

East Asia

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Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in the world and is often perceived as the favourite of the discriminated against and economically underdeveloped. It has drawn a huge influx of converts in recent decades, despite endless assertions about the declining influence of religion in the lives of people in the wake of modernization and globalization. Islam's manifestation and continuity in Hong Kong is surprising because religious affinity is less recognized or rewarded. The popular religions here are Buddhism, Taoism and Christianity, adherents to Islam constituting only 1% of the population. However, a notable number of conversions to Islam amongst Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong are occurring.

According to Hong Kong's Majid Ammar Mosque, conversions in the territory average 60–70 per year, and more than 70% are Filipino domestic helpers. The vast majority are women. This, added to the fact that there is a long history of bitter relations between Muslims and Christians in the Philippines, makes the confluence of these factors unique in the worldwide experience of conversion to Islam.

Filipinos in Hong Kong

Migration is not a new phenomenon, especially not to Filipinos, since their country has been facing severe economic crisis for well over two decades. What started as a temporary measure to alleviate economic pressure, has become a permanent way of life for many Filipinos. Hong Kong became a popular destination due to its proximity to their motherland and the higher wages. In the early 1970s, Hong Kong began to experience enormous urbanization and industrial development resulting in a huge demand for labour. Local women escaped domestic service for regulated and well paid factory jobs, which led to a shortage of female domestic workers in Hong Kong. Filipinos became the best option because of their reputation for language skills, educational levels and pleasant personalities. Initially employed by a few expatriate community members, their number steadily rose to 141,000 (September 1999), making them the largest non-Chinese community in Hong Kong.



PHOTO: ANONYMOUS

Conversion ceremony of Filipino women held at the Masjid Ammar Mosque in Wanchai, Hong Kong.

Filipinos nonetheless comprise the most disfavoured community in Hong Kong. Discrimination is reflected in particularly strict immigration rules and pay slashes for domestic workers by the Hong Kong Government, public criticism of their weekend gatherings in public spaces, and labour abuses such as the inordinate monitoring of their work areas by employers. These are only a few examples; many others occur more subtly. Filipinos resist this discrimination by forming strong social networks among themselves, which become the primary agency through which Filipinos come into close contact with Pakistani men, giv-

ing rise to the circumstances conducive to potential conversion. Apart from romantic involvement and inter-marriage with Pakistani men, their prior contact with Muslims, work experience in the Middle East, influence from converted family members, employers or co-workers, dissatisfaction with their former religion, mere curiosity, or a desire for enlightenment also motivate potential converts. Pakistani migration to Hong Kong began during the colonial era, when most served as policemen and soldiers. Many now work as private watchmen and security guards.

Religious conversion is not an impulsive overnight decision and many converts undergo a difficult period of transition. Often converts are seen as deviant and face ostracism from their own group. Financial, emotional and social support derived from among new organizational and social ties provides inner strength to endure such challenges. Many of the converts undergo several or all of the following stages.*

Context, Crisis and Quest

Though Pakistanis and Filipinos in Hong Kong possess ample similarities – such as their relatively low status in Hong Kong, a large component of single people, the large size and minority status of each group, and English language ability – there are two sharp distinctions – their educational attainment and religious affiliation. Filipinos are generally credited with high educational attainment where as Pakistan's literacy rate is low compared to the developing world's standards. As far as the religious difference is concerned, Islam is predominant in Pakistan, while Catholicism is the dominant religion of the Philippines. These similarities and differences play an important role in their relationship.

Marital laws in the Philippines, such as the denial of divorce, severe restrictions on birth control methods and a legal ban on abortion, can result in marital dissatisfaction and single motherhood. At the same time, marriage in Pakistan is viewed as an obligation toward family and arranged marriage is the rule, sometimes leaving little room for romance. Migration to Hong Kong gives both the Filipinos and Pakistanis greater autonomy and a sense of liberation. They try to exert their influence over their new marital choices here. The Hong Kong government's restrictive rules on the entrance of the domestic workers' families forces many of the women to live a single life. At the same time, the Pakistani men's perceived fear of the influence of alien culture on their immediate family members results in a similar situation. Both may have already established a family back home.

The lower position of women in Pakistan, especially non-Muslim minority women, is reflected in Pakistani men's treatment of Filipinos in Hong Kong. Often, ill treatment results in conflict relationships. Women have

told me that they react to such powerlessness by converting to Islam. In doing so, they empower the men and seek to obtain moral identity, gain respect among the men and secure themselves protection from harassment by men in their public and private lives. Catholic and Islamic laws concerning inter-marriage, economic responsibilities toward their respective families, cultural differences between the two ethnic communities, and their immigration status in Hong Kong become factors influencing marital success. Employment conditions in Hong Kong such as the compulsory one paid 24-hour holiday per week and statutory holidays, the absence of immediate family pressure to conformity, strong social network, the recognition by the mosque of their immediate needs, and above all, their need for a physical space to escape the stigma attached to their gathering at public places, all favour the conversion of Filipinos.

Encounter and interaction with the advocate

One person stands out as a prominent figure in Islamic conversion in Hong Kong: Sister Madiha, a Filipino convert who assists the newcomers. Under her guidance, three hundred women have already embraced Islam in 5–6 years. Her nationality, language, religious background, Islamic and biblical knowledge, and occupation are very appealing to the newcomers. Being a Filipino domestic worker with a fluency in Tagalog and English, and herself a convert, Sister Madiha becomes the ideal model for sisters undergoing conversion.

The mosque provides a comprehensive training programme that includes comparative religion lectures, Islamic knowledge classes, elementary Arabic lessons, Quran reading sessions, open forums and discussion of the converts' social problems. It employs various retention programmes, such as conversion ceremonies where previous converts are invited to witness new converts pronounce the *Shahadah* (declaration of faith), converts gatherings, and picnics. Converting to Islam requires one to exhibit certain expected public and private behaviour and the women face resistance from their employers, friends and family in the course of performing their new religious obligations.

Commitment and consequences

The first recognition of a convert as a Muslim comes from the conversion ceremony, a symbolic ritual that marks the first day of her transformed religious life. The basic obligations of Islam, including the wearing of *hijab*, consumption of *halal* food, and the performing of the five daily prayers exert enormous pressure on the converts. Some balance the religious obligations and situational context of Hong Kong by abstaining from pork, but not from other non-*halal*

foods, such as beef or chicken. Some wear loose clothes, instead of the *hijab*, and may pray during the absence of their employers or during their leisure time instead of praying at the times designated by Islamic laws.

Though the women are primarily brought to Islam through their boyfriends, one cannot discount their genuine strength of belief. If their relationship with the man is stronger during their transition period (from Christianity to Islam), most turn into committed converts. Many women face physical, psychological, financial and marital problems and are conflicted over many issues, such as the position of a converted woman whose Christian husband refuses to convert along with her, how to avoid staying alone with a male employer, how to handle pork when cooking for employers, how to justify wearing the *hijab* to the employers, how to avoid confrontations over religion with their family and friends and how to convince the family to carry out Islamic burial arrangements.

Gender and conversion

Though there is little evidence from previous studies as to whether women or men most often convert to Islam elsewhere, the overwhelming majority of the converts among Filipinos in Hong Kong are women. The main reason is that there is an imbalance in the population distribution of Filipinos in Hong Kong based on gender. The intensity of religious faith of Filipino women and their prior tendency to shift among different denominations within Christianity are also instrumental in facilitating conversion.

The general slow down of the economy in Hong Kong, particularly the inability of the Mosque to fund sisters in terms of financial crises, the absence of a physical space for converts with terminated contracts, and the unwillingness of fellow Muslims to employ the converts, leave them vulnerable to reversion to their former religion. In some cases Muslim men behave in ways that dissatisfy many of the women, whose lack of knowledge of Islam allows them to make gross generalizations about the teachings of Islam and cultivate negative images of Islam and Muslims, thus sometimes contributing to reversion. ♦

Note

* See also Louis R. Rambo (1993) *Understanding Religious Conversion*. Yale University Press.

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