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TAMANG CONVERSIONS: CULTURE, POLITICS, AND THE CHRISTIAN CONVERSION NARRATIVE IN NEPAL

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The ordinary person does not, unless corrupted by philosophy, believe that he creates value by his choices. He thinks that some things really are better than others and that he is capable of getting it wrong. We are usually not in doubt about the direction in which Good lies.

Iris Murdoch, The Sovereignty of the Good, p. 95

I say: Man Thapa, I've come to talk about sin; everybody says you're the man to talk to if I want to know about sin.

He laughs. "I like your questions! You always like to talk about big things! This will be good! Sin," he says, "is based on greed; this is the worst kind of sin, to be greedy. Other sins are small; even murder is a lesser sin than greed."

I say: That's very Christian.
"Maybe it is. I haven't read the Bible much. But this is what sin is."
Tom Fricke, Field Notebook, 15 November 2005

Introduction

In the late 1950s according to the first modern census account, there were fewer than 30 Nepali Christians in the country. This may be an undercount, of course, but whatever the number it is a step back from the reports of the earliest Christian mission in Nepal. That mission, established by Capuchin friars from Italy in 1715-16, lasted until shortly after the fall of the Kathmandu Valley to Nepal's first national monarch, Prithvi Narayan Shah, in 1769 (Vannini 1977). The Capuchins claimed to have baptized over 12,000 Nepalis in their 54 year residence. Nearly all were sick children given to their care and baptized before death, the friars content in the knowledge of their souls' swift transport to heaven. But the total number of adult baptisms barely cracked 80, and all of the living Nepali Christians moved to India with the friars. This was not a notably successful mission. And so, the real conversion story rightly begins within many of our lifetimes.

By 1990, the 30 or so Christians counted in the 1950s had become 200,000. This was in spite of the law against proselytizing, an offense punishable by 3 years imprisonment if unsuccessful and by 6 years if a conversion resulted. Recent numbers are more controversial, ranging from the one million or so Christians that the government acknowledges to the

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nearly two million that church-related groups argue for. Whatever the actual number, their growth hugely accelerated following the re-introduction of party democracy in 1990 after a 30 year stretch of autocratic rule. Depending on who you want to believe, between four and eight percent of Nepal's population has converted to Christianity in the past 18 years.

Here I discuss a small part of that story, the mass conversion of the Tamang and Ghale people of Timling, a village I began to study in 1981 and have continued to revisit since. I confess at the outset that my motivations for wanting to understand this process are grounded in a particular view of the ethnographic enterprise, one that aligns it with the documentary agenda of Robert Coles (1997). As such, I need to acknowledge how my friendships with the people I study have led me to write this essay.

Like other anthropologists who have turned to the study of conversion, I could not have imagined doing so when I first began my research on Tamang themes as a graduate student. For one thing, the people of Timling practiced a Tibetan form of Buddhism and a local shamanic tradition when I first knew them. For another, my interests lay elsewhere. While I originally went to Timling to study household economy, kin, and demographic processes (Fricke 1994), my research expanded from there into questions of social transformation in kinship, marriage, and exchange (Fricke 1990; Dahal et al. 1993; Dahal et al. 1996). Working on those problems led me to an inquiry into cultural moralities — on notions of the good, virtue, and vice (Fricke 1997a, 1997b). Excepting the original research, all of these topics grew out of questions that arose during from fieldwork itself. Timling's people were always leading me to something new. And so it is with their conversion to Christianity.

Still, there are theoretical issues that broaden the relevance of this single case. Joel Robbins (2004) summarizes the two most common explanations social scientists use to talk about rapid group conversions. The first takes conversion as the outcome of directed missionary effort in combination with the lure of encompassing colonial orders. The second locates the source of conversion in the vertiginous disruptions of socioeconomic change leading to the need for new conceptual schemes adjusted to circumstance. As with the Urapim of Papua New Guinea, whose conversion Robbins treats, neither of these explanations fit Timling well. Timling's conversion occurred at the initiative of the people themselves without a proselytizing mission. The Tamang sought out Nepali Christians to teach them the new *dharma*. They even met resistance from those you would expect to share it, especially from the Catholics in Kathmandu who doubted their motives. And while the changes occurring in Timling might lead one to argue that they were responding to cultural devastation — something on the order of what Jonathan Lear argues for the reconstitution of Crow Indian identity in the United States (Lear 2006) — that narrative would be too pat to account for

the actual process in Timling. My interest here is in making this process intelligible in cultural terms. I will do that in a rough way, leaving out much, but giving you a sense of the story.

The Setting

Timling lies on the slopes of Ganesh Himal, called Lobsang Gyarpo by its people, at the headwaters of the Ankhu Khola in northern Dhading District. Settled about 250 years ago by two immigrant streams, Tamang from the east and Ghale from the west, it was one of the four "Ghale rajyas" that included Timling, Sertung, Borang, and Laba before eventual inclusion into the Nepali state under Prithvi Narayan Shah. Until the middle 1980s when I conducted much of my demographic research in the village, Timling was a village of about 650 people roughly evenly divided between a single Ghale clan, the Gyeldang, and a group of Tamang clans, the Damrong, Gomtsa, Mepa, and Mamba. Since both Ghale and Tamang clans are patrilineal and bilateral cross-cousin exchange a favored form of marriage, the Ghale and Tamang have intermarried from the start of their co-residence. As a result, the language spoken in the village is the western Tamang dialect of northern Dhading District. The social and cultural life of Timling's people is well within the descriptions found for other western Tamang communities (Höfer 1979, 1981; Holmberg 1989; March 2002). It also finds its echoes in descriptions from other nearby Tibeto-Burman language speaking people (Desjarlais 2003; McHugh 2001).

Until the middle of the 1980s, Timling's economy was overwhelmingly oriented to a local subsistence based on agro-pastoralism (Fricke 1994). After 1987, its young men and women became increasingly involved in the wage labor economy, finding work at first on the road construction crews for the mine at Lari. Later, large numbers of Timling's people joined the Nepali Army and moved even further afield to join the labor streams to Qatar, Dubai, and Saudi Arabia. A large and shifting number of people currently reside for at least part of the year in the Kathmandu Valley just north of the Ring Road where they work at various labour jobs and send their children to higher quality schools than are available in the village itself.

The Tamang Conversion

General Contours: The conversion story in Timling is not a straightforward result of missionization by outsiders. Nor is it without political coloring even from the start of its contemporary phase. Many of the pivotal moments in the wave of conversions experienced in Dhading District, regarded as one of the centers of the new Christianization movement in Nepal (Shah 1993; Tamang 2004), play on Timling's link to larger national political events. Before the 1990 reintroduction of party politics, conversion was not only illegal but also actively punished. Although proselytization remained officially illegal until

very recently, the 1990 political change created enough ambiguity that a formerly "underground" Christianity came into the open and began to spread rapidly.

Timling's conversion is a part of the post-1990 process (Fricke 1994). Before that, around 1980, large numbers of Tamang had converted in Jharlang to the south. They were met with beatings and jail from local political leaders and police. Notwithstanding their "underground" status, some of these Christians would visit Timling before 1990. They came to proselytize and were uniformly rebuffed. The simple response to proselytization was that conversion was illegal. This response changed after 1990, when Christianity began to be associated with the nascent democracy movement.

This intertwining of politics and conversion was illustrated in the first post-1990 election. Pitted against a representative of the old order with close marriage links to Timling lamas was a member of the now legal Congress Party. Although never actually declaring himself a Christian, the Congress politician allowed that rumor to float since it solidified his association with new orders at multiple levels: as a member of an opposition party, as a representative of a "modernity" associated with the west, and as a conduit of the imagined largesse that many thought would come from connections to Christian denominations. The association with development echoed even in the name by which it was known in Timling. *Christian dharma* became corrupted to *kisan dharma* by most speakers and the associations between farming and the west made it easy to associate with *bikas* since all experience with visitors bringing in new farming practices were always in the context of development.

The first phase of conversion in Timling led to a visit by a Nepali Protestant based in Kathmandu. He had heard about the movement in Timling and traveled to the village in 1991. Although the Tamang had declared themselves Christian before his visit, he performed the first baptisms, about which Timling's people still laugh. The Jesuit priest and anthropologist Father Casper Miller tells us that this Nepali minister baptized 83 people during his one or two day visit (almost exactly what the Capuchins accomplished in 54 years!). Father Miller also relates the bemusement of Timling's people who told him, and who often repeated the same story to me, that "with hardly any instruction he took them to the river, dunked them, and shouted "Naya Jivan!" as he pulled each one out of the water" (Casper Miller, S.J., personal communication).

These conversions were regarded as being to an undifferentiated Christianity of an evangelical and fundamentalist sort that included new prohibitions against the consumption of alcohol and tobacco along with such desired practices as praying over the sick. Closer engagement with Christians, through trips to Kathmandu to receive training as lay ministers,

opened the people of Timling to a more nuanced and denominational understanding of their newly acquired *dharma*. This understanding was followed in the intensely competitive world of post-1990 missionization in Nepal with the realization that foreign denominations would supply resources -- including jobs, access to school, and money — to those who represented them in the new mission fields.

Thus, a second phase began in which several denominations could claim shifting numbers of adherents in Timling, based on the highly personalistic ties with new lay ministers. Timling was suddenly home to several churches, small cane-roofed structures built with stone from the dismantled stupas that dominated the open courtyards in the center of the old clan neighborhoods. Christian denominational membership had largely mapped itself onto old clan groupings that, paradoxically, had defined a nominal allegiance to various sects of Tibetan Buddhism in the past. (Without knowing the canonical differences between these sects, Timling's Tamang identified their lamas as *nyingma*, *gelugpa*, and so on depending on their clan identity.)

A final and third phase of conversion occurred in the context of labor migration to the Kathmandu Valley where a large group of Timling's people had relocated. These people began an inquiry into Catholicism based on their new understanding of denominational differences within Christianity. Among their initial understandings of difference were the lack of Catholic prohibitions against tobacco and alcohol, and also the emphasis placed by Catholics on the Virgin Mary and the saints. Their other teachers had told them that Catholicism wasnot a pure form of Christianity because of these differences. Yet, by November 2002, nearly all the Timling people resident near Kathmandu had become Catholic. They now have their own parish in the newly formed diocese centered on the Church of the Assumption, a name that resurrects that of the first Capuchin church built 200 years earlier.

Today, virtually all of Timling's people are at least nominally Christian. The explicit exceptions to this conversion story are two lamas and Timling's headman, together with their families, all of whom are connected by marriage to the families in Borang, where Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) had strong supporters in the district.

Political Ripples: The association of the Congress Party with oppositional politics, coupled with the rumors that its candidate was a Christian, only reaffirmed the sense that Christianity stood for a new order. At a meeting in Timling organized by Congress partisans, one activist declared, "The RPP people act like kings," he said, "but there are no kings! Look! We need to follow our hearts. If this village wants to get above the bears in the forest, to get developed, to have electricity, to have a road, then it will go Congress!" I will develop that association with kingship later. For now it sets the stage for

acts of violence unusual in Timling's contemporary history, though not unknown from stories told of the distant past.

The first such act of violence involved the 1991 death of a RPP organizer from the neighboring village of Sertung. An intense argument broke out when he, joined by a crowd of other Sertung men, warned Timling people that if the village went Congress, they would cut them off from the trails running south through their village, that they would beat anybody who voted against them. After a few hours, the roiling talk calmed and people retired to the houses of their allies (there was also a large RPP faction in Timling). That night a scuffle broke out and the RPP organizer was killed with a knife to his chest (see Fricke 2006 for an extended account).

After his death, RPP gangs filed into Timling, "furious looking men armed with long staffs... They kick and beat people, men and women both, demanding to see the people whose names they call out" (Fricke 2006: 213). The gangs stayed with their Timling supporters, making a list of 27 names they took to be involved. Nearly all of these were of new Christians. All were considered political enemies of Timling's Pradhan Panch, an RPP member with marriage connections to Borang and Sertung. "Tell them to come so that we can beat them. Tell them, if they don't come, we will take their wives. If they have sons, we will take them."

In the end, nine men and women were taken to jail. Six of them were sentenced to 20 years. Of those arrested, one was the first Christian convert in Timling, Dorje Ghale. Among those sentenced to prison, and gaining early release with the others in 2000, was Dorje's father, household head of Timling's second Christian family.

This intertwining of politics and conversion continued for nearly a decade. In September 1999 a press release appeared with the headline: Five Churches Destroyed, Villagers Pray in Open Fields (UCAN 1999). The release began, "Tribal Christians in and around Timling village in Dhading District northwest of the Kathmandu Valley gather in open fields to pray now that five churches there have been destroyed." The release went on to say that "the suspects are local Buddhists including lamas and supporters of a member of parliament who is known to harbor anti-Christian sentiments." There was some resistance to the destruction: "attackers used axes and metal tools, and battery-powered lights to see what they were doing, but that the tin roof of one church was spared destruction after angry village women threw stones at the attackers and chased them off." And the conflict had a history. "Tensions began rising in May," it continued, "when a local village leader called on villagers to leave Christianity with threats of withdrawing medicines and other government facilities for those who refused to do so." The release goes on, "The Christians however, said they "would rather die than leave our faith," and concludes "that reported faith healings have served to convert villagers to Christianity."

A Conversion Narrative: Dorje Ghale

With these accounts I may have appeared to sidestep the two explanatory holes of missionization and social devastation only to have fallen into others: Christianity as conversion to modernity or conversion as oppositional politics. Before taking up the issue of how we might understand Timling's conversion in cultural context, I turn now to examine one man's conversion narrative. An outline of events such as those presented above allows a too easy folding of the conversion into favored explanatory narratives and too easily misses the concreteness of personal experience. We need to bring this down now to a flesh and blood person.

I have several accounts similar to the one you are about to read. Indeed, the UCAN press release just quoted mentions widespread accounts of "faith healings" while David Holmberg (personal communication) has shared a transcript excerpt from a Tamang man near Trisuli that includes very similar themes. We choose this extended narrative both because of its power and because Dorje Ghale is the first person in Timling to announce his conversion. That alone might be enough, but there is more advantage here. Dorje could be thought of as an unremarkable man — Iris Murdoch's "ordinary person." Others are more analytically inclined than he. Some, in fact, could sustain what amounts to theological reflection. But to say "unremarkable" is not to imply incapable of remarkable things. It is to say that Dorje displays to a high degree the Tamang virtues that I will discuss later — virtues of generosity, for example. Dorje engages dutifully in the brideservice work expected of a Tamang man. He shares whatever he has with those who come to his household. His family is no richer or poorer than most. People in Timling like him.

And yet, he is widely known for his failings, too — an ungovernable temper and impetuousness. This is the same Dorje who was among those arrested for the killing of the RPP organizer, the same Dorje whose father spent nine years in jail for that killing. Dorje was 36 years old in 1990 when the events of his story culminated in conversion.

The narrative:

So. The way I see how the Christian Dharma came to Timling is like this: First, those things we call Christianity were in Jharlang, you see? In Jharlang, they had heard about it and it came there. After that, a guy from up there in Labdung, just above Timling, brought it to his place. This was in 1989. Do you follow?

Yes, it was just one person, the one called S. Thapa, who brought it. And from where did he get it? That would be from Jharlang, from a friend of mine, the one they call Sano. Yes, it was like that. And this was precisely in the year 1989.

But then, I need to talk about my own situation, what my own life was like. And after that how I myself heard that they had brought it. Do you follow me?

So. They said that in Timling, we should also follow the Christian dharma -- I had heard that we should become Christian. And it was at the very time I heard this that my own bad fortune came to pass. You see, it was my second born daughter, my Mayawati. Do you see?

Well, Mayawati became terribly and painfully ill. And as that happened she, well, she was contorted with the pain of it. Sometimes, it seemed as though she would die. Do you see? Oh, how she cried out in pain! And what terrible things she cried!

When this happened and these things were said, my first act was to sacrifice a male goat. And again, as it went on, I sacrificed a young ram. I had called a bombo to eject the spirit. The bombo directed me to cut a male goat. And then again another sacrifice.

Well, when I made these sacrifices, for a time she did get well. Let's see ... Phagun, Chait, Baisakh, Jeth, Asar, Saon, Bhado ... she was well again until the month of Bhado. And then she was afflicted once again in the very same way.

This illness went on and on so I went to the Gompo Lama. So I went to him and what he did was to utter all kinds of demon expelling mantra over me. "I am expelling your afflicting spirits," he said to me. Do you follow?

Well, when he said that, I went to his house with him and I stayed there for two, maybe three, nights. What I'm saying is that I stayed there at the Gompo for 3 nights, right there in the lama's own house. Do you see?

So I remained there and he worked his mantra. And while he was doing this, while I was at the Gompo, my daughter got well. Do you see?

Yet, right after that when I returned to my own house, she again took sick. It was as if she were going to die. She said her heart pained her. She said her head pained her. And again all I could

think of was what, just what, is it that I must do? So, once again, I called to the Gompo Lama — this time to my house. For another two days, I called him down the path to my house.

For those days, he stayed in my own home. My two daughters and my son slept together on that side of the hearth, the three of them together. And the two of us, the Gompo Lama and I, slept together on this side. So you see?

So we slept together. And at night he'd cast his spells for us, doing the mantras and the sacred gestures, saying the words that would remove our sin. Now, exactly what he said, I really don't know. But even though I don't know exactly, this is what he did.

And while he was doing this, just as the earliest morning light began to brighten the sky, the first rooster began it's call, "kuk kuk kukdayan kwan." Do you follow me?

Well, as we sat, up there just above my house — just up there a little way — I could hear this little hen-like bird. I had heard it once in the night while we sat there around the fire. "Juhi-juhi, juhi-juhi," it said. And hearing it, I thought, "Could this be a human's doing?"

This is what I was thinking as I listened. I thought, "What is it saying; what is it doing in the night like this; what is this "juhi-juhi" that it speaks? And even as this was happening, the lama said, "It's an afflicting spirit." Yes, that lama said, "It's a spirit, the spirit to whom we must sacrifice, maybe." So we went up to the place, you know right up there just above Sercha Thapa's house, and right after we got there it said again, "juhi-juhi, juhi-juhi."

And it continued on like that as we reached the spot, continued just as we heard it from within my house, and the lama said, "The afflicting spirits are leaving now..."

And my daughter got well. This all happened in the month of Phagun — Phagun, Chait, Baisakh, Jeth, Asar, Saon, Bhado... it was again, exactly in that month of Bhado that my daughter once again took ill, my daughter Mayawati.

Oh how it fell! The sweat just poured from her! And the way she was contorted! Her flesh burned and she clenched her hands like this! Death was on it's way. She shivered as though facing death!

Well, because of the time this happened, it was the month of Bhado, I had to be up in the cattleshelter above Labdung with my wife's father. Do you see?

Because of my daughter's sickness, I stayed there with her in the cattleshelter near Labdung arriving in the night sometime after midnight and staying until the first light of dawn. And while I was there, my wife's father, a guy from Labdung, said this to me: "Look, in Labdung they say that some people, the ones they call Christians ... well, I've heard that these people can cast away spirits." He said we should go to them and tell them to come to my house. That's what he said, "Look, there's a person here in Labdung who has himself taken up this thing called Christianity."

The person he was talking about was S. Thapa of Labdung. You know him, one of the Protestants. Are you following this?

Then he said, "Okay, let's go, why shouldn't we try this? They cast away afflicting spirits -- if they can do that, then we should go right away!"

"If you try this Christian thing, you become well," he said. He said, "This is how they pray and their prayers cause the spirits to flee. You don't have to sacrifice goats. You don't have to sacrifice rams," he said. "The afflicting spirits flee immediately. They flee!"

This is what he said. "Well, if this is so," I began to think, "then why do we need to cut our animals? Why do we go onto debt?"

So I said, "Okay then, call him," and my wife's father went to do that.

We – that is, Tokche's mother and my wife's brother – the three of us remained in the shelter and my wife's father went, calling out to him to pray his Christian prayers for my daughter.

There were 30 people who came. One was S. Thapa. Another was C. Thapa. So there were these two and all those others from Labdung, too. All those people came to my cattle shelter above Labdung. Do you follow me? And after they came, the two I just named began to pray.

Now, they didn't do it like we do these days, "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." You see, Protestants don't do this "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." This is how they do their praying from what I've seen: "Oh, I give you thanks, Lord. Heavenly Father, this person has been possessed by an afflicting spirit. Make this sign of sinful life vanish. Cause it to flee. Cause it to go!" Do you follow me?

And after praying like this, just a single time, my daughter got a little bit better. Then again, and again, and again they'd pray like that and each time, she got a little better. Do you see?

And yet one more time they did it. They prayed over her in three separate bouts and she became well. In one or two hours she was well. Do you see?

She was healed and I suddenly realized, "Aho! Why do we need to sacrifice a goat, a ram, as we've done since time long ago . "Seeing how this praying worked, I thought, "Why is it that we go into debt?" It was clear that this prayer caused the affliction to go. This certainty took hold in my heart-mind [soul].

And when it took hold, I had to ask, "What is the reason, from what source, from where did you get the power to do this?" By that I meant to discover from where he brought this kind of prayer. And he answered that he brought it from Jharlang.

"Where? From whom? From whom in Jharlang?" I asked.

"From Sano of Jharlang. I went there to study with him, to bring this back with me," he said. Do you follow me?

Well, after he said that, I thought, "Aho, so that's it. I wonder what kind of person this is in Jharlang, what kind of person that he does such good things? And they told me that he reads the Bible, he teaches people to pray, and he teaches people how to sing these Christian hymns.

That's what they said. And when I asked them from where he brought such things, they said, "Who knows where he learned these things. All we know is that we learned them from him there." That's what these two Labdung guys said.

> *So, after that, after that month of Bhado ... well, since then, I too began to pray. Do you see? That's when I began to pray. I left the old dharma and I put the Christian dharma in its place. I am the first in Timling. My wife and I are the first.*

Understandings

So now we have something to work with -- we have conversion and we have politics. We have a St. Paul or St. Augustine. A sprinkling of "modernity" and western allure to spice the mix. This would be enough, and no need for more since the narrative says it all, for many people. But not so the anthropologist. Much of what I now consider, briefly and schematically, will lack novelty for many, but it is a necessary step for the argument.

As with Dorje, the personal stories of others invoke enormous suffering and its resolution in Christian prayer. Typically, they involve possession, the failure of traditional means of cure, and the contrasting success of Isu's adherents — the *biswasi*, or "believers." One gets the sense, if these stories are taken at face value, that the Tamangs are hard core empiricists in the scientific mode. But as Alasdair MacIntyre writes "... the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity. I am born with a past; and to try to cut myself off from that past, in the individualistic mode, is to deform my present relationships" (MacIntyre 1981: 221). We are required to recreate this embeddedness to make any single account intelligible.

The problem with the standard stories of conversion — Pauline rupture, missionization, social disruption, conversion as a vehicle for political opposition — is not that they are completely wrong, but that in their simple versions they are too much the perspectives of outsiders. We want to argue that while these are surely part of the story, the form they take had to be grown into. To quote MacIntyre again:

> [T]he practice of putting into question, whether within a tradition or between traditions, itself requires the context of a tradition. Doubting is a more complex activity than some skeptics have realized. To say to oneself or to someone else "Doubt all your beliefs here and now" without reference to historical or autobiographical context is not meaningless: but it is an invitation not to philosophy, but to mental breakdown, or rather to philosophy as a means of mental breakdown.

Whatever process leads a Tamang to become a *biswasi*, mental breakdown is not the outcome. Without reference to these historical and autobiographical contexts, we are at risk of demeaning the conversion event itself. Part of the problem is our understanding of the very terms conversion, religion, and politics.

Take conversion: Many analysts see conversion to Christianity as a rupture. This is probably true in many cases. That is, conversion may be the starting point of a departure that plays out over time, even as the event itself must be placed within a specific person's history and the surrounding cultural context. Still, to speak of "conversion" is to carry the freight of Sts. Paul and Augustine (the two most famous conversions in western literature) in our heads. The received stories for these two jibe almost too well with the Cartesian, and later Lockean, sense of the individual as contextless self-creator. Our models follow St. Paul's injunction that we "put on the new man." William James, who did more than many to bring this model of conversion into the academic and popular imaginations in is 1902 Gifford lectures (published as *Varieties of Religious Experience*), wrote of the experience as sudden and deep psychological change associated with crisis (discussed in Wills 2004: 14-20).

Like William James, we like our conversions neat. If they come with falling off a horse and being blinded, all the better. As Garry Wills writes, "The stories of Paul and Augustine have led to a belief that "real" conversion is sudden, effected by the incursion of an outside force, and emotionally wrenching" (2004: 3).

But most of us know it to be a messier process -- or at least that the processes are various. Think of John Henry Newman's reasoned path from Evangelical Calvinist to High Church Anglican, and then from the Oxford Movement to Catholicism. It's as though he thought himself to Rome. And, indeed, Wills goes on to argue that the attributes of the two model conversions of Augustine and Paul are themselves constructions that obscure the real autobiographical continuities for both saints. These two conversions, he says, were hammered by William James to fit a Calvinist model.

Take religion: The theologian Nicholas Lash argues that our very concept of religion is a product of the major shifts in thinking that occurred with the Enlightenment — that it, in other words, does a poor job in its airtightness in handling how people actually experience religion, not as something distinct from the rest of culture, but as very much a part of culture (1996). Talal Asad (1993), Joel Robbins (2004), Webb Keane (2007), and others have made similar points. To that extent this is old hat. Nevertheless, the residue of these post-enlightenment ideas fits so well with the putatively clean edges of conversion that they are likely to insert themselves into our thinking.

The South Asianists among us will already know that the word we so casually translate as religion — *dharma*— is a much richer and broader concept. Nicholas Lash, again, writes:

> Quite apart, however, from the fact that the 'fit' between *dharma* and 'religion' is very poor indeed, the assumption that these two

> terms mean more or less the same overlooks the extent to which the meaning of *each* of them has varied according to the contexts and the circumstances of its use (1996: 22-23).

He goes on to suggest that the only word he knows with a similar range of meaning is the Latin word *ratio* — with its connotations of field, ground, and background — as used by Thomas Aquinas.

But we don't have to be textual about this. The Tamangs themselves give us a sense of that word, *dharma*, as they use it. Some ways are similar to how we use "religion." But the word for them also carries the meaning of virtue. The drift toward one sense or the other is made clear by context. In 1987, for example, I spoke with Sirman Ghale about women being drawn into prostitution through their employment in roadwork. Sirman recounted his rebuke to the Nepali soldiers organizing the construction:

> "I didn't act like you when I was in the army. I wasn't a worthless soldier like you. If all you want to do is ruin another person's daughter then you are no more than people without *Dharma*. If that's how it is, then what is food? Where will you sleep? You people who would knock up these girls would even sell your own life if you had the chance. Poor people do this labour. The children of poor people come to do this labour and you give them food with the only thought being to use them. But what about tomorrow? You'll use these people today to satisfy your appetites and tomorrow they'll be forgotten!"

In more recent fieldwork, I asked several people in a room near the Catholic Church in Baniyatar to tell me about sin. "It's not helping people. It's not seeing another person's need and then, as much as you can, helping that person," they replied. And when I asked what the opposite of sin might be, they replied, "*Dharma.*" Man Thapa, whose words head this essay along with Iris Murdoch's, went on to say, "The opposite of sin is *dharma*. The source of *dharma* is love."

As with religion and conversion, so with politics. I won't elaborate except to say that politics is not a container to hold a set of relationships apart from culture. Like kinship for the Tamang, or anybody else for that matter, it is about relationships. And kinship, politics, and virtue are woven together in ways that make thing a too simple explanation of conversion as opposition.

But how to get traction with all of these? If conversion is in the same family as broader social and cultural transformations which we less often describe as rupture, then it directs our attention to broader theories of change. Along with Joel Robbins, who uses him to frame conversion in Papua New Guinea, I have a fondness for the structural history of Marshall Sahlins

(1987). And also for Sherry Ortner's cultural schemas expressed in narrative in her study of Sherpa monastic history (1989). At the same time, the elegance of their stories makes me cautious.

If there are any shortcomings to the Sahlins and Ortner accounts of cultural transformation, a crucial one is a lack of attention to narrative's role in opening up an agent's own motivations as a moral project. Practice and agency in these accounts come off as bloodless, without juice. For Sahlins, and less for Ortner, this might be the unavoidable result of depending on historical sources. Still, one wonders if more could have been done with the narrative connection to notions of the good, to virtue, and to vice. In part, what is lacking is attention to the evaluative part of a story.

I have been struck by how the virtue ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre draws these connections. His occasional citation by anthropologists is usually a tangential aside. Yet, MacIntyre's virtue ethics precisely link these structural models of change to a person's agency, notions of virtue, and the good through his idea of practice. MacIntyre's inspiration derives from his argument that we all strive for a narrative unity, a coherence, in how we tell the stories of our life. Those interpreters who begin with "rupture" remove themselves from the experiencer's fundamental act of meaning — an act that, to be sure, can seek to make sense of the apparently discontinuous.

As MacIntyre writes, "What I am ... is in key part what I inherit, a specific past that is present to some degree in my present. I find myself part of a history and that is generally to say, whether I like it or not, whether I recognize it or not, one of the bearers of a tradition," that "insofar as the virtues sustain the relationships required for practices, they have to sustain relationships to the past — and to the future — as well as in the present" (MacIntyre 1981: 221).

Practices, the Good, Virtues

Dorje's conversion narrative, an account that is straightforward in a Tamang context, opens up to us through those same Tamang understandings of practices, of the good, and of virtue. MacIntyre has a particular definition of practice:

> "By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and the human conceptions of ends and goods involved, are systematically extended" (MacIntyre 1981: 187).

In other words, practices are closely linked to ideas of the good — they are not merely behavioral. To engage in a practice is to be subject to evaluation— one can be bad at a practice, not because of a lack of technical ability, but because the animating spirit with which the practice was entered does not measure up. MacIntyre's notion of practice is easy to apply to everyday features of Tamang existence — to marriage, to entertaining guests, to building a house, or herding animals. The important thing for the analyst is that practices and their understanding open up culturally significant ways of evaluating the world.

Like Holmberg (1989) and March (2002), I recognize what we might call a "Tamang ethos of reciprocity" that plays itself out in across countless domains of social life. One sees it in their marriages — the classic bilateral cross-cousin marriage that involve giving and receiving (as they see it) women between patrilines as markers of equality and union (Fricke 1990). As with other classic examples of societies practicing this form of marriage, wider relationships involving labor, ritual, and other exchanges are organized through these connections. In the ideal of direct exchange the reciprocal relations, always in tension, balance out through time.

One also sees the ethos in the sharing of food as an act of social belonging open to anyone in the village. Walk into even the poorest household and the first offering after being seated near the hearth will be from the cooking pot or of beer. The offering and acceptance of vegetable food and beer, the staples of local life, connotes a common identity among the sharers. They are of one stomach ("*nyala po gi*," as they say)

Giving carries no threat of diminishment. Even more, giving food is itself a requisite of abundance, a view that finds ratification in both mythic themes and in practice. Holmberg (1989: 53) recounts a myth in which the sharing of a tiny bird snared in hunting results in the redoubling of its meat to an extent requiring two people to carry it on a pole between them. Variants of this myth are widespread throughout the Tamang area. Similarly, when a group of households has purchased an animal for slaughter any person who comes later and requests to be included in the subscription is automatically given a share of meat. There is always enough.

The failure to give without obvious calculation from the produce of one's hearth is the source of accusations of greed. Such accusations are directed against any household and its members in which whatever food or drink present is not shared with a visitor. They are also directed against one's own family members who fail to give labor or service where they are expected to do so.

Taken together, these practices imply an understanding of "the good" that is nearly Aristotelian (and Aquinan, see McCabe 2008) in its repetition across domains. It also implies the possibility of judgment. As MacIntyre elaborates:

> A practice involves standards of excellence and obedience to rules as well as the achievement of goods. To enter into a practice is to accept the authority of those standards and the inadequacy of my own performance as judged by them. It is to subject my own attitudes, choices, preferences and tastes to the standards which currently and partially define the practice.... In the realm of practices the authority of both goods and standards operates in such a way as to rule out all subjectivist and emotivist analyses of judgment (MacIntyre 1981: 190).

Timling's people, like Iris Murdoch's ordinary person, are in no doubt about the good. Moreover, their depictions of it have remained constant, expressing the same emphasis both before and after their conversion. The good is embodied in the act of exchange. As Man Thapa said, "You have to give. You have to receive. You have to think of the other's heart-mind."

These social goods and this ratifying virtue are what MacIntyre calls "goods internal to a practice" — goods that when achieved are good for the whole community. But he also acknowledges the existence of other kinds of good, those he calls external — these are distinguished by being subject to individual possession, "objects of competition in which there are winners and losers." In the Tamang case, these external goods open up the possibility of greed — the greed of the spirits, the greed of political actors and their supporters. In Dorje's case, the recurrent illness of his daughter and his inability to satisfy the afflicting spirit was a marker of that spirit's greed and insatiability.

Achieving the good requires dispositions toward virtues specific to those goods. "A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such good" (MacIntyre 1981: 191).

While virtue may be its own reward, its links to the good of reciprocity and exchange are what give it purchase in everyday life. But reciprocity and exchange themselves require a social universe to have any meaning. That meaning has to do with the threatening world in which the Tamang live. Social others can support and maintain the health of the Tamang person; they can also cause debilitating harm through sleights and afflictions that destabilize. Greed has physical effects. A person's desire or greed can dislodge or hobble the many souls that make up the Tamang self. Even the unwitting coveting of a person's food or goods can threaten because greed travels into the objects coveted. Generosity is protection of the self as well as a good in its own right. These virtues stabilize social life.

Here, again, is Man Thapa: "There are 3 kinds of sin: sin against God, sin against others, sin against the self. But of all these, the worst is sin

against others." I asked if there are other kinds. "No, that's it. The source of sin is greed. It's harder for a rich person to avoid sin. A rich person needs to see others and help them, but greed might prevent him from sharing."

But social life extends beyond the bounds of human others to include gods, shades, and spirits. Witches are human embodiments of greed, but the roster of threats is longer. Holmberg provides a lengthy account of over 20 named classes of potentially harmful agents. "All these evils," he writes, "contort the proper forms of sociality" (Holmberg 1989: 99). With these non-human agents, too, the Tamang enter into relationships of exchange. As with humans, it is good to give, but not too much, and it is okay to receive, but not too much. Lamas, *bombo*, and other practitioners have the responsibility of identifying and satisfying their demands. Their success is a good for a person's well-being, a well-being that has to do with their internal states — the state, before conversion, of their multiple souls, any one of which could be dislodged by not just the actions, but also the thoughts of another being. The physical manifestations of these states are in their physical health.

"The *Kali Yuga* Has Come"

It is within this context that we need to speak of social disruption. At first glance, this explanation for conversion had some appeal, especially if one were to avoid the over-simple approach of using economic causality to explain everything. My earlier research in Timling had, after all, documented the massive movement of people into the wage labor economy (Fricke et al. 1991). Of men born between 1936 and 1945, for example only 14 per cent had reported working at wage labour for a month or more by age 18. The figures increased rapidly, doubling to 29 per cent for those born in the next decade, and to 47 per cent for the next. By the time of the 1990 conversions, young men were not only working steadily as porters and at road construction, but many were beginning to discover the diasporic opportunities of contract labour in the Middle East. This sounded good and my early thinking about conversion was along the lines of Jonathan Lear's discussion of the Crow Indians, the destruction and reconstitution of their worldview attendant on the confinement to reservations and the end of warfare as a means of displaying virtue (2006).

It is a good story but it quickly runs into problems. The first conversions were in Timling itself and precisely among Tamangs who, although stressed by the general conditions of the village, were no more stressed than others and were not deeply involved in these dislocations. Moreover, those Tamangs who were most involved in new economic pursuits were among those most likely to be hostile to conversion in the earliest phases.

And yet, the Tamangs had a very real sense even during 1981 fieldwork that they were living in a period of moral decline. As Sirman Ghale put it, "The *Kali Yuga* has come, it's like that." Sirman's reference was to the widespread sense that practices and the virtues maintaining them were in decline. On the grounds of actual practice alone, my 1987 research corroborated that sense. The practice of providing brideservice to a wife's family, a central component of the good marriage, had gone steadily down over the years — from 80 per cent of the marriages entered into before 1960 involving brideservice to just 59 per cent of those entered into marriage between 1975 and 1987. What we might call "divorce" — an event that would tear the relations of exchange and reciprocity between lineages — had increased dramatically over that period, too, from only 13 per cent of those marriages entered into during that earlier period to a risk of nearly 50 per cent in the later period (Fricke 1997a: 201). Sirman had this to say about the changes:

> In the village, everybody is joined. But in the city a person makes his own way, his own provisions for tomorrow's food; he's alone. He builds one house for himself. And then another builds one for himself and so on ... everybody for himself. And in that way the old habits are gone, finished.

Schemas: But the decline of virtue is not especially tied to the present. Tamang stories depict Timling as having gone through recurrent cycles of decline and renewal in its history. These stories describe the decline of virtue as impetus for bringing in other, newer guaranteers of virtue, from the ancestors of the Ghale clan itself in the distant past, to the lama who established the temple in a more recent period.

All Timling residents agree that the Tamang clans settled the area first. Ghale, on the other hand, are said to have arrived later from the more Tibetanized areas of Manang or as having an association with the Shah kings who eventually unified the Hindu Nepal state. The story of their arrival is a story of virtue renewed. It is also one that finds echoes in the earlier quoted words of the Congress Party organizer in 1991.

Timling people say that prior to the arrival of the Ghale, the Tamang had their own king who began to act in an unkingly manner by demanding that special foods be provided to him daily and by increasing his labour demands on the people of Timling. He became greedy. In retaliation, the Tamang went northwest where a shaman told them they would find their new king. He would be recognized as the one child in a crowd of children from all castes who protected himself from becoming dirty by sitting on a wool blanket. Such a child was found and the Tamang carried him to Timling on their backs, naming him *Khuruwa* which Timling people say is Tibetan for "one who is carried." The Tamang king and his supporters were defeated in a

series of fights with *Khuruwa*'s supporters and fled across Pangsang La to settle in another village. All Ghale in Timling claim *Khuruwa* as their apical ancestor and place his arrival as roughly ten generations ago, precisely the period when the Shah kings were expanding from their base in Gorkha to conquer the hill villages toward Kathmandu.

A second story, also told more elaborately than I can recount here, refers to a later time. Timling is said to have prospered after the establishment of the Ghale King, *Khuruwa*, who grew and established his family in the village. But the village descended into a period when the people "forgot their *dharma*" and afflicting spirits and witchcraft began to operate without restraint. Timling's king was uncertain about how to confront this loss of *dharma*. Jharlang, another kingdom with its own Ghale king (and also the village where Dorje went nearly 200 years later to learn the Christian *dharma*), had brought in a lama from Tibet and order and prosperity marked that village. Timling's King resolved to find a lama for his own village.

One day a hunter traveled into the valley in the rugged country below one of the flanking ridges of Lobsang Gyarpo. In search of game he noticed a mysterious stairway ascending the usually impassable cliff up the face of Bhabil. He climbed it and crossing the ridge came on a paradise occupied by a Lama and his family. Although high in the Himal, well-tended fields burst with grain ready for harvest. There were cattle, yaks, and herds of sheep. There were even banana trees! The hunter didn't talk to the Lama, but ran back to report what he had seen to Timling's King who immediately sent a party out to climb that stairway and talk to the Lama. The party was unsuccessful. Where there was a stairway, there was again only a cliff. The search was repeated several times without success.

Finally, the Ghale King went himself. And there was the stairway. He climbed it to see the same paradise described by the hunter and he spoke to the Lama, asking him to come to Timling to renew the *dharma*. The Lama refused, saying that he had come to this place to turn his back on the sinful world and devote his life to God. The King pleaded with him. He refused. The King continued his pleading and eventually the Lama agreed to move further down into the valley but still beyond Timling. He did this but the distance proved too far. And so with further cajoling and, finally, the offer of land to be devoted entirely to the Lama and his disciples, he agreed to establish a Gompa right above the village itself. And so Tashi Chetsong Gompa was established in Timling and virtue returned to the community (Fricke n.d.).

Histories: These are stories that the Tamangs tell. But the last one connects with more conventional political histories by having a rare and priceless connection to documentary evidence. This conventional history is one that links the village Lamas with the monarchial state. In 1987, the Gompo

Lama allowed me to see and later photocopy a court document written in 1872 after a dispute involving the land given to that storied lama. The document incorporates the then Gompo Lama's original petition, translated into court Nepali, recounting the establishment of the Gompo by a Karmapa Lama named Ngawang Thele Lama in 1807:

> *As it is, my father Ngawang Thele Lama from Paasingtaar had built and been living in a gompo in an area called Lekh Byaabul, part of Timling village within the Sat Saya Khola region. After his living in this gompo for about 12 years, the headman of this area, Bute Uli, insisted that he move to the village.*
>
> *"We will build you a gompo just above the village at the place called Khadeu and give it to you. A lama is needed nearby to perform religious rituals and to stay in the gompo and serve God," he said. The land around Khaadeu Swara was donated from the inheritance of three brothers -- Kami Ghale, Tarki Ghale, and Nurpu Ghale. They made vows not to take back the land around the gompo until the snows of the high Himalaya melt away and vanish, until the Black Pond and White Pond dried out, until the black crow transforms into a white crow, until the Dugerne Khola's waters reversed themselves and returned to their source, and until the mountains and rivers became level. "The land exists for the use of your descendants. If you do not have descendants then it is for the use of your disciples. From this time on our two groups' descendants will not quarrel or argue over Khaadeu Swara which has been given away to God."*
>
> *The document giving the land was written in Tibetan script and the three brothers signed it as is known by both villagers and outsiders. This law was also enforced by the family and descendants of the 3 Ghale brothers, Kami Ghale, Tarki Ghale, and Nurpu Ghale together with all those living in the village.*

The document is remarkable for several reasons. Not only does it corroborate the oral stories that have him living near the same ridge, but it suggests that he did so for 12 years, originally moving to the area shortly after the 1792 China-Tibet war. That he was Karmapa and from Phyasing brings local Timling history into relation to the state. The Karmapa lamas, having been given their rights to the Gompos of the region by the king of Nepal, were beholden to the Nepali Raja during that war. When the Chinese armies came through on their way to Kathmandu, they punished these lamas making sense of his desire to flee the sins of the world.

But more importantly, it draws Timling's Gompo history directly into relations with the royal government and underlines the association between the government and the Buddhist *dharma*. The efficacy of the practices of the Buddhist lamas of Timling were linked to the efficacy of the state and its representatives.

The document originated in a land dispute between members of a Ghale lineage — who violated the original agreement:

> *Now, in the last two to four years, four villagers--Gundi Bhote, Buddha Bhote, Saangur Bhote, and Yasing Bhote — have entered the forest which was until then unoccupied to clear the land for swidden. In addition, the land that I have administered the law on, given as an offering, has been encroached on and argued over by a Ghale headman, Changyel Ghale, not of the lineage of the group giving the land in the document. So there are altogether 5 people who have intruded upon and disputed the gift of land that has from 1807 until the present forbidden the use of land to them.*

The decision came down in favor of the Lamas, further cementing the link between Timling's Gompo, the Buddhist *dharma*, and the state:

> *Therefore the written document is true and in accordance with the offering of land used by the lamas from 1807 until the present. The land has been used by the lama and also the forest has been guarded by the Lama. Nobody can cut down the forest for farming, nobody can argue over the land and nobody can take away the land that belongs to the Lama. The four villagers and the headman, Changyel Ghale, these five should be called and they should be fined for breaking the law, and the aforementioned law should be regulated on the land as well as in the forest. As the land had been used in Khadeu by Swange Lama — gave back the land to the monastery Lama Un Upa.*

Discussion and Final Comments

This is enough and yet too little. But it is time to try to pull all of this together into the elements that begin to make cultural sense of that first Tamang conversion. Our quick sketch makes it clear that several transformations converge in this story of religious change: religious, political, economic, and cultural. Some might fall into the easy view that sees this as a straightforward and homogenizing result of the forces of global change associated with modernity and its trappings of economic monetization, increasing literacy, and ideological change. For an anthropologist, however, such a view is complicated when these events are considered in light of a pre-existing cultural world that structures Tamang perceptions and provides the motivations for acting in that world (Fricke 2004; Murdoch 1970; Taylor

1989). Indeed, studies of other aspects of change in Nepal (Ahearn 2001; Liechty 2003) show how clearly "modernity" involves a complex relationship between global processes and highly localized interpretations of them. The connection to people as perceiving and motivated actors means that even those elements of global change thought of as most universalizing need to be understood from the ground up, from within specific settings and histories and among specific people. Modernity, democracy, Christianity — each of these is inherently local even as they take part in global meanings (Sugirtharajah 2001; Taylor 2004).

The literature on Christian conversion tends to divide in its emphasis on different elements of the conversion process. One strain focuses on political economic contexts (Hefner 1993); another on the globalization of "modernity" (Van Der Veer 1996); and another on missionizing Christianity (Brouwer et al. 1996; Frykenberg 2003). Other scholars focus on the experiential elements of conversion (Csordas 1997; Rambo 1993). The orienting approach that begins with Tamang indigenous notions of personhood and cultural perception provides a unifying framework for reflecting on each of these.

The Tamang cultural world, similar to many of those in Nepal associated with Tibeto-Burman populations, is one that has been characterized by its emphasis on an ethos of exchange, alliance, and reciprocity (Fricke 1990; Holmberg 1989; March 2002). This ethos finds its expression in the most mundane activities. Indeed, the widespread presence of symbols relating to this ethos of exchange mark it as a central or "key" theme (Ortner 1973, 1989) for unlocking the cultural significance of action within Tamang culture.

There are first the notions of the good and the consequent evaluations implied by practices. We have sketched an argument here that Tamang practices imply the social goods of exchange and relationship shored by the virtue of generosity.

The vice of greed, a marker of imbalance in the pursuit of internal and external goods, describes the ambitions of Timling's leaders and their affiliated politicians at the time of the *Janandolan* 1990. Although I have not been able to develop the history here, when a Tamang from a neighboring village was first given a position as minister in the pre-1990 government, in 1980, the Tamang spoke of him as their man in the government, the one who would watch out for them and bring them protection. They spoke of him as they spoke of Timling's old kings. By 1990, this same man was seen in different terms -- some might say corrupt, but that would be to miss the Tamang sense of a man without virtue.

And then there are schemas in Ortner's sense. The narratives of past declines and return of virtue through the agency of the Tamang themselves. It was the exploited Tamang who went off to seek their new king. It was the

Ghale king who went off to entice the lama to renew *dharma* in Timling through the gift of land. And it was Dorje who went off to Jharlang to learn to carry the new *dharma*, his very language echoing the carrying of Khuruwa to Timling. And finally, there is the history that linked the lamas with the government in the past, and by extension to the more recent electoral turmoil of the 1990s.

I have been struck, even in conversations with members of the mission communities in Nepal, how intent people are on explaining the Timling conversions with reference to an external cause. The favored source varies with the point of view of the person. For some, it is political: "Aha! They converted to express their political opposition!" For others, it is the lure of material and economic advantage: "Yes, it is clear that they've converted to get at jobs and money and schools." Others point to the interest in curing, making the Tamang into rational decision-makers weighing costs and benefits: "Well, they find that Christian curing is less expensive and just as effective as sacrifice." All of these "explanations" share the characteristic of projecting a particular, and western, view of personhood onto the Tamangs. There is an insidious denial of agency to the Tamang underlying these narrowly causal statements, even as each of them claims to treat real motivations. The denial starts from the very application of the categories -- religion, politics, economy, rational decision-maker — that are themselves imported.

To see this, we might return to Dorje's story. Dorje explains his own conversion as a response to his daughter Mayawati's illness and the failure of trusted methods to effect a cure. But in looking at this story in cultural terms we see that health and its maintenance is about the quality of relationship. What we might think of in western terms as sickness is in fact a failure of relation. In the same way, the failure of trusted curing techniques indexes a wider failure in relationships with those actors — local deities and spirits — who are expected to behave in ways that cement their involvement in continuing reciprocities. Mayawati's illness and the failed cures ramify from this single person to a broader premonition of a world out of whack. All of these can be condensed into a diagnosis that echoes earlier stories of the decline and renewal of *dharma* — in all of its senses including virtue.

A further point should be made as a way to connect all of this to the concrete emotions of a human being. In seeking an efficacious cure Dorje was, of course, motivated by the poignant, searing parental love made so evident in his account. And yet, that love is itself a motivator for culturally constituted action and realization. As Man Thapa said, "The opposite of sin is *dharma*. The source of *dharma* is love."

This approach to conversion raises the question of the extent to which imported ideas associated with "the modern" represent ruptures or continuities with existing cultural attributes. How are events understood and

how are they evaluated in local terms? How are they joined and experienced in ways that violate western categorical boundaries? To be sure, they represent change. But as with Amitav Ghosh's decentering of the west as the primary influence in new cultural configurations (1993, 2002), I want to argue for a perspective that gives agency to those people too often characterized as mere recipients of the foreign. It needs to be stressed that Timling's people, like the Urapim documented by Robbins, sought out their new *dharma* and brought it to Timling in their own time and for motivations distinctly their own. What develops from that initial conversion will, of course, be complex and likely not fully under their control.

Although Nepal has been largely free, since 1990, of the religious strife prominent in journalistic accounts from India, the spread of Christianity has occasioned expressions of concern at the intrusion of foreign ideologies and the corruptions of indigenous identity (Pathak 1997; Shah 1993; Tamang 2004). The perspective taken here, in keeping with Dahal's recent reflections on the rise of an indigenously Nepali middle class (2004), suggests that such intrusions cannot help but be made local. Still, however local they may become, they do have implications for the pressing political concerns that face Nepal. Their precise implications will vary, not only by the different stances toward plurality inherent in the imported ideas themselves, but also in their interaction with local meanings. I argue that, at the earliest moments of conversion to Christianity, the people of Timling were behaving very much as their ancestors had done.

And so, a final question: have I made Timling's people sound like mountain Aristotelians? I recall that it was they who got me to read MacIntyre in the first place. During my 1987 fieldwork, the recurrent mention of "the good person" and the virtues of generosity against the vices of greed caused me to begin my turn to the virtue ethicists. I read MacIntyre in particular with that shock of recognition a person gets when he or she reads the theory after the experience. It was as though MacIntyre had lived in Timling himself. If not Aristotelians in the direct sense, the Tamang seemed to be "anonymous Aristotelians" in Karl Rahner's sense of "anonymous Christians."

Note

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