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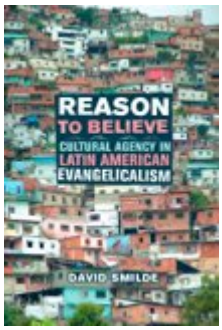
David Smilde. *Reason to Believe: Cultural Agency in Latin American Evangelicalism.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. xv + 262 pp. $21.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-520-24943-1.



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The problem animating *Reason to Believe*, the recent book by cultural sociologist David Smilde in the Anthropology of Christianity book series published by the University of California Press, is at its core a simple one: as broadly hinted at in the work's title, how is it that similarly situated distressed individuals either choose to, or decline to, convert to a religion in a milieu where, at least on the face of it, that religion offers a series of obvious social, economic, health, and psychological benefits? Springing immediately from this question, though, is another set of conundrums that are equally taxing: given the boons associated with conversion, how are we to understand these conversions as anything other than mere utilitarianism? And, if these conversions are, in fact, motivated by instrumental concerns, how does this not serve to denature the very belief that grants benefits in the first instance? In short, what does it mean to determine that one should "believe," is such a decision possible, and who is free to make that kind of determination? In the end, Smilde presents an understanding of Latin American Pentecostalism as a this-worldly "forward looking, intentional project of self- or family reform," a process that, while informed by determining social and cultural circumstance, is still agentive, and while seeking material benefits, is not strictly materialistic in the sense that the term is used in an Anglo-American context (p. 13). The response that he gives has an impact on a wide variety of sociological and anthropological topics, including network theory, issues of practice theory and rational choice accounts of religion, and the long-standing debates between proponents of voluntaristic and structural views of human action.

The venue in which Smilde thinks these problems through is his amazingly detailed ethnographic work with poverty-stricken Venezuelan men who have become "Evangelicos" (the word used to reference primarily Pentecostal theological conservatives, both Unitarian and Trinitarian, who have rejected Prosperity/Word-of-Faith theology and practice). Smilde's fieldwork, though stretching into what effectively is the present day, was primarily conducted in Caracas during the second half of the 1990s, a period known by Venezuelans as *la crisis*--a protracted fiscal, social, and political meltdown that was triggered by vio-

lent crime, corruption, and falling oil prices, all of which was aggravated by a series of poorly conceived neoliberal reforms. During this period of painful collapse, Evangelicos stood out from other segments of the general classes--the middle- and lower-class populations that were reduced by la crisis to survival strategies. What seemed distinctive about Evangelicos was the way in which their ethical code appeared to immunize them from the worst aspects of the general malaise that was epidemic at the time. In the popular imagination, with their reputation for financial propriety, for abstaining from drugs and alcohol, and for not participating in the economy of retributive violence; with their supposed steadfastness in their marital and familial relations; and with their imperative for mutual support, the Evangelicos tended to escape the worst of the deprivations that wracked Venezuela. This popular picture of Evangelicos was no mere stereotype--as Smilde convincingly argues, these purported benefits of belief were actually available to many converts suffering from the dis-ease that marked life during the dangerous years of la crisis, and indeed a great many of his informants stated that they converted primarily to take advantage of these elements of Evangelico life.

Yet despite this seemingly obvious beneficial nature of Evangelico belief, only a small (but growing) proportion of Venezuelans--and of Latin Americans more generally--have adopted this faith. The reason for this, Smilde argues, lies in the fact that the very social disruptions that expose an individual to these deprivations are what create a space for Evangelical conversion in the last instance. Invoking network-conversion theory, he observes that most people deal with the difficulties of violence, poverty, and substance abuse by turning to their extended--and usually Catholic--families; hence familial connection mitigates the severity of these behaviors. These families, which provide not only support but also housing in the overcrowded barrios of the city, as well as a sense of identity and belonging, usually stand as a barrier to full participation in the Evangelical life; the Venezuelan family ethic, described by Smilde as "flexible, context-dependent, [and] personalistic," is the antithesis of the evangelical moral code (p. 160). Thus, it is often physical distance or emotional alienation from their family of origin that makes one vulnerable to financial vulnerabilities and moral weaknesses that makes it necessary, from a utilitarian standpoint, for an Evangelico to make the "choice" to believe--but it is the same factors that allow them to convert without experiencing familial opposition.

Smilde's use of network theory, however, is complemented by a deep appreciation of both agency and culture in the manner through which the network--and its constituent participants--operate. An essential element of Smilde's use of network theory is his insistence that the network neither causes automatistic enforcement of conformity nor can serve as a complete (and hence reductionistic) explanatory frame. The network serves not merely as a mode of social normalization or recruitments, but also as a means through which ideas and modes of self presentation can reverberate, even at a remove, as indicated by the importance of modeling of Evanglico others who are present, but removed from immediate contact from others, in the social network. This framing, which purposely makes room for agency, and hence for "choice," comes with its own problem though. The conception of a "choice" to believe seems contradictory not only due to the causal chain that has belief precede intent in Western metapsychology, but also because the gap between worldly rewards as the impetus for otherwordly affiliation appears to cut across too many of the distinctions (the sacred and profane, the religious and the secular) that are used to navigate the post-Enlightenment Euro-American social landscape. In a nice moment of pragmatic cultural analysis, though, Smilde demonstrates that what is of greatest concern to Evangelicos, and what is the source of their distinction in the Venezuela imaginary--namely, their moral comportment as

individuals and the health of their families--is not profane but sacred in their typology, and thus does not run afoul of being "instrumental" in the sense of being merely a spiritual orientation adopted for "this-worldly" gain. Further, whatever residual unease that may be caused by the seeming contradictions in "choosing" to believe in the first instance is overwritten by the Evangelico imperative to see agency as properly located not in their hands, but in the hands of God; hence the choice was not properly theirs in any way other than as a decision to accept the divine mandate with which they were presented.

For Smilde, the mode of analysis carried out here, emphasizing the pragmatic aspects of the spiritual imagination of actors as they work in refashioning their lives for the better, bears the seeds of a new research project in the study of religion, one that can overcome the opposition between structural models of culture (which allows for different articulations of meaning, but which leaves little room for agency), and practice-theory and rational choice accounts (which depicts individuals working toward an apparently objective, and often economical, self-interest, granting them agency but tending to discredit as immaterial their conception of the world as anything other than a local definition of the goods that are considered worth contesting over). Even if a reader is not convinced by his call for a re-imagining of how religion should be theorized (and I imagine that it is more compelling for sociologists of religion than, say, cultural anthropologists who may have already intuited some of Smilde's point--though even for them Smilde's review of the evolving debates in sociology and religious study on this issue is informative), this volume is worth reading for its well sketched ethnography; the accounts of Venezuelan drug-fuelled street violence is captivating, as are the narratives of the street Evangelicos who have, sometimes with great struggle, overcome it. Equally of value is the subtlety of Smilde's analysis, especially when he observes the way in which Evangelico commitment, with its privileging of sudden personal transformation and divine agency over gradual self-reformation and internal struggle, can at times be as much of a hindrance to overcoming violence, substance abuse, and marital discord, as it is a cure for it. This book stands as an important contribution to a wider sociology of religion, and also to the ethnographic study of Latin American Protestantism (and would probably read quite well if paired with Elizabeth Brusco's sadly out of print ***Reformation of Machismo*** [1995], which shares an abiding interest in Evangelical conversion as a social process of reworking gendered subjects). With its focus on the social and cultural forces on individual, as opposed to collective, conversion, this work is also a worthwhile contribution to the anthropology of Christianity, which shares Smilde's interest both in religion as an element of culture and in conversion as a moment of transvaluation, but tends to operate for the most part at the level of larger collectivities than the individual and the family. With its close attention to sociological theory, as well as to the difference in social action that can result from different constellations of culturally specific categories, this book perhaps could even stand as a bridge between the sociology and anthropology of religion in general (and Pentecostalism in particular), two fields that, while not unaware of each other, could profit from greater conversation--as shown by Smilde's excellently researched, intelligent work here.