A Promise of Unconditional Acceptance: Conversion to Christianity and the struggle for being in Sinja, Nepal

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1 The presence of Christianity in Nepal can be traced back to the eighteenth century. It is only from the 1950s onwards, however, when the country formally opened its borders after about two centuries of self-declared isolation, that Christianity started having a significant impact on Nepali society. Ever since then, Nepali Christian congregations – the vast majority of which are Pentecostal/charismatic – have grown at an extraordinary rate, flourishing over the last few decades even in remote areas such as the Sinja Valley, in the north-western district of Jumla. The reason for this astounding progression appears to be related to the unprecedented political and social changes that followed the civil war – a climate of widespread instability and uncertainty that Ian Gibson has labelled 'cultural unsettlement' (2017b: 17, see Barclay 2016, Fricke 2008: 35-36, Gaborieau 1994, Ripert 2008: 70–73, Poletti 2021). However, attributing the reasons for conversion only to the current zeitgeist does not suffice if we are to address the underlying causes that apparently make Nepal the fastest-growing Christian community in the world (Gibson 2017b: 87). In Sinja, the motivations that have led a number of people to seek a better life in the Christian faith are intimately related to the problematic situations they are confronted with in their lives, which are rooted in turn in a very specific understanding of personhood, as I briefly review in this essay, drawing on fieldwork conducted in 2014–16 and 2019. The point, of course, is not to cast a value judgement about the local Hindu worldview vis-à-vis the Christian one for which it is traded, but to explore why some people in Sinja have found in the latter a more viable existential option, and what consequences conversion to Christianity has on their experience of who they are.
Everyday life as a struggle for being

The exploration of personhood in Sinja that started with my PhD thesis has shown that, among local Hindus, ‘a person’ does not coincide with a fixed entity given once and for all. The soul (puruṣ or ātmā) is the most important element of personhood. ‘The puruṣ is like the sim card inside the mobile phone’, as it was often evocatively described to me. Despite its paramount role at the core of the self, however, a number of external agents become entangled in the soul, determining personality traits. Well-meaning actions are seen as the expression of deities within, whereas morally deplorable ones are attributed to the influence of demons. The various forces (śakti) at play in the soul are the same that dominate the cosmos outside of it, so that there is no real difference between what is inside and what is outside the self. Consequently, by virtue of this symmetric correspondence of the macrocosm with the subjective microcosm, distinct aspects of someone’s personhood momentarily take over the soul as appropriate responses to the worldly events in which it becomes embroiled. This is very well expressed by a Sinjali metaphor suggesting that ‘the bell sounds according to the clapper’. Fluctuating states of being are hence not to be seen as different moods of an individual. Rather, personhood appears as a kaleidoscope of situational selves heavily dependent on circumstances (see Poletti 2019, 2020). This points to a less monolithic understanding of the self in Sinja, in line with what has been noted by others throughout South Asia (eg Ewing 1990: 252, Lecomte-Tilouine 2015, Levy 1998: 327–28, McHugh 1989).

This composite personhood does not mean that people do not recognise any cohesiveness with themselves and with other people. As I have illustrated elsewhere (Poletti 2018), astrological divination acts as a hermeneutic endeavour to weave together this kaleidoscope of life experiences in an ongoing existential narrative that indicates the outline of one’s personality, thus allowing a degree of continuity across life events and the corresponding situational manifestations of the soul to which they give rise. Still, the lack of a unitary principle comparable to the Christian soul has important repercussions on the lives of local Hindus. Far from being given a priori, personhood needs to be constantly actualised in relational interaction with other people through appropriate actions that match one’s social persona (see Poletti 2021). There is a great deal of pressure on people of both genders to live up to the kind of person they are supposed to incarnate. This can be the cause of much tension, particularly when what happens in their lives hinders the fulfilment of social expectations, such as the incapacity for a male householder to provide for his family or, for a woman, to bear a male heir. Persistent failure at meeting these obligations can have catastrophic consequences, as instantiated by the high rate of suicides in Jumla (see Hagaman et al 2018, Rai et al 2017: 3). In fact, in a context wherein being-in-the-world is not a guaranteed achievement but needs to be narratively constructed and continuously reiterated through matching types of behaviour, a person is faced with the risk of not being at all were this effort to fail due to adverse circumstances, giving way to the possibility of an utter ‘failure of being’ (Poletti forthcoming b, see also Lamb 1997).

In light of the above, it would be unfair to consider conversion as being motivated by the desire for financial gain – a widespread prejudice in Nepal. There might certainly be people who converted also for opportunistic reasons, but this is not the underlying
reason for which many embrace faith in Christ. As Gibson observed among Bhaktapurian Christians (2017b: xii), most of them are people whose lives were marked by some sort of traumatic experience and who sought relief by converting to Christianity. As far as I was able to observe during my own fieldwork, Christianity in Sinja seems to attract those who, for whatever reason, repeatedly proved incapable of conforming to social expectations. Conversion provided them with solace from this struggle for being, sparing these people from the relentless pressure of having to actualise who they are expected to be. Thus, in recognising the intrinsic value of anyone who knocks at its door, the Church offers a refuge that welcomes and supports those who find themselves on the fringe of society, regardless of their social status.

5 In fact, contrary to the classic argument about conversion in South Asia, this phenomenon does not solely concern traditionally unprivileged people such as Dalits (former ‘untouchables’), providing them with the means of distancing themselves from the hegemonic reality that relegated them to the bottom of the social ladder (see eg Mosse 2012). Most of the converts I met occupy a rather high social position, while it is not uncommon to come across local Dalits perceiving Christian practices as a perilous threat to Jumli cultural heritage. According to local Christians, the prominence of high-caste people in their congregation is simply for demographic reasons, given that there are more Chhetris and, to a lesser degree, Bahuns in the area compared to the various Dalit castes. While this may certainly be the case, I believe that another possible cause for such a situation is that most positions of authority are in the hands of high-caste families, which contributes to their social prestige. They therefore appear to be more subjected to the enduring pressure of having to live up to the ‘proper’ social person they are expected to embody, whilst their ‘failures of being’ are potentially more exposed and the object of gossip (for a concrete example of a high-caste couple and their struggle for being, which eventually resulted in the wife’s suicide, see Poletti forthcoming b). In situations like this, the Christian community may come to offer a new social milieu wherein anyone is accepted for what they actually are, not for what they have managed (or not) to achieve, ensuring them a place in the world regardless of what might have gone wrong in their lives. Through the promise of acceptance by a non-judgmental God who is said to love His creatures unconditionally and by an equally accepting congregation of believers, conversion to Christianity fosters a state of rediscovered existential peacefulness that many converts describe as the principal outcome of their radical choice (see also Gibson 2017a).

Older issues and newer challenges

6 God’s love is not just a remote, abstract notion, but it finds expression in the miracles that many a convert reports happening in their lives. Cases of miraculous healings are indeed what often trigger a desire to convert. The pattern of conversion, as I could trace it in Sinja, recalls what has been observed elsewhere in Nepal (see eg Gibson 2017a: 765, 2017b: 130). It all begins by seeking relief from some kind of malaise, normally a rather mysterious and sudden one, the cause of which cannot be easily identified. After failing to find help from local healers (dhāmi), potential converts lose faith in Hindu gods, which, as is typical among Pentecostals, are subsequently regarded as surrogates of the devil seen as tempting people to misbehave (see also Macdonald 2018: 5, Meyer 1999, Schieffelin 2002, Weddle 2010: 169–70). One of the reasons for this
demonisation is that local deities (maṣṭo) have to be cajoled by means of ritual offerings if they are to endorse human activities. These donations can be very onerous and can drain a family’s entire resources if it has to face multiple issues in a row. Miracles – which happen spontaneously and ‘for free’ – illustrate Jesus’s greater power over local deities, thus creating fertile ground for conversion. However, although converts tend to establish with Jesus a ‘contractual’ relationship not dissimilar to the one between Sinjali Hindus and their maṣṭo gods, wherein conversion is bartered for healing, this does not always yield the desired results. Yet the absence of palpable results has never really been a problem for any believer (Weddle 2010: 33). There is much more to miracles than recovery from a physical ailment.

Miracles play a fundamental role for Pentecostal Christians because they constitute a sign of the pervasive presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. This ‘presence’ of God in the world plays out in quite a particular way among Sinjali Pentecostals. Mundane happenings are recognised as miracles when these replicate in one way or another what is written in the Bible. In other words, after reading the Bible, people realise that this is not a tale about distant past and future events; Biblical occurrences are taking place right now as people experience them in their lives. It was against this background that sudden recoveries from short mysterious illnesses could be later conceived as the manifestation of the resurrection of the dead promised by the Bible upon Jesus’s Second Coming (see Poletti forthcoming a). These miracles appear to bear an important imaginative component, insofar as some life events are narratively re-experienced in an utterly new way when they are told as part of a conversion narrative, which overlaps with the scriptural text. Thus, miracles help to bring about a radical change in converts’ lives. To convert, in fact, is not a straightforward thing to undertake, especially for people who do not enjoy much freedom of choice in Nepali patriarchal society. Women and the young are much more dependent on others in their decision-making than, say, an older man who is the head of a household, and their conversions usually take much longer to be fully accomplished. Therefore, in manifesting the ‘truth of the Word’ in the world, miracle stories provide ‘proof’ to support the conversion of people in structurally disadvantaged positions and often prompts the rest of the family to convert eventually as well.

On the whole, conversion significantly reorients converts’ experience of personhood. After the conversion process, ‘a person’ shifts from being the intersubjective product of relational circumstances needing to be relentlessly reaffirmed to becoming the inherently Christian subject of a conversion narrative. In making Sinjali Pentecostal partakers of the biblical narrative co-protagonists of that story, miracles secure for them a place in a world which is a manifestation of the Word of God, thus sheltering them from the threatening prospect of ceasing to be in any meaningful way. At the same time, embracing Evangelical Christianity also introduces novel issues. Just as conversion provides relief from the overwhelming anxiety of having to conform to social expectations, it also shortens people’s lifespan. Contrary to their Hindu counterpart, converts reject any possibility of reincarnation. This means that their existence no longer spans over a multitude of subsequent lives; it all plays out in their current lifetime, the achievements of which will be eventually examined by God to determine whether they deserve a place in Heaven at His side, or whether they will instead be precipitated among the damned in Hell. The duration of life therefore appears to be considered with much greater apprehension by Christian converts, as it
needs to be used in the best possible way in light of these ultimate consequences, which introduce yet another, unprecedented form of anxiety. Hence, as older challenges disappear and new ones come to the fore, these dynamics foreground the multifaceted struggle for being which underlies an ever-changing society faced with yet more existential alternatives, none of which is without its pitfalls.

Pentecostals are not the only Christians to be found in Sinja. There is also a family who belongs to the World Mission Society Church of God (WMSCOG): a church that originated in South Korea, with several branches in Nepal. The story of how this faith reached the Sinja Valley is quite revealing. The head of the household – a man in his forties – had started attending service at the local church. He told his younger brother who was studying in Kathmandu at the time, and urged him to find a congregation there which he could join. The brother was not aware that ‘Christianity’ encompasses various distinct denominations and so he entered the first church he came across. Sometime later, the two brothers met at Jumla headquarters, and went to attend a service together. They soon realised that their faith and the related practices differed significantly. After a lengthy discussion, they eventually decided to embrace the South-Korean doctrine the younger brother had become familiar with in the capital, establishing a branch of this faith in the Valley that now counts a total of 11 members, all belonging to the same family. This story encapsulates the gradual denominationalist tendency which, since the 1990s, has led to the fragmentation of the Nepali Christian population into many different sections, at times very small, as in this case (see also Gibson 2017b: 96, 167).

Conclusions

The tumultuous times that followed the establishment of democracy in Nepal in 1990 saw a revival and political instrumentalisation of cultural and ethnic differences that eventually led to a decade-long civil war between 1996 and 2006 (Gellner 2007: 1823, Hangen 2005: 59, Lawoti 2007, Shah and Pettigrew 2009: 225). Since the war, Nepal has experienced a relative improvement of the standard of living, even in rural areas (Fisher 2011, Poletti 2021, Shah 2008, Zharkevich 2017). Yet the war has also produced an enduring sense of insecurity throughout the country. In this post-war climate of instability, Evangelical Christianity, in its various denominations, has gained ground as an alternative to the dominant Hindu worldview, the hegemony of which is perceived by many converts as the main cause of animosity (Gibson 2017a: 774). Conversely, nationalist activists perceive religious conversion as a threat to Nepal’s Hindu national identity, which has been criminalised in every Constitution of Nepal, and remains so despite the fact that the country was declared a secular state in 2006 (Gellner and Letizia 2019).

That being so, religion appears to be crucial for the study of social change in a multifaceted scenario of rapid cultural transformations of contemporary Nepali society, having played a key role in the post-1990 political arena. However, while some research has highlighted how conversion to Christianity has ended up challenging the pre-existing cultural establishment (see eg Ripert 1997 among the Tamang of northeast Nepal), the radical and enduring manner wherein Christian notions reorient and transform the way people experience themselves remains largely unexplored (Gibson 2019). The contestation of traditional identities does not only have social and political
implications. There is also – and perhaps even more importantly – a major existential corollary to it, as I have tried to briefly overview in this short essay. This emphasises the fact that it is of paramount importance to move beyond abstract tropes of ‘cultural identity’ if we are to understand the actual challenges Nepali people are confronted with, using subjectivity as a key analytical lens to examine the enormous rapid changes currently underway in Nepal (Sales 2011: 124, Poletti 2021). Besides, showing that conversion to Christianity in Sinja has nothing to do with the external imperialistic threat of foreign powers, as it is portrayed at times in the Nepali political discourse, but instead tackles engrained personal issues, could also help dampen the surge of hostility to which some Christians communities in other parts of the country have been subjected. All in all, highlighting the process whereby people become distinct kinds of persons has the potential of revealing much about how personhood articulates amid contrasting values in the ever more complex social scenario of post-conflict Nepal.

Fig 1. Home churches

The first church was set up in Sinja in the 1980s, in the house of a local schoolteacher, one of the first persons to convert to Christianity in the Valley. As numbers grew, this was no longer big enough to accommodate everyone. Thus, in 2006, a fairly wealthy believer offered a piece of land on the outskirts of his village where a proper church could be built. Known as ‘mother church’, this is now the main point of reference for this congregation. Sometime later, secondary churches were built in other places to serve all the members scattered over the area. In 2019, the last time I was in Sinja, there were four churches in the Valley. The one in this photograph is housed in the loft of a private house in one of the Valley’s main bazaars.

Photo: S Poletti, 2019.
On the first Saturday of the month, everyone is invited to the ‘mother church’ for the Lord's supper (parbhu bhoj). On that day, the pastor hands out the Eucharist and informs everyone of the church’s calendar of events for the coming month. The Lord's supper is hence an important social occasion to enhance the cohesion of this little community scattered over rugged mountainous terrain.

Photo: S Poletti, 2019.
On most special occasions, after a religious service, everyone is invited to partake in a collective meal, which creates an informal moment of community spirit and gives people the chance to get to know one another and to share their personal stories, thus strengthening the feeling of belonging to a broader community of faith. These occasions are particularly important for those who live in rather remote settlements, who do not otherwise have the possibility of interacting daily with like-minded fellow believers, as is the case for those living in the bazaar. Caste membership is no longer regarded as important by local Christians. 'There are only two castes: male and female', they are often heard saying. Proof of this being that the person in charge of preparing these collective meals is a Dalit, who substitutes for the pastor of this congregation whenever the latter is unable to celebrate a church service and who cooks some of the most delicious dāl bhat I have ever eaten in Sinja.

Photo: S Poletti, 2019.
Sinja’s Pentecostal congregation belongs to a much bigger organisation whose headquarters are located in Pokhara. While this organisation provides training to pastors and essential materials such as printed Bibles, local branches scattered around the country receive very little financial help from this wider network, and are largely self-sufficient. Besides a fixed monthly donation of 10% of one’s income to the church, each Saturday during the religious service believers are encouraged to make small offerings according to their own means to help cover the pastor’s travelling expenses, since he is not salaried. All the activities organised by the church, such as feasts and common meals, are entirely self-funded with this system, which is also used to help the needy.

Photo: S Poletti, 2019.
Fig 5. At the church

At the church are people of all ages and castes. Women tend to outnumber men, although it is difficult to give a precise percentage, as there is no official register of the baptised members of this congregation. Religious songs (bhajan) precede the celebration of a religious service, whilst everybody dances to the rhythm of a drum (māḍāl) that is commonly used during Hindu festivities in Sinja, and which local Christians have adapted to their own needs. At first, Christian converts were socially ostracised and ridiculed because of their practices, which came across as extravagant to the rest of the population. 'Nowadays, instead, it is easier to be a Christian', said a man in his 50s. 'Now we can talk freely about Jesus to other people, and no one says anything [bad]'. Today, new converts can rely on the encouragement of a well-established community that has significantly grown over the years to number about 200–250 members, according to the main pastor. This only makes up about 2% of Sinja's total population.

Photo: S Poletti, 2019.
Fig 6. New generations

Talking about converts, however, is no longer always appropriate, since there is an increasing number of second-generation Christians in Sinja who were born into this congregation. Christian children go to the same schools as their Hindu peers, with whom they are often seen playing, and receive the same formal education. It is primarily at home and at church that they learn a specifically Christian conduct, while taking part in the congregation's manifold activities.

Photo: S Poletti, 2019.
A significant part of Sinja’s Christian population is concentrated in one of the main bazaars of the Valley, where it runs all sorts of businesses. As an important meeting point in the area, this is an ideal place to live for many of them. Many customary rules and habits – such as those regarding purity and pollution, which are paramount among local Hindus – appear to have been somewhat relaxed here compared to the surrounding villages, thus facilitating life as a proper Christian. Christian houses and shops can often be easily identified by the ubiquitous presence of the sign of the cross which figures on shop signs and as a decorative motif on private houses. The photograph shows a view of the bazaar and was taken from the balcony of a prominent local Christian businessman.

Photo: S Poletti, 2019.
According to many believers, the most striking aspect of this new religion is that the Christian God actually answers people's prayers, without asking for anything in return. Prayer can take multiple forms, from a personal inner dialogue with God to its collective invocation at church, as shown in these pictures. Moreover, members of the congregation may also pray over each other to propitiate their mutual wellbeing or as a way to initiate miraculous healings, as is customary among Pentecostals.

Photo: S Poletti, 2019.
God's almighty power is a concrete force in the lives of Sinjali Pentecostals, which often takes the form of miraculous healings of different kinds of ailments. In many cases, these miraculous occurrences help to substantiate converts' choice to turn their back on Hindu deities in favour of what is described as a more powerful and caring divine figure. Major physical disabilities, such as severe limping or blindness, however, are unlikely to be cured upon conversion, and the value of a professed miracle has to be looked for elsewhere than in its tangible, visible effects.

Photo: S Poletti, 2019.
Putative miracles testify to the actual pervasive presence of the Holy Spirit in everyday life. Thus, stories of miraculous events that provide 'evidence' of God's power support women and youngsters living in large families during the delicate phase of their conversion, helping them to pursue this radical change in the face of their relatives. The way miracles manifest themselves follows a specific logic that is intimately related to a believer's knowledge of the sacred scriptures.

Photo: S Poletti, 2019.
As for other Protestant denominations, the Bible is the ultimate source of truth in Pentecostal Christianity. However, this is not a bygone truth. Miracles manifest themselves when people realise that some events narrated in the Scriptures actually happen in their everyday lives. In other terms, for Pentecostals, the Word and the world are the same, inextricable reality. Like prayers, the Bible is read both individually or with the rest of the family at home, and in a more collective fashion at church during Saturday services. Although most of the Christians I met in Sinja are literate and therefore capable of reading the Holy Writ, many revealed that they found it quite difficult to make sense of its content, especially at the very beginning.

Photo: S Poletti, 2019
Personhood, in Hindu Sinja, is not given *a priori*. Who someone is needs to be actualised through appropriate behaviour that should reflect the kind of persona one is socially expected to embody. Being-in-the-world therefore appears to be a continuous effort to actualise one's own being in this context.

Photo: S Poletti, 2016.
Fig 13. Failures of being

What happens in people’s lives does not always conform to social expectations. The protracted failure to fulfil what one is socially expected to be can prove a heavy burden to bear, and, in the long run, may even lead people to take their own lives, as I was able to ascertain in several cases. (One day, walking down a lane in the village where I used to stay, I came across one of my neighbours. As we chatted, she started lamenting the hardships of life in Jumla – a theme that often came up in these kinds of extemporaneous exchanges with villagers. This snapshot captures that moment, which I include here only for its allegorical meaning, just like for the previous image).

Photo: S Poletti, 2016.
Conversion narratives tend to portray a stark difference between the kind of persons converts were before and after their encounter with Christianity, foregrounding a significant bettmerment of one's lot that goes much further than one's state of health. Upon conversion, Christians quit the social milieu in which their 'failures of being' made their life difficult, and find themselves among a different community of believers that recognises their intrinsic value and dignity regardless of what might have gone wrong in their lives. What seems to make Christianity appealing in the eyes of many converts is this promise of unconditional acceptance that thereby guarantees their presence in the world against the pressing burden of having to be a certain kind of person, thus providing a new life for those who have repeatedly failed in this struggle for being.

Photo: S Poletti, 2019.
In a loft not far from the ‘mother church’ is a place of worship of one particular Christian family. When I went to visit them, Ramesh, the householder, proudly showed me an award he had received for the work he has carried out as a committed member of the World Mission Society Church of God (WMSCOG). In the past, there had been some tension between him and his family and local Pentecostals, apparently after some family members had tried to draw some of the latter into their sect. More recently, the situation has calmed down, and these two Christian congregations now appear to practise their respective faiths mutually ignoring each other.

Photo: S Poletti, 2019.

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NOTES

1. For an extended historical account of the presence of Christianity in Nepal, see Gibson (2017b: 87–108, also Perry 2000).
2. As an example, I can cite the case of a blind man who claimed that he had been healed of blindness after conversion, but whose sight did not appear to have improved whatsoever (for a similar case of a hunchbacked man, see Gibson 2017a: 772).

ABSTRACTS

Over the last few decades, Nepal’s Christian population has flourished even in quite remote contexts such as the Sinja Valley, in the north-western district of Jumla. The reasons why people are drawn towards Evangelical Christianity in particular are primarily existential and are intimately related to the problematic situations they are confronted with in their lives, which are rooted in turn in a very specific understanding of personhood. Among local Hindus, the lack of a unitary principle comparable to the Christian soul has important consequences. Far from being a permanent achievement, personhood needs to be constantly actualised in relational interaction with other people, through appropriate actions that match one’s social persona. This can cause a lot of tension, particularly when what happens in someone’s life hinders the fulfilment of social expectations. What seems to make Christianity appealing in Sinja is that, in this religion, one’s self is given a priori by God, thereby ensuring that everyone is of equal worth within the congregation. This promise of unconditional acceptance fosters a state of rediscovered existential peacefulness that many converts describe as the key outcome of their radical choice – a choice that is often facilitated by the occurrence of miracles. At the same time, conversion to Pentecostal Christianity also introduces unprecedented challenges, preventing us from viewing conversion as a simplistic, one-dimensional transition.

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