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Focus on the Busy Intersections of Culture and Cultural Change

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CATHOLICS & CULTURES

Scholarship for the Pedagogy of Global Catholicism

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LAURA ELDER

Focus on the Busy Intersections of Culture and Cultural Change



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Trained in cultural anthropology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, her primary research interests are global political economy, Islam, and gender in South and Southeast Asia. Always fascinated by the interplay of culture and capital, during her graduate studies she examined the dynamics of sex, money, and power among hedge funds in Asia. She has conducted fieldwork in Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, Qatar, and Singapore. Currently she is finishing a comparative analysis of the promotion of women's expertise in Islamic financial services in Southeast Asian and Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

As a cultural anthropologist working in South and Southeast Asia, I am delighted to see the significant representation of these areas on the Catholics & Cultures website. From an anthropological point of view, however, I would suggest a reorganization and increased emphasis on the dynamics of cultural change across the site. From Ghost cultists to prosperity Christians and wealth-affirming Buddhists to market Muslims, recent decades have ushered in an unprecedented religious resurgence around the world.¹ And this turn to piety has been marked by popular participation, voluntary association, a re-recognition of laity expertise, a focus on prosperity and, in particular, an increased leadership role for women.² Many scholars argue that this resurgence marks the desire of ordinary believers for security, self-initiative, and dignity in the face of overwhelming social, economic, and environmental change. But a common theme running through the literature on religion is that dissenting voices within major religious institutions have broken away, forming communes as well as business enterprises to establish and practice new ways of life based on a revised understanding of their faith.³

- 1 See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Cornell West, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, eds. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Van Antwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Harvey Cox "Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America. David Martin; Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth. David Stoll." *American Journal of Sociology* 97, no. 2 (1991): 579-582, <https://doi.org/10.1086/229812>; Daniel D. Groody, Gustavo Gutiérrez, and José O Aylwin, *The Preferential Option for the Poor beyond Theology* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014); Robert Hefner, "Religious Resurgence in Contemporary Asia: Southeast Asian Perspectives on Capitalism, the State, and the New Piety," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no. 4 (2010): 1031-47, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0021911810002901>; Tariq Modood, *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007).
- 2 Alexander Agadjanian, "Evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches in Latin America and Eastern Europe: An Introduction," *Religion, State and Society* 40, no. 1 (2012): 3-10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2012.669581>. Paul Freston, "Evangelical Protestantism and Democratization in Contemporary Latin America and Asia," *Democratization* 11, no. 4 (2004): 21-41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1351034042000234512>; Hefner, "Religious Resurgence in Contemporary Asia."
- 3 See Tomoko Akami, "Between the State and Global Civil Society: Non-official Experts and Their Network in the Asia-Pacific, 1925-45," *Global Networks* 2 (2002): 65-82, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-0374.00027>; Edmund Terence Gomez, Robert Hunt, and John Roxborough, "Introduction: Religion, Business and Contestation in Malaysia and Singapore," *Pacific Affairs* 88, no. 2 (2015): 153-71, <https://doi.org/10.5509/2015882153>; Charles Hirschkind, "Beyond Secular and Religious: An Intellectual Genealogy of Tahrir Square," *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 1 (2012): 49-53, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2011.01346.x>; Mary Ida Bagus, "Getting the Monkey off Your Back: Women and the Intensification of Religious Identities in Post-Bomb Bali,



Some of this literature suggests that these non-conforming groups have ventured into business to support and promote their belief in the distinctiveness of their faith. These groups have created local and transnational business links that, among others, allow them to transfer funds to complement the activities of fellow communities in need of resources for proselytizing.⁴

In this vein, the dynamic connections of religious resurgence reveal the important ways that religious ritual and performance are meaning making spaces which are not self-contained or cut off from the rest of culture, but rather are a key locus of cultural change. Renato Rosaldo, for example, shows us rituals are “the busy intersections of culture.”⁵ And I, in turn, ask my students: What does religious resurgence mean politically, economically, and socially? Where would you locate the appeal of these practices? What is the basis of conflicts? What is the role of the state and/or global forces? On the Catholics & Cultures website, a renewed emphasis on busy intersections of meaning making—as rituals are connected, disconnected, and reconnected to other domains of social life—would improve the utility of the site for analyzing these connections. El Shaddai, a populist, prosperity gospel oriented Catholic group originating in the Philippines, for example, now claims millions of adherents and substantial multinational business initiatives around the world.⁶ Based on Katherine Wiegele’s work, the documentation provided for El Shaddai on the website provides a careful exposition of how El Shaddai welds

Indonesia,” *Women’s Studies International Forum*, Special Issue: From Village Religion to Global Networks: Women, Religious Nationalism and Sustainability in South and Southeast Asia, 33, no. 4 (2010): 402–11, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2010.02.014>; Mohamad Maznah, “The Ascendance of Bureaucratic Islam and the Secularization of the Sharia in Malaysia,” *Pacific Affairs* 83, 3 (2010): 505–24, <https://doi.org/10.5509/2010833505>; Geoffrey Samuel and Santi Rozario, “From Village Religion to Global Networks: Women, Religious Nationalism and Sustainability in South and Southeast Asia,” *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 301–4, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2010.02.003>.

- 4 See, for example, James B. Hoesterey, “Prophetic Cosmopolitanism: Islam, Pop Psychology, and Civic Virtue in Indonesia,” *City & Society* 24, no. 1 (2012): 38–61, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-744X.2012.01067.x>; Daromir Rudnykyj, *Spiritual Economies: Islam, Globalization, and the Afterlife of Development* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010); Filippo Osella and Benjamin F Soares, *Islam, Politics, Anthropology* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
- 5 Renato Rosaldo, *Culture & Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (New ed. Boston: Beacon Press 1993), 17.
- 6 Katharine L. Wiegele, *Investing in Miracles: El Shaddai and the Transformation of Popular Catholicism in the Philippines* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005).



self help, hope and prosperity among impoverished, marginalized workers who have been excluded from both political and development initiatives. The site also gestures to the significance of El Shaddai among elites and those with political influence but unfortunately provides no context regarding conflicts between these groups of adherents. Further, the discussion of El Shaddai could better represent the meaning making among followers around the world not just in the Philippines. While meaning making is “on the menu” the framing of the entire website around nation-states works against users following these networks of charismatic practice elsewhere. If we move to Hong Kong, for example, we learn that in Hong Kong, “One Filipino priest suggests that half of Filipinos in Hong Kong would probably prefer charismatic forms of worship over traditional types...” and that, “Members are at times engaged in fun and laughter, and at other times cry and in distress as they reflect on life’s difficulties and their worries.” From an anthropological point of view, it would be beneficial to fully represent practitioners’ own interpretations of their work and lives as well as the ways that ritual practice binds migrant workers and communities of practice transnationally.⁷ To put it another way, the people who are being represented on the screen spend most of their lives at work, laboring to

El Shaddai's Saturday evening "gawain," or fellowship service, in Manila is broadcast all over the country. Photo by Thomas M. Landy/ catholicsandcultures.org.

7 Nicole Constable, *Maid to Order in Hong Kong: Stories of Migrant Workers*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007); Nicole Constable, "Migrant Workers and the Many States of Protest in Hong Kong," *Critical Asian Studies* 41 (March 2009): 143-64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672710802631202>.



Filipino Catholic El Shaddai members at daily liturgy, St. Joseph Church, Hong Kong. Photo by Thomas M. Landy/catholicsandcultures.org.

provide for families and networks that extend across the globe. And as this labor cuts across national, cultural, religious boundaries, the site itself could usefully connect across these spaces.

Finally, a renewed emphasis on cultural change would also provide a better means for exploring reflexively, by seeking to understand both yourself and others in and through the website. As the philosopher Ian Hacking has so persuasively shown us “representing is intervening” and, while telling stories, describing practices, and interpreting rituals, the site could provide a frame for both how people think about “others” but also how people think about themselves. Ritual spaces are framed by, and most importantly alter meanings, as people seek to manifest desire and aspirations (for this world or another one) through ritual performative space. For example, again thinking through the Philippines, the extraordinary work of Julius Bautista provides a particularly innovative view from the margins by connecting the Philippines’ leading export (Overseas Foreign Workers) to the ways that some Catholic men seek to recuperate respect, masculinity, and self-worth through rituals of the Passion. Bautista takes us into the world of Sencho,

a forty-year-old technician from the Philippine province of Pampanga who,

for most of the past fifteen years, has whipped his own back to a bloody pulp in a ritual commemorating Jesus Christ's Passion on Good Friday. When I spoke to him in 2012, he told me that he began self-flagellating on behalf of his mother, Meling, who worked as a domestic helper in Hong Kong to earn enough money to service a family debt. Sencho's flagellation was a way of appealing for God's help in alleviating his family's financial situation. After several years of this kind of self-sacrifice, Sencho too had taken up employment in the Middle East, an endeavor he took on with a self-confidence extending from the ritual experience. "No problem," he recalled; "if I could flagellate, I knew I could handle Saudi." Narrating this experience brought back memories of his mother, who had since passed away because of illness. "My flagellation is painful.... But that's nothing compared to how she sacrificed for us in Hong Kong. She's the [real] hero...she's the martyr."⁸

The binding, meaning making work here is painful but I suggest well-worth representing, if the intention of the website is to fruitfully provoke thoughtful conversations across our world rather than just within our own cultural contexts. On the website these rituals are carefully presented as over-sensationalized in the media and as discouraged by the Catholic Church. This is a very understandable representational choice, perhaps meant to minimize the "othering gaze," but I suggest that this choice inadvertently shifts focus away the power being claimed by participants. A more ethnographic move, one that I ask of my students and that benefits critical understanding, is to include both the observe and the observed in all representations. To this end, and again as a step beyond ethnocentrism, ritual cultures and practice in the United States should be also included on the site. The World Wide Web is also of course itself a busy intersection of culture and it has become an essential meaning making space because it connects across cultural spaces. Best practices in designing for the web rely on forging community by connecting into and out of spaces, places and cultures. Another important step in reemphasizing cultural change would be to provide links (both interreligious and intercultural) betwixt and between this website and other online forums. For example, the Phil-

8 Julius Bautista, "Export-Quality Martyrs: Roman Catholicism and Transnational Labor in the Philippines," *Cultural Anthropology* 30, no. 3 (2015): 424.

ippines exposition is written by Tom Landy and Esmeralda Fortunado-Sanchez but it is not linked to Esmeralda Fortunado-Sanchez's work, the work of others, the organizations mentioned, or other individuals or collectivities that make meaning here there and everywhere. For example, if we move to China, to the context of Lancang river valley in Yunnan, we similarly find a fabulous description of altar pieces at Niuren Catholic church but the marginalization, exploitation, forced resettlement, and devastating cultural and economic upheavals of dam development along the Lancang (the headwaters of the Mekong river affecting the livelihoods of millions) is relegated to the introduction.⁹ Fortunately, the links provide some of these important connections. Here, I suggest that, if politics is not restricted to the introduction, if we dig into these intersections and link in and out and across, then the webs of meaning which are created through the busy intersections of culture come alive and site users can better represent, understand, and analyze cultural change globally.

⁹ Bryan Tilt, *Dams and Development in China: The Moral Economy of Water and Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).



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