

## **Jesus and the Gang**

*Jesus and the Gang: Youth Violence and Christianity in Urban Honduras*

Jon Wolseth

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The plethora of recent literature concerning the rise in youth-based violence in Latin America predominantly focuses on mechanisms and causes at the root of this trend, such as media, parents, the increased availability of guns, and globalization. As important as it is to document the mechanisms and causes of violence, Jon Wolseth's book *Jesus and the Gang: Youth Violence and Christianity in Urban Honduras* instead shifts the paradigmatic frame to emphasize the way in which youth react to violence. Using the example of Honduras, he studies two institutions of inclusion available to youth—gangs and churches—and considers ways in which youth navigate, justify, and negotiate their identities through these media of escape.

Using ethnographic accounts and participant observation in Colonia Belén, a pseudonym for the town he studied, Wolseth observes how youth define space, time, and personal identity in relation to the greater community. He briefly touches on several macro-level policies and structures underlying the widespread prevalence of violence in Honduras. These include decreased funding of youth-focused social services, increased brutality of security forces enforcing a “zero tolerance” crime policy, and proliferation of the illegal arms market. However, his analysis mainly focuses on meso-level and micro-level factors that influence youths' relation to crime and to the Church.

Beginning with an overview of the current political and social environment of Honduras, Wolseth articulately interweaves sociological theory, clips from personal interviews, and notes from his own observations to construct a multi-dimensional snapshot of Colonia Belén. He outlines the use of geographical space within the community as a territorial claiming of place by youth. Highlighting the importance of the town's bridge as a locus of discussion about violence, he unravels how this physical location becomes both a site of random violence and a subtext for personal relationships, narratives, and identities. He follows with a similar argument for the use of art in gangs, both in the form of tattoos and

street graffiti, as a means of demarcating territory and creating a shared identity. The distinctive, highly visible symbols of gang membership feed a sense of unity within the group while socially isolating members from the rest of the community. Use of practices such as the *carnal* system (blood brothers) and *apodos* (gang nicknames) demonstrate how kinship ties and support networks among gang members foster a sense of inclusion but also make it difficult to leave the life of crime.

As an alternative to crime, some youth choose the church as a source of economic, emotional and spiritual support. Differentiating the strategies of the Catholic and the Protestant church youth groups, Wolseth emphasizes that both churches fill a role as places of sanctuary. One gang member remarked that “[g]angs don’t want to mess with a *Cristiano*, for fear of calling down God’s wrath” (p. 124), revealing the heavy influence of the church across the social spectrum. A claim of allegiance to God is not only a method of protection but also a safe exit from gang life without retribution. The Catholic base ecclesiastical community welcomes all youth, including gang members, through “accompaniment,” social engagement, and forgiveness. Alternately, Protestant churches look to transform members’ relation to the greater community through personal and social healing, offering a safe re-entry point to society. Former gang members’ departure from the gang and subsequent conversion demonstrate the church’s place as both an exit from gang life and an entry into a new network of inclusion. However, the fluidity between gang membership and religious affiliation exemplifies the two institutions’ parallel roles in the lives of youth and their negotiation for their place in society and relationship to violence.

While Wolseth’s thin volume adds a nuanced perspective to the interaction of gang membership, the church, and violence, his work lacks several elements. First, as he acknowledges throughout the book, he often falls into the typical trap of ethnographers by becoming too close to his subjects. His close relationship with several gang members, and especially his influence on one member to have his tattoos removed, leads him to downplay the brutality of gangs, suggesting that their actions are a product of their environment, releasing them of self-agency or individual blame.

Second, while Wolseth hazily mentions the influence of youth violence on the rest of Colonia Belén, he fails to include any ethnographic data or personal accounts from community members outside of churches or gangs. Due to the lack of outside examples, and without comparisons to communities in other towns, his study stands as an isolated case.

This lack of contextualizing evidence leaves the reader caught between two institutions without recognition of the larger community in which they are embedded. While he nicely bookends his findings with general theory, his focus on just one location and one narrowly defined section of community life raises doubts about more general claims.

These shortcomings aside, *Jesus and the Gang* provides an insightful firsthand account of youths' reconciliation of space, time, and identity within a volatile and often unpredictable community situation. As the Honduran government continues to implement tighter crime control laws, laws specifically aimed toward gangs, Wolseth's exposé serves as an alert for a new tactic, a tactic that includes more youth-oriented social services and more opportunities for economic advancement. While his work demonstrates the benefits of the church in this situation, it is clear that the violence affects everyone. His multi-perspective account thus provides insight into the nature of violence and reveals possible avenues for social improvement on an individual, community and governmental level.

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