

Personal Religious Practices of Christian Overseas Filipino Workers in an Islamic Host Country

Minami O. Iwayama

Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Manila, Philippines
moiwayama@pup.edu.ph

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the personal religious practices of Christian Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) who are situated in an Islamic host country that prohibits non-Moslem religious practices. It also explores how Christian religious practices have evolved and adapted to circumvent religious persecution. Moreover, it discusses the functions that personal religious practices have for OFWs in the Islamic host country.

The study employed qualitative research methods. The researcher interviewed Christian OFWs who are: situated in the Islamic host country as contractual workers for the duration of the study or had previously worked in the Islamic host country and are residing either in another host country or the Philippines during the implementation of the study. Moreover, since the study is situated in an Islamic host country that not only prohibits non-Moslem religious practices but also prosecutes its violators, the said host country will not be named and shall be referred to as “the Islamic host” or “the Islamic host country” in the entire manuscript. The study made use of thematic analysis as a method of data analysis.

Results showed that in terms of private religious practices, OFWs have learned to adapt to the challenges posed by the laws of the Islamic host country. Since the said law prohibits any forms of Christian worship in public, most of them resorted to praying in seclusion (e.g. at night inside their bedroom or accommodation) to avoid getting caught. Also, given the fact that the Islamic host prohibits the entry of Christian religious materials, some participants have resorted to alternatives (e.g. using one’s fingers instead of a rosary) and virtual materials (e.g. online bible, e-books, online images of Jesus and Mary). However, it was also found out in the study that some participants knowingly violate the laws of the Islamic host country by bringing with them prohibited religious materials that puts them at risk of receiving sanctions like deportation, lashing, or even death.

On the functions of private religious practices, it was found out that it helps the participants to cope while they are in the Islamic host country. Instead of being burdened with the idea that they are prohibited to conduct their religious practices, the participants of the study continued to conduct their religious practices privately. By doing so, they can: have more intimate relations

with Him, know Him more, thank Him, and apologize to Him. These personal religious practices also eased the hardships that are being encountered by the study's participants by having God as a source of guidance, comfort, inspiration, and protection. The conduct of personal religious practices in the Islamic host country as a continuation of the religious practices initially conducted in the Philippines also reminds them of home. Lastly, these personal religious practices also provide the study's participants with a source of enjoyment and relaxation.

Keywords: *Christianity, Labor Migration, OFW Phenomenon, Overseas Filipino Workers, Religion, Sociology of Religion*

INTRODUCTION

The Philippines is known as one of the top labor-exporting countries globally, with around a tenth of its population living abroad and more than one million leaving the country each year to work abroad (International Labour Organization, 2022). Historically, labor migration has been deeply embedded among the Filipino people, and the concept of "moving abroad" has often been perceived as a strategy to have access to greener pastures (Asis, 2017). As early as the American period, labor migration has been intended as a temporary and seasonal employment strategy (Maca, 2018). Filipinos worked in various plantations in the United States and its Pacific territories to earn a living (Asis, 2017).

It was only during the regime of President Ferdinand E. Marcos, however, that labor migration was institutionalized with the enactment of the Labor Code (Maca, 2018) as well as the creation of government agencies that are specifically dedicated to the needs of Filipino migrant workers. Moreover, he took advantage of the rising global demand for contractual workers in heavy industries and the service sector as a temporary panacea to the problems of unemployment and inflation that plagued the Philippines (Villegas, 1988).

After President Marcos was exiled and the country's democracy was reinstalled, the Philippines, however, continued to rely on labor migration. Instead of a temporary panacea, the Philippine government continuously depended on labor migration in solving its economic issues. The billions' worth of OFW remittances helped in relieving the Philippines of its onerous foreign debts to various international financial consortiums (San Juan, 2009). Thus, the deployment of OFWs around the world became a "phenomenon". In fact, several administrations after President Marcos took pride in the OFW phenomenon. President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, for one, proudly called herself "the CEO of a global Philippine enterprise of eight million Filipinos who live and work abroad" (Rodriguez, 2010).

OFWs have been celebrated as “mga bagong bayani” or modern-day heroes. President Corazon Aquino was the first to refer to OFWs as modern-day heroes, praising them for the sacrifices they continued to endure not only for their families but also for the Philippines. According to Manalo (2022), President Aquino juxtaposed the ideas of martyrdom and self-sacrifice that is attached to Philippine national heroes with OFWs by framing the act of working abroad as an individual sacrificial act that is used to advance the collective good. During the term of President Arroyo, “bagong bayani” was reframed. Instead of relating it to the sacrifices and the negative experiences that OFWs must endure abroad for the common good, “bagong bayani” became a source of national pride. OFWs are then perceived as economic heroes who have brought prosperity and modernity to the Philippines through their provision of remittances and investments (Manalo, 2022).

Analogous to the national heroes of the past who were lauded for their martyrdom and self-sacrifice, however, our modern-day heroes are faced with different physical strains in their life and work while they are situated abroad. News that are related to Filipino migrant workers who are on death row, languishing in jail without legal assistance (Migrante, 2015, as cited in Picos III, 2019), maltreated, raped, and sexually abused (Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2019) have become a staple content in Philippine news. Worse, they end up coming back in coffins –all for livelihood and the promise of an improved future (San Juan, 2009). Aside from physical strains, OFWs are also subjected to mental health strains that are linked with stress and social isolation, marginalization, discrimination, and abuse (Silva et al., 2020), as well as psychological and spiritual strains caused by their separation from their familiar surroundings, families, and peers (Urrutia, 2013). To alleviate these strains, Filipino migrant workers have depended on religion.

Religion is considered a basic and dominant social institution with a very strong influence on people given that their value systems are often based on it – with religious teachings influencing people’s behaviors, approaches to situations, and relations with each other (Dupre, 2008). It is an important cultural capital that an individual carries with them with certain elements of their faith even if they migrate to another country (Dupre, 2008). Thus, taking this into consideration, the researcher finds interest in the Philippines – a country that lauds itself to be the only Christian nation in Asia, the home of Roman Catholics which comprise 86 percent of its total population, and 8 percent of its remaining population belonging to various nationalized Christian cults and Protestant denominations (Miller, 1982) – deploying most of its OFW population to Islamic nations such as Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Qatar, each, respectively, receiving 26.6%, 14.6%, 6.4%, and 5.4% of the total number of OFWs deployed as of the year 2020 (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2022).

Given that people carry with them elements of their faith wherever they go, how do Christian OFWs manage to practice their religion in host countries that restrict and even prohibit and prosecute non-Islamic acts of faith?

There have been instances when religion was used by OFWs situated in Islamic host countries to avoid strains. The US Department of State (2009) reports Filipino Christians converting to Islam for “convenience” since doing so brings social and economic benefits while they are abroad. In a study which was conducted by Iwayama (2019), an OFW in an Islamic host country who was forced to convert to Islam after being detained and tortured by the Religion Police for carrying Christian magazines so that he will “become good”. Several Christian OFWs convert to Islam to avoid prolonged interrogation, torture, and the chance of being raped in prison once they are caught conducting non-Islamic religious practices since Filipinos who are detained and imprisoned in the Islamic host country are vulnerable to rape regardless of gender or sexual orientation (Iwayama, 2019). Christian domestic workers in Islamic States are often known to convert to Islam for social and economic benefits. Domestic workers are the most vulnerable type of workers in Islamic states since they live in the household of their employers. Therefore, to avoid discrimination, abuse, and the chance of being raped, these Christian domestic workers convert to Islam. Becoming a “sibling in faith” results in them being treated by their Moslem employers more humanely. Moreover, they are given monetary rewards for their conversion to Islam.

Aside from using religion to avoid physical strains, potential mental, psychological, and spiritual strains are lessened, if not avoided by OFWs, by integrating themselves with Filipino religious communities abroad. In a study conducted by Iwayama (2019), Christian OFWs situated in an Islamic host country that prohibits and punishes religious practices by non-Moslems risk their lives by practicing their faith albeit clandestinely since religion acts as a source of strength, a form of amusement, a form of motivation to become a better person, an anesthetic that numbs the physical, emotional, and mental strains, a source of networks, and a method of knowing God better.

This paper is an offshoot of the aforesaid study. While the previous study shows the general conditions of Christian OFWs in the Islamic host country - the status, organizational operations, religious practices of Religion X, Y, and Z members, and the effects of religion and religious affiliations in the lives and works of Christian OFWs; the aim of this paper is to focus on the personal religious practices of Christian OFWs by looking at their individual religious practices, location of worships, time of worships, and religious items used during worships in order to explore how their practices adapted to the policies of their host country that provides harsh punishments to those who conduct non-Moslem religious practices.

There are extensive pieces of literature on labor migration and the OFW phenomenon. Most of these studies, however, have failed to explore the relationship between Filipino religiosity and the OFW phenomenon. The influences of religion on the said phenomenon – how religion can help alleviate strains but at the same time cause them – have been overlooked. Thus, this paper describes the personal religious practices

of Christian Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) who are situated in an Islamic host country that prohibits non-Moslem religious practices. It explores how Christian religious practices have evolved and adapted to circumvent religious persecution. Moreover, it discusses the functions of personal religious practices have for OFWs in the Islamic host country.

METHODS

The study employed qualitative research methods. The researcher interviewed 20 Christian OFWs who are situated in the Islamic host country as contractual workers for the duration of the study or had previously worked in the Islamic host country and are residing either in another host country or the Philippines during the implementation of the study. The participants are members of three Christian religious organizations which the researcher refers to as Religion X, Religion Y, and Religion Z. Moreover, since the study is situated in an Islamic host country that does not only prohibits non-Moslem religious practices but also prosecutes its violators, the said host country will not be named and shall be referred to as “the Islamic host” or “the Islamic host country” in the entire manuscript. To further protect the interest of the participants, the researcher will not refer to the participants by their real names. Prior to the conduct of the study, an informed consent form was provided by the researcher, and the participants were also briefed about the purpose, the procedure, and the duration of the study. The researcher allowed the participants to select the method for conducting the interview that is convenient for them. Some of the interviews were conducted through Facebook-mediated textual communication or “chats”, given that some participants who were currently situated in the Islamic host country during the conduct of the study are working and could only allot several minutes of their time per day, while others are hesitant to divulge their true identities. For the method of data analysis, the researcher used thematic analysis given that it allows a flexible approach to qualitative analysis which enables the author to derive new insights from the data gathered on the duration of the study.

RESULTS

The main objective of the study is to discuss the personal religious practices of Christian OFWs and look at how their practices adapted to the policies of the Islamic host country that provides harsh punishments to those who conduct non-Moslem religious practices. Another aim of this paper is to look at the functions of personal religious practices of OFWs in the Islamic host country.

To answer the first objective, this section discusses the following: personal religious practices, location of worships, time of worships, and religious item/s used during worships.

Personal Religious Practices of Christian OFWs

Personal Religious Practices.

The following are the personal religious practices of the study's participants: [1] Talking to God; [2] Reading the Bible; [3] Chanting Memorized Prayers; [4] Making Religious Gestures; [5] Singing Worship Songs; [6] Memorizing Biblical Verses; [7] Reviewing and Reflecting on the lessons provided by the Religious Organization, [8] Sharing Biblical Verses and Religious Images Online, and [9] Posting Personal Prayers on Facebook.

[1] Talking to God

Talking to God is the most common form of personal religious practice in the study. Out of 20 participants, 17 mentioned that they express their faith by talking to God. According to Josie, talking to God is similar to breathing; if she fails to pray, it is like her dying because her spiritual relationship with God perishes. For Tina, talking to God makes her closer and closer to Him. Sarah mentions that she talks to God for guidance, for protection especially while working, and for her to have a successful and stress-free day. In Mara's case, she talks to the Lord for guidance and relay Him the thoughts and feelings she has during difficult times, especially when she feels lost and helpless. Monika mentioned that she talks to God in her mind every time she feels frustrated while at work. Mel, on the other hand, talks to God to thank Him for the good things and for always taking good care of her and to apologize for the things she did wrong.

Talking to God is the most common form of practice because it is the most convenient form of prayer. According to Jeff, he is able to say his "thank you" prayers and "take care of me and my family" prayers even though he is in the middle of the desert with his Moslem colleagues because he is able to talk to God in his mind. Nilo also mentioned that talking to God in his mind is convenient since it allows him to do it anywhere, even while at his workplace or while inside the comfort room.

In Dante's opinion, OFWs learned to talk to God and pray in their minds while they are in the Islamic host country because of the policy prohibiting public worships of non-Moslems. He explained that OFWs are afraid of losing their jobs, be deported, jailed, or given lashes. Hence, they adopted the practice of talking to God in their minds. However, there are Filipinos who deliberately violates the aforesaid policy. Dante explained that: you know, "Filipinos are really hard-headed. They do what they want. They do what is prohibited."

[2] Reading the Bible

Following talking to God, reading the bible is the second most-common form of personal religious practice in the study. Seven participants mentioned that they express their faith by reading the bible. According to Tina, reading the bible before going to bed and talking to the Lord before sleeping are part of her daily routine. She explained that it is important for them to read the bible because only by doing so would enable them to know the God of the Bible. In Claire's case, she reads the bible to apply its teachings to her daily life. In Sarah's case, she mentioned that she always read the bible after her work: *"In a way it became a hobby of mine. Also, it became my form of relaxation after being stressed at work."*

[3] Chanting Memorized Prayers

Three participants of the study mentioned that they chant memorized prayers as part of their religious practice. According to Abbie, she prays the *Angel of God* every night so her guardian angel would watch over her while she sleeps. Gail mentioned that she recites the prayers in her prayer book before she sleeps at night while in her bed. For Joey, praying the Rosary is his religious practice every night.

However, Jeff, Darius, and Tina mentioned that they are against reciting memorized prayers. According to Tina, prayers should come from the bottom of the heart and not from memorized prayers created by other people. She explained that if people only pray memorized prayers, their relationship with Him will be impersonal. This sentiment is shared by Jeff and Darius as well.

[4] Making Religious Gestures

Two participants of the study mentioned that they make use of religious gestures such as making the sign of the cross and the bowing of the head as a form of worship. According to Jeff, there are instances when his only way to pray to God is bowing his head in silence. While he is in the middle of the desert during his work and cannot make the sign of the cross in public, he resorts to the bowing of his head to worship God. On the other hand, Joey mentioned that there are times when he feels exhausted from work so instead of chanting the rosary, he would just make the sign of the cross before directly going to sleep.

[5] Singing Worship Songs

Two participants of the study sing worship songs as a form of worship. According to Victor, he sings worship songs when he spends his quality time with the Lord. Nilo also claims to sing worship songs before his work starts and before going to bed.

[6] Memorizing Biblical Verses

Out of 20 participants, Josie claims to memorize bible verses as part of her worship. According to Josie, going to bed, she reads the bible and every night, she attempts to memorize a biblical verse because the verses are God's way of talking to her.

[7] Reviewing and Reflecting on the lessons provided by the Religious Organization

Only Claire mentioned that her act of reviewing her religious organization's teachings form part of her worship. According to Claire, she reviews and reflects on the lessons provided to her by Religion Y every night.

Interestingly, given that the Islamic host country prohibits non-Moslem worships, some participants of the study made use of virtual spaces to showcase their faith to the public and at the same time, evade persecution. These two themes: [8] Sharing Biblical Verses and Religious Images Online, and [9] Posting Personal Prayers on Facebook, are personal religious practices conducted virtually.

[8] Sharing Biblical Verses and Religious Images Online

Two participants, Joey and Mae, mentioned that they share biblical verses and religious images online. Joey shared that originally, his intention in making a Facebook account is for him to talk to his wife and friends. He always tells them that he wants to go back to the Philippines and that he can no longer take working in the Islamic host country until he was able to read a bible quote shared on Facebook: *"Have I not commanded you to be strong and courageous? Do not be afraid for your Lord will be with you wherever you go."* According to him, upon reading this passage, *"the faintness of my will disappeared. So, I still remember it."* Since then, he always shares bible quotes and even religious images of Jesus, Mary, and the Saints on Facebook, so he could help others who are having a hard time like him before. Sharing online also made him feel like he was preaching the bible to other people, thus he feels like he is making it up to Him for his failure to confess his sins and receive the holy communion while abroad.

In Mae's case, since she must respect Islamic beliefs, she cannot show her faith and pray anywhere. Hence, she settled to sharing inspirational bible verses online. *"Reading novenas or the bible is prohibited. So, instead of using novenas, I just read inspirational quotes and bible verses online. At least I can even share it on Facebook."*

[9] Posting Personal Prayers on Facebook

Only Joey claimed that he posts his personal prayers on his Facebook account. According to Joey, since he cannot express his prayers publicly, he expresses it on his Facebook account. He also does this for his family and friends to see his prayers, and in order for them to know that he is also praying for them.

Location of Religious Worships.

Majority (19 out of 20 participants of the study) conducts their religious worships inside their bedroom or accommodation. The reason why most of them conduct their worships within the confines of their accommodation is because this is the most secluded place for them – they are able to conduct their religious practice/s without worrying that others will see them. According to Joey, he is having a hard time praying when he is on the field for his work. He can only complete his prayer, with the gesture of the sign of the cross when he is hidden inside his room. For him, his bedroom is the only place where he can pray earnestly. One participant mentioned that she conducts her worships inside her bedroom as a sign of respect to other non-Christians. According to Claire, she respects her Moslem employer very much and because of this very reason, she never flaunts her religious beliefs to anyone inside her employer’s household and just keeps it to herself.

Three participants mentioned that they pray in their workplace. According to Sarah, she prays and reads the bible in her workplace after office hours when no one is around anymore. Nilo claims that he prays in his workplace before his work begins and after his work ends. He also mentioned that there are instances wherein he prays while he is at work, during breaks or when he goes to the comfort room. In the case of Jeff, he can pray in the middle of the desert during his field work, but only if he prays silently inside his mind.

Two participants of the study claim that they can pray anywhere. According to Topher, he prays randomly anywhere: “...sometimes even if I am on the road I pray.” Topher explained that since he prays silently in his mind, he can pray even at his workplace. Mara also prays in her mind, so she can pray anywhere.

Two participants of the study mentioned that they make use of Facebook for religious practice. As mentioned by Joey, he prays on Facebook so his family and friends would be able to see his prayers. In the case of Mae, sharing biblical verses online is a form of worship for her.

Time of Worships.

Personal religious practices of Christian OFWs are often conducted before going to bed or before sleeping. Out of 20 participants, 13 mentioned that they conduct their worship at night before they go to bed or before they sleep. According to Sarah, given that she cannot show others that she is praying and that anything related to her Christian faith should not be displayed in public, she prays privately in her bed before sleeping.

Three participants mentioned that they pray anytime or during their free time. According to Topher, he prays anytime anywhere given that he prays silently in his mind. In Jean's case, she prays every time she has free time, either during her working hours or when she is relaxing at her accommodation. In Mara's case, she does not follow a rigorous prayer schedule. According to her, she dislikes the idea of limiting her chances of talking to the Lord. She also added that she can be as random as possible when praying. Mara even cited some instances when she would randomly talk to the Lord while in the middle of the road, while strolling inside the mall, or even during the worships of Moslems.

Two participants mentioned that they conduct their religious practices upon waking up or before they go to work and after their work, before they go to bed or fall sleep. Herbert mentioned that he would recite his personal prayers to the Lord before he sleeps at night and upon waking up in the morning while he is still inside his room.

Two participants mentioned that they pray while at work. According to Gail, every time she feels overworked and exhausted while working, she offers herself and everything else she does to the Lord. She believes that by doing so, her faith in the Lord becomes stronger. In the case of Monika, she explained that she talks to the Lord while she is at work, especially when she feels frustrated at work.

However, three participants admitted that there are instances when they are unable to pray at all. According to Topher, there are times when he fails to pray because he is very exhausted from work. *"I always pray every day, however there are instances when I am very busy and exhausted with work, so I end up forgetting to pray."* Like Topher, Mel also admits that there are times when she fails to talk to the Lord because of exhaustion from working the entire day. In the case of Mark, he believes that the Lord is always there watching him and guiding him every day even though there are days that he fails to pray.

Religious Items Used During Worships.

The most common religious item used by the study's participants is the Bible. Out of 20, 11 participants mentioned that they are using this item during their worships. The reason for the bible being the most common religious item used is that all three Christian religious organizations in the study subscribes to the usage of the bible. On the other hand,

other religious materials are specific to a given Christian religious organization. In the case of using the crucifix or the images of angels and saints during worships for example, only members of Religion Z subscribe to this practice, and some members of Religion X and Y even mentioned their disagreement with such practice. According to Tina who is a member of Religion X, it is against their beliefs worship false gods such as the statues of Jesus Christ, saints, and angels. Like Religion X, Herbert explained that Religion Y only allows them to use the bible for worship and prohibits them from worshipping symbols and false gods.

It was found out in the study that two types of bibles are being utilized by the participants, a physical bible and a virtual bible that is either an online or downloadable version or an application version that is being installed on the phone. Out of 11, 8 participants mentioned that they make use of a virtual bible.

Tina explained that bringing tangible religious items is very risky since it is forbidden in the Islamic host country, and so she takes advantage of the technological innovations and uses an online bible as an alternative to the physical bible given that the former is easier to hide than the latter. Like Tina, Topher believes that it is very dangerous to carry Christian items. He added that he cannot see the point of some OFWs who are risking their employment just to carry with them some religious items when they can just directly pray to the Lord without using such items. In the case of Claire who works as a domestic helper, since she is staying in the household of her Moslem employer all the time, she has no other choice but to resort to a bible that she was able to download from the internet through her mobile phone. According to Claire, her employer is not knowledgeable of her using the household's internet connection to download religious materials. She is afraid that her employer might confiscate her phone and deny her of free internet access if she is found.

However, contrary to the aforesaid sentiment of utilizing technology for worship, Herbert's believes that the act of downloading the bible and sacred images is disrespectful and offensive: *"For me, it is like disrespecting. It is making sacred objects like those games that you could just download online. It is okay for me if it is only song sheets or verses that you would download, but downloading the holy bible..."*

Two participants mentioned that they make use of a physical bible. According to Josie, the physical bible that she has with her was something given to her by a brother who is a member of her religious organization, although she admits that she has no idea how her brother was able to secure such a forbidden item. In the case of Sarah, she has no idea who own the bible that she is using. She explained that upon arrival to her accommodation, the bible was already there.

Only Victor makes use of both the application version and the physical version of the bible. According to Victor, he has a bible installed in his phone and laptop, and a physical version of the bible that is not originally his. He explained that it was left by someone else in his accommodation. He thinks that the original owner left it there on purpose since risking to bring it back to the Philippines poses the danger of being caught in the airport. However, regarding usage, Victor mentioned that he uses the installed version of the bible more than the physical since the latter puts him more at risk.

Aside from using the internet to download the bible, four participants claim that they use the internet in to search and download religious books, song sheets, inspirational biblical quotes, and images of Jesus Christ, Mary, saints, and angels. According to Tina, she uses the internet to download religious e- books like the Purpose Driven Life by Rick Warren. In Mae's case, she uses the internet to search for inspirational quotes and bible verses. In Joey's case, he searches for biblical quotes and religious images, while in Nilo's case, he uses the internet to download worship songs.

Four participants mentioned that they have with them forbidden religious items aside from the bible. Gail has with her a prayer booklet that was able to luckily pass the airport security, although she added that her crucifix necklace was confiscated at the airport. Gail mentioned that she has been keeping the prayer book hidden from her employer since she is afraid of losing her job. In the case of Monika, she has with her a picture of the Nazareno hidden in her wallet. She explained that she always carries with her said picture since it reminds her of Christ's struggles and that it inspires her to become resilient especially in work. Abbie has with her an Our Lady of Manaoag prayer booklet, while Nilo still has with him a crucifix and a rosary that luckily passed through the international airport's thorough inspection.

Three participants mentioned that they did not bring with them any religious materials, and that they never utilized any religious materials while they were in the Islamic host country. According to Jeff, he did not carry with him any religious items since he was oriented before departure that he will be in trouble if he is caught doing so. Jeff heeded said warning to prevent himself from getting into trouble. He added that he perceived this prohibition as a challenge sent by God to test his faith. For him, even though he had no religious items during that time, this did not impede his faithfulness in God; on the contrary, it made his faith stronger.

In the case of Dante, although he did not deliberately bring with him any religious items, his Jesus Christ tattoo landed him in jail for three days. He narrated that police officers kept on interrogating him because they wanted him to admit that his tattoo is an image of Jesus Christ, which he denied by claiming that such was his mother's image. The police did not believe his claim, and so his clothes were stripped off of him and then he was left in a cell for three days.

In Jeff's opinion, what's more important is to avoid trouble and protect himself since he has a family to support. He explained that although he has no religious materials with him, he is still able to always pray the rosary. He chants the Our Father, the Hail Mary, and the Glory Be without physically holding a rosary, and he uses his fingers as an alternative to a rosary's beads to guide him in counting.

Functions of personal religious practices of OFWs in an Islamic host country.

The second objective of the study is to look at the functions of Christian OFWs' personal religious practices. In answering this objective, it was found out that the personal religious practices of OFWs in the Islamic host country served as a venue: To have more intimate relationship with God; To know more about God; To thank God; To apologize to God; To seek God for guidance; To seek God for comfort; To have God as an inspiration; To ask God for protection; To continue the conduct of religious practices initially conducted in the Philippines; and To enjoy and relax.

To have more intimate relationship with God.

One of the functions of the personal religious practices conducted by OFWs in the Islamic host country is to serve as venue to have more intimate relationship with God. According to Josie, she continuously keeps an intimate relationship with God by spending more time with Him despite the restrictions that are being imposed on the religious practices which are conducted by non-Moslems in the Islamic host country because she does not want her *spiritual relationship* with Him to perish.

However, some participants mentioned that the restrictions only made their relationship with God more intimate. According to Tina, unlike in the Philippines where she is free to pray anytime and anywhere she wants, the way she expresses her faith in the Islamic host country is very limited. Nonetheless, because of the religious restrictions of the Islamic host country, her relationship with God became more intimate; she talks more to God privately. Like Tina, Mel claims that the policy of the Islamic host country in restricting her religious actions made her relationship with God more intimate because she became more aware of her interactions with Him. Every time that she is at work or in a public space, she is reminded that she cannot pray to him. Hence, she makes it up to Him by talking to Him more in private.

To know more about God.

Two participants mentioned that they can get to know God more through their personal religious practices. According to Jean, she spends her solitude reading the bible since it is God's words, and it is the only way for her to get to know more about God. For her, there is no other way to know more about God, but reading the bible because: "*The*

bible is the ultimate source of divine revelation. What the bible states is the exact word of God.” For Tina, talking to God allows her to get to know him and herself more.

To thank God.

Personal religious practices also serve as a venue to thank God. According to Mel, she talks to God to thank Him for the good things that are happening to her and for always taking good care of her. For Topher, thanking God is always part of his prayers because it is all thanks to Him that he was able to have a strong will to stay. In Mark’s case, he explained that although there are threats in the Islamic host country against those who have faith in God, he remains faithful and thankful to God because He gave him decent work and good life, and He never abandoned him.

To apologize to God.

Some participants make use of their personal religious practices as a venue to apologize to God. According to Mel, she prays to God to apologize for her wrongful acts. Similar to Mel, Tina prays to apologize for her wrongful acts, may it be personal, or work related. She added that she always seek God’s apology because: *“God looks for faith not for perfection.”*

Both Mark and Dante mentioned that they pray to God to apologize to Him for the instances that they are not able to pray to Him. Both also believes that God understands their circumstances and so they are confident that God forgives them. According to Mark, he knows that God accepts him even though he fails to pray at times because He knows that his priority is his work. Like Mark, Dante believes that God knows that he did not leave the Philippines to pray abroad. He went and left his family behind because he needed to work. If religion would impede him from doing this, then there is no point of leaving the Philippines. Hence, he is confident that God understands his situation.

In Joey’s case, he explained that his failure to receive the holy communion and his failure to confess his sins made him feel that his sins are now piling up inside him. However, instead of sulking and feeling depressed, he started sharing biblical verses online as a form of apology and to make it up to Him.

To seek God for guidance.

Personal religious practices provided a venue for some participants to seek God’s guidance. According to Josie, her personal religious practices serve as God’s way of guiding her. She believes that trusting the Lord with all her heart, mind, and soul will allow Him to guide her to the straight path. Therefore, in both her personal and work life, she believes

that God is guiding her through her prayers. For Mel, God guides her to perform well in work through her personal religious practices. Through prayer, she is always reminded by God that the life here on earth is just temporary and the hardships she had and will be experiencing are just temporary hardships. Mel, therefore, believes that she must be good at work to appease God in heaven, and such serves as God's guiding her.

For Sarah, Jesus Christ guides her by always reminding her that He endured all hardships, so she must endure it as well. In Mara's case, she talks to the Lord for guidance and relay Him the thoughts and feelings she has during difficult times, especially when she feels lost and helpless. Topher mentioned that God's guidance made him endure the sadness he feels while he is in the Islamic host country: *"If God did not guide me, maybe I've been in the Philippines for a while now and maybe I will not be able to endure the sadness I'm feeling here. I was again saved by our savior."* For Joey, his faith guided him to be more dedicated to his work. He explained that he always keeps in mind that vices and spending are mere temptations to weaken his love to the Lord. Joey added that because of his dedication to his work and to the Lord, he was able to save more than the amount he expected.

Two participants mentioned that solely asking for God's guidance without making any effort will not result to anything. According to Jeff, although the Lord guides people and gives them solutions to their problems, if they do nothing but seek God's guidance, nothing will happen. Like Jeff, Gail believes that prayer alone is not enough. She believes that prayer should be combined with hard work and determination. Hence, unlike the other participants of the study who merely sought God's guidance through their personal religious practices, Jeff and Gail believes that there should also be an action on their part and that they should refrain from solely relying onto Him.

To seek God for comfort.

Personal religious practices also become a way for the participants of the study to seek God's comfort. According to Monika, there are instances when she feels frustrated at work especially when the people around her are not treating her kindly. She talks to God to vent out her negative feelings. She explains that: *"When I feel really frustrated, I just cry it all out to the Lord. When I feel like giving up, I just have to pour all the bad feelings I have to Him. I don't have any other choice, I cannot quit my job, I need money. Also, I do not have anyone to talk to, so I talk to Him. At least when I talk to Him, I am sure that He listens."*

In Topher's case, the idea that there is a God that guides him while he is far away from his family comforted him, He explained that God was his source of comfort and refuge especially in instances when he is having a hard time at work or when he is facing personal challenges.

To have God as an inspiration.

Some participants of the study mentioned that their personal religious practices provided them an inspiration to go on. According to Topher, the Lord inspired him greatly to become stronger and to face the challenges ahead. Without Him, he would have not lasted in the Islamic host country without his family and without knowing anyone. Topher added that: *“Because of Him, I was able to strive hard in order to face the challenges that are given to me especially on work related aspects.”* In Tina’s case, whenever she feels like giving up, she remembers the hardships of Jesus. She explained that: *“if Jesus died so we could live forever, we should become strong enough to show that we are thankful to Him for sacrificing just to save us all.”* The hardships experienced by Jesus inspires her to go on.

For Jean, the idea that God is always there watching her inspires her to perform her job better. She also mentioned that God’s words through biblical verses inspires her as well since she considers these verses as *energy pills*. Jean added that: *“every time I read the bible, I feel energized...like I have taken vitamins.”* I Similar to Jean, Claire mentioned that the idea that God is always there serves as her inspiration: *“I would always think that God is always there. As he said My presence will go with you and I will give you rest. I know through prayer, God takes care of me Give your burdens to the Lord and he will take care of you. He will not allow the godly to slip and fall. And with His words, I believe.”*

To ask God for protection.

Some participants of the study mentioned that through their personal religious practices, they can ask God for protection. According to Victor, he prays to God for protection especially during his work. He also asks God to give him a healthy body. He added that doing so shows how much he trusts his life to God. Like Victor, Abbie prays for the Lord to always bless her with a strong body and will because getting sick is very difficult in the Islamic host country. For Sarah, she prays for God’s protection especially while she is working. In Dante’s case, he prays every night so that God will protect him, make him strong, and allow him to wake up every day. According to Jeff, he prays that the Lord would protect not only him, but also his family who are very far away from him.

To continue the conduct of religious practices initially conducted in the Philippines.

The personal religious practices of the participants served as venue for the continuation of the conduct of religious practices initially conducted by some participants in the Philippines. According to Mara, whether she is in the Philippines or the Islamic host country, she talks to the Lord for guidance, especially during difficult times. She added that talking to the Lord while she is in the Islamic host country makes her feel like she is at home.

However, given the Islamic host country's prohibitions, the conduct of such practices was altered. According to Joey, back in the Philippines, he always prays the Rosary. Now that he is in the Islamic host country, he still prays the Rosary through the Rosary beads. However, given the prohibition on the usage of Christian religious items, he uses the fingers in his hands as an alternative to the beads. In Joey's case, since the Islamic host country prohibits his religious routine when he was still in the Philippines, namely hearing the holy mass every Sunday and saying his prayers inside a chapel, he now practices the act of just bowing his head and praying silently every night before he sleeps as an alternative to his previous worship routines.

To enjoy and relax.

According to Sarah, she always reads the bible after work: *"In a way it became a hobby of mine. Also, it became my form of relaxation after being stressed at work."* Similar to Sarah, Abbie talks to the Lord after finishing all her duties at work to relax. Abbie added that in instances when she feels stressed and uneasy with the idea that she is far away from her family, she prays to relax and calm her mind. For Gail, every time she feels overworked and exhausted, she offers herself and everything else to the Lord and she believes that doing so not only calms her soul but makes her faith to the Lord stronger as well. In Tina's case, she conducts her personal religious activities because it gives her joy to glorify the name of Jesus Christ. For Mae, every time she reads inspirational biblical verses, her sadness disappears.

SUMMARY OF THE STUDY AND ITS MAIN FINDINGS

This paper aims to discuss the personal religious practices of Christian OFWs in the Islamic host country where non-Moslem religious practices are prohibited. It also aims to look at the functions of said personal religious practices.

In answering the first objective of the study, it was found out that the following are the personal religious practices of the study's participants: talking to God, chanting memorized prayers, making religious gestures, singing worship songs, memorizing biblical verses, reviewing, and reflecting on the lessons provided for by the religious organization, sharing biblical verses and religious images online, and posting personal prayers on Facebook.

In terms of the location of religious worships, the most common location is inside the participants' bedroom or accommodation since it is the most secluded place for them. The privacy puts their minds at ease while praying; they can concentrate more without being bothered by the idea that someone might see them doing an illegal act. Praying in seclusion also allows them to show respect to the Moslems around them. It was also found that some participants resorted to pray in virtual spaces like Facebook since it allows

them to publicly exhibit their worships without the risk of being caught. Two participants, however, mentioned that they are not bothered by the location of their religious worships since they have already learned to pray in their minds.

At the time of worships, majority mentioned that they conduct their worships before going to bed or before sleeping. This is related to the location of worship as well. Given that most participants opt to pray in seclusion, they end up praying before going to bed while they are inside their room or accommodation. Other times of worship are during the participants' free time, anytime, upon waking up or before they go to work and after their work, before they go to bed or fall sleep, and while at work. However, three participants mentioned that there are instances that they are unable to pray at all because of exhaustion from work.

On religious items used during worships, the most common item is the bible. It was also found out in the study that the participants utilize two types of bibles, a physical bible and a virtual bible that is either an online or downloadable version or an application version that is installed to a phone. Other items used during worships are the following: inspirational religious books, prayer books, Our Lady of Manaoag prayer booklet, song sheets, inspirational biblical quotes, and images of Jesus Christ, the Nazareno, Mary, saints, and angels.

Hence, in terms of private religious practices, OFWs have learned to adapt to the challenges posed by the laws of the Islamic host country. Since the law prohibits any forms of Christian worships in public, most of them resorted to praying in seclusion – at night inside their bedroom or accommodation, to avoid getting caught. Also, given that the Islamic host prohibits the entry of Christian religious materials, some participants have resorted to alternatives (e.g. using one's fingers instead of a rosary) and virtual materials (e.g. online bible, e-books, online images of Jesus and Mary). However, it was also found out in the study that some participants knowingly violate the laws of the Islamic host country by bringing with them prohibited religious materials that puts them at risk of receiving sanctions like deportation, lashing, or even death.

In answering the second objective of the study, it was found out that the personal religious practices of OFWs in the Islamic host country served as a venue to have more intimate relationship with God, to know more about God, to thank God, to apologize to God, to seek God for guidance, to seek God for comfort, to have God as an inspiration, to ask God for protection, to continue the conduct of religious practices that were initially conducted in the Philippines, and to enjoy and relax.

The personal religious practices of OFWs help them cope while they are in the Islamic host country. Instead of being burdened with the idea that they are prohibited to

conduct their religious practices, the participants of the study continued to conduct their religious practices privately. By doing so, they can: have more intimate relations with Him, know Him more, thank Him, and apologize to Him. These personal religious practices also eased the hardships encountered by the study's participants by having God as a source of guidance, comfort, inspiration, and protection. The conduct of personal religious practices in the Islamic host country as a continuation of the religious practices initially conducted in the Philippines also reminds them of home. Lastly, these personal religious practices also provide the study's participants with a source of enjoyment and relaxation.

The results of the study led the researcher to develop a conceptual framework on the functions of personal religious practices of OFWs in the Islamic host country (see figure 1 below). This can serve as guidance for further studies on the religiosity of OFWs abroad. As found in the study and as reflected in the conceptual framework below, the functions of personal religious practices of OFWs centers on OFWs building intimate relations with God by wanting to know Him more, thanking Him, apologizing to Him, among others, and seeking Him for guidance, comfort, protection, inspiration, and even for relaxation.

This supports the theory of Hirschman (2013) which states that religious faith remains important for migrants since religion provides solace from undesirable human experiences. These undesirable experiences of the participants - being away from their families and friends, battling loneliness and homesickness, having a difficult time at work, and so forth, enticed the participants to hold on to religion. Although the researcher initially theorized that the participants of the study would stop their religious rituals given that they are Christians and are situated in an Islamic host country that is intolerant of non-Moslem religious practices; as found in the study, these Christians carried on with their religious practices.

In the end, it can be concluded that these OFWs who remain exposed to occupational hazards, as well as emotional strains brought about by being distanced from their familiar surroundings, families, and friends, added to that the immediate and external threats abroad (Urrutia, 2013) remain resilient, which is done by holding on to their religion.

REFERENCES

- Asis, M. (2017, July 12). The Philippines: Beyond Labor Migration, Toward Development and (Possibly) Return. Retrieved from <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/philippines-beyond-labor-migration-toward-development-and-possibly-return>
- Dupre, A. (2008). What role does religion play in the migration process? *Perspectives on Migration*, 7-11.
- Hirschman, C. (2003, November 24). The role of religion in the origins and adaptation of immigrant groups in the United States. Retrieved from faculty.washington.edu/charles/pubs/Role_of_Religion.pdf.
- International Labour Organization (2022). Labour migration in the Philippines. Retrieved from <https://www.ilo.org/manila/areasofwork/labour-migration/lang--en/index.htm>
- Iwayama, M.O. (2019). Understanding the role of religion and religious organizations in the life and work of overseas Filipino workers in an Islamic State. *Asia Pacific Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, 7(2): 55-64.
- Maca, M. (2018). Education in the 'New Society' and the Philippine Labour Export Policy (1972-1986). *Journal of International and Comparative Education*, 7(1): 1-16.
- Manalo, A. (2022). Bagong Bayani: Tracing the Reverence and Portrayal of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in Philippine Political Discourse. *Emory Journal of Asian Studies*
- Mcallister, S. (2013, July 2). *Overseas Filipino workers deserve better protection*. Retrieved from <http://www.peoplesworld.org/overseas-filipino-workers-deserve-better-protection/>
- Miller, J. (1982). Religion in the Philippines. *Asia Society's Focus on Asian Studies*, 2(1), 26-27.
- Philippine Daily Inquirer. (2019, January 15). 'It comes with the territory' [Editorial]. Retrieved from <https://opinion.inquirer.net/118894/it-comes-with-the-territory>
- Philippine Statistics Authority. (2022, March 7). *2020 Overseas Filipino Workers (Final Results)*. Retrieved from <https://psa.gov.ph/statistics/survey/labor-and-employment/survey-overseas-filipinos>
- Piocos, C. M. (2019). Suffering that counts: The politics of sacrifice in Philippine labor migration. *Humanities Diliman*, 16(2), 26-48.

- Rodriguez, R. (2010). Migrants for Export: How the Philippine State Brokers Labor to the World [abstract]. *Minnesota Scholarship Online*. <https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816665273.001.0001>
- San Juan, E. (2009). Overseas Filipino Workers: The Making of an Asian-Pacific Diaspora. *The Global South*, 3, 99-129.
- Silva, Ma. E. C., Zarsuelo, M.-A. M., Zordilla, Z. D., Estacio Jr., L. R., Mendoza, M. A. F., & Padilla, C. D. (2020). Policy Analysis on the Mental Health Needs of Overseas Filipino Workers: Addressing Gaps through Evidence-based Policy Reform. *Acta Medica Philippina*, 54(6). <https://doi.org/10.47895/amp.v54i6.2602>
- Urrutia, L. (2013, August 17). Overseas Filipino Workers: A risk society analysis. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/5241905/Overseas_Filipino_Workers_A_Risk_Society_Analysis
- U.S. Department of State. (2009, October 26). International Religious Freedom Report 2009. Retrieved from <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2009/127285.htm>
- Villegas, E. (1988). *The Political Economy of the Philippine Labor Laws*. Foundation for Nationalist Studies.

Figure 1.
Conceptual framework illustrating the functions of personal religious practices of OFWs in an Islamic host country.

