

Life in An American Village: Congregations, Faith-Based Service, and Community. A DVD by Jack R. Rollwagen. The Institute, Inc. 2009. N/A.

This four-disk DVD set is one installment of a longer documentary series, *Life in an American Village*, a project by cultural anthropologist and filmmaker Jack Rollwagen. The project is intended to present a “holistic approach to life in the area around the village of Brockport, New York, a community in upstate New York between the cities of Rochester and Buffalo.”¹ Additional DVD sets focus on other aspects of life in Brockport (for example, art and agriculture), but this installment is positioned to examine religious expression in the life of the community. Religious expression is approached through three lenses: congregations, faith-based organizations that promote social justice and welfare, and religious education.

The main interest here seems to be in exploring the ways that Brockport’s religious organizations work with one another to respond to changes in the community—specifically, how churches have pooled resources to provide social services to the growing Mexican migrant worker population in western New York. The first three DVDs in this set are each comprised of two or three short films focused on portraits of particular organizations or programs, including a Baptist congregation with a progressive pastor who is retiring; a Christian nonprofit’s work with local migrant workers; and an evangelical private school. The fourth DVD is made up of interviews with academics experts, including sociologist of religion Nancy Ammerman; Ram Cnaan, an expert in faith-based social services; and specialist in Mexican American religion Virgilio Elizondo.

This set is designed for classroom use. Most segments are a convenient 20-40 minutes in length. (Although, to provide fair warning to the time-sensitive teacher, the actual running times do not always match the times listed on the DVD case.) For students of American religion or sociology of religion, there are some fascinating portraits here—especially of the Catholic church in

1 “About This Project,” The Life in an American Village Filmmaking Project, December 30, 2008, <http://lifeinamericanvillage.blogspot.com/> (accessed January 31, 2010).

Brockport and its gradual embrace of a Spanish-only Mass and the education of migrant worker children, or the large annual ecumenical Bienvenidos event, intended to signal welcome to the migrant workers who arrive in the area regularly. The project is also valuable in its focus on local religious participation in a village and rural setting, rather than in a large city. But because the segments depend on one another to provide critical information (the history, numbers, and economics of the Mexican migrant population in Brockport, for instance), it is sometimes tricky to imagine how one might screen these individual short films in the classroom. It seems unlikely that many teachers would opt to use the entire series, more than four hours total, in any class.

Most students will probably need to adjust to the slow pacing and subtle structure of Rollwagen's style of documentary camerawork and editing. No doubt with the intent of avoiding heavy-handed directorial shaping of the content, the interviews are very lightly edited and often run for 15-30 minutes without a visual break or audible question from an interviewer. (The expert interviews, in fact, are all more than 40 minutes long.) The footage of worship services (for example, the Baptist Sunday service or the Catholic Mass in Spanish) is made up of very static camerawork, often long shots of religious leaders conducting worship, some of which is due to filming restrictions in the places of worship. Perhaps I am too cynical, but without much orientation, these films ask a lot of student attention spans. At times, important information comes out unfortunately late and deeply buried.

Indeed, the most regrettable feature of this DVD set is that there are so few introductory or contextual materials to help the viewer understand what she or he is seeing and why. In the fourth disc, academic experts Ammerman, Cnaan and Elizondo provide broad background on relevant topics—for example, methods of congregational research, voluntarism in American religious history, the role of congregations in providing social welfare in the United States, the history of Latin American *mestizo* experiences, and themes of Mexican American religious expression. The experts make occasional direct references to the specific religious circumstances of Brockport—and when they do, this is helpful. But this background is embedded in long interviews that move from topic to topic without much obvious structure, which, again, proves challenging for classroom use. Furthermore, although viewing the full series on Brockport would no doubt provide more context, this set gives no orientation to the circumstances of the village itself, its demographics, history, politics or economics. (Indeed, for a documentary series centered on a particular place, we *see* remarkably little of Brockport, New York beyond the interiors of churches and nonprofit offices and some footage of workers on farms.)

Even more helpful, I think, would have been a filmed or textual articulation of Rollwagen's aims and methodology for this set. Why did Rollwagen choose to document these particular forms of religiosity in Brockport? How did he select these organizations and individuals? Much attention is devoted here to Christians who view themselves as working towards social justice and the considerable local religious efforts to work with, educate, and welcome migrant farm workers. This is a perfectly interesting focus, and seems to reflect something unique and fascinating about

Brockport's religious community.

However, in a documentary that purports to explore religious expression in a community I am not familiar with, I want to know specifically why Rollwagen chose to make the work with migrant workers so prominent. Is it representative of most religious activity in Brockport? Was it simply what struck Rollwagen as most interesting about the town's religious practice? What else is going on religiously in Brockport? Why are particular religious communities missing? (For example, are there no African American churches?) Perhaps most critically, are there no forms of non-Christian religious expression in Brockport? Do non-Christians not work with migrant workers or within ecumenical organizations, or are their numbers so small that it would not be realistic to explore them? In her interview, Ammerman references religious pluralism as a defining feature of American religion, and I would argue that the absence of religions other than Christianity is not particularly typical of the twenty-first century "American village."

There is a deft attention here to the interconnections between religious and non-religious organizations and to the formal and informal networks that make community work possible. I was struck also by how the short films consistently explored the links between this local, American village and a global context. (I appreciate being able to illustrate for students how the circumstances of Latin American economies might relate to local American religious experiences. Some of the Elizondo interview is especially helpful on this front.) But as a teacher of religious studies, I found myself wishing there were a richer conception of what "religious expression" might mean. Because the in-depth interviews are primarily with clergy, lay leaders, and academic experts., we don't see or hear much from non-specialists about religion as it is practiced and understood by lay people on a daily basis—the often messy and informal practices of lived religion. Were I to show this in class, I would encourage students to brainstorm what might have added dimension to this portrait of the religious life of a community. (Footage of migrant workers going about their daily devotional practices? Interviews with members of the congregation who were skeptical of the projects with migrant workers? A montage of religiously themed bumper stickers on cars?)

One film cannot faithfully document a community's entire religious life, of course, and Rollwagen is right to make choices. Yet understanding why and how these choices were made would inform my viewing of this DVD set and help me contextualize the films for my students.

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