Evangelical Review of Theology

EDITOR: DAVID PARKER

Volume 31 · Number 4 · October 2007

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by

Paternoster:
thinking faith

WEA
Theological Commission

for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

ERT (2007) 31:4, 369-375

Case Study: Overseas Filipino Workers

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KEYWORDS: *Migration, marginalisation, missionary, pilgrim, production, economy, consumerism, nurture, conversion*

GLOBALIZATION HAS engendered the phenomenal growth of transnational economic migration, with its opportunities and heartaches. The economic interdependence of countries has resulted not only in the exchange of goods but also in the exchange of services, in the form of the movement of migrant contract workers from poorer economies to more affluent ones. However, the need to maximize profit by factoring the least cost in production has brought about the massive importation of cheap labour.[1] In this case study, I will set out the situation of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and their families, and explore biblical and theological themes relevant to their plight. Although I would reflect on the particular case of Filipino economic migrants, many of the issues discussed here apply to other labour migrants as well.

I The Broken World of OFWs

With about eight million Filipinos residing overseas, comprising 10 percent of the country's population of 86 million, the Philippines has one of the largest proportion of migrant workers in relation to its total population of all countries. For many Filipinos, migration is a symbol of hope because it provides an alternative to being unemployed or underemployed, living in poverty, or having a life that is qualitatively less than one's aspirations. Remittances sent by a family member working overseas can give significant economic help to a household in the Philippines. On a national scale, migration is seen as necessary for national

1 Graziano Battistela, 'Transnational Mobility of People in Relation to Patterns of Industrialization and Impact on Individuals and Family in Asia' in *Colloquium on Church in Asia in the 21st Century* (Manila: Office for Human Development, Federation of Asia Bishops Conference, 1997), pp. 117-38.

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survival. The remittances of OFWs make up 20% of the country's exports and 10% of GDP, which are a lifeline to a government struggling with a large external debt. Because of the OFWs contribution to the economy, the export of migrant workers has become part of national policy.[2] However, labour migration means also marginalization, social dislocation, downward social mobility, and family fragmentation.

Filipino migrants experience marginalization in two ways. First, they become socially and structurally invisible in relation to the host society. Even though they have college degrees and professional backgrounds in the Philippines, and may have prominent roles in their family and community, they disappear into other people's homes, hospitals, nursing homes, manufacturing centres in other countries. Second, they experience a subaltern existence. The pain of marginality is made acute by being regarded as mere instruments of policy and by being subjected to ethnic, economic, and social differentiation. Migrant workers are often seen as mere objects to advance the interests of both the country of destination and the country of origin, without regard to the personal and family fragmentation and disempowerment that this produces.

Those who work as domestic workers are vulnerable to abuse since, as live-in workers, they are dependent on their employers and have no private spaces of their own or complete control of their time. As foreigners who are employed in jobs on the lowest rung of the economic and social ladder, they are also subject to prejudice. Moreover, as temporary residents, they do not have adequate legal and civil rights to protect them from being exploited. In addition, because migration holds the promise of economic advancement, some Filipinos have resorted to illegal means to be able to work and live overseas. This has given Filipinos the reputation of being law-breakers and has led to some humiliating deportations and imprisonment.

In addition, economic migration produces the phenomenon of transnational families, in which one or two parents are abroad while children are reared by one parent or by relatives. This arrangement brings a lot of emotional stress—guilt for parents, insecurity and loneliness for children, and emotional distance between parents and children.[3] This is especially the case when the migrant is the mother,[4] a common situation since women comprise more than fifty percent of OFWs. A conflict then results between the economic security of the family and its emotional and psychological well-being.

On a national scale, the migration of so many nationals means massive

2 Graziano Battistella, 'Philippine Migration Policy: Dilemmas of a Crisis', *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 14 (Apr 1999), pp. 229-48.

3 Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration, and Domestic Work* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp 82-88.

4 *Hearts Apart: Migration in the Eyes of Filipino Children* (Joint Research Project by the Episcopal Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants, Scalabrini Migration Center, and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration, 2004), pp. 3, 23.

brain drain as teachers, doctors, nurses, engineers move to other parts of the world. This is tragic, considering that in many villages in the Philippines, medical facilities are understaffed,[5] while vital infrastructures are needed for the development of the local economy.[6]

II Biblical Themes and Texts

Christian responses to the OFW phenomenon are varied; thus, the theological themes and biblical texts used are varied as well. The following sets forth briefly the different views, with the themes and texts that are found to be relevant for each view.

1 The Migrant as Provider

Economic migration can be regarded as something God brought about in order to provide for the needy. The globalized marketplace is considered as an opportunity for economic betterment, while the migrant worker is viewed as a provider not only of the family, but also as a financial supporter of the local church and its missionaries. The texts that fit this position are the stories of the migration of Jacob and his family to Egypt, as well as the migration of Naomi and her family to Moab because of famine. Like Joseph, the migrant is seen as a channel of God's blessings for the family and for the nation. The theological themes emphasized are God's sovereignty and providence, so that God is seen as working out a plan to provide for the family through the globalized environment. Anthropologically, economic migration is regarded as part of the outworking of the Genesis mandate for human beings to exercise dominion over the created order (Gen. 1:26-28). Concentrating on the economic contribution, however, has led to the neglect of the spiritual, emotional, and social aspects of migration.

2 The Migrant as Missionary

Another positive view sees economic migration as something that God allowed in order to advance the cause of global mission. Many evangelical groups espouse this view. God has a plan for the scattering of Filipinos all over the world because Filipinos have the qualities needed to become an effective 'tentmaker'. They are adaptable, can easily learn another language, and have penetrated almost all industrial sectors in over 180 countries, including those where traditional missionaries are not allowed to enter and share the gospel.[7] Thus, they are well placed to become witnesses by doing their jobs well and seeking for opportunities to share their faith.

The most relevant text for this view is Acts 18:2-4, in which Paul, along

5 In 2003, 25,000 nurses left the country, three times more than the number of graduates that year. Nurses emigrating soon after graduation leave hospitals in the Philippines without quality medical care. See 'Filipino Take "Going Places" Literally', *Washington Post* (May 26, 2004).

6 The above section consists of excerpts from Athena E. Gorospe, *Narrative and Identity: An Ethical Reading of Exodus 4* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

7 Jojo M. Manzano and Joy C. Solina, 'Worker to Witness: Becoming an OFW Tentmaker' (Makati: Church Strengthening Ministries, 2007), pp. 34-37.

with Priscilla and Aquila, are shown to be working on a trade as they preach the gospel. Other texts cited show God's people being forcefully brought to a foreign hostile culture, and being able to be a witness for God in that place: Joseph in Egypt (Gen. 41:14-49), the captive servant girl of Naaman in Aram (2 Kgs. 5:1-15), Daniel in Babylon (Dan. 2:24-48), and Nehemiah in Persia (Neh. 2:1-9).[8] The Jewish dispersion in Acts due to persecution is also used, since the scattering of the Jerusalem church resulted in a wider coverage for the proclamation of the gospel (Acts 8:1-4; 11:19-21). A particular case is Philip who proclaimed the word in Samaria and to an Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:5-13; 26-39).[9] Again, God's sovereignty and providence are the main themes, with the church's mission to 'make disciples of all nations' being given emphasis.

Many OFWs have become Christians while working overseas and have grown in discipleship through the ministry of other Filipino migrants. Many churches ministering to OFWs have been planted and are growing. However, only sporadic fruit has been seen among non-Filipinos, especially in Muslim countries. At the same time, since the contract of an OFW lasts only a few years, there is a rapid turnover of leadership in the migrant church. Many of those active in ministry while overseas have become displaced upon their return home, sometimes becoming alienated from the local church. The missionary model can gloss over the negative effects of migration, extolling its virtues, without properly addressing its problems.

3 The Migrant as Sojourner and Pilgrim

Another view recognizes the reality of migration because of the economic need, but also sees the migrant's marginal status and vulnerability in relation to the host society. Catholic churches in the Philippines give emphasis to this view. What is highlighted is the gift that the stranger brings to the host society and the need to provide hospitality for them.[10]

Naomi loses her husband and two sons but she gains a faithful daughter-in-law in Ruth, who, as a migrant in Israel, becomes a source of blessing for Naomi through a son that would continue her husband's lineage.[11] In the

8 Manzano and Solina, 'OFW Tentmaker', pp. 40-41.

9 Narry F. Santos, 'Survey of the Diaspora Occurrences in the Bible and of Their Contexts in Christian Missions in the Bible', in *Scattered: The Filipino Global Presence* (eds. Luis Pantoja et. al,; Manila: LifeChange Publishing, 2004), pp. 59-60.

10 See Maurizio Pettená, *Migration in the Bible* (Exodus Series 2: A Resource Guide for the Migrant Ministry in Asia; Quezon City: Scalabrini Migration Center, 2005); Fabio Baggio, *Theology of Migration* (Exodus Series 3; Quezon City: Scalabrini Migration Center, 2005).

11 Ruth describes herself as a *nokriyah* (stranger), rather than as a *ger* (resident alien) (Ruth 2:10), emphasizing her oddness and perhaps indicating why people might not readily trust her. See Dianne Bergant, 'Ruth: The Migrant Who Saved the People', in *Migration, Religious Experience, and Globalization* (ed. Gioacchino Campese and Pietro Ciallella; New York: Center for Migration Studies, 2003), p. 52.

NT, the acceptance of the stranger is equated with the acceptance of Christ (Mt. 25:34-45), in the same way that the reception accorded Christ's disciples in their mission also indicated the degree of their acceptance of Christ and his message (Lk. 10: 8-12, 16).[12] Thus, 'the presence of God in the foreigner is the foundation for the duty of hospitality'.[13]

In the OT, a high value is given to hospitality to strangers and travellers (Gen. 18:1-6; 19:1-9; 24:15-33; Ex. 2:15-22: 1 Kgs. 17:8-16). Hospitality is exemplified in the NT by the welcome that Mary and Martha (Lk. 10:38-42) and Zaccheus (Lk. 19:1-10) gave to Jesus. Moreover, having experienced what it was like to be an alien, Israel is enjoined not to oppress the alien (Ex. 23:9; Dt. 24:17-22), to ensure that there would be food for them (Lev. 19:9-10; Deut. 14:28-29; 26:12-13), and to be inclusive in their worship by allowing the alien to join in their celebrations and festivals (Lev. 19:9-10; Deut. 16:10-15).

The theological themes and images that are important for this view are the following: the welcoming God, the church as a pilgrim people (1 Pet. 2:11), the church as a welcoming community, and a theology of work that sees gainful employment as a basic human right.

Some churches in western countries have provided welcome to migrants, enriching not only the migrant but also their communities. However, the problems causing migration are not addressed. Moreover, there is also a tension in host countries between providing welcome to strangers and protecting their own citizens. A more thorough theological response needs to be articulated regarding this issue.

4 The Migrant as Victim

A more negative view of labour migration highlights its effects on the individual and the family, on national human resources, and on cultural values. Thus, migrants are presented as victims of global economic forces beyond their control. Individually, migrants acquire consumerist values and they dream of upward mobility while living overseas, thus making it difficult for them to return home permanently. Families become vulnerable and children are deprived of the nurturing presence of parents. The services of the country's skilled labour are not employed in helping the country's own people, but are exported to help those who are better placed to avail of competent medical help and educational resources.

Thus, what is advocated is structural change, both in the sending country and the receiving one. For the sending country, what needs to be addressed are the basic issues that lead to migration—unemployment, poverty, lack of opportunity, colonial mentality, government policies that encourage migration, etc. For the host country, what needs to be encouraged are policies that would see the migrant not solely as an instrument of profit, but as a total person with human needs and basic rights.

The following theological themes can be used to support this view: the God of justice and righteousness, the

12 Baggio, *Theology of Migration*, pp. 15-18.
13 Baggio, *Theology of Migration*, p. 19.

dignity of human beings made in the image of God and not just as instruments of production, the importance of the family in the faith community, and the incarnation as an example of downward mobility.

The focus on the victimized state of migrants, although addressing structural issues, can fail to recognize the migrants' own agency. Thus, instead of empowering them to make decisions for themselves, it can lead to greater dependency and hopelessness.

5 The Migrant as Liminal Person

This view sees temporary migration as a liminal experience, in which the migrant undergoes a rite-of-passage that would enable him or her to negotiate a successful return to the home country.[14] Although migration is a place of marginality, it can be also be a place of possibility, if the migrant moves from marginality to liminality and finally to reincorporation into the home community through reverse migration.[15] Because migrants are able to develop a 'plurality of vision', they can be a great resource to the home country upon their return.[16]

The early chapters of Exodus focus on the marginal experience of migrants. On one hand, there is the account of Israelite migrants who were seen as threats to the security of their host society, and were therefore subjected to different forms of ethnic cleansing and subjugation. On the other hand, there is the depiction of Moses in Midian, who described himself as a 'stranger', and whose life as a shepherd in a foreign land was hidden and invisible. By using *ger* as a self-description, Moses acknowledged his marginal, dependent, and less privileged status as a foreigner living among the native-born inhabitants of Midian.[17] These two pictures capture the general experience of Filipinos who migrate to other lands.

Moses, however, did not remain in Midian. Through the call of God to return to Egypt, the marginal life in Midian became imbued with a transitional character, an in-between state

14 Filomeno Aguilar has connected international labour migration with ritual passage, which partakes of the character of a pilgrimage, although not in a theological way. See 'Ritual Passage and the Reconstruction of Selfhood in International Labour Migration', *Sojourn* 14 (April 1999): 98-139.

15 For this view, see Gorospe, *Narrative and Identity*, pp. 291-301.

16 Edward Said calls this a 'contrapuntal perspective', that is, exiles become aware of simultaneous dimensions that make possible an originality of vision, by virtue of their crossing borders and breaking barriers of thought and experience. See *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 185-86.

17 Frank Spina proposes that *ger* be translated as 'immigrant', indicating those from another tribe, city, or country who must place themselves in a dependent relationship with someone else in the host country because they do not enjoy the customary rights or privileges. Also 'immigrant' calls attention to the original circumstances that impelled the move to a more favourable social setting. See Frank Anthony Spina, 'Israelites as *gerim*: Sojourners in Social and Historical Context', in Carol L. Meyers and M. O'Connor, eds., *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of his Sixtieth Birthday* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983), p. 323.

between the Egypt of Moses' upbringing and the Egypt of his prophetic calling. It was in this liminal space that Moses was transformed, receiving a new identity that enabled him to fulfil his role as God's spokesperson to the Israelites.

The story of God's call to Moses can inform the experience of Filipino migrants. First, it shows that they need not be oriented by the global capitalistic consumerist mentality of success. There is an alternative 'journey of achievement' which is defined not by economics, but by commitment and service. Second, it shows that there are other claims in life than the claims of one's family and kin. The Exodus story helps to relativize the claims of the family in light of God's call and the claims of one's own suffering community, paving the way for return migration.

Again, structural issues may be glossed over in this view, although it gives a role to agency. Moreover, the question of whether to return permanently to one's country after migrating is not an easy one to answer, and theological and pastoral guidance must be given to those who are contemplating doing so.

III Following Jesus in the Context of Global Economic Migration

The above models show that discerning how to follow Jesus in the context of global economic migration is not an easy path. In the first place, it involves several spheres: the migrant, the migrant's family and relatives, the migrant's employer, the church, the sending country, and the host country. It is the church, however, which is the locus of discipleship, since it is the church that oversees the formation and well-being of migrants and their families, as well as the one that exercises a prophetic role in calling both the sending society and the host society to policies that would reflect the values of God's kingdom. The challenge is to know the appropriate theological response to a particular situation, since it is possible to have the right theology but apply it to the wrong context.

What is clear, however, is that in forming a theology that relates to the globalized marketplace, one must take into consideration the plight of the migrant workers. This would involve recovering Jesus' concern for the marginalized, the invisible people who are often forgotten in today's market-driven world.