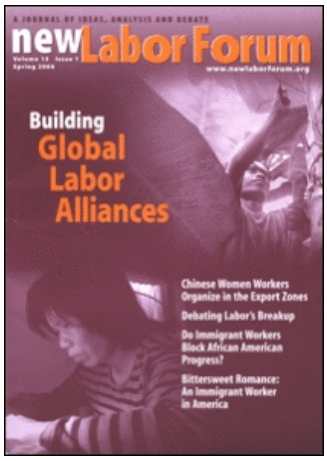
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gross incompetence. With the Bush Administration in receivership for its catastrophic war in Iraq, and the Republic itself trashed and looted, the Democrats have no choice but to step up and put Vietnam behind them.

Which is to say, for "half a party" to find its better half, its red, white, and blue half missing all these years, to follow the lead of its great prophet—the "cloud splitter"—and govern like there is no tomorrow. ■

Love of God Among the Ruins

By Mark Hulsether

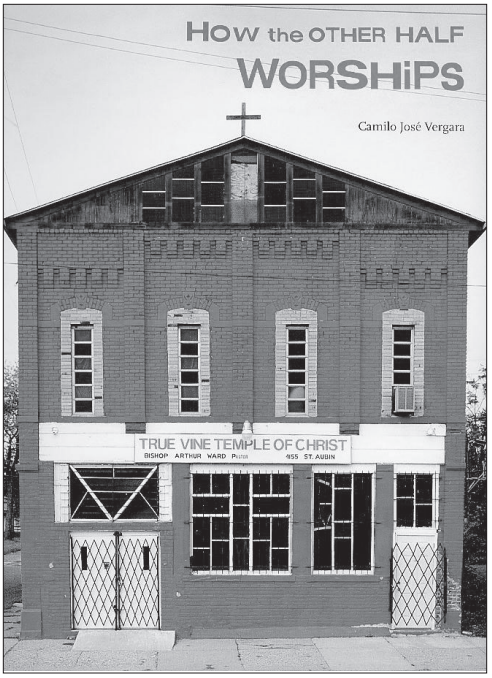
How the Other Half Worships

By Camilo José Vergara

RUTGERS UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2005

How the Other Half Worships, by Camilo José Vergara, focuses on the religious lives of African Americans and Latino/as who create churches in some of the nation's most impoverished inner city neighborhoods. It is beautiful to look at, stimulating, original, and altogether commendable within the limits it sets for itself. At the same time, these limits make it feel incomplete in ways that may be frustrating for some readers.

A wide-ranging study of inner city religion would be a welcome addition to recent public discussions of religion, which too often imply that most U.S. religion is either conservative or otherworldly and politically disengaged. Pundits have exaggerated both the supposed decline of liberal



Christianity and the supposed monolithic and conservative nature of evangelical Christians. True, evangelicals are disproportionately conservative, but at least a third of them are politically moderate or left of center, especially if we include nonwhite churches. Moreover, although liberal churches have slipped

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in power relative to other groups, they retain more momentum than is often acknowledged. I once worked in an inner city Minneapolis church that sponsored a homeless shelter and taught English to Hmong refugees; its minister and key parishioners were active in community organizing efforts. A map of religion in this church's neighborhood that excluded it would be misleading—and more pointedly, an organizer informed by this map might make serious mistakes.

The great virtue—and at the same time the frustration—of Vergara's book is the way it relates to rethinking such maps: both its straightforward contributions and the opportunities it misses. Vergara was born in Chile and studied sociology at Columbia University. Since 1977, he has been using photography and ethnographic observation to document changes in U.S. cities, with special attention to architecture and uses of space. Earlier books, notably *The New American Ghetto* (Rutgers University Press, 1995) and *American Ruins* (Monacelli Press, 1999) established a foundation for the current project. His work has gained wide attention; the BBC has produced a documentary about him, the *Nation* has published his articles, and museums have exhibited his photos. In 2002, he received a MacArthur Foundation genius award.

Vergara's latest project continues to focus on buildings, their changes over time, and their role in neighborhoods decimated by deindustrialization, redlining, poverty, and crime. Half the book consists of over three hundred color photos, the majority of which are of church buildings. Often Vergara photographed them repeatedly to document how they and the nearby built environment changed; in many cases, the surrounding areas have deteriorated but churches have thrived. Vergara notes that declining commercial areas are ideal places for new churches. He is especially interested in storefront churches that may (for example) adapt an old grocery or car dealership—although he also shows how people adapt synagogues and churches built by groups who have fled to the suburbs, and how a few build new churches, including megachurches.

Vergara blends his photos with pictures of people using the buildings, as well as the art and material culture that they create: murals, windows, pictures, devotional objects, and so on. Many of these photos are visually stunning and thought provoking. For example, he shows that many churches portray Jesus as black, but the poorest churches tend either to represent him as white or tell Vergara that he is a spirit that transcends color. The photos dramatize vitality and creativity amid the ruins of these neighborhoods. Vergara admires how people build meaning, community, and coping skills in the context of bleak environments; often he returns to their ideas about personal deliverance and God's care for the poor. It is interesting to consider if such themes of positive thinking and self-esteem would function in the same way or differently in upper-middle-class neighborhoods. Vergara understands that not everything about his churches is positive and that some ministers take advantage of their parishioners. He writes that he is "immune to Christianity" (p. 281). Still, on balance, he concludes that these churches are "an oasis from a world obsessed with celebrity, youth, possessions, and status. If I had felt it in

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me, I would have repented, become a believer, and perhaps I would have walked with God" (p. 281).

Whereas Vergara's photos are superb—almost to a fault, since their raw energy may overpower questions about what they leave in the shadows—his text is somewhat more problematic. He provides a minimum of analysis and lets people speak for themselves in response to open-ended questions, reasoning that his contribution is "primarily visual and documentary" and that he seeks to be a "relentless recorder of things seen and heard" (p. ix). Much of his text consists of quotations from ministers, deacons, and church members. Two chapters compile lyrics of hymns, texts from church signs and bulletins, and information about businesses that supply Bibles, choir robes, and the like.

In general, the book benefits from this approach. However, it is not always easy to discern when commendable efforts to be an impartial observer—to define a research field by exploring neighborhoods and talking to people one meets there, then serving as a "conduit for the churchgoers' religious opinions" (p. xiii)—shade into ensuring that one's principles of selection and modes of questioning will remain unarticulated, even though they presuppose working definitions and implicit analyses that could be developed more fully. Such questions arise even before we turn to religion. Although Vergara offers photos from twenty-one cities, most are from New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, Newark, and Camden. Without denying that this is an impressive sample, we still might ask how these cities compare, both to each other and to southern cities and smaller Midwestern ones. We might also wish for more discussion of how Vergara determined the boundaries of his neighborhoods, given that the book deals almost exclusively with blacks and Latino/as. Although the book treats many specifics, its overall effect is to present a barrage of examples from many places as variations on a theme. Readers seeking a comparative analysis of how structural problems emerged in different cities or how people organized to address them will find limited guidance.

VERGARA'S PHOTOS ARE SUPERB—ALMOST TO A FAULT, SINCE THEIR RAW ENERGY MAY OVERPOWER QUESTIONS ABOUT WHAT THEY LEAVE IN THE SHADOWS …

Turning to religion, although Vergara introduces widely diverse groups including Catholics, mainline Protestants, African American Spiritual churches, and new religions like the United House of Prayer for All People, most of his cases are either Baptist or from the Holiness-Pentecostal tradition. Since he ranges beyond Christianity to touch on Santería and attitudes toward witchcraft, his silence

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about African-American Islam is a noticeable omission. He also excludes most Euro-Americans and Asian Americans who join churches in struggling neighborhoods.

This focus may well be defensible, but because the logic behind the selection is hazy, it is not always easy to interpret the data. Vergara provides little overt analysis of any kind, other than a concern with issues of meaning and personal transformation in an otherworldly frame of reference. He sorts one chapter into a jumble of dissimilar categories including theological concepts, an idiosyncratic set of rituals, and a few incommensurate denominational groups, all illustrated with anecdotal and repetitive quotes. It is as if a chapter on labor were divided into sections on solidarity, bargaining, the AFL, potluck dinners, social movements, the CWA, picketing, justice, executive committees, and tactics. Perhaps this is meant to mirror the jumbled nature of practices on the ground, but it offers limited leverage to clarify differences among his cases or overall analyses of the evidence.

One example of a missed opportunity for analysis is the treatment of gender. Vergara notes that most church members are women and most ministers are men. Although storefront churches have historically been in the vanguard of women's ordination, and although this is reflected in Vergara's evidence, nevertheless a key dynamic in many congregations is women freely joining communities led by men who (at least on the surface) teach women's submission. How should we interpret this? Vergara offers little guidance. Moreover, he notes that many churches are antigay and the photos often have interesting gender constructions, but he does not pursue these issues in systematic ways.

… WHATEVER THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN RELIGIOUS PRACTICE AND ACTIVIST WORK IN LABOR OR OTHER ORGANIZATIONS … VERGARA BARELY PURSUES THEM.

In another example of special interest to this journal, Vergara offers a list of jobs held by church leaders, either in the past or alongside their current positions. These include work in hospitals, the military, bus driving, counseling, fire fighting, barbershops, sales, teaching, construction, and various kinds of factory work. The ministers include a community organizer, a lawyer for the Environment Protection Agency, and people who work at various levels of city government. Vergara reports that "several" are active in their unions. However, whatever the connections between religious practice and activist work in labor or other organizations—either synergies that are mutually reinforcing or zero-sum conflicts over time and energy—Vergara barely pursues them. He gives an impression that churches focus on matters of symbol and ritual largely disengaged from such concerns—with a partial exception for rescue missions and similar ministries. Although this impression may match the situation in many places, it is hard to tell whether Vergara's churches are "objectively" disengaged, or whether he lacks the interest and background to tease out more connections.

In his defense, Vergara says that "If I

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had wanted to write a book that was logical, consistent, and politically correct from beginning to end, I would have to have chosen another topic!" (p. xiv). He says that he does not highlight how churches relate to social issues because they did not express this as a priority. Although he can see that they have a gender politics and are often involved in community development, he brackets such issues when discussing what is important about their religion. This is the point where we might wonder whether an observer with a different sense of what is religiously or politically relevant might have found a different group of "them" or gathered a different set of evidence. Vergara notes his distance from "true scholars [of religion] who know Greek and Latin and read old parchments" (p. 283) but a more telling point is that his bibliography is thin in listing scholarship on contemporary cultural-political aspects of religion.

Based on my own experiences with inner city churches in Minneapolis, New Haven, Knoxville, and Brooklyn, I know that these cities include neighborhoods that are impoverished but at least partly white, with white evangelical churches that would be fascinating to compare to Vergara's churches. They include what we might call white "legacy" churches that are more theologically liberal than Vergara's storefronts. Some of these fit Vergara's paradigm insofar as their members are aging or moving away; they may be candidates for being razed or taken over not too far in the future—but meanwhile they still exist. These cities also include black, Latino/a, and interracial churches with leaders (also black, white, and Latino/a) rooted in forms of Christianity quite different from Vergara's key examples. Importantly, these cities include white "social action" Christians who work in inner city legacy churches, new churches, and church-related agencies, with or without a connection to processes of gentrification. In some cases, such as the Minneapolis one noted above, these considerations might be important; in other places they may represent exceptions that prove Vergara's rule. Either way, they suggest that treating his analysis simply as a mirror for religious people speaking in their own voices could (in some contexts) truncate our mental maps and understandings of religion.

On balance, by focusing our attention on a large and understudied part of U.S. religion, and by doing so in a visually arresting and conceptually open-ended way, Vergara significantly advances our thinking about how religion fits together with the lives of working-class people—provided that we understand that Vergara's map of inner city religion is not fully complete. Activists and cultural workers who seek to strengthen relations between religion and the left—whether they are rooted in labor, political groups, or religious organizations—are in Vergara's debt as they engage with the powerful evidence he has gathered. ■