

*Investing in Miracles: El Shaddai and the Transformation of Popular Catholicism in the Philippines.* By Katherine L. Wiegele. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005. 207 pp.

El Shaddai (the name reportedly comes from that used by Abraham for God in the Old Testament) is one of the more remarkable popular religious movements in the world today. With a following of some 9 million to 11 million in the Philippines and abroad, it is significantly larger than other prosperity movements. Moreover, it differs from similar movements particularly in that it remains — however, uncomfortably — within the fold of an established denomination, in this case the Catholic Church. In this work, Wiegele attempts to understand, from an anthropological point of view, the dynamics of its growth and its impact on Philippine Catholicism.

Begun in Manila in 1981 as a non-denominational Christian radio programme featuring sermons by “Brother Mike” Velarde, a businessman and real estate developer, El Shaddai struck a responsive chord especially among the poor in the slums. Soon after beginning his program, Velarde identified himself with the Catholic charismatic movement. After more than 20 years of phenomenal growth, his movement now brings together up to a million followers for all-night weekly prayer meetings and healing rallies in one of the largest parks in Metro Manila; the meetings are telecast and broadcast by radio throughout the country, there are El Shaddai chapters in practically every province of the Philippines and in 35 countries abroad, tapes of Velarde’s sermons circulate widely, and he is a significant force in national politics.

Without any formal training in theology, he appears to have derived much of the content of his preaching from American TV evangelists of the “prosperity gospel”, which emphasizes healing, health, and prosperity as God’s gifts to the righteous, and “positive confession” (publicly professing one’s faith in the Lord’s promises). He teaches that by tithing and the making of “seed faith” offerings, the faithful follower puts God in his debt, and by his “positive

confession” brings blessings down upon himself in the form of health, freedom from debt, repaired personal relationships, a job abroad, or whatever.

Velarde’s relationship with the Catholic faith, to which some 83% of Filipinos belong at least nominally, has frequently been strained. Many doubt that the prosperity gospel, with its emphasis on material blessings, conveys the whole of the Christian message, and his attempts to interpret scriptural texts in that sense seem more than forced. He plays down many traditional Catholic practices, particularly veneration of Mary, in favour of direct contact with the Holy Spirit. Yet his weekly prayer and healing rallies end with a Catholic Mass, and the Catholic hierarchy has designated theological advisers for El Shaddai. Individual bishops and parish priests are divided, some supporting the movement and seeing it as an alternative to the Pentecostal groups which have been attracting many of the Catholic faithful, others suspicious of it or opposed.

On the political side, he sided with former President Estrada while many of the Catholic bishops and the middle class generally were mobilizing to impeach him on grounds of massive corruption. But he has avoided precipitating an open break with the Catholic Church, and when “push came to shove” in the run-up to the impeachment proceedings, Velarde pulled in his horns and accompanied his wife who was leaving for medical treatment abroad.

In attempting to understand this phenomenon, Wiegele at the outset rejects simplistic interpretations which would reduce El Shaddai’s appeal to reactions to stress or to cargo-cult hopes for a bonanza from on high. She notes that such explanations “mask the multifaceted social, political, economic, and personal conditions in which spiritual choices are made — and in which new religious forms arise and become compelling” (p. 14).

For her database, Wiegele did more than a year of fieldwork in the Philippines and in Rome, living much of the time in an urban poor community in Metro Manila with a heavy concentration of El Shaddai followers, attending prayer and healing rallies and counselling sessions, interviewed Mike Velarde and many of his followers as well

as parish priests and members of the Catholic hierarchy. She also visited eight other local chapters of the movement — four in Metro Manila and four in the provinces.

Her interpretation of the power of El Shaddai centres on personal transformation. Through the mass rallies, radio and TV, and under the influence of the powerful preaching of Velarde and his associates, the individual achieves a sense of being one with a massive and even world-wide community. The fact that the rallies are held outdoors under the night sky, and in a place (the grounds of the Philippine International Conference Center) normally reserved for the elite gives a sense of mass power. Audience participation (“Amen?” “Amen”) and even such “gimmicks” as holding umbrellas upside down to catch the blessings from on high or holding up one’s wallet to be filled, add another dimension to this experience. At the heart of it is the sense that one is in direct contact with the Holy Spirit, a sense that many fail to achieve in the more staid and stylized rituals of the Church.

Personal transformation here involves a rejection of one’s past and a redefinition of one’s present state. As the crowd chants in unison “I am rich, I am strong. Something good is going to happen to me,” the individual no longer thinks of himself or herself as poor or weak, insignificant. Moreover, the chant, in some cases at least, turns out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy: inspired by it, individuals give up gambling and drinking, work harder, and learn to get along better with what they have. They are inspired also by the public testimonies of those who, having paid their tithes and other contributions, found themselves rewarded by promotions in their jobs or relief from illness.

The intensity of the experience here is seen in the phenomenon of “slaying in the Spirit” in which the prayer leader prays over a person, who then falls to the ground partly unconscious. Again it is seen in the “counseling sessions” some of which are described in detail: these seem to consist mainly of penetrating the subject’s defenses, breaking down his or her self-assurance, and making the subject admit to being the source of all of his or her problems — and all

done with supreme self-confidence on the part of the healer who claims to be acting in the name of God and who wears down the subject hour by hour.

All of this is portrayed by the author as taking place in a world of folk Catholicism, inhabited by spirits of various kinds and specialists in dealing with them. To the present writer, who has carried on a social-pastoral ministry in an urban poor community for almost 20 years, this part seems a bit overdone. In the present writer's experience, the spirit world that Wiegele describes is real but not as prevalent as she would make it seem. Of course it is also possible that Wiegele has penetrated more deeply beneath the surface than the present writer has.

At the same time, our own research into religious attitudes among the urban poor does reveal a great desire for direct communication with God over and beyond stylized ritual; the poor see the church as a *takbuhán*, a place of refuge where one goes to cry, to talk the Lord Who always understands, to ask forgiveness for one's sins, and where one gains the strength to carry on.

The social orientation of El Shaddai is on the conservative side, with regard both to gender relations within the family and to the wider social arena. In this it contrasts with the local parish described by the author. The parish priest there is highly respected by the community for his assistance in helping the people to buy the land when a local political leader was trying to arrange an illegal sale outside the community. The priest closed down the El Shaddai chapter along with other groups, as being too centred on themselves and not sufficiently on the community. His attempt to substitute prayer sessions led by himself failed, but the parish continues to have a vibrant life with various social projects.

Meanwhile, El Shaddai continues to be a major force in Philippine life. It is clear that it has a powerful impact on individuals. Its impact on the Catholic Church is as yet ambiguous. On the political stage, it supported the present president, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo who was re-elected to a full term in 2004. And more recently a housing project of Velarde's real estate firm received a loan of 360 million pesos from

the government's housing fund — the single largest draw-down in the history of that fund.

The book, finally, is a valuable contribution to our understanding both of El Shaddai and of religious dynamics in the Philippines. Given the size and complexity of the movement, it will be interesting to see whether other studies arrive at similar conclusions.

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