

“A Horrible, Awful Shame”: Oppositional Affect as Religious Labor at Azusa Street Revival

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At the beginning of the twentieth century, a long-running discussion within American Christianity focused in on the role of affective experience in religious identity. Who *were* and who were *not* real people of God ceased to be primarily a matter of belief. The discussion was drowned out by the crescendo of the ritual script of holiness evangelicalism. Itinerant camp-meeting preachers like Maria Woodworth Etter (d. 1924), decrying the formality of liturgy as dead ritual,” exhorted seekers instead to know God’s power for themselves. This knowledge Etter and her contemporaries comprehended to be bodily knowledge. Holiness revival meetings that ran all night, characterized by trances and physical paroxysms like “the jerks,” were reportedly punctuated by miraculous healings. Among rural, agrarian folk Wesley’s heartfelt religion had taken a spectacular turn into affective overwhelm. Yet, during the same period, mainline traditional Protestantism censured “emotional fanaticism” and forwarded the clarified mind as the pinnacle of spiritual health, increasingly coupling it with middle-class aesthetics (McCloud 2007). Religious competition within Protestantism developed an oppositional relationality of emotional states and ritual scripts that were produced along class lines.

When, in 1906, California’s Azusa Street Mission broke out in a familiar, if more fervid, production of catharsis and bodily ecstasies, the resulting scandal gave fresh sociological meaning to “pearl-clutching.” As the Los Angeles Times lamented that

Azusa made the “night...hideous” and competitor preachers decried its aesthetics as the “last vomit of Satan,” participants described their experiences as “so sweet, [they were] heaven below.” This paper reads this polarization of emotional apprehensions of the divine for its class moorings and highlights latent opposing anthropological discourses. What do various visceral reactions toward religious convulsions reveal about their cultural gazers, be they American coreligionists, (then-)newly cosmopolitan Los Angelenos, or French critical theorists in the wake of Lacan? If, as Monique Scheer posits, emotions are a kind of practice and as Judith Casselberry argues, religious emotions are a kind of labor, what has the religious labor of early American Pentecostalism produced? How do Pentecostals continue to use affect to access authority and and legitimacy as social goods otherwise difficult to acquire? Pentecostalism is the most important development in religion in the twentieth century, accumulating more than 500 million adherents in roughly the span of one hundred years, what do the class contours and warfare of its birthing on American soil reveal about the politics and power of public affect?