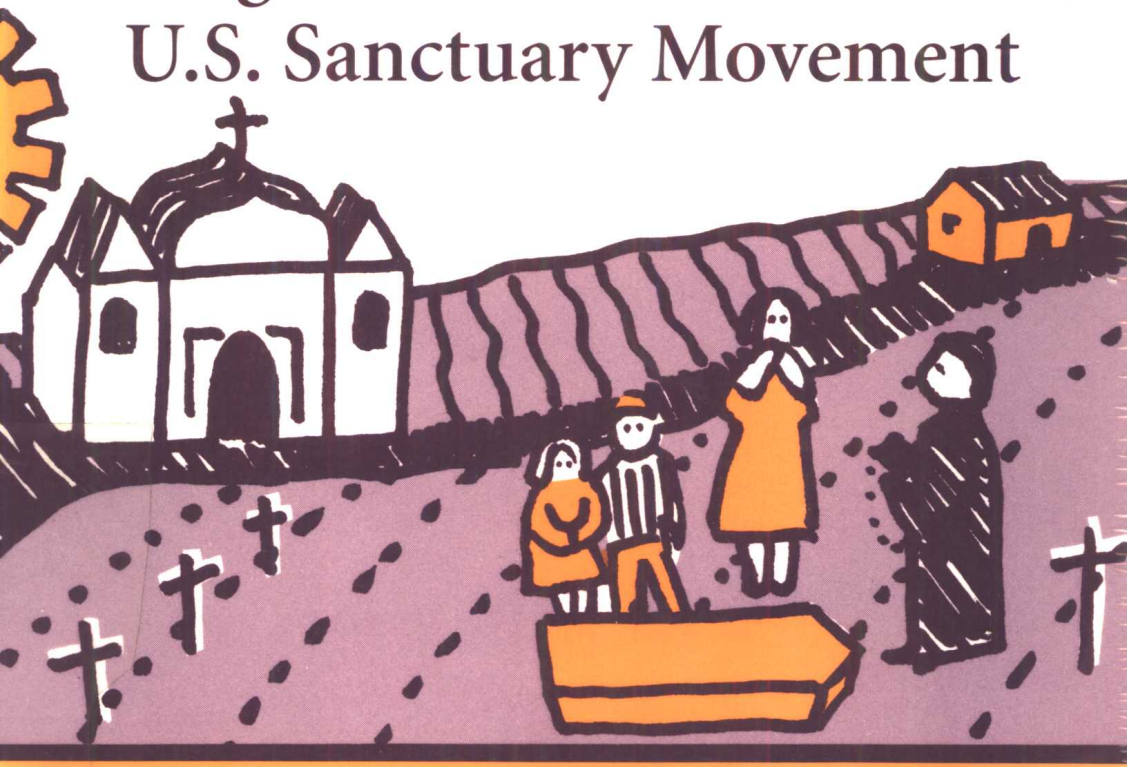
The CULTURE of PROTEST

Religious Activism and the U.S. Sanctuary Movement



Susan Bibler Coutin

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Susan Bibler Coutin

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Introduction

One warm September morning in 1987, I was sitting in a folding chair in the crowded sanctuary of "All Saints"[1]—a Tucson, Arizona, Protestant church that had declared itself a sanctuary for Central American refugees in 1982 and whose pastor had been convicted in 1986 of conspiracy, transporting, and aiding and abetting the transportation of illegal aliens. This particular Sunday was unusual because other convicted sanctuary workers and their attorneys had gathered in Tucson to plan their appeal and had joined the 200 or so church members at All Saints' regular worship service. At the beginning of the service, the lawyers and others active in the defense effort were asked to stand so that they could be honored. When the pastor thanked the defense attorneys for their hard work and commitment, he spoke as though the congregation itself had been on trial. I found myself wondering how many of the "unindicted co-conspirators" named in the indictment were from this congregation.

The sermon that Sunday morning wove together trial, truth, tilling, and tax collecting to ask how one could *denounce* injustice while *benefiting* from injustice. The sermon was based on a parable from the Gospel of Matthew in which a father asks two sons to till the fields. The first son agrees but never follows through. The second son refuses but later does the work. Jesus (the teller of the parable) then asks the Pharisees (his audience) which is the better son. When they choose the latter, Jesus tells them that the prostitutes and tax collectors will enter heaven before they do. The minister drew two conclusions from this parable: first, that lies, such as claiming to promote peace while aiding the Contras, are the root of evil, and second, that God judges individuals by their actions rather than their words. Declaring that the modern church had become too comfortable, the pastor positioned himself and his audience among the Pharisees. He told his congregation, "The question before us today is whether the *poor in spirit* will go to heaven before the *preachers* and the *lawyers* and the *powerful* in society." The minister went on to portray sanctuary, the trial, and the appeal as actions that were *un*comfortable and that therefore could redeem the powerful. Using words evocative of human rights violations in Central America, the pastor reminded the congregation that only one week after he told the ruling families of his day that the despised

would enter heaven before them, Jesus was betrayed, denounced, captured, tortured, and killed on a cross. The minister thus likened sanctuary work and the trial to Jesus' act of denunciation, to the truth that undermines the reign of the powerful, and to the persecution that awaited both Jesus and Central American activists.

Coincidentally, that particular Sunday morning—when I heard a pastor who was a convicted felon encourage individuals to proclaim truth at the risk of imprisonment or death—was my first visit to All Saints. I had been involved in the sanctuary movement in the San Francisco Bay Area for more than a year and had been conducting fieldwork and interviews among participants since January 1987. I'd been in Tucson for about a month and had already met this pastor, attended meetings, interviewed a rabbi, and done volunteer work. So, on that Sunday morning when I stood to introduce myself to the congregation along with other new visitors—a weekly ritual in this well-known church, which one member described as a "goldfish bowl"—the pastor told church members, "She's here to help us with our sanctuary ministry, and she's very welcome. Glad to have you with us."

And I was glad to be there. Despite my fears that this church, which had been infiltrated by undercover government agents, would not welcome an anthropologist in its midst, no one reacted suspiciously to my presence. Rather, after the service, several churchgoers greeted me, asked about my research, and invited me to worship with them again. Nor, I soon discovered, was I alone in my quest for knowledge of the movement. During the brief period after the minister lifted a Salvadoran boy to ring the church bells and before church members divided into Bible study classes, I met a young man from the East Coast who was being funded by his university to work with the sanctuary movement. When I asked why he'd taken on this task, he told me that his father was a minister, he was a church member, and he didn't want to give up on the mainstream church.

And why was I there, talking to a young man who didn't want to give up on the mainstream church, looking at wall-hangings that commemorated the martyrs of Central America, feeling the echoes of this sermon, and mentally comparing All Saints to congregations in California where I had worshiped and attended sanctuary meetings? I was analyzing the culture of protest within the U.S. sanctuary movement; a grass-roots religious-based network whose aid to undocumented Central Americans had unleashed the state's power of surveillance.

The Culture of Protest

Protest movements, like societies, have cultures; however, unlike societies, cultures of protest are created when individuals and communities deliberately invoke, recombine, and reinterpret preexisting practices and meanings in light of particular social causes and notions of justice. Constructing and reshaping culture is not, of course, limited to protest movements. Whenever individuals act,

they choose between, reformulate, and sometimes improvise on available cultural options. Moreover, these choices often have political implications. For example, enrolling one's child in a public high school that has just instituted busing can be a political act. However, whereas everyday actions can and do intentionally and unintentionally contest and reconstruct social norms, these processes are often buried in the onslaught of social life, their implications, though significant, difficult to ascertain. In contrast, to form the construct known as a social movement, actors create discourses and actions that coalesce around particular political causes and at particular historical moments. Because of their visibility and their explicit link to political issues, protest movements provide a uniquely unmuddied window on the ways that individuals produce culture and on the political nature of such processes.

The sanctuary movement formed during the early 1980s when religious volunteers devised methods of assisting and advocating for undocumented Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees. The sanctuary movement had a particularly rich culture.[2] Its name derived from the prototypical movement practice: congregations giving sanctuary to Salvadorans or Guatemalans at risk of being detained and deported by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). In addition to this action, movement members brought Salvadorans and Guatemalans into the United States, traveled to Central America to accompany displaced communities, organized caravans to transport Salvadorans and Guatemalans to other parts of the United States, held ecumenical prayer services and vigils focusing on Central American issues, enabled undocumented refugees to testify publicly about their experiences, sent telegrams protesting human rights abuses in Central America, lobbied Congress, provided social services to Central American refugee communities, sold and distributed Central American crafts and literature, organized press conferences, arranged visits and public presentations by visiting Central American activists and religious leaders, raised bail bond money for detained Central Americans, helped detainees file for political asylum, and more. As they performed these activities, sanctuary workers invoked and reinterpreted legal, cultural, and religious practices in unique ways. These reinterpretations as well as the practices through which they were enacted made up the culture of the movement.

My own involvement with the sanctuary movement was occasioned by the trial of which All Saints' pastor spoke. During fall 1985, as I was designing my doctoral research, the prosecution of eleven sanctuary activists—including All Saints' pastor—began in Tucson. Articles about the trial made front-page headlines, and newspapers around the nation featured in-depth stories about the movement and its history. As I learned about the movement, I realized that not only would sanctuary's unique fusion of religious and political activism afford material for analyzing how people manipulated cultural concepts and practices, but that, in addition, the movement struck a personal chord. I discovered that a Protestant church that I had attended sporadically as a U.C. Berkeley undergraduate was one of the

original sanctuary congregations. The movement aided Central Americans, and I spoke Spanish, had lived and studied in Colombia and Argentina, and had focused on Latin America in my graduate studies. Sanctuary was designed to combat human rights abuses, and while I was in Argentina, I had worked with the mothers of the disappeared—an experience that had exposed me to the atrocities of state terrorism and deepened my commitment to oppose such abuses in the future. Doing fieldwork within the sanctuary movement would not only further my academic ends, it would also reconnect me to some of my religious roots and enable me to take practical action on human rights issues.

As I began reading about protest and resistance, I became aware of a schism that obscured the similarities between organized protest movements, such as sanctuary, and the continual, though often implicit, acts of resistance that occur in everyday life. Studies of organized social movements viewed protest as an exception to the normal state of affairs (Piven and Cloward 1977; Gusfield 1970; McCarthy and Zald 1973, 1977; Marwell and Oliver 1984; Hannigan 1985; Melucci 1989; Klandermans and Tarrow 1988), an aberration that occurred when resources became available to aggrieved groups, permitting them to act. What came to be known as "resource mobilization theory" assumed that when it *did* occur, protest consisted of rational, strategic action designed to accomplish clearly explicated goals (Jenkins 1983; Zald and McCarthy 1979; Gamson 1975; Oberschall 1973; Tilly 1978). In contrast, analyses of what Scott termed "*everyday* forms of resistance" (1985: 29, emphasis in original) considered resistance an *ongoing* facet of social life, the inevitable consequence of social asymmetry (Scott 1985; Comaroff 1985; Taussig 1980; Limon 1983; Ong 1987; Price 1983). These theorists contended that, in addition to being strategic action, protest could take the form of seemingly apolitical cultural practices that implicitly critiqued the structures in which they occurred. To understand the political implications of such practices, these researchers argued, protest had to be placed in its social, cultural, and historical context.

In order to analyze how sanctuary practices that did not appear rational, strategic, or goal-oriented were an integral part of the protest enacted within the movement, I have drawn on the analytical tools that were developed to study everyday forms of resistance. By placing sanctuary within its cultural context, I discuss how this movement, like other acts of resistance, engaged discourses of power that were much more pervasive and insidious than the movement's stated cause. In other words, sanctuary addressed not only U.S. foreign and immigration policy but also power-laden facets of middle-class U.S. cultural, religious, and legal life.[3] The movement's challenge to power-laden discourses occurred not only through strategic actions but also through the informal, "nonpolitical" yet nonetheless insurrectional practices participants developed alongside prototypical movement practices. Therefore, in addition to analyzing movement strategies, such as sheltering undocumented Central Americans, I examine sanctuary rituals, the jokes and stories told by volunteers, the interaction between sanctuary

workers and refugees, the forms of community created within the movement, and the "conversions" that some participants experienced as they became acquainted with Central American reality. Along with explicit strategies, these seemingly superfluous aspects of movement culture commented on the social context in which they were formed. By its very existence, the sanctuary movement incrementally changed society.

This book is divided into three parts, each of which focuses on a different facet of movement culture. Part One, "Crossing Borders," analyzes how movement culture was created, reproduced, and made authoritative to participants. Part Two, "Sanctuary," examines the ways that power and resistance pervaded both the movement's and the government's deployment of U.S. immigration law. Finally, Part Three, "The Culture of Protest" brings together these discussions of social and political processes in order to investigate the ways that movement culture enacted participants' visions of a more just social order.

The Research Subjects

My portrayal of the sanctuary movement is based on fieldwork and interviews conducted from January 1987 to March 1988 in sanctuary communities in the San Francisco East Bay in California and in Tucson, Arizona. The San Francisco East Bay is made up of a number of cities, including Oakland, Berkeley, Albany, Hayward, and San Leandro, whose populaces range from affluent to impoverished. Though the twenty-six participating congregations came from many of these locales,[4] the East Bay sanctuary community was centered in Berkeley, a city noted for its political activism. The sanctuary congregations in the East Bay were organized into a covenant body that worked with other local covenants (for example, the San Francisco Sanctuary Covenant), all of which belonged to the Northern California Sanctuary Covenant. In addition to sheltering undocumented Salvadorans and Guatemalans, the East Bay Sanctuary Covenant (EBSC) provided social services to the approximately 60,000 to 80,000 Central Americans who had settled in the Bay Area, sent delegations to Central America to accompany displaced communities, and performed other advocacy work. The legal risks of these activities were minimal, and no East Bay participant had been indicted for doing sanctuary work.

Tucson, located 64 miles north of the U.S.-Mexico border, is a sprawling desert city. Unlike the San Francisco East Bay, Tucson—which is buttressed only by South Tucson, a largely Chicano barrio; Oro Valley, a more affluent community; and Marana, an outlying farming town—is at least an hour's drive from any other major town. In Tucson, sanctuary and related work was carried out by what one participant labeled "agencies," most of which worked under the auspices of the Tucson Ecumenical Council (TEC). These agencies included the TEC's Task Force on Central America (the TECTFCA, or simply "the Task Force"), the Tucson refugee support group (TRSG), Tucson Ecumenical Council Legal Assistance (TECLA),

and the TECHO Interamerican Center (an educational and community group focusing on Central America).[5] Though participants worked closely with colleagues in Nogales, Phoenix, San Diego, and elsewhere, Tucson sanctuary groups were not structurally connected to a larger regional body as were their East Bay counterparts. Moreover, with the exception of one or two extremely active congregations, most participants worked through the aforementioned community groups rather than their own congregations. Due to its proximity to Mexico, the Tucson branch of the movement focused on bringing Central Americans across the border and helping them reach safety in the United States. Because of this focus, the U.S. government had infiltrated the local movement and in 1985 indicted movement members on conspiracy and alien-smuggling charges. The grueling six-month trial that followed the indictments had affected not only the eleven sanctuary workers who were prosecuted but also their supporters and the approximately 100 other individuals that the indictment termed "unindicted citizen and alien co-conspirators."

My fieldwork in Tucson and East Bay sanctuary communities consisted of what anthropologists call "participant observation"—living among and joining in the activities of the people one is analyzing. Among other things, I lived in middle-class areas in Oakland and Tucson, attended services at two Protestant churches and a synagogue, interviewed approximately 100 participants, volunteered with social services programs, attended community-wide sanctuary meetings and events, and answered phones in an office. It was through such everyday and seemingly mundane experiences and conversations that I learned of the cultural depth of the movement. As Gerlach and Hine noted, "There is a quality of experience in any movement which cannot be imparted by rational means but must be communicated through existential means" (1970: 197). By sharing the activities of movement members, I was able to analyze this "quality of experience" as well as the types of activities more commonly designated as social protest.

The first congregation where I did fieldwork was "First Church," a Protestant church I had attended erratically my senior year at the University of California, Berkeley, unaware that the congregation had recently declared itself a public sanctuary for Central American refugees. Founded in the late 1800s, First Church was a well-established middle-class church with a large sanctuary (leased to another congregation), a small chapel where church members worshiped, and a separate building that housed church offices and meeting rooms. The church's proximity to a major university and a local seminary lent an intellectual cast to the congregation. Once a congregation of 1,200, First Church's membership had dwindled during the 1960s and 1970s to approximately 300 people. After this loss, First Church had defined part of its ministry as making its facilities available for community use. First Church's commitment to social action dated at least to the civil rights movement. Rev. Henry Carson, a former pastor, recalled that during the 1960s, "it got pretty bad in the neighborhood. I remember coming back to the office, and the secretary would have tears in her eyes because of the tear gas that was

coming in the window." First Church's pride in diversity was reflected in creative worship services that invoked a variety of new and old traditions. The excellent choir, which included some professional singers, performed beautiful, complex religious music that sometimes shook the rafters.

In some ways, First Church was not a typical Protestant church. It had joined the movement of Reconciled Congregations, which publicly affirmed the value of homosexual men and women in the life of the church. The announcements that preceded services were as likely to mention a demonstration at the Concord Naval Weapons Station as a luncheon for new members. During coffee hour one winter morning, there was a letter-writing campaign to support the Moakley-Deconcini bill (legislation that would temporarily prevent the deportation of Salvadorans and Nicaraguans) and a petition drive to oppose harboring the *U.S.S. Missouri* in the San Francisco Bay. However, First Church was not entirely atypical either and had its share of potluck dinners, Bible studies, bake sales, and church committees.

First Church was one of the most active congregations in EBSC. Its representatives to the EBSC Steering Committee participated in EBSC meetings and activities, acting as liaisons between the congregation and the local sanctuary community. First Church had its own Sanctuary Committee—approximately ten church members who met monthly to organize such projects as funding a refugee house, writing to members of Congress, and holding potluck dinners with church members and Central Americans. Members who were not on the Sanctuary Committee participated in First Church's sanctuary work through worship, sanctuary-related events, and occasional donations of time and money. The few people who performed most of First Church's sanctuary work did so with the backing of the entire congregation.

The second congregation where I did fieldwork was "Congregation Aron Kodesh,"[6] a small Berkeley synagogue that had declared itself a sanctuary congregation in 1984 when Jews joined the local movement. Congregation Aron Kodesh was part of the Jewish Renewal Movement[7] and had been founded so recently that the congregation had yet to secure a permanent building. Congregation Aron Kodesh was organized in the late 1970s to embody an alternative vision of synagogue life. The synagogue's purposes included commitment to social justice, renewing the depth of Jewish spirituality, and creating community. Congregation Aron Kodesh members—who, at the time of my research, numbered between 100 and 200—were committed to their young synagogue and, in choosing to join this particular congregation, had explored what it meant to be Jewish. Congregation Aron Kodesh sought to include people whom synagogues had traditionally excluded, such as interfaith couples, single-parent families, and lesbian and gay individuals, couples, and families. The congregation was run on an egalitarian, democratic basis, and services were innovative yet traditional. Uniting politics and spirituality, Congregation Aron Kodesh members had formed committees on Black/Jewish relations and sanctuary and had performed a Passover Seder at the nuclear test site in Nevada.

One Shabbat service that I attended conveyed Congregation Aron Kodesh's commitments to community and to renewed spirituality. After lighting the Shabbos candles, the twenty adults in attendance formed a circle around the burning candles, put our arms around each other, and shared aloud the blessings we had experienced during the previous week. We then returned to our seats to chant and read prayers in Hebrew and English. The rabbi led the prayers, sometimes clapping, stomping rhythmically, or moving around the room. At one point the prayer books were set aside and the rabbi asked us each to reflect on times when we had had contact with the mysterious, the connection to the universe. Participants broke into small groups to read and reflect on rabbinical writings about finding the holy in everyday life. After about fifteen minutes, we reassembled to meditate, pray, break the *challah*, and bless the wine. The service concluded with participants chanting, holding hands, and moving about the room in a line dance.

Synagogue members' sociopolitical work (including sanctuary) was a vital part of the congregation. Like First Church, Congregation Aron Kodesh was one of the more active sanctuary congregations in the East Bay. The Sanctuary Committee sent representatives to EBSC meetings and used the synagogue's newsletter to keep the congregation informed of local sanctuary events. Sanctuary Committee meetings, attended by seven to ten participants, were held monthly. The congregation's sanctuary work had included housing refugees, paying the bail for a detained Guatemalan family, and funding a synagogue member's trip to Central America. Synagogue members who were not on the committee participated in sanctuary activities by issuing a public declaration of sanctuary, donating money and other items, and attending sanctuary-related activities (such as a worship service focusing on the congregation's sanctuary work).

In Tucson, I conducted fieldwork at All Saints, the Protestant church widely regarded as the origin of the sanctuary movement. All Saints was a small white adobe church located in a Tucson barrio. The cactus-studded yard and gravel parking lot seemed appropriate for the church's desert surroundings, while a children's playground attested to the vitality of the congregation. All Saints services struck me as surprisingly traditional after those of First Church and Congregation Aron Kodesh. Though sermons often distilled liberation theology, much of the liturgy proclaimed such fundamental Christian beliefs as that Christ died for humanity's sins so that people might have eternal life. The choir was led by a gospel-singing Baptist who reportedly could not read music but whose spirited voice and direction brought the music to life. Merlin Wynn, a church member, eloquently described why he joined All Saints:

> The actions were what drew me to it, not the words. I would come here, and especially the first four or five times, what I came for wasn't the talking, it was [____]'s music. I would let the words go by, and someone would be up there talking, and it would wash right over me, and then I would hear the singing, and I would cry. I

didn't go there for the talking, but for the sadness and the joy and the awareness of the world's needs and what to do about it. There, I learned about having faith and truth, rather than simply having a beautiful opinion.

Services at All Saints were informal. Children often played on the floor in the midst of the abundance of chairs—there were no pews—that had been squeezed into the small sanctuary to accommodate the 200 or so churchgoers. The services were lively and participatory but less deliberately so than at First Church or Congregation Aron Kodesh. For instance, one Sunday morning the pastor ended the Bible reading for the children's sermon, saying, "and let the women present be silent, for they don't have permission to speak." He then looked around expectantly, and a young man who worked with a squatter settlement in Mexico yelled out, "Amen!" The minister commented, "Hah! I thought I'd get an amen from someone, but I didn't think it would be you." As congregants laughed, the minister continued,"I just added that last part to make sure that all of the adults were paying attention."[8] All Saints was a close-knit congregation, and services celebrated that community through announcements and prayers about members' concerns, joys, and activities. At the end of each service, the minister scooped up one of the children, lifting him or her high to ring the church bells.

All Saints' commitment to social action had historical depth, as one church member explained: "All Saints was founded seventy-five years ago to minister to the Indians, who were pretty oppressed in those days. Even then, it was a challenge to the status quo and a ministry to the oppressed." All Saints had traditionally focused on local issues, such as assisting prisoners' families and working for a community park, rather than the national issues that First Church and Congregation Aron Kodesh usually confronted. It was ironic that All Saints helped to spawn a national movement.

Unlike First Church and Congregation Aron Kodesh, All Saints' sanctuary work was not carried out by a committee. Rather, the All Saints members who were active in border crossings and related work participated in meetings of local sanctuary groups, such as Trsg and the Task Force. However, sanctuary was an integral part of the church. The entire congregation had endorsed the movement by declaring the church a public sanctuary. All Saints' administrative body made decisions about how to accommodate the Central Americans who regularly slept in the church building. Almost every church service, in one way or another, referred to the congregation's sanctuary activities. As previously mentioned, All Saints' pastor had been convicted on alien-smuggling charges, and numerous congregation members were listed on the indictment as "unindicted co-conspirators." Though their methods, faiths, and organizational forms differed, All Saints, First Church, and Congregation Aron Kodesh were linked to each other and to more than 300 congregations nationwide that had declared themselves sanctuaries for Central American refugees.