

philippine studies: historical and ethnographic viewpoints

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Marian Piety and Modernity: The Perpetual Help Devotion as Popular Religion in the Philippines

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Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints
vol. 62 nos. 3–4 (2014): 399–27

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Marian Piety and Modernity

The Perpetual Help Devotion as Popular Religion in the Philippines

This article argues that Marian piety in the form of the Perpetual Help Devotion exemplifies “modern popular religion,” which has grown through mechanisms of strategic accommodation and creative refashioning in response to urban transitions in Metropolitan Manila and the ecclesiastical elites’ regulation of piety. Differences between religious authorities and devotees have produced diversified devotional practices, which retain their relevance due to an ethic of self-care that enables devotees to craft identities and self-understandings in the modern context. Rather than a threat, modernity provides opportunity structures and resources that enable religious beliefs and practices to respond to the exigencies of modernity.

KEYWORDS: POPULAR RELIGION · MODERNITY · URBAN TRANSITION · MARIANISM · PERPETUAL HELP DEVOTION · CATHOLICISM

In local, regional, and national shrines throughout the country, both anecdotal and documented evidence point to the vibrancy of popular religious practices, which are celebrated with great intensity during feast days. This liveliness in devotional practice is especially notable for shrines and feast days associated with Mary, the Mother of Jesus, insofar as “Marianism” remains a defining characteristic of Philippine Catholicism. Catholic shrines dedicated to Mary are the most popular in the country and account for 75 percent of all shrines nationwide (Association of Shrine Rectors and Promoters of Pilgrimages in the Philippines 1995). Outside of Catholicism, Mary is also officially recognized in the liturgy and piety of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (IFI) and the Episcopal Church in the Philippines (ECP). Forms of Marian piety are also found among adherents of indigenous religious movements in the Philippine countryside, particularly in Mount Banahaw in Quezon province. In these cases, one observes the wide range of adaptations made to suit Marian piety to particular contexts, ensuring its relevance in public life amid changes brought about by modern transitions.

In this article the growth and maintenance of the Perpetual Help Devotion in the Philippines are used as a platform from which to engage issues pertaining to the interface of popular religion and modernity. Redemptorist missionaries brought the Perpetual Help Devotion to the Philippines in 1906. At present the National Shrine of Our Mother of Perpetual Help (henceforth, “Perpetual Help shrine,” or simply “shrine”) in the Baclaran district of the city of Parañaque, Metro Manila, serves as the center of devotional practices. While a considerable number of devotees have been introduced to the devotion in this shrine, most other devotees have encountered it in Catholic parishes. Since 1948, when the communal novena devotion was introduced, the Perpetual Help Devotion has spread beyond the confines of the shrine and has become a regular Wednesday activity in most parishes.

The Perpetual Help Devotion is an example of modern popular religion and its continual refashioning by various agents in order to cater to emerging needs and aspirations. This transformative capability goes beyond personal interests; it ensures that popular religion remains relevant to a broad range of communal interests, thus retaining its public character. This view recognizes the relative independence of popular religion from other forms of religious practice and is contrasted to earlier accounts that pegged it as a residual category vis-à-vis institutionalized religion. Contemporary perspectives

assign to popular religion an autonomy that is “evidently becoming a label . . . to name more complex processes” (Pace 1987, 12) and serves to distinguish its “differential logics” from that of institutional Catholicism and the rationalizing culture of modernity (Parker 1996).

In this regard modern popular religion is important in understanding not only contemporary religious forms but also modernity itself. Modern popular religion may be deemed a response to the increasing complexity in a cultural field that is “exploding with new contradictions giving life to a plural world” (ibid., 210). The devotees, who are the subjects of modern popular religion, straddle these cultural heterogeneities and in the process utilize the opportunities afforded by modern conditions to craft life trajectories and public action.

It may be noted that devotional practices have been at the forefront of interactions among broader social forces at various junctures of Philippine history. Pioneer Spanish missionaries, who began work during the early years of Spanish colonialism, utilized Marian piety to encourage the locals to abandon their worship of local divinities; in the process, they altered the country’s religious landscape toward localized Christian expressions (Aduarte 1905/1973; Barcelona and Estepa 2005; Santos 1983). In these “local religions” (cf. Christian 1981), religious agents accepted Iberian Christian iconography using their local worldview, which imbued these *larawan* (icons and images) with *bisa* (potency) (Mojares 2002). This syncretistic mingling of Christian and indigenous elements is indicative of broader transformative continuities, which have assimilated a Christian framework into local practices and beliefs (Macdonald 2004).

In the years leading to the revolution against Spain in 1896, Marian piety was again on the sidelines of emerging nationalist sentiments and the “crisis of legitimacy” within colonial Catholicism. Initiated by peasant religious movements in Mount Banahaw “nationalist Marianism,” which involved Marian piety in anticolonial struggles, found its way into Gregorio Aglipay’s IFI (Ileto 1979, 106). With the loss of its privileged status after the Spanish colonial period, institutional Catholicism likewise justified the use of Marian piety in reinforcing Catholic values as the moral foundation of Philippine society.

As can be gleaned in the complex interplay between religion and social forces outlined above, the vibrancy of Marian piety in the Philippines rests on the ability of agents to make popular religious practices relevant to emerging needs and aspirations. The discussion in this article draws from my

PhD dissertation research, which demonstrates how agents accomplish the dynamic of popular religion's "strategic accommodation," exemplified in the case of the Perpetual Help Devotion, in response to urban modernity and the regulation of piety by religious authorities (Sapitula 2013b). To make this case I use data obtained through ethnographic research at the Perpetual Help shrine and its surrounding area from September 2009 to June 2010. Apart from my observations of and participation in the activities there, I was privileged to have been given access to copies of old prayer books, chronicles of the Redemptorist community, and most importantly thanksgiving letters written by devotees over a period of six decades from 1948 to 2008.

The Perpetual Help Devotion as Modern Popular Religion

The Perpetual Help Devotion is centered on ritual acts toward a purportedly miraculous icon of the Virgin Mary that found its way to Rome from Crete in Greece toward the end of the fifteenth century (Ferrero 2001). Initially entrusted to the Augustinians, the icon almost fell into oblivion until it was "rediscovered" by the Redemptorist missionaries, who requested custodianship over it. Pope Pius IX approved this request in 1866, and since then the icon has been displayed at the main altar of the Church of St. Alphonsus de Liguori in Rome. The Redemptorist missionaries brought replicas of the icon to the Philippines when they arrived here in 1906. In 1932 they settled in Baclaran, where they built their church and monastery as a base for conducting mission work in the Tagalog-speaking provinces of Rizal, Bulacan, and Zambales.

The novena sessions on Wednesdays, which today draw a sizeable number of devotees to the shrine, date back to 1948, when Australian Redemptorists introduced them. Revised in 1973, the "Perpetual Novena" consists of prayers, litanies, and songs addressed to Mary under the title of "Our Mother of Perpetual Help" (Maguire 2005). A typical Wednesday in the Perpetual Help shrine begins with a mass at 5:30 AM, continues with ten novena and mass schedules throughout the day, and ends with the novena at 7:00 PM (fig. 1). An estimated 100,000 devotees attend every Wednesday, a figure that rises to 120,000 on the first Wednesday of the month, when devotees from provinces outside Metro Manila visit the shrine (Hechanova 1998).

Forms of modern popular religion in the Philippines, especially its Catholic variants, were crafted after the Spanish colonial period, with the move away from religious monoculturalism that rendered the Catholic Church one actor among many others in a pluralizing public domain. At



Fig. 1. Devotees lining up to touch the icon of the Mother of Perpetual Help on a Wednesday evening after the novena, 31 March 2010

the turn of the twentieth century the "reforming spirit" sought to upgrade Catholic practices in line with posthispanic cultural dispositions.

This dynamic of adjustment and synthesis continues to exist in the contemporary religious scene. Jayeel Cornelio (2008) alludes to the creative refashioning of charismatic organizations in order to deal with the emerging needs of a wide range of worshipers. Similarly Katharine Wiegele (2006, 2007) positions the El Shaddai movement as a transformation of popular Catholicism itself, while Christl Kessler and Jürgen Ruland (2006) find an emerging "populist religion" among Pentecostals in the middle and lower classes in the Philippines. Modern popular religion, however, is germane not only to contemporary charismatic and Pentecostal organizations but also to Catholic variants that involve icons, novena prayers, and ritual acts. The Perpetual Help Devotion typifies this Catholic variant especially because of its location within the climate of internal reform within twentieth-century Philippine Catholicism. This devotional form thus showcases a pattern of creative refashioning.

Pope Leo XIII's apostolic constitution *Quae mari sinico*, promulgated in 1902, served as the basis for the Philippine church's post-Spanish ecclesiastical

reform under Rome's direct supervision. Quite different from the previous era, ecclesiastical authorities utilized Marian piety to reinforce Catholic values as the moral foundation of Philippine society, in a bid to reassert the influence of Catholicism in public life. This strategy was accomplished amid the tense relations between Catholic ecclesiastical officials and the American insular government and the Catholic Church's dismay over vigorous Protestant missionary activities that threatened Catholic numerical superiority.

The arrival of the Perpetual Help Devotion in 1906 enhanced the already extensive panoply of local Marian devotions in the country. Despite its affinity with traditional piety, the Perpetual Help Devotion differed from previous Iberian-inspired forms of Marian piety as it epitomized a doctrinally conscious and tempered devotional heritage characteristic of posthispanic Philippine Catholicism. Mostly coming from Australia and Ireland, the pioneer Redemptorist missionaries in the Philippines banked on their status as non-Spanish priests to distinguish themselves from the Spanish friars and encourage people to resume Catholic religious practice (Boland 1982). As a non-Spanish religious order, the Redemptorists adopted a missionary style born of the "stormy" sociopolitical climate of twentieth-century European Catholicism rather than of the unquestioned union of church and state in the fifteenth-century "Christian monarchies" of Spain and Portugal. Elsewhere in the world the Redemptorists fostered new forms of piety based on "religion of the heart" yet firmly under institutional controls (cf. McSweeney 1980).

In the Philippines this missionary style is evident in the Redemptorists' preference for devotional cultures that downplay emotionalism and miracles in favor of more doctrinally conscious religious practices. The emphasis on tempered forms of practice is apparent in texts of novenas, which, after the icon, are the second most important tool for spreading the devotion. Novenas are not only established formulas of prayers, but are tools to educate devotees about the basics of the Catholic faith and the reading of social issues in line with Catholic principles. A close reading of novena texts spanning six decades suggests a veering away from "magical" (*mapaghimala*) notions of the icon toward doctrinally informed, restrained, and "updated" sets of prayers. For instance, the word *himala* or *mapaghimala* appears in five instances in the 1926 novena, but the same word or its English equivalent ("miraculous") appears just once in the 1936, 1948, and 1973 versions of the novena.

The 1936 novena enjoined devotees to submission and obedience, but at the same time invoked biblical passages and provided excerpts from saints'

writings and general catechetical knowledge. During this period, the pioneer Redemptorists popularized the Perpetual Help Devotion alongside the regularization of "invalid marriages" that had been performed by Aglipayan or Protestant churches (Boland 1982; cf. Dela Goza and Cavanna 1985).

The 1948 text for the communal novena was largely derived from American sources and assumed final form only after years of experimentation (Gomez 2003; Hechanova 1998). Prayers in the 1948 novena provided ample recognition of "temporal needs" as evidenced by explicit references to petitions about bodily healing, stability in everyday life, and protection from disasters. This aspect was retained in the 1973 version, although it departed from the "privilege-oriented and 'high'" Mariology (Gomez 2003, 31) that characterized previous novena versions. This departure reflected changes in theological directions within Catholicism in the 1970s, inspired by the Second Vatican Council. Thus a restrained Mariology inspired the 1973 novena. Although references to Mary as "Immaculate Virgin Mary" and "Queen of our Homes" persisted, the most common references, such as "Dearest Mother" and "Dear Mother of Perpetual Help," tended to focus on her ordinariness and closeness to devotees.

Devotional Selves as Modern Religious Lives

In addition to creative refashioning, modern popular religion also operates on a nuanced notion of identity and selfhood. The decline of magic that Keith Thomas (1971) referred to at the onset of European modernity did not only indicate widespread questioning of superstition but also reflected "profound changes in spiritual outlook" (Taylor 1989, 191). This change hinged on a greater sense of self-possession, that is, of finding one's paradigms within oneself rather than dictated by larger social structures (ibid.). Carried to "posttraditional" societies of our time, the emphasis on inwardness implodes traditional religious authority: while such forms of religious power are still present, they remain merely as "'authorities' among others, [that is,] part of an indefinite problem of expertise" (Giddens 1991, 195). The devotees' experiences provide an entry point for assessing the nature of modern religious lives, demonstrating how agents actively utilize resources afforded by modern conditions to respond to needs and craft identity claims.

The thanksgiving letters written by Perpetual Help devotees to Mary are replete with expressions of their aspirations for *mabuting buhay* (good life) and upward mobility that are combined with notions of *biyaya* (blessing) and *grasya* (grace). Through their religious practice, devotees form *social*

imaginaries of class that intersperse notions of material prosperity with aspirations for interpersonal and spiritual well-being. Devotees utilize religious practices in conjunction not only with specifically religious resources but also with market conditions, thus uniting “the modernizing thrust to the deep structure of spiritual ‘animation’” (Martin 2002, 5).

Modern popular religion does not sit well with efforts to distinguish the “sacred” and the “profane” and instead transforms the “profaneness” of everyday life by infusing it with a transcendental character (Martin 2009). While there is a “differentiation of secular spheres” (cf. Casanova 2000), agents chart life trajectories by using religious resources to infuse supposedly secular spheres—like bodily well-being, economic relationships, and urban transitions—with spiritual significations. The devotional letters suggest that strict demarcation lines between the material and spiritual do not make much sense to devotees.

Consider the thanksgiving letter dated 12 October 2005 from one devotee who suffered bankruptcy in their small-scale business:

After 10 years working abroad, we agreed to have a little business . . . Mama Mary, we thanked you so much, after long ten years, nakapundar kami ng bahay at sasakyan pang hanapbuhay . . . Laking pasasalamat ko po, dahil naging smooth ang takbo ng buhay namin with our little kids. We went into construction business. At first, it went good even without investing capital . . . Akala namin, ito na . . . we have the break.

Sinubukan po naming pumasok sa isang malaking company para makakuha ng kontrata sa pag-asang ito ang solution. Yon po pala ang umpisa ng lahat, lahat na kung saan at ano kami ngayon . . . MASAMA PO BANG MAGHANGAD NG DAGDAG NA KITA? . . . Nalugi po kami sa kinuha naming trabaho, at nagkaroon pa kaming kaso sa mga suppliers namin, hangang sa nagkabaun-baon kami sa utang. We tried to start anew . . . pero lalo kaming nadapa at hangang ngayon hindi pa kami nakakapag-recover. Alam ko po, pagsubok po ito sa amin. Everything is meant for a reason. At ang lahat ng ito ay tanggap ko.

After 10 years [of] working abroad, we agreed to have a little business . . . Mama Mary, we thanked you so much, after ten long

years, we were able to save money to buy a house and car to use for our business . . . I was very thankful that our lives with our little kids ran smoothly. We went into construction business. At first, it went good even without investing [much] capital . . . We initially thought, this is it, we have the break [we need] . . .

We tried a partnership with a big company to secure good contracts, hoping that would be the solution. But that was the start of everything that led us to where we are now . . . IS IT WRONG TO ASPIRE FOR ADDITIONAL INCOME? We went bankrupt and had court cases filed against us by our suppliers, until we sunk in debt. We tried to start anew . . . but we fell all the more and until now we haven't recovered. I know that you sent all these tests to us. Everything is meant for a reason. And I accepted all of these [willingly].

Besides the utter directness and even confrontational mode of relating with the divine figure expressed here (cf. Sapitula 2013a), the devotee particularly defends her belief that it is not wrong to aspire for material wealth, especially if her family benefits from it. This notion, shared by a significant number of Perpetual Help devotees, indicates that the spiritual dimension of life does not negate aspirations for material security.

Especially in the context of personal relationships, devotees regard the acquisition of material and other “temporal” benefits as a necessary aspect of daily life, which does not contradict the pursuit of a proper “spiritual life.” The thanksgiving letters reveal that notions of well-being are firmly grounded in relationships with the divine figure and with other devotees. These relationships highlight the social roots of well-being that transcend (but do not negate) individual states: well-being is as much about positionality in a network of relationships as it is about subjective feelings and dispositions. As a devotee notes in a letter dated 22 July 1954 (written in English):

Our faith on you is concrete, so we feel that every step we make is guided by you and when difficulties come across our path we don't hesitate to ask for your kind intercession. Everything we do is referred to you, dearest Mother, so we feel secure under your care. So everything goes on smoothly, and oftentimes the things I ask you is granted.

Another female devotee's thanksgiving letter (dated 1 September 1986, written in English) echoes the same sentiment:

I wrote this letter to thank you for all the wonderful graces and blessings I've been receiving from you. Of all the millions asking for help from you, you still remember me and my prayers. All my prayers and wishes had come through and I know that I deserved it and that I never had failed you of what you expect from me.

These confident expressions of one's worth come from devotees whose life trajectory is "in good order" and who experience everyday life without anguish, confusion, or discord.

Like aspirations for well-being, the logic of moral identity formation also proceeds along the same principle of "creative fidelity,"¹ by which moral choices are framed in the context of local moral worlds (cf. Kleinman 1994). In the devotees' accounts moral identities are based less on codified moral standards than on "self-reflexive" assessments of commitments with oneself and others. Among Perpetual Help devotees, this reflexive turn is quite visible in the noticeable decline of the influence of "Catholic-oriented moral culture" in devotional accounts—that is, an identifiable religio-cultural logic revolving around sacramental practices (especially confession and communion), a church-sanctioned marriage, the necessity of joining Catholic religious associations, and a Catholic school education.

One feature of the "Catholic-oriented moral culture" is a relatively straightforward system of rewards and punishments: adherence to normative standards leads to rewards; nonadherence, to punishment. In a letter written in English dated 22 September 1951, one female devotee alluded to this system in her experience of obtaining a Catholic Church-approved marriage:

For over forty-three years ago, my husband and I had been married by a Protestant minister. We lived as husband and wife from that time. Due to my early becoming an orphan of mother I was left unguided to my religious duties. A life full of afflictions, tribulations and miseries. At last, my continuous attending masses and other religious activities, the thought came to my mind that all these unhappiness were due to the lack of receiving the sacrament of Matrimony.

The devotional letters reveal a religio-cultural logic that prevailed in the decades prior to the 1970s but declined thereafter. Emerging realities during that time altered the configuration among agents in institutional Catholicism and the state such that definable boundaries became difficult to maintain.

This changing configuration profoundly affected the construction of devotees' moral selves. The devotional letters indicate a slow but steady change from reliance on codified moral systems to context-based articulation of moral principles. This changed emphasis is apparent in notions of "giving back," that is, in the perceived obligation to "repay" the divine figure. Consider the contrast between these sample letters from two devotees separated by five decades: the first, dated 23 January 1952, written in English; the second, from 2006, written in Tagalog:

I took up the Pre-Bar Review for four months with very inadequate facilities, such as books, and with no money. The environment in which I lived was not conducive to a good review. . . . In spite of all these, I took the Bar Examinations . . . I computed my grades and it reached only an average of 68% . . . there was only one hope for my success in said examinations—to pray that you extend to the Examiners your spiritual blessings for . . . their pity upon me and their patience in reading my poor handwriting . . . Every Wednesday, we went to Baclaran and joined the Novena prayers. Rain and storm did not hinder us from going to Baclaran . . . Last January 7 at 12:30 p.m., I found my name as one of the successful Bar candidates of 1953 . . . I am now a lawyer and will soon practice my profession, if God permits it . . . I will try my very best to perform my duties as a lawyer religiously. Please help me, my Mother, please give me courage and strength.

Compare this letter with what another devotee penned in 2006:

Kahit na po nang kami'y magkasintahan pa lamang ng aking mister ay lagi na po kaming dumadayo tuwing Miyerkules upang makapag-novena maging ito ay pasasalamat o novena ng kahilingan, at eto nga pong nakaraang abente ng Abril ay natugunan ang pinakamimithi naming kahilingan: ang makapagtapos sa kursong Medisina ang aking

kabiyak. Salamat po sa Panginoon, at sa inyo Mahal na Ina, dahil nasuklian ang apat na taong paghihirap at pagpupuyat sa pag-aaral ng aking mister, upang marating niya ang kinalalagyan niya ngayon. Palibhasa'y lumaki kaming dalawa na salat sa materyal na bagay, at mulat sa paghihirap ng mga tao sa aming paligid lalong lalo kapag nakakakita kami ng mga batang pulubi sa paligid ng simbahan, ay ipinangangako naming magtulungan sa pamamagitan ng paggamit sa aming mga pinag-aralan upang maibsan ang karamdaman ng mga batang lansangan. Balak po kasi ng aking mister na magpakadalubhasa sa panggagamot sa mga bata (Pediatrician) upang sa abot ng aming makakaya ay makapaghatid ng libreng serbisyo at maibalik ang lahat ng grasyang tinatamasa namin sa ngayon.

Even when we were not yet married, we always came here [to the shrine] every Wednesday to pray the novena, either to thank you or to ask for favors. This last 20th of April, you answered our most urgent request: my husband finally finished his studies in Medicine. Thanks to you, Lord, and also to you, dear Mother, because my husband's four years of hardship and long sleepless nights during review days finally paid off, putting him where he is now. As both of us grew up with paucity of material possessions and therefore sensitive to the poverty of people around us, especially the street children we see around the church, we promise to help each other by using our education to ease the suffering of street children. My husband is planning to specialize in being a Pediatrician so that, insofar as we are able, we can provide free services and give back [*maibalik*] all the graces that we have at present.

These two devotees speak of similar concerns about their need to pass examinations. However, while there was explicit reference to the performance of religious acts as a way of “paying back” in the 1951 letter, such reference is at best implicit in the 2006 letter, where the devotee mentions an intention to “give back” by helping others. Exemplars of two historical periods, these letters allow us to surmise a shift in devotees’ notions of moral obligations from one with “sacramental” undertones to one based on a broad ethical view.

The Incorporation of the Perpetual Help Devotion into the Urban Center

The increasing popularity of the Perpetual Help Devotion at the heart of Metro Manila allows for a nuanced articulation of the relationship between popular religion and urban modernity. A nuanced assessment of the interplay between religious forms and “industrial and postindustrial cityscapes” (Orsi 1999, 43) may be made when popular religion is distinguished from folk religion (the latter understood as comprising agriculture-based religious practices in rural areas). Urban popular religion hinges on an understanding of transitions that tend to weaken local ties toward “mobilization/incorporation toward the centre” (Mouzelis 1999, 143). The incorporation of religious forms in the “modern city” leads to the near-complete separation of the sacred from the secular, and religious buildings as “officially sacred” edifices are distinguished from the secular space that surrounds it (Kong 2001). The distinction, however, remains contested as religious agents do not impose the strict sacred–secular divide: in their “religious imagination” of places, agents sacralize not only shrines but also streets, workplaces, and homes (cf. Hervieu-Leger 2002). To explain how religion can condition the direction of urban growth is theoretically more consistent than to conceive urban modernity and popular religion as diametrically opposite.

The onset of the transformation of Baclaran itself was brought about by, among other factors, the “pilgrimage-based economy” centered on the Perpetual Help shrine (cf. Ambrosio and Pereira 2007). In the 1930s Baclaran was a predominantly fishing village that was in a peripheral status vis-à-vis the highly urbanized city of Manila. The first Perpetual Help shrine in Baclaran, built in 1932, functioned mainly as a rural mission church. The Chronicles of the Baclaran community (henceforth, “Chronicles”) show that until 1947 most of the attendees of the Perpetual Help shrine’s activities were the local fisher folk. In an entry dated 24 December 1947 the priests noted, “we had the usual midnight Mass here in Baclaran. The church was crowded out by 10:30 PM mostly by the *barrio* folk, so that quite a number who came in cars were forced to go elsewhere. The church has grown too small for the congregation that attends it.”

Today the picture is starkly different. The Perpetual Help shrine attracts devotees way beyond its immediate geographical territory, eventually becoming a translocal place of worship (fig. 2). Baclaran is the densest barangay of Parañaque City, thanks to the considerable number of small-



Fig. 2. Devotees taking photos of the carriage with an image of the Mother of Perpetual Help on the feast day procession, 27 June 2010

and medium-sized commercial establishments there (Planning and Development Coordinator's Office 2009). The busiest streets of Parañaque surround the shrine, where the weekly influx of devotees attracts commercial ventures.

The year 1948 marked the turning point in the history of the Perpetual Help Devotion with the commencement of the communal novena, which helped spread the shrine's reputation beyond Baclaran. In the years following 1948, the number of devotees who were not Baclaran residents increased significantly. According to the *Chronicles*, the first Perpetual Novena on 23 June 1948 attracted an estimated seventy participants. A year later there were already eight novena schedules, and during the 5:00 PM and 6:00 PM sessions the crowds spilled over outside the small chapel. The steep rise in the number of devotees occasioned two renovations of the church building, with the present structure able to accommodate 2,000 persons sitting and an additional 9,000 persons standing. These changes coincided with the

decline of fishing-related activities (Jacinto et al. 2007), the commencement of infrastructure improvements and land reclamation, and the steep rise in commercial ventures.

The rise in the number of devotees brought about a marked change in the shrine compound and its surroundings. The pilgrimage-based economy altered the commercial life of the district and conditioned the subsequent expansion of the shrine itself (cf. Ambrosio and Pereira 2007). Various reports in the *Chronicles* pointed to the rise of businesses along streets adjacent to the shrine, including "morally reprehensible" ones like a casino (reported in 1947) and some nightclubs (reported from 1959 to 1960). Religious authorities also dealt with the issue of sidewalk vending as early as 1949, when they complained about private property owners who encouraged vending along the streets, thus making movement quite difficult for devotees.

The increasing articulation of material interests in the Perpetual Help novena prayers amid the instabilities of urban living has demonstrated that religious and moral significations suffuse the capitalist economy in ways that transform motivations for engaging in economic exchange. The appeal of the communal novena devotion has rested largely on its emphasis on bodily well-being and material security, alongside other spiritual favors. The novena prayers seem to resonate with expressions of "temporal well-being," conditioned by the particular struggles of Manila residents, such as after the devastation of the Second World War when they had to cope with a depressed economy and slow infrastructural improvements.

Aside from the type of diversification discussed so far, the Perpetual Help shrine has also been at the forefront of an emerging religious pluralism, with the increasing visibility of Muslim migrants in Baclaran since the 1990s. Muslim settlers from Mindanao, intending to capitalize on the crowds of devotees frequenting the shrine, have initiated business ventures in the area. They have remained, however, mostly at the periphery of the district's commercial life, often resorting to street vending that increasingly has led to feelings of suspicion and unrest among long-time merchants. Akin to many places in the metropolis, the encounter between Christians and Muslims in Baclaran is characterized by hierarchized conviviality, "a structure of urban social stratification resulting from processes of 'othering' identities and groups that do not conform to standards imposed by traditional elite forces" (Sapitula 2014, 143). In this case it is inevitable for pluralization to carry overtly religious undertones, as Christian residents and devotees in Baclaran encounter Muslim migrants in closer proximity.

The implications of such encounters transcend religion and spill over into the fray of everyday interactions, economic exchange, and law enforcement. The interaction of Christians and Muslims in Baclaran raises issues about how religious pluralism alters the direction of urban transitions. The need for a “culture of sustainable pluralism” rests on the principle that in our cities religion is public in character, and the move toward diversification ought to consider religion’s role in shaping urban spaces. In the case of Baclaran a “culture of sustainable pluralism” has to be intentionally molded by state agents, religious organizations, and other stakeholders precisely because internal migration has resulted in the increasing visibility of alternative religious identities. This pluralistic mindset brings with it the imperative of including the religious dimension in guiding the direction of urban planning, so that diversification offers new possibilities for intercultural encounter and minimizes divisive tendencies among different communities and interests.

Regulation of Piety and Modernity in the Perpetual Help Devotion

The increasing complexity of devotional identities and urban transitions has prompted religious authorities to closely regulate the conduct of prayers and devotional practices as well as the expectations of devotees. This increasing ecclesiastical presence in devotional practices resonates with what Ribeiro de Oliveira (1994) identifies as the regulation of privatized Catholicism of the masses, that is, church- or shrine-based devotions organized by religious authorities. Understanding this variant of Catholic popular religion acknowledges the inherent power dynamics that impinge on the devotee’s “private” and “public” relationship with the saint in regulated spaces like a church or shrine. This power-laden relationship has led scholars to emphasize how popular religious practices respond to regulation, taking into account the “differential logics” on which such practices are based (Parker 1996; cf. Blancarte 2000).

Historical studies have shown that the regulation of devotional practices is not new. Ecclesiastical officials actively regulated the use of amulets and symbols of faith since the third century (van den Broeck 1979). In the context of that era, the regulation of popular piety was intended to resist the conflation between Christian and purportedly pagan practices, a feature that prevailed throughout the Middle Ages in Europe. What varied was not the act of regulation, but the intention behind attempts to manage the piety

of lay followers. In the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation, religious authorities exercised control over popular religious practices in shrines and elsewhere to respond to stinging criticisms that equated Catholicism with superstition. In the face of the challenges posed by modern transitions, the intent of regulation has again shifted toward the alignment of religious practices with emerging conditions and needs afforded by contemporary arrangements in order to retain their relevance.

Religious authorities in the Perpetual Help shrine have demonstrated their regulative intent throughout the years by taking necessary steps to “rationalize” religious practices, in order to distinguish them from “magical” or “superstitious” ones. Religious authorities assess and evaluate devotional practices in the Perpetual Help shrine to bring them closer to approved and recommended normative standards (cf. Long 1987). Regulation in this sense includes the alignment of devotional practices (novenas, veneration of images and relics, and pilgrimages, among others) to official rites (Benediction of the Sacrament, celebration of the mass, and other forms of liturgical prayer) as a means to increase the laity’s participation in church life (McSweeney 1980). In elite-sponsored popular religion, religious authorities act as “domesticating agents” to ensure that devotional exercises are kept within the range of acceptable standards. This devotional policing calls to mind Weber’s (1956/1978) excursus on ethical behavior (the rationalization of personal conduct), wherein rational-legal forms of control lead to the professionalization of clerical authority itself (van der Veer 1988).

Such regulative control over practices is active in the shrine, as seen for instance in how the rites of the blessing of religious articles begin with a reminder that the ritual is similar to *pagmamano* (the practice of placing the hand of an elderly person on one’s forehead to seek their blessing) and that having religious articles blessed does not transform them into *anting-anting* (amulets). In other instances religious authorities recommend “approved” forms of piety. Lighting votive candles, for one, is perceived as a “theologically sound” devotional practice that has a prayerful character, and a separate chapel has been constructed for this purpose. The touching or wiping of the saints’ images is tolerated, although too much display of emotion toward images might mean a “misplaced” view and is frowned upon. Lastly religious authorities discourage devotees from walking on their knees as it involves self-inflicted punishment. This practice is perceived as “individualistic,” especially because it is purportedly utilized as leverage for obtaining divine favor.

Apart from devotional practices, religious authorities also regulate how volunteers and close associates as well as ordinary lay people attending the novena sessions articulate their devotional identities, e.g., as “committed” versus “rank-and-file” devotees. In this regard the regulation of piety ultimately involves the “production” of the appropriate devotee, that is, the



Fig. 3. Devotees walking on their knees on the center aisle of the Perpetual Help shrine, 30 December 2009

devotee who conforms to given institutional goals and expectations. This type of devotional regulation seeks to effect qualitative changes in devotees’ life trajectory, by aligning the performance of religious acts with motivations that transcend “ritualistic” and “individualistic” ends. The expected change of orientation entails something quite profound insofar as it impinges on devotees’ identity claims and perceptions (cf. Alvesson and Willmott 2002).

In this light, religious authorities place a premium on the relationship between practices and normative standards. The notion of “correct practice” rests on the ability of devotees to control strong displays of emotion (restraint) and “see the bigger picture” of devotional practice (fig. 3). Committed devotees I interviewed also expressed how religious devotion ought to transcend individual needs. One female devotee explained (3 March 2010):

Dahil nagtrabaho ako dito sa Redemptorist, hindi lang, hindi lang yung parang personal eh. Pati minsan nga, yung, minsan yung pangkalahatan, ganon. Mula sa—mula sa community, mula sa pamilya, kaibigan, bayan at buong—buong mundo. Kasi kailangan mong i-hingi din yun. Katulad ngayon, ‘di ba? Yung nangyayari sa—sa lipunan, nangyayari sa kalikasan. Parang, parang wala kang mahingan ng tulong kungdi intervention ng Diyos, ‘di ba? Lalo na—tagtuyot. Anong gagawin, ‘di ba? Talagang magdadasal ka na lang. Hindi—hindi lang para sa sarili mo . . . Kaya pinagdadasal ko talagang umulan. Yung tipong ganun na hindi lang ako ang magbe-benefit, hindi lang yung pamilya ko, hindi lang yung kaibigan ko.

Maybe because I work here with the Redemptorists, it [devotional life] is not for my personal needs alone. Sometimes, even the universal ones—from the community, family, friends, the nation, and even the whole world—you also need to pray for these things. You cannot really ask anyone but God’s help in these matters, right? Especially during droughts, for instance, what can you do? You can only pray about it. You do not only pray for yourself . . . that is why I am praying hard that the rains will come. It’s really praying for things that not only I can benefit, not only my family and my friends.

In terms of discourse, the appeal to “integral evangelization” in official shrine newsletters and promotional materials emphasizes this supposed need to integrate faith and everyday practice. The Perpetual Help shrine is expected to assume a more active role by influencing devotees’ mindset about the exercise of their religious devotion. How this “integral evangelization” figures in identity claims is exemplified by statements about the characteristics of “true devotion,” which is perceived as “mission-oriented” and “socially conscious.” Since 2010 notions like *deboto-misyonero/a* (devotee-missionary) and *debo(mi)syon*² have been the subject of homilies, posters, and magazine articles. The message of *debo(mi)syon* proposes a synthesis between religious expression and social awareness, arguing that diminution of either constitutes an incomplete or misdirected devotional practice.

As can be gleaned from this discussion, the Perpetual Help Devotion typifies modern popular religion insofar as it resonates with more rationalized forms of practice. This move toward rationalization obliterates supposed “superstitious” elements, which can range from expectations of miracles to attempts to tame certain “magical powers” through the observance of ritual acts (cf. Sharot 2001; Thomas 1971). In the Philippine context religiously inspired rationalization stemmed from the need to modify devotional practices to cater to the temperament of early-twentieth-century Catholicism. The Perpetual Help Devotion was framed to be different from earlier “localized” forms of Marian piety, like devotions to Nuestra Señora de Caysasay (Batangas), Manaoag (Pangasinan), or Peñafrancia (Bicol), among others. In order to maintain the relevance of devotional practices in public life, religious authorities have championed doctrinally conscious devotional practices to attract new generations of Catholics, most of whom are not particularly attached to the Hispanic-oriented religiosity of the past. Rationalization is the response taken by institutional and individual agents to accommodate shifting conditions that offer challenges and opportunities for devotional practice.

Devotees confronted with this regulative intent, however, are also active agents who make sense of ecclesiastical regulation as one among many sources of action. Devotees’ accounts reveal that elite regulation is perceived as an important dimension in religious practice. The vast majority of devotees, however, do not taken official regulation as an immutable guide. The devotee acts as a *bricoleur*, that is, one who is

adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project . . . The set of the ‘bricoleur’s’ means cannot therefore be defined in terms of a project . . . [but] only by its potential use or, putting this another way and in the language of the “bricoleur” himself, because the elements are collected or retained on the principle that ‘they may always come in handy.’ (Levi-Strauss 1962/1966, 17–18)

The notion of religious practices as *bricolage* has implications on devotees’ responses to ecclesiastical regulation. In their letters devotees frame moral action not only by the interplay of institutionally informed moral vocabularies but also by notions of personal well-being and webs of social relationships. In this regard devotional practices transcend unidimensional notions of practice in that they pay simultaneous attention to varying systems of evaluating everyday experience.

Conclusion

Marian piety in the Perpetual Help Devotion qualifies as a form of modern popular religion. As such it can be adequately conceptualized around pivotal points such as historical transitions, the changing character of devotional regulation, and urbanization. These markers allow the inquiry to proceed beyond the strictures of notions such as “folk religion” and “incomplete institutionalization” (e.g., Mensching 1964; Bock 1966). An exemplar of modern popular religion as the creative refashioning of religious practices, the Perpetual Help Devotion has been configured into increasingly complex urban and institutional arrangements. At the same time, this form of popular religion has involved the “turn to the self,” with devotees or religious agents crafting “modern religious lives” in shaping their life trajectories.

The devotional accounts presented in this article reveal that ideas of well-being and moral action have been shaped by factors such as moral vocabularies imposed by the institution and the network of one’s personal relationships with others. This finding highlights the necessity of reorienting our understanding of popular religion in two ways. First, devotional practices heed various ways of reflecting everyday experiences and thus go beyond one-dimensional notions of practice. Second, there is sufficient reason to surmise that modern popular religion is concerned

with an “ethic of self-care.” As Michel Foucault (1986, 53) asserted, caring for oneself need not be understood as withdrawing from social life by “going inward”; on the contrary, “the care of the self—or the attention one devotes to the care that others should take of themselves—appears then as an intensification of social relations.” This increased attention accorded to interaction with others directs the inquiry toward the social implications of popular religious practices insofar as they are involved in constructing identities and self-understandings.

This process of configuration into modern sensibilities demonstrates that the modern need not always be perceived as a threat to religious practice. On the contrary, modern conditions can provide resources and motivations which, when creatively utilized, can even encourage religious belief and practice. As Christl Kessler (2006) puts it in her assessment of charismatic Christianity in the Philippines, creative syntheses enable adherents to be “genuinely religious” and yet “genuinely modern.” The same may be said of modern popular religion: the continuing relevance of Marian piety in the Philippines suggests that nothing in modernity is inherently hostile to religious practice, although certain aspects of modernity may pose challenges. Individual and institutional agents, therefore, need to avail themselves of the opportunities and resources afforded by modern conditions, so that religious practices continue to cater to devotees’ temperaments and needs.

The mechanisms of “strategic accommodation” utilized by religious authorities and devotees discussed here have enabled them to portray the relevance of religious practice in the face of emerging challenges. Done against the backdrop of urban transitions and differing devotional expectations, this configuring process is complex, multifaceted, and sustained. Moreover this process entails a tough balancing act between, on the one hand, preserving the institutional integrity of religious beliefs and practices and, on the other hand, opening possibilities for expansive engagements with exigencies on the ground. This configuring act has produced different expectations from both religious authorities and ordinary devotees. The tensions, however, serve as dynamic grounds for the production of meaningful and relevant practices and ways of thinking. They thus prove beneficial to religious practice because they allow both sides to engage each other’s expectations and meaning-making schemes.

In its various forms, modern popular religion allows social science inquiry to understand the complexity involved in the interface between religion

and modernity itself. Michael Carroll (1989) notes that it is better to speak of “Catholicisms” (in the plural) to account for the myriad ways by which the Catholic tradition is appropriated. Observations have also been made regarding Catholicism’s recent “shift of center,” from Europe to the Global South, particularly in Africa and Latin America. The vibrancy of religious practices in these continents, as well as in the Philippines (as the only country in Asia with a majority of the population comprising of Catholics), necessarily leads to a shift in outlook in assessing the relevance of religion in modern life. The sustained treatment of modern popular religion in this study contributes toward that direction. Indeed the Philippine experience offers important benchmarks toward a broader theorizing of the sociological relevance of religious practice in contemporary society.

The plurality and dynamism of Marian piety in the Philippine context strongly suggest that there is no singular way to account for what is “Catholic” today. The demand for fuller theoretical engagements is met not only by downplaying emerging differences but also by understanding them more fully and integrating them into conceptual maps. As demonstrated in this study, even in the case of “elite-sponsored” Marian piety different orientations and regulative capacities render the Perpetual Help Devotion highly pluriform. This ongoing diversification in devotional forms is the unfolding trajectory that has been treaded by Catholicism in order to adjust to the exigencies of modern life. The success of various agents in dealing with strains associated with this process of diversification assures Catholicism of its continued relevance in public life.

Notes

This article is a revised version of a paper originally presented at the Eleventh Conference of the Asia Pacific Sociological Association (APSA), Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City, 22–24 Oct. 2012. The editorial office thanks Jacqueline Marie D. Jacinto for her help in preparing the manuscript of this article for publication.

- 1 The term “creative fidelity” was introduced by philosopher Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973) in his attempt to expand what it means to show obedience and faithfulness. In his discussion of the concept, he counterposes notions of openness and variability to the traditional emphases on deference and constancy.
- 2 “Debo(mi)syon” is a Tagalog neologism that combines *devotion* and *mission* in one word.

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