

for some courses its blend of analytical simplicity and relatively broad scope may be an advantage—providing a lucid and accessible, if sometimes contestable, starting point for further discussion.

**Mark Hulsether**  
University of Tennessee

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***Reason to Believe: Cultural Agency in Latin American***

***Evangelicalism***. By **David Smilde**. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. xviii + 264 pp. \$22.95 paper.

Only a sociologist will love certain stretches of this book, but it provides a keen sense of why millions of lower-class Latin American men take refuge in a religion that seems antithetical to Latin American culture. The best thing about David Smilde's book is his portraits of lower-class Venezuelan males and the violent milieu they inhabit. Some choose to save their skins through evangelical religion (here mainly pentecostal), and some do not. In the context of Latin American studies, where political correctness often inhibits full disclosure, Smilde's candor about the lives of his friends and subjects is refreshing. The not-so-good thing about David Smilde's book is his interruption of these men and their travails with arcane debates among his fellow sociologists about instrumental versus substantive rationality, intentionality, and agency versus structure. I don't see the point, given that the author's sympathetic reporting of his subjects' lives should be enough to refute mind/body dualism.

As a case in point, consider Jorge the drug-addicted *asaltante* or stickup man. After some of his victims almost kill him, he sensibly decides to accept the Lord and make his living as a door-to-door salesman. When Jorge explains his decision in terms of "I was against the wall, I was cornered" (4), this strikes Smilde as instrumental rationality, a term many sociologists and anthropologists wish to avoid because it is reductionist. Smilde would prefer to explain why Jorge converted "for religious reasons, not for the nonreligious rewards" (7). Yet as Smilde is quick to acknowledge, naked instrumentalism is exactly how many Latin Americans explain their decision to join evangelical churches. "Can people really *decide* to believe in a religion because it is in their interest to do so?" Smilde asks (7). Of course they can because, in his own words, "they feel a deficit of control over some aspect of their lives . . . and want to gain a sense of agency. Evangelicalism can portray their issues and provide them with a project of change" (86). The genius of evangelical strategy is that it projects persons' internal

struggles, between their different selves, into a supernatural drama between God and Satan in which they can position themselves on the stronger side and choose friends who will help them stay there. As to how people can believe in non-empirical supernatural postulates, two realms from which the author abstains—neuroscience (see Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002]) and the practice of possession—will be of more assistance than sociology.

Getting back to what Smilde does exceedingly well, the slums of Caracas, Venezuela, are a dramatic and revealing stage for studying what born-again religion can and cannot accomplish. As in other countries, oil revenues have financed grandiose state ambitions and a globe-trotting elite but left the majority of the population in the dirt—literally. In shanty-towns that spread up hillsides and down into ravines, people scrap for survival in what seems like a war of each against all. Men in particular have been left without gainful, legal employment. Once they stumble off in search of compensatory excitement, women are left in charge of boys without effective male authority figures and without prospects. Alcohol is one of the few ways that men can bond with each other and, like the rapid spread of drug addiction, produces feelings of freedom, however momentary. In this milieu, Smilde observes, violence is far from being senseless. To the contrary, it is an effective power move.

Given the absence of police and judiciary in the lower strata of the metropolis, collisions between men lead to deadly contests over honor, in what Venezuelans call a *culebra* (snake) or *cadena* (chain) of vendetta killings. The only choice for men trapped in these contests is fight or flight—unless they join an evangelical church, which provides almost magical protection because evangelical status signals that one cannot participate in violence and that one is therefore not a threat. Based on the experiences of his subjects, Smilde explains how evangelical discourse can help victims negotiate with criminals. For men who know they will lose contests in machismo, born-again religion provides an exit to an alternative definition of masculinity. But if born-again religion makes so much sense for men who wish to prolong their life, “why doesn’t everyone decide to believe?” (8). Smilde’s answer is that they are still deriving their identity and solutions from a male-headed family that they do not wish to alienate. From the perspective of network analysis, Smilde observes, conversion is not about ideology but rather about aligning one’s behavior with friends and family members.

Thanks to Smilde’s participation in congregational life, reinforced by interviews with men and their intimates over five years, he obtains enviable critical depth on converts—far more than could be obtained simply by taking their testimonies at face value. Smilde doesn’t believe everything he hears. For example, evangelicals overestimate the power of their miracles to overcome addiction. And while they claim to fight poverty, concrete

solutions to poverty tend to take a back seat to the pleasures of exhortation. As for the evangelical bromide that believers are more ethical than Catholics, which Max Weber picked up with his observation that Baptist churches serve as reputation banks, this may have been true in late nineteenth-century Omaha, but it is not true in late twentieth-century Caracas (or where I work in Guatemala, for that matter). To the contrary, Smilde finds, evangelical probity is undercut by competing obligations, men on the mend but not yet mended, and the expectation of favoritism. At least in Caracas, therefore, conversion produces less a “disciplined self” than a “caring self” (80). Nor are the women necessarily impressed when their partner becomes born-again; Smilde sees cases where women reject the new moral order as a power move. From the perspective of profane Venezuelans, evangelicals are unconvincing hypocrites because they claim to break with the opportunistic personalism of Venezuelan social life but often get sucked back into it.

**David Stoll**

Middlebury College

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***How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Recovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity.*** By **Thomas C. Oden**. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2007. xxi + 206 pp. \$19.00 cloth.

In his small volume, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, Thomas C. Oden argues that the origins for the varieties of Christianity practiced among peoples of Western European descent can be traced back to the varieties of Christianity practiced in pre-Islamic Africa. Modern Western Christianity evolved from African “seeds.” The “fathers” of the early Christian tradition, men such as Origen, Athanasius, and Augustine, were and should be recognized as Africans. Thus, instead of viewing the Christianity introduced to Africa by European and American missionaries as something foreign to African consciousness, it is more accurate to appreciate that Western missionaries have been bringing home a (decadent) offspring in desperate need of renewal.

Oden advances a case for an ignored and wrongly denied legacy. “My core hypothesis,” he explains, “is that much intellectual history flowed south to north; from Numidia to Sicily to Italy to France; . . . from the Nile to the Euphrates to the Danube; . . . from Pelusium to Gaza to Cappadocia” (72). Oden identifies seven intellectual gifts from Africa to the Western Christian world, the most important of these being the idea of the university, the form followed by Christian spiritual exegesis, the basic substance to Western