

Restructuring Spiritualism in New Life: Conversion to Christianity in Pokhara, Nepal

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Article History

Received 29 April 2020

Revised 11 September 2020

Accepted 21 November 2020

Abstract

Christianity entered Nepal more than three and half centuries ago but religious conversion is still a contentious issue. This paper explores the trend of conversion to Christianity in Pokhara, Nepal. The study method was qualitative and quantitative. Observation, interview schedule and case study guidelines were used to obtain data from 70 converts of AG Church, Fulbari, Pokhara. The study findings reveal that females and oppressed of all caste/ethnicities with low occupational status were more interested in conversion. With no single cause of conversion, process and consequence, there is a nexus between conversion and modernity, consequences and the elements of continuity. With healing and church charity as the key motivations behind conversion, people convert with different intentions to overcome health problems, discontent with present religion, for money, friends and family influences. Christian church activates charities/supports for conversion. Conversion as a choice is a product of modern individualism, and the converts perceived contentment and changes in post-convert life. The accusation that conversion to Christianity is for financial gains may be valid for those who come with expectations, but the majority converts economic status is not satisfactory. In the absence of a state sponsored health and social security system, prevailing socioeconomic inequalities and pseudo-scientific non-medics superstition of church, conversion may be a way to break predominant sociocultural hierarchy/barriers. Hence, it should not be very surprising that many more will adopt Christianity in future. Educational systems should be reformed to reflect each religion's genuine teaching and ideology and hence generate awareness on proselytizing.

Keywords: proselytizing, evangelization, healing, pseudo-scientific non-medics

Introduction

Religion is a social institution and a powerful organizing force in all societies. As a belief, its feelings touch the very depths of individual soul. Bhushan and Sachdeva (1999) affirm that religions pervade practically in every society but there is an infinite diversity of the forms of religious beliefs and practices. In multi-religious Nepal, the population distribution of Hindu, Buddhist, Islam, Kiranti, Christian, Jain, Sikh and unstated is 81.3%, 9.0%, 4.4%, 3.0%, 1.4%, 0.1%, 0.1, 0.7% respectively (CBS, 2011). This percentage figure indicates that all religions are increasing except Buddhism and Kiranti. The decrease of some religious population can be explained in terms of their conventionalism and orthodoxy. This also indicates that conversion to Christianity is speeding up. According to Lofland and Stark (1965), when a person substitutes one cosmological standpoint for another he/she is in the process of conversion. For Brown & Humphreys (2003), and Rambo (1993), religious conversion is an alteration in one's system of beliefs or a change in righteous allegiance. The constitution of Nepal 2015 declares the country a secular state, but prohibits proselytizing which is the act of religious conversion, or actions inviting this. Part 3 Article 26 of Nepalese constitution gives right to religious freedom but restricts religious conversion/proselytization which is an offence punishable by three-year detention for successful and by six years if conversion has resulted and states that those acts shall be punishable (Bista, 2017).

According to the first modern census account of Nepal, in 1950s, there were less than thirty Nepali Christians in Nepal. Budhathoki (2003) has stated that in 1579, a band of Christian missionaries were invited by the Mogul emperor Akbar in North India. With this entrance they began to use Nepal as a passageway for Tibetan mission. Perry (1993) affirms that hoping to open a route from Peking to Rome, two priests trekked into Kathmandu on Christmas Eve of 1661 during the reign of King Pratap Malla. Likewise, on 14th March 1703, six Capuchin Fathers travelled from Rome and this was the beginning of conversion in Nepal (Rai, 2017). The Capuchin missionaries were expelled after the unification of Nepal in 1769. The foreign missions send missionaries all over the world for conversion to Christianity through charity work, education, mercy service and direct evangelization (Rongong, 2012). Their major tools of conversion were free education, medical services, and social services mainly caring the orphans. These orphans become preachers and missionaries when grown-up, which was a kind of strategy for spreading Christianity. Rai (2017) insists conversion to Christianity through labor migration and the entrance of Christian Gospel to Nepal, but not basically through the western missionaries only.

Nepali origin people in Darjeeling gradually converted themselves to Christianity and had been praying for Nepal's Hindu's conversion.... *prabhu arjee suni leau, Gorkhali le mukti paune dhoka kholi deu* (God! listen to our prayers, please unlock the door for Gorkhali's salvation) (Rai, 2017). Perry (1993) argues that the Indian Christians of Nepali origin were pioneers of *tent making missionary* (non-professional) preachers. Contrary to colonized countries, the Nepali Protestant church was established under the indigenous leadership. Nepali origin David Mukhia and his wife from India established Nepal's first church Ramghat church in Pokhara in 1952.

The political change brought by the change of 1990 was a crucial moment by gaining new ground for democracy and religious freedom that accelerated the process of conversion in Nepal, consequently Christian organizations geared up the growth of Christianity. The ex-British Gorkha Army played a lead role in Nepali Christian history. In the later days, the Christian conversion has undergone a paradigm shift (Budhathoki, 2003). Not only Nepal, many Asian countries including China are in great transformation due to widespread conversion to Christianity. Aikman (2006) has predicted that in the next thirty years, one-third of China's population could become Christian, hence making China one of the largest Christian nations in the world which in turn would reshape China's sociopolitical landscape.

The year 2000s saw the speeding growth of Christianity in Nepal. There were likely more than one million baptized Christians present by the early 2010s and Nepal's church is the fastest growing in the world, with an annual growth rate of 10.9% (GCTS, 2013). It is widely believed that between four and eight percent of Nepal's population has converted to Christianity in the past 18 years (Fricke, 2008). Despite the law against proselytizing, recent numbers are more controversial, ranging from the one million or so Christians that the government acknowledged to the nearly two million that church-related group argue for (Johnson & Zurlo, 2020). This increase is really much higher but may be inaccurately reported. Whatever, the actual growth, much of this growth can be attributed to Nepal's internal changes viz. opening of Nepal to foreigners, restoration of democracy, a decade long Maoist Civil War, end of monarchy in 2008 and transition of Nepal from a Hindu kingdom to secular republic with a greater religious freedom. The mushrooming growth of Christianity raises questions on secularism and conversion.

Buckser and Glazier (2003) affirm that anthropologically, conversion is a very seldom a sudden moment of insight/inspiration involving a change both of individual consciousness and of social belonging of mental attitude and of physical experience, whose unfolding

depends both on its cultural setting and on the distinct individuals who undergo it. From the perspective of *Religious Conversion Theory in anthropology and sociology*, the sociological understanding of religious experience comes from the combination of social action with its subjective meaning. Weber (1992) gives an exemplary interpretation that conversion recognizes the profound inner relationship between the personal fate, ideologies of salvation, and Protestant Christianity is the sources of value system determining social organization, people's mentality, behaviour that support the growth of capitalism and entrepreneurship. From Marxist perspective, McKinnon (2005) opines that religion is *opium* of the people which soothes the pain produced by oppression and hence religious movements are produced in an oppressed class.

Arguing from a psychological perspective Hood et al. (2009) opines that most of the people decide to convert to another faith or religion to make their life more integrated and happy. Rambo (1993) suggests four components of conversion: culture, social, personal, and religious system and five types of conversion-apostasy or defection, intensification, affiliation, institutional and traditional transition. Mlk (2012) has attempted to answer the question of what it means for a Nepalese Hindu to convert to Christianity. Through a phenomenological and narrative analysis, he concludes that there is a pattern of steps that Nepalese Hindus go through when converting to Christianity, a pattern, he calls steps *as Stability, Crisis, Encounter, Conflict and Restored Stability*.

Leve (2014) stated that many of the conversions are related to illness. In the post-earthquake period of 2015 and during the recent COVID-19 pandemic 2020, there were claims that the Christian pastors find sick people, wage laborers, talk to them, distribute food, money, clothes and these people were convinced to follow Christianity. Before the release of Nepalese in 2015, debates bulged over whether to scrap secularism and adopt an official Hindu designation. While Christians and other minorities feared a clampdown on religious freedom, the Hindu right insisted that secularism would allow Christianity to thrive in Nepal. They indict churches of supporting proselytizing. There are accusations that a major factor in conversion is financial gain. This paper tries to explore whether this accusation is true or not, with the main endeavor to explore why people change their beliefs and whether they are contented with their conversion? Is Christianity helpful in eradicating inequalities/sufferings of their life? The major objective of the paper is to explore the trend of conversion to Christianity in Pokhara, Nepal.

Data and Methods

Pedestalled on anthropological principles of Positivist and Interpretivist tradition, both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used in this study. For Primary data collection, the fieldwork was conducted in a meticulous field study period during February 12-28, 2020 in *Assemblies of God (AG) Church*, Fulbari, Pokhara which is among one of the largest church in Pokhara. There are seventy convert Christian families (altogether 260 family members) in this church. Each of the 70 family heads were selected for the study under the census method of sampling on the ground that as elderly they are the key decision makers in the household activities and have good understanding on conversion. Apart from survey method that facilitated in collecting information on the converts motivations and their social relations in post-conversion period, the qualitative ethnographic information was collected through observation (viz. worship, prayer for bodily, psychological and spiritual healing), interviews and case studies on valuation, feelings and contentment after the conversion.

For controlling the validity and reliability, a generic assessment checklist was designed on the magnitude of motives, ramifications, trends of conversion and pre-test was consummated at 10% of the sample size i.e. 7 converts at Ramghat church, Pokhara that assisted in maintaining consistency of reliability across time, items and respondents. This facilitated in assisting validation of measurement tools to represent of variables. There were diverse challenges in collecting data on controversial religious conversion. The major challenge was to persuade converts to share their experiences on their erstwhile and post-conversion life. Ethical approval in the form of verbal consent was obtained from each family head before data collection.

Results and Discussion

Socioeconomic, religious and cultural status plays important role in human life so as the gender/sex status in patriarchal Nepali society were the female decision to religious conversion is influenced and determined by the hegemonic male of the family. Among the sampled population, seventy family heads, about 79 percent are males and 21 percent are females. On the age structure, 7 percent are between 20-30-years-age group, 29 percent between 30-40 years, and 43 percent are of 40-50-years-age group. Similarly, 14 percent are between 50-60-years-age group and 7 percent are from the age group of above 60 years. About 19 percent are illiterate, 26 percent has completed primary level education, 31 percent secondary level, 20 percent Bachelor level and 4 percent Master level education. The majority converts

have obtained Secondary (class 9-12) education. About 72 percent are married, 14 percent are unmarried and 14 percent are separated, divorced/widow (er). Around 58 percent respondents are married within the same caste and 42 percent had inter-caste marriage. Of the caste/ethnic composition, 22 percent are Chhetri, 14 percent Brahmin, and 43 percent are from different *Janajati* groups (ethnicities) viz. Gurung, Magar, Tharu, Newar. According to a report by FNCN (2017), 65 percent Christians of Nepal are Dalits but in *AG Church*, the percentage of Dalits (Kami, Damai and Sarki) is only 21. Of these caste/ethnicities, Brahmin, Chhetri, Newar and Dalits were by birth Hindus and the *Janajati* groups were either the followers of Bon, Buddhism, Animism or even Hinduism.

About 57 percent converts have nuclear family and 43 percent are from joint family. Around 15 percent have family size ranging from 2 to 4 members, 57 percent families have 4 to 6 members, 14 percent have 6 to 8 and 14 percent families have more than 8 members in their family. About 14 percent of them are waged farm laborers, 29 percent are involved in small business, 36 percent are engaged in job and 21 percent are wage laborers. About 29 percent families have an annual income ranging from NRs 150000 to 200000, 22 percent earn 100000 to 500000 annually, and 21 percent families have an annual income of 200000-250000. About 14 percent families have an annual income of 50000 to 100000, 7% make an annual income of 250000-300000, and only 7 percent families have an annual income of over 300000. Most of the convert families have low annual income which makes us contemplate on whether they have been really benefitted monetarily after their conversion. However, religion can manipulate response to poverty by having a moral impact when principles benefitting all in society are applied that can influence the reaction to poverty by nurturing an attitude of willingness to practice liberality.

Information Sources and Motivational Dynamics of Conversion

The converts obtained information on Christianity from different sources. About 21 percent converts got the information on Christianity from neighbors, 29 percent from friends, and 36 percent from books/mass media and the rest from other sources such as Christian gospel tracts. The derived information prepared the ground for their decision to discard traditional religion and convert to Christianity. Mostly the women as family heads were the initial converts. Around 45 percent mothers' converted first tracked by 30 percent fathers' as first converts in the family that motivated other members to convert. Similarly, 10 percent elder sisters' converted initially and 15 percent early converts were the brothers. About 31 percent early converts experienced criticism and harassment by their family members. However, 51 percent

families were appeased and 18 percent converts had no overt reaction from family which depicts that most of the families were positive on their siblings' conversion.

Budhathoki (2003) stated that humans always have a tendency to experience a new way of life. To drive this process forward, there should be favorable forces. The converts had different heartening reasons behind their decision to be a Christian. Table1 spells out the 70 converts motivational factors of conversion.

Table 1

Motivational Factors of Conversion

Choose to follow Jesus	Number	Percentage
To be released from addiction and bad habit, sin	3	4.3
Healing from disease and evil spirit	25	35
Hope to earn money	2	3
Life satisfaction, salvation/peace of heart, hope	11	16.7
Charity, brotherhood, love and care, bliss	15	21
Family bigotry and quarrels	3	4.3
Caste discrimination, ego-centric society	5	7
It's not a religion, it's a science	4	5.7
No any other special reason	2	3
Total	70	100

Healing from diseases and charity by churches are the key motivational dynamics of conversion to Christianity. Mental, physical and bodily healing from diseases or from evil spirits is the prime lure of conversion followed by enticement of church charity support, brotherhood, love and care and bliss. Churches use various strategies and charitable supportive measures for conversion viz. charities in the form of humanitarian supports as clothes, medicines, food, and the most important, love and care to poor and destitute children and the needy people.

Other motivations forces of conversation were--for salvation/peace of heart, life satisfaction, and the hope of better life. Many converts were the victims of Hindu caste bigotry, discriminations and the so-called egocentric society hence they took the decision to convert to Christianity. Some people converted to Christianity in the anticipation of getting money, some due to family bigotry and quarrels and to be released from addiction, bad habits and sin and the rest because of the *so-called* scientific logic of Christianity as a science. For the converts, conversion is a moral revolution that goes beyond intellect and feeling, creating a new 'self', through which internal unity of mind and body is re-established and then

pleasure spread out. Healing, for them, is the process of the restoration of health from an unbalanced, diseased, spoiled or unvitalized organism. As a psychological process of dealing with problems, it was observed that healing is performed in church by praying and refers to all bodily, psychologically and spiritually healing done under the observation of church. It is also a grieving process resolved to the degree that the person is able to lead a normal or fulfilling existence without being besieged by psychopathological phenomenon. The personal experience includes phenomena such as *Parmeswar* (God) answering a prayer, hearing Gods voice, reading the Bible, but most often; a quick healing. One case reveals:

Dalit Hindu women by birth, I became sick after marriage. I spent a lot for treatment. One day in my dream, I heard the dream that told me to come there, and then he would cure my diseases. After that I went to church. After abandoning Hindu idol worshipping and chanting bible hymns under a pastor with prayers, I heard the voice of Jesus. I was automatically healed. My family felt relief. Buoyancy was in my heart and mind. I was saved from sinful life by the voice of Jesus.

Nock (1933), suggests that conversion is a reorientation of the soul, deliberate religious turning from the old that was wrong to the new which is right. The converts had certain special events that compelled them to right away espouse Christianity with the reasoning that their old religion was wrong. They adopted Christianity when sick, while they lost peace and also to get rid from evil spirit and to be cured from diseases. A convert explicates:

Tortured by evil spirits/ghosts from the childhood, I was perturbed and was hospitalized for a long time. Abiding by the Hindu norms, I sacrificed 21 chickens and 3 goats. I was impoverished by the frequent expenditures. One day, my wife's mother told me to adopt Christianity. After that I went to the church and experienced the process of healing. Now I am good. There is no need to spend money. I am contented and living a blissful life liberated from evil spirits.

Theologically, healing is the victory over evil spirits, often associated with the mysterious power of Christ. This pacification or the defeat of spirits allows some converts to remove them from the so-called evil power. Prayer-based healing analogous to exorcism is mysterious, practicing healing and exorcism with emotive worship which is the prime reason behind conversion. Conversion occurred among those who become ill, then find what they perceive to be insufficient support from family of traditional healers, leading them to turn to church for social support and healing. It was noticed that spiritual healing was sought by people for different purposes. Some seek it because of physical illness, or because of mental,

moral, or financial problems; others because of an internal unrest that gives them no peace regardless of how much outer satisfaction and success they may have. But sooner or later the realization emerges that until one establishes conscious contact with the source of his/her existence there will be unhappiness, dissatisfaction, incompleteness, regardless of how much health or wealth he possesses.

Practicing New Life: Spiritual Restructuring of Attachments to Christ

Various differences can be noticed among the converts after conversion. About 91 percent converts were satisfied with their conversion. They experienced positive change in their work and lifestyle, practice and behavior, social etiquette, festival celebration pattern, birth, death and other rituals, addictions etc. For Parajuli (2011), majority of Nepali Christians are evangelic Protestant but there is also a small Catholic population. The studied converts are Protestants hence they avoid all non-Christian rituals and ceremonies contrary to Catholics who are more open to celebrate Hindu festivals like *Bhai Tika* and *Dashain*, and are permitted to consume alcohol.

After conversion about 71 percent converts perceived deleterious alteration in relationship with friends and neighbors viz. boycott from Hindu rituals and cultural festivities, rejection and exclusion from their native organizations. Some converts had bitter experiences of transformation viz. desertion by high caste Hindu neighbors and discriminations in sociocultural rituals and traditions. But 29 percent do not felt any change and problem with others. Around 51 percent converts experienced certain positive alteration in their financial status but 49 percent did not perceive any change in their economic status. One case elucidates:

A poor Janajati by birth, my relations to wife was worst and life had been futile. I reached onto the verge of committing suicide. Suggested by a friend, my conversion was liberation—a great transformation in lifestyle, behavior and financial status. Though mistreated by the society, I am well-to-do and free from all types of predicaments. In Christmas we raise money for church funds (comprised of members' tithes, or 10% of our earning) for poor families.

For low socioeconomic profile subjugated people, conversion has provided a way to dissolve the crisis, and as a *resolution* their life-story is changed to a turning point miracle. If they are sick they get healed and if they are depressed they receive peace with a vow of repentance from past sins; accept Jesus as their savior and swear to follow his teachings. For them, conversion is a drastic transformation of *self* that emphasize interpersonal processes of change. It was observed during church prayer that converts raise their voices waving their arms, pouring hearts to Christ *Parmeswar*. The ambiance is emotional with prayer, praising

Parmeswar's power, thanking for his love, and pleading him for help...for a spouse or children illness to be cured, to return safely from abroad labor, for a son, for a job, or for relief from sorrow/anxiety. Tears pour as words rise, freely or painfully, in joyful shouts or barely visibly.

Contrary to previous religious practices, the personal experience of Christ is the important turning point in their life. Though instinctive and absurd, converts imagery of growing closer to Christ through conversion process, a spiritual restructuring of attachment through their new found relationship with *Parmeswar* God, changed their relationships with themselves, others and Christ as an overruling and life-shaping force in their relationship with others.

Conversion is not concentrated in any particular community though generally the poor and oppressed have been more receptive to Christ's deliverance that renders continuity to newly adopted Christianity. One of the core foundations of Christian belief is that humans are inherently sinful and only Christ can deliver man from sin but in contrast the prevailing modern world attitude is that man is born free of any 'sin' and any sin committed are due to human deeds hence each person needs to work out his/her salvations, not by any religion. In a globalized world, altering sociocultural values, individualism and modernization occurring in life style, broader exposure, mystic cheapness of Christianity, socioeconomic discrepancy and Hindu orthodoxy has inspired the people to take a decision in conversion, requiring conversion in Nepal to be interpreted in a broader context.

Conclusion

There is a linkage between religious conversion and modernity, consequences of conversion and rupture with the past and the elements of continuity, but there is no any single cause of conversion, no one process and no one simple consequence of that process. The causes of conversion are driven by motivations with health-healing, charity, poverty, socioeconomic disparities, biblical practices of *conviction-embed superstition* rather than pure religious belief and probably the presence of well-funded foreign missionaries for reinforcing Christianity. Political volatility and the failure of state machinery to stop conversion is also liable to this. Relatively egalitarian Christian attitude towards class, caste and gender is accelerating conversion process offering opportunities and empowerment hence making Christianity more modern and convincing. Accordingly, converts were more contented in a post-conversion life. Money is the not only architect of religious proselytization except for those who joined Christianity with various expectations of personal gain. Contrary to Weber (1904) hypothesis that Protestantism was successful in instilling moneymaking views, religious conversion

has not fully aided the convert's economic status. However, conversion has been both an opportunity and a challenge for the converts in a Hindu-majority society but there is an often unnoticed fact 'faith' that can lead to genuine religious belief. For other, becoming a Christian is a process of illegal proselytization.

The decline of conventional religions in Nepal compels all to reevaluate their traditional standoffs and practices and think why their religion is fading. In the absence of a strong state sponsored health and social security system, and given the prevalence of *pseudo-scientific non-medics' superstitions* in not just the rural communities but also the cities, it should not be surprising that many more people will convert to Christianity in near future. In a stalemate country, there is nothing oppressed can do to change their status, hence conversion may be a way to break social and cultural hierarchies and the new religion as *opium* (as claimed by Marxism) soothing the pain produced by oppression. Churches provide an important social safety-net where the government failed to do so. In a secular welfare state, it is requisite to eliminate socio-cultural and economic disparities, create social justice and ramp up the public health and social support infrastructure, only then fewer people will articulate interest in conversion. Educational system should be reformed to reflect each religions' real teaching and ideologies so that to create awareness on *non-medics' superstitions* and proselytizing.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Prof. Vikash K.C. for his productive suggestions to enhance the quality of this paper and for his relentless efforts and prolific facilitation to augment my academic and professional career. This research work is an independent venture of the author.

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