Brendan Jamal Thornton

Negotiating Respect: Pentecostalism, Masculinity, and the Politics of Spiritual Authority in the Dominican Republic. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2016. iii + 272 pp. (Paper US\$ 69.95)

Negotiating Respect examines the way Pentecostal Christianity in the Dominican Republic has grown rapidly over the past 50 years despite the continued dominance of the Catholic Church in Dominican society as an anchor of national identity. Brendan Jamal Thornton argues that scholars have tended to neglect the study of Protestantism in the Dominican Republic and much of the Caribbean in favor of African-derived religious practices, such as Haitian *vodou* and Cuban *santería*, that better fit the well-travelled, “savage slot.” He challenges us to critically examine the role that gate keeping concepts such as “race,” “nation,” and “creolization” have played in steering scholars away from Pentecostalism, as well as other cultural practices that diverge from our expectations of syncretized, Afro-Creole cultures.

Thornton conducted over two years of fieldwork in a municipality of about 84,000, studying two churches: the Iglesia de Dios, a branch of the international Church of God denomination, headquartered in Cleveland Ohio; and the *Iglesia Evangélica Pentecostal*, a smaller, independent and more socially conservative congregation. He was less concerned with the reasons people converted than with the social consequences of their conversion, particularly for poor, male urbanites. Converts (*cristianos*) tend to divide the social world into two opposing sets of values—good vs. evil, righteousness vs. wickedness, et cetera—that can be gleaned from the converts’ speech, demeanor, and manner of dress, and their degree of involvement with, or vulnerability to saints and spirits associated with Dominican *vodú*. However, despite this rather Manichaean worldview, Thornton argues, evangelicals “acknowledge the same basic contours of a shared spiritual universe wherein a range of perspectives is accommodated” (p. 55). Thus, conversion is viewed—or, better, experienced—less as a radical rupture with African-influenced *vodú* or state-sponsored Catholicism than as an intensification of genuine Christian beliefs, morality, and lifestyle within a pluralistic religious universe. For example, although *cristianos* view conversion as a way to temper, if not escape from the ritual obligations associated with *vodú* deities, they do not repudiate the latter’s existence or efficacy within a Christian-centered, yet heterodox belief system.

While Pentecostalism offers its adherents exemption from the ritual obligations of *vodú*, it also allows them to leave behind the transgressions and disrepute of their preconversion lives. In a fascinating chapter, Thornton demonstrates how this “conversion exemption” makes it possible for the members of

youth gangs (*naciones*) to recast their stigmatized identities as *delinquentes* to that of “true Christians” and respectable men. Indeed, evangelical conversion is seen to free *cristianos* from the gang-related debts, obligations, and violence of their prior lives “in the street.” Moreover, youth gangs not only acknowledge and respect the religious authority of evangelicals, but also appeal to Christian symbols and rhetoric to lend authority and legitimacy to their gang-related activities and identities. Men who have led disreputable lives, whether as gang members or *tígueres* (“macho” men), can convert the ignominy and transgressions of their womanizing, drug abuse, and other illicit activities into spiritual authority through testimonials that emphasize their personal transformation from a life of sin. Paradoxically, this radical conversion experience provides men with a source of respect that is rarely available to women, and that serves to legitimate male leadership of Pentecostal congregations.

Although Thornton’s vivid biographical sketches and interview material provide compelling evidence of this gendered ideal of conversion and its social consequences, they provide less of a sense of the Pentecostals’ collective life, organizational structure, and institutional relationships. We learn surprisingly little about the social composition of the two churches (baseline data on age, gender, and ethnicity, for example) and how, if at all, the two congregations act collectively at the local, national, and international levels. Do congregants engage in mutual assistance or community outreach activities? Do they network with peer groups in the Dominican Diaspora or, in the case of the Iglesia de Dios, its U.S.-headquartered denomination? Are the churches involved in electoral politics or affiliated with Christian-identified political parties, such as the Partido Quisqueyano Demócrata Cristiano?

Greater attention to the social organization and collective life of the two congregations (i.e., how congregants interact *with each other*) would add to and, perhaps, complicate the book’s central arguments. For example, although we learn how many men view their conversion and derive respect and authority from it, we do not get a sense of how *women* view, assess, and contest those claims in the quotidian life of the church, community, and household. And though Thornton offers a convincing account of how the “conversion exemption” releases *cristianos* from the stigmas and demands of *vodú* deities and street life, I was left wondering whether conversion similarly exempted people of Haitian descent from the racial and religiously-based stigmas that they face in Dominican society. In a municipality that was home base to the late Sonia Pierre, renowned human rights activist and daughter of Haitian immigrants, ethnicity too begs for greater attention.

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