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**Katharine L. Wiegele/Investing in Miracles**

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# I

## Seeking El Shaddai

For nearly fifteen minutes we pass face after face in every direction. We walk silently, at a steady pace. Were it not for the landmarks in the distance—the city’s skyline on one side, the orange sunset dusting Manila bay on the other—we might be disoriented on our journey toward the rally stage. The crowd of half a million is calm but expectant. Some listen to the radio broadcast from the grandstand or browse vending stalls. Others write down their needs, worries, and dreams on pieces of paper that will be prayed over, when the sky grows dark, by the charismatic “Brother Mike” from his glowing electric stage in the distance. And somewhere behind the stage curtains, his face caked with makeup, Brother Mike is stiff with performance jitters that only his wife and his closest aides witness. Up close, with his neon plaid suit and exaggerated stage features, he looks fantastically larger than life.

Father Bert, a Filipino Catholic priest, has accompanied me to this national El Shaddai rally in which Brother Mike Velarde, as he does every Saturday night, will preach and heal the faithful.<sup>1</sup> Father Bert is not a member of El Shaddai nor of the Catholic charismatic movement. In fact, he explains, he opposes what El Shaddai stands for because he feels it runs counter to liberation theology. Nonetheless he wishes to attend because he wants to “see how it is done.” How does Brother Mike create moods of elation, moods in which one can feel the Holy Spirit moving, moods so powerful that people, men and women alike, come from all over the nation to experience a prayer and healing rally, lasting five or six hours, sometimes ten, until dawn, even in the rain? How does he motivate millions of impoverished Filipinos to donate 10 percent or more of their income to an organization that has not even so much as a church building? How does he inspire millions to testify, often publicly, that they have been radically transformed and attest that miracles have graced

their lives? Father Bert has listened to tapes of American evangelists like Jimmy Swaggart in an attempt to spice up his own oration style, but he still has not managed to fill his church and its coffers to overflowing, nor has he heard any testimonies of miracles or lives transformed. How does Brother Mike, and the preachers and evangelists under him, do it? After the rally, as we weave through the crowds and traffic on the way home, Father Bert tells me vaguely that experiencing the rally will help in his community organizing, but how, exactly, he cannot say.

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This is a book about people who have been in the public eye in the Philippines since they began gathering for miracle and healing rallies in the early 1980s. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the El Shaddai movement's ever-growing numbers have posed a challenge to religious institutions in the Philippines, particularly the Philippine Roman Catholic Church (PRCC). Their unorthodox ways not only threaten status quo religious boundaries of practice and belief but also present opportunities for the PRCC to stop the massive flow of Catholics to Protestant and evangelical groups in the Philippines. In the past several decades these groups have enticed followers with what many El Shaddai faithful see as more spiritually, socially, and materially relevant (and, some say, authentic) forms of religion. Observers have often found it difficult to categorize the El Shaddai movement. Its prosperity theology often prompts debates as to what constitutes Catholic or even religious activity and has even led to questions about the meaning of religion itself. Its boundary crossing has produced both uneasiness and curiosity.

The El Shaddai movement has also been fascinating to journalists and other observers. El Shaddai practices like "seed-faith" offerings, "positive confession," and "prayer requests," all part of its controversial prosperity theology, have provided fodder for debate on the compatibility of material desires and religious motivations. This obsession with El Shaddai's prosperity theology has often led to journalistic reductions of the movement that see El Shaddai rituals as designed solely to elicit favors, often material, from God. While focusing our attention on the relationship between religious and capitalistic moralities—and perhaps prompting self-reflection on the part of Filipino and Western observers—these reductions seriously underestimate the complexity and sophistication of contemporary Filipinos.

In this work I document the rise of the El Shaddai movement, its

ethos and its ritual practices, and the new sociocultural forms it has spawned. In so doing, I seek to understand how and why this movement grew so rapidly to the point where it yields considerable influence in the public arenas of political, economic, and religious discourse in Filipino civil society. Ultimately the El Shaddai movement reveals the changing culture of Filipino lower and aspiring middle classes at a time when old understandings of class struggle and Catholic sacrifice no longer resonate with contemporary aspirations.

The movement's rise to popularity coincides with a period of intense social, political, and economic change in the Philippines—namely the People Power Revolution of 1986, which ended the Marcos dictatorship and restored democracy, and the rapid economic growth that took place during much of the Fidel Ramos presidency. Mike Velarde, the movement's leader, has capitalized on his strong ties with the Philippine Roman Catholic Church and successive Filipino governments. He supported the economic and political initiatives of the Ramos presidency and more recently aligned with many Protestant denominations in support of President Estrada, even as Catholic Church leaders and the Filipino public rallied against Estrada and eventually forced him from office.

#### THE MOVEMENT IN CONTEXT

Mike Velarde assesses the El Shaddai movement this way:

With the El Shaddai DWXI–PPFI [Prayer Partners Foundation International] Ministry, the Philippines is witnessing a real spiritual and moral revival, shaking established religious organizations and denominations. The Catholic Church, which El Shaddai DWXI–PPFI primarily aims to serve, is divided on the issue. Protestants, Pentecostals, Fundamentalists, Iglesia ni Cristo members, and members of other denominations are trooping to El Shaddai fellowships and mass and healing rallies regularly all over the land. Communities and cell groups are sprouting everywhere like mushrooms, in different cities and capital towns all over the Philippines. [Velarde 1993a:20]

While this enthusiastic assessment by Brother Mike may seem to exaggerate El Shaddai's influence and growth, in fact his description is close to the truth. The El Shaddai movement—formally called El Shaddai

DWXI Prayer Partners Foundation International, Inc. (also called El Shaddai Ministries)—began in 1981 as a nondenominational Christian radio program. One Sunday a small group of listeners gathered in thanksgiving outside the DWXI radio station. Within fifteen years the group had become a substantial movement with a followership of 9 to 11 million. (Even the most conservative estimates fall within this range.) By 1997 the group had chapters in nearly every province in the Philippines and more than thirty-five countries, with an overseas membership comprising around 20 percent of the total.<sup>2</sup> Velarde airs El Shaddai television programs throughout the country and broadcasts El Shaddai radio on dozens of his own stations nationwide. Tapes of his sermons circulate widely among Filipino overseas workers. Today he is also part owner of television Channel 11 in Manila, another prominent venue for El Shaddai religious programming. Up to a million followers gather each week in Manila for nighttime prayer and healing rallies led by Brother Mike. Indeed, Velarde has been called one of the fifty most powerful people in Asia (*Asiaweek*, July 5, 1996) and one of the ten people “who made a difference” in the Philippines in the decade following the People Power Revolution (*Philippine Daily Inquirer*). He has also been instrumental in national Filipino politics during successive presidencies since the mid-1980s.

The El Shaddai movement takes its name from a booklet written by Rev. Kenneth E. Hagin, a popular American preacher of the prosperity gospel. Velarde renders the name in English for members of El Shaddai Ministries as “God Almighty” and “The God Who Is More Than Enough”—an image of God well suited to the group’s prosperity orientation. The name is actually of Hebrew origin. According to the religious historian Karen Armstrong, El Shaddai was a name used by Abraham for his deity. Drawing from biblical sources, she writes: “It is highly likely that Abraham’s God was El, the High God of Canaan. The deity introduces himself to Abraham as El Shaddai (El of the Mountain), which was one of El’s traditional titles” (Armstrong 1993:14).

The organizational structure of El Shaddai DWXI-PPFI, which has been “inspired by the Holy Spirit,” is authoritarian with Brother Mike at the top as the group’s “servant-leader.” Below him the Executive Secretariat is composed of sixteen “senior disciples,” two of whom are closely related to Velarde (a brother and a son). These sixteen make recommendations to Velarde and lead the seven “ministries” or departments that compose the foundation.<sup>3</sup> Two Catholic priests appointed by Bishop Ted

Bacani serve as spiritual directors, helping in the training (“lay formation”) of El Shaddai’s disciples, pastors, evangelists, service volunteer disciples/trainees, and prayer group coordinators.<sup>4</sup> The movement has several main venues: national prayer and healing rallies held on Saturdays and Tuesdays at two different public spaces in Manila; daily prayer and healing *gawain* (ritual events) at El Shaddai’s main headquarters in Makati, Manila; smaller *gawain* organized weekly by local El Shaddai chapters throughout the Philippines; weekly *gawain* hosted by international El Shaddai chapters; national rallies held during special events such as chapter anniversaries, Christmas, and Pentecost; and extensive radio and television programming.

Velarde began describing his group as “Catholic charismatic” shortly after its nondenominational beginnings. Although this label is indeed fitting, it does not exhaust the movement’s range of activities and implications. Like other charismatic Christians worldwide, El Shaddai practice emphasizes the Holy Spirit and experience over religious doctrine. The term “charismatic Christianity” is used here in the sense in which Karla Poewe defines it: “encompass[ing] all Christianity, from its beginning in the first century, that emphasized religious or spiritual experiences and the activities of the Holy Spirit” (1994:2). Charismatic Christianity also involves the reinterpretation of and healing of one’s life—a process that relies on religious language and the use of signs (Roelofs 1994; Poewe 1994:21).

Charismatic Christianity differs from Pentecostalism in several important ways. Broadly speaking, Pentecostals form their own denominations whereas the term “charismatic” usually describes Christians from mainline denominations who have adopted Pentecostal-like beliefs and practices. As Russell Spittler writes in an article reviewing the use of these categories: “Pentecostals share with charismatics affirmation of spiritual gifts, speaking in tongues, healing, and prophecy. And the religious services of both are likely to be characterized by lively singing, manifest spiritual gifts, personal testimony, prayer for healing, and nonliturgical informality. But the two groups may have quite divergent theological views, eschatological expectations, worldviews, and attitudes toward social action” (1994:106). Charismatics can be found in nearly every Christian denomination, and their theological views vary accordingly. Pentecostals and fundamentalists, by contrast, share a “precritical and uncomplicated” approach to the Bible but diverge on such matters as

speaking in tongues and style of worship—those aspects Pentecostals share with charismatics (p. 106).

By these definitions and by self-definition, El Shaddai is a Catholic charismatic group, although it does not emphasize speaking in tongues and other spiritual gifts for laypeople as much as some charismatic groups do. And while the group shares some doctrine with conservative Protestant charismatics (Coleman 2000), it is Catholic not only because it “aims to serve” the church but also because it is officially recognized by the Philippine Roman Catholic Church as a Catholic lay movement. In 1989 the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, after some scrutiny, declared Velarde to be a faithful Catholic, albeit a businessman and entrepreneur without formal religious training. The Philippines’ highest Catholic official, Archbishop Cardinal Jaime Sin, has publicly recognized the movement as Catholic, and the church has appointed a spiritual director to advise Velarde and his pastors on theological matters. Velarde avoids blatantly preaching against official Catholic doctrine. (Nevertheless, many El Shaddai pastors and evangelists look to conservative Protestant preachers such as Jimmy Swaggart as stylistic models for their preaching.) A Catholic mass is said by a clergyman at every El Shaddai national rally, and Velarde gives a portion of the group’s collections to the Catholic Church. Local El Shaddai chapters since 1995 have been required to affiliate with a Catholic parish. The pope, during his popular visit to the Philippines in 1995, inquired about the group after seeing thousands of El Shaddai banners and other insignia among the millions who gathered in his presence in this Catholic country, but he has not made an official declaration about the group.

El Shaddai can be classified as belonging to a specific wing of charismatics worldwide called the “prosperity movement” (also called variously “faith,” “faith formula,” “health and wealth,” or “word movement”). The prosperity movement in general has also been called “neo-Pentecostal” owing to its origins in Pentecostalism, its acceptance of material prosperity, and its appeal across social classes and religious denominations (Coleman 2000). El Shaddai, like other prosperity movements, typically blends what have been called “textual” and “tactile” orientations to faith—textual because they have a fundamentalistic approach to the Bible, tactile in that they emphasize religious experience in the form of testimonies, ecstatic speech, and bodily movements (Coleman 2000:24; Cox 1995:15). The ministries of American televangelists Pat Robertson and

Oral Roberts and preacher Kenneth Hagin, key figures in the origins and development of prosperity teachings, have each to varying degrees influenced the development of El Shaddai. Because many of the beliefs and practices associated with prosperity theology are inconsistent with normative Filipino Catholicism, some controversy exists among mainstream Catholics and the Catholic clergy in the Philippines as to whether the El Shaddai movement should be considered legitimately Catholic.

The El Shaddai movement clearly exhibits the main theological features of prosperity movements globally: healing, prosperity, and “positive confession.” Simon Coleman (2000:28) explains that in prosperity teachings, healing and prosperity (or health and wealth) are said to be promised to all believers based on a covenant made with Abraham in the Old Testament. Positive confession refers to the idea that not only faith and obedience but also one’s specific statements can elicit God’s power and intervention in the lives of the faithful: “Thus ‘positive confession’ is a statement that lays claim to God’s provisions and promises in the present” (Coleman 2000:28; Hollinger 1991:57). Healing, prosperity, and positive confession are three prominent features of El Shaddai theology and practice.

Mike Velarde is unique among prosperity leaders in that he, and El Shaddai Ministries, remain officially part of a fixed denomination. Most leaders of prosperity movements have distanced themselves from mainline denominations (Coleman 2000:30), just as charismatic leaders in general (that is, leaders with a gift for attracting a large following) have distanced themselves from larger institutions (Weber 1946, 1968; Lindholm 1990). Moreover, El Shaddai’s Catholic affiliation makes it unique among these prosperity movements because religious congregations of this kind have traditionally been made up of denominational Protestants. Although the Catholic charismatic movement has been accepted globally by the Roman Catholic hierarchy for some time, a prosperity movement whose membership is dominated by Catholics appears to be without precedent. And yet, while El Shaddai’s followership is mainly Catholic and the group maintains legitimate ties to the Philippine Roman Catholic Church, Velarde, like his prosperity counterparts in other countries, still functions as a leader who is not obligated to any denomination. Velarde fits Kenneth Hagin’s entrepreneurial model of “establishing an overtly independent ministry that is a vehicle for evangelistic activity far beyond the level of the local congregation” (Coleman 2000:30). Among many

other similarities, El Shaddai also shares with prosperity groups in Africa and Latin America an accommodation to (or even ideological emphasis on) globalism and, as well, an organization that favors large congregations in urban settings.

Prosperity movements vary insofar as they develop within particular local contexts even though the preachers, doctrine, and organizational structures may be imported to varying degrees, especially from the United States. (Prosperity movements worldwide, including El Shaddai, now send preachers overseas, maintain radio stations or programming abroad, and evangelize in places like the United States and Hong Kong.) El Shaddai is probably the largest prosperity movement worldwide in terms of followers—significantly bigger than other movements of its kind. As mentioned, its denominational connection with the Roman Catholic Church is unique, and this gives rise to a host of particularities not only in El Shaddai practice but also in the dialectics of El Shaddai's relations with Philippine society at large. Aside from these obvious features, the cultural forms that El Shaddai has taken (and created) result from the specifics of Filipino culture and history.

#### CHRISTIANITY IN THE LOWLANDS

Filipinos have never been empty vessels for imported ideologies, religious or otherwise. Vicente Rafael (1988) describes the process of Tagalog conversion to Roman Catholicism under early Spanish rule as translation—as a reinvention of symbols and signs, an interpretation of events and symbols through local categories, and resistance to colonial authority through slippages of meaning in colonial power relations. Pre-colonial notions of reciprocity and debt combined with Roman Catholicism to form uniquely Filipino concepts and practices within—and in opposition to—Catholicism and Spanish rule. Concepts such as *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude) and *hiya* (shame)—central to reciprocity and the formation of social relationships—contributed to the nature of Tagalogs' indigenized relationships with the Christian God and Catholic religious authorities. According to Rafael, Tagalogs conceived of God as a benefactor to whom they were constantly in debt, a debt that could be repaid only at death. This perspective bound the Filipino in an obligatory relationship with God and the church.

Relationships of debt and reciprocity are still significant elements of contemporary Filipino society. El Shaddai members, however, through financial offerings to God and positive confession (which allows the believer to elicit God's intervention), become the initiators of the reciprocal relationship with God. By obligating God through these acts, El Shaddai members can be said to reverse the direction of the debt relationship with God. Moreover, El Shaddai changes the primary focus of one's relationship with God—from salvation in the afterlife to this-worldly uplift. Rather than waiting to repay one's debts to God in the afterlife, they invoke God's generosity here and now through positive confession and tithing and, in so doing, lay claims on the power of God by indebting God to them. Popular Catholic notions of suffering are also transformed through El Shaddai ideology and practice. Older modes of Catholic expression that made suffering virtuous have been replaced by the pervasive image of a God who wants humans to be healthy and prosperous, a God who dislikes suffering. Rafael also focuses attention on the unexpected ways in which early Tagalog converts understood the Catholic sacraments of communion and confession. El Shaddai healers manipulate the normative meanings connected to these sacraments, wrest from them their spiritual efficacy, and relegate them to tradition and obligation without ever discarding them.

Religion in the Philippines has always been part of the language through which power relationships and radical political and economic change have been understood, manipulated, and resisted. As Filomeno Aguilar documents, Spanish colonialism and the penetration of foreign merchant capitalism in Negros, a Visayan island, was understood by Filipinos as a "clash of spirits" between competing cosmic forces—the foreign merchant capitalists represented on one side and the Spanish friars on the other (Aguilar 1998:26). Reynaldo Ileto (1979) writes about Tagalog resistance to Spanish colonialism from 1840 to 1910 and tells how grassroots movements utilized local conceptions of the passion story of Christ (*pasyon*). While Spanish clerics intended the *pasyon* to encourage acceptance of suffering and submission to Catholic doctrine and colonial power, the story was mobilized for revolution and resistance. Ileto shows how Filipinos combined the *pasyon* with local notions of *loob* (inner self), *utang* (debt), and other salient cultural concepts to produce relevant religious practices and ideologies. Fanella Cannell's (1999) study of contemporary Christian practice in Bicol shows how inequalities and power

relationships are mediated and understood through cultural and religious idioms of persuasion, reluctance, and pity. Heather Claussen (2001) describes feminist Catholic nuns in the Philippines who, through their unique blend of faith and politics, are attempting to address contemporary inequalities and reshape Filipino culture and gender norms.<sup>5</sup>

From these works we learn how Filipinos have transformed Catholic practice and symbols into idioms through which they resist, cope with, bring about, and understand change. According to John Bowen, one way to study broad cultural change is “by analyzing those ‘mediating’ institutions and cultural forms through which people redefine who they are” (1995:1062). Religion is one of the ways through which Filipinos have reinvented themselves—both in the past and, I believe, today—in the context of recent religious innovations such as the El Shaddai movement. Through El Shaddai, Filipinos are transforming Catholicism in specific ways to cope with economic, political, and social change. New religious ideas and practices are co-opted to achieve personal transformations when Catholic traditions no longer satisfy changing spiritual needs and leftist ideologies of struggle and oppression no longer articulate the aspirations of contemporary Filipinos.

Apart from these issues connected specifically to the Filipino milieu, the El Shaddai movement offers an interesting case study of charisma, sacred power, and influence in Southeast Asia. This book also addresses questions connected to religion and power in general—namely some of those raised by Talal Asad (1993), who asks how religious “moods and motivations,” religious authenticity, and spiritual authority are actually created.<sup>6</sup> What conditions have led to the acceptance of different religious authorities and different logics of spirituality in the Philippines? And, finally, if religion is a mediating institution for broad cultural change, what does the El Shaddai movement tell us about change in Filipino society?

#### MY FIELDWORK: FROM METRO MANILA TO ROME

I got my first glimpse of Brother Mike on television while the biggest typhoon in decades was thrashing the capital city. While the majority of greater Metro Manila was having a power outage, Brother Mike’s green

and pink checked suit glowed from the generator-powered color TV in my hotel room as his dramatic Tagalog speech competed with the wind and rain crashing against the window. It was a replay of last week's prayer and healing rally. As the camera panned the seemingly endless expanse of followers, I wondered how I would get from *here* to *there*—from behind the TV screen into the homes and the individual lives of the people whose sincere, emotion-filled faces drew me into the intense mood of the nighttime rally. Who were they, exactly, and how would I find them? Eventually I did come to know a small fraction of these people—by living with them and sharing the drama of their lives in an interior section of a semi-squatter neighborhood in Manila. Yet the *bridge* between these two worlds—that is, the anonymous, imagined world of the mega-rally on TV, broadcast nationwide and internationally for public consumption, and the everyday worlds of the followers into whose homes these programs are broadcast—came to permeate nearly every aspect of my research.

In many ways, the idea of bridging these two levels of experience not only framed the direction of my research but also characterized the difficulties in finding appropriate anthropological frameworks and methodologies for doing research, in a globalized and diverse capital city of roughly 15 million, on religious experience that is simultaneously—and consciously—both global and local. Not surprisingly, the lives of my informants embodied the contradictions and ironies of the complex environment from which this movement emerged. My fieldwork, perhaps not uniquely, was also riddled with the ambiguities of modern urban environments: how to study, anthropologically, very large and diverse communities; how to understand the notion of “community” that is both imagined through mass media and enacted in small neighborhood groups at the same time; how to define a particular community in contiguous and dense urban residential space; how to access people who commute up to three hours every day and work long hours (as painters, servants, construction workers, vendors); how to pinpoint and describe attitudes and practices that may change daily, sometimes before your very eyes, with a sermon or speech heard on the radio; and, not least, how to cope with the experience—as an observer—of being filmed and observed by *someone else* with cameras broadcasting live on national television. Some of these issues are mentioned in the text of this book; most are not. But all of

them color the ethnographic representation I have produced—from my interpretation of events to the overall organization of this work. They also contribute to any shortcomings you may find here.

This book is based primarily on ethnographic data I collected from November 1995 through December 1996 in the Philippines. Most of the fieldwork was done in Metro Manila; secondary case studies were done in four different provinces. I used traditional ethnographic techniques such as participant observation, structured and unstructured interviews, and interview schedules. I also collected limited quantitative survey data both at national rallies and at my primary fieldsite. As well, my research included the analysis of recorded, transcribed, and published preaching texts of Mike Velarde and other El Shaddai preachers and healers, El Shaddai publications, and local media coverage of issues directly or indirectly related to El Shaddai. In Manila, Filipino and English are the languages most commonly spoken. Although my research was conducted in both languages, English was rarely used outside of interviews with relatively well educated informants who were comfortable speaking it. Filipino was most often preferred. Almost all of the interviews and many sermons were taped and later transcribed and translated with the assistance of two Filipino research assistants.

Because the El Shaddai movement is at once a local, national, and even global phenomenon, my fieldwork necessarily ranged between these settings. In fact, I became interested in the various ways in which El Shaddai members form communities (or a sense of community) given the magnitude of their followership and the geographical expanses that often separate them. The majority of my research took place in urban settings in Manila: I lived in a semi-squatter neighborhood for about seven of my thirteen months in the field for this project. This local community, with its particularly high concentration of El Shaddai followers, became my primary focus for studying local manifestations of El Shaddai religiosity. My ties with members of this community began in the second month of this fieldwork period and lasted throughout my stay in Manila. During the months in which I was not actually living in this community, I rented a small apartment in a lower-middle-class neighborhood nearby.

In addition to this local community, I observed El Shaddai at work in eight other local chapters—four in other areas in Metro Manila and four in provincial areas. The four Manila chapters represent a variety of socio-economic and community characteristics. The four provincial chapters

represent different ethnolinguistic El Shaddai constituencies and varying degrees of acceptance and control by local Catholic clergy and diocesan bishops. The Roxas City and Baguio City branches were located in dioceses where the bishop and parish priest had rejected the local El Shaddai groups. El Shaddai chapters in Pangasinan and Batangas were chosen mainly because of my previous contacts with communities in these provinces but also because these two local branches represented opposite poles in terms of El Shaddai independence vis-à-vis local church authority. My fieldwork also involved participating in religious events of a variety of Christian denominations.

Much of my fieldwork was also conducted in national El Shaddai arenas: at national rallies, at the national headquarters where El Shaddai leaders and workers have offices and where some rituals and training took place, and from the airwaves of El Shaddai radio and television broadcasts. I was introduced to Mike Velarde briefly backstage before an El Shaddai rally in Manila. Later in the fieldwork, I personally interviewed him on two occasions at the El Shaddai national headquarters. I also dined with him and several other guests on his birthday in his headquarters office and once backstage after a rally at the Philippine International Convention Center.

I interviewed national religious leaders not only from the El Shaddai movement but also from the Philippine Roman Catholic Church (including the archbishop of Manila and several other bishops), the Catholic charismatic movement, the National Renewal Movement, and various other religious denominations. My interviews also included academics from several universities in Manila, a supreme court justice, and journalists—not to mention the hundreds of El Shaddai members and Manilans of other religious persuasions I spoke to or interviewed throughout my stay. I attended El Shaddai functions at dozens of locations. And, finally, I observed an El Shaddai prayer mass at a Filipino Catholic church in Rome—the parish was composed almost entirely of Filipino immigrants and overseas workers—and interviewed the presiding priest and several participants there. While in Rome I also made unsuccessful attempts in the Vatican to obtain an official church position (or unofficial assessment) of El Shaddai DWXI–PPFI.

For the sake of anonymity, I have used fictitious names for people and places throughout. The names and places associated with public figures and public events, however, have been left unaltered.

## CARGO CULTING AND OTHER PITFALLS

Moments of stress can push people to seek out new experiences. Brother Mike once told me that people are more receptive to God when they are weak. Coming from the spiritual leader of El Shaddai, however, this psychological take on religious and spiritual change surprised me. It shares something with the Catholic “Church of the Poor” idea in the Philippines—the idea that poverty has traditionally been a privileged site of God’s grace and intervention. But it also resembles the psychologically reductionistic approaches to religious change I have tried to avoid here—functional stress-anxiety and deprivation models, for example, that reduce people to stress-equilibrium mechanisms. God takes many forms in contemporary Manila, and there is an astounding array of options in the religious marketplace. Considering that at least 10 million people have found something compelling about Brother Mike’s message and El Shaddai’s ideology and rituals, one must ask: Why now? Why El Shaddai? Why this segment of the population? What needs and desires does El Shaddai address that other religious groups do not? Reductionist explanations mask the multifaceted social, political, cultural, economic, and personal conditions in which spiritual choices are made—and in which new religious forms arise and become compelling. A multitude of contexts and factors impact on the religious choices of contemporary Filipinos. Many scholars have recognized the importance of both sociohistorical factors and personal experience and identity in assessing conversion and religious change. (See, for example, Aragon 1992; Hefner 1993; and Kipp 1991.)

Another reduction of the El Shaddai phenomenon that flourishes in journalistic accounts both in the Philippines and abroad is what I call “cargo culting.” This tempting explanation focuses on El Shaddai’s prosperity theology and its “prayer request” and “seed-faith” rituals through which members request miracles from God. Lamont Lindstrom (1991:1) writes of Melanesian cargo cults that arose in the 1940s and 1950s:

People turned to traditional or innovative religious ritual to obtain “cargo.” . . . Sometimes the [cargo] concept meant money or various sorts of manufactured goods such as vehicles, packaged foods, refrigerators, guns, and tools. And sometimes, metaphorically, cargo represented the search for a new social and moral order that would ensure

local sovereignty and the withdrawal of colonial rulers. In either case, people worked for and expected a sudden, miraculous transformation of their lives.

Lindstrom has written extensively about cargo cults in the Pacific and notes the peculiar anthropological and popular appeal of cargo cult stories in the West. Stories about cargo cults, he argues, “suggest a kind of forlorn, sometimes mad, state of insatiable wanting. . . . We relish cargo cult narratives because these are parables about our [own] desire” (p. 2).

Applied to El Shaddai (and with comparable fascination), cargo culting offers a facile and comforting answer to the basic questions surrounding the movement—questions such as why do so many poor and marginalized Filipinos give millions of pesos each week to Brother Mike? It reduces El Shaddai enthusiasts to seekers of miracles, both material and social. While the miracle-seeking aspect of El Shaddai religious life is certainly not insignificant, my broader goal is to show there is much more at stake here than appliances, salary raises, jobs abroad, and healing. At stake for many El Shaddai members is their place and identity within society at large; the meaning of their own experiences of poverty, suffering, and oppression; and the relevance of their very notions of God, Christian community, and Christian life.

By avoiding such reductions (whether psychologically functionalist or cargo cultist), by allowing for multicausal explanations, and by emphasizing ethnographically specific descriptions, I hope to avoid several other pitfalls in the study of religious change. One is the tendency to ignore or dismiss or “explain away” spiritual experience. I have tried here to remain open to the possibility that spiritual transformation and experience can sometimes be a significant motivation. I also aim to avoid stereotyping members of the El Shaddai movement and Filipino Roman Catholics. Finally, it is my hope that this ethnographic portrait of the El Shaddai movement preserves the agency of the people involved instead of representing them as mere followers, a mindless mass. They are people with choices, people who fashion and transform ideologies, religiosities, and situations for their own purposes, people who are not mindless at all.