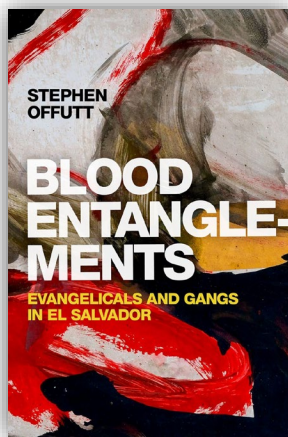


BOOK REVIEW

Blood Entanglements: Evangelicals and Gangs in El Salvador

By Stephen Offutt

Reviewed by Christopher Valencia



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In *Blood Entanglements*, Stephen Offutt carries out a sociology study to explore the complex relationships between gangs and evangelicalism in modern El Salvador. At the outset, Offutt presents his central argument as studying El Salvador's lower class communities to understand how gangs and evangelicals are entangled with one another (3).

Early on, Offutt reviews the modern histories of both of these groups. Like the beginning of many evangelical missions, Offutt recalls a history of evangelicalism beginning with one individual; in this case, the missionary Francisco Penzotti who started a Bible study in El Salvador around 1893. By the end of this timeline, over half of poor communities became evangelicals. Juxtaposed to this religious history, the presence of gangs would emerge strongly. Offutt explains how gangs began as family clans. In the 1970s, gangs or *maras* would develop that seemed to be more representative of hippie culture. Noting further developments, Offutt highlights: "Maras evolved as

national political and social unrest grew. Full scale civil war broke out in 1980. The fraught environment was one reason that the increasing numbers of *maras* were becoming harder and more violent" (11). In time, gangs would proliferate, and because of their power they gained strong influence in communities, the public sphere and even in government and political procedures.

Offutt explains how many scholars, while engaging the relationships between gangs and religion, have noted the "haven thesis," that is, how religious communities, like churches, may provide a haven for the poor and those in social distress. He underscores a common modern example of Pentecostal churches in poor neighborhoods (7). Yet, Offutt proposes a new thesis: "the entanglement thesis" (15-16), which sets out to explore the broader interactions between evangelicalism and gangs that the haven thesis may overlook. This term is convenient as evangelicalism itself is "notoriously fluid and adaptable" (16). What is the value of the entanglement thesis? Offutt writes: "it privileges the geographic and physical proximity to social problems" over the tendency of evangelicals to try to separate from them (16). Focusing again on context, it "recognizes the implications of low barriers to entry on evangelical identity and community in impoverished places" (16). And lastly, the thesis pays attention to "social networks that connect church leaders and members" to the community (18). Rather than looking at the ties that break, there remain "relationships that continue outside of faith communities."

In chapter 1, Offutt describes the context of urban poverty in which many young people find themselves, noting several vulnerabilities in this context. Summarizing them in nine points, he writes: "food, water, sewerage, health, education, family, migration,

employment, and political institutions, are all causally linked to one another” (27-28).

Further, in this chapter Offutt introduces the “organization parallels” between gangs and evangelicals (28), demonstrating how both groups—at the grassroots level—“use similar organizational strategies to overcome the environmental challenges that poverty creates” (28). For example, both may adopt *patrimonial* systems (30). Other examples include rituals (31-32), recruiting methods (33), and internal codes of conduct (38); for example, while rituals could easily be embedded in religious practices, Offutt reminds us how gangs often use rituals to “incorporate individuals into the group” (32). Identifying such similarities that take place in this context, Offutt underscores and explores how “the two groups bleed into one another” (42).

In Chapter 2, Offutt discusses the entanglement of cosmologies between these two groups. For many across these groups, there can be similar beliefs in God, Satan, angels and demons. He notes how in the conversion experience (from gangs to evangelicalism), rather than a break from the past, there is now a double up on allegiances (59). Offutt expands on how one’s relational location—vis-a-vis to God or Satan—is changed, but not one’s beliefs (60-61). Rather than creating large cosmological distinctions, central to his thesis, Offutt points out: “The entanglement thesis intends to highlight evangelicalism’s cultural continuity and the shared, community wide cosmologies. Such dynamics have implications for all sectors and institutions of society” (64-65).

In Chapter 3, Offutt explores complicated family networks across these groups. In this chapter we see how gangs and evangelicals can offer forms of support for issues like domestic violence. Physical abuse in the home can lead kids to join gangs. For example, if a father is a factor in domestic abuse, a son may join a gang to find a means of protection. Though the son is now involved with the realities of street life, the house now possesses more order. Furthermore, to the youngest son, the older brother is now the “hero” due to a reckless decision to join a gang. The church at times remains involved because some families—though involved or affiliated with gangs—want their children to be raised in the church (76-77). The interconnections thus remain complex. In the larger community, some evangelicals may praise God because gangs are deemed as answers to prayers since they provide a level of safety in the neighborhood (78). In another example, Offutt explains how if a son brings

home money that he acquired through gang activities, and the family needs it, the family may simply thank God for the finances. Offutt emphasizes how the relationships remain mutual: for security, evangelicals rely on gangs; for moral reform, gangs reach out to evangelicals (83, 89).

In chapter 4, Offutt explores the relationships between gangs, evangelicals and the police. Collaboration is explained as being stronger between gangs and evangelicals, but less so with the police. Offutt’s mentioning of this triangular situation—and the different ways the three groups navigate power in society—underscores power dynamics in insightful ways (92). He writes: “Whereas gangs and evangelicals are woven into communities through their patrimonial systems, local police officers patrol communities that they do not know and in which they are not trusted” (108). With these ties in view, Offutt presents evangelicals not as escapist, but as deeply engaged with their communities (115).

In Chapter 5, Offutt expands on how gangs and evangelicals work together to negotiate power—drawing from both their street power and church power for some level of local governance. For example, when other authorities fail to provide safety, evangelicals may seek gangs for protection (121). Similarly, evangelicals can offer protection—desiring to help kids from the troubles of the streets (123). Noting the role of pastors, Offutt mentions how gang members often respect and obey such moral authorities (126). Again, power dynamics here takes on a unique role. In these cases Offutt captures how “hard power” and “soft power” interact; in many cases, the hard power of gangs often wins out, but the soft power of the church still survives (126). As an additional and important concept, Offutt also explores how these entangled contexts and situations often create a moral logic characterized by respect and affection (140). In the remaining chapters (6 & 7), with these dynamics in view, Offutt investigates the shared economic exchanges between these two groups, and how church organizations at times may get infiltrated by gang members. These become other lenses through which to explore power dynamics and moral logics as these two cultures bleed into one another.

As a sociological work exploring how these two cultures interact, Offutt reminds us how the relationships between the streets and religion are quite complex. Rather than presenting evangelicalism as a “safe haven” protecting Salvadorians from the volatile nature of gangs, in this ethnographic work we see how

seemingly distinct worlds collide, intermix and become entangled. This work reminds us how religion weaves into urban life in unexpected ways, creating unlikely yet very real relationships. In the process, power and moral dynamics are viewed in a new light.



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