Pentecostal peacefulness: virtue ethics and the reception of theology in Nepal

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The anthropology of Christianity has struggled to theorize the place of theology in Christian social life. Drawing on Alasdair MacIntyre’s account of virtue ethics, in particular his concepts of practice, narrative, and moral tradition, I explore the reception of Pentecostal theology in the Nepali city of Bhaktapur. I show how local Christians have drawn on Pentecostal eschatology to develop a pacifistic ethics, allowing them to negotiate local social and religious conflicts. The belief that Christ has decisively defeated evil spirits allows local Christians to detach themselves from cycles of aggression connected with witchcraft accusations, providing a space of security in which to cultivate distinctive practices of care. Connecting this local theology with a wider tradition in Pentecostal moral thought, I argue that MacIntyre’s virtue ethics provides a powerful tool for interpreting the relationship between local circumstance and extra-local theology, and for studying cross-cultural patterns of theological reception.

As soon as I began meeting Christians in the Nepali city of Bhaktapur, I noticed the importance of a particular type of story in their lives. When I asked someone ‘How did you become a Christian?’, they would usually give a long and fluent answer, a narrative that had been told with minor or major variations many times before. Frequently, the narrative would be shaped as follows:

- The person becomes ill, and blames this on witchcraft visited on them by an aggrieved relative, friend, or acquaintance.
- They seek ritual solutions within Hinduism, including acts of worship to the gods and visits to religious healers.
- Finding these remedies ineffective, they become resentful towards the healers and gods; they may also resent family and friends for insufficient care.
- Meeting a Christian, who promises that if they pray in Jesus’ name they will be healed, they start attending a church; a fellowship is established in their house to pray for healing.
• Their condition improves, but they are told that healing will only be secure if they are baptized and become a full church member, abandoning all Hindu worship.

• Full conversion causes a breach with family and neighbours, and the convert’s social life becomes focused on the church community. After conversion, full healing is usually reported.

While such narratives seemed to be centred on healing, something else struck me as their most significant feature. The physical effects of illness could still be seen on some converts reporting healing – healing meant more to them than just a physical change. I noticed that the period before healing was typically described in terms suggestive of conflict (emphasizing anxiety, the danger of witchcraft, tension with family, community, healers, and deities), while the period after healing was described in terms suggesting peacefulness (highlighting mental tranquillity, security from demonic attack, harmonious relationships with other Christians and the Christian God). Allowing for the fact that the conversion story is a stylized genre in evangelical Christianity, and this genre demands a strong contrast between the ‘before’ and ‘after’ of conversion (Stromberg 1993), I was still convinced that these contrasts represented something real. I lived among Bhaktapurian converts for almost two years, and observed the lives behind the stories.¹ What takes place, I wondered, in order for an experience of peacefulness to emerge? I came to see peacefulness not simply as an experience but as an ethical practice in church communities; this practice, I saw, was connected with the Bhaktapurian Christian theology.

A central achievement of the anthropology of Christianity has been to advance the comparative study of ‘Christian culture’. Joel Robbins (2004a; 2007), who has done much to define the field, argues that anthropologists have been too quick to interpret the beliefs of newly Christianized groups in terms of their pre-conversion culture, rather than in terms of a distinctively Christian culture. This ‘continuity thinking’, he suggests, stems from theoretical biases rooted in anthropology’s history.

Anthropologists like Robbins who associate Christianity with cultural discontinuity, and stress the importance of distinctively Christian culture, often write broadly within the tradition of Weber’s Protestant ethic, in that they associate Christianity, and Protestantism in particular, with modernity and capitalism. Their focus tends to be on cultural orientations – attitudes towards personhood (Meyer 1999; Robbins 2004a; van der Veer 1996), materiality (Cannell 2006; Keane 2007; Webster 2013), or time (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991; Marshall 2009; Robbins 2001; 2010), for instance – that are taken to be widely diffused among Christian groups. While such approaches yield important insights, they may also obscure complexities in Christian intellectual life, and risk collapsing theological beliefs into sociological categories in a way that is distorting. Michael Scott (2005), for instance, has shown how an over-reliance on the category of ‘individualism’ can distort Christian theologies of personhood. This article seeks to clarify the role of theology in Christian social life.

A number of scholars have recognized the failure of anthropologists of Christianity to engage extensively with theology (Jenkins 2012; Robbins 2006; 2013; Scott 2005). One reason for this may be the theoretical frameworks they employ. Anthropological understandings of culture have often been expansive, encompassing the ‘complex whole’ (Tylor 1871: 1) of meanings and practices that constitute human experience (Barnard & Spencer 2005). Given that this approach was formed partly in reaction against ‘humanistic’ definitions of culture, which prioritized ‘high culture’ such as
art, music, and philosophy, it is perhaps understandable that anthropologists have at times neglected the role of ideas, and their history, in human society. This neglect has been remedied in a number of contemporary anthropological approaches to culture, in particular those within the anthropology of ethics.

In what follows, I present the work of the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, influential in the anthropology of ethics, as a possible basis for incorporating the history of ideas into anthropological understandings of Christian culture. Specifically, I argue that three concepts that MacIntyre takes to be constitutive of the broader concept of virtue—practice, narrative, and moral tradition—can, when applied to particular ethnographic contexts, illuminate the interplay of local circumstance and extra-local theology, thus opening new avenues for anthropological comparison. Applying these concepts to Bhaktapuri Christianity, I find that a Pentecostal moral tradition I label ‘Pentecostal eschatological peacefulness’ (hereafter PEP) has decisively influenced the predominant practices and narratives within this community. By promoting a narrativization of individual life that posits a stark break at the point of conversion, wherein evil spirits causing conflict are pacified by the power of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, the moral tradition of PEP has provided a space of security in which Bhaktapuri Christians have been able to cultivate new ethical practices which emphasize peacefulness and mutual care. Recognizing the significance of a particular moral and theological tradition within Bhaktapuri Christianity, it becomes possible to shape new comparisons with other ethnographic contexts influenced by similar theologies.

**MacIntyre’s virtue ethics**

Alasdair MacIntyre’s work has been widely influential in both the anthropology of Islam (Asad 1986; Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2005) and the anthropology of ethics (see Laidlaw 2014: ch. 2). Given that the anthropology of Islam has been suggested as a model for the anthropology of Christianity (Robbins 2003), and that ethics has been a central concern for ethnographers of Christian communities (e.g. Klaits 2010; Robbins 2004a; Zigon 2011), it is surprising that anthropologists working on Christianity have seldom engaged with MacIntyre. One exception is Cheryl Mattingly (2010; 2014), who has used MacIntyre’s work to illuminate the moral lives of African-Americans engaging with the medical system. She has shown, for instance, how his narrative conception of ethics illuminates the conflicting understandings of personhood held by Christian patients and secular medical professionals (2014: ch. 7).

In his most influential book, *After virtue* (2007 [1981]), MacIntyre attempts to synthesize the virtue ethics of Aristotle with a sociological approach drawing on the Marxist tradition. This, as James Laidlaw has suggested, is ‘philosophy with an ethnographic stance’ (2014: 47). MacIntyre proposes that there are three stages in the ‘logical development’ of the concept of virtue: first, that of practice; second, that of narrative; and, third, that of moral tradition (2007 [1981]: 186-7).

A practice, as MacIntyre understands it, is ‘any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized’ (2007 [1981]: 187). Goods, in this context, are ‘those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity’ (2007 [1981]: 187). According to this definition, ‘throwing a football with skill’ would not be a practice, as it is not in itself a ‘socially established cooperative activity’; the game of football, however, would be a practice (2007 [1981]: 187). MacIntyre’s emphasis on specific forms of social activity distinguishes him from deontologists such as Kant,
who conceive of morality in terms of rules applying to all people in all circumstances. The notion of ‘internal goods’ – goods, that is, that cannot be justified independently of particular forms of activity – also sets him apart from utilitarianism, which justifies moral action in terms of its utility for humankind as a whole.

MacIntyre’s understanding of narrative is embedded in an account of the coherence of individual lives. Over and above the particular practices an individual might engage in, he argues, there is a need to understand that person’s life as a unity which is orientated towards a particular telos, namely the good towards which it aims (2007 [1981]: 203). He argues that human life must be treated thus, because otherwise human behaviour becomes unintelligible:

[We] cannot . . . characterize behaviour independently of intentions, and we cannot characterize intentions independently of the settings which make those intentions intelligible . . . [A] setting has a history, a history within which the histories of individual agents not only are, but have to be, situated, just because without the setting and its changes through time the history of the individual agent and his changes through time will be unintelligible (2007 [1981]: 206-7).

As human beings have a need to understand both themselves and others, ‘man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal . . . I can only answer the question “What am I to do?” if I can answer the prior question “Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?”’ (2007 [1981]: 216). Thus, in any given society, the virtues are understood in terms of the narratives of individual lives set within that society’s moral traditions, which are often themselves presented in narrative form.

The concept of moral tradition begins in the observation that

What it is to lead a good life concretely varies from circumstance to circumstance . . . [and] we all approach our own circumstances as bearers of a particular social identity . . . I belong to this clan, that tribe, this nation. Hence what is good for me has to be good for me as one who inhabits these roles (2007 [1981]: 220).

Individuals, according to MacIntyre, become bearers of moral traditions through their social roles. MacIntyre’s position is different both from the individualism of thinkers who hold that the self as moral agent can be detached from its social roles, and from the conservatism of those who ‘contrast tradition with reason and the stability of tradition with conflict’ (2007 [1981]: 221). Against the latter group, MacIntyre posits that ‘all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought, transcending through criticism and invention the limitations of what had hitherto been reasoned in that tradition’; furthermore, ‘when a tradition is in good order it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which give to that tradition its particular point and purpose’ (2007 [1981]: 222). He defines a tradition therefore as ‘an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition’ (2007 [1981]: 222).

**A Pentecostal moral tradition**

I argue in what follows that Bhaktapurian Christians have been decisively influenced by a moral tradition I call ‘Pentecostal eschatological peacefulness’ (PEP). To indicate the character of this tradition, a short excursus into Pentecostal theology is necessary. Anthropologists have dissected the basic theological fissions in the Pentecostal movement, in particular that between Pentecostals proper, who emphasize ‘Spirit baptism’ and speaking in tongues, and charismatics, who welcome gifts of the Spirit.
such as exorcism and healing but are less doctrinally rigorous (see Robbins 2004b: 119-23). (In what follows, I use the terms ‘Pentecostal’ and ‘Pentecostalism’ broadly, to denote the religious movement encompassing both charismatics and self-identified Pentecostals.) An area of Pentecostal theology that has received only limited attention from anthropologists, however, is eschatology, or the theology of the ‘last things’.

The theologian Steven Land (2010 [1993]) argues that the hallmarks of Pentecostal theology are that, for Pentecostals, abstract beliefs cannot be separated from the experience of God, and that this experience is marked by eschatology. The first Pentecostals, he notes, were not primarily intellectuals, but rather a group of marginal believers who had a transformative encounter with the Holy Spirit, causing them to adopt distinctive practices such as healing, prophesying, and speaking in tongues. Land characterizes Pentecostal experience, from this time to the present, in terms of an ‘already-not-yet’ eschatological tension, in which the Kingdom of God is already manifest in the gifts of the Spirit, yet also fervently awaited as soon-to-arrive. ‘As was true for John Wesley’, he writes, ‘so too Pentecostals travelled in the Spirit forward and backward in time – back to Sinai, back to Calvary, back to Pentecost – forward to the Armageddon, the Great White Throne Judgement, the Marriage Supper of the Lamb’ (2010 [1993]: 46). This eschatological tension, Land argues, is the key to interpreting Pentecostal theology, worship, and ethics.

Ethnography provides ample evidence of connections between eschatological tension and Pentecostal ethics. These are often manifested in varieties of moral rigorism – that is, highly demanding forms of moral life. Among Pentecostals emphasizing the ‘not yet’ of God’s Kingdom – that is, millenarians – asceticism is often prominent, as believers ready and purify themselves for imminent judgement (Anderson 1979; Cox 1995; Robbins 2004a). Such millenarianism seems frequently to have an ‘inward’ focus: with the outer world passing away, external structures and projects are devalued and individual disposition before God becomes key. For those emphasizing the eschatological ‘already’, significant moral transformation is also typically called for, but this transformation is more focused on the church community, which lives out the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God. Zionist churches in South Africa, for instance, which see themselves as contemporary realizations of God’s Kingdom, use rituals of healing and exorcism to forge ways of life distinct from those associated with capitalist production and colonial power structures (Comaroff 1985). In Botswana, where the AIDS epidemic has led to an upsurge in witchcraft accusations, Apostolic churches use healing prayer and invocatory song to cultivate peaceful relationships that counter social breakdown (Klaits 2010).

Some scholars see peacefulness as a dominant characteristic in Pentecostal ethics. David Martin, for instance, associates Pentecostalism with the ‘creation of a certain kind of pacificistic personality’ (1990: 12), and attributes this to the cultivation, in voluntaristic church communities, of autonomous social spaces, substantially separated from the status ascriptions and power dynamics of wider society. Evidence for Martin’s thesis can be found in Latin America, where Pentecostals are well known for standing in opposition to ‘macho’ values of self-assertion, sexual conquest, and violence, aiming to displace these with self-restraint, marital fidelity, and gentleness of behaviour (see, e.g., Brusco 1995; Smilde 2007). Further evidence of a pacificistic tendency in Pentecostalism can be found in situations of persecution, where it is often taught that violence and hostility should not be returned in kind, but rather met with love and prayer (see Allen 2013; Shortt 2012).
While Martin offers a sociological explanation for Pentecostal peacefulness, eschatology plays an equally important role. The theologian Murray Dempster (2012) has drawn out the connections between eschatology and pacifism among American Pentecostals living around the time of the First World War. He shows the centrality to Pentecostals of this period of the idea of restoring the New Testament church, as it was formed on the day of Pentecost (2012: 126-9). For true Christians, it was believed, the power of evil had lost its hold, following Jesus’ defeat of evil on the cross: this defeat was manifested in the gifts of exorcism and healing, and in the virtuous life of the church community. Here, we see the eschatological ‘already’ – the idea that evil has been conclusively defeated by Jesus – connected with moral perfectionism in the church, including ideals of non-violence. Dempster also shows the strong missionary impulse of early twentieth-century Pentecostals, associated with their sense of impending Apocalypse (2012: 135-8). The ‘conversion of the nations’ was considered necessary to precipitate Christ’s coming, and merciful given their imminent judgement. Conflict stood as an obstacle to proselytization, and was in any case unnecessary – as evil had already been defeated by Jesus on the cross, it was superfluous to meet it with violence.

This short theological excursus indicates some of the main contours of the tradition of PEP. It is characterized by narratives relating to the defeat of evil on the cross and impending judgement, and theology connecting these narratives with the formation of counter-cultural communities eschewing violence and conflict. The pacificist element in Pentecostalism seems often to come to the fore at times of conflict, as during the First World War or Botswana’s AIDS crisis. As one would expect in light of MacIntyre’s definition of a moral tradition as a ‘historically extended, socially embodied argument’, this tradition is neither homogeneous nor stable. Rather, it constitutes a pattern of associations and ‘family resemblances’ between certain biblical narratives, theological arguments, social circumstances, forms of community, and ethical practices, which vary according to context.

In the context of Bhaktapur, as we will see, the biblical narrative of Christ’s defeat of evil has assumed particular prominence because of the need felt, by a substantial minority of Bhaktapurians, to remove themselves from cycles of conflict associated with witchcraft accusations, and to cultivate caring and pacificist practices in response to these. In the next section I focus on the development of these innovative ethical practices within Bhaktapurian Christianity; in the subsequent section I connect these practices with Pentecostal narrativization of individual life and the moral tradition of PEP.

Social change, ethical practices, and the rise of Bhaktapurian Christianity

In both scholarship and journalism, Bhaktapur has frequently been portrayed as the most ‘traditional’ of the three cities of Nepal’s Kathmandu Valley. In 1928, the traveller Perceval Landon wrote that Bhaktapur had ‘retained an individuality and an aloofness that other towns in the Valley have to some extent lost in the ever-growing influence of Kathmandu’ (1993 [1928]: 219-20). In 1990, the anthropologist Robert Levy wrote of Bhaktapur as an ‘archaic city’, carrying forward ‘a long-established local culture [and] civilization’, with social organization being orientated towards ‘moral, rather than technical order’ (1990: 18-19).

Such approaches, tinged with Orientalist romanticism, have been rightly challenged by more recent scholars (Grieve 2006; Hachhethu 2007). However, most observers do recognize that in recent decades social change has taken place more slowly in
Bhaktapur than in its neighbours, Kathmandu and Patan. The social and religious practices developed by the Newars (the ethnic group comprising around 80 per cent of Bhaktapur’s population) during the Malla period (1201-1769) are still more important to social life in Bhaktapur than they are in Kathmandu or Patan (Liechty 2003). The Newar caste system is central to Bhaktapurian society, with caste rules in eating and marriage still widely observed; the majority of Bhaktapurian Newars maintain a demanding schedule of Hindu rituals, including life-cycle ceremonies that require large expenditures on feasting and sacrifice.

Notwithstanding its comparatively slow rate of social change, Bhaktapur has experienced disruptive social developments. Since the 1960s, the Nepali government has pursued ambitious policies of modernization. The education system has expanded rapidly, bringing literacy and knowledge of Nepali to the majority of Bhaktapurians for the first time. There have been successive land reforms, granting security of tenure to tenants and mandating the redistribution of land (see Gellner & Pradhan 1999). A communist party which emerged in the wake of land reform – the Nepal Workers’ and Peasants’ Party (NWPP) – has dominated Bhaktapur’s politics for more than forty years. Representing the farmer caste against the interests of landlords, it has done much to erode traditional conventions of caste deference. It has also, using funds obtained from a tourist entrance fee, initiated street-cleaning, sanitation, and education and health projects, which have significantly improved living standards (Hachhethu 2007).

In recent decades, Bhaktapur’s younger generation has been influenced by globalized culture, consumerism, and higher education, arousing increasing critique of traditional values and practices. The civil war of 1996-2006, although affecting Bhaktapur less than other parts of Nepal, has contributed to a general climate of insecurity.

Improved living standards have been widely welcomed, but Bhaktapurians also voice disquiet over the cultural impact of change. During my fieldwork, I would sit on the public porch in my local neighbourhood and talk with older people who sat there during the day. I used to ask how things had changed since their childhoods. They would remark positively on clean streets and land reform, but also complain bitterly that important rituals were no longer kept up, that young people no longer showed proper deference, and that family members no longer cared for each other well. Two types of complaint about failing care within the family recurred frequently. Disputes between brothers over the division of property are common across South Asia (see, e.g., Parry 1979); within Bhaktapur, it was said, such disputes had become more frequent and intense, owing to the greater value of the land now at stake, a reduced regard for family comity and reputation, and increasing readiness to resort to the law. Tensions between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law are also common in many South Asian communities (see, e.g., Bennett 1983); in Bhaktapur, it was said by older people, these disputes had been made more bitter by the education of young women, and their exposure to modern ideas and fashions, which had increased their assertiveness and inattentiveness towards elders. Such complaints were often accompanied by the observation that the needy – the elderly, the sick, the impoverished, those who were isolated from relatives – were going unloved and uncared for by family and community. I heard such anxieties voiced not only by the old, but also by the middle-aged and even the young.

It is in this context that Christianity has developed in Bhaktapur. In the period after 1951, when Nepal was opened to outside groups, Bhaktapur’s Newars were noted as particularly unreceptive to Christian evangelism. A mission hospital was founded in the city in 1954, but the fellowship attached to it failed to attract converts (Perry

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2000: 67). It was only after the arrival, in the late 1980s, of a group of high-caste Newar converts from outside the city that Christianity began to make inroads in Bhaktapur. The church they established gradually succeeded in attracting significant numbers of converts through a focus on healing, and a strategy of attracting middle- and high-caste Newars. From the late 1990s, other churches, more diverse in terms of caste, began to spring up: in a survey conducted in 2013, I found twenty-two churches in Bhaktapur with a total of approximately 2,725 baptized members, representing roughly 3.3 per cent of the city’s population. The majority of churches in Bhaktapur, as in Nepal as a whole, could be broadly described as charismatic or Pentecostal. This has been an extremely recent and rapid growth: thirteen of the twenty-two churches surveyed had been founded since 2005.

The upsurge of Christianity in Bhaktapur has been enabled by the sociocultural changes I have described. Churches tend to attract those who have ‘fallen through the cracks’ of traditional social organization – that is, those who have found themselves without sufficient care at a time of personal crisis. These are the ill, the neglected, the marginalized – those who have been worst affected by the failures of care discussed by my friends on the porch. As I noted at the outset, a typical conversion story is one of illness caused by presumed witchcraft, followed by healing. Seventy per cent of the Christians I interviewed had converted after an experience of healing, either of themselves or of a family member: most of these healings followed a supposed attack of witchcraft. As is the case elsewhere (e.g. Meyer 1999), witchcraft accusations were typically associated with disputes in families or neighbourhoods. In the case of Bhaktapurian converts, these disputes often related to failures of care.

For Bhaktapurian Christians, the cultivation of new ethical practices relating to care is central to the process of conversion, and also underlies the centrality of peacefulness within their ethical lives. The story of Vishnu, a Newar farmer, illustrates this. He became a Christian in the early 1990s when he was in his late fifties. In an interview, he recalled:

Some demons (saitan) were very envious when they saw that I was earning a lot of money so they harmed me with black magic … [A friend] brought some soaked paddy to my mill to make beaten rice … I said to him that I could not beat the rice for him without immediate payment … He was very angry and thought I had insulted him. In revenge he did black magic on me … I got ill and could not be cured at all … I had a problem with my back, [which was] bent in a complete ‘u’ shape.

As I got to know Vishnu better, I learned that the incident of witchcraft described stands for a wider situation of social discord. In the early 1990s, his increased prosperity – brought about by his rice mill – was eliciting jealousy from the local community and causing his sons to push for a division of family property. After he became ill, he found that his sons resented the cost of treatment, and that people whom he had considered friends did not step forward to help. It was then that he came to believe he was a victim of witchcraft; sometimes he would attribute this to his sons, sometimes to his resentful friend.

Vishnu described how, in this context of physical suffering and social tension, he met a Christian woman:

Later … God sent a friend to my house with the good news (su-samachar) of God … [It was a woman] who used to collect grass from my field for her cattle … When she saw me she asked about my sickness, and I explained to her what had happened. Then she asked if I wanted to join with the Lord (prabhu) and get better from my sickness. I replied to her that I would join if I was cured …
When I joined the church I felt a new sense of aliveness because I started to become better and better. When my sickness was cured, I felt a great joy.

Although Vishnu maintains that he has been cured, his back is still very bent, so from a physical perspective it cannot be said that he has fully recovered. I would interpret his experience of healing as representing, in the first instance, a social and spiritual change in his life, which has given him a new sense of peace and well-being, while also relieving his physical pain.

Vishnu’s conversion, and his integration into the church community, were a gradual process. After he met the Christian woman, a regular fellowship was set up at his house to pray for healing, which was attended by four or five church members from his local area. These people became good friends to Vishnu, and would help with work in the fields which he was unable to perform, and which his sons neglected. Vishnu also attended church regularly, learned hymns and Bible stories, and adopted Christian habits such as refusing to drink alcohol (which is an integral part of many Newar rituals). Over the next two years, his physical condition improved somewhat, but not to the extent that he considered himself cured; it was a desire for full healing that led him finally to decide to be baptized and give up all Hindu worship. This precipitated a decisive break with most of his immediate and extended family (they considered it unforgiveable that he would neglect rituals such as those for his dead parents) and exposed him to mockery and opprobrium in his local community. As Vishnu’s ties with his family and community weakened, those with the church became deeper. Since his conversion, most of his social time has been spent with other Christians. He attends organized or informal prayer fellowships almost daily; when he can no longer care for himself, he plans to retire to a room in the church building.

When describing his integration into the church community, what Vishnu emphasizes more than anything else is the distinctiveness of its ethical practices. He would point out, with manifest emotion, that those who cared for him in the church had no social obligation to do so, while those who did have such an obligation did not help. Whereas relatives and neighbours were indifferent or hostile, Christians with whom he had no social ties offered extensive support. He also noted that Christians asked for nothing in return for their help and prayer, while Hindu healers demanded significant sums. From a social perspective, the process of Vishnu’s conversion represents the disintegration of one, conflictive set of relationships, and the establishment of a new, more harmonious set of relationships, based in practices of material and spiritual care. The establishment of more harmonious relationships gave Vishnu the confidence to disengage from more conflictive social interaction.

After his conversion, Vishnu faced the problem of how to respond to intensified familial and community hostility. For a time, his wife refused to cook for him and his sons broke off all contact. Neighbours accused him of bringing the displeasure of the Hindu gods on them, and said that Christians eat beef and engage in illicit sexual relations. It took Vishnu some time to accept the teaching, continually reiterated in churches and fellowships, that Christians should respond to hostile words with mollification or silence, while praying for and loving those who have wronged them. Gradually, he learned to restrain his anger and find ways to avoid conflict. He recalled his actions during a dispute between a new convert and some people in his locality:

[There was a man] who had been very sick and was saved at the church, and he was saying that Jesus was the only great god, and that the idols of Narayan and Mahadev should be swept away into the
river. Because of this other people got very angry and he was about to be beaten ... I went there to praise Narayan and Shiva and try to correct what he said in order to protect him. I said that Narayan and Shiva are also great in their own areas. And I said that our God is supreme for us.

Reflecting on this incident, he said:

Our Lord faced such a great torture and was hung on the cross where his blood was running down his body ... Our Lord was so kind and compassionate that he did not utter a single word when he was crucified. He accepted all the acts against him.

This story illustrates the importance of pacifistic ethical practices for Bhaktapurian Christians, and shows how these practices are related to the need to care for other Christians and protect them from social conflict. Vishnu’s invocation of the crucifixion of Jesus in justification of his pacifistic ethics points to the way that these ethics depend on a particular Christian moral tradition. It is this moral tradition, and the narrativization of individual life that stems from it, to which I turn to in the next section.

Insecurity, narrative, and moral tradition
Robert Levy has noted the peculiarity of Bhaktapurian Hinduism in the wider South Asian context. Whereas in most of South Asia the cults of the Tantric or ‘fierce’ deities such as Kali and Bhairava are subordinate to those of the high or ‘pure’ deities such as Vishnu and Shiva, in Bhaktapur this is not the case. Elsewhere, Levy notes, upper-caste Hindus often see the cults of the Tantric deities as an ‘inferior ... superstitious folk religion’, but in Bhaktapur these gods are ‘fully legitimate, and not only legitimate but the focus of aristocratic and royal Tantrism’ (1990: 602). The temples and cults of the Tantric deities are central to Bhaktapur’s major ritual complexes (1990: 602). While the Tantric deities require blood sacrifice, and are seen to operate in a realm of ‘value-transcendent power’, the high deities do not require sacrifice and are seen to order the moral realm (1990: 602). Tantric deities are associated with relationships grounded in coercion and patronage, while high deities are associated with relationships grounded in purity and caste (1990: 343-4).

The unusual prominence of the Tantric deities in Bhaktapur creates a potential insecurity in the city’s spiritual life, which is significant at least retrospectively for those who convert to Christianity. It should be noted that the views of Christian converts, on whom my research focused, cannot be taken as representative of Bhaktapur’s population as a whole. The Hindu cosmos, as described by converts, is multi-faceted and unstable. Diverse supernatural actors require worship in diverse modes. Within this multi-faceted cosmos, no particular deity appears to have dominating power; rather, the worshipper must balance the demands of a range of gods and hope that the deities he or she succeeds in pleasing have enough power to fulfil his or her ends. The Tantric deities are seen by converts as powerful but also potentially cruel and unreliable. They are often portrayed in the act of killing other spiritual beings, or with necklaces of human skulls; it is believed that if they are displeased or activated by black magic, they may attack those who worship them. The insecurity of the Hindu cosmos is often cited by Bhaktapurian Christians as a reason for conversion.

The contrast between insecurity within Hinduism and security within Christianity is central to the way in which Bhaktapurian Christians narrativize their lives, particularly among those who have suffered a supposed attack of witchcraft. Witchcraft victims who become Christian have typically made numerous unsuccessful appeals to Tantric deities for healing prior to conversion, as these deities are seen to hold particular power.
over evil spirits. One way that Tantric deities are appealed to is by visiting a medium (a religious specialist who becomes possessed by, and channels the power of, a Tantric deity) in order to obtain exorcism (see Gellner 2001: ch. 8). Mediums often charge significant sums for their services, and may exercise physical force during the course of an exorcism. One female convert, who became mentally disturbed after childbirth and was thought to be possessed, recalled:

One medium hit me with a stick made of sugarcane. She hit me in the eyes and I was bleeding from my eyes, so my husband became very angry with her and took me home ... After visiting I would feel OK for a while then I would feel the same again later.

A common element in conversion stories is the deterioration of relationships between converts and mediums, who come to be seen as greedy and possibly threatening. In this case, the woman came to believe that a medium was performing witchcraft on her: this is not an uncommon development (Gellner 2001: 209). The Tantric deities, and those who channel them, are seen as potentially helpful but also unpredictable: one can never be sure that they will not suddenly become hostile.

Most converts have also previously appealed to Tantric deities through sacrifice: they would frequently mention sacrifice when discussing the relative security of Hindu and Christian spiritual life. Sacrifice was said to illustrate the greed, cruelty, and relative powerlessness of the Hindu deities, in contrast with the kindness and strength of the Christian God. Reflecting on a long search for healing, one convert said:

When I started going to church I began to feel that there really is a living God, and this God speaks in our hearts ... When I was following that side [Hinduism] I always had to try to work out which god could help me ... Those gods may harm you if they are activated by the devils or black magicians ... When I was still practising [Hinduism] nothing in my life was secure ... The gods from that side just eat and eat. And they even try to eat us too.

Here, the act of eating – a reference to meat consumed from sacrifices – is taken to indicate greed and dangerousness, while the act of speaking ‘into the heart’ is taken to illustrate love and care. It is said by Christians that the Tantric deities’ need to eat illustrates their relative weakness, as they would die without food. The Christian God, it is often pointed out, does not require sacrifice, but rather sacrifices himself for others. The sacrifice of Christ on the cross is often presented as an instructive example of pacifistic and loving behaviour. It is also taken, paradoxically, to indicate Christ’s strength, as it marks the decisive defeat of evil spirits by God.

Bhaktapurian Christian conversion narratives tend to posit a stark break at the point of conversion, marked by an acceptance of the Christian God’s power to defeat evil spirits, and thus provide spiritual security. This is illustrated in the story of Laxmi, born in 1955 into the farmer caste. In the mid-1980s, her 7-year-old son, Dilip, began to behave strangely. He would cry for no reason and lash out violently; the problem was so bad that his father had to stay at home from work to restrain him. Laxmi believed Dilip had been cursed by some female neighbours with whom she had argued. After several years, her husband met some Christians, and they began sending Dilip to a church for prayer. Eventually Laxmi and her husband became Christians: they were baptized in 1997. During this time, there were intermittent improvements in Dilip’s behaviour, but nothing permanent. As an adult, Dilip became an alcoholic and subjected his wife to severe physical abuse. In 2010, he was finally convinced to be baptized, and since then, in the context of close attention from various church members, there has been a dramatic improvement in his behaviour, as perceived by the community. He has given
up alcohol, ceased to beat his wife, and begun to behave in what is considered a far more conventional way.

It is notable that Laxmi and her husband became Christians many years before their son’s full healing. Rather than healing, Laxmi emphasized ‘spiritual joy’ and ‘peace’ when describing her conversion. Here, she recalls the establishment of a prayer fellowship in her house:

They [the church members with whom she was in contact] proposed to organize a fellowship . . . and said they wanted to pray for me too . . . They asked if I had any health problems. I made up a fake sickness, saying I had fever . . . They prayed for me, and even though I was not ill my body started to feel much better after that prayer. I felt spiritual joy (atma ananda) and began to consider believing in [the Christian] God. As they were running the fellowship I became familiar with people from the church and . . . my belief increased more and more.

The word I render here as ‘joy’ – ananda – is a Hindu theological term usually translated as ‘joy’, ‘bliss’, or ‘ecstasy’; in everyday speech, it encompasses a wider sense of peacefulness, well-being, and comfort. Laxmi presents the ‘spiritual joy’ (atma ananda) she felt when Christians prayed for her as the turning-point in her conversion story: it marks a transition from wariness of Christians to openness towards them. This experience did not occur during solitary prayer but as others prayed for her; it was closely bound up with her increasing familiarity with church members and a sense that they cared for her and her son.

Laxmi connected her sense of joy during prayer with a Christian theology that is clearly in the tradition of PEP. She placed particular emphasis on the peace bestowed on her by Christ’s ability to defeat evil spirits, stemming from his sacrifice on the cross:

[During prayer] we have spiritual joy, we have peace (shanti) . . . It is not certain that prayer will cure physical sickness, but it is certain that it will cure sickness . . . from evil spirits. Maybe for a little time, the evil spirits will resist God, but their power is nothing in front of God. There is a song where it says the evil spirits are trampled under the feet of Christ.

Laxmi understands this defeat of evil spirits to have occurred through Christ’s crucifixion, and particularly through his blood. When she prays for spirits to be expelled from a possessed person, she prays ‘by the power of Jesus’ blood’, or by ‘Jesus’ powerful cross’. These forms of prayer are common among Bhaktapurian Christians. Laxmi says that Christ’s power over evil spirits has given her a sense not only of spiritual but also of social security. While she formerly had a great fear of witches, they now do not trouble her, because ‘a witch cannot stand before God; they will immediately begin to scream.’

Laxmi described how her newfound sense of security helped her to cultivate new ethical practices. She recalled an incident shortly after her conversion when she confronted a woman she believed had cursed her son:

We knew who those people were but we did not fight with them. Later that witch said to us, ‘From now on I will not be able to harm you people, because you have recognized the best god (banlamha parameshowra).’ . . . She said this without feeling shame. I replied to her: ‘From now on, who will be able to harm us? We have got a God who is capable of putting you people under his feet’.

Immediately after recalling this, Laxmi began to talk about the practice of loving enemies:

In the past we found it very hard to [love our enemies], but now it is getting easier for us . . . Now, even when our enemies curse us, we bless them instead. We tolerate them and stay quiet. There is a saying of God: ‘You tolerate and I will punish them’ . . . If we talk to non-Christians in the same way that they speak to and swear at us, then we will be the same as them, we will not be Christians.
As with Vishnu, it took some time for Laxmi to develop a pacifistic approach to those who were hostile to her. When she first converted, as we have seen, she felt a sense of triumph over her adversaries, and could not restrain herself from expressing this. However, she later recognized the need to tolerate hostile people peacefully. It was Laxmi’s sense of God’s power – ‘We have got a God who is capable of putting you people under his feet’ – that relieved her of the fear that had previously driven her involvement in aggressive cycles of behaviour in her community.

Laxmi’s pacifistic ethics should be viewed in the context of the teaching practices of Bhaktapurian churches. She attributes her ability to tolerate enemies to her reading of the Bible, and to her deep involvement in the church: as her husband does not have time for this, she says, he has found adopting peaceful ethics harder. Laxmi was functionally illiterate prior to conversion; she was taught to read in a house fellowship. Within these fellowships, which are central to Bhaktapurian church organization, younger Christians teach their elders to read the Bible, and also explain the meaning of passages to them. House fellowships are also forums where Christians share their sufferings, pray for each other, and collectively work through moral issues. The group will often suggest ways a member could diffuse a conflictual situation in his or her family or neighbourhood. In larger services on Saturdays or other days, peacefulness is central to preaching and teaching. Pastors often dwell on the story of Jesus’ crucifixion, and on the power of his blood to defeat evil spirits. The safety from witchcraft that results from this, it is constantly reiterated, means that Christians can respond to hostility with love: as a witch cannot harm a Christian, it is said, there is no need to fight him or her.

In Laxmi’s story, then, we have seen how a narrativization of individual life positing a dramatic transition from a conflictive spiritual cosmos to a peaceful one engenders the development of pacifistic ethical practices. We have also seen how this narrativization of Christian life is connected with that strand of PEP which foregrounds Christ’s defeat of evil on the cross. That is, Bhaktapurian Pentecostalism foregrounds the eschatological ‘already’ of the crucifixion over the eschatological ‘not yet’ of the Second Coming, thus creating a sense of spiritual security conducive to the cultivation of new forms of social and ethical life.

**Virtue ethics and the reception of theology**

How, then, has employing MacIntyre’s concepts of practice, narrative, and moral tradition illuminated the relative significance of local circumstance and extra-local theology in the formation of Bhaktapurian Christian culture? We have seen the significant role played within this culture by both local circumstances (family and community conflicts related to social change; the prevalence of Tantric deities in Bhaktapurian Hinduism) and extra-local theology (the Pentecostal doctrine of Christ’s defeat of evil on the cross). To clarify the relative significance of these varied factors, I will briefly recapitulate my main arguments in terms of MacIntyre’s three concepts.

The central ethical practices in Bhaktapurian churches, as we have seen, are those of care and peacefulness. Social and cultural changes have created a situation where significant numbers of Bhaktapurians find themselves without sufficient care at times of difficulty, and in situations of conflict. Churches, by focusing their activities on caring for the afflicted and inculcating pacifistic ethics, provide a way forward for such Bhaktapurians that is experienced as healing. To a certain extent, church practices of care
can be seen as a reconstitution of types of caring practice that were previously widespread in Bhaktapur but have been eroded – that is, as a response to local circumstances. At the same time, these practices are also innovative: care in Bhaktapur has traditionally been practised within the bounds of particular social and familial groups; Christians, on the other hand, offer care to people with whom they have no previous social connection. Church practices of peacefulness in response to hostility are also innovative, as they involve eschewing the cycles of conflict and witchcraft accusations that have become common in Bhaktapur.

These ethical innovations are closely connected with the ways Bhaktapurian Christians narrate their lives. As we have seen, Bhaktapurian Christians tend to posit a radical break in their lives at the time of conversion. Conceiving of individual life in terms of a radical disjunction predisposes Bhaktapurian Christians towards the possibility of significant ethical change.

These forms of narrativization are decisively shaped by the moral tradition of PEP. As I have described, this tradition is characterized by a tension between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’ of Christian eschatology, with Bhaktapurian Christians emphasizing the ‘already’ of Christ’s defeat of evil on the cross. This ‘already’-focused eschatology – positing a radical break in history at the time of the crucifixion – is mirrored in the structure of individual conversion narratives. With evil and witchcraft decisively disempowered, Christians are able to disengage themselves from previous forms of worship and social interaction, free from the fear that such disengagement will make them vulnerable to spiritual attack. Having disengaged themselves from previous practices and relationships, they cultivate new ones in the community of the church.

Analysis of Bhaktapurian Christianity in terms of MacIntyre’s concepts, then, suggests that while local circumstances and culture have made the growth of Christianity possible, and have created needs that are being met by Christian communities, the specific character of Christian culture in Bhaktapur can be explained to a significant extent in terms of a particular Pentecostal moral tradition. This conclusion is consistent with the approach of Joel Robbins (2007), in that I have argued that Christianization has led to significant cultural discontinuity in Bhaktapur. Additionally, this analysis suggests the validity of a criticism I have made of the anthropology of Christianity: that it has unjustly neglected the significance of ideas, and their history, in Christian life.

Attention to Pentecostal ideas has indicated that aspects of Bhaktapurian Christianity which could be thought of as reflecting local culture or a process of modernization may more accurately be considered a reflection of Pentecostal theology. For instance, some might read the centrality of Christ’s sacrifice in Bhaktapurian Christianity in terms of the centrality of sacrifice in local Hinduism. My approach, however, suggests the importance of the connection of Christ’s sacrifice with the defeat of evil, and pacifistic ethics, in Pentecostal theology. Likewise, the willingness of Bhaktapurian Christians to break away from their families to forge new communities might be read in terms of an individualism associated with modernity. My analysis, however, suggests the significance of a sense of security associated with Christ’s defeat of evil, and related changes in the way that life is narrativized.

This emphasis on the significance of theology has implications for anthropological comparison. The concept of moral tradition, with its grounding in practice and narrative, allows for an examination of the influence of theology in Christian life.
that both takes full account of ethnographic particularity and enables cross-cultural comparison of the interaction of ideas, meanings, and social forms. For instance, a comparison can be drawn between the influence of PEP in Bhaktapur and in Apostolic churches in Botswana, as described by Frederick Klaits (2010). In both cases, Pentecostals have developed pacifistic ethics in response to social conflict manifested in witchcraft accusations; in both cases, there is a foregrounding of Jesus’ crucifixion as the final defeat of evil, providing security from demonic attack. Furthermore, churches have in both cases cultivated caring practices for physically afflicted people whom wider society has neglected. This comparison suggests that PEP is most likely to be adopted in situations of social and spiritual breakdown; it further suggests that it can often be perceived as successful in creating stable communities based in pacifistic and caring practices. To confirm these hypotheses, further comparative work would be needed. What I hope to have demonstrated is that MacIntyre’s virtue ethics offers anthropologists a way to clarify the role of theology in Christian social life, and that such clarification offers new avenues for cross-cultural comparison.

NOTES

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1 The main period of my doctoral fieldwork was from February 2012 to July 2013. I conducted further fieldwork in Bhaktapur during shorter trips in 2010, 2011, 2014, and 2016. My main research methods were participant observation and interviews; I also conducted a survey of Bhaktapur’s churches. My research focused mainly on Bhaktapur’s Christian population, though I did live with a Hindu family and conduct some interviews with Hindus in the city.

2 One dimension of eschatology – millenarianism – has received several focused treatments (e.g. Marshall 2009; Robbins 2001; 2004a).

3 As Cox (1994) has pointed out, Land does exaggerate the homogeneity of Pentecostal eschatology.

4 Some have taken the opposite view, for instance Marshall (2009).

5 For a lengthier examination of the relationship between peacefulness and eschatology with Pentecostalism, see Gibson (2017).

6 On the history of Nepali Christianity, see Barclay (2009) and Perry (2000). The Christian population of Nepal is now at least 1 million, or 3.6 per cent of Nepal’s population (see Shrestha 2012).

7 Insofar as the great majority of Nepali and Bhaktapurian churches practise healing and exorcism, and have emotive styles of worship, most could be classified as either charismatic or Pentecostal. Only a minority of churches, however, formally define themselves in these terms. See Shrestha (2012) on the range of denominations present in Nepal.

8 Among the thirty-four people with whom I conducted extended recorded life-history interviews, twenty-four converted because of healing. The proportion was similar among the much larger number with whom I conducted informal interviews and conversations. Ram Prasad Shrestha, head of the Missions Commission of Nepal, estimates that 75 per cent of Nepal Christians convert because of healing (2012: 60).

9 On the significance of Christian practices of care in another South Asian context, see Roberts (2016).

10 I use pseudonyms for all informants.

11 Transliterations of the original language are Newari or Nepali.

12 In Bhaktapur, the Tantric deities are usually referred to literally as the ‘gods to whom one can offer blood’ (hi pha dyo), while the high deities are referred to as the ‘ordinary gods’ (sadharan dyo).

13 For Hindus in Bhaktapur, the Tantric gods have a wider and generally more positive spectrum of meanings than for Christians. On perceptions of the Tantric deities in popular Hinduism, see Fuller (2004).

14 It should be noted that needs for social and psychological peace stemming from the breakdown of traditional Newar social practices are also being met by other new religious movements, such as Vipassana meditation (see Leve 2011; 2016).

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La pacifisme du pentecôtisme : éthique de la vertu et réception de la théologie au Népal

Résumé

L’anthropologie du christianisme a rencontré quelque difficulté à théoriser la place de la théologie dans la vie sociale chrétienne. À partir de l’histoire des vertus retracée par Alasdair MacIntyre, et en particulier de ses concepts de pratique, de narration et de tradition morale, l’auteur explore la réception de la théologie pentecôtiste dans la ville népalaise de Bhaktapur. Il montre comment les chrétiens locaux ont exploité l’eschatologie pentecôtiste pour développer une éthique pacifique, qui leur permet de négocier les conflits sociaux et religieux locaux. La croyance que le Christ a remporté une victoire décisive sur les mauvais esprits permet aux chrétiens locaux de se détacher des cycles d’agression liés aux accusations de sorcellerie et de se créer un espace de sécurité dans lequel ils peuvent cultiver des pratiques distinctes d’attention vers les autres. En reliant cette théologie locale à une plus large tradition de la pensée morale pentecôtiste, l’auteur avance que l’éthique des vertus de MacIntyre offre un outil puissant pour interpréter la relation entre

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circumstances locales et théologie venue de l’extérieur, ainsi que pour étudier différents schémas culturels de réception théologique.

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