Tagapagligtas, Ilaw, Kasama: Religiosity Among Filipino Domestic Workers in Hong Kong

Betty Cernol-McCann
United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia
Hong Kong

Margaret Helen U. Alvarez
College of Arts and Sciences, Silliman University
Dumaguete, Philippines

Dennis P. McCann
Agnes Scott College
Decatur, GA, USA

The plight of Filipino domestic workers abroad is much documented, especially in relation to economic pressures and psycho-emotional stresses. This paper investigated their patterns of coping by looking at their religious activities and attitudes towards their situation and life away from their families and country. A quantitative-qualitative study done in 2005 was supplemented by interviews made in 2009.

In the 2005 study, the majority of the 121 respondents were college-educated, young adults, married with children, and had been working in Hong Kong for over a year. Many of those who indicated they were single had also left children in the Philippines. Similar demographics were characteristic of the 17 Filipinas interviewed in 2009, but this group was made up mostly of residents of Bethune House who had taken shelter there after having experienced significant difficulties with their employers.

In the 2005 study, virtually all (118 out of the 121 respondents) reported attending church in Hong Kong—most of them of the Roman Catholic faith. Attending church is an activity that gives them inner peace and wholeness and also allows them a fellowship with other Filipinos. Prayers focused on practical problems, for example, personal health and family members' health so that they could remain employed in Hong Kong, as well as the welfare of their employers and the Hong Kong economy. The religious person

is one who has personal discipline and applies this discipline to life and circumstances. God is viewed as powerful above all things, *tagapagligtas* (Savior), *ilaw* (guiding light), *kasama* (companion). In the 2009 study, while the primary focus was on the respondents' happiness or well-being in general, the importance of religiosity for them was evident in their ranking of God (Religion) as a source of happiness higher than family, friends, and work.

It was confirmed that Filipina domestic workers derive much comfort and support from a strong and active faith that in their view is crucial for their survival in Hong Kong. This conclusion is offered in order to stimulate further research on the role of churches and religious institutions in supporting Filipinas who must work overseas to meet the needs of their families.

KEYWORDS: religiosity, spirituality, foreign domestic helpers, women's migrant labor, Hong Kong

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

On any given Sunday in the Central District in Hong Kong, visitors are likely to encounter masses of Filipina domestic helpers, catching up with friends and acquaintances from their home provinces in the Philippines, buying or selling "load" for their mobile phones, lining up to make remittances at the branch offices of major Philippine banks, or simply relaxing on their one day off a week. These women may be regarded by some as a tourist attraction, "a spectacular site" (Constable, 1997) now well entrenched as part of Hong Kong's social landscape (Tam, 1999), but to those whose relatives may be among the helpers hanging out at Statue Square or seeking shelter in the vast shady space created for *Feng Shui* purposes under the HSBC building, the sight of so many Filipinas may evoke mixed emotions: dismay that so many of our fellow citizens have had to seek employment abroad, joy in the company of so many sisters whose laughter resonates so deeply with one's own heart, and perhaps, curiosity, an eagerness to learn where they came from, how they got here, how they manage not only to survive but to remain proudly and incorrigibly Filipina, in spite of the hardships that they have had to endure and that we somehow have been spared.

Our study is a result of efforts to turn these mixed emotions to good account, in the hope of learning from our sisters. It seeks to

begin an investigation into one of the major sources of their strength and resiliency in coping with the heavy burdens they bear as "Heroes of the Filipino People." After rubbing shoulders with them in various ways for many years, here we will attempt to share the results of interviews that we believe may help our readers to understand better the role of religious faith and practice in their lives as foreign domestic helpers. While our investigation is preliminary and hardly scientific in any definitive sense, it is offered in the hope of stimulating further research and discussion. We contend that religious faith and practice are a crucial, though often neglected dimension of the experiences reported to us in these interviews. We hope to convince the reader that religion and spirituality play an important role in sustaining the mental health of Filipina domestic helpers working in Hong Kong. As such they must be factored into any well-informed explanation of the resourcefulness and resiliency of most Filipina workers because these factors empower so many of the workers to preserve their basic humanity under often stressful circumstances. This essay is meant to open a discussion of the role of religion and spirituality among the domestic helpers. This is also meant as a challenge not only to previous academic studies of women's migrant labor under conditions of globalization but also to religious institutions both at home and abroad to render pastoral support for these women more effectively.

Let us begin our inquiry with the Filipinas on their Sundays in Hong Kong, since this was the day of the week when most of our interviews were conducted. The Central District in Hong Kong is a convenient location for various reasons. Statue Square, which fronts Hong Kong's "Legco" or Legislative Council building, is the terminal point for various political demonstrations, and thus well known to the tens of thousands who have participated in the protests against the various forms of discrimination and abuse that they routinely endure in Hong Kong. Statue Square is just two blocks away from the Mission for Migrant Workers[1], an NGO founded by Filipinas, former domestic helpers themselves. It, among other things, sponsors Bethune House, a shelter where domestic helpers may find sanctuary when they get into serious trouble with either their employers or the government. After documenting their cases, the Mission provides legal aid as well as counseling and other support services, while Bethune House gives them a place to stay as they await the disposition of their cases before the Labour Tribunal (Constable, 1997). St. John's Anglican Cathedral, where the MFMW has its offices,

is half way up Garden Road. Further up the hill just beyond the US Consulate is St. Joseph's Catholic Church, whose Sunday masses in Tagalog and English are packed with Filipinas who consistently form the bulk of the congregation worshipping there. One readily observes the Filipinas moving in groups up and down Garden Road, visiting the churches, as friends and relatives save their spaces for them in and around Statue Square or over at Exchange Square, opposite the World Wide House, where the remittance centers as well as various boutiques catering to Philippine tastes may be found.

The history of foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong began in 1969, when expatriates were allowed to bring along their servants from overseas (Tam, 1999). In 2007, Filipinas were still the largest nationality group of domestic helpers, followed by groups from Indonesia and Thailand (Rivera, 2007). It is estimated that in 2010 only 48% of the 284,901 foreign domestic helpers living and working in Hong Kong were from the Philippines, while it is commonly reported that 90% of the Filipino residents in Hong Kong are domestic helpers.[2] These trends indicate not only Hong Kong's increasing reliance on foreign domestic helpers but also a decreasing share of that work going to Filipinas. The dramatic rise in the number of Indonesians employed as domestic helpers may reflect the fact that Hong Kong employers generally regard the Indonesians as more manageable and often willing to work for less than the minimum wage. The Filipinas' superior skills in social networking, and greater awareness of their rights under HKSAR law, may actually make them less competitive than helpers hailing from Indonesia and Thailand.

Filipinas bound for service in Hong Kong are usually recruited through employment agencies or by the word of mouth of helpers who make referrals for relatives and friends (Tam, 1999). The regulatory framework for such employment is established through a series of bilateral agreements between Hong Kong and the Philippines, dating back to the Marcos regime. The work visa specific to foreign domestic helpers restricts them to domestic duties in service to a specific employer. The official "Employment Contract for a Domestic Worker Recruited Outside of Hong Kong" governs relations between the helpers and their Hong Kong employers (Constable, 2003). The contract outlines the rights and obligations of both the helper and the employer. Covering a two-year period, it can be legally terminated with one month's notice or one month's pay in lieu of notice by either the helper or the employer. A helper whose contract ends or is terminated is usually required to return to the Philippines within

two weeks.

Foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong had been receiving a monthly minimum allowable wage (MAW) of HK$3,400 until an increase of HK$80 was given effective June 6, 2007 (Rivera, 2007). For all contracts signed after July 2008, the MAW is now set at HK$3,580[3]. Aside from wages, the contract stipulates the helper's holidays and benefits, and the employer's responsibilities for providing suitable and furnished accommodation and food free of charge, as well as a list of reimbursable fees and expenses[4]. In exchange for these considerations, the contract stipulates a range of "domestic duties" that helpers are expected to perform, specifically including "household chores, cooking, looking after aged persons in the household, baby-sitting, and child minding" as well as other unspecified services. The HKSAR Immigration Department's rulings on "Foreign Domestic Helpers" are quite detailed on what may and may not be demanded of them[5]. While such regulations may be intended to protect the helpers, they are in fact difficult to enforce (Constable, 2003). The many violations of these contracts have been well documented by migrant and labor organizations based in Hong Kong, as well as various foreign observers, including Constable (1997, 1999), Momsen (1999), and Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2002).

In taking a step back from the immediate situation facing domestic helpers in Hong Kong, we must remind ourselves that the migration of Filipino workers has become so commonplace that the Filipino family without members working abroad is now a thing of the past. With good reason, Padilla (1994) describes this phenomenon as the creation of a Filipino diaspora, literally "the scattering of Filipinos all over the world." He further characterizes it as "the road from bagumbayan"—the road of the diaspora. The term Bagumbayan comes from the Filipino word "bagong bayan," literally meaning New Country or New Town. Its historic significance stems, in Padilla's view, from two ways of interpreting bagumbayan: there is the road to bagumbayan—raising the question "What happened to us?"—and the road from bagumbayan—which shifts the focus to "What lies ahead of us?" (Padilla, 1998).

Answers to these questions have usually concentrated on explaining the structural characteristics of Philippine history, with particular emphasis on the political economy and globalization. Such perspectives tend to highlight the ways in which labor migration is controlled, regulated, and sponsored by states, whose priorities are governed less by humanitarian concerns than by capitalist interests,

reflecting the power of local elites as well as the international financial system (Aguilar, 2002). While such analyses may help inspire organized resistance to globalization, they also prompt observers to lose sight of the fact that migrants are not just victims but subjects capable of actively responding to the opportunities and constraints that confront them. As sociologist Maruja Asis notes, "when we deploy overseas workers, we send out human beings, with all their potentials and vulnerabilities" (Asis, 2002). Thus, receiving countries have to reckon with human beings, even if their intention may only have been to exploit cheap foreign labor. "Limiting migrants' rights," as Asis observes, "has not kept migrants from expressing their humanity. Despite the conditions they find themselves in, or perhaps because of such conditions, they seek out other migrants, they build communities or alternative institutions, and some become settlers."

While Asis' emphasis on the Overseas Filipino Worker's (OFW's) moral agency has prompted our investigation of the role played by religion and spirituality, we must acknowledge the context in which the domestic helpers' agency is exercised. The global services sector, in particular, depends upon a markedly gendered labor market, through which the demand for domestic help in Hong Kong has been matched with an enthusiastic supply from poorer neighboring countries (Aguilar, 2002). Because of its geographic proximity and relatively high wages, Hong Kong has been one of the most popular destinations for migrant workers from the Philippines (Groves & Chang, 2002). Once the system was established, the burden of household chores was relieved for Hong Kong women, thus enabling them to accept paid employment outside the home, particularly in managerial positions. Rimban (1999) points to the irony that while middle-class women in the receiving countries can now afford domestic helpers and thus pursue careers of their own, it is the Filipinas who, along with other foreign women, have been brought in to do the household chores. One consequence, so painfully evident in Hong Kong, is that the gender discrimination that all women confront has been compounded by racial discrimination (Lee, 1996). "What divides women from women," in the words of psychologist Meredith Kimball, "are not the political strategies of different feminisms, but the economic and social differences that are associated with racial and other forms of domination that operate across gender lines. The issue of domestic workers is illustrative of these differences."

The cultural and psychological impact of going abroad to work as a domestic helper should not be underestimated. Except for Sundays,

most Filipina domestic helpers live the rest of their week in a condition of "surreal timelessness" (Parreñas, 2001). They are isolated by racial and cultural differences from the families they serve in Hong Kong and removed in both time and space from their families at home. These post-modern Cinderellas—generally as well-educated as the women they work for, yet often treated as wayward children, continually at risk of becoming the object of whatever dysfunctionalities their employers may be plagued with—are dispossessed of their personal identities, at least until next Sunday. Their quotidian isolation means that their experience of the Filipino diaspora is more of an "imagined community" than as a source of real solidarity (Alegado, 2003). While our Hong Kong kababayans (compatriots) will never come to know or meet the great majority of their counterparts, on Sunday they can at least return symbolically to their barangay, unfailingly marked off by cardboard and picnic blankets somewhere in the Central District. There they may be reunited with relatives, schoolmates, and others from their home neighborhood, and if only for a few hours they can renew the bonds of culture, national identity, custom and tradition, that define them as *tao*. The stress involved in such a surreal existence inevitably raises questions: How do they survive? How do they cope as well as they do? What is their support? Does religion and spirituality play a sustaining role in their lives?

Myers (2005) has described how religion can give people a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives, help them accept their setbacks gracefully, connect them to a caring, supportive community, and comfort them by putting their ultimate mortality in perspective. This new emphasis on the ways in which religion can help sustain mental health and overall wellness marks a departure from the skepticism that marred the work of the major philosophers who paved the way for the social scientific study of religion in the 20th century, namely, Hobbes, Hume, Comte, Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. Such writers formed what philosopher Paul Ricoeur termed "the school of suspicion" (1977), whose perspectives have been refuted by later, more insightful approaches inspired primarily by field work in social psychology and cultural anthropology. One prominent representative of this reassessment is Clifford Geertz's definition of "religion as a cultural system" (1973) that may serve as deep background for the present study. We hope to illuminate the religious aspects evident in the coping patterns of Filipina domestic helpers and determine whether and to what extent religious faith and practices help them overcome the stresses they routinely face as OFWs.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Previous studies have featured attempts to analyze the mental health of OFWs but with little attention paid to the role of religion in either sustaining or subverting it. Psychological studies on the impact of employment in domestic service overseas have focused on working conditions (French & Lam, 1988), labor economics (Lane, 1989), and demographic factors (AMWC, 1991). More recent studies have focused on stress factors and mental health (Bagley, Madrid, & Bolitho, 1997), the effects of extended parental absence on the children of migrant workers (Wolf, 2002; Parreñas, 2003), the challenges and adjustments involved in their return home (Constable, 1997), the impact of power differences between the OFWs and their employers (Groves & Chang, 2002; Constable 2002), and the organizational activities of migrant workers (Asato, 2003; Ogaya, 2003).

While recent studies have underlined the importance of investigating the impact of working overseas on the children and families these women leave behind (Wolf, 1997; Scalabrini Migration Center, 2003-2004), some researchers have also focused on the personal experiences of the women themselves. In particular, the Hong Kong study of Bagley, Madrid, and Bolitho (1997) conducted in 1995 among 600 Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong found that potential stress factors included employment-related issues; debt problems in the Philippines; and domestic problems concerning husband, children, or extended family. Two groups had particularly good mental health adjustment: one group (14% of the sample) consisted of single women without dependent children, college educated prior to emigration, and free of major debts in the Philippines; the other group (17% of the sample) was composed of women over 30 years old, who were in their third or subsequent contracts as domestic helpers, with strong ties to Filipino social organizations, including many personal friends in Hong Kong. By contrast, two other groups had particularly poor mental health: one group (7% of the sample) consisted of women experiencing conflicts with employers over alleged inefficiency or carelessness, and suffering through various forms of abuse inflicted by a household member; another group (5 % of the sample) was composed of women with high debt burdens in Hong Kong or the Philippines.

Nicole Constable's (1997) study took a deeper look at the lives

of Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong, focusing particularly on the employer-employee relationship as seen through the eyes of the employee. Using a theoretical framework influenced by Michel Foucault, Constable observed the forms of control that Filipina domestic workers experience and the multiple ways they responded to the disciplines imposed by their employers, noting the dynamics of resistance and protest, docility and self-discipline, pleasure and power. In each of these sets, Constable shows how the complexity of Filipina responses makes their experiences difficult to interpret according to standard binary paradigms of oppressed and oppressors.

Similarly, Stiell and England's (1999) study looked at the employer-employee relationship as experienced by Filipina domestic workers in Toronto, Canada. Their investigation compared the Filipinas with Jamaican and English domestics, and found evidence to support the notion that they are comparatively more "docile, subservient, hard-working, good-natured, domesticated, and willing to endure long hours of housework and child care with little complaint." Indeed, it appears that Filipinas have the dubious reputation in Canada of being preferred "because they are seen as less aggressive," surely a comparative advantage in some circumstances but not in others. It also stands in marked contrast to their image in Hong Kong, where they are regarded as more aggressive and resourceful than, say, their Indonesian competitors. Filipinas have a comparative advantage in their ability to speak English and Spanish. Their Roman Catholicism is also a benefit in Europe, particularly in Italy and Spain (Momsen, 1999).

Parreñas' (2001) study of migrant Filipina domestic workers in Rome and Los Angeles attempted to broaden the focus beyond investigating domestic work as an occupational issue toward a more comprehensive analysis of the institutional settings to which they are responding. She, thus, viewed the workers' experiences through the lens of four key institutions of migration—the nation-state, family, labor market, and the migrant community. Based on the women's stories that she collected, Parreñas analyzed her findings that ranged from the politics of domestic work in the context of globalization to the existential "dislocation of nonbelonging" that shapes the Filipinas' interpretations of their own experience. A sense of "nonbelonging" or isolation may be the greatest psychological challenge faced by those who must work abroad.

Despite the superficial appearance of community conveyed by the clusters of OFWs gathered in locations like Statue Square, Parreñas

(2001) points out that such gatherings are actually isolated pockets—so-called because the term pockets suggests a segregated social space, in which social interactions are enclosed—reflecting the dispersion of Filipinas for purposes of social control at scattered geographic sites in the city. The groups of OFWs seen trudging up and down Garden Road to St. Joseph's Catholic Church or St. John's Anglican Cathedral indicate that the church, wherever and whenever Sunday services are offered in either English or Tagalog is an example of such pocket. Like all religious believers, migrant workers participate in such religious rituals in order "to implore God to assist them in their temporal and spiritual needs."

While previous studies on Filipina domestic workers have described the church as "a way station of some sort" (Mateo, 2003), researchers generally seem incurious about what goes on in these pockets formed under such conditions in a foreign country. When viewed in the context of the isolation most experience in their weekly work routines, however, regular church-attendance can be understood as providing an important time and space for Filipino women to establish their own support system and social networks (Cheng, 1996). The gatherings, including regular church-attendance, provide a valued opportunity for exchanging information and sharing experiences, and overcoming their shared sense of "nonbelonging," if only for a few hours on Sunday.

But highlighting the social function of religion may only be the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. While church-attendance is generally the most visible and therefore most readily measured indication of religious faith and practice, it should lead us to further inquiries into what lies hidden beneath it. For example, to what extent do female Filipino domestic workers turn to religion when they are not in church, that is, when they are at work? Understanding what religion may mean to them personally as well as socially should be a top priority for researchers, given the challenges specific to the nature of the work they do. Psychological studies of religion and its importance in people's lives have become more positive in their assessment in recent years. If at one time, coping strategies based on religious faith and practice tended to get dismissed as infantile, today spiritual health is considered a vital aspect of one's overall health, just as the physical, intellectual, emotional, and social aspects of it are.

Nevertheless, the reassessment of religion's positive contribution to spiritual health does not entail an uncritical acceptance of all forms of religious activity, social or personal. Turner et al. (1992), for

example, have cautioned that while some people find deep spiritual meaning in institutionalized religious practices, living by a set of rules is not what spirituality is about. Spirituality should not be confused with indicators measuring how often people attend church. Regardless of religious affiliation, people who value spirituality seem to share a faith that consists of certain experiences that they regard as ultimately trustworthy: they believe that a power greater than themselves exists; they believe that this power is omnipotent, in the sense that it is in control of the universe and everyone's lives within it; and they believe that this power is good, cares for and loves them, and controls and guides their lives according to their best interest (Turner et al., 1992). Religious beliefs, as disseminated by religious institutions like churches that build upon these experiences of basic trust, name them, explain them, and teach people how to live more consistently by them.

The ways in which common human experiences are identified as religious, named and explained in religious beliefs, and reinforced through participation in religious rituals is well known among psychologists starting with William James whose Gifford Lectures, published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*[6] (1902), is credited, among other things, with initiating a genuinely scientific study of religion. James' empirical approach to the study of religious experience broke with previous critics, such as Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, whose "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Ricoeur, 1977) seemed more intent on explaining away religion rather than understanding it. A similar trend can be seen in the development of anthropology, which as it became more rigorously empirical eventually set aside post-Enlightenment perspectives that dismissed religion as representative of a "primitive" stage in the evolution of human civilization. While such negative attitudes continue to influence the ways in which some researchers ignore or underestimate the significance of religion (Larson, 1995), anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1977) along with other revisionists have made it possible to take a more positive view of religion and its role in shaping cultures, and the social and personal identities emergent in them.

In order to understand the observed complexity involved in the ways religions actually function in human communities, Geertz defined religion as a "cultural system": "Religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in [women and] men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence, and clothing these conceptions with such

an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (1977, p. 87). This definition is not biased against the study of religions in favor of one religious perspective or another, nor does it focus on religious beliefs as if these were the most salient features of religious experience. It provides instead a template for understanding how religions develop and change, as religious people inherit them and adapt them to the different challenges they face in life. It also establishes a context for addressing philosophical questions about the truth-claims of religion. The fact that religions are thought to convey an ultimate truth about life is not to be dismissed as a sign of irrationality or pathological insecurity, but as the normal result of allowing religious symbols to shape one's personal and social identity, the practical results of which can be tested, revised, and renewed or repudiated in light of one's own experience. Religions continue to shape their adherents' perspectives on reality for pragmatic reasons: in short, they work—or at least they work better than any other option currently available to those who remain committed to them. It is natural that, for those whose identities are shaped by them, religious beliefs and practices are considered normal, if not uniquely realistic.

Not surprisingly, such positive reassessments of the general significance of religion find their echoes in the studies of various psychologists. Curran, for example, says there is no doubt that religion or religious teachings play an important part in people's lives (1995). Consistent with Geertz's perspective, sociologists use the term religiosity to refer to the intensity of commitment of an individual or group to a religious belief system. As to why religion is appealing, the simplest explanation is that all religions, despite the tremendous variation among them, respond to particular human needs (Curran, 1995). Even so, as psychiatrist David Servan-Schreiber points out, however, spiritualities can be both healthy and unhealthy spirituality. If prayer produces a state of calm, of love and a sense of belonging, it has positive correlates to one's health. But if spirituality reinforces fear, self-loathing, and various anxieties, it is hardly conducive to mental health (Power, 2003). Ellis (1995), for example, warns against the fanaticism that often results from dogmatic religious devotion. Such fanaticism, he says, is mentally and emotionally unhealthy.

Rather than rely on gross generalizations about religiosity and mental health, more empirically oriented studies of what religion means to people who take it seriously seem long overdue. Duke University's Harold Koenig, for example, suggests that further research might consist in taking people's "spiritual histories," asking

such questions as "Is religion a source of comfort or stress?" and "Do you have any religious beliefs that would influence decision making?" (Kalb, 2003). The investigations we are reporting here are meant to respond to this constructive suggestion, and develop it further in understanding the spiritual struggles of Filipina domestic helpers. If Parreñas (2001) is right in characterizing domestic work abroad as a "labor of sorrow" or a "labor of grief" because the dislocations of migrant Filipina domestic workers involve the pain of family separation, the experience contradictory class mobility, partial citizenship, and the feeling of social exclusion or nonbelonging in the migrant community, we need to know more about how religion has enabled them to survive under such difficult conditions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to situate our research methodology in relationship to other approaches, we find useful to start with Lee's critical analysis (1996) of the two previously dominant approaches to understanding migrants' labor experiences: either a micro-level or a macro-level approach. In the micro-level approach, the individual migrant worker is the unit of analysis. Her human capital (individual characteristics such as schooling, work experience, skills) and her motivations become paramount in defining migration and her success or failure in the job market. The structuralist macro approach, on the other hand, shifts the inquiry toward explaining personal experience in terms of world systems as in, for example, dependency theory. This theory has been criticized for depicting an overly rigid scenario of class and status divisions in an undifferentiated capitalistic labor market. But, as we have already seen, the relationships between migrants and employers are diverse and cannot be reduced to such a single-minded formula.

Alternative to both of these, Lee (1996) cites the work of Goss and Lindquist (1995) as offering a more promising approach. Goss and Lindquist seek to understand international migration in terms of the moral agency of the workers. Their responses to the challenges they face is best examined not as the result of individual motivations and structural determinants, although these must play a role in any explanation, but as the actions of agents with particular interests who play specific roles within an institutional environment, drawing knowledgeably upon sets of rules in order to increase their access to resources.

Given the prominence of women in contemporary trends in globalization, Lee (1996) also points out that the role of gender as a fundamental basis for defining migration and labor market experiences can no longer be neglected. Women's moral agency and how they choose to exercise it must be understood in terms of their gender, a point that has been established philosophically by Gilligan (1993) and personally observed in the USA by Ehrenreich (2001). While the social, political, and cultural meanings of gender often operate to women's disadvantage, it is useful to remember that women can also benefit from migration and work. Lee quotes Morokvasic (1984) in support of the relevance of an agency approach to the investigation of women's employment and its impact on their lives: "…[M]igration and incorporation of women in waged employment bring both gains and losses … [W]omen can gain independence, respect, and perhaps awareness that their condition is not fated and that it can be changed." The focus of this present study is to determine whether and to what extent religion is a positive factor in the way Filipina domestic helpers in Hong Kong discover and exercise their moral agency, and thus overcome to whatever extent possible their fate as victims of oppression.

METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

A 2005 study consisted of 122 brief interviews in Hong Kong among randomly selected Filipina domestic helpers. This sought specific information on their personal religious faith and practices. A subsequent 2009 study consisted of 22 in-depth interviews, lasting two hours each, 17 of which were conducted among the workers who had taken refuge in the Bethune House shelter in Hong Kong operated by the Mission for Migrant Workers. While the latter interviews were focused on the question, "What makes you happy?" the answers received also confirmed the importance of religious faith and practice in the lives of those interviewed.

The 2005 Interviews

One hundred and twenty-two Filipina domestic helpers working in Hong Kong were approached for an informal interview, in the tradition of *pakikipagsalamuha*—or communion fellowship. That is, the people who agreed to an interview recognized their common

bond with the interviewers, who themselves were Filipinas with either direct experience of or a sympathetic understanding of their work. Three interviewers conducted the sessions between March 19 and April 5, 2005, usually on the Sundays in the parks of Hong Kong where most Filipino domestic workers congregate when they have their weekly day off.

Demographic Characteristics

Slightly over half of the respondents in this study (59.5%) are young adults aged 35 years old and below with 16% of that number 25 years old and below. About 30% of the group appeared to be those in middle adulthood, which is significant in confirming what the literature previously indicated regarding the fact that many of the Filipina domestic helpers have families and children at home, whose needs they are seeking to fulfill by working abroad. Among the women we interviewed, almost half (48%) have been married, with five of these indicating that they are separated and two are widowed. Nearly 40% of the married women reported having children of their own in the Philippines. Several of those who indicated that they are single also reported having children to support.

As to their levels of education, the women reported facts that are consistent with the findings of previous studies. Far from representing the less educated elements in society, those who seek employment as foreign domestic helpers report education achievements well above the national average. Almost half of our respondents (about 40%) are college graduates with an additional 30% having had some college education. Only one of the respondents completed her education with an elementary school diploma; on the other hand, only one respondent had earned a Master's degree.

Here is what was reported about their length of service in Hong Kong: 63% of the respondents have spent between one and ten years working there with about a quarter having been in Hong Kong less than a year and about 14% over ten years. Restated in terms of the number of two-year contracts they had fulfilled, slightly over half the respondents (57%) have had only one or two contracts, 26% have had three or four contracts, and the rest—a little over 20 %—have completed contracts whose numbers range from five to 12. What this suggests—consistent with previous studies—is that the Filipina domestic helpers generally expect to work in Hong Kong for a limited number of years, in order to fulfill specific economic objectives.

Apparently they neither intend to stay in Hong Kong permanently, or in any case, they have only rarely succeeded in doing so.

When asked about their wages in Hong Kong, the range reported by our respondents was from HK$2,500 to HK$6,685 per month, with vast majority (almost 80%), not surprisingly, receiving the standard minimum allowable wage (MAW) of HK$3,270 per month. After some political struggle, including street demonstrations, organized by various groups of Filipina domestic helpers and their supporters, in August 2010 the MAW was raised to HK$3,580 per month, with a mandatory food allowance—when food is not provided for "free" by their employers—of not less than HK$750 per month. Given the increasingly high cost of living in Hong Kong, it is remarkable that more than half of the respondents (60%) send between 41% and 80% of their salary home to their families and an additional 7% sends home between 81% and 100% of their salary. Conversely, only about 13% of the respondents keep between 81% and 100% of their salaries for themselves, a figure that is less likely to reflect a taste for luxury than the incessant demands of their creditors, who often are able to have their charges withheld from the workers' wages before they receive them. Our respondents' reported success in sending remittances home at such remarkably high rates is testimony not only to the heroic sacrifices thus routinely make for their families, but also is consistent with findings reported in previous studies[7].

What, then, are the Filipina domestic helpers actually doing in exchange for the wages they earn? Housekeeping tops the list of the type of work done by respondents, followed closely by cooking and laundry as well as childcare. A few of the respondents, less than 20, also listed such work as elderly care, car wash, pet care, tutoring, and marketing.

The Role of Religion in the Lives of Filipina Domestic Helpers

Our informants were asked the following questions: [1] What is a religious person? What personal qualities do you identify as religious? What practices do you think of as religious? [2] What image of God emerges from your own experience? [3] Do you go to church or participate in religious services? If so, how often do you go to church? What do you get out of going to church? and [4] What do you pray to God for?

According to our respondents, a religious person is first, one with personal discipline, secondly, one who applies this discipline to life

and its challenges, and third, one who engages in religious practices. When asked to explain what they meant by personal discipline, they tended to focus on outcomes, namely the personal characteristics that they believe are cultivated in religious faith including such virtues as humility, patience, open-mindedness, honesty and truthfulness, selflessness, faith in God, God-fearing, loving, devoted, and responsible. When further asked about the application that these characteristics have in their lives, they gave the following responses: communicates well with others, avoids committing crimes, does not use vulgar language, is generous, is a peacemaker, and so on. Asked to give examples of religious practices, they cited going to church, attending Bible study, inviting others to attend church, and obeying God's commandments.

Responses to the question "What is the image of God that you keep as you do your work here in Hong Kong?" fell into three categories: God as omnipotent, God as omnipresent, and God as omniscient. These terms, of course, are generalizations based on the concrete images that our respondents put forward in their own way. A plurality of them (close to 30%) viewed God as omnipotent—powerful above all things, *pinakadakila* ("supreme"), *tagapagligtas* ("the Savior"), the source of strength, the provider, and the protector. Another 24% of the respondents viewed God as omniscient using images such as the light, my guide, the One who has many plans for me. About 18% then described God as omnipresent—God as spirit, father and friend, *kasama ko dito*, ("the one who is with me here"), God is trust, He tries me, everything to me, my anchor. Some of the respondents, less than ten percent, indicated either both omnipotent and omnipresent or both omnipotent and omniscient. A few responses, such as carpenter, hardworking and "cannot be described" could not be placed in any of these categories, although they are suggestive of theological references to Jesus, on the one hand, and the sheer Otherness of God, on the other.

When asked about their own participation in religious services, only three respondents in the entire sample signified that they do not attend church in Hong Kong. The vast majority of the one hundred and eighteen who do attend church do so regularly, with 58% going four times a month, and 22% three times a month. Most attend Roman Catholic services because most (79%) of the respondents were Roman Catholic—roughly parallel to the religious affiliation reported for the Philippines as a whole—while the rest were a mix of Methodist, Aglipayan—members of the Philippine Independent

Church that was formed as a result of the Catholic church's refusal to bless the Philippine Revolution—and Charismatic group affiliations. Respondents testified that they attend church because it gives them inner peace and a sense of wholeness—for example, they feel blessed, feel forgiven, feel new, find peace of mind or spiritual relief. About 34% felt that going to church provides them with knowledge, guidance, and inspiration—*magandang aral* (teaches good lesson, edifies me), enlightens me, God's word, a guide to living. Quite a few (7%) indicated fellowship with God and with others—they feel close to God, they feel at home, as one said, "I feel I have a home here." Other responses indicated that going to church is "more of a practice," an "opportunity to pray," or the expression of a commitment to God.

When asked what they usually pray about while in Hong Kong, over half (about 54%) have asked for "good health" for themselves and for their families, but especially so that they may continue to do their work. Many prayers (44%) have been for their families in general—for God to take care of their families in their absence, for their families' well-being, and so on. Many (26%) have also asked for peace—for themselves and their families, and for world peace—and for comfort and strength (18%), guidance in solving work related problems (17%), and personal safety (17%). Quite a number (23%) have prayed for their employers—that they continue to be good—and even for the Hong Kong economy. Other concerns (27%) were very personal in nature, for example, prayers "for my youngest child to find a job," regarding "anything that affects my relationship with Jehovah and Jesus," "that my partner will marry me and give my son his name," "to get married soon."

The interviews in this first set concluded by asking whether, in addition to participating in religious services, the Filipina domestic helpers had availed themselves of other, more concrete forms of assistance, such as the programs at the Mission for Migrant Workers. Only 23 respondents (less than 20%) indicated that they had approached an organization for help in Hong Kong. Most of the organizations approached were religious groups, though one respondent said she had sought help from the Philippine consulate. The fact that the assistance sought usually was for advice, as well as the relatively low proportion seeking any assistance, suggests that in general this group of respondents were confident of their own resourcefulness—with the help of God—to meet the challenges they face in Hong Kong.

In response to the final question "Now that you are working in

Hong Kong, would you rather be in the Philippines?" the majority (61%) said "No", 30% said "Yes" and the rest either did not answer (8%) the question or simply said "not sure" or "depends." Low pay in the Philippines was the number one reason why the respondents (30%) preferred to stay in Hong Kong, followed by the lack of jobs in the Philippines and the difficult life there (17%). However, they would rather be in the Philippines if jobs were available (13%) in order to be back with their families. Working as a domestic helper in Hong Kong may be a difficult life, even for these respondents, but it remains their best option so long as economic and social conditions in the Philippines continue to work against them and their families.

The 2009 Interviews

While intended primarily as an in-depth elaboration of the earlier study, the subsequent investigation also explored a question not directly focused on the role of religion in their lives, but on the question of how happiness is experienced, and to what extent it is possible, even among the domestic helpers who have had an especially hard time in Hong Kong[8]. Rather than a random sample, selected for interview were women in residence at the Bethune House, sponsored and managed by the Mission for Migrant Workers. These women, 13 of them Filipinas and five of them Indonesians, lived together in a religiously diverse community at Bethune House. They had taken shelter there so that they could pursue their options once they had been fired by their employers or forced to break their employment contracts. The contrast with the first set is evident in the fact that only 20% of that group had sought help—mostly in the form of advice—from organizations like the Mission. While the respondents in this second set roughly match the first set in demographics, in contrast to the first set they were clearly in crisis over the difficulties they had encountered. All the more remarkable, then, is their testimony to the role of religion in sustaining their personal struggles to achieve their goals and thus find happiness in Hong Kong.

The interviews were conducted primarily at Bethune House and lasted for approximately one hour each. While they were focused on two major questions: the informants' work experience and their perceptions regarding their own happiness, they also sought to document the respondents' personal information, their employment history, and the specifics concerning their last employment situation in Hong Kong. Most of the information about their religious faith and

practices emerged from the way they chose to discuss the question of their own happiness. In focusing on the question of happiness, the intent was to collect enough information so that their responses could be compared with the more generalized findings on happiness reported by the World Values Survey and related national studies[9].

There were roughly three groups of interviewees: 1) Group One, consisting of Filipinas who have not had recourse to Bethune House, 2) Group Two, consisting of Filipinas who were currently sheltered at Bethune House, and 3) Group Three, consisting of Indonesians who were currently sheltered at Bethune House. Group One consisted of four women working in Hong Kong as domestic helpers at that time, two of whom had extensive work experience in other countries. Group Two consisted of twelve Filipinas living at Bethune House, plus one Filipina volunteer supervisor at Bethune House. Group Three consisted of four Indonesians living at Bethune House, plus one working in Macau while serving as a volunteer for Migrante International, an organization affiliated with the Mission. Since the focus of this study is primarily Group Two, Groups One and Three served as reference groups for making comparisons in evaluating the responses of Filipinas at Bethune House.

Demographic Characteristics

The Filipinas in Group One correspond roughly to the 30% of the earlier study's total who are over the age of 35. The average age in Group One is 42, three of whom are married, and one married but legally separated from her spouse. Three of the four were mothers, with an average 3.3 children. As to religious affiliation, one is Protestant; the other three are Catholic. Their levels of education, while not as high as those reported in the earlier study, are well above average for the Philippines as a whole: one attended high school through 3rd year, two graduated from high school, and one was also a college graduate. Thus the group as a whole has an average of 13 years of formal education.

Group Two, corresponded roughly to the 59.5% of the earlier study described as young adults, average age, 32.7. Six of 13 are single, five currently married, one married but legally separated, and one widowed. Eight of the 13 are mothers, with an average of 1.5 children. These figures are higher in the proportion of married with children than what was reported in the first set of interviews. As to religious affiliation, Group Two tracks consistently with both Group

One and the earlier study: ten identify as Catholics, one as Aglipayan. All 13 had graduated from high school, and two of these also were college graduates, with an average of 13.9 years of formal education[10]. Given the fact that their educational achievements are just as high as those of Group One, education or a lack thereof cannot explain the difficulties that prompted them to seek shelter at Bethune House.

The Indonesians (Group Three) are clearly comparable to the young adult group described in the earlier study, with an average age of 28, but their marital status is somewhat different in that one is single, one is married but separated, and two are already divorced. The fact that none is currently married may be indicative of a difference between Indonesia and the Philippines, in terms of marriage and divorce law. The Indonesians also report fewer children, with only two women having given birth to one child each. As to religious identification, all are Muslims, which makes the Bethune House unusual, if not unique, in its success in fostering a community with such diversity in religious orientation. The Indonesians all reported high levels of education, even more dramatic in their contrast with the averages reported for their sisters back home. While one attended high school through the 11th grade before seeking employment, the other three were high school graduates and one of these also a college graduate. On average then Group Three reported 12.75 years formal education among the four of them.

One of the areas in which information was requested concerned work experience. In Group One, three of the four had previous employment in the Philippines and had worked for an average of 4.5 employers overseas, for an average of 14.75 years. How this average translates into number of contracts is unknown, since some of the overseas employment occurred in venues outside of Hong Kong. While none in this group had ever felt the need to take shelter at Bethune House or similar institutions, they did testify to the problems that led to the termination of their previous contracts: Four reported leaving because of underpaid or unpaid wages, three because of overwork, two because of illegal work, one because of sexual harassment, one because of other disputes with employers, and two because their employer had been relocated. The total number of incidents is higher than the total number of responses since each had worked for several employers over their careers as domestic helpers. Group Two also reported previous employment in the Philippines, with ten of the 13 having worked there before going overseas. On average they reported 2.1 employers overseas with an average of 4.2 years

working experience. Their reasons for leaving previous employers indicate that despite their short careers, they had faced more extreme difficulties than what was reported by Group One: While none of them claim to have been harassed sexually, nine had been abused or physically assaulted, three left because of underpaid or unpaid wages, three because of illegal work, one because of overwork, five because of other disputes with employers. Those who left but not because of a negative experience with the employer included one because the employer was relocated, one because of family needs at home, one in order to start a business at home, and three simply because the contract was successfully completed. In Group Three, three had previous employment in Indonesia, with an average of two employers overseas, and 4.2 years of employment overseas. Their reasons for leaving previous employers, not surprisingly, paralleled the incidents reported in Group Two: underpaid or unpaid wages, two; overwork, one; illegal work, one, other disputes with employers, two; abused or assaulted by employer, two; and one, because the contract had been completed.

The Pursuit of Happiness among OFWs

In order to establish a baseline on their responses to other questions about happiness, the respondents were asked to rate how happy they felt on the day of the interview, on a scale of one through seven, with one being "very unhappy," and seven being "very happy." Since this question was not asked explicitly of the respondents in Group One, their answers remain unknown; nevertheless, Group Two averaged 4.4 on this scale, and Group Three 4.0, which seem to suggest that, despite the difficulties that led them there, they are generally content with their situation at Bethune House.

Significant variations, however, began to emerge with the follow-up question, on the same scale, asking them to rate their happiness at [a] overseas job locations other than Hong Kong, [b] Hong Kong job locations, [c] Bethune House. Group One's responses were: [a] overseas job locations: 2.75, [b] Hong Kong job locations: 4.17, [c] Bethune House: N/A. Not surprisingly, given their success in Hong Kong, they reported significantly greater average happiness there than in previous overseas employment. Group Two's responses were just the opposite: [a] overseas job locations: 5.6, [b] Hong Kong job locations: 2.9, [c] Bethune House: 5.6. This, too, is no surprise, given the fact that they had recently left their employers under difficult

circumstances, and considered themselves fortunate to have found shelter at Bethune House. Group Three's averages differ somewhat from either of these: [a] overseas job locations: 2, [b] Hong Kong job locations: 3.5, [c] Bethune House: 5. Despite their recent unhappy experience, they still considered themselves happier in Hong Kong than in previous overseas locations. The overall impression created by these results is that happiness is situational. The Filipinas and their Indonesian sisters are normal, healthy women, who are reasonably content with their lot in life, so long as they are not exploited or abused.

Finally they were asked to rate the highest source of happiness in their lives. In response to the question, "We can summarize the things that make you happy in terms of four categories: Family, Friends, God (or Religion), and Work. Can you rank these in order of importance to you?" The following report the average scores from each group: The closer the score approximates to 1, the higher the factor rates as top priority; the closer the score approximates to 4, the lower the factor rates as top priority. Group One gave the following ratings: [a] Family 1.3, [b] Friends 4, [c] God (or Religion) 2, and [d] Work 2. For them, family is their greatest source of happiness, followed by God and, not surprisingly, their employment success. Group Two, consisting of the Filipinas sheltered at Bethune House, gave the following ratings: [a] Family 1.6, [b] Friends 3.75, [c] God (or Religion) 1.27, and [d] Work 2.72. God (or Religion), for Group Two, is even more important than Family and Work. The Indonesian Muslims (Group Three) gave these responses: [a] Family 2, [b] Friends 3, [c] God (or Religion) 1.8, and [d] Work 2.6. God (or Religion) is their top priority with Family a close second.

Experiencing God at Bethune House

Given what we have already learned from the first set of interviews about the role of religion in the lives of Filipina domestic helpers in Hong Kong, what else emerges from the second set, particularly from Bethune House? When asked to explain their ratings, the respondents typically understood God as their best friend. Given the routines of a domestic helper's daily life, prayer is both more informal and more intense than it may have been at home in the Philippines. When asked to describe her prayer life, one muses that she thinks of it as talking to God, as intimately as a Filipino child talking with his "Lolo." God is "Diyos," the Creator Spirit, the One to whom thanksgiving is due for

all good things, the One with whom we can talk about our problems, who can give us the strength to face the difficulties of the moment. She prays to God in her tiny room, at the end of the day, in the lonely hours when, exhausted from her daily chores, she becomes aware once more of her separation from loved ones at home. Only one person—a resident of Bethune House, who had recently experienced some very hard times—said she thought God was punishing her for her sins. None of those interviewed expressed morbid fears of God, as if they felt like hiding themselves from Him. Only one informant, an evangelical Protestant, had anything to say about a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

William James' psychological observations about religious experience may be useful here insofar as he made a diagnostic distinction between "healthy-mindedness" and "the sick soul," and their corresponding religious expressions in the "once-born" and "twice-born" religious personalities. The "twice-born" personality is classically expressed in "born-again" or evangelical Christianity, in which the primary focus is upon accepting Jesus Christ as one's personal savior in order to be saved by His Grace from one's sins. The "once-born" personality, however, is conscious of the presence of God continuously in his or her life, and has rarely if ever, experienced the feelings of alienation from God that make being "born-again" seem so compelling to some. The Filipina domestic helpers' thoughts about God in their lives typically exhibit the characteristics of "healthy-mindedness" and their intimacy with God through informal prayer rather than the formulaic invocations of sin and grace seemed convergent with the "once born" religiousness. Filipino Catholicism encompasses both in its doctrines and practices; for that is part of what it means to be "catholic." But Catholics are typically selective in what they take from their faith traditions, emphasizing some points while ignoring others and relying upon what seems to work for them.

The respondents interviewed at Bethune House did not focus on sin and guilt; they did not speculate on whether God was angry with them; they did not interpret their struggles as indicative of a questionable or shaky relationship with God. They seemed self-confident about already living in the presence of God, and thus could speak directly to Him simply and from the heart. They were not particularly concerned about religious services or where they received the sacraments of the church. While most claimed to regularly attend church services, this does not mean that they go to mass every Sunday. Indeed, a handful of them said they went to St. John's Cathedral for

mass, the Anglican church where the Mission for Migrant Workers has its offices. At least one Catholic helper described participating in evangelical prayer meetings organized for the Filipinas by Protestant missionary organizations. While she had no intention of abandoning her inherited Catholic faith, she felt that the prayer meetings were helping her grow closer to God in her own way. The somewhat broadminded approach to religious faith and practice evidenced in their responses may also be testimony to the deep but unspoken spirituality that unites all those sheltered at Bethune House, both Christian and Muslim. At a time when in many parts of the world there is so much hostility and mutual misunderstanding between Christians and Muslims, Bethune House seems to offer a way forward in which the reality of God can be affirmed without exacerbating the divisions already existing among all His peoples.

DISCUSSION

The interviews confirm that religious faith and practice form an important part of the personal identities of Filipina domestic helpers, and provide various ways of coping with the challenges involved in their work in Hong Kong. The fact that nearly 80% of them report going to church regularly and find positive spiritual support in what they do there, also suggests that organized religious activities in which they experience not only communion with God but also solidarity with each other still define the core of their faith and practice. The images of God reported by them, though categorized in classical theological terms, signify that the self-discipline they find in religion emerges from and flows toward a vivid personal sense of God's intimate presence in their lives, empowering and sustaining them in their work. Nothing in their responses indicates either superstitious reliance on a god to solve all their problems, or an attachment to the traditional religious rituals for fear of provoking the god's anger against them. Our findings, therefore, confirm the positive association between religion and mental health that other researchers have observed, while also not reducing this association to the vague appeal of individualistic forms of spirituality.

Magpakumbaba—a capacity for acting humbly or humility—is often celebrated as a positive Filipino value. And yet this virtue exists in tension with other Filipino values that honor education and teach us to stand up for our rights. The resulting conflict in our state of

mind does not automatically lead to positive results. Perhaps this is why it is very important to create what has been referred to as a "psychological safe space" (Kotani, 2004), something that exists both in our inner world (that is, the intra-psychic or mental space) and in the outer world of reality where our relationships with other people play out. Recall Parreñas' analysis of our need for "pockets" of social space. Our interviews confirm that for Filipino women working overseas, religion has become an important venue for the creation of this protective pocket or safe space.

Curran (1995) was cited earlier as stating that all religions, despite the tremendous variation among them, respond to particular human needs. We believe that our findings help document the kind of comfort and support that Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong have derived from their religious faith and practice, while living away from their families in the Philippines. It is worth noting that it seems only natural that these women turn to their churches and religious organizations because almost all of them have Sunday—the day of worship—as their day off from work. It is also true that precisely because they are striving to save as much money as they can to send home as remittances, that they will forego other, consumer oriented, leisure time activities, in favor of gathering with their friends at religious services. While the comfort and support provided by the churches and religious organizations is primarily moral and spiritual, we should not forget that there are economic and social benefits as well. Indeed, for similar reasons, many if not all of the migration and labor organizations also make themselves available to the workers on Sundays.

Nevertheless, it is not so much the religious organizations that are responsible for the domestic workers' wellbeing as the spirituality and religious faith of the workers themselves, who are changing these organizations to fit their specific needs. The personal discipline that they expect to find, and their participation in religious services are the characteristics that they believe will ensure their success in responding to the challenges of working overseas. In order to overcome any challenges they face in Hong Kong, they recognize their need to be faithful, God-fearing, honest, loving, open-minded, truthful, and they hope to become more so because of their weekly participation in religious services. By the same token, they expect God to be powerful—a savior, provider, and protector—without whom they are left to the tender mercies of an indifferent and often hostile environment. That practically all of the respondents go to church

regularly reflects and serves to renew the hopes and expectations that they bring with them from home.

Thus the interviews confirm that the religious attitudes of the Filipina domestic workers are actually very positive, optimistic, and hopeful. They believe they find genuine comfort and support in church attendance and prayerful fellowship. Their prayers tend to focus on economic questions: they pray for good health and peace as prerequisites to remaining in a foreign work setting. This is understandable given that the reason that these women are working abroad in the first place is to relieve the financial burdens on their families. While their religious faith and practice can wave no magic wand over their underlying hardship—loneliness, homesickness, and their understandable anxieties over what may be happening to those they have left at home—it still enables them to cope with the hazards along the path they have chosen, far better than any of the usual means of escape that Hong Kong has to offer.

CONCLUSION

Our findings are offered here in the hope of stimulating further research on the role of religious faith and practice in the lives of Filipina domestic helpers. There are several areas for further study.

One of these concerns is what, if any, transformative impact carries over from the role religion plays in their Hong Kong lives when the Filipinas return home, when they resume their duties, perhaps as wives and mothers, perhaps as entrepreneurs, perhaps as students returning to school in order to begin a new career. If the Filipinas in Hong Kong seem to be unusually faithful in their church-attendance and devout in their personal prayers, how does their experience compare with the role religion plays in the lives of their sisters at home? Our impression is that the experience of migration in search of employment tends to intensify religious faith and practices rather than undermine it. It is as if, before going overseas, workers had access to an answer without knowing very well what questions it addressed. Such an impression needs to be tested by further research. What is the role that religious faith and practice actually plays in the lives of women in the Philippines today? Does it change when some of them go abroad in search of work? Once they return home, do they maintain their level of religious participation, or do they revert to whatever is considered normal among their families and friends?

Another concern might focus further on research in comparative studies of Filipina domestic helpers in other venues. In Hong Kong the Filipinas form a highly visible community—at least on weekends—where newcomers can readily find access to existing social networks that will help them survive the challenges of living and working abroad. But is Hong Kong an exception? Given the fact that the helpers are part of the vast Filipino diaspora, with large numbers working in the Middle East, in Europe, and in North America, the question is whether religious faith and practice is as significant in these venues as in Hong Kong? Are the churches and other religious organizations as receptive to their needs as some of them are in Hong Kong? Does the pocket of social space needed for mental health and spiritual renewal shrink in these other venues? Does Filipina religiosity under such circumstances become more intensely personal or does it fade away altogether?

Given findings such as ours that emphasize the role of churches and religious organizations in the lives of the Filipina domestic helpers, further study and analysis should be focused on what they are doing—or failing to do—to assist these women and their families before, during, and after their working days overseas. Are those contemplating going abroad for work finding adequate counseling and support in their home parishes and congregations? What, if anything, are churches and religious organizations doing to prepare the workers for the cross-cultural challenges of working in a foreign home, with employers who may know even less than they do about the kinds of problems that can lead to a breakdown in communication, and the likelihood of abuse? What, if anything, are the churches and religious organizations doing to challenge the predatory practices of some employment agencies—both in Hong Kong and in the Philippines—whose chief aim seems to be to burden the workers with impossible levels of debt? What, if anything, are they doing to support the families of the Filipinas working overseas? Have they, for example, sought to develop any pastoral strategies specifically targeting the needs of the caretakers at home, particularly, the husbands and fathers, who have been left to look after the children while their mothers are away? What, if anything are they prepared to do to assist the return and reintegration of the Filipinas, once their contracts are completed?

Given our findings regarding the kinds of issues that occasion the prayers of Filipina domestic helpers, we feel more needs to be done by churches and religious organizations to provide concrete answers

for them. As we have attempted to show, prayers can be overheard, and when they are, it is up to everyone concerned to get involved. Bethune House, which has made such an important difference in the lives of domestic helpers in desperate circumstances, did not happen miraculously. It is the result of hard work, hard lessons learned, and a willingness of many to respond concretely to the prayers of their sisters. Such efforts need to be multiplied, not only in Hong Kong, but wherever Filipinas find themselves working abroad. In order to make this possible, further research needs to be done on precisely how the system of Filipina labor migration works, understanding the challenges involved, identifying the institutional problems—on the part of both the sending and receiving countries—that heighten the risks of abuse, surveying the actual costs and benefits of such employment, not just in financial terms, but also in psychological and spiritual terms as well. We hope to encourage other researchers to follow up on the tentative leads we believe our findings suggest, particularly, in understanding and strengthening the role that churches and religious organizations can play in supporting the Filipina domestic helpers abroad.

ENDNOTES

[1] For more information on the Mission for Migrant Workers, please consult its website: http://www.migrants.net/.

[2] For a survey of information available online regarding "Foreign Domestic Helpers" in Hong Kong, see the Wikipedia article on this topic at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foreign_domestic_helpers_in_Hong_Kong.

[3] HKSAR Labour Department Public Support and Strategic Planning Document on Foreign Domestic Helpers: http://www.labour.gov.hk/text/eng/plan/iwFDH.htm.

[4] HKSAR Employment Contract for a Domestic Helper Recruited from Outside Hong Kong—English Version: http://www.immd.gov.hk/ehtml/id407form.htm#SADD.

[5] Foreign Domestic Helpers—Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs): http://www.immd.gov.hk/ehtml/faq_fdh.htm.

[6] William James (1842—1910) is an American philosopher who did pioneering work in the field of psychology of religion. An online text of his classic, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), along with many of James' other works, is available at http://www.des.emory.edu/mfp/james.html.

[7] The total remittances from overseas workers to the Philippines in 2005 were US$10.7

billion dollars, which ranked 3rd among nations worldwide, with only citizens of India and Mexico sending home more. Figures are unavailable for the % of this total that is sent by women working abroad as domestic helpers. Source: www.nationmaster.com/graph/lab_wor_rem_rec_bop_cur_us-remittances-receipts-bop-current-us.

[8] The full results of this second set were reported in an unpublished paper given at the 46th Annual Convention of the Psychology Association of the Philippines (August 2009), "Are We Having Fun Yet?! Happiness and Strength of Character among Filipina Domestic Helpers (OFWs) Living and Working in Hong Kong." A copy of this paper is available by request. Email dmccann@agnesscott.edu.

[9] Information on the World Values Survey, its methodology, and its findings particularly on the question of happiness, and whether people's attitudes toward it or experience of it change under different circumstance is available at its website: www.worldvaluessurvey.org/index_findings. The relatively high ranking reported for the Philippines—in comparison with societies that rank higher in terms of economic development—provoked quite a bit of controversy among Filipinos. Here is one representative response: Alan C. Robles, "Happiness Viewpoint: It Doesn't Take Much" *Time*, 20 February 2005. Source: www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1029896,00.html.

[10] The significance of the educational achievements of the OFWs, as reported in our first set and confirmed in the second, can hardly be overstated. According to statistics issued by the World Bank and disseminated through the NationMaster.com website, the average adult Filipino has completed 8.2 years of schooling, while the average for 17 Filipinas interviewed for this study is 13.7 years. The 8.2 years earns the Philippines 28th position in a field of 100 countries, which is quite impressive, given that only Japan has a higher ranking among east and southeast Asian nations. The Indonesians' educational achievements are also worth noting: the 5 interviewed for this study averaged 12.75 years, in comparison with their national average of 5 years of schooling, ranking 66th worldwide. By comparison, the Nation Master statistics indicate that the highest number of years of schooling among adults, predictably, was reported was the USA's average of 12 years. This means that the average domestic helper interviewed for this project has achieved a higher level of formal education than the average American. Statistical source: www.nationmaster.com/graph/edu_ave_yea_of_sch_of_adu-education-average-years-schooling-adults.

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