energies into a reactionary and regressive faith. While such reductionist thinking is largely a thing of the past, the fuller story of marginalized religious movements is still obscured in some ways.

Sowing the Sacred and *From Dust They Came* helps us think of these communities in new ways by drawing on a rich trove of relatively untapped sources. The authors use amateur and professional photographs that reveal important details about religious life and practice. Barba seeks to understand a "denomination's cultural production by placing visual and material culture on an equal plane with the few written sources." (23) Barba also uses oral histories, biographies, periodicals, music, and commemorative histories. Ebel employs New Deal camp newsletters, government reports, letters, speeches, sermons, and more.

I think most historians think about roads not taken in research. Or, to extend the metaphor, we might wonder about the things along the roadside that we pass by. Says Ebel in his introduction: "The challenge in writing this book has never been a lack of material. The challenge has been deciding what story to tell and what stories to leave for others, which spaces to draw forward and which to leave in the background." (17) Taking that as a starting point, and with the limits of space, I'd like to highlight a few matters that might be worth further exploration. These two books are so generative that sometimes they posed more questions for me than they answered.

Barba notes that Apostólicos resisted "a hostile Catholic hegemony." He points out that their "dogged anti-Catholicism set them at odds against Latin American Catholic art traditions of saints, crosses, or any sanguinary depictions of Jesus." (185, 186) Elsewhere he observes that: "Apostólicos collectively, then, recall elements of the past that distinguished (or in their case 'sanctified') them from their contemporaries, especially the Catholic majority." (195) I found myself wondering about the pervasiveness and impact of these mutual hostilities. How did Mexican and Mexican-American Catholics and Pentecostals in California define themselves against each other? What was at stake in religious disagreements and conflicts? In my own work on the predominantly black-white biracial South of the 1890s and early 1900s, where there were very few large Catholic communities, it was more common for Pentecostals to set themselves against, or in distinction to, other Protestants, like Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians. In that time and place, Pentecostals were eager to champion their lively, animated, freewheeling worship services and spirit-filled faith against the cold, formal religion of their adversaries. Foes of Pentecostalism shot back, calling them holy rollers, tonguers, fanatics, and child-minded types. What do we learn about Mexican religious communities in California through the heated disagreements between so-called aleluyas and Catholics?

Related to this, as I read *Sowing the Sacred*, I was curious about how Apostólicos compared with African-American and white Pentecostals. To what degree did those within the tradition align with or depart from others regarding anti-Catholicism, anti-communism, millennialism, speaking in tongues, or the emphasis on healing? A similar question came up for me about comparisons of holiness dress codes, policing of behavior, and shunning of extravagant places of worship.

Ebel's *From Dust They Came* prompted some similar questions for me. From my work on Dust Bowl religion, I've seen premillennialism, or general apocalypticism, in many of the sources. Fundamentalists and Pentecostals drew on end-times themes to frame the Great Depression and the environmental calamity of the drought and dust storms. Reading events as signs of the times was a driving theme in the movement since the early 1900s. Woody Guthrie summed up a similar line of biblical thinking after he experienced the catastrophic April 14, 1935 Great Dust Storm in the Texas Panhandle. "We watched the dust storm come up," he recalled, "like the Red Sea closing in on the Israel children…. And I'm telling you it got so black when that thing hit…" (Guthrie in Duncan and Burns, 101) The devout Texans who sheltered with Guthrie as the strange storm raged "was up pretty well on their scriptures, and they said, 'Well, boys, girls, friends, and relatives, this is the end. This is the end of the world." The experience inspired Guthrie to pen his darkly comic song "So Long, It's Been Good to Know You."

In addition to questions about the extent of their end-times views, I still wonder how Dust Bowl migrants read their trek in religious terms. Likewise: What about their pacifism; their sharp views on dress, popular culture, and "worldliness" (music, dancing, and movie attendance); and their tendency to shun partisan politics? What of the ways that they intentionally contrasted themselves with the presumed stale, lifeless religion of other Protestants?

On the flip side, I also have some lingering questions about the specific underpinnings of the faith of New Deal agents and officials. What more can we know about the background and religious orientation of camp managers, administrators, and New Dealers? I'm reminded of the work of historians Jess Gilbert, Evan Berry, and Mark Stoll, who have traced the religious roots of ecology and agrarianism, and the ways the Social Gospel inspired government work in the 30s.

In the end, these points may be rather minor in the bigger scheme of things. However, both books have inspired me to think more expansively about the types of sources we use as historians of American religion whom we focus on, and how we narrate the past. After reading *Sowing the Sacred* and *From Dust They Came*, I am convinced that these will reshape how we understand transplanted religion, liberal Protestantism, domesticity, migration, and, more broadly, religion in 20th-century America. Finally, I look forward to seeing how future studies build upon the vitally important work that both have done.

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