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**From the Selected Works of Paul F. Lakeland**

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# The Culture of Protest: Religious Activism and the US Sanctuary Movement

Paul F. Lakeland, *Fairfield University*



Available at: [https://works.bepress.com/paul\\_lakeland/16/](https://works.bepress.com/paul_lakeland/16/)

their *sonum* is less than completely satisfying. Some remarks on their activities and training appear in the first chapter, but in the rest of the book, they are but shadowy presences. As Vitebsky suggests importance of the shamans' gendered roles, their neglect is disappointing.

Finally, at the end of the preface Vitebsky notes that just as the work was going to press in 1992 he visited the Sora and found their society changing rapidly. Although that observation came at a time when reworking the volume might have proved daunting, the work tends to freeze Sora life in a perennial, ethnographic present, reflecting what Vitebsky encountered in 1979. But, these are perhaps mere quibbles; in a work as rich as this, the reader is left hungering for more. I have read few other studies of tribal India that offer so much depth. There is rich material in this volume for those interested in cross-cultural studies as well as for area specialists.

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**Susan Bibler Coutin**, *The Culture of Protest: Religious Activism and the U.S. Sanctuary Movement*. Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview Press, 1993. Pp. xiv + 250.

The U.S. Sanctuary movement arose and flourished during the decade of the eighties. In response to the flood of undocumented Central American aliens arriving primarily in the south-west of the U.S., and in the light of the perception that most if not all of them were fleeing intolerable social conditions for which U.S. government policy was in large measure responsible, significant numbers of American citizens banded together to offer "sanctuary" to numbers of these illegal immigrants. Doing so, the Americans involved courted legal action at home, and often braved the dangers of the "crossings" with those people they had set out to help. Initially a movement within Christian churches, particularly in Arizona and California, it spread beyond Christians and beyond the south-west, though it remained most active and most courageous within the states contiguous to the Mexican border.

Susan Coutin's book, based upon her 1990 doctorate from Stanford University, sets out to study the Sanctuary movement, and in particular to investigate what happens to the inner convictions and even spiritual perspectives of those deeply involved in this movement for social change. She opens with an introduction that exposes the peculiar problematic of her particular research project, that in order to study what she had elected to examine, it was necessary for her to participate in the movement itself. From the outset, then, Coutin faced the tension between a willing and increasingly committed involvement in Sanctuary, and the need for at least some recognizable level of professional "objectivity" to govern the structure of the research and the analysis of the data accumulated.

The three sections into which the book is divided examine in turn three intersecting and interwoven elements of Sanctuary. The first begins by outlining the history of the movement, then recounts stories of experiences of crossing borders related by people in the movement, and concludes by looking at the transformations and even personal conversions that these

experiences produced. Here, Coutin notes the conscientization that occurs among Sanctuary workers, and distinguishes between the experience of Christians and Jews. Interestingly, both here and in the concluding chapter she sees the Christians often being led to a more dramatic change in their religious self-understanding — as in a conversion to liberation theology — while the Jews seem to see the parallels between their own and the Latin American experiences of exile and persecution. Was there really no equally dramatic conversion among Jews?

Part two focuses on the political position of the illegal immigrants, Sanctuary's attempts to re-present them as refugees, and the legal actions that followed against Sanctuary. Here the author turns to the social theory of Michel Foucault, and his argument that power and hence oppression resides in the texture of a particular discourse. I am not sure that Foucault is all that helpful here, and even less sure that he can be employed piecemeal in this fashion, though he does support the author's contention that small, individual decisions do in the end constitute cultural change. The final section tries to draw out the deeper levels of change that involvement in Sanctuary elicited in people, and to some degree to generalize from the Sanctuary phenomenon.

The concept of the "participant observer" in social scientific research is perhaps less controversial than it might at one time have been, and Coutin makes an excellent case for the need for this kind of status for a study of Sanctuary. But the two realities of engagement and analysis that such a role entails focus the reservations that I would have about the ultimate success of the work. On the one hand, there is no doubt in my mind that the author is right when she says that her access to people in the movement would have been impeded by the least trace of suspicion that she was not sympathetic, even that she might be a "plant". On the other, there is a constant sense that Coutin's deep interest in Sanctuary goes beyond merely academic purposes, and is continually threatening to explode the conventions of the scholarly monograph. Indeed, one wishes sometimes that it would. Not that this is a bad or uninteresting work, not at all. But rather that the subject — above all the conversion of heart that occurs within Sanctuary workers — and apparently the sympathies of the author demand a less restrictive format.