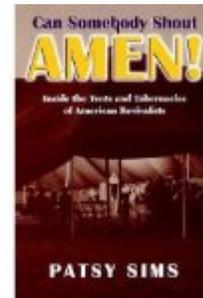


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Patsy Sims. *Can Somebody Shout Amen!: Inside the Tents and Tabernacles of American Revivalists*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996. xx + 234 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8131-0886-5.

Reviewed by Erling Jorstad (St. Olaf College)
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As the first title in its new religion series, Religion in the South, the University Press of Kentucky has reissued this study, first brought out in 1988 by St. Martin's Press. Considered something of a methodological and reportorial classic when issued, Sims's book stands out as an impressive beginning for this press's new venture. The press states it is bringing out "innovative, interdisciplinary studies that seek to identify the relationship of religion to southern politics, race, gender, and class." This book qualifies, if on its own terms, for inclusion based on those criteria.

Perhaps well known to the readers of this list, *Can Somebody* reminds us anew of the importance of hands-on, door-to-door (or, here, tent-to-tent) interviewing, first-person, participant-observer research. An associate professor and Coordinator of the Creative Nonfiction Writing Program at the University of Pittsburgh, Sims here shows the fruit of her research—started in 1981, with a tape recorder, lots of cassettes, and some remarkable intuitive site findings—to locate some very little-known tabernacles and tents. She attended nearly fifty services, led by fifteen evangelists (Pentecostal). Audiences ranged from fifty to some five thousand. She interviewed on tape twenty-two revivalists, thirty-one of their workers and close relatives, fifty-five members of the audiences and some thirty specialists. Her bibliography, by now, of course, very dated, shows close reading of the standard works of those years: Bernard Weisberger, William McLoughlin, Jeffrey Hadden, Vinson Synan, David Harrell, and others.

As the material was processed, the author decided to analyze in some depth the ministries of six leading individuals, and one leaderless subgroup, the snakehan-

dlers. Here are wonderful recorded conversations with H. Wayne Simmons, Tommy Walker, R. W. Schambach, Ernest Angley, H. Richard Hall, and Mike Shreve. This is oral history at its best, preserved by a master researcher. Sims also has pungent quotes from revival meetings, healing services, critics of the stars (especially the controversial Ernest Angley), and insights from the likes of Professor Robert Coles's *Migrants, Sharecroppers, and Mountaineers*.

Readers should know Sims has chosen to go for the bold, the dramatic, and the revealing anecdotes and quotations rather than draw on more formal academic analysis. One finds here no deconstruction, no postmodernist textual analysis, and only enough historical setting to put each of the seven chapters in some kind of context. She assumes, I think, some rather extensive prior knowledge on the reader's part of the Pentecostal gifts of the Holy Spirit, the socio-economic foundation for revivalist/healing involvement, and an understanding of why those following the tent-tabernacle movement chose to remain largely outside the existing denominational parishes.

Sims avoids organ-tone conclusions, but does establish an overarching interpretive theme (p. xviii). These revivalists—"one-man denominations"—were able to fill tents and auditoriums "and affect the thinking of many poor as well as middle-class American Protestants who feel lost and estranged in an increasingly complicated world." The seekers came, repented, and rejoiced because they found under the big tops "a source of entertainment, a sense of belonging, a feeling of worth—they are, after all, God's chosen people."

It is good to have this book back in so accessible a

form. It probably would not be the book Sims or an equally adept researcher would write today. But as a period piece, it is something of a classic.

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