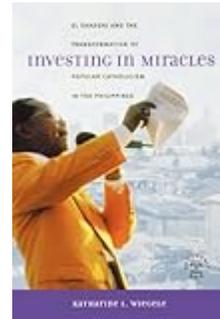




Katharine L. Wiegele. *Investing in Miracles: El Shaddai and the Transformation of Popular Catholicism in the Philippines.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004. 216 pp. \$21.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8248-2861-5.



Reviewed by Emmanuel Serafica de Guzman

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El Shaddai in the Philippines

I read Katherine L. Wiegele's book *Investing in Miracles*, aware that I brought along some pre-textual suspicion about El Shaddai. This suspicion is largely a negative one; I viewed El Shaddai as a nuisance in society and the church. I realize that such suspicion is borne out of simple ignorance of what this contemporary popular religious movement is all about and how it affects people's lives.

Founded in 1981 by a businessman, turned charismatic, "Brother Mike" Velarde, the El Shaddai movement is estimated to have seven to ten million adherents, not only in the Philippines but also in countries overseas where Filipinos reside. Due to this power of numbers, state leaders, politicians, and church leaders have been turning to this movement to garner support for their own agendas. But what makes this movement a potent force in Philippine social and religious life rests on its internal dynamics, in particular, how the movement negotiates its existence among its own members, and how it navigates through larger Filipino realities and conflicts.

As a non-El Shaddai, I am very happy that the book has brought to the fore many facts about and aspects of El Shaddai in an extensive scholarly manner. Specifically, the methodology of unearthing and understanding the movement "from within" is commendable for it has gotten in touch with those whose lives are webbed in the movement, on the levels of both the ordinary members and the leadership. Though El Shaddai is not necessarily a little-known phenomenon, writings about it are greatly lacking. Wiegele's research is a significant contribution in shedding light on the lived experiences of Filipino Christians who are struggling with their faith in a vortex of social, economic, political, and cultural transformation. Whether one agrees or disagrees, accepts or rejects, the El Shaddai, the study provocatively invites readers in the social and theological fields to discuss and debate the significance of the movement in Philippine society.

For instance, Wiegele shows how members of El Shaddai, more specifically its leaders, are cunningly reinventing Christianity to suit the Filipino psyche, and re-

casting the universalizing faith (of the West, particularly Rome) to suit economic, political, cultural, and religious purposes. What emerges in the process is not exactly in the originating sense that the Catholic Church, for example, wishes to communicate but a negotiated faith or a particularized faith that is bound to the worldviews and expectations of many Filipinos, many of whom are marginalized in numerous aspects of social and ecclesiastical life. Yet, as Wiegele also points out, one may look at the emergence and growth of El Shaddai as a form of resistance not only to the imposed (Western) form and interpretation of Christianity but also to Filipino society, which is marked by inequality and deprivations for many. Whether El Shaddai is truly an alternative option or an escapist/reactionary option can be contested. Nevertheless, the book provides readers with substantial resources for conversation.

The author is affirming where it is due and critical when required. She presents the study in an interdisciplinary way, thus bridging the gap between theory and practice from various social sciences, both on local indigenous systems and on the academic side. Of value, too, are the comparisons she makes between the object of study and other segments of Christianity, particularly in Pentecostal, Protestant, and Catholic streams (interviews with priests, Basic Christian Communities-Community Organizing [BCC-CO], etc.), citing points of convergence and divergence. She likewise seeks connections between local symbols, myths, and rituals of El Shaddai as well as similar or related phenomena across national and cultural locations, thereby weaving stories on a worldwide scale, or at least partial but nonetheless global phenomena of the rise and proliferation of movements investing in miracles in contemporary times.

After reading the book, I have a feeling that El Shaddai, rather than having a strong continuity with Christian tradition and with Catholic principles and structures, is veering toward discontinuity by presenting Christianity in a different way. The presence and approval of Catholic bishops and priests does not mean that the movement is already mainstream or orthodox. One might even say that the Catholic Church is coopting the movement as has been shown in many instances in history. For example, the ascetic movement of the second to fourth centuries was a reaction to urban powers or centers, which were perceived to have been penetrated by the immorality of city life; eventually, the ascetics were recognized and became monastic communities. The beguines of the twelfth to seventeenth centuries were women who decided to form communities in reaction to the rejection

by male-dominated hierarchy. They became notable for their common prayer and service to the poor, and later were coopted by the Catholic Church to become religious orders and congregations for women.

Wiegele's research is, in at least one sense, a new contribution to understanding popular Catholicism in the Philippines. While there have been publications dealing with local phenomena, often on what is perceived to be indigenous to Filipino culture or on social dynamics, Wiegele's book is a breakthrough in investigating a largely urban phenomenon that mixes indigenous and foreign elements; that uses air (mass media) and physical spaces; and that provides a theological syncretism of diverse, sometimes conflicting, beliefs. The work is not an apologia or propaganda for El Shaddai. The study is sympathetic yet distanced in explaining the complexities surrounding the life of the movement. I highly recommend the work for scholars and practitioners of religious and social change. Again, whether the reader agrees or disagrees with El Shaddai's ways is not my concern in this evaluation. Wiegele nicely weaves together scholarly or academic perspectives and concrete experiences or stories. In particular, chapters 4 through 7 are the most engaging, because these parts privilege (from the viewpoint of a theologian) the voices of people whose lives are being transformed by El Shaddai.

While reading this engaging study, I looked for intersections or parting of paths between El Shaddai and the rethinking of Christian tradition endorsed by contemporary theologies and not only with established doctrinal discourses of ecclesiastical authorities, which the author cites a lot. Unfortunately, the author cites only one form of Basic Christian Community (BCC), that of the BCC-CO, ignoring other types of BCC or Base Ecclesial Communities (BEC) in the country. Perhaps she chose BCC-CO to highlight contrasts to a seemingly apolitical movement and another movement with a strong liberationist, social dimension. Very much a contemporary movement, many values of El Shaddai are still preindustrial, especially the belief of the supernatural that directly, and literally, intervenes to provide for adherents' needs, particularly material benefits.

It is still not yet clear to me whether or how El Shaddai is making the Filipino more Christian and human, or perhaps the reverse, how El Shaddai is making its Christian followers more Filipino and human. The Filipino, of course, is continually recast and reinvented in changing situations, and there is a need for more analysis of how El Shaddai is repackaging the Filipino to themselves and

to the global village. I wished also, but which may not be expected within the scope of this researcher's work, for more analysis of the El Shaddai vis-à-vis modernity (also perhaps postmodernity and/or globalization, however this may be defined). Though there are sections in the book that deal with the question, the author could have made this type of analysis more central to her work. The study of popular movements today cannot but probe local dynamics with larger issues of a changing world. The apparent fusion of many sources in El Shaddai's life suggests that, wittingly or not, the movement is a child of its time.

In conclusion, I strongly recommend the work; as I have indicated, this is the first comprehensive study on El Shaddai. Within the field of this reviewer, the book will be useful for the academy (professors, students in MA and PhD programs, and researchers/scholars) in various disciplines of theology. Since the book is written from the discipline of anthropology, theology (and related fields) can listen to and converse theoretically with

the author's methodology and findings, and use a theological jargon to scrutinize it in the light of the Gospel. The book will also be instructive and informative for church hierarchy (of any Christian denomination); it will hopefully be beneficial in reexamining their own internal resources (beliefs, structures, rituals, programs, and practices) vis-à-vis the experience of believers on the popular level, such as the El Shaddai. Moreover, the book will be welcomed by those who are engaged in social or societal transformation that involves the participation of the masses. A colleague of mine, an anthropologist, once remarked that the future of Christianity in the Philippines will not rest on the established institution no matter how influential it is in Filipino society, but with groups and movements on the margins or periphery. In the future, as in the past, it is the ordinary Filipinos who bear the burden of living up to what they believe are the demands of Christ, not in the expectation of the elites or hierarchy, but in their own way. Whether or not the established church will still be relevant in the future, popular movements will make Christianity alive but with a distinct Filipino flavor. These views may or may not apply to El Shaddai, but Wiegele's book starts the conversation.

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