

# Popular<sup>1</sup> Evangelicalism in Costa Rica: A Syncretic Worldview

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We live in a continent that sinks deeper and deeper into poverty every decade. Newly poor people appear daily, and the old social strata of poverty, as it expands with population growth, remains buried in scarcity.<sup>2</sup> The human need to find favorable options to achieve a better lifestyle is universal. Who would not wish to get out of poverty, or—even better—go from being poor to being rich? There are several ways of doing this: winning the lottery, opening

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1. The term *popular* here is not used to connote "widely accepted and enjoyed" but rather is used in the sense of "relating to the general public," akin to "grassroots"; the corresponding term in Spanish frequently refers to nouns associated with "el pueblo," or people from the lower economic strata.

2. In 2012, nearly 21% of the population of Costa Rica lived below the poverty line (Programa Estado de la Nación, "Decimonoveno Informe Estado de la Nación en Desarrollo Humano Sostenible" (San José, Costa Rica: Programa Estado de la Nación, Proyecto Estado de la Nación, 2013), 353, <http://www.estadonacion.or.cr/index.php/estado-nacion/informe-actual>).

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a small business, selling drugs, practicing the various ways of acquiring what belongs to others, or receiving supernatural favor. With any of these options, it is always worthwhile to also wager on a blessing from God, the Virgin, a saint, or the spirits. And why not hedge your bets and combine all the above, just in case?

When there is scarcity, the human impulse to survive in unfavorable circumstances can take us to limits that no moral system would tolerate. Our current society is flooded daily with news

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about corruption at every level. What message of hope does the church hold out in the face of such challenges? On the one hand, we evangelicals in our theological deficiency have been unable to offer a satisfactory pastoral answer to the complex problem of poverty.<sup>3</sup> This orthodox heritage that we are so proud of provided (and continues to provide) an incomplete gospel that reached us first through North American missionaries, and we, in our lack of meaningful, reflective theology, have kept it incomplete. We have opted, for example, for an impoverished “gospel” of formulas and schemes, a dualism (the physical world irreconcilably separated from the spiritual world) that divides human beings in a psychotic ethical mindset (microethical legalism), and an idolatry of the Bible itself based on subjective and arbitrary hermeneutics.<sup>4</sup>

3. “Poverty is not a unique and homogeneous phenomenon; that is why it cannot be easily defined. In reality there are variations in poverty, or rather poverties, as stated by Max Neef, et al. Everything depends on the missing satisfier, or rather the combination of missing satisfiers... The only characteristic of poor families, of those who face problems of infraconsumerism and lack of basic necessities, is a very unstable insertion in the system of production” (Tomás Austin Millán, “Aportes para un estudio de la pobreza,” class materials for the course “Estrategias para la Superación de la Pobreza en Países en Vías de Desarrollo” [Temuco, Chile: Universidad Católica de la Santísima Concepción: Técnicos en Administración de Programas Sociales, 1996], 1), available online, <http://educacioneneldesarrollosocial.blogspot.com/2012/10/tema-2-aportes-para-un-estudio-de-la.html>.

4. José Míguez Bonino, *Faces of Latin American Protestantism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 47.