

Oração de Traficante: uma etnografia by Christina Vital da Cunha: Garamond, Rio de Janeiro, 2017, 431 pp. CDU 307.3364098153

Involvement of drug dealers and gangs in evangelical churches in Latin America has been a subject of discussion for some time. This is not surprising: churches are easy to set up and there is no recognized institutional system to certify the credentials of people who call themselves pastors in the innumerable small churches that are born every day. So they are a tempting prey for traffickers because, apart from their institutional fragility, as tax exempt entities receiving donations in cash they offer an opportunity to launder money and a façade of respectability. In slightly sensationalist publications Kevin Lewis O’Neill has described some shocking situations in Guatemala as, in a less breathless style, did Robert Brenneman for Salvador (Brenneman 2012; O’Neill 2019). The subject is sensitive, difficult, even dangerous, to research, but as Christina Vital da Cunha, Professor at the Universidade Federal Fluminense in Rio de Janeiro, demonstrates, if one has the patience and discretion to build up a presence in a location, it is not more dangerous than any other research among the low-income populations of Latin America’s intricate and multi-layered urban conglomerations. The fruit of her patience, this book, whose title translates as ‘A Dealer’s Prayer’, has marked a milestone in the study of the subject in Brazil on account of the depth of her ethnography – 13 years of engagement in two Rio de Janeiro *favelas*, from her undergraduate years through her Masters and PhD – and also on account of the contextual grounding of her study. In one of the favelas, Santa Marta, located relatively near to the middle class areas of Rio’s ‘Zona Sul’ (Southern area) and therefore to employment and networking opportunities, her central character is a Catholic priest who has taken advantage of his connections to Rio’s prestigious Catholic University to bring educational and infrastructural benefits to the area. He has made no concessions to drugs traffickers one of whom offered to give him a fifty percent ‘cut’ for laundering some money through his church. The other case, which receives the bulk of the book’s attention, is Acari, a favela of 40,000 people, located far away in the Zona Norte (Northern area) where (in the words of a local interviewee) the UN Index of Human Development is one of the lowest in the state. This is a place where anyone who aspires to make their way in the world other than through drug dealing thinks only of moving away. In Acari evangelical churches and their pastors, lacking that Catholic priest’s social capital, have little choice, if they are to survive and grow, other than to carve out a coexistence with the traffickers. Most of their followers, after all, are somehow linked to the traffic, if not as dealers themselves, as their close or distant family members.

Da Cunha constructs a triangular framework in which the life of evangelical churches is paired with family life and the dynamics of the drug trade. To grasp this formula one must begin with what in other (Caribbean) contexts has been called the matrifocal family. She notes that women, in narrating the evolution of their lives, scarcely mention the men, even the fathers of their children. The key figures are sisters, mothers and daughters; the men are usually a source of worry tending too often to go astray and join the traffic. One woman speaks of a vulnerability to ‘the evil that preys on young men’ (‘o Mal que ronda os jovens’). The ‘Batalha Espiritual’ (Spiritual Battle) proclaimed by the churches meshes with the sometimes poisonous character of social relations where a culture of distrust bolstered by possession cults (known once as ‘Afro-Brazilian’) is intertwined with the real dangers of violence that permeate the social fabric, particularly relations between men and women.

The cults themselves have suffered a severe decline, and in borrowing the idea of possession from the cults, the churches have turned the idea of possession inside out: whereas in the cults spirits are inconstant entities to be cajoled, in the churches, although their names are retained, they are reinvented as one-dimensional forces of evil that subject those they inhabit to all kinds of ailments and dysfunctional relationships. Paradoxically, many agents of these dysfunctions, gang leaders and dealers large and small, have joined forces with the churches to denounce the cults as the work of the devil. Da Cunha describes their campaign to replace vivid and colourful murals depicting divinities from candomblé, with Biblical verses. The traffickers make generous donations to the churches and attend principally the Thursday services devoted to 'liberation' when pastors thunderously summon the spirits of evil that inhabit the faithful to manifest themselves and release their victims. However, it is hard to translate the desire to give up those ways into practice. People repeatedly try and fail – hardly surprising when dealing pays some five times more than a 'proper', usually menial even humiliating, job. Young men are called upon to choose between 'being someone' on their home turf and being a nobody in the urban jungle beyond.

If the churches pray for peace and tranquillity, the surrounding climate of violence may be a help, for the traffic is also a system of government. The police can hardly be relied upon to keep order for when they arrive in favelas they frequently start a fight and kill or maim at random: back in 1990 Acari suffered a notorious incident (the 'Acari massacre') in which 11 young people were kidnapped by the police, never to be seen again. The gang leaders administer rough justice, against those who would betray them, but also against rapists and thieves. One of the central personages of the story, a senior druglord called Jeremias, called on to adjudicate in disputes before they claim victims, made it his work to bring the violence of the gangs under control, albeit from afar after he moved to another area. Da Cunha writes of him rather sympathetically: his 'dream' was to bring the dealers to church.

'In the end, to convey the idea that this is not a world where moral absolutes will get anyone very far, da Cunha quotes the words of Pierre Sanchis, a French priest and disciple of Liberation Theology, who made his life in Brazil and became a distinguished sociologist: 'Rather than ruptures, we watch the emergence of new forms of borrowing, passages, reinterpretations, bridges connecting symbolic and ritual universes...' (Sanchis 1997: 109).

Brenneman, Robert E. 2012. *Homies and hermanos: God and the gangs in Central America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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Sanchis, Pierre. 1997. "O campo religioso contemporaneo no Brasil." in *Globalização e Religião*, edited by Ari Pedro Oro and Alberto Steil. Petropolis: Vozes.

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