

BOOK REVIEW

A Diagram for Fire: Miracles and Variation in an American Charismatic Movement

By Jon Bialecki

Reviewed by Q. Adam Marshall

Oakland: University of California Press
2017

Toward the end of his award-winning book¹ *A Diagram for Fire: Miracles and Variation in an American Charismatic Movement*, Jon Bialecki asks the core question that he carefully develops throughout his anthropological engagement with the Vineyard Movement: “Is the study of this mode of religiosity valuable for reasons that exceed a topical interest in this particular object? Does it tell us something about, say, religious change and permutation itself?” (200). Bialecki seeks to understand how we can account for change and variation, not only within Christianity, but cut across religion as a whole. The category of religion as an object of anthropology has been noted for its plasticity and blurred boundaries. Who or what counts as a purely religious subject? Even Christians themselves cannot agree on who counts as being an actual Christian (7). Added to the dilemma of studying Christianity with its multiplicity of modes and variances, Bialecki addresses the “problem of presence” prevalent within the anthropology of Christianity—namely, how do religious folk and anthropologists alike account for an ontologically-absent God who acts in the world? Bialecki suggests that the charismatic Christians of the Vineyard Movement can help clear up these quandaries. With their (at times) shared pneumatology of Pentecostalism, Vineyard Christians expect and allow for God to change themselves, their lives, their wills, and even their religiosity. Yet, understanding *how* God acts through miracles (charisms) remains a fluid, ambiguous, and at times contentious task.

Sophisticatedly drawing on ethnographic and historical evidence, Bialecki addresses these questions by unpacking the logic of *miracles* within a Southern California Vineyard church. The Vineyard Movement’s marriage between Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism allows for various (seemingly infinite)

“modes” of Christian life. While all Vineyard churches are distinctly *Vineyard-like*, no Vineyard church is the same. He researches a “mixed fellowship of middle-aged Vineyard veterans, college students, and young professionals located by the coast in one of the most well-off regions of the country” (xv) and “did everything they did” (xvi). Although an atheist, Bialecki successfully navigates the pitfalls of “mythological atheism,” which brackets off the miraculous and does not take God as a serious actor. God being the driving force of charismatic Christianity, Bialecki recognizes the need to take God seriously in his anthropological engagement with Vineyard Christians. His position as a sympathetic non-believer allows him to gain a unique position in studying God. “Believers,” he suggests, “tend not to try and look inside the miracle to see if they can spy the clockwork” (78).

By dissecting miracles, with their ambiguous meanings and mutating forms, Bialecki makes effective use of Gilles Deleuze’s concept of “the diagram” to express how we can begin to understand variability and how Christianity can actualize in different modes. The diagram “is an abstract machine, a set of pure relations that fold in, interrupt each other, and, when given content, have a product or expression” (69-70). They are simply abstract, mutating, dynamic topologies that connect to different diagrams and cut cross all aspects of the human subject. While his discussion seems at times as “nosebleed metaphysics” (79), his theoretical logic unfolds throughout his book.

He begins by describing the plasticity and multiplicity of *time* deployed by Vineyard Christians. The multi-layered temporality of the “already/not yet” helps explain why some miracles work and others do not. Vineyard temporality might seem as a continuum of competing forces (e.g. is it God’s reluctance to provide a miracle or Satan’s interference?), he assures us it is not. Likewise, the polity of the Vineyard Movement allows for constricted change. The

¹ Winner of the 2017 Sharon Stephens Prize, American Ethnological Society.

Vineyard's history has been rooted in the notion of "freedom from religion" and expectation for God to uproot and drastically change the religiosity of the Church. However, change and variances need to be managed. These sorts of dynamic and seemingly competing forces calls for a non-diametrical theoretical engagement that allows for heterogeneity. Thus, the diagram for fire.

Utilising the image of fire to capture the diagram for miracles (the charismatic diagram), he notes, "for these Christians the Holy Spirit waxes and wanes, but it is never divisible. It is everywhere, yet it moves like a fire, searing some places for a while only to burn out, while bypassing other spaces completely" (5). Miracles, as Bialecki richly shows, are on one hand constrained to specific religious ideologies while others might bleed outward into other, non-religious spheres. In their ambition to experience God's miraculous blessings, Vineyard Christians do a lot of work to "address, mask, or mark" (205) the ontological absence of God. Hearing successfully from God, whether through reading texts or from other human actors (i.e. prophecy), requires negotiation, training, discernment, and an element of surprise to accurately hear God's voice. Just as language and other semiotics are unstable in meaning, so too are the human subjects who seek healing. Healing from demonization, for example, requires a play between the shifting subjectivities of the believer (i.e. the human, evil spirit, and Holy Spirit). Ultimately, healing results in the transformation of the will. As the diagram for fire collapses onto other diagrams, miracles can take shape in unexpected spaces as economic and political locales. Like fire, the Holy Spirit moves, dances, and puts forward mercurial change and is a fitting image for the diagram for miracles.

So as Vineyard Christians accommodate for flux and change, so too should anthropologists of religion. While not privileging religion above other poorly bounded categories that move in and out of religious diagrams (e.g. ethics, philosophy, aesthetics, etc.) it remains an important category for anthropology. Bialecki's theoretical engagement can at times be quite dense. Those unfamiliar with anthropology and/or Bialecki's work might find his writing occasionally impenetrable. However, his captivating ethnography is equally affable as it is impressive. He refreshingly utilises humor throughout his book, which very much reflects his personality. As Bialecki compellingly shows, the intricacies of Christianity, with its different modes and mutating forms on different scales can actually provide important insight to human life outside of theological discourse. While it might seem strange for Christian communities to welcome an anthropologist (an atheist to boot) to critically investigate themselves, it

is, I am convinced, an important practice for reflexivity and self-discovery.



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