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Praying for Peace: Family Experiences of Christian Conversion in Bhaktapur

Ian Gibson

In Nepal's public discourse, Christianity is often described as a divisive force, perhaps a plot by foreign powers to undermine the cohesion of Nepali society. In this article, I present ethnographic material from Bhaktapur suggesting that, at least with respect to family life, the social effects of conversion may often differ from this stereotypical picture. In Bhaktapur, I argue, conversion is more frequently a consequence of pre-existing conflicts within families than a source of new ones. Furthermore, in some contexts, the social, ethical, and ritual practices of Bhaktapurian churches can bring reconciliation to troubled families. In other contexts, conversion can heighten intrafamilial tensions, in particular through the commitment it brings to exclusivist theology. I explore how converts negotiate the conversion process and the tensions that precipitate and result from it, describing how familial power dynamics influence such

negotiations. To give the reader a fleshed-out sense of the lived experience of Christian and part-Christian families in Bhaktapur, I give thick descriptions of the conversions of one church minister and his family, and of a church house fellowship in which post-conversion family tensions are discussed. Connecting this ethnography with wider research on Bhaktapurian Christianity, I delineate the competing forces at work in converts' family lives. In light of the rapid growth of Christianity in Nepal, and the heated and sometimes violent nature of political responses to this, ethnographic research is urgently needed to examine not just the causes but also the long-term effects of Christian conversion; this will help to clarify whether patterns found in Bhaktapur are replicated elsewhere in the country.

Keywords: Christianity, conversion, conflict, Nepal, Bhaktapur.

The Controversial Growth of Nepali Christianity

It was a hot August evening in 2012, and I was packed into a crowded residential square in Bhaktapur. It was Gai Jatra—the Newar festival for the dead—a time of subversions and inversions for Bhaktapurians, during which it is licensed for men to shout obscenities at women in the street, and for dramatic groups to satirize their neighbours or mock the powerful (Widdess 2006). This year, a competition had been organized for the dramatic, dancing, and singing groups that made their way around the city each evening. A panel of judges and a crowd of several hundred people were assembled around a cordoned area in a large square. The judges were all prominent figures associated with the Nepal Workers' and Peasants' Party, the locally dominant communist party known for its emphasis on preserving Newar tradition against corrupting outside influences (Gellner 2001: 276–291; Gibson 2017a: 72–86). The most popular performance that evening, and the one eventually announced as competition's winner, was a harsh satire on Christian conversion.¹

The performance was a *gaicha pyākhang* (literally, 'small cow dance'),² involving a group of masked men dancing in a circle, banging large sticks on the ground, and singing self-composed songs. The songs presented the growth of Christianity as a plot by foreign powers to divide and dominate Nepal, with conversion explained in terms of bribes offered to greedy Nepalis by missionaries. One song included the following lines:

There are many religions here, foreigners are coming to stay here;

They cheat us [*jhānga lāipung*] by changing our religion [*dharma heeka*] and breaking our minds;

They say “religion, religion”, hammering [*chhyāchhyā yāigu*] against our religion;

They entice us, showing us our greed [*lobha*];

[...] After they have broken up our society and our minds, they will eat up the whole country [*desh he naigu*].

The song demanded that missionaries and their enablers be expelled from Nepal, and hinted that violence might be necessary:

Those who eat our country in the name of religion should not be allowed to stay here;

[...] We have to fight [*lwāy ma*] in order to keep our religion alive.

As I observed the crowd's enthusiastic reaction to the song, I reflected on the ever-more hostile atmosphere surrounding Christianity in Nepal. According to one study, Nepal's is the fastest-growing church in the world, with an annual growth rate of 10.9% since 1970 (Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary 2013: 38). In 1966, there were perhaps one hundred baptized Nepali Christians (Kehrberg 2000: 124); today there are probably more than one million.³ It is not surprising that an expansion of this kind should provoke social and political hostility, particularly considering that the last thirty years have seen a range of destabilizing upheavals in Nepal, from the sociocultural disruptions associated with urbanization and globalization, to the decade-long civil war and subsequent transformation of the constitutional order. It is this latter development, in particular, with the institution of secularism and freedom of religion in 2007, that has proved to be the flash-point around which political campaigns against Christian conversion have rallied in recent years.⁴ These campaigns are the outgrowth of a broader climate of anti-Christian antagonism, manifested in widespread social exclusion,⁵ sporadic violence,⁶ and increasingly frequent arrests of church leaders.⁷

As I observed the Bhaktapurian manifestation of this generalized antagonism, I considered the assumptions of fact on which it rests. Nepali discourse about Christianity, both popular and political, tends to assume as self-evident two basic propositions. First: that the primary explanation for Christian growth is found in the activity of foreign missionary groups, which are said to offer financial and material incentives to the poor to convert.⁸ Second: that large-scale Christian conversion has been a divisive and destabilizing force, both at a community and socio-political level.⁹ My own experience among Nepali Christians (eventually more than two years of ethnographic research), suggests that both of these assumptions are flawed.

The idea that conversions are primarily a consequence of missionary money is the easiest to dismiss. Virtually every piece of academic research that has appeared on Nepali Christianity has noted that the primary presenting motive for most conversions is not material inducements but a desire for prayer-based healing.¹⁰ It is certainly true that a complex set of social, cultural, and economic concerns is always interwoven with the desire for healing—I explore some such concerns below—but direct financial gain is rarely expected by converts and almost never, to my knowledge at least, provided.¹¹ Instead, conversion frequently results in financial loss, whether from disinheritance or the closing of economic opportunities by social

opprobrium.¹² Most of the churches I researched in—often ramshackle buildings or fellowships held in a rented room—had never been visited by a missionary, and nor had most of their congregants ever met one. The Nepali church is simply too large and organizationally diffuse to be susceptible to systematic missionary control or influence.¹³

I have written elsewhere (Gibson 2017a, 2017b) on the varied factors which, more than foreign money, help to explain the upsurge in conversions. To summarize very crudely: the relaxation of legal restrictions on conversion after 1990 (Gaborieau 2002: 95-6); a widespread situation of sociocultural, medical, and economic insecurity associated with capitalist globalization and civil war;¹⁴ the erosion of traditional norms of caste, age, gender, and religious authority;¹⁵ and the attractions of a Pentecostal theology offering security from witchcraft and illness¹⁶ are the most important general contexts for Christian growth.

In this article, however, I will only indirectly be concerned with the causes of conversion. Instead, I wish to focus on conversion's consequences, and thus to examine the other general assumption about Christianity I have identified: that it is socially divisive. This assumption arises from genuine social realities, ones that have been experienced directly by the numerous Nepalis whose relatives or friends have converted. Rather than rejecting this assumption wholesale, I wish to nuance it—to suggest, using ethnography on the family lives of Bhaktapurian Christians, that the effects of conversion are more complex and variable, and frequently more conducive to social harmony, than is generally understood.

Regrettably, there is lack of detailed, long-term ethnographies of Nepali Christian communities, and it is precisely such research that is necessary to study conversion's long-term effects. Most anthropological work published on Nepali Christianity consists of articles or chapters by anthropologists who encountered churches incidentally while researching other topics.¹⁷ Other research tends to have been conducted by missionaries or Christian missiologists, whose methods and theoretical orientations generally differ from those of anthropologists.¹⁸ To my knowledge, my own doctoral thesis and subsequent monograph on Bhaktapurian Christianity are the only book-length ethnography of a particular Nepali Christian community to date. I know of other anthropological research currently being undertaken, but none of this has yet been published.¹⁹ Therefore, it will be impossible, in this article, to reach any confident, general conclusions about conversion's consequences in Nepal as a whole, as I have few long-term data from elsewhere with which to

compare my Bhaktapurian findings. I hope rather simply to raise doubts about the soundness of prevailing assumptions regarding Nepali conversion, and to suggest fruitful directions for future research.

Christianity in Bhaktapur

Bhatkapur is often seen as the most 'traditional' of the three Newar cities of the Kathmandu Valley.²⁰ Unlike in Kathmandu and Patan, in Bhaktapur Newars still make up a large majority of the population, and Newari is still the most commonly spoken language. Newar caste relations and religious ritual remain central to the social life of the city as a whole. Nonetheless, like the rest of Nepal, Bhaktapur has seen disruptive social changes over the last fifty years. Since the 1960s, education has brought literacy to the majority of the population for the first time, and land reforms have significantly altered wealth distributions and power relations between landlords and tenants (Gellner and Pradhan 1999). The Nepal Workers' and Peasants' Party, which has controlled the municipal government from the late 1970s, has challenged norms of caste deference and implemented public works and health projects that have radically improved living conditions (Hachhethu 2007; Gibson 2017a: chap. 4). In recent years, Bhaktapur's younger generation has been influenced significantly by global media, consumerism, higher education, and norms of 'expressive individualism' (Gibson 2017a: chap. 10).

When Christians first arrived in Bhaktapur in the mid-1950s, they discovered a community that seemed singularly unreceptive to the Gospel.²¹ A group of church-planters from India settled in the city in 1956, but soon relocated after meeting with severe hostility (Rongong 2012: 68); another fellowship was founded and quickly disbanded in the wake of a dispute about caste (Perry 2000: 67). In the late 1980s, the first sustainable church was formed in Bhaktapur, but even then, in a period when conversions were multiplying elsewhere in the Kathmandu Valley, growth was very slow. It was not until the late 1990s that Bhaktapurian church expansion began to keep pace with that in surrounding areas. When I conducted a survey in 2013, there were twenty-two churches in Bhaktapur with a total of around 2,725 baptized believers, representing approximately 3.3% of the city's population. Thirteen of the twenty-two churches I surveyed had been founded since 2005.²²

As in the rest of Nepal (Tamang 2012: 136), the majority of Bhaktapur's churches are Pentecostal or charismatic in orientation, in that they practice healing and exorcism

and have emotive styles of worship. As also in the rest of Nepal, the majority of Bhaktapurian conversions, some 70% according to my research (Gibson 2017a: Appendices 2 and 7), are ascribed by converts to prayer-based healing of their own or a family member's illness. In this context, illness is defined broadly to include issues such as alcoholism and mental disturbance, which are often attributed to demonic possession. I have written elsewhere on the interconnections between sociocultural changes and Christian growth in Bhatkapur, highlighting particularly conflicts associated with shifting norms of familial caregiving and hierarchical deference (Gibson 2017a: chap. 2-3). Pentecostal theology and practice, as I show in what follows, can meet the needs of a subset of Bhaktapurians desiring security from such conflicts, and the fears of witchcraft with which they are often associated (see also Gibson 2017b).

The main period of my fieldwork in Bhaktapur was from February 2012 to July 2013, and I made shorter fieldwork trips in 2010, 2011, 2014, and 2016. Researching among both Hindus and Christians, my methods included life-history interviews, participant observation, and qualitative and quantitative surveys. Here, I want to highlight two aspects of my methodology: the collection of intimate, long-term, and multi-perspectival data about particular Christian and part-Christian families, and participant observation in church house fellowships. I found that knowledge of intimate family dynamics was indispensable for understanding both the causes and consequences of conversion, and that prayer and teaching taking place in house fellowships often played a key role in shaping these dynamics. The ethnographic material presented in what follows emerges directly from these aspects of my research.²³ Before proceeding to this material, I will lay out in general terms my findings concerning family relationships.

Countervailing Forces

Countervailing forces are at work in the lives of Bhaktapurian Christians, some of which tend towards family division and others of which, given the right circumstances, tend to promote familial reconciliation. The most divisive force in the lives of Bhaktapurian Christians is undoubtedly the exclusivism taught in their churches: the teaching, common to the majority of Nepali Protestants, that a necessary part of conversion is giving up all non-Christian forms of worship, with worship often defined broadly to include, for instance, the giving and receiving of *tikka*, participation in feasts associated with Hindu festivals, and the performance of death rites for

parents.²⁴ Anyone familiar with Bhaktapurian society will know how vital such actions are to the maintenance of family relationships;²⁵ rejecting them invariably wounds relationships deeply, sometimes in ways that are irreparable.

Nonetheless, it is essential to note that most Bhaktapurian converts, at the time they encounter Christianity, *already* have seriously wounded familial relationships, often due in part to conflicts surrounding long-term illness or psychological disturbance (Gibson 2017a: chap. 7, 2017b).²⁶ This predisposes openness to the radical life changes conversion entails. For a person in an oppressive family situation, the very separatism and ethical strictness manifested in churches' exclusivism may be necessary to change their family dynamics, or at least to provide some refuge from them. For instance, many whole-family conversions are driven by a wife or teenage child from a home marked by domestic violence and alcoholism.²⁷ In such a situation, a densely socialized community with inflexible teachings on alcohol and violence may be precisely what is needed to reform the behaviour of an errant husband or father, or at least to provide some protection from him.²⁸ The conversion of a whole household may heal immediate family relationships while damaging more distant ones. Another common scenario, which more frequently leads to individual than to whole-family conversion, is when a person who is suffering from a long-term illness, which they may ascribe to witchcraft, is dissatisfied with the care provided for them by their family and religious healers, and thus finds themselves in a situation of social conflict.²⁹ In such situations, the conversion of an individual alone is unlikely to heal broken family relationships, but may at least provide the convert with an experience of prayer-based healing and access to more harmonious relationships within the church community.

A general factor counteracting the divisiveness of exclusivist teaching can be found in Bhaktapurian Christians' theological ethics, which generally align with a tradition I have labelled 'Pentecostal eschatological peacefulness' (Gibson 2017b). This tradition holds that Christ's sacrifice on the cross has decisively defeated all evil and instituted the Kingdom of God in the here-and-now, meaning both that Christians are invulnerable to witchcraft and that they are called to live out the values of the Kingdom, such as gentleness and social reconciliation, in the present. This often enables Bhaktapurian Christians to disengage themselves from cycles of conflict associated with witchcraft accusations, and frequently prompts them to prioritize family comity over other considerations, implementing exclusivism with a significant degree of pragmatism. This

pragmatism is also influenced by the straightforward need to coexist, as a member of a religious minority, with families and communities who are often hostile.

The ways that these countervailing forces play out in individual cases depend on a multitude of circumstances, including the age, gender, and social location of a family's initial convert. The degree of authority a convert has within their family often influences the degree of pragmatism with which they approach the conversion process: those with less power tend to be more pragmatic, taking more gradual and flexible approaches to implementing exclusivism. The circumstance that determines conversion's impact on a family most is simply whether an individual's conversion eventually catalyzes conversions of other family members, or whether it does not. In what follows, I examine a case of the former and then of the latter kind, providing thick descriptions to give a sense of the intricacy and ambiguity of the interplay of competing forces.³⁰

Praying for Peace

Bimal³¹ was born in Bhaktapur in the mid-1980s, into a caste associated with the Newar Hindu Tantric priesthood.³² As a teenager, he was troubled by insecurity in his home life, with his father drinking excessively and arguing violently with his mother and other relatives. Bimal sought refuge with a group of 'rough' friends outside the house, experimenting with drugs and alcohol, but this way of life left him unsatisfied. He was interested in ideas, and had many questions about the religion he had been taught as a child, leading him to investigate new movements within Hinduism such as Osho and Om Shanti.³³ Disgusted by the dissolute behaviour of his father, and wishing to change his own life, Bimal was attracted to these groups' strictures against alcohol and violence. "I was desperately looking for peace [*shanti*] and joy [*ānanda*]," he recalled, "but I didn't know where to find them."³⁴

When he was sixteen, Bimal's curiosity about new religions, as well as his interest in a girl who was Christian, led him to visit a church. He was immediately struck by the intensity of feeling manifested in Christian worship, and the sense of peace and fellowship evident in the worshippers. He recalled:

When I entered [the church] it was the time of 'praise and worship' [*stuti prasamsa*]. [...] I saw that all the people were singing with an open heart. They were singing "Hallelujah Hosanna". I saw joy and peace on their faces. That was what attracted me. I got a feeling of a different kind of love [*chhutai*

prakār yāgu patti prem] emerging in my heart; it may have happened because of a supernatural power. I received a feeling in my heart that someone was taking care of me. [...] Because of that happiness and joy, I did not feel lonely.

Bimal made a verbal commitment to Christ (*grahan*) that very day, and soon became deeply involved in the church community, in particular the youth fellowship. He initially found it hard to separate himself from his 'rough' friends and their habits, but after a period of two years he was judged ready to take baptism; this meant adopting a 'fully Christian' lifestyle of abstinence from intoxicants, smoking, and all Hindu worship.³⁵

In his first flush of enthusiasm for Christianity, Bimal had imagined that that he would bring peace to his family by bringing them to Christ. The initial reality, however, was precisely the opposite. Bimal's parents were enraged that he had given up Hindu worship and joined a 'foreign religion' (*videshi dharma*), and were terrified that the goddess Barahi, to whom their family had special ritual duties, would visit ill fortune on them as a result of their son's betrayal. In a phrase that Bimal has never forgotten, his father disowned him, saying with reference to the church: "Go there, eat there, and die there" (Nep.: *tyahī jā tyahī ghich tyahī mar*). For a time, Bimal's mother refused to cook for him, and he was forced to eat his meals at a restaurant or the house of a friend.

During this period, Shyam, Bimal's father, began drinking yet more heavily, and became involved in a bitter property dispute with his brothers. Shyam took out his frustrations on his wife and children, subjecting them to his violent anger with increasing frequency. Matters reached a point, Bimal recalled, where there was "never any peace at home"; almost every evening there was an eruption either in the house or in the alleyway outside it, with plates and bottles often being thrown. Bimal had joined a church house fellowship in his local area, and they prayed often for peace in his family. Bimal would sometimes try to pray with his parents, but, as Shyam later recalled, "We ignored our son; we tore our eyes out whenever he was praying."

It was in this fraught context, roughly a year after Bimal had been baptized, that a transformative event occurred. I reproduce Bimal's recollection of this event in full:

My family was cooking dinner at home and it was 'load shedding' time [one of the Kathmandu Valley's recurrent power cuts]. I returned home from a house fellowship, and as I entered the house, I heard the sound of my father calling "Bimaaaaaall!". Hearing my father address me by name, I felt great-

er joy [*ānanda*] than I had ever felt in my whole life—it had been years since my father had called me by name.

I went straight up to the kitchen. When I arrived, my mother was lying on the floor, unable to speak, but making a fearful sound. My little sister was hiding in the folds of mother's sari. I asked my father, who had been drinking, what had happened. He said an evil spirit was troubling them [Nep.: *yahān dushta ātmāle satāyo*]. They had seen the shadow of a person against the wall. [...] Father had felt a big puff of air against his face as though a person was moving very fast. And the curtains were moving too, even though all the windows were closed. [...]

Mother was in a terrible condition. She was shouting “*Jay Barāhi! Jay Barāhi! Jay Barāhi!*” [long live Barahai!]. [...] My father said to me that his head felt like it was made of stone, and he lay down on the floor too. [...]

I was much calmer than the others. [...] I asked if I could say a [Christian] prayer. Father said that if the situation could be resolved then I should pray straight away. So, I scolded the spirit in the name of Jesus Christ, saying, “You go out from here and leave this place”. [...] I asked Jesus to put joy and peace in the hearts of my parents, and prayed in the name of Jesus' blood. Then I said “Amen” and opened my eyes.

My mother had fallen into a deep sleep and was snoring, and there was a feeling of peace in the house. My family no longer felt any fear. I was extremely surprised by this. I said to my mother and father, “How do you feel now about the God I believe in?” I asked them if the Lord [*prabhu*] was listening to our prayer or not. Then, I asked if we should give thanks to the Lord or not, and they said we should.

So, we sat with our heads bowed to the floor and prayed. When we prayed, we all started to weep and no one could stop weeping; everyone cried until they could not cry any more.

Shyam, who was sitting in the room as his son described these events to me, added the following:

In fact, I believed in Jesus Christ at that very moment. After that prayer I felt such a sense of joy and coolness [Nep.: *ānanda sital anubhav*]. I realized, “Oh! Jesus Christ, you are the living, unseen God.

Thanks to you wherever you are. I will believe in you from now onwards, and give up worshipping other gods.”

The very evening of the exorcism, Shyam, impulsive as always, took all the Hindu ‘idols’ (*murti*) in the house and threw them into the water channel the family used as a toilet, saying, “Now this is their throne.”³⁶ The next day, the whole family went to the church and asked to become members.

A vital consequence of the exorcism was that the family, feeling themselves suddenly under the protection of Christ, were freed from their fear of witchcraft. This had been fuelled by and in turn fuelled the multiple social conflicts in which they were engaged.³⁷ Shyam thought that the evil spirit in the house had been sent by one of his brothers; Bimal's mother thought the spirit could be punishing them for Bimal's conversion. The family's sudden sense of spiritual, and consequently social, security provided the psychological context necessary for the cathartic family reconciliation that has been described.

A more than year-long process of behavioural change and integration into the church community was necessary before Bimal's parents were judged ready for baptism. Key to this process was the establishment of a house fellowship (*gharelu sangathi*) in their home, which provided a context in which Shyam could be supported in overcoming his drinking habit, and in which family tensions could be mediated and resolved.³⁸ Each week, several local Christians, including the pastor of the church, came to their home to sing hymns, study the Bible, and pray.

Group prayer within house fellowships is an emotionally intense process that seems to hold a significant psychological or spiritual power. Bimal's family, like many other Christians, point to it when describing their experience of healing (in this case, relational and craving-related). A significant proportion of each fellowship is devoted to prayer requests, during which each person speaks at length about their problems and experiences, while others listen and offer supportive remarks. After the requests, all present will stand and pray out loud for each other's needs for a period of ten or fifteen minutes, sometimes longer. During this time, the room fills with a cacophony of voices, some muttering, some shouting supplications, some begging, some vigorously repeating a single phrase, some explaining in depth to God what is on their minds. Often, people will embrace or place a Bible on the head of an afflicted person. This process binds participants together and gives them a sense of supernatural aid in overcoming their fears and compulsions.

Both Bimal and Shyam described the process of listening and supplication that house fellowships demanded as key to the achievement of peace within their family.

Bimal remarked:

[When we pray together] the family develops love and care for each other. In house fellowships, we have to tell each other our requests for prayer, which allows us to know and understand what the needs and problems of the other people are. [...] When we ask God for help, he makes us nearer to each other and gives us peace [*shanti*].

Shyam described to me how he was deeply affected when confronted in a fellowship with the suffering he had caused his family. “During the time of prayer,” he said, “God showed me how much I had hurt [them].”

It is now some fourteen years since the baptism of Bimal’s parents, and relationships within the family have altered dramatically. Most significantly, Shyam no longer drinks, and behaves with far more gentleness towards his wife and children than he did previously, never employing violence. He both appears and is described by his family to be a kind and helpful husband, if somewhat withdrawn. After converting, Shyam found work as a church minister, which provided an additional incentive for sobriety. Bimal’s younger brother and sister have now been baptized, and his sister in particular has become an active and passionately-believing Christian. In general, the household—now consisting of Bimal, his wife and daughter, his parents, and his siblings—is a notably harmonious one.

Relations between the household and their extended family, however, have generally deteriorated. Shyam is now alienated not only from his brothers, but also from his father and other relatives, who have been particularly appalled by the Christian practice of refusing to perform death rituals for parents. Somewhat mitigating this is Shyam’s improved ability to manage conflict when it arises. No longer fearing witchcraft from his brothers, he can now generally meet their harsh words with emollience or silence, rather than engaging in drunken shouting matches with them in the street, as he did previously. Shyam has made patient attempts at reconciliation with his father in recent years, with some success.

This family conversion story illustrates, in ways that are often self-evident, some potentialities for the interplay of the countervailing forces I identified above. Bimal’s family was, and in some respects still is, divided by exclusivism, but they also achieved reconciliation through the social, ethical, and ritual practices of Bhaktapurian Christianity,

in particular Pentecostal modes of prayer and the forms of association connected with them. The family’s story also illustrates the fundamental distinction between whole-family and individual conversion. When a whole family converts, as it did in this case, the process can be akin to a major operation on the dysfunctions of that family: a painful event causing permanent scars, but leaving the patient more functional than before. On the other hand, when a Christian finds themselves alone in a household, as was the case for a time with Bimal, severe and intractable tensions are likely to exist. If such a situation continues over the long-term, as happens quite frequently,³⁹ a convert will have to find methods for managing tensions that make coexistence tolerable. It is to such methods, described and discussed in the context of a house fellowship, that I turn in the next section.

Managing Tensions

It was February 2013, and I was sitting in a house fellowship in a crowded room in the center of Bhaktapur, listening to a somewhat heated discussion. Bimal, who was by this time working as a junior minister at his church, had just given a sermon, which prompted a woman in the audience to raise some objections. Bimal had compared God’s love to that of a jealous father, who would be wounded if he heard his children calling another person ‘daddy.’ This analogy was used to explain the Christian prohibition on Hindu ‘idol worship’ (*murti puja*). The woman—a Newar lady in her fifties, of the farmer caste, whom I shall call Parbati—then spoke up. She explained that she was not “fully Christian” but was “heading towards becoming a believer,” and complained that Christians had told her (though Bimal had not said this directly), that she would go to hell unless she gave up all Hindu worship and was baptized.⁴⁰ “There is no one here,” she said, “who has been to either heaven or hell.”

Bimal agreed with Parbati that threats of damnation were not an appropriate tool of persuasion, but maintained his criticism of Hindu worship. He said that, whereas Hindu deities required people to perform sacrifices for them, the Christian God sacrifices himself for others.⁴¹ This prompted Parbati to tell the group something of her recent life story, in which Christian exclusivism as it relates to sacrifice had played a significant role. She said:

Five years ago, I made a commitment [*grahan*] that I would recognise God [*parameshwor*]. I had a great desire to do that, and I used to come to church often, but I was not able to go ahead because of my family’s disagreements. My husband’s brothers and

their wives said that I wanted to go to church to escape my religious duties after the marriage of my daughter was completed.⁴² This made me uncomfortable going to church. [...] Although I cannot come at the moment, I have belief [*biswas*] in my heart. Whenever I go out of the house, I always pray and give thanks to [the Christian] God. [...] I hope that God will convince [my family] to agree for me to come [to church].

Parbati described how she had been attempting gradually to accustom her family to Christian practices. Rather than giving up Hindu worship entirely, which would have caused a dramatic rupture with her family, she had asked them to excuse her from participating in worship involving sacrifice. She had also managed to convince her family's *guthi*⁴³ to give up performing sacrifice themselves. She recalled:

It was my family's turn to give the *guthi* feast, so I made a request to the members of the *guthi* to stop the goat sacrifice. I said to them that, if they sacrificed the goat, I was not going to prepare the worship plate [for offerings to the *guthi* god]. I am the one who is obligated to prepare the plate. After my decision, the members of the *guthi* organised three or four meetings. That problem is now resolved. From my turn onwards, the members of the *guthi* stopped sacrificing goats. They are now using an egg instead.

Parbati saw her family's shift on this issue a sign that they were "gradually coming to know God in their minds and hearts."⁴⁴ She expressed hope that they might visit the church with her soon.

The ways that members of the house fellowship responded to Parbati's story illustrate the flexibility with which, in practice, Bhaktapurian Christians often approach their theological exclusivism. Rather than urging Parbati to be baptized and give up all Hindu worship immediately, various fellowship members sympathized with her predicament and commended her gradualist approach. A few women shared their own conversion stories, involving similarly long periods between making a verbal commitment to Christ (*grahan*) and baptism. One described how she was baptized along with her husband and children twelve years after she first committed to Christ, after a long struggle of persuasion. She mentioned a bargain she had made with God, saying to him: "I will give up worshipping idols if you make my husband Christian."

After several women had shared their stories, Bimal interjected, reflecting theologically on what had been said. He noted the high valuation of family relationships within Nepali culture, and said that Christianity valued such relationships equally highly. Returning to his favoured theme of the self-giving love of Jesus, as embodied in his sacrifice on the cross, he said that love was more important than every other Christian virtue, and that although God did not want people to worship idols, neither did he want them to quarrel with their relatives. "Bringing people to Christianity takes time," he said, and "people will come to church if you are loving and gentle to them."⁴⁵ All this was by way of commending Parbati's pragmatic approach to conversion.

This fairly routine pastoral exchange illustrates at least two important things about how conversion tends to play out within Bhaktapurian families. First, the contrast between Parbati's approach to conversion and Bimal's in his own life (though not in his pastoral advice), illustrates a general contrast between how women and men in Bhaktapur often approach conversion. I found that when a man was the first in his family to become Christian, he would frequently—like Bimal—be baptized and abandon Hindu worship fairly quickly, precipitating a dramatic break with his family. This was particularly likely to be the case if the man was older or senior within his household (see Gibson 2017a: chap. 7 and 9). When a woman was the first in her family to become interested in Christianity, on the other hand, she would often delay baptism for many years, patiently attempting persuasion and avoiding a dramatic family rupture (see Gibson 2017a: chap. 8). This contrast is likely related in part to the fact that, being generally less powerful within families, the negative consequences of familial rupture would tend to be greater for women.⁴⁶

The exchange also illustrates the role that pastoral judgement plays in the management of post-conversion intrafamilial tensions relating to exclusivism. Bimal's advice in this instance was fairly permissive, but, as Parbati's comments about threats of hell make clear, his permissiveness on such issues is not universally shared. In general, it can be said that older Bhaktapurian pastors tend to be more rigid in their exclusivism, whereas younger pastors tend to be more flexible. For instance, it is becoming increasingly accepted by younger Bhaktapurian pastors that Christians may attend family feasts at Dashain, despite the fact that food served at these feasts has frequently been offered to Hindu deities.⁴⁷ Explanations for this shift in teaching include the greater educational attainments and therefore theological sophistication

of younger pastors as compared to their older counterparts,⁴⁸ and pressures exerted on church leadership by ordinary congregants wanting to maintain tolerable relationships with their families. The general emphasis on gentleness and love within Bhaktapurian Pentecostal ethics, as reflected in Bimal's comments, is important in providing theological justification for pastors taking a more flexible approach.

Suggestions for Research

As I noted at the outset, the current state of research is such that I cannot satisfactorily confirm whether my findings about Christian conversion's consequences in Bhaktapur reflect patterns present in Nepal as a whole. Nonetheless, what I hope to have done is to alert the reader to the possibility that assumptions prevalent in Nepal about the divisive effects of conversion are profoundly distortive, as they are at least with respect to Bhaktapur, where conversion both heals and ruptures families in complex ways, as I have shown. More ethnographic research on Nepali Christianity is urgently needed, and I would make several suggestions for such future research. First, I would stress the importance of close attention to long-term dynamics within converts' families, and to prayer and teaching practices within house fellowships, both of which I found vital to understanding conversion's causes and consequences. Second, I would suggest attention to divergent patterns within the conversion process shaped by the gender and age of converts. Third, I would simply suggest open-mindedness on the part of the researcher. Some aspects of Nepali Christianity, in particular its exclusivism, will likely be unattractive to many scholars.⁴⁹ It should be remembered that this exclusivism can be a necessary part of processes of conversion that restore some security and satisfaction to the lives of highly vulnerable people, such as abused women and children, and the chronically ill. It is such people who are most harmed by the problematic assumptions shaping popular and political discourse about Christianity in Nepal.

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Endnotes

1. For a fuller discussion of the context of the performance described here and its political significance, see Gibson (2017a: 72-86). All of the material in my 2017 book, which was published in Nepal, can be found more conveniently in my doctoral thesis (Gibson 2015), the full text of which is available online.
2. All italicized transliterations are in the Bhaktapur dialect of Newari, unless otherwise indicated. I preface transliterations in Nepali with 'Nep.:'. It should be noted that contemporary Newari-speakers, particularly when discussing subjects involving abstract concepts, use numerous Nepali (as well as Hindi and English) loan words. I preface such words with 'Nep.: ' only where they are uttered as part of a sentence that itself is in Nepali. When such a word is not so prefaced it indicates that although it derives from Nepali it is also commonly used in Newari, and that, if the word appears in a record of a particular utterance, this utterance was in Newari. For a glossary of Nepali and Newari Christian terminology, see Gibson (2017a: 276-8).
3. Nepal's 2011 census found 375,699 Christians in Nepal, or 1.4% of the population, but most informed observers agree that this is a considerable underestimate; figures of between 700,000 and 2.5 million have been proposed by research groups and national church organizations (see Mandryk 2010: 619; Gibson 2017a: 95; Shrestha 2012: 21-26). Various scholars have noted that religious minorities are systematically undercounted in Nepal's censuses (Hangen and Lawoti 2013: 15; Gellner 2005: 10).
4. This is reflected, for instance, in the passage of a 2017 law placing significant restrictions on religious expression, widely viewed as a move against Christian evangelism (Shellnut 2017). On debates surrounding secularism in Nepal, see Letizia (2012).

5. See, for instance, Gibson (2017a: chap. 7-10); U.S. Department of State (2016); Rai (2013).
6. See, for instance, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (2017); Parajuli (2012); Australian Government Refugee Review Tribunal (2010); Coday (2003).
7. See, for instance, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (2017: 2); Carvalho (2018); Christian Solidarity Worldwide (2017); Arora (2016); Barnabus Fund (2014).
8. See, for instance, U.S. Department of State (2016: 2); Shah (1993); Dhungel (2015); Baral (2017); Pattison (2017); Coburn (2017).
9. See, for instance, Prasai (2014); Coburn (2017); Various (2017); Mishra (2017); Gibson et al. (n.d.).
10. For instance, Fricke (2008); Ripert (2014: 54); Zharkevich (2016: 106); Kirchheiner (2016: 123-163); Leve (2014); Kehrberg (2000: 149); Rai (2013: chap. 5); Shrestha (2012: 60-61); Dalzell (2015: 325, 350); Gibson (2017a: chap. 7, 2017b); Hurley (2018).
11. See Gibson (2017a: chap. 5) and Barclay (2009) for detailed discussions of the history and significance of missionary activity in Nepal. I note there that most missionaries are extremely wary of even the appearance of bribery, both because of the strict terms on which they are permitted to stay in the country, and because their theologies preclude them from considering conversion undertaken in the hope of material gain to be authentic. Hale (1986, 1989, 1993) provides an evocative window onto the approaches and attitudes of missionaries in Panchayat-era Nepal. During this period, the number of missionary organizations in the country was limited, and strict lines of separation existed between them and indigenous churches (see Perry 1990; Khatri 1997; Kehrberg 2000: 98-103; Barclay 2009: 191; Kirchheiner 2016: 96-99). Since 1990, a significant number of denominational missionary groups have entered Nepal, and some of these have provided forms of funding, mainly for church buildings and the education of church leaders, but also more recently for disaster relief, that have aroused significant concern both within and outside the Nepali church (for instance, Johnson 2006; Bhatta 2010; Tamang 2012; Preiss 2016; Coburn 2017). Nonetheless, these funding activities never, to my knowledge or that of other informed observers with whom I have spoken, extend to the direct bribery of potential converts. Such activities, in any case, are not widespread enough to have a significant effect on the majority of Nepali Christians, particularly those outside major population centers.
12. See Gibson (2017a: chap. 5-10); Rai (2013: 51-5); Kirchheiner (2016, 2017); Hale (1989: 8); U.S. Department of State (2010); Hagen (1998: 396-402).
13. On the organizational and denominational diversity of Nepali Christianity, see DAWN Nepal (2007: 11-12); Mandryk (2010: 619); Shrestha (2012: 45-6).
14. See Gibson (2017a: chap. 3, 7 and 10); Ripert (2014); Leve (2014); Zharkevich (2016).
15. See Gibson (2017a: chap. 4 and 8); Kehrberg (2000: chap. 4); Fricke (2008); Rai (2013); Dalzell (2015); Campbell (2016).
16. See Gibson (2017b); Bhandari (1999); Sharma (2001); Fricke (2008).
17. Fricke (2008); Ripert (2014); Dalzell (2015); Zharkevich (2016); Campbell (2016).
18. Perry (1997, 2000); Bhandari (1999); Hagen (1998); Kehrberg (2000); Barclay (2009); Shrestha (2012); Rongong (2012); Sharma (2001, 2013); Kirchheiner (2016, 2017); Hurley (2018).
19. I am thinking of the work of Lauren Leve (see Leve 2014) and that of the doctoral student Guillaume Boucher.
20. Levy (1990), and to varying extents Parish (1994, 1996), Gutschow and Michaels (2005, 2008, 2012), and Widdess (2013), have emphasized Bhaktapur's traditionalism, while other scholars (Grieve 2006; Hachethu 2007; Gibson 2017a), have stressed the extent of social change in the city in recent decades.
21. A small group of Catholic Capuchin friars worked in Bhaktapur over several decades in the mid-eighteenth century, but were expelled after Nepal's unification in 1769 (Alsop 1996). Christian groups were subsequently prohibited from entering Nepal until the overthrow of the Rana regime in 1951 (Barclay 2009).
22. On the recent history of Christianity in Bhaktapur, see Gibson (2017a: chap. 6). For the full results of my church survey, see Gibson (2017a: Appendix 2).
23. For a fuller description of my methods, see Gibson (2017a: ix-xv).
24. Kirchheiner (2016, 2017) and Sharma (2013) have written on these issues at length from missiological perspectives. Later in the article, and in note forty-seven, I outline some debates and shifts that are currently taking place in teaching on exclusivism. On analogous debates in India, see Mosse (2012).
25. Levy (1990), Parish (1994, 1996), and Gutschow and Michaels (2005, 2008, 2012) describe the social significance of Hindu ritual in Bhaktapur in exhaustive detail.

26. The connection between Pentecostal and evangelical conversion and a prior breakdown in family relationships has been highlighted by a range of scholars (for instance, Brusco 1995; Meyer 1999; Cole 2010), but perhaps most systematically by Smilde (2007), who has demonstrated that weak family networks are the most important predictor for Pentecostal conversion in Caracas, Venezuela. In the Nepali context, Fricke (2008) has explored the connections between conversion and relational breakdown. I will not enter here into a detailed discussion of how my findings relate to the extensive social scientific literature on religious conversion (on which, see Gibson 2017a: chap. 1). However, it should be noted that my findings on Bhaktapurian conversion are not anomalous, but appear rather to be consistent with wider patterns in global Pentecostal conversion, in that widespread conversion in Bhaktapur emerges in a context of significant sociocultural as well as familial disruption (see, for instance, D'Epinay 1969; Horton 1971; Anderson 1979; Robbins 2004a, 2004b), and is frequently motivated by a desire to find, and often in fact to some extent achieves, some form of psychological and social stabilization within contexts that are highly stressful and conflictive (see, for instance Davis 2004, and the works cited in notes 28 and 29 below).

27. See Gibson (2017a: chap. 8, 2017b). Many churches in Bhaktapur, and in Nepal as a whole, have a majority of women and a high proportion of young people in their congregations (Gibson 2017a: 228-231; DAWN Nepal 2007).

28. A number of scholars have highlighted the role of Pentecostal and evangelical churches in providing contexts where male behaviour that is harmful to women (in particular, drinking, violence, and excessive spending), can be reshaped, as well as in providing opportunities for female self-organization and leadership in environments where such opportunities are not common (for instance, Martin 1990, 2002; Brusco 1995; Chesnut 1997; Eriksen 2007; Smilde 2007).

29. See Gibson (2017a: chap. 3 and 7, 2017b). On the significance of healing and exorcism within global Pentecostalism, and its relationship both to non-Christian spirit-based forms of healing and to the intense forms of community life often associated with Pentecostalism, see, for instance, Peel (1968); Martin (1990, 2002); Cox (1995); Chesnut (1997); Kalu (2008); Klaitis (2010).

30. Focused description necessitates selectivity; for readers wishing to encounter more fully the voices of older Christians or those experiencing physical illness, see Gibson (2017a, 2017b).

31. I use pseudonyms for all informants. 'Bimal' was my closest friend among Bhaktapurian Christians, and the

narrative about his family which follows emerges from my intimate acquaintance with his whole household over the course of the last six years.

32. This caste is grouped into a number of levels, and Bimal's is one of the lower ones, intermarrying with the farmer caste. I found that the most strongly represented castes in Bhaktapurian churches were the middle and lower Newar castes, Nepali-speaking Dalits, and Tamangs (Gibson 2017a: Appendices 2 and 3). These findings are broadly consistent with reports from elsewhere in Nepal, which indicate that the majority of converts in many areas come from Dalit, Janajati, or other historically marginalized groups (DAWN Nepal 2007; Kehrberg 2000: 140-3; Campbell 2016).

33. On 'new religious movements' in Nepal, see Toffin (2013: chap. 5).

34. All direct quotations come from recordings of interviews or events.

35. On the various behavioral requirements associated with baptism, see Gibson (2017a: 125-8).

36. The disposal of household 'idols' is an important milestone in the conversion process. I encountered several other instances of converts disposing of their idols in potentially offensive ways (see Gibson 2017a: 162), though provocative methods of disposal seem to be becoming less common. The symbolic importance of discarding idols could perhaps be understood in terms of Bruno Latour's concept of 'purification,' which has been fruitfully employed by Keane (2007) in explicating the 'dematerialization' of religious life among Calvinists in the colonial Dutch East Indies.

37. For a detailed examination of the social and theological contexts and consequences of exorcism in Bhaktapurian churches, see Gibson (2017b). On the social effects of freedom from fear of witchcraft in African Pentecostal communities, see Meyer (1999) and Klaitis (2010).

38. On the central importance of house fellowships to Nepali Christian social, prayer, and teaching practice, see Gibson (2017a: chap. 5-6), Kirchheiner (2016: 100-5), and Tamang (2012: 135).

39. In the cases of twenty-seven of the thirty-four baptized Christian converts in Bhaktapur with whom I conducted extended life-history interviews, the whole of that person's nuclear family had converted to Christianity (Gibson 2017a: 255). However, the high proportion of whole-family conversions suggested by this figure does not take into account the significant numbers who begin attending church and make a formal commitment to Christ (*grahan*), only later to cease attending church

because of opposition from their families, therefore never reaching the stage of baptism. In hindsight, I regret that I did not systematically seek out such 'de-converts' during my research. As I discuss in the next section, converts frequently wait for many years between *grahan* and baptism, due to long-term opposition from their families.

40. Most Christians in Bhaktapur will say that all who have not explicitly recognised Christ will go to hell after their death. When speaking about non-Christian family members who have died, however, Christians sometimes say that these people may have recognised Christ in their hearts before death without making a verbal sign.

41. This contrast is frequently drawn by Bhaktapurian Christian preachers.

42. This is an accusation that is often levelled at Christian converts by their families: that they are converting in order to avoid expensive or otherwise burdensome religious duties. On the significance of such motivations among Tamang converts, see Ripert (2014).

43. A *guthi* is a Newar permanent association for religious or social purposes; funeral associations (*si-guthi*) play an important role in maintaining and regulating intra-clan solidarity among the Newars.

44. Sacrifice has come under increasing criticism in Nepal—not just from Christians, but also from Buddhist and Vaishnavite religious movements and Marxist groups, among others (Gibson 2017a: 52-6; Gutschow and Michaels 2005: 199-201; Michaels 2016; Zharkevich 2016). It is likely that this more general atmosphere of unease about the morality (as well as the expense) of sacrifice made Parbat's family more open than they would otherwise have been to giving it up.

45. On the precedence of peacefulness over other moral virtues and theological ideas in Bhaktapurian Christianity, see Gibson (2017b).

46. On gender relations within Bhaktapurian Christianity, see Gibson (2017a: chap. 8). Here, I highlight the important role played in Bhaktapurian Christianity by ideas of 'companionate marriage,' with church teaching frequently emphasizing that couples should spend time together, make decisions jointly, and refrain from violence or harsh words towards one another. As well as shaping church approaches to domestic violence and alcohol consumption, such ideas are also often cited by women when explaining their decisions to delay baptism until they have obtained their husband's agreement. On the influence of ideas analogous to 'companionate marriage' within African Pentecostalism, see Bochow and Van Dijk (2012).

47. I found in my 2013 church survey that a majority of Bhaktapurian churches now encourage their congregations to attend family feasts for most Hindu festivals, while avoiding direct participation in Hindu worship (Gibson 2017a: 228-233). It is argued by the pastors of such churches that, although some of the meat at such feasts may have been offered to idols, if a Christian prays silently before eating it, they will be absolved of participation in idol worship. The importance of family love and harmony above theological scrupulousness is often emphasized. Many of the churches taking this more permissive position have younger pastors, and have been founded in the last decade. Ten or fifteen years ago, I was told, few churches would have allowed attendance at such events.

48. On theological education in Nepal, see Tamang (2012) and Kim (2017). I conducted fieldwork at a well-known theological college in Patan in 2016, and found that, although the theology taught there was certainly not liberal by Western standards, it did consistently emphasize the adaptation of Christianity to Nepali culture, and tended to encourage pragmatic pastoral approaches such as Bimal's.

49. See Harding (1991) on fundamentalist Protestantism as American modernity's 'repugnant cultural other.' Harding's insights could likely be applied outside the United States.

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