"Christian Machismo?" A Review of:

Negotiating Respect: Pentecostalism, Masculinity and the Politics of Spiritual Authority in the Dominican Republic / Brendan Jamal Thornton

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Brendan Jamal Thornton, *Negotiating Respect: Pentecostalism, Masculinity and the Politics of Spiritual Authority in the Dominican Republic*, University Press of Florida, 2016, 288pp., $69.95

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Ross Wignall is a lecturer in social anthropology at Oxford Brookes University. His research focusses on the intersection of morality, faith and the gendered body as modes of youth self-actualisation with recent projects on the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in the UK and The Gambia, West Africa.

Juan Carlos was a drug dealer and user until he found God at the Pentecostal church in El Capotillo, a notorious *barrio* in Santo Domingo, capital city of the Dominican Republic, as he puts it "I used to spend thirty days a month in the streets, smashed, with a machete in hand and with a .38 at my side." Now he preaches at the neighbourhood church, urging other young Dominican men to leave behind their violent lifestyles and join him in converting to the expanding Pentecostal community: "God has told me to be an example for other drug addicts…I preach that there is still hope; everything is not lost…I was a drug addict and now I am free. I was *machetero*, a *bandolero* and today I am free." Juan Carlos's story of

conversion and salvation encapsulates the array of stories Thornton has gathered in this exciting and fascinating study of Pentecostalism and masculinity in the Dominican Republic. Through the careful documentation of young men's lives, he shows how men like Juan Carlos use the masculine credibility they learnt on the street as 'Tigueres' (macho men) to assert and reproduce forms of masculine authority through conversion narratives that assert their credibility as Christians, the macho being paradoxically reinvented as evidence of spiritual devotion.

Thornton's book, then, aligns with an upswell in studies on masculinity and religion, but treads new ground by focussing on the contestation of Christian identity in an area dominated by historically powerful, orthodox forms of religiosity. Thornton challenges this trend by providing an intriguing and in depth portrait of Pentecostal identity in the *barrio* of a small municipal town called Villa Altagracia. Here, urban residents suffering from various forms of deprivation associated with impoverished urban contexts are joining Pentecostal churches in increasing numbers, challenging the accepted Catholic hegemony. Thornton's work plays a vital role in bringing attention to the negotiation of Christian identity in contexts beyond the Northern Metropole, illustrating how historic formations of Christian identity in the Global South are constantly being reshaped by global socio-economic change.

This marks part of a more general trend that has seen the rise of Pentecostal churches across the world. The influence of Pentecostalism over everyday Dominican life has gathered pace in recent decades, with Pentecostal memberships estimated to have increased by at least tenfold in the last fifty years. As Thornton shows, this rapid expansion marks not only how Pentecostalism is proving life-changing for its own converts but is altering irrevocably the nature of what it means to be both Christian and Dominican: "Pentecostalism is no longer a

marginal faith: it is an exceptional one that is simultaneously an integral feature of the local religious milieu, inseparable from the daily life of barrio residents.”.

Local Christianity

In this context, the sense of being Christian plays out along a series of historically configured binaries: local and global; orthodox or heterodox; insider and outsider; and so on. This bucks against several theoretical threads in the study of religion, especially notions of transnational religions invading local spaces. In fact, Thornton suggests that these local-global configurations can instruct us as to the nature of the local more directly, as converts utilise their newfound evangelicism to, in some cases, radically reshape the terms of their Dominican identity. As he points out this is especially the case for countries – such as the Dominican Republic – that are consistently and offhandedly glossed as “Catholic,” without attentiveness to the complex nuances of Catholic identity in the first instance and the multiplicity of Christian experience and identity in the second. As he argues, the influence of Pentecostalism has allowed local believers more latitude in choosing both what they believe and how they worship: “the establishment of Pentecostal and other evangelical churches in barrios across the Dominican Republic creates the opportunity in local communities for people to choose what kind of Christian they want to be, along with providing a language to distinguish between them, moral criteria with which to evaluate them, and license to recognise or refute them.”

In keeping with this style of analysis, Thornton shows how Pentecostal converts draw on new repertoires of action, language and practice to distinguish themselves from their Catholic peers and demonstrate their credentials as a “Christiano.” In the Dominican context, the term

“Christiano” is used for Pentecostal Christians in contrast to the more common “Catolico” for denoting Catholics, though, as Thornton notes, this term can be much broader and often does not constitute active involvement in church life. On the other hand, “Christianos” are easily distinguishable, noted for specific types of behaviour rather than overt forms of religiosity: “They are known more for what they do (testify, preach and so forth) and for what they are prohibited from doing (drink, gamble, and so forth) than for any specific tenets of faith or, more frankly, for what they believe.”

In the context of religious plurality, these performative markers become important points of differentiation for local Dominicans, for whom discussions over how to be a good Christian are part of the everyday fabric of social relations and public discourse. Here, “Christianos” show the way to be a “true Christian” through their rigid interpretations of Christian piety and their emphasis on both an attitudinal and behavioural form of conversion: “Conviction on its own is thought to be insufficient for realising a true Christian identity if not accompanied by an appreciable change in outward appearance or public demeanor.” On this point, showing how belief remains secondary to practice, he joins other scholars in urging for greater appreciation of the ritual quality of Pentecostal life and the subtle ways Pentecostal conversion reshapes belief via the body, rather than the other way round.

Christian masculine prowess

On masculinity Thornton is equally insightful, offering carefully nuanced descriptions of the way young Pentecostals are forced to navigate between differing, and often opposed, models of masculine prowess. Here, he notes that youth gangs and Pentecostal churches share a number of characteristics: they offer “clearly lit paths for self-actualisation,” or rather, routes

to empowerment and citizenship unavailable in the failing Dominican economy and national project; they offer sanctuary, security and affiliation in a world of chaos and competition; and they ultimately create alternate visions of both national identity and political participation which challenge the corrupt and violent Dominican State.

However, as Thornton points out, whilst both the youth gangs and Pentecostal churches are shaped and influenced by global movements, economies and ideas, it is at the local level that young men join them and adopt their associated behaviours. On the street these multiply triangulated forms of aspirational masculinity are shaped by differing pressures and spaces of male performance. A number of his informants described being caught between maintaining the ascetic lifestyle required by the church and being a "man of the streets" or a "tiguere" where chief prerequisites include displaying "slyness, aggressiveness, carousing, womanizing, infidelity, and various kinds of delinquency." Crucially it is at the intersection between the gang and the church that Thornton's study offers most insight, showing how conversions from "tigueres" to "Christiano" is a deeply intertwined, mutually constitutive process: "By acknowledging evangelical Christians, and not Catholics, as representatives of God on Earth, in identifying *evangelicos* as 'true Christians,' as the only Christians 'with God,' youth gangs endorse Pentecostal claims to moral and spiritual authority."

New formations

Thornton's study joins a growing list of empirical work demonstrating how, contrary to popular narratives of religious decline in many parts of the world, religions are thriving and in some cases even expanding their influence in every domain of social, political and economic life. As recent studies have shown, evangelical strains of Pentecostalism are

proving particularly resistant to processes of secularisation and in a number of contexts are generating innovative cultural formations that scholars are struggling to keep pace with.

As he shows, even in a place so dominated by Catholicism as the Dominican Republic, Pentecostal groups can offer important alternative pathways to adulthood and social inclusion which can challenge dominant narratives of gendered identity. Through a carefully detailed ethnographic study Thornton has shed light on one such new outgrowth of evangelical Christianity, by charting the growing influence of Pentecostalism in the Dominican Republic, a locale previously dominated by Catholicism. In doing so, he has asked important broader questions about the politics of Christian identity in areas where multiple possible Christianities are vying for dominance or attempting to co-exist.

Critically, his study traces how these new formations of Pentecostal identity are rooted in the locations, the street-corners and neighbourhood alleyways, from which their adherents originate. In many accounts of Pentecostalism in the Global North, class, gender and place are often overlooked in favour of a focus on spiritual and religious practice. Thornton challenges these accounts by demonstrating, through fine-gained ethnographic details, how one may go hand in hand with the other and, in this case, be mutually constituting. Not only does this offer important insights into the reasons for why young men mired in local cultures of Machismo might sign up to Pentecostal churches, but also why they might remain as part of the congregation over time.

This insight can have much broader implications for our understanding of how Pentecostal movements in overlooked poor urban areas are altering the way young people relate to forms of religiosity and spiritual authority, and adds to the growing literature pointing to a subtle,

and often fragmented, re-enchantment of public space and the public sphere. Significantly, as Thornton notes, these changes must also be linked to the gendering of public and private spaces under new economic formations, such as those instigated by neoliberal policies. In the current socio-economic climate, certain forms of both religious and gendered identity are becoming more permissible than others – sometimes ironically, given their collective expression, linking into cultures of entrepreneurialism and individualism. By analysing these issues in concert, Thornton provides valuable insight into how religious, masculinity and economic changes are reshaping specific places whilst being tied into vast, global movements. *Negotiating Respect* by Jamal Thornton, then, offers a rich and insightful ethnographic contribution to our understanding of Pentecostalism and masculinity in the Dominican Republic – and far beyond.