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Investing in Miracles: El Shaddai and the Transformation of Popular Catholicism in the Philippines by Katherine L. Wiegele

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In this collection, readers are introduced to “Duo-Technique,” which Villa describes as “a poetic pas de deux” (229). Lines of verse are each cut into two and are set so that “an aisle, a vertical partition of the poem” (229) is created. The structure increases the tension in the poem. Some may be reminded of Old English alliterative versification. Duo-Technique, however, is more dynamic, visually and semantically richer, though it is also torture to a typesetter:

Let a man
 contain an angel!
 Yet let him
 not be Fully angel—
 Though he
 Contain! a Full Angel.

Writing in Duo-Technique, Villa is almost pure technician. Part pattern poem, part found poem (all but one of these verses are adapted from poems in *The New Yorker* or elsewhere), the Duo-Technique poems reveal, like his Adaptations in the 1950s, Villa as master rewriter. (The example quoted, in fact, is an adaptation of one of his Aphorisms.) From these apparent finger exercises poets can learn economy and acquire sensitivity to the properties of individual words.

The “Xocerisms” are similar to the sayings that were published sporadically in Philippine magazines. People may doubt the profundity of some of the Xocerisms, but they are certainly charming and witty, even satirical; and some readers may, in fact, find them the most interesting part of the book: “JUNQUE = junk made elegant” (260).

The publication of his collected poems by Penguin puts Villa back at the center of the literary world—a recognition long overdue. It was Villa’s wish to be remembered as an “international poet” and not only as a Filipino poet. Of course, by “international” he probably meant “American,” as the title of his first book of poems in the United States suggests. (In his introduction Francia even interprets Villa’s “God” as America.) His wish comes true eleven years after his death. He is one of only two Filipinos to be published in the venerable Penguin series, Rizal being the other. No reader would question the nationalism of Rizal’s internationalism as some would (and have) Villa’s. But no matter how one locates his politics, his poetry remains

among the most beautiful articulations of the mysteries of art and being. On his centennial, it is only apropos that he declare, through this handsome edition of his collected works, “Have come, am here again.”

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KATHERINE L. WIEGELE

Investing in Miracles: El Shaddai and the Transformation of Popular Catholicism in the Philippines

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005. 207 pages.

Katherine Wiegele provides an easily comprehensible introduction to El Shaddai, a charismatic Roman Catholic lay movement in the Philippines and, according to the author, probably the largest prosperity movement worldwide with a following of over 10 million people. Founded by Mike Velarde, who sees himself as a preacher of generosity, not prosperity, El Shaddai emphasizes healing, prosperity (“health and wealth”), and positive confession (“name it and claim it”). The book consists of seven chapters, a short epilogue, fifteen photographs, a bibliography of 189 items, and an index.

In chapter 1 Wiegele discusses her purposes: to study the rise, ethos, and practices of El Shaddai; and to understand how the movement grew so rapidly, and how it has exerted itself politically, economically, and religiously in the Philippines. She questions whether El Shaddai, as a distinctive mode of human creativity, can tell us anything about change in Filipino society. In sum, she asks, “Why now? Why El Shaddai? Why this segment of the population? What needs and desires does El Shaddai address that the other religious groups do not?” (14). The ethnographic field research that is the backbone of the monograph was undertaken primarily in Manila but also in Baguio, Batangas, Pangasinan, and Roxas City, between November 1995 and December 1996.

In chapter 2, Wiegele describes Velarde’s teaching on Romans 13:8 (“Owe no one anything”). Velarde stresses the value of staying out of debt and setting aside 10 percent of one’s income in savings. When the author

explores how this teaching affected the daily lives of members, she finds the influence to be negligible. Because Velarde also exhorts his followers to tithe 10 percent to his ministry, she also probes into how these donations are managed, about which she concludes, “El Shaddai officers were obscure and even secretive regarding the accounting of offerings” (29). Helpful is the fact that Wiegele outlines the biblical basis for prosperity theology in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament. As well the chapter discusses, somewhat superficially, allegations of corruption directed against Velarde.

In chapter 3, Wiegele examines the evolution of El Shaddai from its founding in 1981 as a radio program and describes the religious space that the movement occupies, namely, radio and TV airways, print media, and open-air rallies, all forms of mass media. She analyzes specifically how this media space “carves out unique forms of religious community and spaces of congregation” (59). By not building a church or worship center, El Shaddai can coexist with the Roman Catholic Church, but by locating sacredness inside the person El Shaddai can function free of the Catholic Church. Wiegele writes, “Brother Mike elevates El Shaddai Ministries to the privileged position of spiritual mediator and relegates the Catholic Church to the position of repository of tradition” (51). Further, the apparent ability of the sacred space of mass media to annihilate social differences (“an engineer stands next to a maid”) produces feelings of community among participants (55). One El Shaddai member is quoted as saying, “At church, God is near. At the rally, he is actually there” (55).

Chapter 4 describes the City of Manila and the two unnamed barangay where most of the author’s El Shaddai informants reside. This discussion serves as a framework for an appreciatively sympathetic examination of how the prosperity theology is understood in people’s lives in chapter 5. Presented here are testimonies of individuals who have “remade their own past and present through their story of transformation” as a result of becoming “children of El Shaddai” (102).

Chapters 6 and 7 explore the diversity of local expressions of the El Shaddai movement, its beliefs and practices coexisting within a plethora of religious discourses. Chapter 6 begins with an attractive discussion of religious specialists (such as *hilot*, *yakal*, *albularyo*, and *spiritista*) who assist people with physical and spiritual problems. Then, Wiegele addresses how local chapters of El Shaddai relate to Head Office and to local Roman Catholic dioceses. Catholic practices associated with the Virgin Mary are con-

trasted with Velarde’s supposed “anti-Mariolatry” and his views on the role of women in the home. She quotes Velarde, “If in a home it is the woman who works for a living and the husband does laundry, that household has a lot of problems. The Lord will not bless that home because it is against the will of Yahweh El Shaddai” (128). Chapter 6 concludes with an extensive and fascinating report on the diversity of personal religious beliefs and practices as they relate to the world of spirits in two barangay in Metro Manila. Hand in hand with the preaching of “health and wealth” is the role of spiritual warfare as a means of empowering people to take control over their lives, the very people who saw “the 1986 People Power Revolution come and go without noticing any significant improvement in their life or relevant changes in the power structure of the country” (144). Chapter 7 explores the charismatic nature of El Shaddai.

In dealing with El Shaddai Wiegele works directly and for the most part with primary-source materials, including interviews with Brother Mike Velarde and Archbishop Jaime Cardinal Sin. However, in dealing with the American roots of Velarde’s prosperity theology, she accesses secondary literature, with no evidence of testing it against the writings and sermons of Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson, and Kenneth Hagin. Were one to offer a criticism, it would be to wish that some of the secondary research was undertaken in a more thoroughgoing critical manner. Be that as it may, this book is a delight to read, and it is highly recommended to anyone interested in El Shaddai, contemporary Filipino religion and culture, the interaction between Filipino Christianities and their cultural environments in urban settings, and the Philippines in general. Although written for scholarly consumption, it is accessible to a nonacademic audience.

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