

Farm Workers and the Churches: The Movement in California and Texas (Fronteras Series, sponsored by Texas A&M International University)

By Alan J. Watt

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In the mid-1960s, the charismatic César Chávez led members of California's La Causa movement in boycotting the grape harvest, and melon pickers in South Texas called a strike against growers, contesting unfair labor and wage practices in both states.


In *Farm Workers and the Churches*, Alan J. Watt shows how the religious and social contexts of the farm workers, their leaders, and the larger society helped or hindered these two pivotal actions.

Watt explores the ways in which liberal expressions of Northern Protestantism, transplanted to California and combined with the pro-labor wing of the Catholic Church and the heritage of Mexican popular piety, provided a fertile field for the growth of broad support for Chávez and his organizing efforts. Eventually, La Causa was able to achieve collective bargaining victories, including a historic labor contract between California agribusiness and farm workers.

The movement did not fare as well in Texas, where the combination of a locally weak union leadership, a more conservative Southern Protestant ethos, and the strikebreaking measures of the Texas Rangers all boded ill. However, a general Chicano/a movement ultimately took permanent root in the state, because of the workers' struggle.

Watt offers a careful examination of the complex interactions among religious traditions, social heritage, and ethnicity as these factors affected the course and outcomes of these two pioneering campaigns undertaken by La Causa.

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Editorial Review

Review

"This book relates to the stories of the men and women whose faith compelled them to take a stand with the farmworkers and in the process pushed various churches to move beyond a very traditional spiritual ministry to translating the Gospel into action and extending institutional support to la causa. The author tells these stories with engaging details and at the same time provides insightful context and overview, making the book appealing not only to history enthusiasts but also to professionals. Although I was familiar with some of the personalities and developments, I found this book so interesting I had trouble putting it down."--Gilberto M. Hinojosa, professor of history, University of the Incarnate Word

(Gilberto M. Hinojosa *Professor of History, University of the Incarnate Word*)

"Watt breaks new ground in this first in-depth study of the Protestant and Roman Catholic ministries with the Chicano and Filipino farmworkers in California and Texas. He introduces several key and previously obscure church leaders who were involved in the farm workers movement. The reader benefits from Watt's . . . comparative study between the challenges the farm workers faced in Texas and California. Students of the relationship between the church and farmworkers in the twentieth century will find this essential reading."—Paul Barton, associate professor in the History of American Christianity and Missiology and Director of Hispanic Church Studies, Seminary of the Southwest

(Paul Barton)

"*Farm Workers and the Churches* has much to commend. Watt's ability to interweave religious history with complex interactions among social and ethnic groups offers a unique perspective for scholars. . . Watt's ability to personalize the various religious participants adds further insight into this history. The comparative nature of this monograph will make it attractive to several disciplines. . . this is a strong work." - Jim Norris, Jim Norris

(Jim Norris *The Journal of American History*)

"This is an important book for all who take seriously the Church's response to economic injustice. . . Watt portrays in illuminating detail the history of La Causa. . . Alan Watt has performed a valuable service for all who in fidelity to the Christian faith and with compassion for the many victims of economic injustice seek to articulate and practice justice for the poor today. He deserves our sincere thanks." - Wayne C. Stumme, Trinity Seminary Review

(Wayne C. Stumme *Trinity Seminary Review* 2011-04-14)

"Watt convincingly ties together much of the historical background that contributed to the religious ethos of La Causa and draws thoughtful conclusions."

"Offers a needed corrective to studies that neglect, downplay, or otherwise misconstrue the role of religion in Chicano history."

(*Western Historical Quarterly* 2011-09-15)

"Watt's most significant contribution here is to the study of religion in the American West."--Sara M. Patterson, *Pacific Historical Review*

(Sara M. Patterson *Pacific Historical Review* 2012-02-29)

"Watt offers a historical drama that documents with precision, expertise, and imagination the important role churches have in the betterment of the conditions of an exploited community when they are willing to team up with other social agents. *Farm Workers and Churches* is a welcome contribution to the field of religious history...also a contribution to social ethics. No minister, historian, or social activist should miss this work."--Oscar Garcia-Johnson, Fuller Theological Seminary, *New Mexico Historical Review*

(Oscar Garcia-Johnson *New Mexico Historical Review* 2012-05-08)

"...a welcome addition to the body of scholarship on agricultural labor..."--Jose G. Moreno, Heritage University and Michigan State University, *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies*

(Jose G. Moreno *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 2012-05-24)

"Watt deserves considerable credit for producing this well-written, thoroughly researched work."--John F. Quinn, *Catholic Southwest*
(John F. Quinn *Catholic Southwest* 2012-12-03)

"...a welcome addition...Watt's book is a valuable contribution to the literature and fosters discussion about the important contributions of white liberal Protestants and white progressive Catholics in the farm workers movement.."--Gaston Espinosa, *American Historical Review*
(Gaston Espinosa *American Historical Review* 2012-10-26)

About the Author

Alan J. Watt, a pastor for twenty-six years, has served as a minister in the Southwestern Texas Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America since 2002. His previous publications have focused on religion and social movements. His PhD is from Vanderbilt University.

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