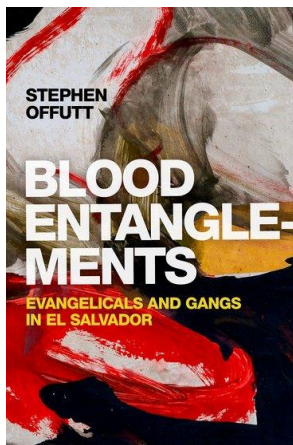


BOOK REVIEW

Blood Entanglements: Evangelicals and Gangs in El Salvador

by Stephen Offutt

Reviewed by Andreas Daugaard



New York: Oxford University Press. 2023. \$29.95.

Blood Entanglements is a compelling account of the interactions between the two most dominant groups in lower-class El Salvador: gangs and evangelicals. While the two groups might seem like polar opposites to most, Offutt explains how these groups have more in common than typically thought. This has implications for understanding how the groups interact, and how evangelicals may work to reduce violence in gang-controlled neighborhoods in El Salvador and across Latin-American.

Evangelicals and gangs certainly are different: Whereas evangelicals are generally perceived to be doing God's work and providing hope and light in difficult contexts, gangs' interests are perceived to be much darker as they bring violence, extortion, fear, and sometimes even have a direct connection to Satan (2).

And yet, the two groups are subject to the same vulnerabilities and afflictions. They generally live in neighborhoods characterized by broken systems: deplorable health care conditions, inadequate schools, broken families, lack of jobs and dysfunctional political institutions. Rather than comprising two groups from radically different realities, Offutt argues that

evangelicals and gangs share a common social reality (28).

The book similarly points out parallels between how gangs and evangelical groups are structured: members of each share patrimony (e.g., meals, goods, and resources) with other members and these are managed by a pastor or, in the case of gangs, a *palabrero*. Each group conducts rituals such as baptisms or *gang initiations*, they recruit locally through relationships, generate income through tithes or extortion, have codes of conduct and national as well as international connections to other churches or *cliques* (30-40).

Both groups provide feelings of belonging (30). In that sense, both groups provide a path for marginalized peoples to overcome the challenges in their social realities and "become someone," which proves very attractive for people with few other options. Furthermore, most gang members believe in God and even consider themselves to be evangelicals: 95.3% of gang members consider their relationship to God as important and 54.9% of them identify as evangelicals (50, see Cruz et al. 2017).

The main point of the book is that gangs and evangelicals not only live within these same realities, but their lives are *entangled*. For example, they share a similar belief system, and it is not unheard of for one brother in a family to be a pastor and another a gang leader. Gangs and evangelicals sometimes form unusual alliances to benefit the communities they are both a part of: Christians may seek out gangs for protection (121) and pastors may negotiate with gangs to prevent violence, settle disputes, or determine appropriate punishment for those who violate community rules (130), and churches and Christian organizations may provide aid for gang-members and their families (137). Offutt argues that, in the absence of a functioning government, gangs and evangelicals collaborate to fill that void (137).

The book engages well with and builds upon previous literature, including particularly the works of Steven Dudley and the Martinez brothers, who have

researched the workings of gangs for decades, but also Brenneman (2012) and Wolseth (2011), who have written about the relationship between gangs and Christians.

Brenneman and Wolseth write about the so-called *morgue rule exception*. Traditionally, gangs do not permit members to leave the gang once *initiated*. Yet the authors document a widespread practice that, by converting to evangelicalism, members are allowed to leave the gang, albeit under close observation to ensure the sincerity of their conversion. Offutt builds on their work and finds this exception is not always respected. He documents a case where the rule was suspended by a gang because “many of them have cheated” (62). Offutt describes the case of high-ranking MS-13 leader El Piwa, who apparently used conversion as a disguise, acting publicly as a preacher while ordering assassinations.

Offutt also discusses the *haven thesis*, which is often used as a framework for understanding the role of evangelicals in society. The haven thesis describes how evangelicals traditionally chose to distance themselves from certain common practices of society: sometimes cutting ties to family, avoiding tobacco, alcohol, and extramarital relationships, or opting out of certain aspects of cultural and political societal life (8). The morgue rule exception is an example of the drastic change that becoming an evangelical can entail.

Yet, while haven theory was useful to understand the sense of separation (and often marginalization) felt by poor evangelicals in the 20th century, the model no longer fully captures the reality of evangelical life in El Salvador and the rest of Latin America. Evangelicals now include a healthy share of all economic/social classes and are a dominant force in lower class El Salvador (18). Offutt holds that better models are needed and proposes the *entanglement thesis*. In short, rather than understanding evangelical life as a haven separate from the society in which gangs reign, evangelical life is intertwined with the gangs because they live in the same neighborhoods and face the same problems, a reality that forces them to interact regularly and deeply.

For those unfamiliar with the context, *Blood Entanglements* provides a very useful understanding of the history and rise of both groups in El Salvadoran society. The book is engaging to read as it mixes context, history, and data with personal stories, though some parts may be somewhat technical and thereby less accessible to casual readers. A major strong point of the book is how it demonstrates why gang-life is attractive to many kids and young people on the margins of society. The book concludes with a set of policy recommendations for churches and Christian organizations.

After finishing the book, I was left wanting more on two fronts, both of which could be subjects of future research by Offutt or others who follow up on his work.

First, the entanglement thesis creates a whole set of ethical and theological dilemmas that the book acknowledges (191), but for which it does not convincingly provide answers. Should churches provide aid and mentoring to gang members and their families, even while aware of the violence they may be committing once they walk out of church? Should pastors negotiate with gang members to create a truce or reduce violence, or ask permission to work in a gang-controlled area, knowing that doing so may increase the gang’s legitimacy, influence, and power? Should pastors hide gang-sympathizers from repressive police raids? Knowing that church and gang members are intertwined is one thing, but should church members and pastors intentionally increase those entanglements?

Such questions regarding our interactions with gang members bring up important and relevant questions about Christian aid and advocacy in other arenas of public life. For example, should Christians work with corrupt politicians to make structural changes, or with abusive police or military officers to provide security? Should they work with corrupt judges in search of justice?

Offutt provides useful reflections on these questions. He argues that including gang members’ children in programming is part of the church’s mission to reach the most vulnerable and give everyone a chance to experience God’s love (173). He draws a parallel between gangs exercising criminal governance and the Roman occupiers at the time of Jesus and cites Jesus’ comment about giving to Caesar what is Caesar’s (192), suggesting Christians may have to accept the reality of gang control, and work to spread the gospel regardless. Finally, he brings in a quote from Martin Luther describing Christians as *Simul Justus et Peccator*, saints and sinners entangled within the same personality (207). He argues the church will always be entangled with the sinful world. Still, these questions beg for more and deeper reflection, both moral/theological and practical. “What would Jesus do?” is an important question, but so is “How can a pastor keep his children safe?”

The second question that stuck with me through the whole book was how the situation in El Salvador has changed because of the extreme measures taken by current president Nayib Bukele. As the book mentions, Bukele’s crackdown on gangs has been so severe that he incarcerated nearly 80,000 supposed gang members, which has, according to *El Faro* (a Bukele-critical investigative news outlet) effectively shattered the gang structure and eliminated their presence from most neighborhoods in El Salvador (Martinez et al. 2023). In light of Bukele’s crackdown, it may be that the

description of gang-evangelical entanglement and the suggested policy recommendations are more applicable to Mexico and the rest of Central America than to El Salvador.

Overall, *Blood Entanglements* is a valuable contribution to the understanding of interactions between gangs and evangelicals and will serve as required background for future research and discussions on the dilemmas created by those interactions in El Salvador and the rest of Latin America. But it is also a bit more than that. This book led me to consider how its title, "*Blood Entanglements*," and its description of the way the violent reality of gangs intertwines with that of evangelicals, is perhaps an apt description of Christ's relationship with the church. Jesus came to earth and entangled himself with sinners, the marginalized and outcasts, and ended up dying for them. In other words, not only does this book help us see more clearly those entanglements between gangs and evangelicals in El Salvador, it also pushes us to think about entanglements in our own lives and how we should deal with them.

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