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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Dust Bowl, the Depression, and American Protestant Responses to Environmental Devastation

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Abstract

The 1930s Dust Bowl on the Great Plains was one of the most catastrophic environmental disasters in history. Over-farming, severe drought, and high winds primed dust storms. Depopulation occurred in Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Colorado, and New Mexico. All was made worse by the economic crisis. While historians have written extensively about the Dust Bowl, its causes and its effects, there is little detailed scholarship on the religious dimensions of this ecological tragedy. This article examines some of the important ways that the Dust Bowl shaped Protestant religious life and popular theology just as it prompted denominational relief campaigns, educational efforts, and conservation work. It looks particularly at Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, holiness groups, and Pentecostals. Reactions to the Dust Bowl reveal patterns of thinking about and acting on ecology, social concern, migration, millennialism, and new federal relief efforts. An examination of the growing historical fragmentation of white Protestantism is central to this article. In this era of environmental ruin and mass migration to the West, religious groups and individuals offered vastly different solutions and interpretations, foreshadowing later political and cultural conflicts. In the 1930s, long before the birth of modern environmentalism, Protestants were asking why things had gone so horribly wrong and what, if anything, could be done about it.

Keywords: the Dust Bowl; religion and the Great Depression; environmental history; the 1930s; the Great Plains; the Council for Social Action

Jesse Clyde Fisher was the Methodist General Superintendent for the Liberal, Kansas District in the mid-1930s. His tenure coincided with an environmental cataclysm. An unprecedented drought, heatwaves, and soil erosion made life in the "dust basin" unbearable. "What is to be done before it rains?" he asked those gathered in Winfield for the Southwest Kansas Conference in October 1935. An ardent Republican, Fisher told fellow Methodists that the "Federal Government found it necessary to put thousands of dollars into this country to keep people alive." That support was critical in a region where dust storms, dust pneumonia, and crop failures devastated communities. Schools could not hold classes in southwest Kansas and, said Fisher, "our

churches barely existed." Dust covered all and piled up three feet high. Houses had to be sealed to keep out the fine particles. "In one place," Fisher recalled, "the ceiling of the new church sagged badly when a few people came for the morning service. Before the men could get at it, it had burst through and the dust was pouring down. Three tons were taken out." Fisher grimly reported that the "mortality rate went up." "One pastor conducted ten funerals in eleven days."[1]

The ecological calamity of the Dust Bowl in the 1930s was unlike anything Fisher and other Americans had experienced before. Exhausted soil and violent dust storms laid waste to the Great Plains. The devastation stretched from Texas north to Alberta and Saskatchewan. Indeed, the Dust Bowl was one of the worst ecological disasters in history.[2] Not surprisingly, this environmental catastrophe shaped the way people on the Plains thought about God, judgment, nature, and their relationship to their land and their government.

The effects of the drought and the storms of dust were apparent all over the country. Dust storms carried fine particles of earth all the way to the big cities of the East Coast. Newspaper headlines regularly announced families on relief, communities in crisis, migrants leaving the arid region, and churches closing their doors.[3] The trauma that resulted would last for decades. Families passed down stories of deprivation, suffering, and poverty from one generation to the next. They also asked themselves: What did it all mean? Could blame be assigned? What could be learned from the destruction of the land?[4]

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[1]Jesse C. Fisher, "Liberal District," in *Official Minutes of the Fifty-Fourth Annual Session of the Southwest Kansas Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Held at Winfield, Kansas, October 9 to 14, 1935* (Hutchinson, KS: Hutchinson Office Supply and Printing Company, 1935), 455–456, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas. See more on Fisher in John D. Bright, *Kansas: The First Century, Volume 4* (New York: Lewis Historical Pub., 1956), 558–559.

[2]Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4–5. George Bergstrom, *World Food Resources* (New York: Intent Educational Publishers, 1973), 203. Along with the Dust Bowl, Bergstrom ranked two other human-caused ecological disasters: the depletion of plant life by livestock in the Mediterranean and the Chinese deforestation of around 3,000 BCE. "Drought Threatens Nation," the *Pathfinder* (Washington, DC), July 18, 1936, 2. The historian Pamela Riney-Kehrberg calls the Dust Bowl "one of the worst sustained environmental disasters in American history." Pamela Riney-Kehrberg quoted in "Ken Burns on the Generation that Survived the Dust Bowl," NPR, the *Takeaway*, November 16, 2012, http://www.wnyc.org/story/250583-ken-burns-generation-survived-dust-bowl/ (Accessed on January 4, 2017). For a counter argument on the human factor, see Kenneth M. Sylvester and Eric S. A. Rupley, "Revising the Dust Bowl: High above the Kansas Grasslands," *Environmental History* 17, no. 3 (2012): 603–633.

[3]"Foreclosure on Church," *Morning Chronicle*, September 20, 1935, 1. "City Church Faces Foreclosure Suit," *Oklahoma News*, June 10, 1936, 2. "Church Faces Foreclosure: Kansas Catholics May Lose Properties," *Hutchinson News*, September 13, 1939, 6. In the Depression years, Robert Moats Miller observed, "the churches suffered along with the rest of the nation. Membership dropped, budgets were slashed, benevolent and missionary enterprises set adrift, ministers fired, and chapels closed." Robert Moats Miller, *American Protestantism and Social Issues, 1919–1939* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1958), 63.

[4]"Methodist Church, Rev. M. E. Markwell, Pastor," *Boise City News*, April 18, 1935, 3. "Dust Not Curse," *Guymon Daily News*, February 11, 1937, 1. Ray Lessig, "Relief from Dust Storms," *Kansas City Star*, March 27, 1935, 15. "With the Churches: Methodist Church, Why Dust Storms and Drought?" *Lodge Pole Express*, March 28, 1935, 1. Harold E. Fey, "The Religious Crisis in Rural America," *American Scholar* 4, no. 2 (Spring 1935): 181–189. Jesse Clyde Fisher, "The Dust Bowl Now," newspaper clipping, June 10, 1937, Paul Holmes Collection, Kansas United Methodist Archives, Baker University, Baldwin, Kansas.

This article looks at questions like these and considers some of the ways that the Dust Bowl altered Protestant religious life and popular theology just as it prompted denominational relief campaigns, educational efforts, and conservation work. This analysis will fill a gap in our understanding of American Protestant responses to environmental devastation and will examine, as a result, the growing divided within white Protestantism in the Depression years.

This article also follows on the scholarship of historians such as Alison Collis Greene, who has written about how the Great Depression and the New Deal transformed southern Protestantism. During this disruptive era, the southern Protestant establishment fractured. Churches divided over political and racial matters and debated the role that the government should play in their daily lives. New religious alliances formed as conservatives rejected New Deal liberalism. A similar kind of fracturing took place on the Great Plains. But whereas Greene finds that the southern Christian left acted largely outside of churches, the situation in the middle of the country was a little different. Liberal and leftist protestants on the Plains tended to operate from within certain mainline churches. Additionally, it was more common for white evangelicals to support the Democratic Party in the former Confederate states. In states such as Kansas, and to a lesser extent Oklahoma, states with strong Republican alliances with churches, believers were far more likely to discredit or denounce the New Deal and the party of Roosevelt.[5]

This article similarly draws on the work of Peter J. Thuesen who has illuminated the "fascinating and often unsettling connection between weather and religion." Thuesen focuses on tornadoes and violent weather, which were experienced with some regularity. The severe drought and dust storms of the 1930s, by contrast, were quite extraordinary, and perhaps even more prone to religious and apocalyptic interpretations. Thuesen notes that "the evangelical Protestantism that has so shaped American culture" has tended "to see disasters through a broadly providentialist lens." At the same time, some non-evangelical Protestants in the 1920s and 1930s began to doubt providentialism and the ability of prayer to change weather.[6] Among other things, this article explores some of these differences and looks at how an environmental catastrophe played a part in the ongoing fragmentation of American Protestantism.

II. Scope and Definitions

The focus here is largely on white Protestantism. The Catholic Church had developed robust outreach programs to rural communities and had established a strong, theologically informed ethic of land stewardship. Judging from polls in the 1930s, Catholics were also much more likely to support Roosevelt and the New Deal.[7] An entirely

[5]Alison Collis Greene, *No Depression in Heaven: The Great Depression, the New Deal, and the Transformation of Religion in the Delta* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 6–7. See also Report of Aubrey Mills, Exhibit B, "Clergy Letters," 21–A, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.

[6]Peter J. Thuesen, *Tornado God: American Religion and Violent Weather* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 6–7.

[7]Christopher Hamlin and John T. McGreevy, "The Greening of America, Catholic Style, 1930–1950," *Environmental History* 11, no. 3 (July 2006): 464–499; Jeffrey Marlett, "Strangers in Our Midst: Catholics in Rural America," in *Roman Catholicism in the United States: A Thematic History*, eds., Margaret M. McGuinness and James T. Fisher (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 92–98; David S. Bovée, *The Church and the Land: The National Catholic Rural Life Conference and American Society, 1923–2007* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010). On support for Roosevelt, see George Horace Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1935–1971, Vol 1, 1935–1948*

different and productive study could be undertaken on that tradition. Also, with limited space and in the interest of precision, a focus on white Protestants reveals important political and cultural tensions at work in the Depression years. The region hit hardest by the drought, soil erosion, and destitution represented one of the most ethnically homogenous parts of the country. Dust Bowl migrants to the West Coast were also overwhelmingly white and Protestant.[8]

Reactions to environmental destruction and the Depression in general varied considerable from one religious tradition to another. This article offers an overview as well as a more detailed analysis of such responses. Reactions to the Dust Bowl disclose general patterns of thinking about and acting on ecology, social concern, migration, and new federal relief efforts. Accordingly, this article examines some of the ways that Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals, and other groups understood the environmental crises of the so-called "dirty thirties." The Congregationalists' wide-ranging efforts to address the problems of soil depletion, drought, and dust storms deserve special attention. Using the sources of the Congregationalists' Council for Social Action, this article also examines how church officials, liberal Protestant activists, and allied laypeople harnessed their faith to the causes of social justice and conservation.

It can be difficult to define religious traditions, which contain many variations within them and change much over space and time. But some general definitional work will be useful to delimit evangelicalism, fundamentalism, holiness, Pentecostalism, and liberal Protestantism. By the 1920s and 1930s, evangelicalism was a broad religious movement that claimed millions of adherents in the US.[9] The Baptist and Methodist denominations had typically been the largest representatives. Evangelicalism was a coalition of likeminded groups and individuals, united by their outreach efforts, theology, and a network of media. George Marsden suggests that key evangelical beliefs included "(1) the Reformation doctrine of the final authority of the Bible, (2) the real historical character of God's saving work recorded in scripture, (3) salvation to eternal life based on the redemptive work of Christ, (4) the importance of evangelism and missions, and (5) the importance of a spiritually transformed life." More recently, however, scholars have defined the term less by beliefs than by practice, gender, race, political orientation, and other matters.[10]

(New York: Random House, 1972), 36; and Gary Scott Smith, *Faith and the Presidency from George Washington to George W. Bush* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 204–207.

[8]"African American Population, 1930," www.nationalgeographic.org/maps/african-american-population-maps/ (Accessed on January 10, 2022). On white Protestants in the Dust Bowl region, see James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (New York: New Press, 2005), 56, 100. See also, Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 61. On the whiteness of Dust Bowl migrants to California, and the intersection of race and class, see James Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 21, 32, 78–113.

[9]*US Bureau of the Census, Religious Bodies, 1926, vol. II* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1929); *US Bureau of the Census, Religious Bodies, 1936, vol. II* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1941).

[10]George Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 4–5. Randall J. Stephens and Karl Giberson, *The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 6–9. Matthew Avery Sutton, "New Trends in the Historiography of American Fundamentalism," *Journal of American Studies*, 51, no. 1 (2017): 235–241. "Roundtable: Re-examining David Bebbington's 'Quadrilateral Thesis,'" *Fides et Historia* 47:1 (Winter/Spring 2015): 44–96. For a skeptical view of the term, see Linford D. Fisher, "Evangelicals and Unevangelicals: The Contested History of a Word, 1500–1950," *Religion and American Culture* 26, no. 2 (2016): 184–226. The 1936 religious census for Kansas estimated that the

Marsden has also described a fundamentalist, with tongue somewhat in cheek, as "an evangelical who is angry about something."[11] The term fundamentalism originally began to circulate in the 1920s to describe typically white, southern, militant, evangelicals who stressed the "fundamentals" of the faith. These fundamentals usually included a firm stance on the infallibility of the Bible, the Virgin birth of Jesus, the reality of sin, the need for salvation, the resurrection of Jesus, the validity of miracles, and the significance of prophecy and signs of the end of the world. Fundamentalists tended to also be patriarchal and aggressively opposed to perceived liberalism in churches and secularism in society.[12]

Pentecostalism shared much in common with fundamentalism, especially its apocalypticism and emphasis on miracles. Pentecostalism emerged out of the holiness movement in the early twentieth century. Holiness people emphasized sinless perfectionism, low-church theology, and an austere understanding of dress and behavior. Pentecostalism took root following a series of interracial holiness revivals in California in 1906. Adherents imagined themselves reliving the experiences of the biblical book of Acts. They held loud, boisterous healing and prophecy services and denounced cold, lifeless religion. Of the four—evangelicals, fundamentalists, holiness people, and Pentecostals—Pentecostals were the most inclined to read droughts, famines, wars, earthquakes, and other disasters in supernatural terms. Unlike most other American Protestants, they practiced healing and tongues speaking. These were signs, they thought, of the turbulent "last days."[13]

Finally, liberal Protestantism represented vast swaths of elite America. Members of representative churches—Episcopal, Presbyterian, Congregational, and Unitarian—were some of the wealthiest and most influential individuals in the country. They were mostly to be found in the northeast. They tended to understand scripture in light of new scientific and theoretical developments.[14] Protestant liberals also began to apply their notion of social salvation to the environment in a more deliberate fashion in the twentieth century. That understanding of salvation would inform much of the thinking and action around the crises of the Great Depression. For many of them, the Dust Bowl was a problem to be solved.

To what degree did theology or practice influence how Americans understood the environmental crisis? Three decades after the Depression, the historian Lynn White

two main Methodist denominations made up 20.43 percent of the state's church membership. The Disciples of Christ represented 9.5 percent of the total. Northern and southern Baptists claimed 8.2 percent. Holiness and Pentecostal groups were comparatively small, with no one denomination claiming more than 1 percent. The 1936 religious census for Oklahoma put the combined Baptists at 22.82 percent and the Methodists at 19.4 percent. The Disciples of Christ represented 8.81 percent. The Church of the Nazarene claimed 1.87 percent and the Assemblies of God represented 1.95 percent. *US Bureau of the Census, Religious Bodies, 1936, vol. I* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1941), 180, 212, 214, 236, 270, 272.

[11]George Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, 4–5.

[12]Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014), xi, 176.

[13]Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Randall J. Stephens, *The Fire Spreads: Holiness and Pentecostalism in the American South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

[14]Elesha J. Coffman, *The* Christian Century *and the Rise of the Protestant Mainline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 5. William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 3–4.

wrote his influential essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis." He concluded that "our science and our present technology are so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our ecological crisis can be expected from them alone." Christian anthropocentrism, a devaluation of nature, and ideas about dominion over creation caused the crisis, White claimed.[15] Yet ideas about stewardship of the land, the sacredness of the soil, and the interconnectedness of living things had long inspired Christians and had animated some Protestant agrarianism in the early twentieth century, and especially in the 1930s.[16]

Important questions persist because scholarship on religious responses to the human-influenced troubles of the Dust Bowl era are largely missing. Indeed, Philip Jenkins writes of the larger field, "for all the current outpouring of climate-related history, one area in particular stands out as a very significant gap, and that is religion, broadly defined." Jenkins claims that "climate remains the missing dimension in the history of religions."[17] For as religious a region as the Great Plains was—the buckle of the Bible Belt in H. L. Mencken's and Sinclair Lewis's satirical imaginations—there has been surprisingly little written on this time, place, and subject. Most historians who have written about the Dust Bowl have tended to deal with the religious dimensions only in passing.[18] In addition, religious life in this period has not received the same degree of coverage as it has, for instance, in the postwar era.[19]

[15]Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (March 1967): 1207.

[16]For a brief discussion of some of the shortcomings of Lynn White's argument, see Evan Berry, *Devoted to Nature: The Religious Roots of American Environmentalism* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 15–16. See also, Catherine L. Albanese, *Reconsidering Nature Religion* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002); Thomas Dunlap, *Faith in Nature: Environmentalism as Religious Quest* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2004); John Gatta, *Making Nature Sacred: Literature, Religion, and Environment in America from the Puritans to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Mark Stoll, *Inherit the Holy Mountain: Religion and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). On agrarianism, see Kevin M. Lowe, *Baptized with the Soil: Christian Agrarians and the Crusade for Rural America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 7–8, 30–31.

[17]Philip Jenkins, *Climate, Catastrophe, and Faith: How Changes in Climate Drive Religious Upheaval* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 22–23.

[18]For coverage of religion and the Dust Bowl, see Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 61, 148, 196; Timothy Egan, *Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), 38, 150, 168, 199–200, 206–207, 212, 218, 260; R. Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1994), 17, 63–66; Douglas Hurt, *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981), 55–57; Gregory, *American Exodus*, 191–221; Paul Bonnifield, *The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt, and Depression* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979), 189–910; Neil Larry Shumsky, "Dust, Disease, Death and Deity: Constructing and Deconstructing the 'Dust Bowl,'" *Journal of American Culture* 38, no. 3 (September 2015): 224–230. One of the best accounts of religion and the Dust Bowl remains Brad Lookingbill, "'A God-forsaken place': Folk Eschatology and the Dust Bowl," *Great Plains Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (Fall 1994): 273–286.

[19]Heather D. Curtis, "'God Is Not Affected by the Depression': Pentecostal Missions during the 1930s," *Church History* 80, no. 3 (September 2011): 580. Jon Butler asks, "In what real ways did the character of the Great Depression deepen the American penchant to create new religions and reshape old ones?" Jon Butler, "Forum: American Religion and the Great Depression," *Church History* 80:3 (September 2011): 578. See also, Jonathan H. Ebel, "In Every Cup of Bitterness, Sweetness: California Christianity in the Great Depression," *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture* 80, no. 3 (September 2011): 590–599;

The range of contemporary religious thinking and acting on the Dust Bowl also reveals something important about the theological and cultural spectrum in Depression-era America. It points to the growing divide within white Protestantism. In this era of environmental ruin and mass migration to the West, religious groups and individuals offered vastly different solutions and interpretations, foreshadowing later conflicts. In the 1930s, long before the birth of modern environmentalism, Protestants were asking why things had gone so horribly wrong and what, if anything, could be done about it.

II. The Historical Background and Making Sense of the Dust and the Depression

Great Plains farmers in the Depression years sought answers and solace from their denominations and local churches, their Bibles, communities, federal agencies, and local farm organizations. But for nearly everyone, the scope and impact of drought, dust storms, and economic ruin were difficult, if not impossible, to come to terms with. On the eve of one of the worst dust storms in recorded history on April 14, 1935, the Associated Press reported that crop damage estimates exceeded $30 million in "a seriously affected area of more than 15 million acres." Associated Press staff writer Robert Geiger witnessed a towering April storm rolling over the western edge of the Oklahoma Panhandle. In a piece for the *Washington Evening Star*, he coined the term "Dust Bowl" to describe the hardest-hit areas of western Oklahoma, southwestern Kansas, southeastern Colorado, the Texas Panhandle, and northeastern New Mexico. The choking clouds of black and saffron dust, said Geiger, "have darkened everything but hope."[20]

In previous decades, there was much to be hopeful about. The needs of the post-war international market had made farming highly profitable, a factor that led to the "choking clouds" of dust Geiger witnessed. The abundance of the post-war years seemed to have a divine origin for those in the middle of the country. Farm families had been spiritualizing their victories and defeats since they had, with the help of the federal government, forcibly removed Indians and settled the territories after the Homestead Act of 1862. During the Great War of 1917–18, the region experienced a boom as wheat demand skyrocketed. God had blessed tillers of the soil with plenty, so thought plains-people. In 1919, Oklahoma's Governor J. B. A. Robertson issued a thanksgiving proclamation, "expressing our gratitude to the ruler of the universe for the bounteous crops" and "for health and happiness."[21] Iowa Governor N. E. Kendall issued a similar statement in 1923, highlighting divine favor. "Nature has rewarded abundantly the industry of the husbandman," he intoned. "Let our hearts be lifted in gratitude," Kendall declared, "for the immeasurable benefits which Divine Providence has bestowed on us." In these boom years the governors of Kansas and Texas drafted comparable proclamations.[22] The people of the Great Plains only later came to understand the results of this market boom and the devastating impact of the so-called great plow-up.

Alison Collis Greene, "The End of 'The Protestant Era'?" *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture* 80, no. 3 (September 2011): 600–610.

[20]Robert Geiger, "If it Rains . . ." *Evening Star*, April 15, 1935, A2. Egan, *Worst Hard Time*, 213–214. See Elkhart, Kansas Methodist pastor Paul Holmes's personal account of the April 14, 1935 storm, "A Dust Bowl Experience," Paul Holmes Collection, Kansas United Methodist Archives, Baker University, Baldwin, Kansas.

[21]"Thanksgiving Proclamation," *Waurika News-Democrat*, November 20, 1919, 1.

[22]"Governor Kendall's Proclamation Points Out State's Blessings," *Weekly Kansas City Star*, November 21, 1923, 4. See also Kansas Governor Henry Justin Allen's "Thanksgiving Proclamation," *Mulvane News*,

Farmers, ministers, and traveling preachers who benefited from the boom times and remained in the region during the Dust Bowl speculated on the divine meaning of calamities and held mass prayer meetings. In Guymon, Oklahoma, right in the middle of the state's panhandle, the conditions stirred theological reflection and widespread calls for prayer and supplication. That region had experienced some of the worst features of the Dust Bowl, including drought, dusters, and the resulting farm foreclosures, depopulation, and even death. A national reporter noted the throngs of citizens who gathered at a Guymon Methodist church in April 1935, seeking divine assistance. "Farmers are in a desperate condition as far as crops are concerned," a minister lamented. "Unless we have rain within three weeks, the harvest will be seriously reduced. Good rains in three weeks mean a harvest. God rules all and our last resort is prayer."[23] To the northwest, residents in Prairie Center, Colorado, held special church services in the springs of 1935 and 1936 to pray for rain. In April of the latter year, locals regularly had to drive their cars with the headlights turned on during the daytime because the air was so thick with dust. "God has answered our prayers last year," a community appeal noted in 1936, "and we believe He is still the same."[24] A kind of *quid pro quo* marked similar calls to communal prayer around the region and spoke to residents' belief in God's sovereignty. Villages, towns, and states issued comparable statements in hope that the weather would improve.[25]

In this era of drought and depression, Protestants were diverging sharply on such matters. A growing number doubted that God could or would respond to prayers for rain. Such skeptics thought that these prayer campaigns were almost pagan in their blunt instrumentalism. In September 1930 the liberal Protestant magazine *Christian Century* convened a roundtable on the question: "Does Prayer Change the Weather?" Just two of the nine participants answered with a firm yes. Liberal Baptist minister Harry Emerson Fosdick answered directly, "Of course prayer does not affect weather." To think that there was some connection between an individual's private, inner religious life and a rainstorm, Fosdick scoffed, defied all logic and represented a "crude, obsolete supernaturalism."[26]

November 18, 1920, 1. "Thanksgiving Proclamation," *Austin American*, November 18, 1917, 8. Harry C. McDean, "Dust Bowl Historiography," *Great Plains Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 117–126.

[23]"Residents of Oklahoma Dust Area Pray for Rain," *Billings Gazette*, April 15, 1935, 1. See also, "Rain Prayers Leave Pastor Ill but Hoping," *Des Moines Register*, April 20, 1935, 1. Kansas wheat farmer Lawrence Svobida wrote about the persistent religious interpretations of weather. "Do you wonder that week after week during the blow season," asked Svobida, "the congregations in the churches devote much of their time to imploring the Higher Power to bring to an end the dreaded dust menace? Is it surprising that people who still feel compelled to remain in the Dust Bowl are frequently heard to express themselves in no uncertain terms: 'I may live here because I have to. I may die here, because I cannot get away; but God grant me decent burial where the dust never blows!'" There would be no rest, he thought, until "Judgment Day." Lawrence Svobida, *Farming the Dust Bowl: A First-Hand Account* (1940; reprint, Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1986), 146–147.

[24]"Dust Bowl to Pray for Coming of Rain," *Rapid City Journal*, April 4, 1936, 1. See also, "Dust Bowl Farmers Pray for May Rains," *Bismarck Tribune*, May 1, 1935, 1; "'Dust Bowl' Pastor Thinks Prayers for Rain Were Aid," *Commercial Appeal*, June 7, 1936, 12.

[25]For other instances of government officials calling for prayer, see, "Hailed as Break in 3-Year Drouth over Southwest," *Great Falls Tribune*, May 6, 1935, 1; "Colorado Governor Asks Prayer for Rain," *Fresno Bee*, May 11, 1935, 6; "Millions Lost in Southeast: Governors Call for Prayers for Rain to End Drought," *Times Herald*, June 5, 1936, 4.

[26]"Does Prayer Change the Weather," *Christian Century*, September 10, 1930, 1084–1086. Fosdick quote on page 1084. Thanks to Peter J. Thuesen for passing along this source. See also, "Prayers for Rain Futile,

Liberals and those who were theologically and culturally conservative disagreed a great deal about such matters. But few across the theological and political spectrum had a clear understanding of the human contribution to the crisis. Scientists at the University of Kansas and the University of Nebraska were developing a clearer picture of the delicate biome of the Plains and the balance of nature. New Deal planners also came to view the Plains as a fragile ecology that had collapsed under capitalist exploitation and a lack of planning. The hubris of farmers had made matters worse.[27] New Deal policies aimed to halt over farming, teach better soil conservation techniques, and stop wind erosion. The latter was partly accomplished with the massive Shelterbelt Project. A so-called "tree army" of workers from the Civilian Conservation Corps and Works Progress Administration planted trees from Texas to Canada. By World War II, they had planted 217 million trees that helped protect 30,000 farms.[28] In 1939, a Methodist official urged churches to "join its forces with Uncle Sam in a more constructive approach to the settlement of the people on the land, to avoid a repetition of the wastage of our rural heritage in riotous farming, to prevent this soil erosion that has its ultimate and more serious disaster in human erosion."[29]

While some promoted cooperation with the government, others looked to scripture, whether searching for signs of the end or similar hardships described in the Old and New Testaments. An anonymous newspaper report from the Guymon Methodist Church assured congregants that even though things looked bleak, they could find some solace in the word of God. This response represented the typical dogged optimism in the region. "Did you know that the Bible had a few words about dust?" asked a church representative in March 1935. The author pointed to a passage in Deuteronomy 28:29: "And thou shalt grope at noonday, as the blind gropeth in darkness." What plainspeople experienced was not without precedent, the writer assured. Trying to find some ray of light in the darkness, the author continued, "Palestine is on the edge of the Arabian desert and has always known the terror of dust storms. Yet this dust swept country has given to the world three great religions, Judaism, Mohammedanism, and Christianity." Living conditions in the ancient Mideast were difficult and even brutal; but God had used His people for a higher purpose. The same might apply in the Oklahoma Panhandle.[30] Protestants in the region were surprisingly upbeat about the rain showers and stable weather the future would surely bring. This positive outlook, often couched in theological terms, was a persistent feature throughout the 1930s. That cheery optimism ran directly counter to the hostile weather they experienced year after year.

Prominent Clergymen Assert," *Miami News Record*, September 5, 1930, 6; and "Divided on Prayers: Baptist Pastor Doubts Appeal—M. E. Minister Quotes Scripture," *Plain Speaker*, July 29, 1939, 1. Thuesen, *Tornado God*, 123–124.

[27]Carolyn Merchant, *American Environmental History: An Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 184. William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *Journal of American History* 78, no. 4 (March 1992): 1357, 1361.

[28]James S. Olson, ed., *Historical Dictionary of the New Deal: From Inauguration to Preparation for War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 450–451. Sarah Thomas Karle and David Karle, *Conserving the Dust Bowl: The New Deal's Prairie States Forestry Project* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2017).

[29]Mark A. Dawber, "The Churches in the Dust Bowl," *Missionary Review of the World* (September 1939): 396–397.

[30]"At the Churches: Guymon Methodist Church," *Panhandle Herald*, March 23, 1935, 2.

Others on the Plains and around the country, seeing the wrath and judgment of God all around them, developed a bleaker view. Philip Jenkins notes that, "Time and again, climate convulsions have been understood in religious terms, through the language of apocalypse, millennium, and Judgment. Often too, such eras have been marked by far-reaching changes in the nature of religion and spirituality."[31] That certainly applies to the 1930s, when millennialism thrived and as newspapers and magazines around the country picked up on themes of judgment and doom. The feeling that the end was near was powerful and seemed to be borne out by shocking experiences. One doubting reporter called the current crop of doomsayers "calamity howlers." End-times visionaries who ranted about the Dust Bowl were no different from those misguided Adventists who used Bible arithmetic to predict the apocalypse in the nineteenth century, said the journalist.[32] But it was hard to deny or downplay the sheer scale of the current crisis.

Woody Guthrie's Dust Bowl lament, "The Great Dust Storm," memorialized this kind of bleak, apocalyptic outlook that was becoming much more common. He sang of the heavy blanket of dust that stretched from Oklahoma City to Arizona, the Dakotas to the Rio Grande: "It fell across our city like a curtain of black rolled down/We thought it was our judgment, we thought it was our doom."[33] At the time that Guthrie penned his lyrics he was relatively unknown. Far more prominent was the journalist and popular historian Frederick Lewis Allen. He gave special attention to Americans' grim views in his sweeping account of the Depression years. For many, he observed, "it must have seemed as if the Lord had taken a hand in bringing the dust storms: as if, not content with visiting upon the country a man-made crisis—a Depression caused by men's inability to manage their economic affairs farsightedly—an omnipotent power had followed it with a visitation of nature: the very land itself had risen in revolt."[34] In Brad Lookingbill's study of folk eschatology on the Plains of the 1930s, he finds that, "Reports of Judgment Day abounded," and observers in the region associated their plight with stories in the Bible. He notes the "the image of terrorizing dust storms" and how "countless people across the High Plains voiced their fears in eschatological language." Lookingbill concludes that "religious beliefs functioned as both an escape and a creative force by pointing to the economic and environmental calamity as evidence of Heaven's mysterious ways."[35]

Growing numbers of Pentecostals, fundamentalists, and holiness people tended to see the Dust Bowl as a clear sign of holy retribution. The devout often thought of themselves as at the center of a divine drama. As restorationists, holiness folk and Pentecostals reimagined their lives in terms of Old or New Testament stories.[36] In the sweltering summer of 1936, the Kansas Wesleyan song evangelist and radio minister

[31]Jenkins, *Climate, Catastrophe, and Faith*, 2.

[32]William C. Utley, "'Wolf!' Cries Sound Once More: Calamity Howlers, Foreseeing Unutterable Doom, Try Today, as in Years Gone by, to Scare the Pants off Us," *Frankfort Daily Index*, November 6, 1937, 1. See also Robert W. Gordon, "Haunting Specter of Cimarron," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 28, 1940, 116; John R. Wunder, Frances W. Kaye, and Vernon Rosco Carstensen, *Americans View Their Dust Bowl Experience* (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1999), 163, 169; and David G. McComb, *The City in Texas: A History* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2015), 219.

[33]Woody Guthrie, "The Great Dust Storm," on *Dust Bowl Ballads* (Camden, NJ: Victor Records, 1940), LP record.

[34]Frederick Lewis Allen, *Since Yesterday: The 1930s in America, September 3, 1929–September 3, 1939* (1939; reprint, New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 197.

[35]Lookingbill, "'A God-forsaken place,'" 279, 280, 284.

[36]Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 1, 72, 95.

J. Orvan Keller was conducting a revival service in Bladen, Nebraska. The state's hottest temperature on record, 118 °F, had just been recorded in nearby Minden. Fittingly, the local newspaper published Keller's message on Jeremiah and how God's people had faced judgment. He ruminated on the signs of the times and linked those to what the ancient Jews had experienced. Families were leaving the area amid the drought and dusters. "Jeremiah saw a land without inhabitants," said Keller. Many who remained in Nebraska were starving. Keller drew on scripture to interpret the country's troubles. "Floods, earthquakes, dust storms, wheat and corn fields withering under a scorching sun," he lamented. All was made worse by the "heat waves taking toll of hundreds of human lives and cattle perishing by the thousands!" Keller concluded, "Jeremiah's vision is fulfilled before our eyes." The evangelist placed the blame not on over-farming, capitalist greed, or poor planning. Rather, the tribulations of the day resulted from a loss of faith and spiritual lethargy. Biblical prophecies appeared to be unfolding in the present.[37]

Numerous evangelicals and fundamentalists on the Plains shared a similar restorationist and end-times outlook. The newspaper headlines that announced swarms of grasshoppers, looming war, heatwaves, and droughts offered evidence of the last days. Luke Rader, popularly known as "America's Pioneer Radio Evangelist," unlocked the secrets of the apocalypse in his revival campaigns through Nebraska and Oklahoma, over the airwaves, and at his River Lake Gospel Tabernacle in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Rader's singing abilities and his thundering sermons on prophecy won him a national following. Like other traveling ministers, he eagerly seized on dire news to drive home his message of repentance or doom for sinners. Announcements for his April 1935 crusade in Knoxville, Tennessee, highlighted sermons on whether Hitler was the Anti-Christ, the evil work of Stalin, and the second coming of Christ. One sermon that considered matters closer to home asked: "Are the Dust Storms the Forerunner of Famine in the Land?"[38]

III. Leaving the Region and Reshaping California Culture

Hunger, poverty, and joblessness made life on the Plains unbearable for hundreds of thousands. Families in the southwestern part Cimarron County, Oklahoma, similar to John Steinbeck's fictional Joad family, packed up what little they had and moved on. A survey of Oklahoma in 1940 showed that 48 out of 77 counties logged decreases in their populations. Out of a total of 61,603 who left the region, 55,267 of those had moved away from the 14 western-most counties in the state. Boise City businessmen sent their wives and children to live with relatives in more stable communities.[39] The population of Grant County in southwest Kansas dropped by 37.1 percent from 1930

[37]J. Orvan Keller, "The Beginnings of Sorrows," *Blue Hill Leader*, July 31, 1936, 6. On the record heat in Minden, see Kenneth F. Dewey, *Great Plains Weather* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 82. Roger G. Robins, *A. J. Tomlinson: Plainfolk Modernist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 71; Matthew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

[38]"Luke Rader to Talk Here," *Knoxville Journal*, April 27, 1935, 3. See also, "Rader to Talk on Communism," *Knoxville Journal*, April 25, 1935, 1; and "Meetin' in the Meetin' House," *Knoxville Journal*, May 6, 1935, 3.

[39]"Many to Migrate: But Family Movement Seen as Temporary; Back When It Rains," *Boise City News*, April 18, 1935, 1. "Drift Back to 'Dust Bowl,'" *Daily News*, August 26, 1940, 4. Frank Houston, "Name 'No Man's Land' Takes on New Significance as Dust Storms Cause Half Inhabitants to Move Elsewhere," *Oklahoma News*, March 10, 1936, 6.

to 1940. Nearby Morton County, Kansas declined by 46.58 percent in the same decade.[40] Many hoped that such changes would be only temporary.

The exodus of residents in Beaver County, Oklahoma, coupled with debilitating poverty, made it difficult, if not impossible, to maintain active churches. This reflected a common pattern in the worst-hit areas. Here in the state's panhandle, east of Boise City, one church after another closed for good. In the case of Bellview Methodist Church, it was because so many in the community had moved west in search of work and better conditions. When a Church of Christ congregation dwindled to a mere 15 members in 1935, it disbanded. Others shared ministers and used jointly operated chapels. When the once-thriving Union Methodist Church could no longer support itself, members sold the building's lumber to a Church of God congregation. The holiness Church of the Nazarene in Knowles managed to survive the Dust Bowl years, only to be destroyed by a tornado later. Accounts of church closures are filled with a sense of loss and deep sorrow. Institutions that had once been so vital to a community sat abandoned or were torn down.[41]

As families moved out of towns and villages in areas plagued by drought and dust storms, other denominational troubles appeared. The strain was particularly serious because of the central role churches, like schools, played in small, remote Great Plains communities.[42] In 1937, Columbia University sociologist Edmund de Schweinitz Brunner and psychologist Irving Lorge warned that America's rural churches had experienced the strains of the Depression years more acutely than other social institutions. Country churches suffered from small congregations, poor ministerial service, and meagre programs. Their survey found a 20 percent decline in rural churches from 1930 to 1936. Great Plains towns and villages experienced some of the heaviest losses just as church giving dropped sharply. In the Dust Bowl region, giving declined in village churches by 44.2 percent from 1924 to 1936.[43] Methodist pastors in Kansas received 40 percent less financial support in 1934 than they had in 1930. Church giving dropped by as much as 73 percent in some parts of the state.[44]

It is little wonder that hundreds of thousands from Kansas, Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma left the depleted Plains for what they hoped would be a better life in the

[40]"Grant County, Kansas," www.kshs.org/geog/geog_counties/view/county:GT; and "Morton County, Kansas," https://www.kshs.org/geog/geog_counties/view/county:MT (Accessed on April 13, 2022).

[41]*A History of Beaver County, vol. II* (Beaver, OK: Beaver County Historical Society, 1971), 209, 352, 364, 367, 368.

[42]Catherine McNicol Stock, *Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 58–59. Edward O. Moe and Carl C. Taylor, *Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community: Irwin, Iowa* (Washington, DC: US Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1942), 61, 63, 73.

[43]Edmund deS. Brunner and Irving Lorge, *Rural Trends in the Depression Years* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1937), 298, 302, 304, 306, 308. Farm foreclosures or tax sales rose from 20.8 per 1,000 in 1930 to 54.1 in 1933. Of these, those hit the hardest were farmers in the Great Plains and the Mountain West. Brunner and Lorge, *Rural Trends*, 31. Samuel C. Kincheloe reported the sharpest rise in church attendance in those he labeled "minor fundamentalist groups." He estimated that these had a growth rate of 15.8 percent for 1933–1935. Samuel C. Kincheloe, *Research Memorandum on Religion in the Depression* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1937), 7–9, 131–137.

[44]Robert Wuthnow, *Red State Religion: Faith and Politics in America's Heartland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 144. See also, Charles J. Dutton, "America's Bankrupt Churches," *Current History* 39, no. 1 (October 1933): 57–62; and A. D. Edwards, *Influence of Drought and Depression on a Rural Community: A Case Study in Haskell County, Kansas* (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, 1939), 66, 80.

American West. Estimates place the number of those who moved west at between 315,000 and 400,000. But it may have been even higher. Most of those migrants ended up in California. And many of these contributed to southern California's distinctive political and religious cultures, a phenomenon that Darren Dochuk has studied in detail.[45]

Some of the most significant cultural changes that drought and dust storms brought about amounted to a kind of religious migration. The hundreds of thousands of plains-people who made the trip west brought with them their religious values and practices. The worship styles of holiness and Pentecostal churches along with the doctrinal certainties and militancy of fundamentalism shaped California history from the 1930s forward. The folkways of poor whites especially influenced the agricultural interior of the Golden State. On the outskirts of Modesto, two small migrant communities cropped up in the mid-1930s, which residents called Little Arkansas and Little Oklahoma.[46]

Some of these changes in California can be charted in church growth. State membership in the Pentecostal Assemblies of God, for instance, grew by 76 percent from 1926 to 1936. The Church of the Nazarene registered 61 percent growth for the same period. Such growth rates continued in the coming decades. From 1941 to 1946, the number of the Assemblies of God's churches in Southern California increased by 50 percent.[47] "For the Pentecostal movement," wrote the journalist Dan Morgan, "the Dust Bowl migration to California was a new kind of opportunity." Recent white arrivals to the state—denigrated by locals as "Okies," "white trash," "fruit tramps," and "holy rollers"—could worship together in holiness and Pentecostal churches without feeling scorned or judged. The religious landscape of the Central Valley changed with the arrival of the newcomers. The journalist and political activist Carleton Beals reported in the late 1930s:

> The Pentecostal pastors circulate among the labor camps in Packard automobiles daubed with the words *Jesus is Here*. Few of the harvest communities, despite their shifting population, are now without a small Pentecostal church. Weedpatch, Nipomo, Brawley, [and] Holtville harbor such churches. Elsewhere the itinerant pastor, the Moses of the migration, sets up a large brown tent which serves as a temple.[48]

Such new transplants brought to the state their plain-folk religious commitments, centered, as Dochuk puts it, on "the primacy of individual conversion, the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible, and the scriptural injunction to witness for Christ."[49]

[45]Gregory, *American Exodus*, 6, 9. Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 20–26, 81–88. Mark A. Dawber, "Misery among the Migrants," *Outlook of Missions* 30, no. 4 (April 1938): 105–106.

[46]Carey McWilliams, "California Pastoral," *Antioch Review* 2:1 (Spring 1942): 110. Jules Loh, "Okies—They Sank Roots and Changed the Heart of California," *Los Angeles Times*, October 18, 1992, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-10-18-me-622-story.html (Accessed on July 8, 2021).

[47]*US Bureau of the Census, Religious Bodies, 1926, vol. I* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1930), 148; *US Bureau of the Census, Religious Bodies, 1936, vol. I*, 176, 178. Darren Dochuk, "Christ and the CIO: Blue-Collar Evangelicalism's Crisis of Conscience and Political Turn in Early Cold-War California," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 74 (Fall 2008), 81.

[48]Carleton Beals, *American Earth* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1939), 401–402. See also, Frank Spencer Mead, *Right Here at Home* (New York: Friendship Press, 1939), 151–154.

[49]Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt*, xvii, see also, 3–50.

Dochuk describes the kind of prevailing optimism and tough resolve that these newcomers brought with them. Plainfolk evangelicals, he notes, bore the imprint of "herrenvolk" democracy. These held to states' rights principles, white supremacy, male suffrage, and equal representation. Baptist, Methodist, Church of Christ, and Pentecostal migrants tended to be anti-aristocracy, mythologizing the agrarian ideals of Thomas Jefferson. Many were deeply suspicious of the federal state. "At the core of their political culture," argues Dochuk, "was an unwavering faith that conflated the doctrines of Jefferson and Jesus. . . . Plain-folk pioneers thus became pilgrims burdened with the responsibility of evangelizing and civilizing, initially on the godless borderland of the western South, then in the dark, secular reaches of Southern California."[50]

Fifty years after Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* appeared, the area of migrant settlement continued to show the political and cultural marks of Kansas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. By the 1980s, Bakersfield and the region around it had more churches than all of San Francisco did. And yet the former had only a third of the population of the latter. The historian James Gregory noted that in addition to the diffusion of churches: "The area's politics and social values are telling too. This is one of the most conservative sections of California. Only recently has voting registration shifted towards the Republican party, but the San Joaquin Valley has been voting conservative for some time."[51] Several years after Gregory made that observation, one California farmer, who migrated to the state with his Oklahoma family in the Depression years, said simply, "Stop in any town in the San Joaquin Valley and you might as well be in Tulsa or Little Rock or Amarillo." He summed it up as "same music, same values, same churches, same politics."[52] The birth of the New Right and the subsequent fusion of conservative religion and right-wing partisan politics owed much to this massive migration. Many in the region would support the presidential runs of Barry Goldwater, George Wallace, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan.[53]

While such evangelical Protestants also tended to view their exodus or errand to California and the troubles of the era in largely spiritual terms or through the prophetic lens of the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation, liberal Protestants, as well as some Catholics, were more likely to seek ecological solutions while offering religious comfort. Some of these also lent their support to the government aid work and land reform efforts that were central to Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal initiative. Jess Gilbert notes that the agrarian intellectuals who guided New Deal programs had deep roots in the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Disciples of Christ traditions. Progressive, liberal Protestantism had a powerful influence on such reformers.[54]

[50]Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt*, 5, 9, 11, quote on 13, 26, 29–30.

[51]James N. Gregory, "Dust Bowl Legacies: The Okie Impact on California, 1939–1989," *California History* 68, no. 3 (Fall, 1989): 79; see also page 83 on the intersection of conservative religion and politics.

[52]Dale Scales quoted in Jules Loh, "Okies—They Sank Roots and Changed the Heart of California," *Los Angeles Times*, October 18, 1992, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-10-18-me-622-story.html (Accessed on July 8, 2021).

[53]Gregory, *American Exodus*, 242–243. Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt*, 274–277.

[54]Jess Gilbert, *Planning Democracy: Agrarian Intellectuals and the Intended New Deal* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 30–31. For liberal Protestant support of the New Deal, see Kevin Kruse, *One Nation under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 5–8; and Paul A. Carter, *The Decline and Revival of the Social Gospel: Social and Political Liberalism in American Protestant Churches, 1920–1940* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1954), 150–162.

IV. Congregationalists, Liberal Protestants, and the Council for Social Action

An influential group of Congregationalists were, in many ways, at the left end of the Protestant religious spectrum. With their strength on the East Coast, but with a significant presence on the Plains, the Congregationalists were one of the few groups to launch ecological campaigns, support large-scale government relief efforts, and to respond more actively to the Dust Bowl and its horrendous effects. That was particularly critical in states that were devastated by drought and soil erosion, including Colorado, Kansas, Texas, and Oklahoma. As late as 1939, the administrator of the Works Progress Administration in Oklahoma reported that half of the state's population was on relief or seeking federal assistance.[55] By that time, the Congregationalists already had a long history of social reform work and conservation efforts. Indeed, as Mark Stoll has observed, the Congregationalists, with their early Puritan roots, were one of the first in the country to develop a theologically informed ecology.[56]

Liberal and leftist Congregationalists established the Council for Social Action (CSA) in 1934, responding to the growing needs of the Great Depression. This faction built the CSA on the work of the Congregational Commission on Social Service, organized in 1913, which after 1927 was called the Social Service Commission.[57] Activists eventually thought the Social Service Commission was ill-equipped for the current crisis. The church's 1934 gathering in Oberlin, Ohio, a hotbed of nineteenth-century abolitionism and religious radicalism, set things in motion. Here, progressives called for a focus on a range of key issues: racial injustice, the clash of capital and labor, church and state issues, and rural poverty and economic uncertainty. The latter focused the denomination's attention particularly on the rural South and the Great Plains.[58]

The CSA produced its monthly magazine, *Social Action*, to help create a national network and to educate readers about a string of social issues. By 1941, the CSA had distributed 800,000 copies. The publication advertised the books of the chief liberal and progressive Protestants of the day, among them Reinhold Niebuhr, Christian socialist Harry F. Ward, and Walter Rauschenbusch. Writers in the magazine—including the Columbia University American historian Charles A. Beard, feminist and labor activist Beulah Amidon, and socialist writer and politician Harry W. Laidler—highlighted peace activism, anti-lynching and civil rights work, the Spanish Civil War, and the fight against fascism at home and abroad. The journal's articles were fortified with the latest social and political science.[59] The Social Gospel drove the CSA's agenda and the group addressed the new problems of an industrial society. It helped unions in their campaigns for recognition, lent support to strikers, and investigated the conditions of sharecroppers.[60]

Theological reflection in the pages of *Social Action* was minimal, especially when compared to other religious periodicals of the era. The publication's guiding light was the late Walter Rauschenbusch, who had been a pastor of a German Baptist Church in

[55]"The Week throughout Oklahoma," *Harlow's Weekly*, October 21, 1939, 1.

[56]Stoll, *Inherit the Holy Mountain*, 5, 9, 139, 150. Lowe, *Baptized with the Soil*, 25–27, 146.

[57]Miller, *American Protestantism and Social Issues*, 236–237.

[58]Margaret Bendroth, *The Last Puritans: Mainline Protestants and the Power of the Past* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 139, 140. "Social Action Council to Map Church Plans," *Washington Post*, September 15, 1934, 10.

[59]Hugh Vernon White, "Christian Social Action: A Bit of History," *Social Action*, September 15, 1937, 3–8. Miller, *American Protestantism and Social Issues*, 237.

[60]"Reveal Church Group Vote on Social Issues," *Capitol Times*, February 6, 1939, 2.

New York's "Hell's Kitchen." One leader of the Congregationalist's activist work saw a clear historical trajectory from earlier reformers such as Rauschenbusch. C. Howard Hopkins, a college professor and recent Yale Divinity School PhD, thought that the "ethical urge that in a previous era had found an outlet in the missionary movement or the abolition crusade now produced new techniques and a new interpretation of the age-old faith." Just as New England Congregationalists once played a prominent role in the anti-slavery movement and the campaign for women's rights, claimed Hopkins, they now addressed the social ills of industrial capitalism, land tenancy, and strains on rural communities.[61]

They were not alone in such efforts. Emboldened by the financial collapse and the Dust Bowl, liberal Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians also established social action commissions. These organizations similarly targeted corporate capitalism and the inequalities of Depression-era America. For example, in 1934, the National Council of Methodist Youth distributed a pledge at its convention that read: "I surrender my life to Christ. I renounce the capitalist system."[62]

V. Activism and Rural Churches

In 1934, the Federal Council of Churches launched the *Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin*, which focused its efforts on rural ministry. Contributors hoped to revitalize rural churches, improve rural ministerial training, and promote soil stewardship. This celebration or valorization of agricultural work had parallels in the urban north. Matthew Pehl has explored a new Depression-era understanding of the relationship between politics, faith, and work. In these years, Pehl notes, "powerful ideas and idioms regarding the social meaning of work reshaped the religious practices and identities of many Catholic, African-American, and southern white evangelical workers." Catholics in Detroit, for instance, featured laborers as key figures in the history of the church and in the message of Christ. A novel Catholic vernacular developed in which workers played a central role.[63]

Liberal ministers and working-class activists around the country targeted rugged individualism, denounced selfish capitalists, and called for Christian stewardship of the land.[64] Broad Protestant and Catholic agrarian efforts such as Rural Life Sunday,

[61]C. Howard Hopkins, "A History of Congregational Social Action," *Social Action*, May 15, 1942, 11–12. See also James Nevin Miller, "Uncle Same Fights the Black Blizzards," *Modern Mechanics and Inventions* (July 1935): 60–61, 141.

[62]Bendroth, *The Last Puritans*, 141. Methodist Youth pledge card quoted in Miller, *American Protestantism and Social Issues*, 68. For other Depression-era examples of social action, pronouncements, and resolutions from various denominations, see Kincheloe, *Research Memorandum on Religion in the Depression*, 250–259. For more on Methodists and social action, see "Report of Social Creed Committee," in *Journal of the Uniting Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Methodist Protestant Church, Held at Kansas City, Missouri, April 26–May 10, 1939*, eds., Lud H. Estes, Edgar R. Heckman, and Cuthbert W. Bates (New York: Methodist Publishing House, 1939), 761. On the revival of the Social Gospel among Oklahoma Presbyterians in the 1930s, see Michael Cassity and Danney Goble, *Divided Hearts: The Presbyterian Journey through Oklahoma History* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), 203–207.

[63]Matthew Pehl, *The Making of Working Class Religion* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 9, 81, 114; quote on 79.

[64]Cragg McCormick Gilbert, "The Church and Rural Renewal: A Historical Survey of Recent Theology and Ministries Promoting Rural Sustainability" (PhD diss., Claremont School of Theology, 1989), 96–97, and on new ideas about Christian stewardship of the land: 116. For more on rural work in mainline Protestant churches, see C. R. McBride, *Protestant Churchmanship for Rural America* (Valley Forge, PA:

a new holiday for the church calendar, hoped to inspire churches to reflect and act on the presence of God in nature. It won the support of the Federal Council of Churches and the Home Missions Council. Kevin M. Lowe describes it as "an intrinsic part of the agrarian project." Lowe notes that even though "the holiday did not promote conservationist and environmental themes in an agricultural context, its broader goal was to try to sacralize and liturgize the full experience of community life in the country." Promoters and organizers of Rural Life Sunday wrote prayers and songs to highlight the holy work of agriculture and the balance of the natural world.[65]

For some like Mark A. Dawber of the Methodist Episcopal Church Board of Home Missions, there had long been an imbalance between the business of agriculture and care of the land. There were obvious explanations for environmental degradation and wanton destruction of the countryside, said Dawber. His 1937 book, *Rebuilding Rural America*, ranged over the cooperative movement, the changes in rural life, new ministries, and the growing needs of America's farm communities. The first printing quickly sold out of its 25,000 copies.[66] "We have sinned against God's holy earth through ignorance, selfishness and greed," he sermonized. "Fortunately," wrote Dawber, "a new day is dawning. We are waking to our unfaithful stewardship and our perils." For Dawber and others like him, changes in thought and action were possible. "Never did the church have a finer opportunity to proclaim the unescapable laws of God," he challenged readers, "and to bring us back to a sense of partnership with him in protecting, salvaging and remaking the holy earth which he placed in our keeping."[67]

Like Dawber, a growing number of Congregationalists called for economic and agrarian reform. The denomination made special efforts to address the problems of the country's farmers. The CSA established its Rural Life Committee, which investigated the hardships of sharecroppers and the rural poor. Ferry Platt led the subgroup until his untimely death in 1937. From then, Shirley E. Green took the leadership post.[68] Programs combatted what participants saw as the fatalism of fundamentalism just as they called for greater government action and commitment.

Arthur E. Holt, a professor of social ethics at Chicago Theological Seminary, worked closely with the Rural Life Committee. In the interwar years, Holt won a reputation as a leading liberal Protestant authority on farming communities and rural churches. He

Judson Press, 1962), 79–87. For the longer background on the Social Gospel and rural missions, see Merwin Swanson, "The 'Country Life Movement' and the American Churches," *Church History* 46, no. 3 (September 1977): 358–373.

[65]Lowe, *Baptized with the Soil*, 83–84. See also, Leigh Eric Schmidt, "From Arbor Day to the Environmental Sabbath: Nature, Liturgy, and American Protestantism," *Harvard Theological Review* 84, no. 3 (July 1991): 299–323; McBride, *Protestant Churchmanship for Rural America*, 38–58; "Rural Life Sunday Urged by Directors," *Catholic Advance*, November 9, 1935, 8; and "Churches Will Observe Rural Life Sunday," *Oklahoma City Star*, May 12, 1933, 4. Later, similar campaigns included Soil Stewardship Sunday and Soil Stewardship Week. Lowe, *Baptized with the Soil*, 162–165; and "Soil Stewardship Will Be Theme of Sermons," *Boise City News*, May 12, 1955, 1.

[66]Mark Rich, "Remaking the Holy Earth," review of *Rebuilding Rural America*, *Christian Century*, September 29, 1937, 1203. For an earlier, similar effort, see Edwin Lee Earp, *Biblical Backgrounds for the Rural Message* (New York: Association Press, 1922).

[67]"Miami Is Selected to Be Host to Next Year's Conference," *Blackwell Morning Tribune*, October 20, 1934, 7. Mark A. Dawber, *Rebuilding Rural America* (New York: Friendship Press, 1937), 33. In June 1937 a journalist summed up a similar, popular way of thinking about the larger meaning of the Dust Bowl as a "sort of divine punishment" for those who greedily "plowed up the soil indiscriminately." "Evolution of a Dust Bowl," *Albuquerque Journal*, June 6, 1937, 16.

[68]Bendroth, *The Last Puritans*, 147. Miller, *American Protestantism and Social Issues*, 237.

had lived in Colorado, Texas, and Illinois, and well knew the problems of drought and over-farming that plagued life on the Plains. The *Christian Century* described him as a formidable champion of Christian social ethics and an advocate for the downtrodden. He was, wrote an editor, "as American as Lincoln or Will Rogers or Walt Whitman—to all of whom he seemed in part akin."[69]

As a typical progressive, Holt believed that expertise and social research would meet the serious needs of the Depression. Even before the ravages of the Dust Bowl, Holt and his students called for a national land policy that would secure family farms and create a more just tax structure, price and currency stabilization, and tariffs that would benefit farmers.[70] Holt implored the Department of Agriculture to "balance up our national economy on the plea that the soil is sacred." When Holt died in 1942, his colleagues were quick to praise him. He was like an Old Testament prophet, said members of the CSA. "Sometimes we were almost afraid of him," they admitted, "as the younger prophets must have been afraid of Elijah." Holt was driven by a moral urgency and a special concern for forgotten men and women.[71]

Holt's message resonated with some on the Plains who were coming to terms with their misfortunes. Indeed, at the denomination's 1934 general conference, the Congregationalists adopted an official statement on agriculture and farm labor: "That there shall be every encouragement to the organization of farmers for economic ends, particularly for cooperative sales and purchases. . . . That there shall be widespread development of organized rural communities, thoroughly democratic, completely cooperative, and possessed with the spirit of common welfare."[72] Such statements had an airy quality and were, most likely, aspirational. Yet, for those who composed them, the country needed a serious overhaul of its economic system just as it needed effective agricultural planning. As the decade progressed, such views were gaining in popularity.[73] More radical and immediate solutions found fertile ground on the Plains.

VI. Radical Change and Support for the New Deal

In 1937, thirty businessmen from Kansas, Texas, and Oklahoma gathered in Guymon, Oklahoma to raise their voices in a collective complaint. After their proceedings, they telegraphed President Roosevelt to stress the urgency of the situation. The problem, in their view, was far too large to be dealt with by local authorities. The drought, soil erosion, and economic collapse were difficulties that a community, a relief organization, or single state could never resolve. Only the strong response of the federal government would do. They called for drastic action. Martial law was needed so that "all the farmers

[69]"Arthur Holt—a Modern Christian Pioneer," *Christian Century*, January 21, 1942, 67–68.

[70]Jacob H. Dorn, "The Rural Ideal and Agrarian Realities: Arthur E. Holt and the Vision of a Decentralized America in the Interwar Years," *Church History* 52, no. 1 (March 1983): 53, 55, 60.

[71]Arthur E. Holt, "America's Real Farm Issue," *Christian Century*, February 19, 1936, 290. See also Arthur E. Holt, "Justice for the Revolutionary Farmer!" *Christian Century*, December 8, 1937, 1522–1524. Dwight J. Bradley, Shirley Greene, Frank W. McCulloch, Katherine Terrill, Elizabeth G. Whiting, "The Staff—To Arthur Holt," *Social Action*, May 15, 1942, 5. Gilbert, "The Church and Rural Renewal," 64–72.

[72]"A Statement of Social Ideals," in *The Year Book of the Congregational and Christian Churches, 1934* (New York: General Council of the Congregational and Christian Churches, 1934), 9.

[73]Peter Fearon, *Kansas in the Great Depression: Work Relief, the Dole, and Rehabilitation* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 173–181, 195, 276–277. On the popularity of the CCC and conservation programs, see Neil M. Maher, *Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12, 164.

in the dust bowl would have to adopt similar measures."[74] Since there were few models of such large-scale relief efforts in the states to look to, the CSA turned to Sweden and England with their cooperatives, their higher wages, and their better conditions for farmers. A member of the group even speculated that the dispossessed would turn to violence if major reforms were not enacted.[75]

For some Congregationalists, the CSA's rhetoric and proposals were far too radical. In particular, critics assailed a 1934 Oberlin resolution critiquing capitalism and "the profit motive."[76] The controversial resolution described the American economic system as "increasingly predatory and in growing opposition to accepted Christian principles." It called for sweeping changes:

> We set ourselves to work toward: 1. The abolition of the profit system, the elimination of its incentives and habits, the legal forms by which it supports and the moral ideas by which it justifies itself. 2. The inauguration of a thoroughly planned and organized social economy, which will apply all our natural and human resources directly to the meeting of human needs, in pursuit of values democratically chosen . . .

It went on to demand the elimination of private ownership in the means of production, the extension of social and health services, an end to unemployment, and the abolition of poverty.[77]

Critics called it the "red manifesto." An editor of the *National Republic* in Jefferson, Ohio, ninety miles northeast of Oberlin, denounced the resolution's "damnable theories." He could not consign the authors of the resolution to hell, but he wished "that there were an island in the hottest part of the Pacific to which we could assign all our parlour pinks who consider themselves intellectuals of the land and there let them try their theories of a 'thoroughly planned and organized social economy.'" Such theories, said this vocal critic, would lead to "the destruction of your congregations" and "the end of the middle class, of the real intellectual life of the nation." Much more measured in tone, a Congregational pastor in St. Louis described the resolutions at Oberlin as part of a "very dangerous trend" that would weaken the country.[78]

These broad, more radical national goals, which infuriated conservative and moderate opponents, were also balanced out with efforts that targeted specific farm communities. A 1937 CSA study packet on "Rural Life" offered some guidance to ministers and

[74]"Roosevelt Asked for Martial Law to Combat Dust," *Lincoln Star*, April 23, 1937, 6.

[75]"Churchmen Study Economic Needs," *New York Times*, June 20, 1936, 17.

[76]John Evans, "Church Social Action Groups Is under Fire," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 19, 1936, 23.

[77]"From the New York Times, June 27, 1934," Founding of CSA, FC-1, Congregational Library and Archives, Boston. "Profit System Assailed in Seminar," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, June 27, 1934, 10. "Church Council Adjourns: Cooperative Social Economy Is Stressed as Meeting Ends," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, June 28, 1934, 20. Carlos F. Hurd, "Dr. Jay T. Stocking Explains Church Council's Challenge to Competitive Profit System," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 30, 1934, 39. W. R. Catton, "Letters to the Editor: Churches Issue Red Manifesto," undated, unidentified press clipping, Founding of CSA, FC-4, Congregational Library and Archives, Boston.

[78]E. C. Lampson quoted in "Red Manifesto Is Issued by National Church Council," *Evening Sun*, 1, 4. "Trends in National Life Discussed by Dr. Porter," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, July 2, 1934, 7. See also, "Congregational Board Opposes Council Action," March 9, 1935, unidentified press clipping, Founding of CSA, FC-2, Congregational Library and Archives, Boston.

laypeople serving in isolated, impoverished communities. Sections addressed soil depletion, tenant farming, and improving farm income through cooperation. (Often, though, beyond the general support for cooperatives, the CSA offered few specifics of what these would look like in concrete form.) The packet also highlighted how churches could better connect their faith to the land. Hymnals contained a variety of topical songs: "God is working through nature, human dependence on God's natural bounty, the coming kingdom of righteousness, etc." It suggested congregations sing songs like "Men of the Soil," or "Beauty around Us." Sermons, too, might address agricultural laborers more directly. Curriculum pointed to Micah, "the prophet of the Judean farmers." This study pack concluded that the commercial interests of American cities had helped create some of the rudimentary problems farm people now faced.[79]

Another one of these packs, produced by the Agricultural Adjustment Administration and circulated to Congregational churches, took up the serious problem of soil erosion. Published shortly after the worst period of the Dust Bowl, the booklet asked a series of questions: Who was to blame for the depletion of healthy topsoil? What role should the government play in managing natural resources and the agricultural economy? Why had farmers not attended to the problems of soil erosion in the past? The booklet also detailed a series of conversations between farmers about the problems that they faced and then asked readers to consider solutions.[80]

Unlike some evangelical and fundamentalist groups, which attributed the dust storms and drought to punishment for a lack of piety, the CSA activists had a far more secular understanding of cause and effect.[81] Occasionally, a pastor in the denomination, such as J. J. Pruitt, doubted strictly scientific interpretations. In 1935, he observed that some fellow Christians who saw God's punishment in the towering pillars of dust on the horizon were wrong. Even if that was bad theology, the preacher figured that "our sophistication that alleges a godless, materialistic universe doesn't seem very convincing as it feeds upon the diet of dust and bluster of that philosophy." Besides, what comfort was materialistic philosophy to the beleaguered farmers of the Plains, he asked.[82] Others wondered if the message of their church was really suited to the needs of the farmer. From Bingham, Nebraska, Reverend Ernest G. Larsen worried that "a dogmatic, theoretical type of Christianity" would not do. In his estimation, the agricultural co-operative movement of Denmark deserved high praise and should be implemented in the states.[83]

[79]"Rural Life: A Study Guide" (New York: Council for Social Action, 1937), n.p., Congregational Library and Archives, Boston. For a similar kind of Christian agrarianism, see Loren W. Burch, "Jesus, Son of the Soil," *Advance*, May 1, 1937, 199–200; K. C. MacA., "National Rural Church Conference," *Advance*, March 1, 1936, 271; and Ralph A. Felton, *A New Gospel of the Soil* (Madison, NJ: Department of the Rural Church, 1951). On the general interest in cooperatives, see Arthur E. Holt, "The Soil in which Churches Grow," *Social Action*, March 1, 1936, 6; Harold O. Hatcher, "Let's Support Cooperatives," *Social Action*, March 1, 1936, 11–17; and Benson Y. Landis, "Christianity and the Cooperatives," *Social Action*, March 15, 1936, 3–8.

[80]"What Kind of Agricultural Policy Is Necessary to Save Our Soil?" (Washington, DC: United State Department of Agriculture, 1936), 1, 13, Congregational Library and Archives, Boston. See also, "The Hand that Feeds Us," *Social Action* (May 1935): 8–12.

[81]For a rare evangelical recognition of cause and effect, see "The Bow of Promise," *Alliance Weekly*, August 10, 1935, 506.

[82]J. J. Pruitt, "Dust," *Advance*, May 23, 1935, 408.

[83]Ernest G. Larsen, "Religion and the Farmer: Have Hard Times Affected His Philosophy of Religion?" *Advance*, June 20, 1935, 485. See also, Malcolm Dana, "Drouth Brings Tragedy: What Shall We Do about It?" *Advance*, September 1, 1936, 544.

Numerous liberal Congregationalists and Presbyterians embraced the New Deal and its many proposals. Overall, however, such supporters were likely in the minority of white Protestants, especially those on the Great Plains. Mainline denominations also included large numbers of conservatives and moderates, revealing further divisions among Protestants.[84] President Roosevelt's administration made some effort to reach out to Protestants of all persuasions. In late September 1935, the Roosevelt White House sent letters to 121,700 clergy around the US to find out about "conditions in your community." Roughly 100,000 letters reached their destinations. "Tell me where you feel our government can better serve our people," the president asked America's ministers. Responses from Dust Bowl ministers were mixed.[85] The cause of the New Deal, in the words of Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, was the cause of Christ. That was Ickes's message to members of the Presbyterian Church USA in May 1934 at the church's Cleveland General Council meeting. Like liberal Presbyterians, many Congregationalists agreed with that message. As early as 1933, a prominent Congregational minister lauded the New Deal but claimed it was not all that new. In fact, it was just an extension of the religious call for justice, mercy, and humility, he said.[86] For some in the CSA, Roosevelt's remedies did not go far enough. Society, said a critic in the group's journal, "must exchange the New Deal for a socialized, a cooperative order."[87] Though only a small minority of Protestants held such radical views, other Americans registered serious concerns about their country and the fate of the nation. One early Gallup poll in 1935 asked Americans what was "the most vital issue before the American people today." Issues that were high on the list for Democrats, Republicans, and independents included: "Religion," "Ending Depression," and "Better farm conditions."[88]

Americans might have agreed that farm conditions needed improvement and faith needed bolstering. But few, like those liberals among the Presbyterians and Congregationalists, had been early champions of environmental causes. The support that key figures and groups in these denominations lent to the New Deal for land management and agriculture reform proved important. "Modern American environmentalism," writes Mark Stoll, "has been remarkable among world environmental and Green movements for its vitality, power, and intense moral critique, which to a large degree were gifts of the Presbyterian tradition."[89] To these descendants of strict Calvinists, Secretary of the

[84]Robert Booth Fowler, *Unconventional Partners: Religion and Liberal Culture in the United States* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 84–85. In a select survey of the clergy response letters to Roosevelt, for instance, John W. Compton finds that the majority of ministers who were Disciples of Christ, Episcopalian, Congregational, and Lutheran had a positive view of the New Deal. John W. Compton, *The End of Empathy: Why White Protestants Stopped Loving Their Neighbors* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 78.

[85]Franklin D. Roosevelt "Letter to Clergy, No. 264," in *Indexes to the 1935 Papers of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (Washington, DC: Division of Press Intelligence for the United States Government, 1935), 230–231. Stock, *Main Street in Crisis*, 120–126. Monroe Billington and Cal Clark, "Nebraska Clergymen, Franklin D Roosevelt, and the New Deal," *Nebraska History* 72, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 77, 79, 82. Fearon, *Kansas in the Great Depression*, 195. Compton, *The End of Empathy*, 76–80.

[86]Lewis T. Reed, "The Golden Rule and the New Deal," *Congregationalist and Herald of Gospel Liberty*, September 28, 1933, 945–946.

[87]Harry W. Laidler, "Summary," *Social Action*, May 15, 1935, 31. Laidler was an economist and executive director of the League for Industrial Democracy.

[88]George Horace Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1935–1971, Vol 1, 1935–1948*, 5–6.

[89]Stoll, *Inherit the Holy Mountain*, 199. See also, Berry, *Devoted to Nature*. Gatta, *Making Nature Sacred*.

Interior Ickes had asked: "Will the leaders in the church follow the banner which has been boldly raised by President Roosevelt in his determination to establish social and economic justice. . . ?[90]

VII. Religion, Anti-liberalism, and Regional Patterns

White evangelicals, if they answered Ickes' question at all, tended to reply with a firm no.[91] Certainly evangelicals, Pentecostals, and fundamentalists hoped to meet the material needs of the poor. They sponsored food pantries, orphanages, rescue missions, and local reform work. But for those on the Plains, larger efforts tended to strike them as abstract, impractical, or even sinister.

Those furthest to the right of the liberal Congregationalists demonized the federal government as they spiritualized natural disasters. Such Protestants scoffed at those who called for large-scale public relief and agricultural reform. A member of the Christian and Missionary Alliance holiness church found fault with such misguided efforts. Speaking to missionaries in training, L. Albert Dick mentioned President Roosevelt's employment programs, the Reforestation Bill, and farm relief. "We have no intention to belittle man in his effort to better the conditions of the world," he preached, "yet we cannot but see that he is making his endeavors from the wrong angle. He is looking only on the material side and forgetting the spiritual." Another writer in the church's magazine heaped scorn on Roosevelt's signature Agricultural Adjustment Administration, which was intended to cut agricultural surpluses and raise the price of farm goods. It was the "climax of futility," said the critic. AAA officials were boasting of success just as "the greatest dust storm in the history of the country carried Dakota soil from [the] sun-baked plains to the Atlantic Coast."[92]

Others shared this line of thinking. A prominent fundamentalist minister drove through Dodge City, Kansas during a dust storm in the mid-1930s. The sky turned dark and the wind brought dust into his car. It was surely a sign of God's displeasure with a wicked government, he reasoned. He alluded to the destruction of crops and livestock that the AAA initiated. For that foolishness God was withholding rain as in ancient Israel. Such accounts assured fundamentalists that Roosevelt was not just a bad president, but that he raised God's ire. The Roosevelt administration seemed to be challenging the sovereignty of God, as if mere mortals could change the natural order of things.[93]

[90]"'New Deal Based on Christ'—Ickes: Secretary Urges Churches Help Establish Justice," *Boston Globe*, May 24, 1934, 4.

[91]L. Albert Dick, "The Paramount Need of the Hour," *Alliance Weekly*, August 26, 1933, 533. See also, "C.C.C.," *Alliance Weekly*, September 9, 1939, 562.

[92]S. A. Witmer, "Consider Your Ways!" *Alliance Weekly*, July 21, 1934, 453. Matthew Avery Sutton, "Was FDR the Antichrist? The Birth of Fundamentalist Antiliberalism in a Global Age"

Journal of American History 98, no. 4 (March 2012): 1052–1074. See also, J. H. Ingram, "God's N.R.A.: The Only Remedy for the Depression," *Church of God Evangel*, September 1, 1934, 6; Nathan Cohen Beskin, "Roosevelt and the Jesuits: Will the Jew Accept a Jesuit-Jew for His Messiah," *Latter Rain Evangel* (September 1934): 10; and Paul W. Rood, "Around the King's Table," *King's Business* (January 1937): 4.

[93]"Current Events in Light of the Bible: National Disasters Continue," *Our Hope* (June 1935): 743–745. See also criticism of the AAA and Roosevelt in "Acts of God," *Our Hope* (November 1935), 307. The Pentecostal Holiness Church approvingly quoted an anti-Roosvelt and anti-New Deal tirade from an Oklahoma Methodist in its denominational journal, "New Deal is Full of Socialism, Pastor Tells Mr. Roosevelt," *Pentecostal Holiness Advocate*, February 20, 1936, 6–7, 9–10. For more on fundamentalist opposition to the AAA, see Sutton, *American Apocalypse*, 241–242.

Some holiness denominations, such as the Church of the Nazarene, said little to nothing about practical measures to alleviate the worst aspects of the Dust Bowl and the economic collapse, and seldom commented on New Deal policies. Yet evidence suggests that Nazarenes, with their regional strength in Dust Bowl states, harbored suspicions about Roosevelt's recovery plan. Some in the denomination, as with their fundamentalist brethren, thought that the Blue Eagle symbol of the National Recovery Administration represented the mark of the beast.[94] One Nazarene wrote a short piece in the denomination's Kansas City, Missouri-based magazine that he titled "No Depression in Heaven," borrowing the title of a popular hymn. "We hear so much about financial depression these days," he worried several years after the stock market crash. Yet, he was certain that "unless we keep our eyes on God and His Word, and fast and pray and believe, we are likely to go down in defeat as individuals, as heads of families and as the Church of the Nazarene at large."[95] It is no wonder that at the same time the church's seminaries began focusing greater attention on the theology of apocalypse.[96]

Matthew Avery Sutton has described the origins of white evangelical and fundamentalist opposition to Roosevelt and his New Deal. For believers, the president seemed totalitarian. They were suspicious of his internationalism and his government solutions. "Fundamentalists began mobilizing against the expanding state at the very moment of the New Deal's inception," Sutton observes. "They helped foment conservative opposition to Roosevelt, lay the foundations for postwar religious mobilization, and created the political world view that subsequent generations of religious conservatives adopted and used to shape American politics."[97] Anti-liberalism and anti-statism rested at the center of such stridency. Stalwarts read Zionism, the Russian Revolution, global wars, and a worldwide depression through an apocalyptic lens, Sutton notes. Similarly, white believers criticized the president's heavy-handed agricultural policies and land reform efforts. Their dissatisfaction added to their overall picture of a malevolent and dangerous chief executive.[98]

Numerous evangelicals, fundamentalists, and Pentecostals wondered about the president's place in the latter days. One year into FDR's presidency, Church of God of Prophecy minister Homer A. Tomlinson admitted that "All America is back of [sic] Roosevelt." But he warned that the country was "headed for the Mark of the Beast, and the revelation of the Anti-Christ, the spirit of which is already working in the world, UNDER JEWISH LEADERSHIP WHO HAVE ALWAYS BEEN AGAINST CHRIST."[99] Such antisemitic conspiracy theories were common among fundamentalists, and had some purchase with Pentecostals such as Tomlinson as well. Writing in the *King's Business* magazine in February 1937, Long Beach California Brethren Church pastor and Kansas native Louis S. Bauman fretted about the dangerous role the federal government had assumed in the lives of Americans. Roosevelt had just

[94]W. T. Purkiser, *Called unto Holiness: The Second Twenty-five Years, Vol. 2* (Kansas City, MO: Nazarene Publishing House, 1983), 81. On the Nazarene's regional strength see Edwin S. Gaustad, *Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 125–126.

[95]William Brownell, "No Depression in Heaven: Let Us Get the Windows Open," *Herald of Holiness*, February 24, 1932, 10.

[96]H. Orton Wiley, "The Visions of the Apocalypse," *Herald of Holiness*, February 24, 1932, 2.

[97]Sutton, "Was FDR the Antichrist?" 1053.

[98]On Roosevelt as communist, see E. C. Clark, "Our Independence," *Church of God Evangel*, June 29, 1935, 3, 14–15. Sutton, "Was FDR the Antichrist?" 1052, 1063, 1067.

[99]Homer A. Tomlinson, "The Jewish People and the Church of God in the Midst of the Fulfilment of Prophecy," *White Wing Messenger*, March 17, 1934, 4.

won reelection. In Bauman's view, the popular president was an American dictator, bent on controlling the lives of citizens. The country, he agonized, "seems to be caught in the world's now rapid drift unto that day when the words shall be fulfilled: 'No man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark [of the beast]' (Rev. 13:17), and 'as many as would not worship the image of the beast should be killed' (Rev. 13:15)."[100]

Beyond such concerns about Roosevelt's satanic power, there were other worries as well. A leader in the Pentecostal Holiness Church, which had a strong presence in Oklahoma, counseled members against voting for the "wet" Democratic ticket in 1932. Support of the Prohibition Party seemed right, he reasoned.[101] Teetotaler churches were especially troubled by the repeal of Prohibition, the spread of communism, and the pernicious influence of popular culture. At its May 1936 meeting, for example, the Kansas Conference of the Evangelical Church assigned clear blame for the nation's many troubles. Church leaders targeted the tobacco industry, the "gambling craze," the liquor trade, sabbath-breaking, and the immoral influence of the press, the radio, and the movie industry. Christians, in this reading of society and culture, were under siege. They concluded, "Large groups of people have lost all sense of the sinfulness of sin and of moral responsibility before God."[102]

Other evangelicals agreed, focusing their attention on personal sin and the need for purity. In late summer 1934, Chicago Pentecostal editor Anna C. Reiff marveled at the "scorching winds, the dust storms, and the grasshoppers stirring in the prairie soil." These all seemed to point to a spiritual drought. Americans had deprived themselves of the living water and had become godless, even as churches sat on every street corner. "Will a Nation Reap What She Sows?" she asked. The weather seemed to be calling fellow countrymen to repentance.[103] A Pentecostal evangelist picked up on that theme in the same publication. He wondered about the "dire drought" that had hit the middle of the country. He scoffed at Roosevelt's planned relief in the region and countered that what was needed was the kind of prayer offered up by the prophet Elijah. Drought was simply, he remarked, the way that God reminded mankind of his powerlessness.[104]

The Assemblies of God denomination, headquartered in southwest Missouri, developed Sunday School curriculum that posed questions for young people to consider. Some of these related to the end of the world, the meaning of the drought, and the spate of unusual weather. One prodded youngsters: "Do you think the present drouth and dust storms in our land have any significance? What do you think would be the best

[100]Louis S. Bauman, "The National Election Viewed Beneath the Searchlight of the Prophetic Word," *King's Business* (February 1937): 50, 69. See also, "Signs of the Times: Getting Ready for the World Dictator," *Bridegroom's Messenger* (May 1933), 3.

[101]Byon A. Jones, "How Shall We Vote," *Pentecostal Holiness Advocate*, July 14, 1932, 3. See also "President Roosevelt: 'The People's Messiah," *Pentecostal Holiness Advocate*, April 27, 1933, 15–16.

[102]"Public Morals, Temperance and Sabbath," in *Journal of the Kansas Conference of the Evangelical Church, Seventy-second Annual Session, Held in Hesston, Kansas, May 13–17, 1936*, ed., C. H. Stauffacher (n.p.: C. F. Kliphardt, 1936), 29.

[103]Anna C. Reiff, "Will a Nation Reap What She Sows?" *Latter Rain Evangel* (September 1934): 3. See also, "The Voice of God in the Storm," *Pentecostal Evangel*, October 6, 1934, 5; "The Dust Storms," *Pentecostal Evangel*, May 18, 1935, 5; Ernest S. Williams, "Some Important Questions Answered," *Pentecostal Evangel*, June 29, 1935, 1; C. B. Hurlbut, "God's Judgments in the Earth," *Latter Rain Evangel*, (June 1935): 21; J. A. M., "Is Revival Ahead?" *Alliance Weekly*, February 16, 1935, 98; and "The Message of Haggai and Zechariah," *Alliance Weekly*, November 9, 1935, 726.

[104]William Booth-Clibborn, "The Pulse of a Dying World: Dire Drought," *Latter Rain Evangel*, October 1934, 12.

way to meet our drouth problem since God is the One who controls the elements?"[105] There were other ominous portents that appeared to be out of the pages of scripture. "This year in addition to insects, we have awful drought" a member of the Christian and Missionary Alliance noted in the mid-1930s. God had not been honored or obeyed, he concluded. Looking to "human government" would not help. "Now insects and drought are collecting years of back tithes that have not been paid to God."[106]

When such believers doubted that federal or state governments could make any significant impact on their current troubles, there were regional-political and cultural factors at work. Wayne Flynt and Alison Collis Greene find evidence of some support for Roosevelt and the New Deal among southern white holiness, Pentecostal, and evangelical groups.[107] That likely had much to do with the long-standing strength of the Democratic Party in the former Confederacy. Roosevelt received his highest margin of votes in the South. In Kansas or Nebraska, by contrast, the Republican Party maintained strong links with evangelicals, and with Protestants in general.[108]

Even on a national level, white Protestants tended to find fault with Roosevelt and the New Deal. In 1936, the *Literary Digest* conducted a poll of religious leaders across the country to gauge support of Roosevelt's New Deal. Though a deeply flawed poll, and biased against the president, it showed some regional patterns. Editors asked 21,606 clergymen: "Do you now approve the acts and policies of the Roosevelt 'New Deal' to date?" A national total of 70.22 percent, or 15,172, answered "no." In Kansas, 73.32 percent answered "no," and in Oklahoma 68.2 percent replied the same. By contrast, only 45.25 percent of Alabama clergy and 39.84 percent of Mississippi clergy said "no."[109] While Roosevelt won the popular vote in Kansas in 1932 and 1936, Republican Governor Alf Landon served from 1933 to 1937. Republicans also held firm control of the Kansas state legislature throughout the Depression years.[110]

There are still other likely reasons why so many white Protestants in the region largely rejected New Deal liberalism and remained deeply skeptical of conservation efforts. White evangelicals, Pentecostals, and fundamentalists certainly did not have the kinds of direct connections to the New Deal order that numerous mainline Protestants had developed. Darren Grem notes that the liberal Federal Council of Churches "supported the New Deal welfare state, labor organizing rights, controls on credit, and farm relief through price controls." Accordingly, "The Roosevelt administration basically returned the favor, commending forms of liberal Protestantism as the

[105]"Topics for Christ's Ambassadors," *Christ's Ambassadors Herald* (September 1936): n.p.

[106]Ira E. David, "Christian Stewardship," *Alliance Weekly*, June 1, 1935, 350.

[107]Wayne Flynt, "Religion for the Blues: Evangelicalism, Poor Whites, and the Great Depression," *Journal of Southern History* 71, no. 1 (February 2005): 29–38. See also, Greene, *No Depression in Heaven*. On a related note, Jarod Roll looks at landless Blacks and whites in the Missouri Bootheel and their campaigns for New Deal reform. Jarod Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion: Labor and Religion in the New Cotton South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 4–10, 83–84, 95, 177.

[108]Wuthnow, *Red State Religion*, 102–104. For more on religion and the New Deal, see Robert Booth Fowler, Allen D. Hertzke, and Laura R. Olson, *Religion and Politics in America: Faith, Culture, and Strategic Choices* (Boulder: CO: Westview Press, 1999), 90–93, 96, 100–101. For a typical Methodist critique of Roosevelt and the New Deal in the Midwest, see Dan B. Brummitt, "Religion and the President," *Christian Advocate*, March 14, 1935, 3.

[109]"Clergy Vote Heavily Against New Deal in Literary Digest Poll," *Hammond Times*, February 21, 1936, 7.

[110]Fearon, *Kansas in the Great Depression*, x. Francis W. Schruben, *Kansas in Turmoil, 1930–1936* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1969), 135–154.

religious equivalent of state reformism."[111] In a similar vein, Jarod Roll has written about poor white and Black agricultural workers in the Missouri Bootheel and their protest of the basic inequalities of the New Deal. Wealthy planters reaped the spoils of the system, claimed indignant critics. "To many despairing agrarians," Roll observes, "the Roosevelt administration was now governed by an ungodly and immoral economic calculus that was destroying their way of life." In some cases the religious language and culture of Pentecostalism and evangelicalism gave the landless poor tools for protest. In southeast Missouri, "they demanded a New Deal of their own."[112] Such subtle distinctions were lost on critics of low church groups. In the eyes of certain mainline Protestants, otherworldly, "emotional sects" had turned their attention away from the real, material problems of the age.

VIII. The Fault Lines of American Protestantism

Congregationalists within the CSA had a mixture of pity and contempt for such believers. Their views of Pentecostals and fundamentalists, for instance, had clear class and regional prejudices behind them. When fundamentalists or Pentecostals preached about God's judgment or spiritualized natural disasters, liberal church leaders and activist ministers thought such actions helped few and harmed many.[113] It is also likely that liberal Congregationalists considered such denominations, which were growing, as a kind of threat to their own influence and power. From their point of view, Pentecostal and holiness groups in the Midwest appealed to converts who yearned for salvation, community, and religious certainty. "They shared the conviction that they have found God," wrote Anton T. Boisen, a chaplain who served in Kansas. He also noted that "they are not seeking to save the world, but to save individuals out of a world which is getting worse and worse." Only salvation and the second coming of Jesus could set things right. Boisen and a denominational editor lumped together ecstatic religious groups and generalized about members, who they considered to be poor, uneducated, marginalized, and disinherited. Nevertheless, such "'Holy Roller' groups have won a sizable following," Boisen reported to fellow Congregationalists. Their "otherworldly" tendencies, as he put it, meant that they were little interested in social action and large-scale efforts to improve society.[114]

What accounted for this mutual animosity and why did these religious traditions respond in such different ways to the Dust Bowl and the Depression? In the decades before the Dust Bowl, American Protestants had been fracturing along political, religious, and cultural fault lines. Even in the late-nineteenth century, some of these

[111]Darren E. Grem, *The Blessings of Business: How Corporations Shaped Conservative Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 31.

[112]Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 104, 106.

[113]William F. Frazier, "Foreword," and Anton T. Boisen, "Religion and Hard Times: A Study of the Holy Rollers," *Social Action*, March 15, 1939, 5–34. See also, Thomas Alfred Tripp, "Dust Bowl Tragedy," *Christian Century*, January 24, 1940, 108–110. Matthew Pehl finds that liberal Protestants and academics similarly depicted poor white southern evangelicals as overly emotional, narrow, and anti-intellectual. Deprivation theory, in this sense, explained the religion of the poor, *The Making of Working Class Religion*, 108.

[114]Frazier, "Foreword," and Boisen, "Religion and Hard Times," 5, 6, 12, 26, 34. See also, James Bright Wilson, "Religious Leaders, Institutions and Organizations among Certain Agricultural Workers in the Central Valley of California" (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1944); Norman G. Eddy, "Store-Front Religion," *Religion in Life* 28, no. 1 (1958–1959): 68–85; and Jack Conroy, *A World to Win* (1935; reprint, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

divisions were becoming apparent. So, while liberals within the Presbyterian Church USA, the Congregationalist Church, and others had come to think of social problems and even ecological issues in systemic and societal terms, the same was rarely true of their more evangelical brethren. The Salvation Army, with its social outreach and concern for the urban poor, was one of the few exceptions to a general rule. The historian Mark Noll observes this shift in Dwight Moody, one of the most famous Anglo-American evangelists of the Gilded Age. "Moody," says Noll, "as if in conscious reaction to the political overcommitments of evangelicals during and after the Civil War, guided his audiences away from external social duties toward a consideration of inner and personal states of being."[115] Moody's turn inward and the shift to personal holiness was one of the distinguishing features of late-Victorian, white evangelicalism.

Yet, in the antebellum years and during the period of the Civil War, an influential minority of northern Black and white evangelicals had championed women's rights, campaigned for peace, worked in the abolitionist cause, and called for labor reform. In late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Kansas, it had been possible for theologically conservative evangelicals to sponsor progressive causes. That is evident in the pages of the widely circulated magazine the *Christian Herald*. Its editors and contributors endorsed labor unions, fought for a degree of racial and ethnic equality, and pushed for legislation banning child labor.[116] Some scholars have termed the gradual turning away from large-scale social reform the "Great Reversal." Particular denominations that underwent this transformation included the Free Methodists, United Brethren, United Presbyterians, Reformed Presbyterians, and Wesleyan Methodists.[117] The heady pre-Civil War optimism faded as white evangelicals and what might be called proto-fundamentalists embraced the end times theology of premillennialism. The Bible's difficult apocalyptic passages were puzzles to be solved. The world, in the words of Moody, was like a wrecked vessel. Added to that was an increasing suspicion of the labor movement and political radicalism along with growing worries about Catholicism, Judaism, and recent immigrants.[118]

"This is the fatal tendency of these liberal times," wrote a leader of the Wesleyan Methodist church in 1890. "Many men of excellent minds, once useful in the advocacy of truth . . . have not only cut away from the great essentials of salvation truth, but opened their 'liberal' minds and arms to the . . . most dangerous and destructive

[115]Mark A. Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 79.

[116]George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 84–85. Heather D. Curtis, *Holy Humanitarians: American Evangelicals and Global Aid* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 13–14, 49, 233–235.

[117]Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1976), 20. David O. Moberg, *The Great Reversal: Evangelism Versus Social Concern* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1972). Leonard I. Sweet, "The Evangelical Tradition in America," in *The Evangelical Tradition in America*, ed., Leonard I. Sweet (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 71–73. For more on the evangelical split in Boston from the 1890s forward, see Benjamin L. Hartley, *Evangelicals at a Crossroads: Revivalism and Social Reform in Boston, 1860–1910* (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2011). Richard S. Taylor, "Beyond Immediate Emancipation: Jonathan Blanchard, Abolitionism, and the Emergence of American Fundamentalism," *Civil War History* 27, no. 3 (September 1981), 273.

[118]Augustus Warner Williams, *Life and Work of Dwight L. Moody: The Great Evangelist of the 19th Century, the Founder of Northfield Seminary, Mount Herman School for Boys, and the Chicago Bible Institute* (Philadelphia: P. W. Ziegler and Company, 1900), 149.

errors."[119] By the 1930s in states such as Kansas and Oklahoma, such logic was commonplace.

The Kansas fundamentalist preacher and radio demagogue Gerald B. Winrod became a popular critic of liberalism, in all its varieties. His fascist views were so widely known that he won the nickname "the Jayhawk Nazi." Winrod blasted modernist Protestantism and reform-oriented faith as antithetical to true Christianity. In part, the Wichita minister and politician made a name for himself for his blistering attacks on Roosevelt's New Deal and for his anti-communism and virulent antisemitism. His magazine, the *Defender*, reached a circulation of around 90,000 by 1936.[120] In it, he battered Roosevelt, liberalism, and a host of other enemies. In 1930, he denounced one denomination for going "wild over 'The Social Gospel,' as if the social side were the all important side of Christianity." He assured fellow conservatives that "The real Gospel is a supernatural, creative, transforming, regenerating Power."[121] Winrod may have represented the far-right edge of the movement, but his anti-liberal views were widely shared.

By the 1920s, the lines were drawn quite sharply. The liberal Protestant minister Harry Emerson Fosdick addressed the matter directly in his influential 1922 sermon "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" The "fundamentalist controversy," he worried, "threatens to divide the American churches as though already they were not sufficiently split and riven." These intolerant and narrow believers, Fosdick railed, intended "to drive out of the evangelical churches men and women of liberal opinions."[122] In many ways, liberal and evangelical religious factions defined themselves against each other. Accordingly, the editors of the fundamentalist *King's Business* shot back in 1925. Fosdick, who was "puffed with pride," had replaced the word of God with a Christless system, warned an editor. The magazine also accused him of smuggling false and dangerous ideas into the church.[123]

In the years leading up to the Depression and the Dust Bowl, the theological battles over biblical interpretation and history, the teaching of evolution in public schools, the role of the government in the lives of citizens, and the place of religion in society split Protestants further apart. Evangelicals and fundamentalists worried they were losing their positions of prominence in the nation's major universities and they developed a growing sense of embattlement, which has remained one of the central, defining features of conservative American Christianity up to the present.[124] The defender of fundamentalism, former Secretary of State and presidential candidate, William Jennings Bryan summed up a growing disdain for expertise and academic authority in his

[119]"A Word of Caution," *Wesleyan Methodist*, February 19, 1890, 4

[120]Gail Ann Sindell, "Gerald B. Winrod and the *Defender*: A Case Study of the Radical Right" (PhD diss., Case Western Reserve University, 1973), 269.

[121]Gerald B. Winrod, "Foreign Missions Are Slipping," *Mennonite Weekly Review*, April 9, 1930, 8.

[122]Harry Emerson Fosdick, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" sermon reprinted as "The New Knowledge and the Christian Faith," *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* 8, no. 7 (November 1922): 467–468.

[123]"News from Northfield and the Moody Muddle," *King's Business* (November 1925), 470. "Fosdick or 'False-Dick,'" *King's Business* (October 1922), 987–989. "War in the Churches," *Bristol Herald Courier*, September 10, 1923, 4. William Booth-Clibborn, "The Pulse of a Dying World: Dictator Fosdick," *Latter Rain Evangel* (October 1934): 12. See also, Joel Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 93–94, 101, 103.

[124]George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 338–340. On the liberal Protestant veneration of science, see Rick Ostrander, *The Life of Prayer in a World of Science: Protestants, Prayer, and American Culture, 1870–1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 87–89.

January 8, 1923, lecture at Moody Tabernacle in Chicago. The Nebraska native lambasted biblical critics and evolutionary scientists. "These men are mind-worshippers," said the Great Commoner. "They are trying to substitute education for religion." A similar kind of suspicion of elites and experts fueled some of the opposition to the New Deal and to new conservation efforts.[125] Other prominent white fundamentalists such as J. Frank Norris, John R. Rice, and J. Gresham Machen declared that Roosevelt was a dictator, a dangerous socialist, or that his policies would lead to slavery.[126]

IX. Conclusion

With the economic crisis and drought shaping daily life across the Great Plains, fundamentalism and Pentecostalism flourished in the region. Adherents established Bible schools around the country in the decade and fundamentalist publications increased their circulation. Fundamentalist radio programs broadcast by Moody Bible Institute's WMBI could be heard across the Great Plains and all over the US. Along with this outreach came the growth and spread of premillennial theology and new ways of thinking about the promises of the past and the prophetic signs of the present. Joel Carpenter describes the fundamentalist upsurge simply: "it provided ordinary people with [a] compelling critique of modern society." On the Great Plains, apocalypticism gave believers a powerful tool for understanding dust storms, crop failures, and economic ruin. For these faithful, liberal Protestantism offered weak answers and solutions, or purposeful deceptions, when it came to the trials of the era. In part, this helps explain why largely white denominations in the region like the Assemblies of God quadrupled its membership in these years and the Church of the Nazarene doubled in size.[127]

Iowa native and fundamentalist preacher Billy Sunday, popular with Nazarenes and those in the Assemblies of God, launched a series of public attacks on modernists such as Fosdick and denounced Roosevelt and the New Deal. By the 1920s, Sunday was America's most well-known and widely respected preacher. Fosdick was, Sunday complained, simply a "mental pervert." Repeal of prohibition in 1933 stung Sunday particularly hard. To Sunday, the repealists were "the worst crowd of God forsaken cut throats this side of hell, and if I was God for a half hour they wouldn't be this side." Sunday had long used violent rhetoric to denounce liberals, taking aim at socialists, communists, social gospellers, and Democrats. In his final years, he thought that the New Deal recovery program, with its solutions for the Dust Bowl and American agriculture, looked like

[125]William Jennings Bryan, "Moses vs. Darwin," in *Contemporary Forum: American Speeches on Twentieth-Century Issues*, eds., Ernest J. Wrage and Barnet Baskerville (New York: Harper and Brothers), 116. Sutton, *American Apocalypse*, 128, 180, 213, 233, 253, 258. Michael J. McVicar, *Christian Reconstruction: R. J. Rushdoony and American Religious Conservatism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 49–51. For more on the religious opposition to the New Deal, see Leo P. Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), 13–19; Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 210; Miller, *American Protestantism and Social Issues*, 116–123; and Compton, *The End of Empathy*, 80–82. For a good general summary of conservative Protestant opposition to the New Deal, see Gillis J. Harp, *Protestants and American Conservatism: A Short History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 153–157.

[126]Miller, *American Protestantism and Social Issues*, 123.

[127]Joel Carpenter quoted in Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 194. Joel A. Carpenter, "Fundamentalist Institutions and the Rise of Evangelical Protestantism, 1929–1942," *Church History* 49, no. 1 (March 1980): 68–70, 73–75.

creeping bolshevism. If nothing else, it was a direct threat to big business. As drought and dust storms swept across the area, Sunday told a congregation in Portland, Oregon, in September 1934 that God had taken "crop reduction out of the hands of the government." For Sunday and his ardent supporters, government efforts to better the conditions on the Plains were foolhardy at best.[128]

With the coming of the dust storms and black blizzards, Congregationalist liberals and allied groups tended to see environmental problems as something that could be solved through scientific know-how, education, government intervention, and denominational effort. Anti-liberal Protestants, for the most part, could not conceive of such efforts and read and interpreted the weather in radically different ways. Such ideas and actions took root in the 1930s and, in the coming decades, would come to inform how religious groups across the theological and political spectrum understood conservation, environmentalism, and government action.

Finally, the history of environmental degradation and religious responses to drought and dust storms has a more current resonance. In 2015, the American environmentalist and journalist Bill McKibben remarked that, "as the reality of climate change has grown steadily more apparent, all the thoughtful branches of humanity have begun to recognize that their philosophies and theologies need to be reconsidered in light of this new fact." For McKibben, "religion may be particularly prone to this rethinking: an understanding of God as all powerful and beneficent badly needs squaring with the reality that we are systematically dismantling our planet."[129] There are other contemporary resonances as well. Widespread knowledge-denial about human-caused climate change remains strong. Conservative white religious groups, according to Pew polling, remain deeply skeptical of the science on global warming and the realities of climate change.[130] Looking back to the 1930s, there appear to have been similar failures to come to terms with a human-caused environmental disaster. Yet there were also creative and pragmatic ways that the Dust Bowl sparked religious and theological dialogue, reflection, and even action.

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[128]Roger A. Bruns, *Preacher: Billy Sunday and Big-Time American Evangelism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 284, 286, 290, 292, 295. Sunday quoted in A.T.S, "The Man in the Street," *Times Herald*, October 14, 1932, 6. "Sawdust Trail Claims Sunday: Opens Last Tour with Slap at New Deal," *Spokesman-Review*, September 10, 1934. "Sunday Flays Administration: New Deal, Communism, Liquor Issue Attacked," *Billings Gazette*, September 10, 1934, 7.

[129]Bill McKibben, "Climate Change: A Warning from Islam," August 24, 2015, www.nybooks.com/daily/2015/08/24/climate-change-warning-islam/ (Accessed on February 18, 2021).

[130]"Religion and Views on Climate and Energy Issues," October 22, 2015, www.pewresearch.org/science/2015/10/22/religion-and-views-on-climate-and-energy-issues/, (Accessed on February 22, 2021). Daniel Cox, Juhem Navarro-Rivera, and Robert P. Jones, "Americans More Likely to Attribute Increasingly Severe Weather to Climate Change, Not End Times," December 13, 2012, www.prri.org/research/prri-rns-december-2012-survey/ (Accessed on February 22, 2021).

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