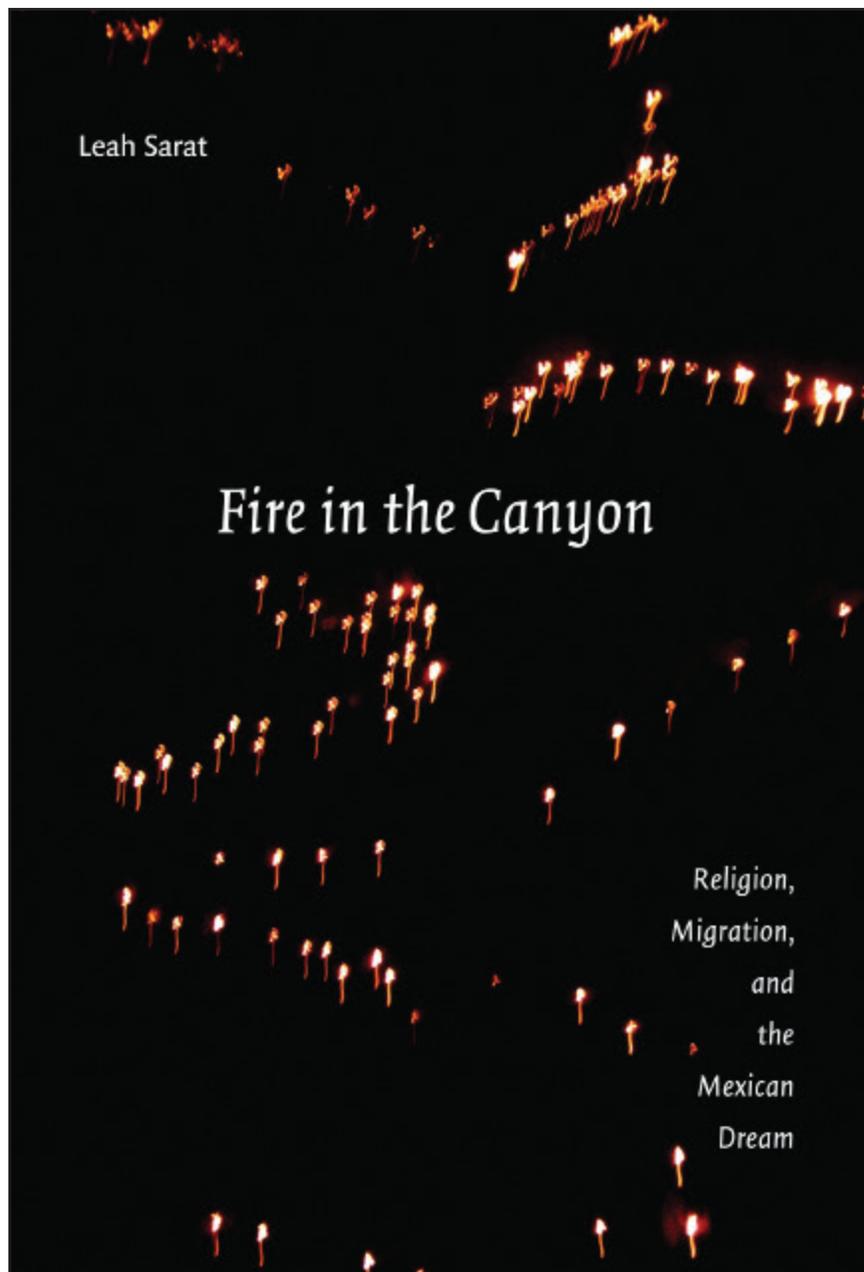


# FIRE IN THE CANYON:

## RELIGION, MIGRATION, AND THE MEXICAN DREAM

### INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



The canyon in central Mexico was ablaze with torches as hundreds of people filed in. So palpable was their shared shock and grief, they later said, that neither pastor nor priest was needed. The event was a memorial service for one of their own who had died during an attempted border passage. Months later a survivor emerged from a coma to tell his story. The accident had provoked a near-death encounter with God that prompted his conversion to Pentecostalism.

Today, over half of the local residents of El Alberto, a town in central Mexico, are Pentecostal. Submitting themselves to the authority of a God for whom there are no borders, these Pentecostals today both embrace migration as their right while also praying that their "Mexican Dream"—the dream of a Mexican future with ample employment for all—will one day become a reality.

*Fire in the Canyon* provides one of the first in-depth looks at the dynamic relationship between religion, migration, and ethnicity across the U.S.-Mexican border. Faced with the choice between life-threatening danger at the border and life-sapping poverty in Mexico, residents of El Alberto are drawing on both their religion and their indigenous heritage to demand not only the right to migrate, but also the right to stay home. If we wish to understand people's migration decisions, Sarat argues, we must take religion seriously. It is through religion that people formulate their ideas about life, death, and the limits of government authority.

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## *Introduction*

*(pages 1-26)*

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### SUMMARY

Since 2004, thousands of Mexican citizens have participated in the “Night Hike”—a tourist simulation of the experience of crossing the border as an undocumented immigrant. Far from the actual U.S.-Mexico border, the enactment takes place in the ancestral canyons and farm fields of El Alberto, an indigenous town in central Mexico whose members have migrated to the United States by the hundreds since the 1990s. Week after week, El Alberto’s members don masks and Border Patrol uniforms as they warn about the perils of migration and fight for their “Mexican Dream” of providing sustainable local employment for the younger generations. Behind the scenes of the border tourism, however, lies an additional story: before El Alberto’s members set foot in the United States, a wave of Pentecostal conversion had swept through the town.

Opening with the scene of a memorial service for a man from El Alberto who had perished at the U.S.-Mexico border, the introduction argues that undocumented migration is far more than merely a social or economic phenomenon. Because migration confronts people with core questions about life, death, and the limits of human power, it is also a religious matter. Today, El Alberto’s Pentecostals draw upon their faith to confront the risks of the undocumented journey and deal with the challenges of transnational life. Yet they are also joining their neighbors in this-worldly efforts to generate local employment through tourism.

Weaving multiple voices into a richly textured ethnography of the intersection of religion, tourism, and performance, *Fire in the Canyon* demonstrates how indigenous people carve out possibilities for action amidst global forces that restrict their mobility while also limiting their option to stay home.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

The introduction provides an overview of the main themes of the book, including:

- the dynamics of religious conversion and change
- the intersection of Christianity with indigenous religion and culture
- the material dimensions of Pentecostal practice (fasting, divine healing, and spiritual warfare)
- the role of religion in transnational migration to the United States
- the human impact of U.S. immigration enforcement and border militarization

*Introduction*  
(pages 1-26)

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- the intersection of religion with globalization
- indigenous identity, territoriality, and community organizing
- ritual, performance, and tourism

*Fire from Heaven**(pages 29-53)*

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## SUMMARY

Before the 1960s, most residents of El Alberto were Catholic. Then, widespread Pentecostal conversion coursed through the town, just as a series of national development projects introduced paved roads, water, and electricity to the region. This chapter examines evangelical perspectives on that period of religious and social change in their town's past. Pentecostals describe their town's past as mired in poverty and isolation. They explain poverty as a moral problem rooted in drunkenness, conflict, and sorcery. By extension, they contend that the new religion lifted them out of their misery by clearing the way for progress and prosperity. As material change fueled conversion, Pentecostalism, in turn, instilled the development process with a sense of divine purpose. The religious narratives depicted here contain an echo of North American prosperity theology, the infamous "health and wealth" doctrine which holds that God rewards the faithful with both spiritual and material blessings. Yet a close look at conversion stories reveals that religious change was originally about something more basic than a quest for financial progress. Conversion was initially about survival, as Pentecostal prayer proved an effective antidote to the rampant illnesses once attributed to sorcery and witchcraft within the town.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Religious conversion is often understood as a highly individual process. In what ways were the conversions described here also influenced by broader material, economic, and social realities?
2. Did Pentecostals in El Alberto make a full break with the religious beliefs and practices of the past, or did these beliefs and practices continue on in new ways? Explain.
3. In what ways do Pentecostal stories about El Alberto's past echo the structure of individual conversion narratives?
4. What role did healing play in early religious conversions? What might this reveal about understandings of the body in indigenous hñähñu culture?

## SUMMARY

As hundreds of El Alberto's members converted to Pentecostalism, the town's Catholics faced new challenges. This chapter explores Catholic perspectives on religious and social change in El Alberto, centering on the transformation of the annual festival for the Santa Cruz, the town's patron saint. For Catholics, Pentecostalism was far from a saving force that delivered the town from poverty and strife. Rather, the new religion was a source of conflict, for it introduced divisions into the fabric of the town's collective life. As more and more people converted to Pentecostalism, clashes over the core symbolism of the Santa Cruz, or Holy Cross, ensued. Once an all-encompassing rite that bound the town's members in relations of reciprocity with the natural world, the festival to the Santa Cruz eventually dissolved, and Catholics chose San Alberto as their new patron saint. Despite their religious differences, Catholics and Pentecostals assert that El Alberto is now a unified town. They find solidarity and shared purpose in their collective labor system, which provides the infrastructure for today's ecotourism projects.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What function did El Alberto's patron saint festival once serve within the community? How did this function change over time?
2. What did the symbol of the Santa Cruz represent for Catholics in El Alberto? What did it represent for Pentecostals?
3. How do Catholic stories about El Alberto's past compare to Pentecostal stories, and what might these differences tell us about these religions in general?
4. Catholics and Pentecostals alike stress the importance of maintaining harmony in their community. How do members of each faith suggest that harmony should best be achieved?

*I Lift Up My Eyes to the North**(pages 68-83)*

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## SUMMARY

Although much changed when national development projects introduced electricity, irrigation, and roads into El Alberto, the town's members still struggled to make a daily living. Labor migration emerged as an additional response to the same hardship that had helped drive religious conversion. Centering on the experience of Pentecostals, this chapter traces the rise of labor migration from El Alberto, beginning with short-term, circular travel to Mexico City and beyond. The chapter highlights the role of generational and gender differences in migration, featuring the voices of women who left home as young girls to work as maids and men who left as teens to work in the construction industry before seeking agricultural employment in the United States. Religious interpretations fade into the background of these early migration accounts. At first, crossing the U.S.-Mexico border was a relatively straightforward endeavor, and the material benefits of working in the United States were so great that the American Dream appeared to be within reach. Migration, for the time being, had introduced its own form of salvation into the life of the town.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In what ways did internal migration within Mexico lay the groundwork for later migration to the United States?
2. How do the early border crossing stories described here differ from the situation facing undocumented border crossers today?
3. Compare the migration narratives of men and women within this chapter. What might their stories tell us about changing gender relationships in El Alberto as a whole?
4. What does this chapter reveal about the unique challenges facing migrants who come from indigenous communities?
5. What do we learn here about the impact of migration on childhood within El Alberto?

*Send Us Power*  
(pages 87-101)

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SUMMARY

Today, Pentecostalism is intimately connected to all aspects of migration, even for those who never set foot the United States. This chapter focuses on the experiences of Pentecostals who remain in El Alberto while their relatives work across the border. As migrants send remittances home, those in El Alberto engage in diverse economic activities to make ends meet. They also call upon God to look after their relatives in the north. The chapter argues that Pentecostal fasting and prayer are uniquely suited to the challenges of maintaining social ties across an international border, and also resonate with indigenous cultural notions of reciprocity and exchange. Faced with the uncertainty brought about by indefinite separation from loved ones and an unpredictable U.S. economy, Pentecostals in El Alberto draw upon fasting, faith healing, and prayer to support the wellbeing of their relatives in the north. They also draw upon religious practices to absorb the tensions and uncertainties of transnational life in their bodies.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What challenges do current migrants face in the United States? What challenges face those who remain home?
2. How might you interpret the lyrics of the song mentioned on page 94, considering the social and material realities described in this chapter?
3. Why do Pentecostals in fast? What do they hope to accomplish by fasting?
4. Prayer is often understood as a matter of individual belief, yet it is also a form of practice. Explore practice of prayer as described here, paying particular attention to embodied experience and collective action.
5. What does this chapter reveal about the importance of the Holy Spirit within Pentecostalism?

*To Crush the Devil's Head**(pages 102-121)*

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## SUMMARY

While evangelicals claim that conversion delivered their town from the hardships of the past, they also state that contemporary life has introduced new dangers. Opening with several anecdotes about witchcraft and devil beliefs in the town today, this chapter examines how Pentecostals draw upon spiritual warfare to mitigate the broader dangers of globalization and rapid social change that have accompanied with migration. Although Pentecostals describe their religion as making a radical break with the past, their beliefs about evil nonetheless contain elements of the traditional hñähñu vision of the cosmos, in which humans have the power to transform into animals and the world teems with agents capable of inflicting harm from a distance. The chapter revisits conversion stories of those who originally turned to Pentecostalism for protection against sorcery-induced illness, and then centers on a worship service in which the pastor warned about a variety of dangers at work in the world today, ranging from the tattoos worn on the bodies of youth to images from the global entertainment media. Drawing upon evangelical spiritual warfare, evangelicals seek counteract the threats present in global culture by weaving a circle of prayer around those most in need of protection—the youth.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Compare the beliefs about witchcraft and sorcery depicted here to those outlined in chapter 1. To whom did Pentecostals attribute acts of sorcery in the past? To whom do they attribute such acts today?
2. What is the relationship between and the media in this chapter? Would you say that Pentecostals regard the media and digital technology as inherently evil, or is there something else going on?
3. Why do you think Pentecostals express concern about protecting the youth from spiritual harm? What might these concerns reveal about the role of young people in the town?
4. Religions often answer questions about the cosmos—that is, about the ultimate nature of space and time. What representations of space and time emerge in this chapter?

## *Shielded by the Blood of Christ*

*(pages 122-142)*

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### SUMMARY

Opening with the story of Alejandro, a man who emerged from a coma after surviving an accident at the U.S.-Mexico border, this chapter explores how Pentecostals grapple with the challenges of the undocumented journey. In particular, the chapter examines the interplay between collective religious practice and individual, flesh-and-blood migration experiences. As U.S. border enforcement policies generate increasingly dangerous crossing conditions, the undocumented journey has pushed many individuals to rely more fully on their faith. For some, the journey has even prompted religious conversions. Individual migration experiences then reverberate throughout the congregation as a whole, giving rise to new practices and new reflections about the relationship between human beings and the divine. Pentecostals state that the U.S.-Mexico border is the creation of leaders who have neglected the divine mandate of neighborly love. They note that true authority rests with God, a divine parent for whom there are no borders. Some Pentecostals even state that their faith shields them from harm as they attempt the undocumented journey. The chapter closes by analyzing a fast through which Pentecostals gathered around Alejandro to give him strength and support his family through their time of trial.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The author quotes historian Timothy Smith, who claims that migration has often been a “theologizing experience” for those involved. What do you understand this phrase to mean? In what ways has migration been a “theologizing experience” for people in El Alberto?
2. What border enforcement changes did the United States implement in the mid-1990s? How did these changes affect the experience of undocumented migrants?
3. Examine Alejandro’s narrative about his accident. How does the act of telling the story shape its content?
4. Based on what you have read here, would you say that border crossing is a rite of passage? Why or why not?
5. How do the Pentecostals depicted in this chapter make sense of unsuccessful border crossing attempts?

*The Night Hike*  
(pages 145-167)

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#### SUMMARY

As recent deaths at the border have shown, even religious responses to the dangers of the undocumented journey are not always enough. Pentecostals have thus joined their neighbors to develop grass-roots ecotourism projects in order to stem the tide of emigration from their town. This chapter examines the town's most innovative tourist attraction: the *Caminata Nocturna*, or Night Hike. The border simulation is part tourism, part transformative performance. The event immerses tourists in a disorienting nighttime landscape, using rigorous exertion and creativity to break down social barriers and inspire new dialogue about Mexican emigration to the United States. The event ends at the base of an ancestral canyon whose sides are lit with hundreds of torches representing those who have died en route to the United States. Costumed Border Patrol officials, flashing patrol lights, and simulated gunshots evoke the danger of a militarized border. Noting that U.S. border enforcement, itself, has performative dimensions, the chapter argues that the Night Hike taps into the symbolic imagery of the undocumented journey and puts it to work in new ways, calling those present to unite their energies in bringing about a new future for Mexico.

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Based on what you have read here, would you say that the Night Hike be described as a rite, or is it just entertainment? Explain.
2. The Night Hike deals with many borders, both literal and figurative. What are some of the borders that it seeks to break down?
3. Why do you think the border simulation ends at the base of a canyon, rather than in a simulated United States?
4. What role does humor play within the Night Hike? Why do you think the guides use humor when dealing with such a serious subject?
5. What difference does it make that tourists participate in the Night Hike? How might their responses be different if they simply watched at performance about the undocumented journey?

## *The Mexican Dream*

*(pages 168-189)*

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### SUMMARY

Through the Night Hike, residents of El Alberto call upon tourists to join them in fighting for their Mexican Dream—the dream of a future in which no one will be compelled to leave their place of origin in search of work. This chapter examines that collective vision, as manifested El Alberto's ecotourism projects. Despite their religious differences, the town's members find in their ethnic heritage a source of inspiration that counters the individualism and materialism of life in the United States. The chapter highlights the voice of Ramón, a prominent Caminata participant and proponent of the Mexican Dream. Ramón states that the most valuable thing human beings can achieve is to live well, in harmony with others. While migration has produced short-term profits, it has also damaged migrants' bodies and eroded the town's cultural traditions. Drawing upon the past for inspiration, El Alberto's members have mobilized their collective labor system to generate alternatives to migration and reinforce the bonds of solidarity that help them survive. The chapter closes by analyzing expressions of indigenous identity within El Alberto, as expressed through several symbolic figures in the Caminata: the town's legendary founder, Don Beto, and the "indios," whose strong local knowledge and fierce commitment to place calls attention to the importance of territorial belonging.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. According to Ramón, what are some of the drawbacks of migration to the United States? How do Ramón's observations compare to Pentecostal perspectives on migration?
2. What is the significance of work within El Alberto? How does the system of traditional labor differ from work in the United States?
3. What do the "indios," Don Chaleque and Don Chaleque, symbolize, and what role do they play within the Night Hike?
4. In what ways are members of the community challenged to "perform" indigenous identity to the outside world?
5. What are some of the practices through which residents of El Alberto reinforce the borders of their home town? Given the context of migration, why might they place such importance on protecting the boundaries of their community?

*Conclusion*  
*(pages 91-208)*

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SUMMARY

The conclusion analyzes the relationship between the Mexican Dream and the Pentecostal faith of many who are striving to make it a reality. Year after year, the residents of El Alberto continue to carry out their border simulation and other collective projects, looking forward to a day in which young people will have the option to make a living at home. Yet the town's members recognize that their dream cannot be obtained overnight. In the meantime, many continue to risk the undocumented journey, and Pentecostals continue to call upon the saving power of the Holy Spirit as they anticipate the fast-approaching end of days. On the outset, there appear to exist deep contradictions between Pentecostalism and the social vision that lies at the heart of the Mexican Dream. While Pentecostal belief stresses the ultimate importance of an individual relationship with God, the Mexican Dream involves a call for this-worldly, collective action. While Pentecostals look to the future for salvation, the Mexican Dream draws inspiration from the past. Even so, several key proponents of the Mexican Dream claim that it is the very promise of Pentecostal salvation that motivates to dedicate their time and efforts for the good of the community as a whole. Through their Pentecostal faith and through their tourism projects, residents of El Alberto are claiming both the right to migrate in search of work, and the equally important right to make a viable living at home.

## *Questions for Reflection*

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1. How did Pentecostalism originally arrive in El Alberto? What role did missionaries play in its transmission? What role did local people play?
2. Pentecostalism brought something new to El Alberto, but it also resonated with some traditional hñähñu beliefs and practices. Which aspects of Pentecostalism appealed to early converts, and why?
3. Based on what you have read in this book, did religious conversion drive social change in El Alberto, or vice versa?
4. What is the understanding of the body within Pentecostalism? In particular, what is the relationship between the human body and divine forces?
5. What is prosperity theology? How is it connected to the experience of migration to the United States?
6. How has U.S. migration changed the quality of life in El Alberto? What are some of the challenges the town's members faced before emigrating? What are some of the challenges they face today?
7. The author argues that U.S. border enforcement serves a practical purpose, yet it is also a form of performance. Do you agree? Why or why not?
8. Analyze how space is used within the Night Hike. What aspects of the actual U.S.-Mexico border do residents of El Alberto seek to recreate within their border simulation? What aspects do they change or leave out?
9. In what ways is tourism similar to a religious pilgrimage? How is it different? Would you describe the Night Hike as a pilgrimage?
10. How might the Night Hike differ if it was performed in the United States, rather than in Mexico?
11. Would you be willing to take part in the Night Hike? Why or why not?
12. Compare how border danger is depicted in the Night Hike to the way danger is depicted in the Pentecostal narratives about migration. How are Border Patrol agents depicted in each?
13. The author argues that religion does more than simply help people cope with the hardships of migration. Based on what you have read here, do you agree?
14. People draw upon religion to prepare for and make sense of migration, yet migration also affects religious practice. Explain how people's migration experiences have affected religious practice within El Alberto.

*Questions for Reflection*

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15. How has U.S. migration affected the practice of Catholicism in El Alberto?
16. When debating immigration, Christians in the United States often reference the importance of the rule of law. What do Pentecostals in El Alberto say about the rule of law, in light of their own experience as undocumented migrants?
17. What unique challenges does U.S. migration pose to women in El Alberto—both those who emigrate, and those who remain behind?
18. What does the Night Hike reveal about ethnic and class relationships within Mexican society?

## *Supplemental Assignments*

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Document a migration story within your family, or among your friends. The migration could involve moving to a new country, or moving from one part of the country to another. Notice whether religion plays a role in the narrative. Try interviewing two people about this migration event, and compare their perspectives.

Has one of your friends or relatives ever changed their religion? Gather that person's conversion story by recording and then transcribing it. Pay special attention to the relationship between individual and social factors within their conversion.

Attend a service in a place of worship that is attended by a high percentage of immigrants. The place of worship should be in a tradition different from your own, or among a different ethnic group. Write an ethnographic report based on your observations.

(Group project) Imagine that your group belongs to a refugee community, and you are seeking to educate members of the second generation about the hardships you once endured in your home country. Design a performance that will help pass on that understanding to future generations.

Research Pentecostal practices within a country other than Mexico. How does the practices of Pentecostalism in that country compare to the practice of Pentecostalism in Mexico, as described in *Fire in the Canyon*?

Research a Native American population whose land has been crossed by the U.S.-Mexico border. How are the challenges they face similar to/ different from the challenges facing residents of El Alberto?