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Editor's Introduction

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Editor's Introduction

In response to the call of the Ateneo de Manila University President, Fr. Bienvenido F. Nebres, S.J., to bridge the Ateneo's cultural gap with El Shaddai and similar religious movements, the Institute of Philippine Culture (IPC) devoted its 45th anniversary conference on 16 September 2005 to tackling social science perspectives on Pentecostal and charismatic (P/c) Christianity in the Philippines. Four papers from that conference are presented in this special issue of *Philippine Studies*.

Although some observers discern elements of a magical worldview in P/c Christianity, Katharine L. Wiegele draws from her ethnographic fieldwork to focus on the El Shaddai movement's engagements with modernity. Its theology of prosperity, which is encapsulated in the very name "El Shaddai," the God Almighty of blessings, is a source of empowerment for many in a movement where the lower socioeconomic strata predominate. Moreover, Wiegele argues, the movement immerses its followers in religious practices—especially its open-air assemblies and the mass media's broadcast of those events—that serve as symbolic inversions of their marginalized social existence. In this sense, P/c Christianity offers a subtle critique of the establishment.

The notion of individuality and choice in P/c Christianity, Christl Kessler argues, is also distinctly modern. This observation applies to the 15 percent of Catholic and 39 percent of non-Catholic Christians who are active in the charismatic movement, as shown by a nationwide survey held in 2003. As in Latin America, any fear of Protestantism overrunning the Philippines is not supported by the fact that Catholics comprise 70 percent of P/c Christians—although their staying within the Catholic Church is not without tensions. Unlike Latin America where P/c Christianity is associated with the lower classes, and unlike parts of Asia where it is linked strongly to the middle classes, in the

Philippines it cuts across all social classes. Significantly, Kessler's analysis reveals that P/c religiosity cannot be reduced to socioeconomic or political factors: except for shared religious beliefs, P/c Christians—who make up 19 percent of all Filipino Christians—are an extremely heterogeneous lot.

The rise of P/c Christianity does not disenchant the world, and in general is an argument against secular modernity. In cultures with a determinative belief in the spirit world, as among the Higaunon studied by Oona Thommes Paredes, conversion both reconfigures and restructures the spirit world by centralizing it under a single divinity. Remarkably, this change is not fertile soil for syncretism, as in folk Catholicism. Paredes relates the success of Evangelical Protestantism to striking parallels between the Higaunon's traditional worldview and the belief complex to which many have converted. With the powerful Christian God on their side, Higaunon believers feel released from the demands of traditional spirits, who thereby have lost their potency to affect everyday life. Yet, believers have not rejected Higaunon identity. Rather, the New Tribes missionaries in the area have contributed to the affirmation, and concomitant redefinition, of that identity.

Believers who come from Roman Catholic traditions do not speak of conversion in the idiom of spirits but in the language of an experiential knowledge of God, using strategies that effectively Filipinize the global phenomenon of P/c Christianity. Based on an IPC study in 2004, my article analyzes conversion narratives among adherents of the El Shaddai and Jesus-is-Lord movements, which I interpret as confronting the question of God's existence that finds its answer in what believers recount as meaning-generating experiences of transcendence. This "intellectual" aspect is overlooked by the dominant emphasis on the functionality and intentionality of belief and religious membership, but is consistent with the view on the relative autonomy of culture.

These four studies are suggestive of profound transformations at various levels: individual lives, families and localities, churches and religions, the country's cultural and ideational landscape, and beyond. To study it using social science perspectives and methodologies requires a huge dose of reflexivity.