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Track: Integration

Dialogue: Migrations and Religious Pluralism

Title: Religion and Migrants' Empowerment: Some Indications from Asian Experiences

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Key issues (300 words)

Thus far, religion has been an epiphenomenon in the discussions on migration in Asia, a state of affairs that may be explained by the focus on the economics of labor migration. While the religious dimension of migration is not that evident, I would advance that religion - as an institution and as a personal expression of faith on the part of migrants - is playing a role in the promotion of migrants' rights in the region. This role is played out in varying ways due to the diverse social, political and cultural contexts of origin and destination countries in Asia.

The Catholic Church, which has a long history of caring for migrants, is one of the voices, along with civil society, in calling for a more rights-oriented approach to migration in Asia. Although the Catholic Church is not a major religion in Asia (except in the Philippines and East Timor), it has developed a range of support services to meet the needs of migrants as well as advocacy efforts to promote migrants' rights. Particularly in Asia, the Church (including the local Churches) is being challenged to care for *all* migrants. The experiences of the Catholic Church in the Philippines, a major country of origin, and those in the countries of destination – Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia – reveal how the Church has been changed and is changing in response to migration challenges.

Religion as part of the identity and culture of migrants can be a source of personal empowerment. In the case of Filipino migrants, various studies have indicated how faith in God is part of the preparations of migrants and their source of strength in working and living abroad. Where there is space for religious expression, this personal faith can evolve into more collective expressions, such as the formation of support groups and lobbying groups by migrants themselves, which can augur for more humane migration.

Content (1200 words)

Up until now, religion has been an epiphenomenon in discussions on migration in Asia, a state of affairs that may be explained by the focus on the economics of labor migration. As a site of migration, Asia has experienced persisting labor migration in the last 30 years, much of which is intraregional, typically involving movements of workers from the less developed to the more developed countries/economies in the region. The unrelenting movements of workers have

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been occurring in spite of the policy of keeping the migration of *less skilled migrants* temporary. This is ensured by way of limited work contracts (usually two years) and not allowing family reunification (which has created the phenomenon of transnational families) – thereby thwarting the settlement of migrants and avoiding discussions on the integration of migrants in the long run.¹

Notwithstanding the goal to keep labor migration temporary and the implicit interest of destination countries to confine labor migration issues to the economic sector, the phenomenon is generating social transformations in Asia, including opening prospects for multiculturalism (or challenging existing ideas about multiculturalism). With the possible exception of Singapore and Malaysia (which pride themselves as multi-ethnic/multicultural societies), the other receiving countries in East Asia tend to see themselves as relatively homogeneous (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong).² Interestingly, despite the different religious backgrounds of migrants and the religious traditions (or lack of it) in the receiving countries, religion has not surfaced as a problem or a source of tension in migration in Asia. Also, although most receiving Asian countries do not officially pursue a policy of multiculturalism towards migrants, it is noteworthy that religious problems have not cropped up. Consider Taiwan, which has Confucian and Buddhist backgrounds, receiving migrant workers who are Muslims (from Indonesia), Catholics (mostly from the Philippines, also some Catholics from Vietnam), other Christians (from the Philippines and other countries), Buddhists (from Thailand) and other faiths and those who do not profess any. The peaceful co-existence of migrants and locals belonging to different faiths invites speculation.³ Is it because religious pluralism is pervasive in the region, such that there is a certain degree of religious tolerance? (Even if there were no migration, Asia is already a *mélange* of religions.) Is it because labor migration presumes (or requires) that migrant workers have to adapt to the cultural, social and political systems of the receiving countries?⁴

¹ Since they are welcomed and sought out by receiving countries, family reunification and permanent residence are extended to highly skilled and professional migrants.

² Thailand, a country of origin and destination, is mostly Buddhist. Although it is relatively homogeneous (in terms of language and the predominance of Buddhism), it is fairly open to other cultures. If it is concerned about the large presence of migrants, the concerns have more to do with the numbers and the political implications. For the most part, I will talk about East and Southeast Asia.

³ Religious conflicts seem more intense and damaging in individual Asian countries - e.g., between Muslims and Hindus in India, between Muslims and Christians in Indonesia. Also, reported conflicts between migrant workers in the destination countries do not seem related to religious issues.

⁴ The UN Convention on the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families provides for the "right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion." In practice, it is difficult for migrant workers to claim this right as there is always the threat of dismissal. Except for Saudi Arabia, and to some extent Malaysia, which have a specific demand for Muslim domestic workers, most receiving countries in Asia do not have a specific preference for migrants of a certain religious background. Again, except for Saudi Arabia, which prohibits non-Muslims of religious expression (including the possession of religious articles which are not of Islam), receiving countries in East and Southeast Asia are generally permissive of the religious practices and expressions of migrants – as long as this does not affect the work. As a receiving



Or is it because there are basic problems in the working and living conditions of migrant workers that religion has been sidelined? The pressing problems experienced by migrant workers – contract substitution, delayed or non-payment of wages, maltreatment, harassment, long working hours, etc - have caught the attention of migrant NGOs and civil society, including the Catholic Church, which prompted many collective actions to improve the conditions of migrants. It is in this context of temporary migration and limited migrants' rights that I will examine the prospects of religion – as indicated by the response of the Catholic Church and the religious expressions of migrants – as possible factors in empowering migrants.

The three points that I explore in this essay are as follows:

- The participation of the Catholic Church in the promotion of migrants' rights demonstrates the role of institutionalized religion as a vehicle for transformative politics.⁵
- The engagement of the Catholic Church with migration issues is circumscribed by specific political, social and cultural factors, resulting in different models of responding to the challenges of migration in Asia. (It would be interesting to examine further whether these responses are specifically "Asian" or whether they have parallels in other regions.)
- The personal faith of migrants is not only a way of coping with the harsh conditions of migration; it can also be harnessed towards more collective actions to bring about social change.

Despite its minority status in Asia,⁶ the Catholic Church, along with migrant NGOs and civil society, has been working to rectify the rights-gap in the m region. The presence of the Church in many Asian countries privileges it to witness the unfolding of the migratory phenomenon with its attendant problems and potentials.⁷ In response to the problems resulting from migration, the

country and as a predominantly Muslim country, Malaysia requires non-Muslim employers of Muslim Indonesian domestic workers to respect the workers' adherence to dietary and other practices required by Islam.

⁵ I have focused on the Catholic Church due to my greater familiarity of its programs and documents on the care of migrants. Other Christian churches are also active in the promotion of migrants' rights in Asia (e.g., Migrant Forum Asia).

⁶ Asian Catholics comprise 10 percent of the world's Catholics. Asia is predominately non-Christian (95.6 percent); other Christians make up 2.8 percent; and Catholic Christians are the smallest group, 1.8 percent (www.cmu.org.uk/religions/12Catholics/cat_pg32.htm, accessed 16 August 2004).

⁷ The structure and organization of the Catholic Church and its presence in different parts of the world may be likened to that of a transnational corporation (Asis, 2002). The Church's response to migration challenges in Asia can be seen in the larger context of the Church's long history in the pastoral care of migrants, the Biblical teachings on migration, and the various documents which have become part of the Church teachings on migration. The first official Church document on migration was Pope Pius XII's Apostolic Constitution (1952), *Exsul Familia*, regarded as the magna carta of the Church's teachings on

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Church has developed various programs and services to support migrants (e.g., paralegal assistance, shelter, information-education, visitation, religious services). In addition, some Churches have expanded their programs to migrants to include trainings in livelihood, skills and savings mobilization (in anticipation of their return to their home countries). More importantly, the Church has also initiated or supported the formation of migrants' organizations that have become an important source of support and empowerment for migrants.

The engagement of the Catholic Church in calling for an alternative approach to migration - one that is based on the respect for the dignity of migrants and the promotion and protection of migrants' rights - has drawn it into the larger public arena and in expanding its networks with other organizations and institutions, including other religious traditions. In general, the Church's response to migration is shaped by the local context.

In the Philippines, a major country of origin and also the most Catholic nation in Asia,⁸ the Catholic Church exerts some influence in public debates on migration. Like other Philippine-based institutions, the Church in the Philippines also has to extend the Church beyond the Philippines to reach overseas-based Filipinos. This involves sending missionaries to care for Filipino migrants (which must be extended to the care of *all* migrants as per the Church teaching) abroad or coordinating with Churches in the destination countries to ensure the care of Filipino migrants.⁹ The Church in the Philippines also developed programs and services for the families left behind.

Elsewhere in Asia, the Catholic Church has to contend with the political space allowed by the host country. In Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong, the Church has been given much latitude as a provider of services to migrants and as an advocate of migrants' rights. In Korea, the collective work of the Church, other Christian churches and Buddhist organizations and NGOs, many good practices in the care of migrants as well as significant policy changes have come about from this synergy.¹⁰ In Singapore, Malaysia – incidentally the two countries with a multicultural policy for their nationals – the Church has to be more cautious in its espousal of migrants' issues. In general, NGOs in these countries have to contend with a strong state. Confrontational politics and strategies may endanger the possibility for the Church to offer support and assistance to migrants. These destination countries in Asia (except Korea) are

migration. The most recent document is *Erga migrantes caritas Christi* (The Love of Christ towards Migrants), released on 1 May 2004 (www.ewtn.org/library/CURIA/PCMIERGA.htm, accessed 26 August 2004).

⁸ Worldwide, the Philippines ranks next to Brazil in terms of the number of Catholics.

⁹ Other churches (non-Catholic) in the Philippines have also developed a strong outreach program to their church members based overseas. This is especially of some home-grown religious groups, such as the Iglesia Ni Cristo, Jesus is Lord Movement, as well as the Catholic-affiliated El Shaddai.

¹⁰ For details, see Joon Kim (2003).

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dominated by women migrants who are concentrated in domestic work (and entertainment, in the case of Japan). Whether and how this gender dimension shapes Church response to migration issues could be explored further.

In fulfilling its mission to care for all migrants, the Church encounters many challenges in Asia. Except for Filipinos, most migrants in Asia are not Catholics, hence it has to make it known that it is available for all migrants.¹¹ To care for all migrants would require knowledge of cultures and languages of migrants – which the existing pool of pastoral agents may not be equipped with. There is also the challenge of bridging the gaps between the migrants and the members of the local church. In some countries – such as Japan, Korea and Taiwan – migrants' issues are no longer confined to work-related problems but have expanded to family issues (as a result of intermarriages). The traditional parish structure (which is territorial) will also have to adjust to the transitory membership of migrants who are passing by, and who will be replaced by other migrant workers after their contracts. The barriers to interreligious and interconfessional dialogues need to be dismantled – a documentation of successful and less successful attempts and collaborations and dialogues can be a step in this direction. It would be worthwhile to examine what are the collaborations that worked and which ones faltered.

Religion as part of the identity and culture of migrants can be a source of personal empowerment. In the case of Filipino migrants, various studies have indicated how faith in God is part of the preparations of migrants and their abiding source of strength in working and living abroad.¹² The interpretation of the trials and tribulations of migration as part of one's spiritual journey (character formation, faith experiences, purification) has also been articulated by migrants (see, e.g., Asis, 2001). One of the factors which may have contributed to the better protection of Filipino migrant workers compared to other Asian workers is the support opened up by the Catholic Church. With their Catholic background and their trust in the Church as an institution, Filipino migrant workers gravitate to Catholic Churches abroad. More than places of worship, the Catholic Church is also a meeting place to link up with other Filipinos. Many Filipino migrants' organizations abroad have their beginnings as Church-inspired organizations. Where there is space for religious expression, this personal faith can evolve into more social expressions, such as the formation of support groups and lobbying groups by migrants themselves. In this instance, migration reinforces the faith life of migrants, contrary to the popular notion that migration can erase old identities and commitments. Conversely, where migrants cannot practice their faith, what does this lead to?

¹¹ Non-Catholic migrants may be hesitant to ask for help from the Church. In Taiwan, a Catholic NGO rented space for its operations to make it more accessible to non-Catholic migrants.

¹² The chance to undertake a pilgrimage to Mecca (one of the pillars of Islam) is one of the motivations for Indonesian women to work in Saudi Arabia (Sukamdi et al., 2001). In Sri Lanka, it has been noted that while the Muslim population is a minority, Muslim women account for a quarter of those working as domestic workers in the Middle East. According to Ismail (1999:232), "... women used their identity as Muslims to justify their travel, claiming that because Middle Eastern countries are Islamic, they would be safe. They also make use of their Islamic heritage to win favourable travel incentives from local recruiters desperately in need of Muslim clients."

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Examining the role of other religious traditions in promoting migrants' rights and multiculturalism in Asia present an exciting field for future studies. Also, in view of the increasing migration of the highly skilled and professional migrants (who are offered prospects of settlement and integration), it would be interesting to examine the meanings migrants attach to religious identity and the role that religious institutions will play in the context of migration under less vulnerable conditions.

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