

Honey in the Lion's Mouth

DAVID MARTIN

The standard contrast, and one rooted in the biblical record and Jewish experience, used to be between Homeland and Exile or Diaspora, but there are other models. There is a Catholic model of pilgrimage sites: pilgrims journey physically and spiritually to a holy city and return to the homeland renewed in faith and with a new religious status. In both these models Jerusalem stands at the apex of aspiration. The contemporary model may retain elements of the Jewish and the Catholic model, but it involves movement back and forth between the original homeland and a new homeland, and New Jerusalem may be in either the original homeland or the adoptive homeland, or even in both. Classic Christian doctrine declares we have “no abiding city but seek one to come,” which might be the universal city or the Zion “above” we inhabit by grace, or some form of the kingdom realized here “on earth as it is in heaven.” But the human desire for tangibility builds Jerusalems here and now.

If that seems a surprisingly theological way for a sociologist to begin a review of contemporary migrations between West Africa and New York, it is nevertheless an

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appropriate introduction for a book that brings together social scientific and theological frameworks in its title, *Word Made Global*, and in its exposition. Mark Gornik tells three stories of transition to and fro: between Monrovia, Liberia, and the Bronx by the Church of the Lord Aladura; between Ghana and Harlem by the Presbyterian Church of Ghana; and between Nigeria and Brooklyn by the Redeemed Christian Church of God International Chapel. Gornik's narrative recounts and analyzes inward spiritual journeys and physical migrations, and is deeply rooted in the literatures of both. It is about all the potent ambiguities embodied in the phrase “All Change,” which includes the potent ambiguity of Transport and being transported. Just as Methodist churches in Mexico followed the railroad, so the West African churches of New York follow the subways. Today the population of New York includes some 100,000 people who are West African, mingling with new arrivals from other parts of Africa and the Caribbean, as well as with African Americans.

Apart from drawing on sociology and theology, this is a study in social geography and the contemporary city, in particular those cities that act as nodal points for the movement of faith across borders. That means there are many explicit and implicit comparisons with similar cities, such as London and Amsterdam. Gornik

has read the extensive literature about the movement of West Africans to these other cities, and he makes an interesting point about cities of global capital as well as global capital cities. Amsterdam and New York are cities of capital, whereas London is both a city of capital and a capital city. There is a sense in which faith follows the money, and in our historical imagination we can envisage a wider backdrop, beginning in Venice and moving to Antwerp and Amsterdam and on to London and New York. It was in these cities that the chosen people of the Hebrew Scriptures, peregrinating through many centuries of exile, prefigured this latest movement of Africans to the nodal cities of the North Atlantic. Spiritual, social, and material capital collude and collide.

The religious movements most characteristic of the 21st century are voluntary in that you choose to join them rather than adhere to them automatically by territorial birthright. They are also transnational, and likely to exhibit gifts of the Spirit. The Presbyterian Church of Ghana is a mainstream church and the Church of the Lord Aladura is an African Initiated Church (AIC), but they share a friendly if rivalrous ecumenism of spiritual gifts with the explicitly Pentecostal Redeemed Christian Church of God. Categories like AIC or mainstream apply only so far, given the free distribution of charismata across the board. This comes out when you consider the three main influences affecting the Presbyterians of Ghana. The first influence goes back to the Pietist Basel

Word Made Global

Stories of African Christianity in New York City

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Christ in the City

MARK R. GORNIK

While back I was speaking with a man new to New York from Ethiopia. Describing his Harlem neighborhood, with an expression of amazement, he observed, “There are churches everywhere!” He saw what few seem able to see—a religious life intricately woven into the urban fabric. Helping us all to see something of the vibrant and diverse world of Christian faith in America's cities is Camilo José Vergara's *How the Other Half Worships*. A work of both documentary photography and sociological reflection on inner-city churches, *How the Other Half Worships* is a major study of urban religion and Christianity in America. With more than 300 photographs, Vergara helps visualize a determined and vibrant life of Christian faith. He is informing us about an ecclesiastical world few outside the churches themselves know much about.

For more than thirty years, Vergara, originally from Chile, has with great originality documented the progressive destruction of some of America's greatest cities. Most often he has focused on the inner city, what he calls the “ghetto,” invoking the strong term to match the hardened exclusion of so many black and Latino neighborhoods. His method is to photograph buildings and neighborhoods in cities such as Baltimore, Camden, Detroit, Chicago, Gary, Los Angeles, New York, and Philadelphia often over a period of decades, charting their history of decline, change, ruin, and, on occasion, restoration. Vergara's sequencing of pictures generates a distinctive way of following what has happened to the city's physical and social form.

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Two of his most important published works in this area are *The New American Ghetto* (1995) and *American Ruins* (1999). Responding to the dignity of the city, his photographs provoke a vital question: *Can there not be a better way?* If today some cities have become “in,” Vergara's work is a reminder of how abandoned so many of America's cities have become, how vulnerable their infrastructure remains, and how challenging their future. Clustered luxury developments and a Starbucks, as we know, do not create either just or sustainable cities in a globalized world. Moreover, they are fleeting commodities when the economic tide turns.

It was by being physically present in urban neighborhoods that Vergara found his interest in African American, Latino, and new immigrant churches. America's inner cities are filled with houses of worship with names like Thank God for Jesus Church, Fire Baptized Holiness Church, Mount Zion Spiritual Temple, House of Blessings C.O.G.I.C. Greater Expectations Deliverance Center, Saints of God House of Prayer, and Iglesia de Dios. He added such churches to his documentary project.

Not surprisingly, given his concern for the physical form of the city, Vergara began his study with the architecture of houses of worship, documenting everything from reclaimed storefronts to the occasional inner city megachurch, but he soon moved to the interior life of congregations. In his introduction to *How the Other Half Worships*, Vergara writes, “I wanted to know, for example, why Christian churches were so pervasive in destitute neighborhoods, and how the local residents thought about fellowshiping, living virtuously, the afterlife, and ways of communicating with the divine—that is, their answers to basic questions about human existence.” In fact, Vergara's questions, from how a church received its name to the meaning of religious words and the benefits of using a tent in a revival, lead to fascinating insights into ecclesiology. Because Vergara's project, by his account, spans twenty-one cities and “thousands of churches,” he attends to broad patterns rather than providing close ethnographic readings or in-depth historical narratives. Working inductively, he

creates his own typologies and connections rather than following the lead of others.

There is nothing grainy about Vergara's aesthetic. His photographs of people and visual culture—buildings, interior spaces, signage, and art—combine a tight focus with lush colors that render his subjects with dignity and power. The photograph gracing the cover, the red-painted brick True Vine Temple of Christ Church in Detroit, comes across as iconic. At the same time, Vergara's photographs are *in* the city, and this larger context frames the book that he has produced. Art and architecture are creatively woven into the urban fabric, saying *this is home*.

Devoting a chapter to pastors, Vergara foregrounds the women and men who lead churches in overlooked neighborhoods. He presents church leaders using their own words on calling, vision, and understanding of their titles such as Deacon, Mother, or Bishop. To cite one response, when asked why he became a pastor, William Yancy of Leadership Missionary Baptist Church in Milwaukee offered, “My uncle was a pastor. I was called to preach; the call came from God. Most people don't really want to pastor, to be responsible for other people. Sometimes [God] has to work with you.”

Vergara is not a professional theologian, but he cares deeply about theological matters. His observations on religious practices, devotional life, material culture, and beliefs have a fresh feel, not condescending or critical. He finds that God is central in the life of churches, and he reports on God as the Lord, the blood of Jesus, and the Holy Ghost or Spirit. He covers such topics as prayer, the devil, the afterlife, the Bible, deliverance, salvation, anointing, tongues, evangelizing (“saving souls”), and revival. Deeply rooted in the evangel, the churches he studies nevertheless elude ownership by the “evangelical” establishment. Theology is taking place from below, creative and responsive to God and life.

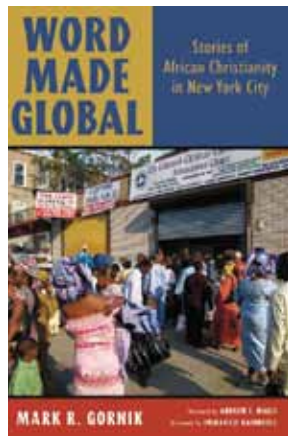
Constantly pushing to understand the material

How the Other Half Worships

CAMILO JOSÉ VERGARA • RUTGERS UNIV. PRESS, 2005 • 286 PP. • \$29.95

Evangelical Missionary Society, and it is evident in the emphasis on heart-work and on a personal relationship to Jesus. The second influence goes back to missionaries from the United Free Church of Scotland, when the Basel Mission was expelled between 1917 and 1926, and it is evident in the Scottish Presbyterian polity, the pastoral garb, and the emphasis on preaching. But the third influence came from both the independent and the Pentecostal/charismatic churches of Ghana, and is evident in the music, prayer, and practices of healing and deliverance. Had the Presbyterians not introduced such practices, they would have continued to lose members to their independent and charismatic competitors. There was once a time when missionaries discounted unseen powers, but no longer, because, as Birgit Meyer has argued, the power of a Pentecostal approach lies in taking them seriously and defeating them.

Few treatments of the movement of Pentecostalized churches around our world examine the exercise of these spiritual gifts in such detail as Gornik does in *Word Made Global* or illustrate their exercise more lavishly. He provides accounts for all three churches, with rich biographies of the leaders, but I was particularly engaged by the account he gives of the foundation, organizational structure, liturgy, and spiritual timbre of the New York Aladura Church, much of it turning around the biography of Mother Marie Cooper, its founder. Her call came through a dream of the eye of Jesus fastened



on her from above, and it meant that she then progressed through a series of offices: first as crossbearer, which initially involves praying over seven people a day, rising to twenty-one, then as deaconess, as senior prophetess, and finally as archdeaconess (for which she was ordained by the Primate of the Liberian see), with two more offices to go, reverend mother and reverend mother superior. Founding a church is one way to advancement.

It all began when Mother Cooper was working as a seamstress to pay the bills and purchased a house in the Mount Eden neighborhood of the Bronx. She then made it into a “faith home,” which in Liberia might include a school but in New York was a combination of household, clinic, refuge, and House of Prayer. Mother Cooper works within an imagined narrative centered on conflict between God and Satan, and she provides spiritual direction by identifying Satan’s malign activity through his demonic minions, and by calling on the protection of Jesus and of the Creator Spirit as that is realized in the cleansing power of water. Instant prayer and fasting is at the heart of her ministry, which is to wipe away the tears of those who come to her, to address their problems at home and at work, and to heal their bodies. Like the leaders of the other two churches, she acts as a cultural broker in the new environment. She makes sure there are no freeloaders in the church, and that everyone participates and acquires experience in turn. It is interesting that in a church even closer perhaps to the shared African cosmos than the others, it is the women who keep

the show on the road. There might be a useful comparison here with the crucial role of women in those parts of the Chinese church closest to the rural life-world.

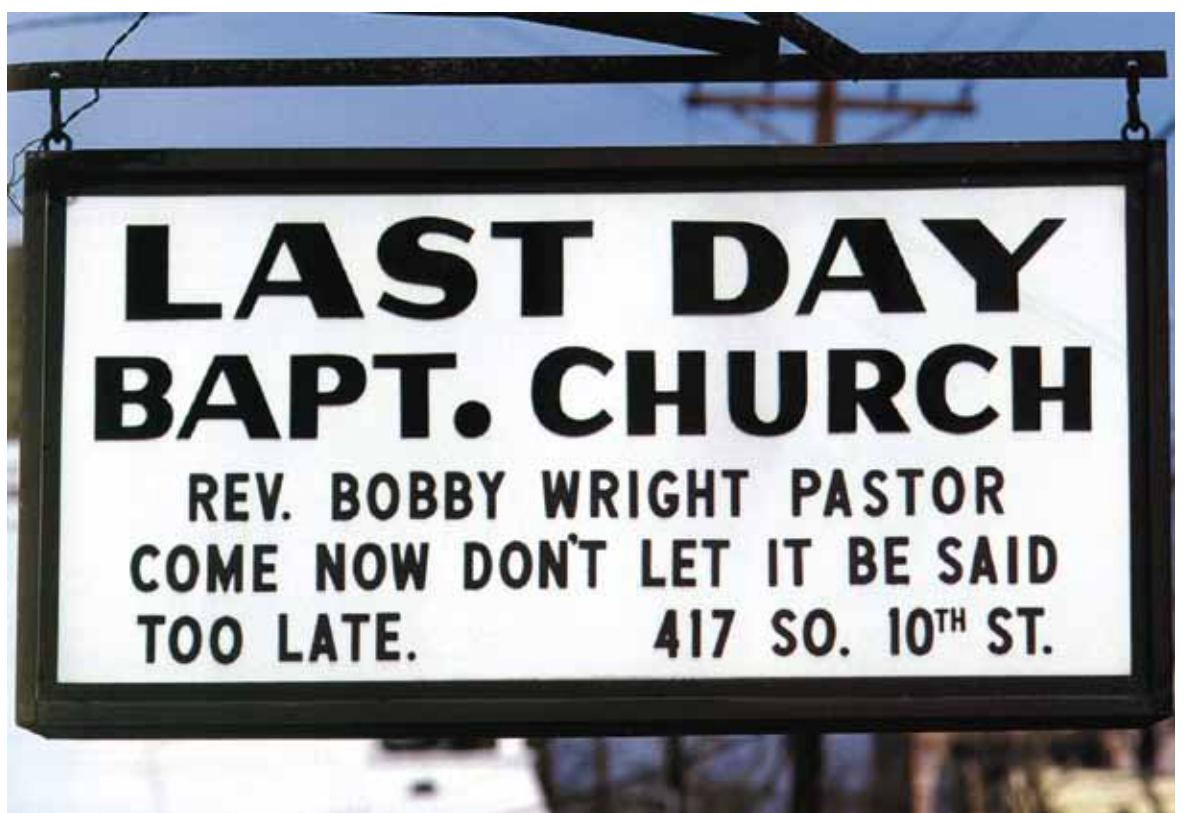
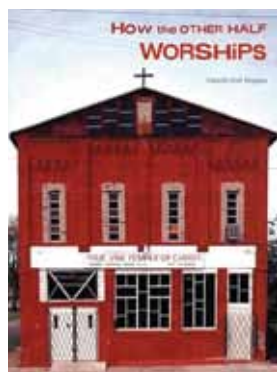
I began with the role of sacred topography in the modern pilgrimage from homeland to new-found land and back again. Five thousand miles from the Bronx is Mount Tabor in Ogere, Nigeria, where the original founder of the Church of the Lord Aladura went up, with prayer and fasting, to receive a vision of the dissemination of the Holy Spirit to all nations. This is analogous to the Holy Ghost Service of the Redeemed Christian church of God, also in Nigeria, and in both churches there is pilgrimage back to the site of origins and a relocation of sacred space and time in New York itself. In the case of Aladura, “Tabor” pilgrims arrive every August from various parts of the United States for thirteen days of the “mountain-top experience.” On the occasion in 2004 described by Mark Gornik, the preacher, Archdeacon Lachana, promised “honey” in the “lion,” representing power through difficulty. He concluded that “every attack becomes a promotion.” That is precisely the spirit represented by each of Gornik’s three churches: no longer under the dispensation of immemorial fate and fortune, but alive to a world where “all things are possible.” If one looks back to the Pietist crucible of contemporary Pentecost, the emphasis on a personal relationship with the Redeemer was circumscribed by a landscape dominated by suffering, hell, and death, here in this vale of tears. Over the last hundred years that landscape is still there, but suffused with hope, particularly in the United States, where the Hill Difficulty of a Pilgrim’s Progress is at least signposted to the Delectable Mountains. **B&C**

dimensions of religion, Vergara documents everything from Bibles and hymns to decorations and answering machine messages, especially as he seeks to frame the relationship of the churches to the outside world. Here the “world” is that which is immediate and local, not the world of national and international politics. The churches that Vergara writes about are on the margins of society and human power.

The title alludes to the work of Jacob Riis over a century ago, which drew attention to the conditions in the tenements of New York. When Vergara asks if the churches view themselves as poor, few directly agree, some even take offense, and still others suggest that affluent people appear to be ignoring God’s priorities. For Vergara as social observer, questions of race, class, and the geographical divide between rich and poor churches in America are front and center.

The broad sweep of the project leaves much unexplored and can produce interpretations that could have been clarified or revised with more context. For example, in Vergara’s view, independence marks most of the Pentecostal, Spiritual, and Holiness churches; they have “controlled their own fates,” as Vergara describes them. But it is likely that larger and denser ecclesiastical ties very often exist, some local but often global. And due to global migration and new expressions of transnational religion, there is also even more diversity of church life in the city than Vergara is able to include.

Yet *How the Other Half Worships* is a remarkable, one-of-a-kind study that bears close and repeated attention. In light of his body of work, Vergara must certainly be considered one of America’s most important urban observers and social commentators. What he gives us is very much a story of searching. Along the way, he



shares what people asked and said of him and his work. He reports that he was asked to join churches, give his life to Christ, and was treated as a friend, yet in his postscript, Vergara characterizes himself as the “ultimate outsider” and “one immune to Christianity.” While he does not leave out criticisms of what he sees and hears, clearly he is engaged by his experience:

How could I hear promises from an “awesome God” with the power to give eternal life and to eliminate suffering and remain unaffected? In these houses of worship I found an oasis from a world obsessed with celebrity, youth, possessions, and status. If I had felt it in me, I

would have repented, become a believer, and perhaps I would have walked with God.

How the Other Half Worships brings to mind theologian John Howard Yoder’s conviction that the witness of the church is found in the way it embodies the gospel in everyday experience. In the lives, rituals, and words of inner-city churches, we encounter a church walking with Jesus, lives based on a God of hope. Wrapped in vulnerability and openness to God, the church on the margins is offering a faithful witness. This is spiritual power, the wisdom of the Cross. It is what the photographs are all about. **B&C**