

Helena Hansen: *Addicted to Christ: remaking men in Puerto Rican Pentecostal Drug Ministries*. Oakland, University of California Press,

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We social scientists have a hard time conceptualizing the emotional dimensions of religion. Especially when describing its high-octane variants, we take refuge in external variables like gender and race or report informants' ready-made narratives of the highs and lows of conversion. But, for understandable reasons, we are deeply resistant to taking seriously what they tell us: our milieu is largely sceptical of their claims and we have been educated to take religious adherence as a symptom of *something else* – big picture changes like secularization, strains in society, or psychological problems. “They” must be lost, seeking for “meaning” and so on. To those who find this kind of sociology boring and frustrating, Helena Hansen's unique endeavour to think behind the symptoms, in a book at once passionate and poised, comes as a welcome remedy. If some are surprised that she sometimes follows everyday evangelical routines like carrying a Bible or that she has even wondered “if God was asking me to go native”, that is a price worth paying.

Drawing on her anthropological formation and her extensive experience as psychiatrist, Hansen expounds convincingly the encounter between two worlds of addiction: like addicts, preachers recount over and over again their history of recovery from former double lives as both perpetrators and victims. On reading her I realize that the innumerable recovery stories I have heard while doing research in Brazilian Pentecostal churches since the early 1990s, are not incidental: ministers rate their successes by the numbers who graduate to a life as church workers or preachers who addictively repeat their stories to any who might listen. Where once they dedicated their skills to the trickery and manipulation needed to access their drugs, now they dedicate them to managing congregations, to controlling people in recovery. After all, is not endless repetition itself a defining feature both of ritual and of addiction?

Hansen's hitherto largely unnoticed, but remarkable and highly original book, based on extended ethnographic work in Puerto Rico dating back to the late 1990s, and on equally extensive experience as a psychiatrist, makes the case that the churches do manage some degree of success with some people by adopting an approach which is the opposite of that of psychiatrists. In the mind of standard biomedical psychiatry, addicts are “cases” who have lost the ability to take decisions about their lives: as humans they are to be kept at a safe distance. For the churches, in contrast, they are people, and bodies, to be touched and handled and almost compelled to renounce their addiction even through the most terrible pain of withdrawal. For the ethnographer, this is not, or not exactly, “faith healing”, even if retrospective narratives of her informants, replete with hallucinations, visions, dreams and intimate conversations with God, do make it sound as if it is. In any case at the end comes a big note of caution: if they are to recover in the long term, addicts need support of an alternative family, which may be the church or the remains of their former network. Sending them “back to their families” is seriously misguided, for their families are usually riddled with trouble of all kinds and may in any case have rejected them because of their addictions.

Her concluding chapter describes public treatment centres which bring addicts into daily community activities such as art therapy, farming and gardening in conjunction with “maintenance medications” such as methadone, which are “stop-gap measures to keep people from craving the drugs of their choice”. It sounds promising, though I suspect it is only for the select or lucky few.

David Lehmann is Emeritus Reader in Social Science at the University of Cambridge and author of *Struggle for the Spirit: Religious Transformation and Popular Culture in Brazil and Latin America* (Polity 1996)

OR

David Lehmann is Emeritus Reader in Social Science at the University of Cambridge and author of *The Prism of Race: the Politics and Ideology* (Michigan University Press, 2018)