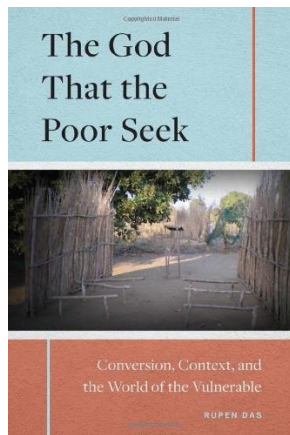


BOOK REVIEW

The God that the Poor Seek: Conversion, Context, and the World of the Vulnerable

by *Rupen Das*

Reviewed by Dwight S.M. Mutoonono



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This book grapples with the question, “What makes the poor seek God?” How and why do they choose to worship Jesus Christ (7)? In order to answer these questions and discern how God works in the lives of the poor, Das turns to looking at how conversions happen among them. In the process, Das explores several elements that are crucial for Christian development practitioners pursuing holistic efforts to keep in mind as they work with the poor. Perhaps first and foremost among these is that research strongly indicates that there is a clear link between poverty and spirituality (8) in that the poor seek divine intervention and their spirituality helps them cope with poverty (95-96, 181, 196); Das thus finds it unfortunate that their spirituality is often ignored by those who work with them (195).

The voices of people experiencing poverty and how they converted to Christianity is the focus of the book. This is especially dear to Das, because so often the poor do not get to tell their own stories. Hence, a large portion of the book (chapters 5 & 6) presents snippets from direct conversations with people living in poverty in Syrian and Indian contexts. The types of

poverty are different, but the unfiltered voices of the people themselves are captured.

The first section of the book (chapters 1-4) provides a fascinating background to understanding Christian conversion through church history. Historically, conversion to Christianity is more a process than an event, with the catechetical system being pivotal to early church practice. Current expectations of personal decision-making are relatively new in church practice. Das argues that the “modern evangelical understanding of conversion has its root in the Puritans and Jonathan Edwards (and to a certain degree the Anabaptists)” (38). In the case of poverty, however, the sense of helplessness and vulnerability of the poor becomes all-encompassing due to their powerlessness to change the structures that led to their poverty (195). In this context, conversions and spirituality enable them to address the deep yearning for a God who is real (161).

The final section of the book analyses the stories in chapter 5-6 and reaches the conclusion that “conversion was a process punctuated by encounters, experiences, and decisions at various points and accompanied by a growing understanding of who Christ is and what he has done for them” (168). A second major finding is that often, supernatural encounters proved decisive in people’s resolutions to leave their former faith and convert to Christianity. In general, it was not a yearning for life after death or some other doctrinal concern that brought them to Christ. Instead, “they wanted a God who is real in the midst of the challenges and evils of life” (186). These insights are highly relevant for Christian development practitioners to understand more fully the spirituality of the people they work with.

The biggest learning point for me in this book was Das’s walk through Christian history in relation to conversion. Throughout my life in Zimbabwe, I have been greatly influenced by evangelical Christianity, in which a personal decision is critical to conversion. I realize now, however, that socialization and liturgical acts were very much part of the conversion process throughout most of Christian history (24). According to

Das, it was the entrance of Constantine into the church that contributed to a weakening of an early church tradition that was effective. Das writes that “though Constantine had a life-transforming experience...he remained unbaptized and uncatechized, yet was considered a Christian” (35). After Constantine, it became normal for people, even whole nations to be admitted into the church without the necessity of catechesis, as had, prior to this, always been the case. Here again, Das’ exploration has implications for how Christian development practitioners interact with the churches and conceive of their work in function of helping to advance spiritual formation as part of their integrative efforts.

Another key issue for Das is utilitarianism. He acknowledges that people may become followers of Christ for utilitarian reasons (184). Yet my experience in the African church causes me to ponder the quality of Christianity or depth of conversion people experience. While the powerful effects of conversion should not be discounted, especially in circumstances in which people need God to break in and do something about their situation, I wonder about what happens if the economic situation changes for the better, and people experience upward social mobility? If there is a link between poverty and spirituality, is that not also an explanation for why materially developed or more prosperous parts of the world experience a decline in Christianity? Are the conversions Das describes deep enough to survive hunger and suffering as Paul discusses in Philippians 4:12-13? If so, what role should Christian development agencies play to learn from the poor while also helping foster deeper spiritual maturity?

My final thought around conversion is that it is not “just a punctiliar event—a decision that can be dated” (170). It encompasses the whole process of salvation from regeneration, justification through to sanctification, and glorification. We are continually being saved and must continually repent and turn towards God in different ways as we grow in the faith.

Das’s book is a great contribution to missiological and developmental issues around people living with poverty. His research and insight into conversions and spiritual insights of the poor challenge Christian development practitioners committed to both material and spiritual aspects of life to listen to and learn from the poor (Chapter 4) on matters of the integration of evangelism and spiritual formation. Outsiders generally think for, speak for, and act on behalf of people in material poverty. This book lets the poor speak for themselves. It is a voice from the margins, articulating issues in the unfiltered way that the disenfranchised understand them. This is the primary intent of the book, and Das achieves it very well. His historical discussion on conversion is likewise incisive and useful.

Dwight S.M. Mutoonono (DMin, PhD Intercultural Studies candidate) serves his church, Faith Ministries, on the international council. He was previously the Executive Director of Africa Leadership and Management Academy in Harare, Zimbabwe. He is married and has two grown children.

Author email: dwight.mutoonono@asburyseminary.edu
