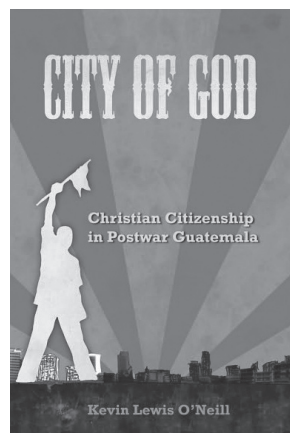


# Spiritual Warfare in Guatemala

RUDY NELSON

The two books under review here, important studies with a wealth of valuable information, invite discussion in tandem. Both began life as doctoral dissertations: Kevin Lewis O'Neill's in cultural anthropology at Stanford, Robert Brenneman's in sociology of religion at Notre Dame. Both writers focus on Guatemala, O'Neill almost exclusively while Brenneman adds El Salvador and Honduras to what he calls Central America's "Northern Triangle." Although both deal with religion, O'Neill concentrates primarily on El Shaddai, an elite neo-Pentecostal megachurch in Guatemala City, and Brenneman on a number of small evangelical churches in the city's poorest barrios. While both are concerned with the role of Christian believers in a violently dysfunctional society, their perspectives are very different. O'Neill operates with a wide-angle lens and organizes his material around the concept of Christian citizenship. Brenneman narrows his focus to one of the society's most critical problems and explores the way Christian citizens are dealing with it. It's a difference that makes a difference.

Let's look first at *City of God*. I can best illustrate what religious faith and life are like at El Shaddai by moving ahead to a scene midway in the book. The time is December 2006, the place the church's prayer room. The air is filled with a steady buzz like an old ceiling fan. It's coming from a group of people hovering over a basket of smooth black stones, speaking in tongues. In teams of eight, they have been doing this seven hours a day without interruption for two weeks. They will continue for one more week. Then the stones, 72



in all, charged with the power of the Holy Spirit, will be individually (and surreptitiously) placed in strategic locations around the city—at locations where "spiritual mapping" has determined Satan is in control: mostly national and municipal public buildings but also various cultural centers and several Catholic churches. On New Year's Day, at a precisely designated moment, these spiritually charged stones will be simultaneously "detonated," putting to rout the demonic forces that control the city and ridding the streets of crime and violence.

This was an operation in the congregation's "covert spiritual warfare," an exercise in Christian citizenship intended to support the church's founding pastor, Harold Caballeros, who had announced his intention to run for president in the 2007 election. (There'll be reason, later in the review, to bring Dr. Caballeros back into the discussion and update the political record.)

If praying over a basket of stones that will at some point "explode" doesn't fit comfortably with your concept of "Christian citizenship"—even as you acknowledge the potent symbolism—O'Neill will understand. When he started his research, the evidence he accumulated soon overturned some of his own expectations. He knew he would face the same problem with many of his readers. Nevertheless, based on his two years of field work at El Shaddai and three other mega-churches, he declares in the preface his confidence that the book makes its case—"that Christian citizenship is an ethnographic fact" and that the members of neo-Pentecostal megachurches



"have placed themselves at the very heart of Guatemalan democratization in ways that go well beyond electoral politics."

Readers will judge for themselves whether that confidence is justified. At the very least, the book performs a significant service in its extensive survey of what El Shaddai believers actually do and think. In that regard, the portrait of Guatemalan neo-Pentecostals is more informative than the abstractions "prosperity gospel" and "health and wealth," with which the reading public in North America has some familiarity.

But O'Neill is up to something a good deal more ambitious. Citizenship, he says, has three interrelated dimensions: *political status*, involving such issues as the right to vote and participate in various levels of the political process; *cultural identity*, relating to the fact that "the bounds and dynamics of citizenship are culturally constructed in specific social and historical moments"; and *governing rationality*, understanding that citizenship has a subjective dimension with responsibilities and dispositions.

It's on the second and third categories that he builds his case. Prayer, fasting, and examination of conscience, which in certain cultures would be considered strange and even nonsensical, he sees as "acts of Christian citizenship" in Guatemala City. Even more important is the third category's "governmentality," in the elaboration of which O'Neill leans heavily on the later writings of Michel Foucault, which stress the responsibility of citizens to govern themselves. Much of what El Shaddai members do along these lines is admirable, especially considering the conditions all Guatemalans face in the seriously dysfunctional society that has emerged since the Peace Accords ended 36 years of civil war in December 1996. You might say it's the ultimate privatization: the state is failing utterly in its responsibility, and neo-Pentecostals are filling in the void. But their efforts are meant to be much more than a stopgap measure. These Christians are "remaking their nation through the renovation of themselves." The moral weight of this mission, borne on their shoulders (the book's major metaphor), is the awesome responsibility of bringing into being the City of God by their spiritual warfare against demonic powers.

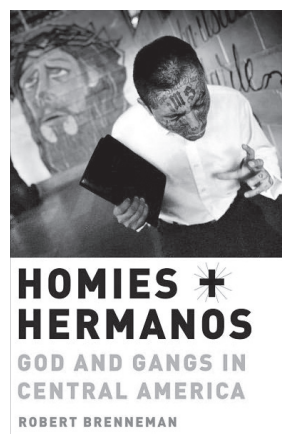
O'Neill acknowledges that by making Christian citizenship so predominantly personal he "flattens a range of historical and material factors, such as genocidal civil war, economic restructuring, and urban violence." A good example of this flattening is the chapter titled "The Founding Fathers," which "addresses the

problematization, the practice, and, ultimately, the paradox of neo-Pentecostal fatherhood in postwar Guatemala City." Put simply, in neo-Pentecostalism's conceptual scheme, the cause of some of the country's most pressing problems is the failure to follow biblical gender roles. The father is the rightful prince of the family and is responsible for instilling the right values that create good citizens. As O'Neill points out, this analysis omits the serious structural problems in Guatemalan society. Fatherhood, he says, "could be read as a certain kind of postwar problem from the perspective of public health or even public policy, for example, but neo-Pentecostalism sidesteps this history by focusing on responsibilities accepted (or declined) by individual men with children."

O'Neill is also ambivalent about "Hands of Love," the church's charitable program. Neo-Pentecostalism in Guatemala is not the church of the poor. One of the factors in its emergence was dissatisfaction with the post-Vatican II insistence on God's "preferential option for the poor." The neo-Pentecostal message that God wants believers to be materially prosperous attracted not only middle- and upper-middle-class professionals but the upwardly mobile as well. Aware of the responsibility that goes along with their wealth, El Shaddai distributes liberally to those less fortunate. The catch, though, is that charitable help goes only to the "biblically deserving," who happen to live in the country, not the city. The teeming masses of poor (predominantly *ladinola*) in the city's barrios are simply not on El Shaddai's "moral grid." It's the indigenous in the *altiplano* that benefit from the charity. The irony, which O'Neill acknowledges, is that the greater need of the Maya—the primary victims of Guatemala's 500-year culture of violence—is justice. And charity, for all the

good it does, sidesteps the more difficult problem of society's fundamental systemic injustice.

Even with these and other flaws that O'Neill discovers in El Shaddai's programs, it's a bit surprising that the title of his concluding chapter is "Disappointment." He makes it perfectly clear that it's not the work of the believers



## City of God

Christian Citizenship in Postwar Guatemala

KEVIN LEWIS O'NEILL • UNIV. OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, 2009 • 312 PP.  
\$24.95, PAPER

## Homies and Hermanos

God and Gangs in Central America

ROBERT BRENNEMAN • OXFORD UNIV. PRESS, 2011 • 312 PP. • \$24.95, PAPER

Rudy Nelson, associate professor of English, emeritus, University at Albany, is co-producer/director (with Shirley Nelson) of the documentary film *Precarious Peace: God and Guatemala*.



he finds disappointing. They continue to shoulder faithfully the burden of governance in matters where the state is shirking its responsibility. Instead he locates the disappointment in “the very category of citizenship itself,” a concept I find difficult to pin down.

A more obvious source of disappointment—in this case for the congregation—is the failure of Harold Caballeros, their pastor, to qualify for the 2007 presidential election. Although Caballeros has been largely missing in my review up to this point, the book leaves no doubt that he is the moving force behind everything the church believes and does, including the strategy and tactics of spiritual warfare. Excerpts from his sermons and reports of his actions permeate the book. In fact, he’s a sort of wild card, a charismatic combination of scholar, spiritual prophet, and politician. Since the failure of his presidential ambitions in 2007, he has seemingly opted for politics full time, turning over pastoral duties to his wife, founding a political party under the name *Vision con Valores* (Vision with Values) and declaring his candidacy in the 2011 presidential election. Although he failed to win, he declared his support for the eventual winner and was rewarded

with the cabinet post of minister of foreign relations, in which position he now serves.

If Caballeros were to use that platform as a successful stepping-stone to the presidency, the issue of Christian citizenship would escalate to a new level, especially in regard to democracy. Recall O’Neill’s claim that the beliefs and actions of neo-Pentecostal Christians are “at the very heart of Guatemala’s democratization.” But Caballeros’ vision, repeatedly stated, is that Guatemala must become a Christian nation—“a Christian society, a saved nation, a new nation, and a nation transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ”—in short, a City of God. Under a Caballeros administration with those criteria, what would democracy look like? What would be the rights of the Maya, the persistence of whose pre-Columbian religious beliefs and practices he considers the demonic source at the root of Guatemala’s problems? And what would be the obligations of Christian citizenship? Dual citizenship, on earth and in heaven, may be the New Testament ideal, but in the violent and morally ambiguous world of postwar Guatemala, it all comes down to individual Christians making decisions—some good, some bad, some in the gray

in-between—as has always been the case.

That kind of decision-making in a morally ambiguous world is exactly what’s going on as well in Robert Brenneman’s *Homies and Hermanos: God and Gangs in Central America*.<sup>1</sup> It is no less important a book than *City of God*, but without the elusive issue of citizenship to deal with, commenting on it is less problematic. Or at least I have that illusion. In my judgment the book is a remarkable study, rigorous in its methodology, thorough in its scope, and penetrating in its insights. As a bonus, it’s accessible without dumbing-down and learned without getting wonky.

Gangs of urban youth and the varying levels of chaos they cause are neither new nor rare. But in numbers and the level of violence, what happened in the crowded barrios of Guatemala, Salvador, and Honduras in the 1990s escalated to new dimensions. The crisis developed when thousands of young men and women, offspring of immigrant populations who

had fled Central America’s civil strife and settled in the Los Angeles area, were deported when they got into trouble with the law. Already divided into hostile competing gangs, they intensified that rivalry south of the border, evolving from *pandillas* (relatively harmless youth bands) to *maras* (complex organizations prone to violence and criminal acts). Initiation ritual took on its own brand of violence, accompanied by tattoos, with the assumption that membership was permanent—i.e., “all the way to the morgue.” The problem has become progressively worse. Gangs not only war with each other; they tangle with weak and corrupt police forces, accumulate stores of sophisticated weapons, and are now involved in the expanding illegal drug trade. It’s a life of constant risk, but trying to exit the gang means an even greater risk. As one gang member expressed it, “Here, there is only one way to get out, and that’s in your pine-box suit.”

And yet some gang members have been able to cut the cord and survive. What has become evident over time is that a significant percentage of the gang drop-outs have experienced religious conversion and affiliated with small evangelical

1. Central American gang members refer to one another with the English term “homie,” which they write in Spanish as *jomi*. Of Brenneman’s 63 ex-gang member interviewees, all but four were male.

## The Intolerance of Tolerance

D. A. CARSON

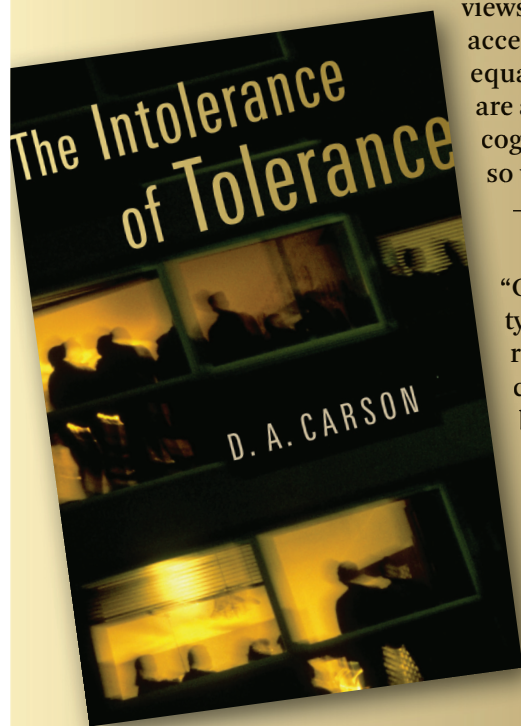
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churches that are themselves embedded in the desperately poor barrios.

“This book,” says Brenneman, “is a sociological exploration of the transformation that many gang youth take from *homie* to evangelical *hermanos*. What makes a gang *homie* trade in his gun for a Bible? And what does the trade teach us more broadly about the nature of youth violence, of religious conversion, and of evangelical churches in Central America?”

Under these general categories readers will inevitably raise a variety of specific questions. For example, what are the push/pull factors involved in joining a gang in the first place? When exiting the gang, what attracts homies to the church? Do the churches of the barrio have programs to attract gang members? If gang membership is an “all the way to the morgue” commitment, why are some dropouts allowed to survive? What keeps converts from backsliding? Are the conversions genuine? Do some converts defect? These questions don’t have simple answers, and Brenneman doesn’t scrimp in probing them. His exploration amounts to a sort of seminar, with insights from sociology, anthropology, political science, history, psychology, criminology, and theology.

The most useful of these acknowledged borrowings is Thomas Scheff’s work on shame as a key factor in human interaction. Even as shouldering a burden is the gathering metaphor in O’Neill’s *City of God*, the emotion of shame is a lens which helps Brenneman examine the people and events in his study. It can be seen in the stories that come out in his interviews: shame at being abandoned by a father and brother who have left for *el norte*, shame at being abused by alcoholic parents, at being humiliated in school, at rotting away in poverty with no hope for a job.

Part of what new converts get when they exit the gang and join a church is removal of that shame. But they get a lot more too: the solidarity of a new kind of family, including both loving concern and the close supervision of their behavior; help in finding a job (though jobs are scarce in the barrio economy); and a whole new busy agenda. Evangelical churches are demanding consumers of time. They hold lots of meetings, mostly at times when gangs are active in *la vida loca*, the wild indulgence in sex, violence, alcohol, and drugs that characterized their former life.

And converts benefit from what has come to be called the “evangelical exception.” Brenneman says that in every area he studied he found some variation of the saying “You don’t mess with God,” an inheritance of the inbred Latin American cultural respect for religion. Gangs honor a genuine religious conversion. But that custom has a flip side. The gang monitors the behavior of converts, and if they find evidence of a false conversion, they soon see to it that the pretender is in a “pine-box suit.”

In Guatemala, gang members—and any young person who might be mistaken for a gang member, including ex-homies who have become *hermanos*—also face the threat of what has come to be called “social cleansing.” In response to the apparent inability of legitimate government to deal with troublemakers who are perceived as the Enemy, the popular desire for a firm hand has led to killings by off-duty police or civilian vigilantes. When ex-gang members, who have left behind lives of violence, are forced to live under this threat, the irony is inescapable. In 2007, irony was piled on top of irony when (as Brenneman relates the story) Erwin Sperisen, then director of Guatemala’s National Police, in a televised interview for his

Christian talk show, “defended the practice of social cleansing and openly admitted to the existence of ‘death squadrons’ while confirming that evangelical police personnel had been active in them.” Sperisen at the time was a member of El Shaddai.<sup>2</sup> Neither neo-Pentecostalism nor El Shaddai as a church should be held responsible for a statement by one of its members. But the sequence of events underscores the troubling possibility that spiritual warfare can turn into something more lethal than spirit-filled “exploding” stones.

In his final assessment of the *homies to hermanos* rescue efforts, Brenneman picks up on the social cleansing issue: “Instead of resorting to ‘social cleansing’ or neighborhood ‘roundups’ and incarcerations,” he says, “the larger task facing local neighborhoods, national governments, and the international community is that of tackling the structures that perpetuate shaming through persistent inequality, unemployment, and failing schools while undermining the accessibility of weapons and drugs.” What is the role of the churches in this effort? “Churches can join in the effort through social and religious programming, but by themselves they will not be able to solve the problem of gang violence with preventive or restorative programs.”

Brenneman’s last word, though, is positive: “In short, I believe the self-reform perspective undergirding evangelical efforts at ‘gang rescue’ has an as-yet-unrealized potential for congealing into critical consciousness and a movement for economic and social justice.” His book could help realize that potential.

**B&C**

2. Sperisen, who holds dual Guatemalan and Swiss nationality, resigned under pressure for involvement in other infractions and has settled in Switzerland.

# Updating the Faith?

ALAN G. PADGETT

At the turning point of the century, at one of the world’s most prestigious universities, a brilliant theologian and historian at the height of his powers was given the honor of addressing the entire faculty and student body. He chose as his theme the essence of Christianity. His published lectures quickly became a bestseller, sparking admiration and controversy throughout the world. The century was the 19th, the university was Berlin, and the theologian was the great Adolf von Harnack.

The question of the identity or essence of Christianity is hardly a new one, nor was it so in 1899. The earliest Christian pastors, martyrs, bishops and apologists all had to work hard at explaining the central elements of their fledgling religious movement, and the key spiritual truths of the faith, both to those who publicly spoke against their religion and to converts. Just as we do in the 21st century, so the Christian fathers and mothers of the classical age lived in a multicultural world of many religions and worldviews. Europe, Africa, and Western Asia (where the Christian religion first spread) were a complex jumble of cultures, languages, and peoples: a cultural quilt of north and south, east and west. Into this world the apostolic message defined itself over against Judaism, polytheism, mystery religions, and popular philosophies. Eventually divisions within the church also required attention to the core beliefs, holy texts, and sacred practices of the faith. Creeds, a New Testament canon, and core practices of the faith were the result of centuries-long work by women

and men who followed in the way of Jesus and the apostles. Together all of these things solidified the identity of Christianity. In the midst of all this, Christian teachings expressed in hymns, sermons, and liturgies played an essential role. But do they still, or are such antiquities hopelessly out of date?

What role do theology and established doctrine play in a vibrant Christian life? What place do tradition and reason have in the ongoing identity of the church and the central tasks of mission and worship? These are some of the vital questions addressed in the three fine volumes considered here. Philip Clayton, John Franke, and Alister McGrath all consider the essence of Christianity, in different ways and not always explicitly in these terms. Especially important in all of them is the theological dimension of faith. Are there proper boundaries or centers to Christian doctrine and practice? Each of these books is a readable, clear, and authoritative presentation by a seasoned scholar-teacher. All three reward careful reading and reflection, yet each voice speaks from a different location. Clayton’s work falls clearly in the centuries-long tradition of liberal Protestant thought, while the other two authors represent versions of evangelical Christianity.

Harnack’s *Das Wesen des Christentums* (translated as *What Is Christianity?*) remains a classic in the noble tradition of liberal theology, expressing many of its essential insights. For this movement, the essence of the Christian religion is primarily moral and spiritual. Jesus is best understood historically as a great moral teacher, promoting the “higher righteousness” of love for God and neighbor. The core of the Christian gospel, argued Harnack, is the universal Fatherhood of God, the infinite value of the soul, and the fellowship of all humankind. These great truths, when acted upon, lead us toward the Kingdom of God. Yet classic Christianity would have a very different answer. What about the creeds and confessions, what of

the sacraments, the bishops, and the institutional church? In his second lecture, Harnack contrasted “the gospel” (as he saw it) with other important areas of religious life. There he considered, among other topics, “the gospel and doctrine or the question of Creed.” Harnack’s decisive rejection of creeds and established doctrine has continued to define modernist or progressive Christianity. To take a recent example, the president of the Claremont School of Theology, Jerry Campbell, in justifying the school’s move to become a multifaith institution, rejected the core Christian practice of evangelism in the name of Christ. Campbell opposed the traditional gospel with his view of the “fundamentals” of the Christian faith: “love for God and love for your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>1</sup> Harnack’s Christianity may be two centuries old, but it is alive and well today.

Philip Clayton, who teaches at Claremont, brings this open-minded tradition of theology into conversation with the much newer emergent church movement. The main concern of his book is to keep theology relevant to a changing world. Theology must listen to the Spirit, wherever she may be speaking. This means that believers must get outside established patterns. As Kant cried for all modernity, “Dare to think for yourself,” so Clayton speaks to all Christian believers: “Dare to do theology yourself!”

Of course he is right about this main point. Any thinking Christian disciple is already a theologian in the broad sense of the term, and should make the life of the mind part of her discipleship. We do need to listen to the larger culture and to what is happening in areas of great learning and arts. Theology is always open to revision just because Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and risen, is the living Word. But these concerns should take a second or third seat to special revelation, Scripture, and the classical creeds. Clayton chooses to ignore the danger of losing any

1. Robin Russell, “Claremont’s Religious Diversity,” *The United Methodist Reporter*, July 2, 2010; [umportal.org/article.asp?id=6914](http://umportal.org/article.asp?id=6914).

## BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ESSAY:

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Alister McGrath, *Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth* (HarperCollins, 2009).

John R. Franke, *Manifold Witness: The Plurality of Truth* (Abingdon, 2010).

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