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

by Jon Bialecki, Oakland, CA, University of California Press, 2017, 288 pp., \$34.95 (paperback), ISBN 9780520294219

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Jon Bialecki's *A Diagram for Fire: Miracles and Variation in an American Charismatic Movement* presents a unique study of the Vineyard movement, a group of affiliated churches within contemporary North American charismatic and evangelical Christianity. Bialecki carried out fieldwork in one Southern California Vineyard church, where he attended services, meetings, and 'small groups' for over two years. He met with members of the church for countless conversations, studied the Bible with them, and read the books that they recommended. He also visited other Vineyard churches, attended national Vineyard gatherings, and interviewed a range of people in the wider Vineyard movement.

In the midst of all the ethnographic material that he collected, Bialecki observes a recurrent event, namely 'the miracle'. This observation becomes the springboard for his analysis: How can we, as social scientists, understand the miracle? How can we describe what is going on in an event that is so intimately associated with an action by God? How can Bialecki study it when, as he points out in the book, he is himself non-religious?


There is no sustained conversation on the miraculous in the anthropology of religion, perhaps because of these difficulties of including God as a social actor in the analysis, and the field's practical tendency toward methodological atheism. It is therefore all the more welcome that Bialecki puts forward a unique and theoretically bold answer to these questions. He suggests that the miracle – as well as other religious events – can be studied through the Deleuzian diagram. A 'diagram' here refers to a set of relations between social forces, and the plasticity of these virtual relations may yield a variety of actual social situations. This gives Bialecki a more targeted research question: What is the diagram of a miracle? Or, what is the diagram for operating with God?

The bulk of the book is devoted to outlining the diagram that Bialecki proposes. He calls it 'a diagram for fire', alluding both to the Christian representation of the Holy Spirit in the form of fire, and the Christian charismatic orientation toward lively, 'on fire' experiences, such as entering into a connection with God through speaking in tongues. It seems to me the connection made between fire and the miraculous also evokes the ability of fire to consume, interrupt, and change. A schematic presentation of the diagram, Bialecki suggests, would take into account relations between social forces such as the (willing and unwilling) responses that are available when a miraculous sign presents itself, and the different types of causal explanations (naturalistic, theological, etc.) that may vie for credibility. In an innovative move, this theoretical scaffold allows Bialecki to analyse the real effects of God in a social setting, regardless of God's ontological status. For example, he is able to provide nuanced theoretical reflection on miraculous events – such as a 'deliverance' from demonic domination – without having to resort to either methodological atheism or theism; instead, he can convincingly describe this phenomenon as a real actualisation of the diagram for fire.

Bialecki's theoretical reflections on facets of the diagram are interspersed with evocative ethnographic descriptions of how the diagram plays out in a range of different situations within a Vineyard community. There are wonderfully vivid stories of prayer, prophecy, and healing in Vineyard groups. The experience of singing worship songs comes alive, as does the experience of having God speak to you through Bible reading. Bialecki reports his own attempts at prayer, and even being the subject of a minor healing, with characteristic critical reflexivity.

The 'middle-range healing' he describes occurred at an evening 'small group' meeting, during the time set aside for prayer requests. Bialecki mentioned that he had a cold, and a handful of the group members gathered around him; some touching him, some standing or sitting nearby. One spoke in tongues, and then gave direct commands to the illness ('illness go to Jesus'). While the situation may seem formulaic, Bialecki tracks in his field notes the particular associations he finds between the ritual language and previous conversations between himself and members of the group, giving an interesting glimpse into the spontaneous personalisation of the ritual. At certain moments he felt faint, and at others waves of warmth, and the second time the group stopped to check how he was doing he noticed that his cold symptoms were hardly troubling him any longer. In the book he reflects on not just the technicalities of this ritual – the vocabularies and modes of address, for example – but also the work that this event, and others like it, do in allowing the small group to locate desires (for healing) and forces (divine and demonic) in and out of human subjects. Importantly, in this diagram, the outcome is surprising.

The book has earned the Sharon Stephens Prize from the American Ethnological Society, as well as honourable mention for the Clifford Geertz Prize from the Society for the Anthropology of Religion. As indicated by these prizes, the book is important far beyond the anthropology of charismatic Christianity. It is a pioneering work that speaks to a diverse set of audiences, from scholars seeking to understand religious and miraculous events, or other types of unexpected social events (in the political realm, for example), to those readers who are interested in how to theoretically unfold a Deleuzian diagram. I suspect that this is a book that will be read and reflected on for many years to come.

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