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## **Experiencing Transcendence: Filipino Conversion Narratives and the Localization of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity**

Filomeno V. Aguilar Jr.

*In contrast to functionalist explanations for the spread of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity, this article discursively analyzes conversion narratives to understand the localization of a global cultural phenomenon. The narratives were drawn from interviews, conducted in 2005, with members of the El Shaddai and Jesus-is-Lord movements. Approached from the perspective of critical realism, the narratives embody a diversity of plots, creative tensions, and distinctively Filipino elements that speak of a reconstituted self and a new engagement with society. They reveal the informants' grappling with the question of God's existence, which finds resolution in individualized experiences of transcendence that generate and infuse local meanings to Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity.*

*KEYWORDS: conversion narratives, experience, localization, critical realism, language*

A burgeoning social science literature chronicles the globalization of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity within a hundred years of its acknowledged beginnings in the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles, California, in 1906 (Jenkins 2002; Coleman 2000; van der Veer 1996; Poewe 1994).<sup>1</sup> These studies highlight a universal pattern in which personal religious experience is emphasized, the Bible is central, and belief in the Holy Spirit is most prominent. Much of the literature rightly situates this phenomenal spread, and by implication the large-scale conversions, in their social and historical contexts (e.g., Gamarra 2000; Hunt,

Hamilton, and Walter 1997; Hefner 1993). At the same time, the literature also points to important differences in the characteristics of movements and their social consequences as versions of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity get rooted in different parts of the world. By and large, however, the explanations for what is now recognized as a key element of cultural globalization draw largely from a functionalist perspective: analysts “routinely deploy broad sociological arguments about the role of deprivation and anomie in fostering the growth of ecstatic, sectarian, and millenarian religious movements” (Robbins 2004, 123).

Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity’s engagement with modernity, however, is frequently emphasized. One of the field’s foremost analysts, David Martin (1990, 2002) stresses that dislocated migrants as well as women and other marginalized groups in Latin America and elsewhere find in these new types of churches spaces to develop an alternative modernity and distinctive social structures that liberate from the past, without overtly challenging the political establishment. With its stress on individualism, these churches succeed on the basis of capitalist-type growth and marketing strategies. Synthesizing the literature, Joel Robbins (2004) argues that the global explosion of this type of Christianity can be explained by its cultural dynamics, which allows its reproduction along a standard, Western form and the preservation of its distinctiveness as it travels around the world while, at the same time, enabling it to dialogue with the local culture and even produce indigenized variants.

In the Philippines, studies of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity have focused mainly on the El Shaddai movement, which emerged in 1984 as an outgrowth of a radio broadcast.<sup>2</sup> These studies similarly underscore the functionalist angle, with explanations of the movement’s success attributed to factors such as its utility in finding solutions to personal problems within a meaningful frame of beliefs and actions (Sanchez 2002; Vargas 1998); its cultural familiarity in being rooted in Filipino folk Catholicism and popular devotions (Mercado 2001); its provision to members of a community where they can feel accepted and integrated (Sanchez 2003); the attractive liturgy, enthusiastic atmosphere, and entertainment value of its gatherings and prayer rallies (Mercado 2001; Sanchez 2003); the movement’s organizational dynamics

and pragmatic economic assistance to members (Vargas 1998); the communication skills and effectiveness of its leader-preacher, Mariano Velarde, popularly known as Brother Mike (Osorio 2001; Mercado 2001); and the group's political salience (Jamon 1998).<sup>3</sup>

The prominence of functionalism dates back to the earliest theorizing by Emile Durkheim, whose *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* laid down the basic tenets of functionalist thought in the study of religious belief. Many insights are gained from functionalism, but it has its limits. Robert Althaus (1990) has pointed to the existence of the "instrumental paradox" in popular religion in which those who seek to fulfill certain needs through religious practice tend not to fulfill them, whereas those who fulfill those needs did not have them as their intentional goal. Focusing on the conceptual distinction between, on the one hand, instrumental or utilitarian action and, on the other hand, symbolic and moral action that is often seen as disinterested, David Smilde (2003) underscores the theoretical problem of "intentional" belief as violative of the relative autonomy of culture. Alternative approaches that go beyond functionalism are needed. In this light, this article discursively and empathetically analyzes conversion narratives to understand the generation and infusion of local meanings to Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity in the Philippines.

### **Conversion Narratives and Language**

Harvey Cox (1995) distinguishes between "fundamentalist" religions that concentrate on doctrinal purity, such as Christian Fundamentalism, and those of the "experientialist" kind that emphasize the ability of adherents to experience the transcendent. With its stress on experience, Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity belongs to the latter. The centrality of "experience" demands that it ought to be the object of study. However, experience is a complex and ambiguous category and "notoriously slippery" (Carrette 2002, lix),<sup>4</sup> and the experience of what is demarcated as religious conversion is undoubtedly difficult to study. If we are to eschew studies that assume religious experience to be reducible to the psychological, neurological, or even pathological, the closest that a social scientist has as a handle to studying conversion are the

stories that converts tell about that experience.<sup>5</sup> Despite problems of representation, mediated knowledge, and contextual factors, stories of religious experience can be analyzed without violence to the meanings intended by the narrators.

The first attempt to analyze conversion narratives is William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* where, a century ago, he famously defined conversion in terms of a reconstitution of a once-divided self:

To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace . . . are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities. This at least is what conversion signifies in general terms, whether or not we believe that a direct divine operation is needed to bring such a moral change about. (James 1902/2002, 150)

James's study has been criticized, marginalized, but recently revalorized (e.g., Viswanathan 1998, 82–87; also Geertz 2000, 167–86). Albeit imperfect, his pioneering method of gathering narratives and interpreting them has remained relevant.

The only other major study of religious conversion narratives is Peter Stromberg's (1993) *Language and Self-Transformation*. Stromberg's sophisticated analysis of what converts say and how they say it (including voice inflections) argues that conversion is not an event external to language but is itself constituted in the very ritual act of narrating the self—a point consistent with regnant literary theories on the narrative construction of reality (e.g., Bruner 1991). Change in the individual is not denied. However, Stromberg argues against a referential theory of language, which appears to have informed James's work. What goes on in the narration is a performance that deals with the individual's unarticulated personal issues and resolves them by recourse to canonical, or symbolic, language that pertains to something enduring and goes beyond everyday life. His analysis denies the possibility that the informants actually underwent a religious experience, and removes the divine from discussion. Stromberg's analysis, in effect, depicts a conversion narrative as a simple language game.

Critiques of Stromberg's work have pointed out that in ignoring the informants' own interpretations of their experiences Stromberg treats his subjects as mere "specimen, dissecting rather than giving voice" (Peacock 1994, 989; also Gullestad 1996). His strategy of distilling the subjects' "unacknowledged aims" and projecting them back onto the subjects "as problems they themselves seek to solve" indicates that "what is being hypostatized is the model of the researcher, not the lived reality of the people being researched" (Kulick 1994, 757). With the recorded speech stripped of the meaning of the storytellers, the analyst proceeds to make his own inferences without regard for the informants and their world of meaning.

An analogous debate had surfaced in the 1970s in Southeast Asian studies, when social scientists began to make sense of peasant millenarian movements in the colonial and postcolonial periods (Benda 1972; Benda and Castles 1972). As Anderson (1977) points out, scholars mimicked colonial authorities in their response to peasant movements: the power-laden interrogator does not listen: "The only thing they never do is to take seriously what the people in the millenarian movements had to say" (*ibid.*, 49). Anderson attributes this attitude to the unbridgeable cosmological divide that separates the interrogator from the interrogated, the imperialist from the colonial subject, the scholar from the peasant informant. As in Saminism, language represented and constituted the unbridgeable chasm. The only way for a Saminist to begin to make sense to an outsider is for him to speak in the language of the latter; however, when this happens, the Saminist has ceased to be one (Shiraishi 1990). With the division intact, the worldview of the peasant seems so obviously in need of understanding and explanation, but the worldview of the colonial ruler and the scholar is never questioned as also needing understanding and explanation. We are in the midst of epistemic politics that paradoxically wants to hear the informant without really listening to what she or he says. For the interlocutor, language represents the moment of puzzlement (Anderson 1977). And so it would seem for Stromberg.

In their review of narratives of personal experience, Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps (1996) suggest that, although narrative and self are deeply intertwined, narrative and experience are conceptually separable.

The inseparability of narrative and self is grounded in the phenomenological assumption that entities are given meaning through being experienced . . . and the notion that narrative is an essential resource in the struggle to bring experiences to conscious awareness. At any point in time, our sense of entities, including ourselves, is an outcome of our subjective involvement in the world. Narrative mediates this involvement. (Ibid., 21)

Thus, experience is not reducible to language, which provides tools for narrating and making sense of experiences that, in turn, lead to knowledge of self and of the world.

Ochs and Capps emphasize that narrator and listener are both involved in narration, and processually become coauthors: "Narratives are tales that tellers and listeners map onto tellings of personal experience. In this sense, even the most silent of listeners is an author of an emergent narrative" (ibid.). Moreover, every telling provides both narrator and listener with "an opportunity for fragmented self-understanding" (ibid., 22), given that only certain facets of selfhood are brought into the apprehension of narratives. In any event, the "tellings of personal experience are always fragmented intimations of experience" (ibid., 21).

### **Critical Realism**

If we are to avoid lapsing into an imperialist disregard of religious converts and their stories à la Stromberg, we need to take conversion narratives seriously despite the limitations inherent in the act of narrating. In this task, a school of critical realists have begun to map out some general directions that are useful in demarcating the general theoretical terrain for this study. Among its leading proponents are Margaret Archer, Andrew Collier, and Douglas Porpora (2004), who are social scientists and theists at the same time. Because they posit that ontology and epistemology should not be conflated, they are committed to the principle of God's ontological realism but also assert that epistemic relativism means that judgments about reality and one's experiences of it are socially and historically situated; each one is positioned to see, experience, and know ontological reality differently. They hold the view



that "God manifests himself and is accessible in a variety of different ways experientially" (*ibid.*, 5).

Critical realists take religious experience as a valid category for analysis, although the experience may be falsified. Religious experiences, like other human experiences, entail emotions. Importantly, experiences "come to us already partially interpreted" (*ibid.*, 4). Thus, interpretation is integral to the conversion experience, and to any experience for that matter. Critical realists contend that the absence of religious experience is itself a kind of experience, subject to social and historical contexts. With the goal of establishing a level playing field for religion and secular ideas in order that reasoned debate may ensue, Archer et al. argue that "whereas the religious and non-religious approach the objective data asymmetrically, the rationality and validity of their respective beliefs must be treated symmetrically" (*ibid.*, 5). Bracketing aside ontological judgment, they assert the following minimal position: The absence of religious experience will make it rational for an atheist to disbelieve in transcendent reality; in similar vein, the experience of transcendent reality will make it rational for the believer to believe in transcendent reality.

An important issue in dealing with religious narratives, such as those in a social scientific study like this, is whether the meanings are purely individual, or whether they must be located in the social. Although James's context at the start of the twentieth century was one that had moved decidedly toward the privatization of religious belief, at the end of that century Geertz (2000, 167–86) would assert the decline of purely individual meaning. For Geertz the meaning of religious belief is found in the social. As a critical realist, however, Archer (2004) is wary of methodological individualism, but cautions against a purely sociocentric account. Her argument pushes social scientists to consider the reality of divine action as apprehended by individuals and as expressed by them within the limits of language. This study takes the position that narratives of religious conversion must be considered within the broader social and historical contexts in which these are told; nonetheless, the emphasis on the social tends to ignore individual meaning, to which therefore this study opts to give prominence. Additionally, the study is open to the possibility of divine action as interpreted by

the narrator. As Archer argues, “social theorising cannot evade hermeneutics—the need to understand what prompts an active agent to act” (ibid., 144). The narrators in this study act on the basis of religious experiences and their interpretations of it; thus, the study seeks to give voice to those experiences and discern what they imply for the central question of the localization of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity.

### **The Informant-Narrators**

As part of a larger study undertaken by the Institute of Philippine Culture (IPC), Ateneo de Manila University, fifteen El Shaddai affiliates were interviewed during the months of April and May 2005, while another fifteen members of the Jesus-is-Lord (JIL) Church<sup>6</sup> were interviewed from May to July 2005 in various places around Metro Manila. A common set of guide questions was used in the interviews, all which were conducted by Mr. Lou Antolihao, then research associate of the IPC. The key informants were identified through the snowballing technique and by simply chancing upon individuals during gatherings of these groups. The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. However, only thirteen of the fifteen El Shaddai interviews were useable because, in two cases, the tape recorder malfunctioned and the field notes were not useful for purposes of detailed retelling.

On the whole, the informants from the two groups were about the same age, the mean for El Shaddai followers being 45 years, for JIL 46.7 years. Of the El Shaddai informants 8 of the 15 were females, while among the JIL informants 9 of the 15 were males. In each group, 12 of the 15 informants had acquired some college education; college graduates numbered 5 in El Shaddai and 7 in JIL. Among the El Shaddai informants 8 of the 15 were gainfully employed, 4 were directly involved with the movement as preachers or volunteers, while 3 were unemployed. Among the 15 from the JIL Church, 10 informants were gainfully employed, 1 was a student, 1 was a housewife, 2 were retired, and 1 was a full-time church volunteer.

Indicative of long-term commitment, the mean number of years of adherence to the El Shaddai movement was 13 years, while the coun-

terpart figure among the JIL followers was 12 years. Some informants had been with El Shaddai since its inception in 1984, while one JIL informant had been with the movement since 1980, or two years after it began. For both groups some informants had been with the movement for only about a year at the time of the interviews, which may be indicative of these movements' capacity to attract new members. Four informants emphasized that the year of affiliation with the movement was not the same year in which they underwent a religious experience. It is not unusual for members to have joined other groups before affiliating with either El Shaddai or the JIL Church.

Admittedly, the original plan of this study was guided by a functionalist concern to find out what made these movements and their organizations attract members, how members are recruited, and how members assist in drawing in more individuals to expand the base of membership. Only upon close examination of the data did it become apparent that the informants were narrating stories that did not conform to the study's original intent. A different perspective had to be found, which now informs this article.

### **The Interviews**

At the outset, Mr. Antolihao had minimal personal knowledge about the movements covered by this study. In a sense he was a "neutral" interviewer, but he was also genuinely interested in what the informants had to say. He would later reveal to me that he admired how the informants were able to change their lives, and considered his interview experience as part of his own spiritual journey. He was 28 years old at that time, and considerably younger than most informants. He had earned a Master's degree, but his interviewees were also educated and articulate. Yet, Mr. Antolihao would also admit that he was not totally devoid of skepticism, in the midst of which he strove to be open-minded. He would look back and ponder whether the informants sensed his skepticism, for he thought that many felt defensive (probably caused by negative reactions to earlier tellings), which would explain why many informants asked a lot of questions before they agreed to be interviewed. Their stories were so personal, and on some

occasions informants were teary-eyed, or ended up crying, while narrating the events that led to their conversion. Other informants, however, were aggressive and seized the interview to evangelize the interviewer, who endured patiently such aggressiveness (and several “baptisms”) as an inevitable part of fieldwork.

The interviews were far from the power-laden interrogation of peasant members of millenarian movements. Nonetheless, a gulf did separate the interviewer from the interviewee, as Mr. Antolihao admits. The interviewer’s inability to connect fully with his interviewee is signaled by Fabian’s statement after recounting his religious experience: *kailangan ikaw din mismo ang makaranas . . . Kailangan maranasan mo ‘yung paghipo eh. Mabirap ipaliwanag* (you yourself need to experience . . . You need to experience the touch. It’s hard to explain). The assertion that “it’s hard to explain” establishes the ideational divide, and the inability of words to bridge it.

Apart from this gulf, the tellings are conformable with the usual unfolding of personal narratives (Ochs and Capps 1996). The informants look back and recapture an experience within a set of events that are made to cohere in relation to the outcome. In their narration they already possess a vocabulary for making sense of what transpired. Their speech acts are irremediably that of the believer, regardless of attempts to invite in the interviewer into their world. The informants speak in their distinctive canonical language, employing words, terms, and phrases that have distinctive ingroup meanings. Terms like *gawain* (service), *panyo* (handkerchief), covenant, and El Shaddai have their own peculiar meanings to members of the El Shaddai movement. Terms like born again, prayer of acceptance, salvation, and of course Jesus is Lord have their own signification to adherents of the JIL movement, which would not be shared by nonmembers.

Despite the complexities of any interview, the informants on the whole can be said to have been spontaneous in narrating aspects of their lives. Not rehearsed or contrived, the narratives differ in style, but not substance, from studied and prepared accounts given during religious services, or published for a mass readership (e.g., OMF 2004). Although narratives are always fragmentary, some of the stories

recorded in this study contain apparent gaps and others have no straightforward chronology. The style of narrating is punctuated by Filipino linguistic strategies, as will be discussed below, which would be edited away in something rehearsed or published. Nevertheless, the narratives constitute a type of performative act before a male interviewer, whose gender may have led males to be more elaborate in their telling than female informants.

Readers may note that, as the social scientist who must analyze the transcribed narrations, I have had my own religious experience, which sensitizes but also complicates my “empathetic register” (Archer 2000, 152). I have sought to distance myself from these narratives, but although not a member of either of the two movements in this study I remain in a way as some sort of an insider. Cognizance of this fact may guide readers in regarding or disregarding what I have to say about these conversion narratives.

### **Plot Structures**

Evoking a point of view, the structuring of the informants’ plots can be classified as that of the trapped, the swept, and the yearner. The labels are not mutually exclusive, and should be seen mainly as heuristic devices. However imperfectly, the labels attempt to capture the variant modes used by the narrators to describe their religious experiences. This article focuses on eight narratives, which are presented in detail in the appendix.

The story of “the trapped” depicts a life in crisis: the narrator portrays a problematic life, often filled with vices or ill temper. One often finds the excuse of being simply human, but the narrator portrays the cause of the crisis as uncontrollable. The personal turmoil deepens until, pushed to a corner, the narrator reaches a threshold. The narrator may then seek divine intervention, or pose a challenge to God. The life-changing moment in the story is then reached. This is the plot of the stories told by Fred and Wally.

In the story of “the swept” the narrator depicts a largely involuntary experience in which the person undergoes an experience that leads to

faith. The storyline highlights a supernatural event that sweeps along a person, who refers to something beyond the self that leads the individual into an unanticipated outcome. The experience of the divine may not be actively and consciously sought, and the story may even depict the preconversion self as scoffing at the practices of Pentecostal-charismatic Christians. The story of the swept—Minda, Lloyd, and Fabian—may be akin to the conversion story of Saul/Paul found in chapter 9 of the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament.

In the story of “the yearner” the narrator presents a self in search of personal transformation, such as moral integrity in one’s life and social world. Because “seeker” is often spiritualized, that term is avoided here, as the yearning may not be explicitly couched in spiritual terms. However, in this type of story one observes a pronounced search for the meaning in life, which eventuates in an experience of transcendence that results in an integrated self and social order. The stories of Angie, Nena, and Don may be read in this manner.

In these diverse plots, the self and divine agency are portrayed in direct interaction, often mediated only by soliloquies as forms of prayer. Other actors are involved in the story; they perform important but secondary roles in stories that become inexorably teleological.

### **Diversity, Nonlinearity, and Authenticity**

The stories tell us there is no generic conversion experience. Apart from diverse circumstances, the stories differ in that conversion may happen in a single moment, or in a protracted course. Among the trapped, Wally interprets his medical recovery as a miracle, and his story contains a single turning point, as in many a conventional story of conversion. Similarly, stories of the swept (Minda, Lloyd, and Fabian) and of yearners (Nena and Don) identify a specific episode that serves as a turning point in their lives. For many, attendance at a religious service becomes the defining moment, particularly a JIL service for Minda, Fabian, Nena, and Don. However, Wally’s hospital experience and Lloyd’s attempt to murder his wife while asleep at home serve as life-changing events that take place outside a designated religious space.

Among the nonconventional stories, El Shaddai adherents Angie and Fred describe their lives in ways that do not allow a single turning point to be identified. Angie says that she was attracted by what she saw as a radical character change in a friend, but we are not told if she felt suddenly mesmerized by the change or if the attraction went through a process of unfolding. Without knowing this, we cannot contextualize her friend's invitation to Angie to attend an El Shaddai gathering. At the same time, we do not know what transpired during the religious gathering that Angie attended. What we have are hints of a process of becoming, best expressed in the continuous present tense of such verbs as *nagiging matatag* (becoming immovable), *pakikinig at pagbabasa* (listening and reading), and *tumatatag* (becoming firm). Don may serve as a contrast to Angie in that he describes himself as having been amazed at a friend's transformed life, but he tells us his broader search for the truth. Don's friend's invitation to a JIL service is evidently easy to situate as the trigger of his conversion, which occurs during the religious gathering. We have no analogous information in Angie's narrative.

Fred offers a meandering view of his life. He undergoes a religious experience in 1992, claiming he "felt the presence of the Lord," which can well be seen as a moment of religious conversion. However, he drifts away (*nag-backslide*) until he reaches a point of severe crisis arising from the street troubles he had initiated, which land him in one court case after another. He is compelled to ask for divine help, and acts based on what he interprets as divine guidance to do what would have been unthinkable: ask forgiveness from those he had wronged, which leads to the dismissal of the cases against him. From one perspective his action of seeking forgiveness from those whom he had wronged may be interpreted as his way of buying himself out of the crisis. However, he tells us that his action was divinely inspired, which then leads him to feel a deep sense of gratitude: *nagkaroon ako ng utang na loob sa Panginoon*. *Utang na loob* (debt of the inside), conventionally rendered in English as debt of gratitude, is a profound expression of thankfulness, which in Filipino culture need not necessarily follow a patron's act of beneficence, especially since in a crisis situation a patron is deemed obligated to help (cf. Lynch 2004; Aguilar 2004, x). Fred

thus depicts his gratitude as a willful act. Yet, he admits that it was not a smooth process even after that point, and he says that only since 2000 has his walk with God been “straight.”

In Fred’s case conversion is a protracted rather than a single life-changing event. It diverges from the conventional Western genre of the conversion narrative, which follows the standard sequence of confession of guilt, personal epiphanies, and dedication to a new life. Indeed, the recounting of the preconversion self is not so much a form of confession as a strategy to explicate the eventual transformation in the person. Fred’s story, but also those of other informants, offers an autocritique of the self that, in many respects, is an ongoing critique.

Fred’s story of drifting away after an initial religious experience opens the possibility that there are those who can claim to have undergone a religious experience but whose stories may no longer be heard because they have since pursued a different course in life. They may have completely deconverted, and dissociated themselves from any religious group. Studies of deconversion (apostasy) are rare. To acknowledge this fact is to recognize that the “conversion experience” can be open-ended.

In their narrations, the informants evince a degree of authenticity in presenting both their pre- and postconversion selves. Guilt does not weigh heavily in their telling. The inner conversations with God, particularly in the yearner-type stories, are depicted in a similar way prior to and after conversion, with the preconversion self portrayed as somehow already in touch with the divine, and not just at the moment of conversion. This mode of presenting the preconversion self with sympathy (and probably self-forgiveness) agrees with the pervasive motif in Filipino cultural history of *awa* (pity) and *damay* (compassion) for others and, most probably, for the self as well (cf. Iletto 1979, Cannell 1999). It is also consistent with the emphasis on *kapwa* (other human beings) that will be discussed shortly. These Filipino conversion narratives therefore deviate from the Western genre, which underscores a linear movement from estrangement to authenticity (Viswanathan 1998, 82–87). To be credible, narrating self-transformation for a Filipino does not necessarily require self-deprecation and alienation.



### **Crisis, Moral Responsibility, and Reengagement with Society**

In some narratives the reader may detect some profound personal issues the narrators were grappling with in the past, or even at present. As Salvatore Cucchiari's (1988, 436) study of Pentecostal conversion in Sicily contends, "conversion is unimaginable without human crisis." Crisis is often depicted as *precipitating* conversion, and the crisis is frequently recognized in one form or other. Cucchiari argues that the "human vulnerability" to crisis is integral to the process of maturity and "is distinctly human as symboling and tool making" (ibid., 436–37). Crisis breaks reliance on self, which becomes open to divine action. However, other narratives in this study suggest that an intensely felt personal crisis need not always occur prior to conversion. In these cases there is no overt intentionality in seeking a religious experience. For example, Minda talks about the death of her father, which prevented her from going to college and compelled her to join the labor market immediately after high school. Nevertheless, her narrative, in the swept genre, shows no angst about the loss of a parent. In her story we see a lively character that comes to realize that she was in search of something vital in life only after she had undergone a religious experience. No great turmoil is portrayed as preceding or succeeding her conversion.

Although a conversion narrative need not be foregrounded in a human crisis, Cucchiari's argument about the creative potential of crisis is critical: "taking responsibility for the consequences of one's suffering . . . represents a pivotal moment in the maturing reorganization and reintegration of the self" (ibid., 427). The creative potential of crisis is found in the assumption of moral responsibility for one's actions, which implies "a risky commitment of self to new realities and consequences the convert only partially understands" (ibid., 428). A close look at the narratives reveals a palpable turn to moral responsibility.

Lloyd's story shows that he is no longer dominated by fits of jealousy; on the contrary, he explicitly talks of his postconversion problems as a series of tests of character (*tinetest yung ugali ko*) that leads him to act and respond differently from his preconversion self. He realizes that external objects are not at stake; rather, his temper and impulsiveness are. It dawns on him that he can exercise self-control. Unlike in the

past, he chooses not to retaliate against those who damage his jeepney, but looks for a solution—an alternative overnight parking spot—to prevent a similar occurrence. In addition, he resists engaging in illegal activities; should he fail in this area he has no one to blame but himself and his “stupidity” (*kung ito naman mangyari sa buhay ko, tanga ako*). With the ability to make deliberate moral choices, he can now admit personal accountability for a moral failing. He is resolved to lead a new life, he says, for God’s sake. A convert such as Lloyd not only acquires a perspective for dealing with life’s challenges, but wills to cultivate a morally responsible self, which alters the actor’s way of engaging with society. This is not to say that the narrators claim absolute moral uprightness; if anything, the claim is a struggle toward moral consistency, which is not always achieved.

As in Lloyd’s case, Fabian’s story speaks of a conscious renunciation of illegal activities, particularly gambling, which gave him easy money in the past but which he realized had become incompatible with the new moral commitments of his changed life. The giving up of illegal gambling is not depicted as an automatic behavior, but as the effect of studying his situation. The possibility of holding on to illegal income sources was not foreclosed. In another person’s case, the outcome could well have been different. Fabian’s story also cues us to inner realities that may not manifest in visible behavioral changes. As a former student activist, he continued to harbor a hatred of then Pres. Ferdinand Marcos. Letting go of this hatred took a long time, he admits. Obedience to a call by his movement’s spiritual leader led him to desire a heart that could forgive the ruler and the excesses of his regime. When he is finally able to forgive, the self is reorganized and released from the burden of hate, allowing him to take the moral step of praying for someone who was once the object of his wrath. It is important to remember that this struggle to forgive is predicated on a prior conversion experience, that is, the quest for moral responsibility is part of the continuing reorganization of self in the postconversion period. At the same time, inner change not only transforms the self but the manner of engaging with society, in Fabian’s case through prayer for a once-hated president.

## World-Dualism and Universalism

As Robbins (2004, 127–29) points out, just as it leads to the making of a new world, conversion in Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity involves world-breaking that produces a “dualism” between the regenerate and the unregenerate. Believers normally speak of a “world” (*mundo*) that is separated from God, and the preconversion self may be described as “worldly” (*makamundo*). This discontinuity and separation from the old world is ritualized. Among JIL followers the prayer of accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior is a key ritual of leave-taking from the world. For both El Shaddai and JIL adherents the nature of the religious assembly is perceived to be a space of radical difference from tradition and society. In it flourishes a subculture.

Yet, believers rejoin the old world from which they ought to be separate. To be in it to evangelize may be wholly legitimate in this new framework. However, if one is not overtly engaged in proselytizing, to be in the old world can be problematic: one must maintain spiritual distance while concomitantly forging social integration. Indeed, for the convert reintegration may be the strategy if significant others do not approve of or believe in the authenticity of the transformation that has occurred. Believers, as the narratives attest, experiment with striking a delicate balance of living in the reality of their new world, while learning to reposition themselves in the old. Angie, for instance, had to prove to her husband and children that she is a new person, despite their incredulity. Fabian had to learn a new approach toward governmental authority, despite the apparent injustice.

In effect, believers straddle two worlds. However, it is not a case of being caught liminally in a clash of worlds that needs a wager of not being caught appeasing the other world, as in the colonial conquest (Aguilar 1998). Rather, the believer straddles two worlds with a mission of making the new gradually transform the old. This straddling can be a rather intense struggle for the convert, who gradually acquires new resources, life principles, perspectives, and even a new vocabulary to “grow” in the new world of faith and fit into the tangible religious group of which he or she is a part, while also adjusting back to the

old world that may or may not accept the convert's new personal trajectory. In effect, the convert needs to develop two sets of cultural strategies for dealing with the two worlds, yet being made aware that he or she no longer "really" belongs to the old world.

Intolerance and rejection of all those other than one's fellow believers may seem justifiable given this world divide, but it is not a real option in this belief system. Despite dualism, the narrators do not use a condemnatory tone toward those who have not undergone the same religious experiences as they have. If anything, what is stressed is a shared humanity, with the narrators "drawing upon listeners' commonsense knowledge of what is expected in particular circumstances" (Ochs and Capps 1996, 27). Addressing the interviewer Minda exclaims, *Siyempre, wala tayong alam tungkol diyan sa kaligtasan* (Naturally, we don't know anything about what they call salvation). She further adds that feeling drowsy while the word of God is being preached is natural because "we" are not used to it, this is not part of what "we" grow up with (*'Di siyempre ikaw para kang no, nandiyan 'yung aantukin ka kasi word of God, eh. Hindi tayo ano dun sa mga gano'ng ano dahil hindi 'yung 'yung kinagisnan natin*). Minda speaks on the premise of a shared culture and common religious upbringing.

Wally explains that vice is typical among his fellow artists (*Siyempre* typical, *di ba, yung bisyo*). The interjection of *di ba* (isn't it) suggests that he expects the interviewer to agree with the inference that the inclination to vice is "natural." It is almost an excuse for those who are in his profession. He goes on to recount the dead-end of his smoking habit and what he regards as God's rescue, without ever going back to say anything ill about other artists. Fabian, the leftist, does not speak negatively about those of a similar ideological position. He states matter-of-factly that historical materialism is incompatible with a belief in miracles. He neither disparages this philosophical tradition nor looks back after his conversion to put down other activists. If he talks of a "closed mind," it is to refer to his alone. Indirectly, he tells us that the question of rationality, which was a major issue in his preconversion self, was resolved supernaturally. This peculiar manner of resolution probably prevents him from vilifying those who remain skeptical.

Don, who tries but fails to get his group in the Adoracion Nocturna to hold Bible lessons, may be deemed as providing the closest to a negative statement regarding the life of vice of his former coreligionists. However, even his telling veers away from judging them, with their life of vice brought up in the narrative specifically in the context of a prayer-question: If it is God we serve, why are our lives messed up? The narrative strategy focuses on his confusion, arising from a deeply felt disjuncture between moral living and active church involvement. Lloyd, the retired jeepney driver, also talks about those who did nasty things to his vehicle, but the focus of his narration is his struggle to find an appropriate response to those provocations. The offer to manufacture fake gin receives the retort that it means deceiving one's fellow human beings (*panloloko sa kapwa 'yun*). The potential buyer of a fake product is not regarded as a distant stranger who can be exploited because of his own vice, but is embraced as *kapwa*.

Thus, the narrators do not exhibit a confrontational dualism. They separate from the rest, but the rest remain one's *kapwa*. There is otherness, without a pernicious othering. The informants' empathetic registers have been heightened by the Biblical teaching of loving others, for, as Don puts it, *di ba pagminahal mo ang Diyos, di mo pwedeng sabihin di mo mabal ang kapwa mo, dahil hindi mo naman nakikita ang Diyos, di mo naman maipapakita at mapapadama ang pag-ibig mo sa Diyos kundi sa kapwa mo* (isn't it that when you love God, you cannot say that you do not love your *kapwa*, because you cannot see God and you cannot demonstrate and make others feel you love God other than through your *kapwa*). The flexibility of *kapwa* is such that it can refer to fellow believers, and be exclusionary, but it can also be inclusive of everyone else. Dualism coexists in creative tension with a kind of universalism.

### **Egalitarian Rituals and Individualism**

This study does not include an ethnography of the religious gatherings of these two movements. Nonetheless, the egalitarianism that has been documented in other Pentecostal and charismatic churches, and in Protestantism in general, is observable in the narratives of El Shaddai and

JIL followers in this study. Despite the hierarchy in the organization as a whole and in those that take leadership roles during a religious gathering, a sense of equality pervades these collective rituals. In the narratives, the religious assembly occupies a central position. It is often where conversion experiences take place. Consequently, the process of how the informant gets to find herself or himself in a religious gathering is of pivotal significance. It is also to this main collective activity that converts invite others, in the hope that the invitees would come to share the faith of the person who extends the invitation. The assembly becomes the focal point of evangelization, a core activity in which everyone is capable of participating. Extending the invitation is a form of democratic participation in evangelism, and does not require formal procedures, educational qualifications, or some such prerequisites.

The paradox is that, in these massive gatherings of several hundreds of people, anonymity prevails but believers and converts retain their individuality and do not feel anonymous. The preacher is perceived to speak directly to the person in the crowd. In fact, the crowd recedes from the individual's landscape of consciousness. Witness Fabian's story of how he felt alluded to by the American preacher who simply described a man wearing eyeglasses. There would have been countless such men in that crowd, but Fabian felt he was personally being addressed. In his first attendance at such a religious event, Don felt that the preacher was gossiping about his life. In Pentecostal-charismatic collective rituals, the preaching may last for at least an hour, sometimes longer, but the long exposition is believed to carry a message meant for the individual. It is not a case of passive spectatorship in the conveyance of general information, for there is a sensation that the preacher and the individual listener are engaged in an intimate conversation. This creative tension is encoded in conversion narratives: amid a massified assembly, the individual is affirmed. One can imagine the innumerable others, along with Nena or Don or Minda or Fabian, who also undergo a religious experience for the first time, each personally addressed in a crowd of strangers. However, the individualized message happens at the same time that countless others may not receive a message; these are those engulfed by the crowd.

Among believers the rituals of the assembly signify a meaningful community, where collective acts of praying, singing in unison, and listening occur simultaneously in religiously marked time. In the religious assembly empty, homogeneous time takes a back seat, although in the secular world, especially in the sphere of the nation, empty calendrical time prevails (cf. Anderson 1991). In the religious service, the individual who receives a message is immersed in a timeless activity that is not only egalitarian but also in touch with the divine. In the narratives, the moment of conversion is timeless: it occurred objectively in the linear past, but subjectively the moment is wrapped in eternal significance. Rhetorically, the past lives on in the present and in the foreseeable future. In Minda's words, *'yung naramdaman ko nung time na 'yon . . . hindi ko talaga makalimutan* (what I experienced at that time . . . I can never forget). What others may see as chance or coincidence is framed as destiny: it is one's appointed time. As Nena puts it, time *na talaga*.

### **The Incommensurability of Divine Action**

Because of differential views of reality arising from epistemic relativism, critical realists argue that similar experiences need not lead to the same cognition and labeling of those events (Archer et al. 2004). Although informants describe involuntary episodes as core to their religious experience, others who undergo similar episodes may not apprehend it as anything religious. Conformable with their point of view, however, the narrators are disposed to interpret and narrate their experiences as religious and supernatural and to speak in terms of divine action. Note that in none of the accounts is the spirit world, including the demonic that is often associated with Pentecostalism, directly brought into the picture. At the same time, the cultural context of the informants is one in which centuries of exposure to Catholicism have disseminated a Christian view of the supernatural.

Among the swept, the episode is usually prefaced with the narrator's initial disparagement of the event, which serves to dramatize the unexpected. This initial reaction allows the narrator to depict his or her unbelief, a condition with which the uninitiated may identify. Thus,

Minda describes collective behavior in a JIL service as like “losing one’s mind” (*Parang mga siraulo*), their style of praying as “embarrassing” (*nakakahiya*). Fabian describes miracles as *kalokohan*, implying trickery, deception, and credulity. Apparently against their will, these narrators remember finding themselves swept along as by a tide. The unsettling start is resolved not by the narrator but by divine action.

Minda’s description is vivid: she does not know why she volunteers to attend the JIL service when in fact she was not the one being invited. She repeats the words of the prayer of acceptance as if in a daze, only to realize that she is in tears. She wonders why, and thinks of controlling her tears, but does not when she looks around and notices people’s eyes were shut. Fabian’s is similar: after going home to check on a blaze that he fears might engulf his house, he unwittingly finds his way back to the miracle crusade. The speaker on stage refers to a man wearing a pair of eyeglasses and thinks he is the one being addressed. His body begins to shake and feels as though an electric current is passing through his body. He is asked to position himself in front of the stage for the prayer of acceptance, and all resistance evaporates. After the prayer he cries profusely (*Yung luha ko tsaka uhog nagsama*).

Lloyd’s is comparable: he plans to murder his wife, then happens to glance at the sign “Jesus is Lord,” and stops in his tracks—he pauses, sits down, then cries without meaning to. For him what clinches the story is the discovery that a sibling dreams about him and his wife locked in a quarrel, and prays for them at about the same time that he had intended to carry out his vicious scheme. The coeval events are not brushed aside as coincidence, or pure accident, but as events explicitly connected by God’s design. Jerome Bruner (1991, 19) refers to this narrative strategy as coherence by contemporaneity. This realization brings Lloyd back to his senses (*natauhan ako*), as if everything that preceded it was a dream, or a nightmare.

As a result of the unexpected resolution of an unsettling situation, the narrator caps the story with exhilaration. Minda gets a high from what transpired in the JIL service: she is bathed in joy and wants to scream, telling her mother once she reaches home that she cannot explain what has come upon her. Fabian goes home with an inexplicable



joy. Although not in the swept mode of storytelling, Don leaves his first JIL service with his heart overflowing with a happiness beyond explaining (*kaligayahang naguumapaw sa puso ko*). Nena goes home after her first JIL service continually praising God. As Ochs and Capps (1996, 29) put it, “all narratives . . . expose narrators and listener/readers to life’s potentialities for unanticipated pain and joy.” In the conversion narrative, the tellers reveal the “incommensurabilities of a particular lived situation” (*ibid.*).

In the telling, the narrator often wonders what is happening as he or she is swept along, and tries to come to terms with it at that time. However, they are unable to define what was happening at that moment. Later on they may find some label by which to objectify the experience. As Minda puts it, *Yun pala 'yung tinatawag na* (Oh, now I know it is what they call) Born Again experience. By the time of the interview she has learned the discursive field of the JIL Church and can use an ingroup terminology. Still, language is unable to represent fully the sensations and emotions and the whole experience to which only the narrator has access experientially. Confronted with the ephemeral, language shows its limits. The experience of the transcendent is ultimately ineffable. Interestingly, in making these claims, the narrators employ distinctively Filipino narrative strategies.

### Experience and Filipino Narrative Strategies

Despite the profundity of the experiences recounted by the narrators, they punctuate their stories with words and phrases that express canonical truth with provisionality. These built-in breaches of the canonical seem to question the very legitimacy of their narratives. Often employed is the word *parang* (sort of, like), and occasionally *siguro* (maybe), even when informants obviously mean a certainty. For instance, Fred says, *parang nakita ko na talagang bubay ang Diyos* (it was sort of like I saw that God is really alive). This technique is also used to describe his emotions: referring to his stint as a seafarer, he says, *hanggang ngayon medyo tuwang-tuwa pa rin ako* (until now I am somewhat still very happy).

Angie describes her faith in a convoluted way: *Parang tumatag ang kapit mo sa Kanya* (It’s like your grasp on Him gets more secure). She

also says: *siguro dahil sa pakikinig sa mga turo at naiisabuhay niya* (maybe because of listening [to the teachings] that she is able to apply to her life). Minda avers, *Siguro 'yung time na talaga 'yung calling sa 'kin ng Lord* (Maybe it was the time really for me to be called by the Lord). Minda also says: *Ay, parang natagpuan ko na 'yung matagal ko ng hinabanap* (Ay, it's like I have found what I have long been searching for). Lloyd declares, *Parang naniwala ako na totoo ang Diyos* (I sort of believed that God is true).

The mixing of provisionality with certainty is indicative of a colonized subjectivity, as indexed by *siguro*, which in its original Spanish denotes certainty but its polar opposite when appropriated into the Philippine linguistic matrix. A Western missionary can easily be imagined being left dumbfounded by this Filipino linguistic device. Yet, it is precisely this ability to speak of, and to, God in ways sanctioned by Filipino culture that endorses the faith as locally meaningful.

Other aspects that flag a Filipino narrative style may be seen in Fred's account. Pressed to the wall due to his legal cases, Fred recounts asking himself, "*Ano kaya, saan ko kaya ilalapit ito?*" (Whom can I approach about my case?). In other words, he is looking for someone to solve his problem, a fixer or mediator who may well be a *padrino* (sponsor) who will negotiate with higher authorities to have the cases dropped. Finding no one else, he approaches God and discovers that God is his great *padrino*, who helps settle his court cases. As a result, he expresses profound gratitude and incurs an *utang na loob*. The divine is conceptualized and related to using Filipino concepts of mediation, reciprocity, and gratitude.

Indeed, the very notion of "experience" or *karanasan*, whose root (*danas*) suggests undergoing something, is linked to *hipo* (touch). Recall Fabian's statement: *kailangan ikaw din mismo ang makaranas . . . Kailangan maranasan mo 'yung paghipo eh. Mahirap ipaliwanag* (you yourself need to experience . . . You need to experience the touch. It's hard to explain). The word for touch—*hipo*—is often employed in situations of unwanted sexual advance, which may not lead to sexual union, but the passing touch is nonetheless seen as opportunistic. The dead may also make themselves felt through an ethereal *hipo*. Fabian's idiom for God's touch will have ghostly or sexual connotations in another context. In his

story it refers to a transitory yet momentous event. Moreover, the passive construction of “paghipo,” which denotes action by an actor who is not directly mentioned in the sentence, suggests that the listener is being told about an extraordinary event.

### The Question of God's Existence

Employing their own inimitable ways, the narrators compel us to look beyond functionality: their stories are often about soul searching or, more accurately, a searching for the truth about the existence of God. Acknowledging this existential issue in the narrators' lives forces us to confront a stereotype: “the image of the unthoughtful fundamentalist” (Maynard 1993, 248).

The quest for an answer is most evident in the storyline of the yearner, although it is also present in the other accounts. Angie says her faith in God deepened because of her involvement in the El Shaddai movement. However, Nena presents her case explicitly as a search for God: although she had been attending Catholic masses, she did not really know God (*parang hindi ko kilala ang Diyos, panay lang ang simba ko*). She hopped from church to church: Iglesia ni Kristo, Jehovah's Witnesses, a Baptist church, until she ended up in a JIL service after listening to a radio broadcast. In 1992, she narrates, she finally got to know God (*nakilala ko ang Diyos*) and all her doubts about God's existence vanished (*nawala yung mga pagdududa ko na walang Diyos*). An analogous story is told by Don: uneasy about his companions in the Adoracion Nocturna, he got involved not only in St. Joseph's Church but also in Santa Cruz Church and in the Cursillo movement, because he was in search of truth (*nagbahanap ako ng katotohanan*), which he encountered in the JIL movement.

Equivalent accounts are found in the other narrative strains. At the brink of death in a hospital, Wally prays, “El Shaddai, *kung totoo Ka at kung totoo Ka ngang bubay . . .*” (El Shaddai, if you are real and if you are truly alive . . .). His request for a new lease on life is premised on a question, even a challenge, that God prove his existence. Minda, who comes to realize that she found what she had long been looking for, says that she was enlightened about God (*nadagdagan pa 'yung kaliwanagan*

ko about God), had a genuine encounter with Jesus (*talagang natagpuan*), and found joy in accepting Jesus as her own savior (I find joy *nung tinanggap ko si Jesus bilang sarili kong Diyos na tagapag-ligtas*). At the conclusion of his foiled murder attempt and knowing about his sibling's prayer, Lloyd declares that he has come to believe that God is real (*naniwala ako na totoo ang Diyos*). Fabian, who scoffed at the talk of miracles, considers his conversion as the moment of knowing God (*magmula no'ng makilala ko Siya*).

Whether actively sought or not, the fundamental question about the existence of God appears to be a central issue in many of the conversion narratives, which conclude with a definite and affirmative answer. This is not to say that the informants were necessarily atheists or agnostics prior to their religious experience, but what was primarily a cultural belief in a variously conceived God was put on the line. Thinking about Evangelical Christianity on an Andean village in Ecuador, Kent Maynard (1993, 254) ruminates, "Going through life, our beliefs may be casual and relatively unexamined. Something must occur to cause us to think 'deeply' about our beliefs, and either discard them as superficial or erroneous, or claim them much more actively." Belief, then, is unreflective, but faith results from a conscious process based on the evidence of experience. The informants tell of a train of events that made them reconstitute belief into faith.

In addition, informants from the JIL Church have had to redefine their institutional belonging, with some recalling that they used to be devout Catholics (*sarado* or locked-in). In their case, the transition of belief to faith is most patent because it involves a formal shift in church affiliation. The JIL informants also stress the importance of a personal knowledge of God, which is an active choice that is actualized in the prayer of accepting Jesus, a type of prayer not reported by the El Shaddai informants. A personal relationship with God that did not exist previously is said to begin for the very first time. This relationship becomes the cornerstone of a new identity, with JIL Church membership being incidental. Consequently, during the interviews, many emphatic objections were raised concerning the use of the word "membership"—and "recruitment"—in the guide questions of this study. The relationship is with God, not with the church or movement.

In the absence of a language of spirits, which Robbins (2004, 129) rightly points out is often part of the “locally meaningful idioms for talking about the past and about current social problems,” the idiom of a personal God in a long Christianized culture allows Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity to speak meaningfully to local conditions.<sup>7</sup> For the informants the localizing idiom is a personal God who is intimately knowable and conceivable in Filipino ways, with whom one can converse in the vernacular, who is awesome yet deeply concerned about the individual believer and all that matter to her or him.

### **Conclusion**

The conversion narratives in this study inform us that it may be simplistic to say that these individuals’ engagement with Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity issues from a deliberate instrumentalist goal. At the functionalist level, these movements would be seen as the answer to poverty, alienation, insecurity, and marginalization. The informants may have found a community as a result of their new faith, and may have found a path that offers them a sense of efficacy and confidence in dealing with life’s problems. They may have been afforded a sense of egalitarianism in a deeply unequal society. They may have found a stable identity in a turbulent world. But these outcomes were not the conscious motivating factors to undergo conversion, as if in some sort of experiment. Prosperity may or may not have arisen from their new life of faith, and some even had to give up lucrative activities deemed to have become incompatible with their new set of life commitments. To an outsider an apparent intentionality may lend rationality to faith. The convert’s perspective, however, requires no such rational justification, for the religious experience is itself the cause of and evidence for faith.

These narratives may be read as personal journeys to meaning and wholeness via the age-old question about the existence of God, which is entwined with the search for truth. Through the fulcrum of personal experiences, the ontological status of reality is validated. For the narrators, conversion is knowing God experientially, so to say, not from the head but from the heart. In all this the meaning is intensely personal. Nevertheless, the search for God takes place within a given social, cul-

tural, political, and historical milieu. The answer is context-bound. The context, however, is not the final determinant. What is apparent is that the availability of Pentecostal and charismatic movements provides the opportunity for an answer to the question of God's existence to be found by given individuals in a specifically Pentecostal-charismatic way.

Information on the object of faith in Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity may be transmitted through formal structures and institutions (locally evolved in the case of the movements in this study) that organize religious assemblies. Despite variations, these assemblies conform to a recognizable standard format found globally. Nevertheless, the universal message is apprehended in a personal and individualized way. Despite the complexities and limits of narrating, the conversion narratives suggest the possibility of a genuine experience of a living God, and along this line the narrators frame their stories. Converts come to terms with their experiences of transcendence using the linguistic tools and devices available in the local culture. The incommensurable divine is spoken of in local idioms and styles, which prevents adherents from thinking that theirs is an alien and utterly distant God. On the contrary, by speaking of the divine in Filipino ways within common templates of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity, the divine is simultaneously embedded in a distinctly Filipino framework and, in effect, also becomes Filipino. Moreover, the convert's transformed self struggles to define a new form of engagement with society, even as that self seeks to differentiate itself from that society. Imbued with a mission to influence others and equipped with a new set of moral commitments, the convert is aware that faith ought to be applied meaningfully to the local situation. In this and other tellings, Filipino converts narrate religious experiences that are generative of meanings that localize Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity in the Philippines.

#### APPENDIX: THE NARRATIVES

The eight narratives presented below are renditions in English, told in the third person (the translator's perspective), and have undergone layers of mediation, but do seek to hew as closely as possible to large portions of the transcriptions of the informants' recorded interviews. These accounts do not use quotation marks,

except when a similar textual strategy can be deduced from the original responses. The names have been altered.

How can nontheists, given the cosmological divide, understand these religious narratives? *Verstehen* or understanding, in Weber's view, is not the same as empathy and has definite limits, as Archer (2000, 152) reminds us. Mindful of these limits and the observation that "[o]ur individual empathetic registers have different ranges" (ibid.), I invite both theist and nontheist to read through these accounts and find for themselves what can be understood.

## THE TRAPPED

### Fred

Fred is 37 years old and unmarried. He was invited by a cousin to attend El Shaddai gatherings in 1986. He said he was blessed and felt the presence of God. But worldliness competed with spirituality, and he returned to the world, backsliding. That was when he experienced the severity of his problems. He became the president of drunks in Recto [in Manila] and got into fights, eventually getting embroiled in three cases of assault involving a petty marijuana boss, a barangay official (*kagawad*), and a policeman. He felt his life had become nothing more than one court hearing after another, and wondered who could broker on his behalf (*saan ko kaya ilalapit ito?*). In his search for a solution (*lunas*), and when he felt he was about to be placed behind bars, he went back, all by himself, to the *gawain* (service) of God in El Shaddai. He cried his heart out and pleaded, "Lord, help me because I have so many problems." It was his moment of surrender (*talagang suko na ako*). Bit by bit he was taught to humble himself and seek forgiveness from those whom he had assaulted, and the cases against him were dropped. He saw in what happened that God is alive (*talagang bubay ang Diyos*). He expressed his gratitude as feeling much obliged toward God (*nagkaroon ako ng utang na loob sa Panginoon*). That happened probably in 1992.

It was not to be a straight path, however, for when his life had become settled (*umaayos na ang bubay*), he started to become lukewarm (*nanalami*). That happens, he says, when one is not fully molded in one's faith. When other problems arose because of his old lifestyle (*masasamang gawain*)—with his mates dying—he finally resolved to have a new life (*magbagong bubay*). He asked God to help him return to His fold, and to remain steady in the *gawain* in El Shaddai. God is kind (*mabait*) and answers prayers, he said. This time he did his best to really draw near to God (*Talagang sinisikap ko sarili kong ilapit sa Diyos*).

He felt that perhaps God was pleased with him. He had taken a seafaring course, but no longer expected to find work on a vessel as he was past thirty years of age. But in one gathering Brother Mike said that, if an airplane passes overhead, they should shout the name of the country they wished to go to. He shouted "America!" He ended up finding employment in a ship based in Greece, but was pleasantly surprised to find out that its destination was the United States. His wish was fulfilled and he became a seafarer at age 36. On board there were Bible sharing meetings involving crew from other religions, which did not matter as long as they knew the Lord (*basta kilala mo ang Panginoon*). Although his contract has expired, he is still very happy with the beautiful gift God gave him. In El Shaddai, he believes that the God they worship is the living God (*naniniwala akong bubay ang Diyos na sinasamba ng El Shaddai*).

Only since 2000 has he been consistent (*talagang straight-straight na*) with the Saturday *gawain*. He remains in El Shaddai because he has seen his life totally transformed from what it was previously. The teaching comes from the Bible, he says, and the Holy Spirit moves in their midst.

### Wally

Wally is 51 years old, married, with four children aged sixteen to twenty four. He is a graduate of the University of the Philippines, with a degree in Fine Arts. He was a painter by profession, but today is a preacher in the El Shaddai movement.

It all started as a result of his heavy smoking—vice, he explains, being typical of artists, citing some who cannot paint if they are not drunk. One day he was rushed to the hospital because he could no longer breathe. At that time his wife was already with El Shaddai.

His wife had succeeded in inviting him to attend an El Shaddai gathering only once. He said he was busy and dismissed El Shaddai events by saying that he knew it already (*alam ko na 'yan*) as he had attended the Cursillo movement. In fact, he was the one who taught his wife how to pray the rosary. He was also the one who enticed her to go to the Baclaran church on Wednesdays and the Quiapo church on Fridays. On those nights they would meet at the designated church, and he would be coming from Hyatt Regency on Roxas Boulevard, where he was then employed as a manager.

On the day he was hospitalized, they were saying that the El Shaddai handkerchief be placed over his chest. But he did not believe in that practice. In any case, he overheard his wife speaking with the doctor, who admitted being in a quandary in understanding what was going on as his body was darkening (*nangingitim ako*). His legs had blackened, and they could not find his pulse. He heard the doctor



tell his wife, "your husband is sick, it is like he is dead." He was terrified and, for the first time in his life, prayed genuinely, saying "El Shaddai, if you are real and if you truly exist (*kung totoo Ka at kung totoo Ka ngang buhay*), if you would extend my life, I would serve You." He also surrendered his smoking habit. He felt he was dead, but God raised him up to new life. Right after leaving the hospital, he could not even stand the scent of cigarette smoke. Impelled by the miracle he witnessed, he fulfilled his covenant promise to serve God. Thus, in 1988 he was "called" (*tinawag*) to El Shaddai through sickness.

## THE SWEPT

### Minda

Minda is 41 years old, a housewife with four children with ages ranging from twelve to nineteen. She is married to an FX taxi driver-operator. As a Catholic, she was active in the Legion of Mary and was also a member of a local church choir in Quezon City. After high school she could no longer go to college because her father had died and she had to work. And she had to work even on Sundays, which kept her from joining the choir and attending mass.

One day she overheard a neighbor, who had become Born Again at P.U.P. [Polytechnic University of the Philippines], inviting a neighbor-coworker to attend a JIL event. Although the latter declined the invitation, Minda interjected, "Why do you invite her but you're not asking me to go?" She did not know why she said it, but reckons it was her time to be called by the Lord (*Siguro 'yung time na talaga 'yung calling sa 'kin ng Lord*). She thought her neighbor had hesitated to invite her because she was a fanatic of the religion she grew up with (*talagang panatiko ako sa dati kong kinagisnang relihiyon*). In any case she went along.

When they had reached Araullo [High School in Manila for the JIL service], she was shocked at what she saw. It was the testimony portion, and people were applauding. She thought, "These people are crazy" ("*Parang mga siraulo ang mga tao*"). She felt embarrassed (*nakakahiya*) that, when praying, people bowed their heads and lifted their hands. But, following the instruction to newcomers, she left the main hall to attend the Seminar on Salvation, where she was told that, to receive salvation, she must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. She felt like falling asleep as it was the word of God, and she was not used to it. When people were asked to stand for the Acceptance Prayer, she found herself following the words of the prayer as if in a daze (*parang wala sa sarili*). She was surprised that tears were rolling down her cheeks. She wanted to control her tears as she felt embarrassed, but when she looked around people had their eyes shut.

Subsequently, she listened to the preaching of Brother Eddie and felt illumined. As she was leaving that place, she noticed that she was feeling an altogether different sensation. It was as if she was floating on air (*parang . . . nakalutang ako sa lupa*), and she wanted to shout. She felt very light (*Ang gaang-gaang ng pakiramdam*). She later realized that that was what is called the Born Again experience. She can never forget how she felt at that time.

When she reached home, she asked her mother why she was so happy, like she wanted to shout. Then she connected her experience to the street posters she was seeing at that time that said, "I found it. You can find it too." She realized that it was like finding what she had long been looking for but could never find (*parang natagpuan ko na 'yung matagal ko ng binabanap na kailanman hindi ko nabanap*). She then found out that it was what they would refer to as finding joy in accepting Jesus as one's own God and Savior.

She was single then and attended several basic seminars, which solidified her faith in the Lord. From that time until now, she is still with the Lord (*nandidito pa rin ako sa Panginoon*).

They started conducting Bible studies in her place. None of her family members was against it because they saw that even the drug addicts, the pushers, were being transformed. What they could not accept, she says, was the idea of so many restrictions (*maraming bawal*), especially concerning vices, being imposed on someone who was Born Again. But, she says, if you are in the Lord there are no prohibitions: you yourself will say no, you yourself will have the conviction not to do something that will displease the Lord. As they say, she says, "If you meet Jesus, you will never be the same again." If you genuinely encounter (*talagang natagpuan*) the Lord Jesus, you will really become a new creation.

### Lloyd

Lloyd is a 56-year-old retired jeepney driver, and married to Rosemarie, who is twenty-four years his junior. He describes himself as a hothead street kid (*laki sa kahye*). Three separate cases—double frustrated homicide, physical injuries, and double frustrated murder—have allowed him to taste prison life, but he managed to get out of prison (*inayos namin*). Perhaps, the turning point came, he reckons, when literally a life was at stake.

It all started when his wife brought him to a JIL service. He continued to attend those services only to amuse her, although he was beginning to hear God's word. His character (*ugali*) had not changed: he was temperamental and thought the worst of people (*mainitin ang ulo, masamain isip, palabintangin*), which became a source of conflict with his wife. He became extremely jealous, and could not

stand his wife coming home late from work or from church, where she served as an usher. After one major altercation, he began to plan on killing her. After she had fallen asleep, he took out his knife (*balisong*) to commit the murder. He thought that perhaps he should also kill himself. As he was planning his moves, he glanced upon a sign in the room with the words “Jesus is Lord.” Then it was as if someone whispered, “Child, that’s wrong.” He stopped in his tracks and recalled God’s words. He began to sweat profusely (*Pinagpawisan ako ng malapot*). Then he asked, “Lord, is what I’m intending to do right?” He then found himself crying, which awakened his wife, but he had already hidden the knife. They had a good talk (*nagkaroon kami ng maliwanag na pag-uusap*), but he could not go back to sleep.

The following day, he told a younger sibling about what happened. On knowing the time of the incident, his sibling—who was familiar with his temper and brushes with the law—said, “At that time I was dreaming that you and your wife were fighting. Then I prayed that whatever your problem was it would not end in something untoward.” On hearing this, Lloyd was sort of brought to his senses. It’s like he believed that God is real (*Parang naniwala ako na totoo ang Diyos*). Through the prayers of his parents and siblings, he finally changed.

Since then, he says, he has served God. He underwent training, and is now engaged in prison ministry in Muntinlupa and at the City Jail. Although he has no formal Bible training, his testimony (*pagpapakatotoo*) of God’s work in his life enables him to preach about salvation. Inmates believe when he tells them about the importance of faith in God because of what they know about his previous life.

His character continued to be tested. There were those in his neighborhood who would taunt him by messing up his jeepney. He was already Born Again but the Lord confronted him about forgiving others. So rather than retaliate he decided to look for an alternative night parking location for his vehicle. On another occasion rocks were being thrown on the roof of their house. Naturally, he said, his temper flared up, but it was a good thing that he controlled himself. He then realized that he could actually practice self-control (*doon ko nalamang napipigil ko yung sarili ko*).

He also felt a testing in relation to illegal activities, an easy way to make money. A mate (*barkada*) asked him to participate in illicit gambling on racing results, but he studied the issue and asked, “Lord, would this be right?” Of course, he says, if you read the Bible, you would know it isn’t right. Another approached him to manufacture fake Fundador drinks, which, he says, is easy to make and sells briskly during the Christmas season. But he knew it was a lie (*kasong panloloko sa kapwa ’yun, eh*). The temptation became acute when someone became ill in the fam-

ily. But he thought to himself that if he fell into it he would be stupid (*tanga ako*). His promise to God was “I will change for your sake” (*magbabago ako alang alang lang sa Yô*). He says that, as God’s word declares, one can only show love for God by following his commands.

### Fabian

Fabian is 57 years old, married, with three adult children aged eighteen, twenty, and twenty-one. He is a sales agent, but has a college degree in chemical engineering. He says that what happened in 1980 could have been an accident. At that time he was the operations manager of a customs brokerage firm, with an office across the Nurses’ Home of PGH [Philippine General Hospital]. He saw a sign on a street post announcing the “Mike Makini Miracle Crusade.” A miracle: what a sham (*kalokoban*), he thought to himself.

He was then a member of the SDK, Samahang Demokratiko ng Kabataan, which he identifies as a moderate left group. When martial law was declared [in 1972] all leftist and anti-Marcos groups were branded as communist. Many were arrested or went into hiding. In his case, perhaps God really had a different plan for him (*Ako naman talagang may plano ang Diyos siguro*). He was fortunate that he did not have to hide as no photograph of him in any rally had been taken, for he would always stay at the rear of the group. But he had been exposed to the teachings of Engels and was aware of dialectical materialism. He no longer believed in miracles.

Nevertheless, he went to Araullo High School, the venue of the miracle crusade, because it was near his office. He recalls entering the place while smoking a cigarette, which, he says, is a vice, like alcohol and gambling, that’s natural for men to indulge in. He felt awkward and put off the cigarette. Then he noticed something strange (*parang weirdo*). Of course, he says, charismatic worship is noisy, with lots of clapping of hands. When the preaching was over, nothing different happened because at that time, he says, his mind and heart were closed (*sarado ang isipan at puso ko*). He did see some lame persons walk but thought, “How much was paid to those guys to pretend they were lame?”

He could not understand why the following evening he was there again. He positioned himself on the second row from the front so he could see if the lame really get to walk. He began to inquire from those seated beside him, “*Brod*, what happened to you?” “Well, I had palsy from birth.” “What about you *brod*?” “I had an attack.” “Can I take a look at your leg?” He saw it had shriveled. He thought, “If this one is able to stand up I will believe miracles happen.” Sud-

denly an usher approached him with the request to move as the first ten rows were reserved for the handicapped. He replied, "Wait a while, *brod*, I'm just waiting for something; I'll leave soon but I'm seated because I'm talking to someone." But he did not intend to leave until he could see what would happen during the prayer for healing.

Suddenly, he looked back and saw a huge fire. The fire seemed so near to his residence in Pandacan. He rushed home on a taxi, but once there he realized the fire was some distance away. After leaving his gear, he went out of the house, intending to watch the fire at close range (*Manonood na lang ako ng sunog*).

He did not realize that, while walking, he had gone past the fire scene and had reached the bus terminal. He boarded a bus and got off near Araullo. He entered the hall but could not go to the front part, and the American guest was already beginning to pray. It was so audible, he said (*Dinig na dinig ko*), "If you are looking for a miracle, be prepared. I can feel the Holy Spirit moving towards that man with the eyeglasses." He told himself, "I'm very far from the stage" [for him to be pinpointed]. It was some 30 to 40 meters. But then he began to shake and, trembling, he sat down. It felt like an electric current entered his head, moving downward (*Parang merong kuryenteng pumasok sa ulo ko pababa*). An usher and usherette approached him, "Brother, what illness was cured from you?" He said, "None, I'm not sick." But he felt many hands were touching him. "Can you follow us in a Prayer of Acceptance?" He did not know what it was about but there was no longer any resistance on his part (*wala ng resistance sa 'kin*). He went in front of the stage and seriously followed the prayer (*pagsunod ko, talagang by heart*). Brother Eddie by then was speaking. After the prayer he found himself crying like a child (*talagang naramdaman ko 'yung luba ko tsaka ubog nagsama*).

He went home clutching a cigarette, but with an inexplicable joy (*may joy na hindi ko maintindihan*). For two days after the event he would light a cigarette but would discard it after a single puff because it did not taste right (*masama ang panlasa ko*). On the fourth day, he asked "What's wrong with my sense of taste? It's like I'm sick, but I have no fever." Then he suddenly heard, "Child, did I not say in the crusade, I'll give you the very best (*'yung pinaka-maganda*). I removed your vice, but you are forcibly bringing it back." He looked to his left and right, and to his back, but there was no one. "Lord, is that you?" He decided to enter his room and pray, "Lord, forgive me. I will no longer touch a cigarette." Since then he has not smoked a cigarette, and he has even developed an allergy to cigarette smoke.

Before this incident, and although he would not consider himself an alcoholic, every night he would down two bottles of gin (*nagko-consume ako ng dalawang*

*kuwadro kantos*). He would drink one bottle as an aperitif, and another before going to bed. He would drink by himself, but not get drunk. After what happened at Araullo he was repelled by the scent of gin. And although he did not gamble, he played a key role in illegal gambling (*Ako ang cabo ng bookies no'n*), and had even quit his job because he earned big money from it. He said, "Lord, you don't like this; give me a good job." He gave up gambling, and eventually became a sales agent.

What took a long time to remove from him was his hatred toward Marcos. He was an activist, and had a cousin who had been tortured. For four years after he had known God (*magmula no'ng makilala ko Siya*), he would not pray, although Brother Eddie preached, "Even if we don't like Marcos, we have to pray for those in authority, as it says in [Paul's letter to] Timothy. Let's pray and let God decide." He asked, "Lord, I cannot pray for the president. Give me a heart that can forgive so I can begin to pray for him." Only after he had made this request was he released [from anger]. The opportunities brightened, and he moved from one good job to another, but he was used first in the prison ministry.

If you like to experience the love of God, just listen, he says, and you yourself will experience it. He adds, you have to experience being touched as it is hard to explain it (*Kailangan maranasan mo 'yung paghipo eh. Mabirap ipaliwanag*).

## THE YEARNER

### Angie

Angie is 48 years old, an accountant, married with four children aged twelve to twenty years old. She joined El Shaddai in 1992. What attracted her to the movement, she says, was the remarkable change in the life of a companion (*kasama*) in church. Before that friend joined El Shaddai she was like a rascal (*suwail*) who acted as though she was a big shot (*para bang . . . napakataas na tao niya*). Maybe because of the teachings she had heard and applied in her life, she changed and became kind (*mabait*) and humble. It was like Angie marveled at her transformation (*para ba akong nahanga sa pagbabago na nangyari sa kanya*), so she went along when invited by this person.

However, tests (*pagsubok*) do not disappear. As they say, she says, when your faith and trust in God is becoming established and stronger, you are given (*binibigyan*) a more severe testing (*mas matinding pagsubok*). But because of listening and reading lessons that God reigns over you (*sa aral na ang Diyos ang nagbahari sa iyo*), and your faith in Him is firm (*malakas*), you will not be shaken, you will not be uprooted (*bindi ka nabubuwal*) because of the trials.

One of those trials pertained to her children. She could not entice them to go

to church, as they preferred to join their friends (*barkada*) or simply had so many reasons (*maraming katuwiran*) for not going to church or attending the services (*gawain*) in El Shaddai. Her husband, too, would not go because he did not see any change in her at all. But when she joined El Shaddai she willed to change her life (*binago kong labat ang sarili ko*). She managed to draw her children and husband, and, by the mercy of God, she says, they are now together [in El Shaddai].

She showed them, she says, the Lord really showed them. She wasn't like that before, but she did it.

Even in serving God there are trials, she says. There are those who say bad things behind your back. Even your coworkers malign you (*kinukutya ka*). There are intrigues in your group. Those are the trials of someone in a leadership position. But she resisted those tests (*napaglabanan ko*) because, she says, God is alive and does not slumber, but rather watches and guides us in all that we do.

### Nena

Nena is a 53-year-old widow with three adult children aged twenty-three to twenty-seven. She is a college graduate but is now retired. She joined JIL in 1992 as a result of listening to a radio program called *Tinig sa Itaas* (Voice from Above). It said, "All those with problems, raise your hand, surrender your life to the Lord, and go to the church of Jesus is Lord at Araullo [High School]." She followed those instructions because, although she heard Mass frequently, it was as though she did not really know God (*parang hindi ko kilala ang Diyos*). She asked, "Lord, which church should I go to (*Panginoon, saan po ba ako dapat magsimba?*)?" She had been to Iglesia ni Kristo, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptist, but could not find the right way to know God (*talagang hindi ko natagpuan ang tamang pagkilala sa Panginoon*). Then, in 1992 she finally met God (*nakilala ko ang Diyos*) and told herself, "Ah, this is really where I ought to be." At JIL, she felt the presence of God was in her, causing doubts about God's existence to be dispelled. When she reached home, she kept praising [God] (*panay ang puri ko*). She felt deeply touched by the teachings, and savored listening to God's word (*talagang kimilabutan ako sa mga teaching, talagang sarap na sarap ako sa pakikinig ng salita ng Diyos*). She resolved to continue the ministry (*papatuloy ko ang gawain nga sa ganito*), and faithfully attend JIL services.

In response to the interviewer's questions, Nena describes herself as a true, locked-in Catholic (*talagang Catholic ako, kandado sarado*) before she joined JIL. She also admits that she has problems, but is able to withstand, even fight, them (*napapag-lakasan ko ng loob, napapag-labanan ko*) because of the thought that Jesus is Lord in her life. No one, she says, can restrain her from praising the Lord.

## Don

Don is 43 years old, married, with a Bachelor's degree in civil engineering. He is head of production in the company where he works. How he joined JIL is traced to a friend whose father was a tailor. At that time he was a worker at St. Joseph's Church. Each time he would go to the tailoring shop his friend would ask him out for a drink. One day Don was amazed because his friend related with him differently and invited him [to JIL]. He agreed to go as the activity was God-related (*payag ako basta sa Panginoon*). He was brought to a school and felt strange (*namibago ako*) as people were raising their hands, and suddenly switched from singing joyful songs to tearful worship (*biglang-bigla nag-iiyakan na kasi kumakanta na ng worship*). He remained observant of what to him was a totally new sight.

When he went back to St. Joseph's Church, where his group, the Adoracion Nocturna Filipina, would hold vigil every last Sunday of the month, he asked his group mates to have a Bible study since what they were doing was for God anyway. They refused, and he could not understand why. He continued attending Bible studies [at JIL] and, given his exposure to God's word, inquired, "Lord, why should it be like this, if it is you that we [at Adoracion Nocturna] serve, why are my companions the way they are: a young person under the influence of drugs, an older person who is a drunk?" He felt confused.

He studied at FEATI University, and when he was in his third year he met a man who was able to answer his many questions. Eventually he found out that there was a JIL group in his school. It was in 1984 when he observed JIL services and attended Bible studies for a year. In 1985 he accepted Jesus. Meanwhile, he was bothered, "Why are my companions not keen on having a Bible study?" At the same time, he was serving at Santa Cruz Church, because he was searching for the truth (*kasi naghabanap ako ng katotohanan, eh*). He had joined the Cursillo but did not find it (*di ko natagpuan*), so he went to Santa Cruz but also did not find what he was looking for (*hindi rin ako nasiyahan*). He kept searching for the truth.

That was when he was amazed at the transformation of his friend, who asked him to join a Bible study with these words, "Because we're friends, can I invite you just once, come with me just once, after which I won't bother you again" (*minsang lang kitang iimbitahan, pagkatapos nito di na kita gagambalain*). So his friend brought him to Araullo High School. On entering the hall, they greeted him and shook his hand, making him feel the joy [of the place] (*dun pa lang damang-dama mo na yung kaligayaban*). He was standing at the back, listening to the preaching of Brother Eddie, and he began to think, "Why is this pastor gossiping about my life, which he knows so well (*chinichismis ako . . . 'yung buhay ko alam na alam niya*)?"



But, Don says, that is how sharp God's word is. He could not explain the overflowing joy in his heart (*kaliyabang nag-umapaw sa puso ko*).

When he had returned home to God (*nung umuwi na ako sa Diyos*), he realized the value of each human life, the value of a soul based on verses in the Bible. He continued with the Lord (*nagpatuloy ako sa Panginoon*), and felt a burden for those who did not know God. He would save his student allowance (*baon*) so that come Sunday he could invite another youth in his place to Araullo. If the young man had no shirt, he would lend his. If he had no trouser to wear, he would lend his. His mother found out what he was doing, "Why do you do this, when you yourself do not have a lot of clothes?" He told her, "I do this and my joy overflows (*nag-umapaw ang kagalakan sa puso ko*)." That, he says, was how he got started in JIL.

## Notes

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 45th anniversary conference of the Institute of Philippine Culture (IPC), Ateneo de Manila University, "Global Pentecostalism and Filipino Charismatic Christianity: Social Science Perspectives," 16 September 2005, and at the 7th Asean Inter-universities Seminar, "Human Welfare, Peace and Sustainable Development," Vietnam National University, Hanoi, 19–21 July 2006. The indispensable role of Lou Antolihao in conducting the interviews of fifteen informants from the El Shaddai movement and another fifteen from the Jesus-is-Lord Church is gratefully acknowledged. For the larger study, he interviewed an additional thirty informants: fifteen from various Catholic charismatic groups, and fifteen from various non-Catholic Pentecostal-type churches. Lou also graciously read and gave comments on earlier versions of this paper. The transcribers of the taped interviews included Frances Ruby Arce, Kim Darby Bartolome, Amparo de la Cruz, Kathryn Anne Gonzales, Rosemarie Ramirez, and Annafel Roca. Purificacion Roca encoded the interview responses. Nota Magno helped with the review of literature on the El Shaddai movement, and Ethel Cuyco on the Jesus-is-Lord Church. I am very grateful for the comments of participants in the two conferences mentioned above, and for the comments and suggestions of three referees. In quoting from the transcripts, I have followed the spelling of the transcriber.

1. For a succinct history of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity, which also clarifies the terminological muddle, see Robbins 2004, 119–23.

2. El Shaddai is one of the names of God in the Old Testament that means God Almighty of Blessings. El Shaddai followers object to the "Pentecostal" and born-again labels. As is well known, the movement remains officially within the

Catholic Church. Martin (2005) considers the El Shaddai movement as a “functional equivalent” of mainly Protestant Pentecostalism.

3. Paradigmatic functionalist explanations are also utilized in explaining Filipino conversions to Islam, which has been dubbed as *Balik-Islam* although the individual convert, strictly speaking, is not a returnee to Islam but comes from various brands of Christianity. Lacar (2001, 50) reports this phenomenon but states that the gradual shift to Islam by the converts has not made them happier or more contented than prior to conversion, but they feel a lot safer.

4. On the continuing appeal to “experience” in relation to social class, which has spilled over to subaltern and feminist studies, see Ireland 2002.

5. Jeremy Carrette (2002, liii) calls attention to the politics of psychology and neuroscience as “forms of discourse struggling for a hegemonic reading of human experience” in order to protect “the certainty and domination of a scientific worldview.” Moreover, the neurologist’s technology of brain scanning also relies upon “reports” of an experience to correlate temporal lobe processes with religious or paranormal activity (*ibid.*, lix-lx).

6. Initially called the Jesus-is-Lord Fellowship, the Jesus-is-Lord (JIL) Church is considered as an “independent” Pentecostal church headed by Bishop Eduardo (Eddie) Villanueva, a former activist, communist, and atheist (Suico 2005; Wourms 1992). It is referred to in this study as a movement because it started in 1978 as a set of Bible study groups in the campus of the Polytechnic University of the Philippines (PUP), where Villanueva used to teach. Unlike the El Shaddai movement, JIL has become formally constituted as a church; but like El Shaddai it has a global followership.

7. James (1902/2002, 379) observes that “To-day, quite as much as at any previous age, the religious individual tells you that the divine meets him on the basis of his personal concerns.” Belief, in this case, can be a case of “merely subjective utility” (*ibid.*, 392). Weighing against a pure utilitarianism are the new moral commitments of the convert, which can be costly, as the narratives in this study show.

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