

2014

Review of Flores' "God's Gangs: Barrio Ministry, Masculinity, and Gang Recovery"

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Recommended Citation

Originally published in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53(3): 668-669. Posted with permission.
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jssr.2014.53.issue-3/issuetoc>

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The study of American gang life has been central in many of sociology's classical texts, yet few have analyzed the role that religion plays in ameliorating this social problem. There has been even less scholarly attention paid to the unique challenges faced by Latino male gang members in the context of immigration, race, and class. Eduardo Orozco Flores's book, *God's Gangs: Barrio Ministry, Masculinity, and Gang Recovery*, ties these theoretical strands into one work, which studies the role that religion has in assisting with recovery and resistance to gang life, as well as the role it plays in the reformation of masculine discourses among ex-gang members. The piece situates itself in the larger literature looking at the role of religious institutions as avenues of social support for marginalized populations and provides theoretically significant contributions to that conversation.

Flores draws from 18 months of fieldwork and observations of two ministries, one Catholic and one Protestant, in their outreach ministries to Latino gang members in Los Angeles. He begins with a description of the history of cultural discourses used in policing Los Angeles' Latino gangs. He then follows with an overview of the changing demographic mobility of Latino using U.S. Census and American Community Survey data as a litmus test for segmented assimilation theory. The subsequent chapters focus on comparing and contrasting the two models of gang rehabilitation orchestrated by each ministry in the areas of reintegration, gender discourses, and embodiment. Flores finds that in contrast to what some theories on religious volunteerism would predict—the idea that faith-based organizations may undermine efforts for positive social change—the religious discourses provided by the faith-based ministries gave ex-gang members a toolkit for reorienting their life purposes and goals, facilitating successful recovery out of gang life.

Flores's work has several noteworthy strengths and theoretical contributions. In particular, his results challenge well-known assumptions in theories related to religious volunteerism and downward assimilation. Some studies of faith-based ministries in urban settings have found that religious organizations lacked meaningful relationships with the surrounding community, resulting in ineffective rehabilitation efforts. However, Flores finds that in both ministries, rich relationships with community members were nurtured and were critical for gang member recovery. Second, downward assimilation theories suggest that the disadvantages encountered by Latino immigrants in the United States, such as moving into ecologically dangerous neighborhoods and other structural barriers, would result in a downward spiral into a permanent marginalized social

position (i.e., in poverty and limited social mobility). In contrast, Flores found that faith-based gang recovery programs were able to thwart the predictions of downward assimilation for Latino gang members with some degree of success (though not in all cases) by providing the means for them to leave gang life and achieve some modest socioeconomic standing.

This change in the lives of Latino ex-gang members was partly achieved through a cultivation of what Flores coins as *reformed barrio masculinity*, the foremost theoretical contribution of the book. This type of masculinity is a redefinition of manhood that deemphasized gang-related displays of manhood (characterized as domineering and violent in order to protect and gain status) and emphasizes achieving an idealized manhood by being a “family man” through things such as providing for wives/partners, having nurturing relationships with children, having conservative sexual conduct, and submitting to authority and laws. This theoretical notion is useful because it articulates the processes by which downward assimilation can be disrupted and demonstrates how religious discourses are vital in that process.

Additionally, the study is significantly strengthened by its use of the two-group comparison method, which showcased the different approaches to fixing social problems between Catholics and Protestants. The Catholic organization focused on helping recovering gang members reintegrate into society (*integrative redemption*), while the Protestant ministry stressed an “otherworldly orientation” to recovery (*segregated redemption*), drawing a strict boundary between recovering gang members and the rest of society. Each provided members with a new means to regain social status and honor but did so in distinctive ways—the Catholic Jesuit ministry emphasizes social justice and openness to other types of spiritualities, while the Protestant Pentecostal ministry was grounded in orthodox Protestant theology and evangelicalism. In light of the growth of Latino Protestantism in the United States, this comparison is useful for helping religion scholars think about how and why religious switching is happening, and it provides a more complex picture compared to the often monolithic portrayal of Latino religious life.

There are minor weaknesses to note in an otherwise compelling study. First, while the aim of the review of census data in the second chapter was to provide the reader a historical context of changing Los Angeles demographics, the descriptive findings in this chapter seem disconnected from the findings in the rest of the chapters and are only briefly touched on again in the last chapter. Second, the book is primarily focused on the

perspective of male gang members and leaves out a potential fruitful investigation of how identity is reformulated for recovering female gang members. It also does not explore how reformed barrio masculinity might affect the female partners or wives of gang members.

In the context of a resurgence of a social gospel movement among U.S. evangelical circles in the last 10 years and the continuing debate about the effectiveness of faith-based organizations in providing social support, this book will be essential for scholars of religion studying urban ministries. Additionally, Flores's wide theoretical scope and focus on the Latino/a population positions this text to make a significant contribution in other scholarly areas as well, such as immigration, gender, race/ethnicity, and Latino/a studies.