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Race, Religion, and Space in California's Central Valley

Cori Tucker-Price

The Huntington Library, San Marino, California
Email: tuckerpr@usc.edu

California has historically been imagined as larger than life – a place of excess and grandeur. The organizing power of the myth of the American West is especially evident in the work of Ferenc Szasz, which has helped historians think about the distinctiveness of religion in the region. In the years since *Religion in the Modern American West* was published, the region has emerged as a productive test site for exploring religion's relationship to colonialism, the formulation of diverse racial and ethnic groups, and the role of place and space in scholarly analysis. The work of Jonathan Ebel and Lloyd Barba adds to this literature by uncovering the religious dynamics hidden in California's non-coastal cities. Located in an area known as the Central Valley, cities like Bakersfield, Tulare, and Wasco are bordered by mountain ranges that separate the interior from coastal metropolises and beach towns. Far from the Pacific Ocean breeze, these cities are hot, and their reputations as "rural" towns propped up by an agrarian-based economy have historically fueled stereotypes about the people who live there. As such, the region has tended to be dismissed as a site of serious study.

Fortunately, the work of Jonathan Ebel and Lloyd Barba provides a new analysis of how religion transformed this region and the people who sought to make a life there. In particular, Ebel and Barba provide new theoretical avenues for exploring the relationship between religion and the racialization of space. Their story begins during The Great Depression, a period marked by destitution and desperation. White migrants, featured in books like John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, have traditionally been portrayed as a poor, "backwards" migrant community who arrived in the Central Valley in their broken-down jalopyies on a hope and a prayer that they could claim a piece of the state's promising agricultural Eden. These newcomers, like many who traveled west before them, sought new opportunities in a bid to secure a stronger economic foothold. However, this well-known and well-trodden narrative has, until now, obscured important details about the government's intervention in the economic life of the region and the fact that Mexican farmworkers also came to the region seeking a better life.

Jonathan Ebel's *From Dust They Came: Government Camps and the Religion of Reform in New Deal California* and Lloyd Barba's, *Sowing the Sacred: Mexican Pentecostal Farmworkers in California* provide a fresh perspective on how religious identity, religious resistance, sacred space and reform measures are manufactured, re-imagined, and

wielded by people and larger bureaucratic institutions. In *From Dust They Came*, Ebel revises a familiar narrative about how New Deal reformers during the Great Depression used government camps as mission sites to civilize and modernize white migratory farm laborers. By using federal government documents from the National Archives and Records Administration, Ebel explores "a story and space that are not easily identifiable as religious." Ebel makes this point clear in the structure and layout of the book, which demonstrate how religious sensibilities were embedded in bureaucratic processes. The reader enters the book in the same way a white migrant would have encountered the government camp, through a spatial ordering of reform and rehabilitation. Ebel's methodology and his use of space as a theoretical intervention complicates what most historians have read as a secular story by emphasizing an approach that reads the hidden script embedded within governmental processes. The spatial ordering of the physical camp, the people who encountered the camp, and those who pushed rehabilitative tactics reveal that these sites held religious epistemic value.

While Ebel's white migrants are enclosed in a rehabilitative space sponsored by the federal government, Lloyd Barba's narrative in *Sowing the Sacred* begins in the soil. Barba reorients our understanding of this region to consider a population that has been overlooked and dehumanized – Mexican farmworkers. For him, this is only logical, since Mexicans, "predated, outnumbered, and outlasted Okie migrant workers in the fields." Barba excavates this untold history through an archive of pictures and oral histories created by Mexican farmworkers who were members of the Apostólico community, a Oneness Pentecostal congregation. The existence of these materials highlights one of Barba's major interventions, rereading how religious resistance was formulated by a community that actively created sacred space despite being subjected to the practices of an exploitative and dehumanizing industry.

In both Ebel's and Barba's work, they illuminate how race, religion, and space are intimately intertwined. Despite living and working in the same geographic region, these two communities responded differently to oppressive conditions of power. For white migrants, the federal government saw their impoverished state as incompatible with living a modern and civilized life. To combat this issue, the government invested in government camps that secured the spatial institutionalization of whiteness. In addition to providing shelter and sanitation, the camps were also designed to offer redemption. This is where we see a religious encounter that at first glance appears to merely be a secular, federal government providing reform and rehabilitation. Through Ebel's analysis, however, we see that this encounter serves as a religious critique, taking shape and form through both imagined and built environments. The book's structure and methodology work together to show what this rehabilitation process might have felt like from the migrants' perspective and from that of camp administrators working to implement the government's vision of redemption.

This point was especially potent in Chapter Two, "The Office," where Ebel demonstrates how the camp possessed and embodied religion through the camp manager and the camp office's role in producing knowledge about migrants' religious lives. In this chapter, Ebel demonstrates how this process unfolded through the camp's data collection. It would have been easy to read reports from the camp on illness and injury, correspondence, and occupancy patterns as mundane bureaucratic paperwork. However, Ebel reveals their religious significance, showing how these reports imbued the office with a form of charismatic authority, which is evident in camp administrators like Tom Collins and others. Collins persuaded migrants that their way of living, finding order, self-

governance, and domestic harmony would lead to their conversion as modern (and moral) subjects.

The government's methodical data collection justified its rehabilitation project, but the way camp officials gathered evidence was also important because it advances how we think about the relationship between religion and race as co-constituting identities. Ebel illustrates this point by noting, "Whiteness mattered both because the norms of American domestic life were supposed to be established and maintained by white families, and because the tragic collapse of life and home across the Great Plains had displaced a white population and thrust it into close proximity with racial groups to whom they were supposed to be superior." To be white meant one needed to be civilized, and to be civilized meant an individual was not only worthy of their citizenship status but also of humane treatment. Thus, the camps provided a distinct, structured area that reinforced the spatial institutionalization of whiteness, wherein the migrants could undergo the government's intervention efforts in a civilized and dignified manner.

In the chapter "Gate, Revisited," Ebel discusses the civilizing presence of religion as an integral component of what it meant to be modern, civilized, and white in the camp. His analysis highlights how these ideas about religion and race shaped the government's desire to provide white migrants with shelter, resources, and an avenue for assimilation into a larger society that recognized citizenship rights as an exclusive benefit for white Americans.

Reading Ebel's and Barba's work together reveals how the story of race and religion in agricultural California is often told in vastly different ways based on the demographic configurations of each group. The title of Barba's work, *Sowing the Sacred*, is not only a nod to how Mexican farmworkers incubated alternative religious communities in industrial-agricultural fields but also gestures to their sacred existence. Field labor was exploitative, oppressive, and debilitating work that historically valued the labor but not the laborer. Barba, in contrast, tells a story that showcases the humanity of workers and the religious worlds that they built in a place that one would not expect to find sacred space. In the chapter on sacred routes, Barba frames his source material as "scriptualized narratives." These narratives were the basis of a genealogical undertaking that served to construct Apostólicos denominational lineage as distinct. The question, therefore, arises, how does genealogy function in the worldview of a faith group that has been marginalized by oppressive social structures?

In Barba's work, the narrative recovery and the re-inscription of Apostólicos are tied to a "respectable" religious lineage through the Azusa Street Revival in what he describes as being a "carefully curated construction of denominational church identity." This point is magnified in Barba's discussion of how Apostólicos transformed the sacralized profane. Barba writes that "baptism was often carried out in the state's artificial waterways had been largely dug out by Mexican laborers." As Mexican farmworkers submerged themselves in the canal waterways, this ritual allowed them to experience an imagined citizenship within their religious community while simultaneously being denied citizenship by the nation-state. These ideas come together through the photographs and his analysis of their importance to ritual creativity and sacred space-making.

For example, Barba recounts how Apostólicos used whatever water sources best served their ritual purposes. Fieldworker and itinerant evangelist Miguel Marrufo likely knew that the rains would form particular pools. However, the religious sense of knowing where they could find waist-high water for baptism reveals a sacred relationship with the natural environment, one that is not only sacred but also reminiscent of the local knowledge other groups possessed about the same terrain. For example, it is reminiscent of Native

American spirituality in the region and the way the environment became an intricate map for being and knowing in the world. These ideas are punctuated in Barba's discussion of borderland soundscapes. Through photographs and his descriptive analysis, the reader has space to imagine Mexican fieldworkers' voices ringing out through the hot valley air. The broader hymnody of borderlands soundscapes imbued the physical landscape with the group's sense of sanctification. Through this reframing of the sacred, their humanity can be heard.

Analysis of the soundscape also reveals how a sacred practice served as a form of religious resistance. Barba reminds us that the fields also echoed with the sounds of capitalism and in many cases, pseudo-colonial control. In this sense, farmworkers' religious soundscape served not only to mark sacred space, sacred practice, and sanctification but also as a symbol of resistance. Like the voices of enslaved Africans who sang over Southern fields during slavery to express resistance, hope, and refuge, we encounter here a group that also relies on sound to illuminate and reclaim their humanity. Barba's treatment of this process speaks directly to what the late religious historian Charles Long referred to as uncovering the "underside of modernity."

Jonathan Ebel and Lloyd Barba's work advances new theoretical avenues for uncovering how religion transforms the racialization of space and how these categories influence a more nuanced understanding of rural communities operating under the weight of agricultural capitalism. With their attention to the theoretical role of space, labor, religious resistance, and race, *Sowing the Sacred* and *From Dust They Came* are strong additions to the field, especially for those working on uncovering the untold religious history of life in the American West.

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