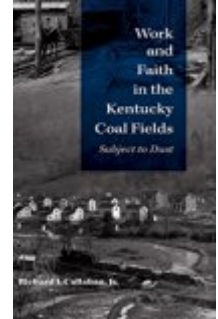


Richard J. Callahan. *Work and Faith in the Kentucky Coal Fields: Subject to Dust.*
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. xv + 259 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN
978-0-253-35237-8.



Reviewed by John Hayes

Published on H-Pentecostalism (August, 2009)

Commissioned by Gene Mills (Florida State University)

I was looking forward to reading this book. In his introduction, Richard J. Callahan proposes a different kind of religious history, one that weaves people's daily work together with their religious sensibility, yielding a more coherent, integrated portrait of everyday faith. In the style of Robert Orsi, David Hall, and others in the past decade who have argued for studies of "lived religion," Callahan sets out to explore the religious lives of Kentucky coal miners in the early twentieth century. This is a welcome approach, since it is still possible, despite the development of social history, to read insular denominational studies that abstract religion from the context of ordinary life—from such phenomena as geography, class position, larger culture, and, Callahan emphasizes, work. Callahan nicely establishes the context at issue here, making the reader feel at home in the world of the Kentucky coal fields, familiar with the miners in their day-to-day lives. But I have to confess on finishing the book that I was left wanting more religion. The portrait of it that appears here is heavy on analysis—some of it very nu-

anced and interesting—but short on illustration. The religion of the miners, unlike their fleshed-out context of labor, remains somewhat shadowy and elusive.

Callahan begins the book by contextualizing the two main subjects: faith and work. Chapter 1 traces the development of religion in southern Appalachia, arguing that Protestantism deviated from national patterns in the course of the nineteenth century, making for a distinct "Appalachian mountain religion" that played no small part in imbuing Appalachia with a sense of otherness (p. 17). The second chapter explores the principal economic transition in the region, as subsistence farmers moved into industrial life in the coal mines, beginning in the 1890s and continuing into the 1920s. The third and fourth chapters are the heart of the book, as they portray everyday life and everyday religion in the coal towns that sprouted throughout eastern Kentucky in the 1910s and 1920s. Callahan skillfully evokes and analyzes what it was like for once-independent farm families to live in a company-owned coal

town with sharp gender divisions and full immersion in a money economy. This world contained its own “structure of feeling,” Callahan argues, one shaped most basically by the dangerous, dirty coal mines (p. 120). “Subject to dust,” mining families accentuated the tangible, bodily elements of their Protestant religion, and they articulated a strong sense of human limitation and mortality. Chapters 5 and 6 are the most interesting in the book, focusing on the spread of “Holiness” (the miners’ blanket term for any Holiness or Pentecostal group) in the 1910s and 1920s, and the miners’ involvement with the National Miners Union and United Mine Workers of America in the 1930s. Seemingly at odds, Holiness religion and labor activism were both, Callahan argues, ways that miners sought to resist the depersonalization of industrial capitalism.

Callahan writes at the outset that the reconstruction of the lived religion of mining families—hardworking, impoverished people who left scant written records—is a difficult project, and he concludes with a confession that his arguments are tentative. Still, the available sources—missionary reports, recorded music, folkloric fieldwork, and oral histories—could have been used more extensively. Callahan gives some insightful analysis, but too much of the book is an abstract interpretive skeleton needing more illustrative flesh. We need more illustrations to see the religion of miners at play in everyday life, and we need to hear more from the subjects to get into their distinct “structure of feeling.” The material on coal town life could have been trimmed some, as that story has been told elsewhere, by Crandall Shifflett (*Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia, 1880-1960* [1991]), Ronald Eller (*Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930* [1982]), and others, and the investigation of the religion that flourished in these places could have been lengthened significantly.

A central claim of Callahan’s, following Deborah McCauley (*Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History* [1995]), is that eastern Kentucky, and southern Appalachia more broadly, was home to a distinct form of Protestant religion, one that differed substantively from the national denominations. Those denominations did make their way into the mountains, beginning in the 1880s as missionaries and paternalistic coal operators sought to bring modern Christianity to a benighted region. For the local miners, however, this was “railroad religion,” distinct from real mountain Christianity with its unpaid, untrained preachers; pervasive sense of limit and human incapacity; and belief in visions, dreams, and omens (p. 60). Callahan is certainly right that these two forms of Christianity could be found in the coal fields of eastern Kentucky. But they could also be found throughout the society of the U.S. South in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In rural areas throughout the modernizing New South, working-class people—small farmers, tenants and sharecroppers, and timber workers—practiced the folk Christianity that, Callahan and McCauley claim, was unique to Appalachia. Songs, folklorists’ fieldwork, missionary reports, and oral histories from throughout the South, not just Appalachia, demonstrate the power of this folk religion for the impoverished working class. The regionwide scope of this lived religion—what Callahan evocatively calls a “theology at the limits”—would suggest that *class*, not *work* per se, was the operative variable in shaping varieties of religious experience (p. 120). Throughout the region, though the work of coal mining and cotton farming clearly differed, the working class lived with poverty’s sufferings, lack of ownership over relevant resources, and an extractive economy that drained wealth away. These common class experiences placed their stamp, I would suggest, on a distinct form of Protestantism that could be found in the flat cotton lands of Mississippi as readily as the coal fields of mountainous Kentucky.

If Callahan's presentation of a unique mountain religion needs rethinking, his analysis of the spread of Holiness, by contrast, is a nuanced, careful interpretation with suggestive ideas for other contexts. He argues that miners joined the Holiness movement as a way to preserve, and intensify, precisely the elements of older rural religion that were under attack by the emissaries of "railroad religion." Holiness took the older belief in visions and omens and made it tangible in signs: healing, speaking in tongues, and serpent-handling, especially. It took the coal mining world's dust-covered, endangered body and made it the locus for these signs, and it took the sense of human limit and intensified it into a foreboding eschatological narrative that preached the imminent end of the world. Callahan skillfully links industrial transformation to Holiness as an intensified resistance movement, corroborating Edward Ayers's older findings that Holiness-Pentecostal groups sprouted not in isolated backwaters but precisely those areas of the New South most rapidly transformed by markets and capital (*The Promise of the New South* [1992]). He goes further and shows that this active engagement with the new context made Holiness believers ripe for unionization when national organizations came into the coal fields in the early 1930s. This link, highlighted and supported with solid evidence, should aid in refuting the still-powerful cliché that Holiness-Pentecostalism was little more than an "otherworldly" escape for the disinherited.

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Citation: John Hayes. Review of Callahan, Richard J. *Work and Faith in the Kentucky Coal Fields: Subject to Dust*. H-Pentecostalism, H-Net Reviews. August, 2009.

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