Book Reviews

Robert E. Brenneman


Robert Brenneman is onto a remarkable phenomenon that connects Central America’s gangs with the region’s deep-rooted ‘barrio evangelical’ churches. In the current extreme environment of Central American gang *clicas* (cells) of the Mara Salvatrucha and Mara Dieciocho, gang members cannot leave once they join; they are in *hasta la morgue* (until the morgue). But gang leaders offer a ‘pass’ (an exemption to the ‘morgue rule’) to exiting gang members who can maintain an authentic conversion to evangelical Christianity, typically in the small- to medium-sized evangelical churches that operate in the same social space as the gangs. The obstacles to successfully leaving a gang are so high that one Guatemalan expert suggests that the only real solution would be moving “to another planet” (p. 8). Evangelical churches provide that other planet, if the exiting gang member shows his former gang mates that he is “taking Curly (*Colocho*, the gang nickname for God) seriously.”

In Central America’s Northern Triangle (Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras), the problem of how to exit the gangs has even generated its own reality TV show (modeled after “The Apprentice”). Gang members are marked by extensive tattooing, and by the violence of the lives they lead and crimes they’ve committed. Leaving the gang means facing two very real paths of death, the first a physical death at the hands of their former or rival gang members, and the second, the social death of finding no way to rebuild their lives in a society that loathes them.

Why would young people choose to enter the gangs, given the stakes, and how do the churches provide that ‘exemption’ to the morgue rule? Brenneman finds the key to both questions in the concept of shame, and in the sociology of emotion. He argues that certain young people (mostly men, but some women) are able to discharge (or at least mask) deep shame resulting from trauma.
matic childhood experiences, by providing “shortcuts to adulthood” through allegedly adult pursuits such as sex, drugs and material consumption, as well as the emotional outlets of anger and violence (p. 123). These latter two, anger and violence, contribute to further developing new spirals of shame that eventually ‘wear out’ gang members of gang life. The expressive rituals and environment of the barrio evangelical churches help ex-homies transform their shame and ‘marry life’ again.

Brenneman writes well and weaves in ample, effective, and well-placed passages from interviews with sixty-three former gang members. He also draws on his years of experience as a Mennonite missionary with Central American barrio evangelicalism. He completes his methodology by interviewing experts and practitioners working in the field of gang rehabilitation and prevention.

The introductory chapter provides a near complete overview of Brenneman’s argument and the book. Chapter one is a brief overview of current research on Central American gangs; in chapter two, he describes the features of barrio evangelicalism and the ways in which its churches share the same social space and certain features with gang cells. Chapter three explores the stories of ex-gang members for clues as to why they joined gangs, as well as the process by which they ‘tried on’ gang culture before making a final commitment. In this chapter, Brenneman introduces the theories about the sociology of shame, while in chapter four, he describes what happens for gang members when the violence of gang life becomes a new source of shame. In chapter five, he analyzes the process of leaving gang life through conversion to an evangelical church, a process that worked for sixty-two of his sixty-three interviewees: one man was shot to death after Brenneman interviewed him. He closes the book with an overview of Catholic and evangelical initiatives developed to reduce gang violence, such as a tattoo removal clinic. In his conclusion, he proposes further steps and broader strategies for arresting gang violence.

Brenneman insightfully identifies similarities between gang clicas and barrio evangelical churches. Both, he demonstrates, occupy the social space of poor or working-class neighborhoods. More interestingly, he finds that both tend towards a franchise-like structure in which local entrepreneurial spirits (often men) affiliate themselves with certain transnational brands, often rooted in the United States, and deploy the symbols, rituals, and resources made available through the ‘brand’ to develop their organizations and recruit members.

The book focuses more on the role of shame and gang life than it does on how shame and discharging shame works for the ex-gang members once they join an evangelical church. Brenneman does state that six of the sixty-three homies-now-hermanos whom he interviewed described highly emotional conversion experiences, and he includes a few of these extraordinary conversion