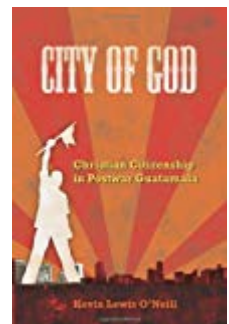
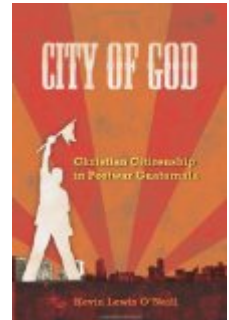


**Virginia Garrard-Burnett.** *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit: Guatemala under General Efraín Ríos Montt, 1982-1983.* Religion and Global Politics Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. xvi + 269 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-537964-8.

**Kevin Lewis O'Neill.** *City of God: Christian Citizenship in Postwar Guatemala.* The Anthropology of Christianity Series. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. xxix + 278 pp. \$21.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-520-26063-4.



**Reviewed by** Timothy J. Steigenga

**Published on** H-Pentecostalism (June, 2010)

**Commissioned by** Gene Mills (Florida State University)

Virginia Garrard-Burnett's *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit* and Kevin Lewis O'Neill's *City of God* share the topic of religion and politics in Guatemala but differ significantly in approach and conclusions. O'Neill's first book is an engaging ethnography of Christian citizenship based on his dissertation research conducted among neo-Pentecostals in Guatemala City in 2006 and 2007. As a historian with thirty years of research experience in Guatemala, Garrard-Burnett brings a broader lens to her analysis of the reasons for and interpretations of the genocidal campaign prosecuted against the Guatemalan people under the government of Pentecostal General Efraín Ríos Montt in

1982 and 1983. Both authors make important contributions to our understanding of the complex interactions between religion and politics in Guatemala. The books also complement each other, as Garrard-Burnett raises precisely the set of questions about Pentecostals and politics that O'Neill ultimately chooses not to address in his analysis.

O'Neill's greatest contribution is that he introduces and defines Christian citizenship as the manner through which Guatemalan neo-Pentecostals participate in the life of their city and state. His central claim is "that neo-Pentecostal Christians in Guatemala City perform their citi-

zenship through Christian practices and that these Christian practices make neo-Pentecostal Guatemalans into citizens” (p. 3). He explores this claim by examining four fields of ethnographic research: neo-Pentecostal churches in Guatemala City, with a particular focus on the mega-church El Shaddai and its founder, presidential aspirant Dr. Harold Caballeros; weekly cell groups associated with the church; the multitudinous media, sermon, Web, and other texts produced by the neo-Pentecostal churches; and interviews with non-Pentecostal leaders ranging from Catholic clergy to Mayan leaders to provide contrast (though these perspectives are rarely referenced in the text).

O’Neill adeptly weaves the narratives of his key informants with theoretical insights and references to Michel Foucault, Martin Heidegger, and numerous other classic and contemporary theorists while simultaneously painting a stark picture of the realities of daily life in Guatemala City. Each chapter explores a different dimension of neo-Pentecostal practice, beginning with the cell structure of neo-Pentecostal churches, moving to spiritual warfare, the construction of fatherhood, the relationship of Guatemala City to the countryside as framed by notions of Christian charity, and finally the particular brand of internationalism espoused within the neo-Pentecostal community. His conclusion reiterates the central argument of the book—that neo-Pentecostals actively exercise their citizenship through prayer, fasting, spiritual warfare, cell-group participation, and other religious practices that cause them to “own” the weight of Guatemala’s present and future. By remaking themselves, neo-Pentecostals seek to remake first their nation and ultimately all nations. In the conclusion, O’Neill also introduces a second argument that is only vaguely implicit throughout the rest of the book—that the enthusiastic brand of Christian citizenship practiced by neo-Pentecostals in Guatemala narrows or even precludes their participation in more traditional forms of political participation. Rather than focus-

ing on the specifics of why or how this may be the case for neo-Pentecostals in Guatemala, O’Neill quickly turns his reflections on the theme of disappointment to a more general critique of liberal conceptions of citizenship framed as individual responsibility.

The book is extremely ambitious and succeeds on many levels. Beyond the already formidable task of addressing neo-Pentecostal citizenship, O’Neill charges himself with the job of making contributions to the anthropology of Christianity, the anthropology of Guatemala City, and the anthropology of neoliberalism, and interpreting Foucault’s analysis of the intersection of governance and Christianity. As an ethnography of the lived reality of neo-Pentecostals in Guatemala City, the book fills a much-needed research gap. O’Neill negotiates the potential minefield of participant observation in neo-Pentecostal life with grace, and displays a knack for juxtaposing the very human process of making sense of daily life in the very inhumane context of postwar Guatemala City.

Perhaps because the project is so ambitious, it also suffers from key weaknesses. First, O’Neill has a tendency to overgeneralize from his case. In other words, he ascribes found attitudes and stereotypes among his respondents to neo-Pentecostalism rather than to the historical and cultural realities of Guatemala (this is not to say that O’Neill is unfamiliar with those realities—he consistently reminds his readers that the neo-Pentecostal worldview tends to “flatten” the harsh historical and economic processes that condition life in Guatemala). The problem is that a reader unfamiliar with Guatemala might be tempted to believe that the tendency O’Neill finds among his respondents to blame Guatemala’s problems on a failure of individual or collective “character” (and in many cases more precisely Mayan character) is a uniquely neo-Pentecostal innovation. Such notions are widely held among middle- to upper-class Guatemalans, and have been tapped

by Guatemalan politicians before (as Garrard-Burnett explains in her book). The same could be said of many of the attitudes toward fatherhood, charity, and the desire for a united national identity outlined in chapters 4 and 5. Indeed, much of Caballeros's political popularity in Guatemala has to do with the way these themes (failures of character, individual responsibility, the need for a unified national identity) resonate with non-Pentecostals as well as neo-Pentecostals.

A second and more serious problem is related to O'Neill's decision to leave the political implications of his research to the end and then neatly sidestep them by widening his lens to a more general critique of citizenship. In both the introduction and conclusion, O'Neill makes the claim that neo-Pentecostal Christian citizens "are more likely to pray for Guatemala than pay their taxes; they tend to speak in tongues for the soul of the nation rather than vote in general elections; and they more often than not organize prayer campaigns to fight crime rather than organize their communities against the same threat" (pp. xvi, 201). While this is certainly true, it does not address the fact of Caballeros's political campaign, his party (ViVa--Vision with Values), or of the specific formal political participation of neo-Pentecostals. Previous studies of Pentecostals and politics in Guatemala suggest that they *do* engage in traditional forms of citizenship (such as voting) at higher rates than their Catholic counterparts.[1] In an attempt to highlight the weight of Christian citizenship practices of neo-Pentecostals (fasting, praying, engaging in spiritual warfare and cartography, etc.), O'Neill seems to purposefully ignore both previous literature on the subject and the details of institutional participation of neo-Pentecostals in politics. Although Caballeros's 2007 campaign was ultimately derailed due to a failure to file the appropriate candidacy paperwork, ViVa was a political entity with a staff, members, and workers. O'Neill sheds no light on the intersections between belonging to El Shaddai and formal political participation. While he is to be com-

mended for paying attention to the everyday lived aspects of neo-Pentecostal Christian citizenship, focusing on these factors to the absolute exclusion of other forms of participation holds particular dangers in the case of Guatemala.

The biggest problem with O'Neill's approach is that it downplays the potential neo-Pentecostal role in contributing to the institutional side of Guatemala's endemic violence, particularly in the form of providing moral justifications for vigilantism and extrajudicial executions (commonly referred to in Guatemala as *limpieza social* or social cleansing). O'Neill effectively documents and brings to life the horrors of everyday violence in Guatemala City through statistics and the words of his informants, but promises more than he ever provides when it comes to actually exploring any direct links between neo-Pentecostalism and extrajudicial policing and violence. O'Neill makes the observation that "though lynching and extrajudicial executions are heinous activities, they involve a level of vigilance that speaks to the kind of active and responsible citizen that Guatemala's postwar context prompts" (p. 22). Given that his primary topic is an exploration of precisely this sort of active citizenship, the omissions are particularly glaring. O'Neill makes no mention of El Shaddai member Erwin Sperisen, the former director of Guatemala's National Civilian Police who has been accused by human rights organizations of implementing extrajudicial killings while in office. He also neglects to mention Caballeros's April 2007 comments on the charges, in which he called Guatemala's death squads a form of "divine justice" that "has to be done and must continue." [2]

Garrard-Burnett's book serves as somewhat of an antidote on both of these fronts. Her analysis of General Ríos Montt's discourse and "vision" of a "New Guatemala" not only demonstrates the manner through which he tapped preexisting perceptions and stereotypes among Guatemalans to provide support to his genocidal project, but also documents the specific links between religion and

political violence in Guatemala. Garrard-Burnett sets out to contextualize why and how the horrors of the early 1980s played out the way they did in Guatemala and how those who did (and did not) experience them interpret those events; she examines the “social truths and processes” lived and constructed around them, and the lessons we can draw from them (pp. ix, xiv). Using secondary and primary sources, including previously unpublished documents from guerrilla groups, church documents, Department of State and U.S. intelligence sources, transcripts of Ríos Montt’s weekly television addresses, and multiple other formal and informal publications, Garrard-Burnett makes the argument that the evangelical general’s message of personal responsibility, morality, salvation, judgment, and righteousness helped the state to regain a moral high ground it had previously lost to the religious and secular Left. With everything at stake in a moral battle for the heart of Guatemala, Ríos Montt utilized these themes to justify a scorched earth campaign that would kill an estimated eighty-six thousand (mostly Mayan) people in a period of less than eighteen months. In the end, Garrard-Burnett concludes that not only the perpetrators but also the Guatemalan public, the guerrillas, the international media, and U.S. policymakers hold some responsibility for this human rights atrocity.

Garrard-Burnett writes beautifully, with a historian’s knack for the importance of particulars combined with keen analytical insights. Her first chapter lays out the basic facts of the case, detailing the chronology of violence under Ríos Montt and his dual popular image as admired bringer of order and hated perpetrator of genocide. Chapter 2 provides an excellent history of the evolution of insurgency and counterinsurgency in Guatemala, explaining how the government ultimately lost all claim to moral legitimacy under the General Romeo Lucas Garcia regime (1978-82), while the guerrillas gained support and legitimacy by expanding their constituency in the face of a narrowing set of options for anyone left in the mid-

dle. The central argument of the book emerges in chapter 3, as Garrard-Burnett dissects the transcripts of Ríos Montt’s Sunday “sermons” broadcast on national television between March and December 1982. As Garrard-Burnett explains, “in the General’s view, Guatemala suffered from three fundamental problems: a national lack of responsibility and respect for authority, an absolute lack of morality, and an inchoate sense of national identity” (p. 64). It is worth noting that these are the same “problems” O’Neill finds neo-Pentecostals struggling to resolve through Christian citizenship today, including reference to fatherhood and family, idealized notions of Guatemala’s role in the world, and the need to “domesticate” the Maya in the formation of a new Guatemala. Garrard-Burnett pushes the analysis to the next level, arguing that, “by his astute appropriation and inversion of symbols, language, and meaning, Ríos Montt managed to engineer not only consent but even enthusiasm for the state’s ideological reconquest of its people” (p. 84). Chapter 4 details exactly what that reconquest entailed, including the military’s “Victoria 82” campaign, the targeted annihilation of entire villages, the strategic use of massacres as a form of counterinsurgency, the formation of civil patrols and model villages (and their contribution to the destruction of Mayan forms of community), and ultimately the role of Mayan conscripts in perpetrating a significant portion of the violence on their own people.

In the next chapter, Garrard-Burnett combs through some of the sticky questions surrounding the role of religion and politics in Guatemala, poking holes in much of the conventional picture of Ríos Montt as engaged in a “holy war” against Catholics using Pentecostalism as a “secret weapon of mass destruction” (p. 114). While the regime certainly viewed the Catholic Left (and any form of local organizing for that matter) as a threat, Garrard-Burnett points out that the majority of priests killed in Guatemala died during the previous regime, and while many Catholic ac-

tivists were killed in 1982 and 1983, they were likely “mowed down along with all the other victims in the violence” as the counterinsurgency strategy shifted from targeted killings to massacres (pp. 128-129). The truly important role of the growth of Pentecostalism, Garrard-Burnett explains, is that it combined with the general’s rhetoric to undermine the Left’s foothold on the “moral landscape of highland Guatemala” (p. 141). An otherwise strong chapter concludes on a relatively weak note with the claim that both Pentecostalism and radical Catholicism each posed “serious challenges to the ragged autonomy of the military government” (p. 142)—a debatable point at best and at least one that requires further explanation given the aforementioned argument linking Pentecostalism and the military’s counterinsurgency goals.

The final two chapters outline the purposeful “ignorance” of U.S. policymakers, religious Right leaders, the media, and Guatemalans themselves to the atrocities committed during this time period, returning to the fundamental question of what circumstances can lead to such “inhuman” outcomes. Garrard-Burnett argues that a confluence of intentional ignorance, fear, and self-preservation combined with Ríos Montt’s ruthless military strategy and concurrent “reinvention of Guatemala’s moral universe” to produce genocide (p. 175). She concludes that “Ríos Montt’s program was only as successful as the Guatemalan public and the rest of the world allowed it to be” (p. 176).

These two books would be well placed together on syllabi for graduate and undergraduate courses on religion and politics in Latin America, religious studies, comparative politics, or even international relations. O’Neill provides a unique “from the ground up” perspective of how today’s neo-Pentecostals in postwar Guatemala City frame and practice their view of Christian citizenship in primarily moral terms, through prayer, fasting, spiritual warfare, and casting their efforts as part of a larger project to recreate Guatemala

and the world. From a historian’s multifaceted viewpoint, Garrard Burnett explores the ways in which a strikingly similar project during the Cold War tapped into preexisting stereotypes and common perceptions in Guatemala to allow the government to implement a policy of calculated murder on an epic scale. While the international context has changed, the outlines of neo-Pentecostal discourse and the historical realities of Guatemala remain largely the same, factors that should make us all the more vigilant about heeding the title of Catholic Church’s 1998 Truth Commission Report on Guatemala: *Guatemala: Nunca Más* (*Guatemala: Never Again* [1999]).

#### Notes

[1]. Timothy Steigenga, *The Politics of the Spirit: The Political Implications of Pentecostalized Religion in Costa Rica and Guatemala* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2002), 141-143.

[2]. Dennis Smith, “Communication, Politics, and Religious Fundamentalisms in Latin America” (paper presented at the Latin American Studies Association Meetings, Montreal, Canada, September 2007).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pentecostalism>

**Citation:** Timothy J. Steigenga. Review of Garrard-Burnett, Virginia. *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit: Guatemala under General Efraín Ríos Montt, 1982-1983.* ; O'Neill, Kevin Lewis. *City of God: Christian Citizenship in Postwar Guatemala.* H-Pentecostalism, H-Net Reviews. June, 2010.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=29678>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.