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# “Born to Build a Nation”: Nepali Christians and Cultural Reimagination

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Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in the Protestant Christian community of Lalitpur, Nepal, this article explores the perspectives and experiences of young adult Nepali Christians who are resisting social pressure to emigrate and instead actively choosing to invest in life in Nepal. Their faith-driven commitment to Nepal, combined with a cosmopolitan global awareness, has resulted in the practice of what I call cultural reimagination. Understanding Christian conversion/transformation as a part of cultural reimagination offers a new perspective on the crucial rupture-vs-continuity debate within the anthropology of Christianity. Building off of Benedict Anderson’s idea of “imagined communities” and Walter Brueggemann’s idea of “prophetic imagination,” this article considers how these Nepali Christians rely on a sense of Christian calling to hopefully yet critically imagine the future of Nepal. Their example encourages Christians from around the globe to engage in prophetic, imaginative work within their own communities.

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## Introduction

“And now I would like to pray for our sister who is returning to Canada. She has been here for a short time, but now she must go back.” The pastor nodded to a young Nepali woman, who quietly and dutifully went to stand alone in the wide empty middle of the stage. I recognized her, though I didn’t remember her name. During my first visit to Naya Jiwan Church we had both stood up and introduced ourselves during the welcome section of the service. I had introduced myself as an American who spent some of her childhood in Nepal, but was back for anthropological research. She had introduced herself as a former member of the church who had lived in Canada for the past five years and had come back for a brief family visit. Although I never had the chance to speak directly to her, I remembered feeling a sense of affinity with her, observing how we both seemed a bit awkward, managing the feeling of disorientation that comes from passing through a place that is both familiar and changed.

As she stood isolated on the stage, head bowed, I wondered how she felt about this prayer. She did seem

a bit embarrassed by the spotlight, even as the pastor’s prayer committed her journey to God with warmth and pride. I could only imagine how her past few weeks had been: probably accepting countless invitations for tea or meals, distributing and then receiving suitcases of gifts, answering questions about how she managed to get to Canada and if she could help this or that person get there too.

Young Nepali Christians like her who have emigrated to Canada, the U.S., the U.K., etc. are considered the lucky ones who successfully navigated a wildly complex system of visa lotteries and immigration requirements. They are the individuals who “made it,” the pride of their families, churches, and communities—even as they are painfully missed. While emigrants to places like Canada are seen as the pinnacle of success, the young woman from Naya Jiwan is actually a part of a much broader current of emigration out of Nepal. For every Nepali who permanently immigrates to places like Canada or Australia, many more Nepalis travel as temporary migrant laborers to places like Malaysia, the Gulf countries, and India.<sup>1</sup> Almost everyone I talked to in

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<sup>1</sup> “Migration in Nepal: a country profile 2019”. See Bibliography.

Nepal seemed to have a family member or friend who was studying or working overseas.

The flow of these emigrants is a clear expression of how much Nepal has changed in the last century. A sliver of a nation sandwiched between China and India, Nepal was relatively closed off to the broader world until the 1950s. The nation of Nepal was united under a Hindu monarchy in the 1700s and made deals with the British Raj to maintain its isolationist sovereignty through the colonial era. A time of political change began in the 1950s, opening Nepal's borders to a greater foreign interchange. The political shifts intensified into a Maoist-instigated civil war in the 1990s, and in 2008, the monarchy fell, replaced by a democratic republic. Since the 1950s, Nepal has undergone tremendous social, environmental, and economic changes.<sup>2</sup> Innumerable roads crisscross the steep hills, connecting formerly isolated villages to the rapidly growing capital city of Kathmandu. People with a diverse set of ethno-linguistic and religious identities have grappled with what it means to be democratic and secular in a country where Hindu elites defined the character of Nepal for centuries (Gellner et al. 2016). A massive trekking tourism industry has sprung up, but Nepal's economy has also been supported by the labor of millions of people who have migrated abroad, either for short-term work or as immigrants.<sup>3</sup> A quarter of Nepal's GDP in 2023 consisted of remittances: money sent back to the country from a global workforce.<sup>4</sup>

Nepali Christians have traditionally been on the margins of Nepali society, facing persecution that could give them even more reason to emigrate than their Hindu peers. Yet during my recent fieldwork in Nepal, I was fascinated to find that, even in a country and community where much of the pressure and incentive is to migrate out of Nepal, some Nepali Christians are choosing, very intentionally, to come back to or stay in Nepal. While participating in the Christian community in the city of Lalitpur, I witnessed a rising generation of Nepali Christians balancing a cosmopolitan global awareness with a deep commitment—a calling—to Nepal. At the intersection of these two things, they engage in what I call cultural

reimagination. I draw on social theorist Benedict Anderson's idea of "imagined communities" and theologian Walter Brueggemann's idea of "prophetic imagination" to consider how these Nepali Christians choose to stay in Nepal and involve themselves in the nation's imagined future.

Like prophets, these Nepali Christians live as those called both "in" and "out" of their communities, prompting other Christians from around the globe to do the same. The Christian Church has historically operated in a world of binaries: *Are you in ministry or are you a supporting layperson?* *Are you from a Christian country or a non-Christian country?* But these distinctions are becoming harder and harder to maintain in our globalizing world. In light of the calling expressed by my interlocutors, this article ultimately argues that all Christians are called to imaginative, prophetic work by default, not by exception.

## Methods

This article is based on ethnographic research centered on interviews and participant-observation among Protestant Christian communities in Nepal.<sup>5</sup> I spent about two and a half months in Nepal, primarily in Lalitpur, one of the three main cities in Kathmandu Valley. Lalitpur has a significant number of Protestant churches, of all sizes and styles. My fieldwork in Lalitpur focused on a few of the more established churches. To protect the anonymity of my interlocutors, these churches have here been merged into one composite church, which I have named Naya Jiwan (New Life) Church. The churches that compose Naya Jiwan are generally and vaguely Protestant, tending towards the "Baptist" approach common among Nepali churches. At both churches, I attended the weekly Saturday services, the regular youth fellowships, and other meetings like worship or choir practices. I also met with members of the Christian community of Lalitpur in non-church settings, like home visits or special celebratory events.

Most of my interviewees were in their 20s or 30s, although I met with a few in their late teens or 40s.

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<sup>2</sup> For a more extensive history of the Nepali Protestant Church, see Rongong (2012).

<sup>3</sup> "Migration in Nepal: A Country Profile 2019". See Bibliography.

<sup>4</sup> "Personal Remittances, Received [% of GDP]—Nepal." See Bibliography.

<sup>5</sup> This article draws significantly upon my M.A. fieldwork and thesis. As the article is written under a pseudonym (see author bio), a standard citation of this thesis is not included in the footnotes nor bibliography.

Though not all were “youth” in the Nepali sense of being an unmarried young adult, almost all of my interviewees had some connection to the youth programming of the church. In age and social positionality, they comprise part of the “next generation” of the Church, so to speak. As the church founders and early members from the 1950s pass away, much of the hope for the future leadership of churches rests with these young people.

My interviews were open-ended conversations, often with people that I had some prior relationship with but did not know well. The interviews were primarily in English, with some Nepali thrown in here and there, per the interviewee’s comfort level. My interviewees all knew English better than I knew Nepali, as many of them went to English-medium schools, and my Nepali speaking has never caught up to my listening comprehension. Considering that proselytizing is illegal under Nepali law and Nepali Christians still face a level of persecution, I only interviewed those who already publicly identified as Christian, and I avoided discussions of evangelism. To further protect the safety of my interlocutors, I have also used pseudonyms and changed/removed certain identifying details throughout this article.

### **Historical and Anthropological Context**

As the last Hindu kingdom in the world (up until 2008), Hindu practices, beliefs, and symbols have made up much of Nepal’s landscape for centuries. The streets of Kathmandu are filled with thousands of temples, and the sound of ringing bells at these temples is so pervasive and familiar that it blends into the hum of city noise. These temples house images and statues of gods and goddesses, but these figures can also be found pasted above doorways, painted on buses, and written into popular music. In much of Nepal, Hinduism is ubiquitous, visibly and audibly woven into the cultural fabric of social life.

In contrast, the 2021 census claims that a mere 1.76% of Nepal’s population is Christian: about half a million.<sup>6</sup> However, many Christian leaders in Nepal have claimed this estimate is much lower than the

reality, which they estimate is actually well over a million (Gibson 2017b, 95). Regardless of the actual numbers, Christians are beginning to have a significant public presence in Nepal. In Kathmandu Valley, little crosses are showing up on shop signs and Bible verses on the windshields of taxis. On one Saturday<sup>7</sup> morning, as I walked from one Lalitpur church service to another, a little girl on the sidewalk gave me a cheery *jayamasih*<sup>8</sup>, the Christian greeting that serves as an alternative to the more Hindu *namaste*. I was surprised by her carefree public identification with Christianity. On another Saturday morning, I hopped on a public bus running along the Ring Road and watched as many people across the bus began to unexpectedly greet each other with hearty *jayamasih*s. I realized, as the little crowd got off the bus, that we were all headed to the same Saturday church service. Once an almost invisible (and widely disregarded) minority, Nepali Christians now hold a discernible place in the national discourse.

Anthropologists who study Nepali Christianity and its rapid rise inevitably run into one of the central debates within the anthropology of Christianity: whether conversion is a form of cultural rupture or continuity. A cultural continuity perspective has been traditionally held by anthropologists. It presumes that when someone becomes a Christian, their motives, beliefs, and/or selfhood may find new expression or interpretation in Christianity, but still essentially remain consistent. In this vein, anthropologist Blandine Ripert (2014), whose work focuses on the Tamang people of Nepal, wrote that “Although the Tamangs warmly welcomed the advances of missionaries, their success is arguably due to the fact that *their belief system seemed to complement ongoing transformations*” (54, italics added). In other words, Ripert holds that Christian conversion built upon beliefs and practices that already existed in the Tamang community, slotting into a long-standing ebb-and-flow of cultural change.

In recent years, Joel Robbins has become the anthropological figurehead for the opposing cultural rupture view, arguing that the self (and the community) undergo a sharply defined moment of transformation in the process of Christian conversion (Robbins 2007).

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<sup>6</sup> “National Report on Caste/ethnicity, Language & Religion” 2021. See Bibliography.

<sup>7</sup> Most Nepali churches meet weekly on Saturdays instead of Sundays. Sunday is a regular work/school day.

<sup>8</sup> Literally translates, “victory/praise to the Messiah.”

Many Nepali-born scholars and anthropologists seem, like Robbins, to emphasize the dramatic personal and cultural breaks that occur in conversion. For example, Nepali social scientist Rajendra Thokar (2018) compares Christianity to a “quake” shaking the foundations of Nepali culture and values (164).

In considering the Christianity of the young Nepalis I came to know, I follow in the path of those like Samuele Poletti (2022) who question the binary at the heart of this debate. I propose a third option: conversion (or the discernment of Christian calling or commitment<sup>9</sup>) as a part of cultural reimagination. Reimagination offers a way for a commitment to Christianity to be both rupture *and* continuity, an experience of radical newness and transformation combined with a deep grounding in the current cultural context. Considering that imagined categories like “Nepali” and “Christian” already have an extensive history, the idea of *reimagination* offers a model that both acknowledges the gravity of this history as well as the possibility of a transformed future.

### **Reimagination and Prophecy**

This proposed cultural reimagination combines thinking from both anthropological and theological sources, namely the anthropological idea of “imagined communities” and the theological idea of “prophetic imagination.”

The phrase “imagined communities” famously originated with political scientist Benedict Anderson. Andersonian “imagined communities” are communities which consist of people who will never all meet each other yet, in some way, think of themselves as one (Anderson 2006, 6). Anderson applied this idea to nationalism; I see its resonance in understanding both how my interlocutors related to the imagined communities of Nepal and Christianity. Being Nepali and being Christian is local and relational, negotiated in what Arjun Appadurai (1996) calls “neighborhoods,” i.e. “situated communities characterized by their actuality” (179). Nepali Christians inevitably live in Nepali towns and go to Nepali churches. Yet Nepal and the Christian Church, as imagined communities, reach far beyond this local scope and create a broader imagination among their citizens/members. Appadurai

(1996) observes that “the task of producing locality (as a structure of feeling, a property of social life, and an ideology of situated community) is increasingly a struggle” (189). This reality means it is harder and harder for a nation-state like Nepal to keep its many neighborhoods within one imagined community.

On the other hand, it remains a challenge for an imagined community like Christianity to maintain a sense of locality in Nepal’s neighborhoods. As Webb Keane (2007) argues, “in some respects Christianity has no locality, either sociologically (institutions and people circulate), culturally (ideas and practices circulate), or ontologically (its truth claims are universal)” (45). This tricky task of nurturing both locality and imagination leads to significant uncertainty, open-endedness, and maybe even turmoil in defining and maintaining both national and religious imagined communities.

The uncertainty would seem to only increase when these national and religious identities intertwine. In the context of his work on Sumbanese Reformed Churches, Keane (2007) encountered the unexpected phrase “Sumbanese Christendom,” which prompted him to consider the very definition of these words: “What is it to be ‘Sumbanese’? What is ‘Christianity’ when it is inflected or qualified by a locality?” (89). I follow Keane and consider similar questions on what it means to be “Nepali” *and* “Christian.” In the midst of such questioning, it becomes possible and perhaps even necessary to reimagine such communities. The imagined boundaries of Christianity and nationality expand and contract under the demands of the local and the global.

From one perspective, this flexing of these boundaries and the emergence of these questions represents a concerning threat to the integrity and stability of imagined communities, whether political or religious. Appadurai’s use of the word “struggle” and Thokar’s “quake” seem to allude to this kind of anxiety. These anxieties clearly have a grounding in an ever changing and globalizing world. However, I choose “reimagination” for its potential as a positive reframing of these definitional questions of identities and communities. What if challenging what it means to be Nepali or to be Christian, rather than posing an

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<sup>9</sup> I add this qualification because many of my interlocutors were born-and-raised Christians and therefore technically did not convert. However, these interlocutors, like many born-and-raised Christians across the centuries, still described themselves as having a particular time where they personally “met” or “knew” Jesus and experienced a spiritual transformation.

existential threat, actually gives new vitality to these communities?

Walter Brueggemann's notion of "prophetic imagination" offers a theoretical framework for reimagination that provides a positive angle and illuminates the critical yet hopeful perspective my interlocutors provided on being Nepali and Christian. Brueggemann's seminal text *The Prophetic Imagination*, originally published in 1978, as well as his later 2015 work *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education* speak to the archetype of the Biblical prophet. Brueggemann (2015) writes:

The prophets are not political scientists with blueprints for a social order. They are not crusaders for a cause. They are not ethical teachers. They are speakers (not writers) who commit linguistic acts that assault the presumed world of the king, who expose the pretensions of the royal system, and who invite listening Israel to *entertain new dimensions of social possibility which they had never before considered*. In much of Protestantism, the prophets have been mistakenly understood as social activists or as social reformers. But they have the more fundamental task of *nurturing poetic imagination*. . . . They seek to form an alternative context for humanness by *creating a different presumptive world* which is buoyed by different promises, served by different resources, sobered by different threats, and which permits different decisions. (73-74, italics added.)

When understood in relation to this prophetic archetype, Nepali Christians embody and share a new imaginative reality that refines and redefines their imagined communities instead of threatening to dismantle or weaken said communities. Prophetic imagination makes real "the possibility of passion" (Brueggemann 2018, 35)—caring deeply about suffering and pain while boldly believing in and envisioning a different future. But where does this prophetic imaginative capacity emerge from? Or, to borrow again from Brueggemann, "How can we have enough freedom to imagine and articulate a real historical newness in our situation?" (2018, 39). Part of prophetic freedom comes from the mixed insider/outsider status of the prophet. The prophet is the voice of a peripheral community (2015, 71), specially positioned to disrupt the old consensus (ibid., 88) and evoke a new world (ibid., 80). Yet

Brueggemann ultimately argues that the prophet's energetic and expansive capacity for imagination comes from a divinely-received calling. Although the use of the word "calling" can evoke a sense of special status (one might imagine the peculiar asceticism and reclusivity of the desert prophet clothed in sackcloth, for example), the calling to prophetic imagination can and should pertain to all Christians. Prophetic imagination is the actualization of the universal Christian condition of grief and hope, whether one works in the church, healthcare, community organizing or something else (2018, 121-125).

This theological understanding of prophets—as critical yet hopeful reimaginers of their communities—adds an important new angle to much of the anthropological discourse around prophets. Dorothy Emmet, in her 1956 lecture, observes the influence of Durkheim and Weber on how anthropology tends to view prophets as individuals distinct from a group and as social radicals or even revolutionaries (13). Durkheim focuses on prophets as socially deviant or even criminal characters (ibid., 13-14). Weber, in turn, defines a prophet as "a purely personal bearer of charisma who, by virtue of his mission, preaches a religious doctrine or a divine command" (Weber 1968, 253). Weber paints the prophet as an individual leader who "exerts his power" over his followers because of his gifts of persuasion or "magical charisma" (ibid., 254). These conceptions emphasize the sociopolitical nature of prophecy: prophets as leaders who can mobilize people and religious rhetoric towards a new social order. Prophecy becomes primarily about social and political action. Although he acknowledges this component of prophecy, Brueggemann primarily emphasizes the linguistic and epistemological dimension of the prophetic message (2018, 21). In other words, the what of prophetic action is bound up with the how and why. In order for the social and political action to actually create something new, someone must propose and conceive of said newness. As Brueggemann argues, "the *imagination* comes before the *implementation*" (2018, 40, italics in original).

While I spend the rest of this article exploring this theological/imaginative angle on prophecy, it is important to first note that the Nepali Christians I came to know might question being compared to prophets in the Old Testament sense. My interlocutors, for the most part, are not directly interfacing with authorities (except perhaps within their churches). They are not composing books of poetry

(as far as I know), and many of them, I would guess, would not consider themselves public speakers. The prophets of the Old Testament received uniquely profound and direct inspiration from God in a way that my interlocutors would likely never claim. However, I reference this archetype of the biblical prophet because I witnessed how my interlocutors' choice to actively stay in Nepal as Nepali Christians meant that they were "creating a different presumptive world" (Brueggemann 2015, 74). In a variety of ways—their words, their faithful actions, even just the very nature of their being and identity—they commit to Nepal and are reimagining what it means to be Nepali.

### "Born to Build a Nation": Reimagining Nepal

Before I could recognize the significance of the choice to commit to and stay in Nepal, I first had to internalize the strength and nature of the current *out* of Nepal. My first youth fellowship meeting at Naya Jiwan Church felt much like a crash course in globalization and migration. After a Saturday service, cup of tea in hand, I was warmly greeted by one of the youth leaders, Nishan, and invited to their weekly youth fellowship. Optimistic but feeling a bit shy, I showed up to the large meeting room where the youth were clumped into chatting groups. Nishan gradually gathered the small crowd. The official meeting proceeded in a quick and orderly manner: Nishan prayed and shared some announcements, we sang some songs, and a young man shared a brief sermon, all in Nepali. Nishan introduced me to the group as the researcher who might be asking people questions about their experiences. Official programming duly over, Nishan invited everyone to hang out for a while. The group split roughly by gender; some of the young men from the group wandered off while the young women clustered to chat.

The young women shyly asked me, in flawless English, if I would like to play a game with them, and I happily agreed. *This is it*, I thought, *my chance to build ethnographic rapport, ask some initial questions, get know some potential interviewees*. They brought out a set of board games, but everyone quickly grew

bored. We discarded the artifice of the game and began to simply chat, toying with the game pieces.

If I had thought I would be asking the questions and learning about them, I was wrong. One young woman broke the ice with a modest compliment: *your eyes are so beautiful*. Then the questions came thick and fast: *You're married? Tell us your love story. Show us a photo of your wedding. Did you kiss your husband at your wedding? We don't do that here*. Then one young woman proceeded to tell the story of a time she went to a *bideshi*<sup>10</sup> wedding and the couple kissed—the first time she'd ever seen people kiss in real life. I managed to slip in a question, asking, if/when they got married, whether they would wear a white dress or red *sari*<sup>11</sup>. They all laughed at this question, not even bothering to answer because it was so obvious that they would wear white. One of them pulled up her TikTok account and showed us all a modest yet elegant white dress that she would want to wear at her wedding. The girls all expressed their approval, but with the air of a pipe dream: they told me it would be years and years before they got married because they need to get a master's degree and a job first.

The TikTok account should have been a clue, but I still found myself surprised by their easy literacy in global media culture: *What shows do you watch? Gilmore Girls? Stranger Things? My sister really likes Stranger Things. Do you like horror movies? Do you like ramen? Do you like spicy food? I eat so much buldak ramen. Do you play sports? It's so weird how Americans call it football when it isn't played with your foot*. I found myself missing some of their references (*You don't know who Colleen Hoover is?*), and I felt old and awkward in my traditional *kurtha* tunic next to their trendy slouchy hoodies and denim. I felt a bit more cool again when they oohed and aahed upon learning about my recent trip to L.A., the land of movies and celebrities. One young woman responded, "How far is that from Texas? I know some people from there."

I asked if they want to stay in Nepal or leave, and the response was basically: *duh, leave*. When I asked why, one girl noted how she would have to leave to get a PhD in her chosen field of study, but the others

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<sup>10</sup> "Foreigner's".

<sup>11</sup> Fabric pleated and draped into a "dress" over a blouse and petticoat. Highly decorated red *saris* are traditionally worn at weddings across South Asia.

seemed to think the desire to leave was self-explanatory.

Many of my interlocutors spoke of this desire among young people to leave Nepal, often with a shrug of acceptance or a note of begrudging resignation. Youth leader Nishan, usually ever optimistic in front of me, once bitterly made a passing comment that the youth group is shrinking as everyone goes to *bidesh*<sup>12</sup>. Jai, another youth leader, shared a similar sentiment:

[The youth] have to go abroad. Some people go for their studies, some people go for work. We cannot stop them, because they have different kinds of challenges, family pressure. They have to earn for the family. Some say they don't see the future in our country, so they leave the country. Most of the people, when they go outside, they don't come back. It's a challenge.

I repeatedly heard the theme that good educational and career opportunities are poor-to-nonexistent in Nepal, and the path to social mobility and financial stability is through *bidesh*. Most of my interlocutors are relatively privileged urbanites who were born into or have achieved a certain level of educational opportunity, so they were likely to set their sights on countries like the U.S., South Korea, or Australia, either for education or work.

With conversations like those above, it would seem likely that many young Nepali Christians are more than ready to drop the Nepali label and go make it big in “the West.”<sup>13</sup> Perhaps patterns of emigration and globalization are disconnecting young Nepalis from their heritage. One of my interlocutors, a successful young businesswoman named Rebekah, observed that “Nepal is really fascinated by Western culture and people really try to be like a foreigner. Nepali TikToks, they try to be fancy and act like, ‘Oh I can't speak Nepali. I can only speak in English. *Nepali ali-ali aaunchha*.”<sup>14</sup> They think that if you can speak in Nepali, you are old-fashioned.” She noted that she struggles to sell products that are made in Nepal or seem Nepali: her Kathmandu Valley based

consumers want to buy into a more “Western” and “modern” aesthetic.

Although some young Nepali Christians undoubtedly are following the current and looking outside Nepal for their future, the more time I spent getting to know these young Christians, the more I recognized a countercurrent, one that could potentially root them more deeply in Nepal. A significant proportion of my interlocutors, in spite of all of the economic and cultural reasons to emigrate, expressed a deepening loyalty and commitment to Nepal. Within their commitment to their specific Nepali communities and the idea of the nation of Nepal, they began to powerfully reimagine their communities and nation.

The interlocutors who fell most clearly into this category were generally slightly older than the ones who most strongly expressed a desire to get out of Nepal. Yet despite being slightly older, these interlocutors were decidedly *not* “old-fashioned” homebodies. They had almost as much cultural literacy as the Naya Jiwan youth I described earlier. For example, when I met Bibek at Naya Jiwan Church, I was taken aback by just how cool and cosmopolitan he was. He spoke slang-infused English with a strong American accent and little bit of a swagger to match. When I introduced myself, he told me how he had just been to the state where I live, visiting family who, it turned out, live a half a day's drive from me. Bibek perfectly fit the image of the globe-trotting adventurer, showing me photos of his trips around the world. And he seemed to somehow know everyone within the Christian communities that I moved through. He talked about the pastors like old friends, but after youth fellowships, the youth would affectionately swarm him. Of all of my interlocutors, Bibek seemed to have the most abundant financial and social capital. Although he had every opportunity to leave Nepal, he made it very clear to me that he intends to always come back.

Seeing the emptying of your country is heartbreaking. Many people think they are born in Nepal at the wrong time, there's no opportunity. If

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<sup>12</sup> “Foreign country / countries”.

<sup>13</sup> I was intrigued to learn that this label of “the West” could sometimes include countries like South Korea and Japan, but not India. Although I did not fully explore this definition in my interviews, “the West” seems to be an “Other” defined by cultural and geographical distance and perceived affluence.

<sup>14</sup> “I know only a little Nepali.”

they were born 300 years ago, Nepal was better financially, socially. Kathmandu used to be like today's Dubai or Singapore. We did a lot of trade with Indian empires and Chinese empires. But for me, I feel privileged to be born in *this* time, in Nepal. There is lots of work to do for this country. If I was born in New York right now, I would just be rebuilding or managing the city. But here, I have an opportunity to build it. All of [my family] left Nepal for the dream cities of the world, but I am born to build a nation, so I'm going to stay here and at least contribute a little part of what I can to the country.

Bibek has both pride in what Nepal has been and a sense of investment in what he wants it to be. In Bibek's experience, seeing the West in all its reality (e.g. a culture of overwork and loneliness) instead of through the rosy lens of social media only deepened this commitment to "building Nepal." Bibek told me that he sees part of his life's calling as sharing these thoughts with youth in the church so they can "make a better choice" as they consider leaving Nepal. He honored their free will, but indicated that he hoped that they would be the people who stay and reimagine a future Nepal.

Interlocutors like Bibek who talked about their commitment to Nepal did not, notably, seem primarily motivated by a strong sense of patriotic nationalism. Their desire to invest in Nepal or, more specifically, the next generation of Nepali Christians, did not seem to stem from a belief that Nepal is special or superior. Interlocutors willingly critiqued or expressed doubts about life in Nepal. For example, though Bibek said he would never want to leave Nepal, he caveated that his Christian morals mean he is unwilling to engage in bribery, and the normalization of such corruption in certain Nepali business circles would be the one thing that could force him to leave. For Nepali Christians like him, any sense of national loyalty came second to and originated within their Christian faith.

Considering this clear awareness of their relative allegiances to Nepal and to Christianity, I would describe Bibek and others' dedication to reimagining Nepal in terms of "vocation" or "calling", particularly in accordance with Brueggemann's sense of prophetic calling. In fact, Emmet's 1956 lecture (referenced earlier in relation to prophecy) argues that what Weber and Durkheim miss in prophecy is the idea of vocation. She argues that "the vocational person learns to live as a servant of some work which is greater than

his own purposes. Where this vocational devotion is combined with a first-hand power which brings people to see things in a new way, we speak of him as prophetic" (Emmet 1956, 22). I agree with Emmet's assessment of the importance of vocation to understanding prophecy, but I am inclined to include an element of agency relative to her presentation of vocation as ultimately deterministic, that is, as something that is bestowed upon the prophet. Theologian Andrew Davidson observes that vocation/calling is "about the overlap of freedom and purpose" in the Christian life (Davidson 2009, 3). Davidson characterizes humans as created for a reason by a purposeful God (*ibid.*, 4). Yet Davidson does not see this limiting but rather creating the conditions for individual agency: "Providence does not close down opportunities and choices but opens them up. Vocation is about sifting amongst these choices and the actions that go with them" (*ibid.*, 4). Davidson outlines the markers of all human vocation: 1) gratefulness, 2) humility, 3) working for the good of the whole, and 4) creativity (*ibid.*, 5-6). These four characteristics are clear in Bibek's self-narration: 1) he was grateful to live in Nepal now, 2) he knew that he may only contribute "a little," 3) he gave significant resources to serving the youth of the Nepali Church, 4) he saw himself as "building" Nepal. This vocational commitment to Nepal, though less effusive than a conventional patriotism, seems no less devoted. It profoundly directed the course of Bibek's life and, he seemed to hope, the lives of people around him in Nepal.

Like Bibek, another interlocutor, Nishan expressed a similar vocational commitment to Nepal in his life and work at Naya Jiwan Church. At the beginning of my interview with him, he told me, "I never thought I would be working for the church." However, within a year or two of working at Naya Jiwan, Nishan went from feeling "this is just a job" to "this is what I was called for."

When Nishan used the word "called," my ears pricked. I had wondered if this theological idea would come up in my interviews, but Nishan was the first to use it. The interview moved on, but calling came up again as we talked about the youth leaving Nepal. Nishan, with the air of resignation described above, told me: "I can't blame the young generation for leaving Nepal. For me, if I also got the call to go, I would also go. But it's not about calling. They are going to solve their problems. But I don't have any bad words for them, they are just following their dreams. They're not doing anything wrong. Maybe some of them dream

about good houses or good family in the future or about having lots of money in the future. For me, I dream about serving. And God provides.”

I explored further: “Is there a difference between a dream and a calling? Or are they the same?”

“No,” Nishan responded immediately, “They are very different things. I could dream about writing hundreds of songs and making them famous, but a calling is different. If my dream is about writing songs, but it is not my calling, I will have nothing.”

A calling, in Nishan's understanding, comes from regularly talking with God. Nishan connected his experience to the story of Jonah: he might want to go to the “easiest place in the world,” but God could call him to “the poorest villages in Nepal” or “thousands of young generations.” He concluded: “It's not me deciding my things, it's Him [God] deciding my stuff.” Although this statement may sound fatalistic, it still exists at the intersection of freedom and purpose described by Davidson because Nishan had to choose to listen to God or not. The purpose is already there, and God has provided for it, but humans have the freedom to rebel or accept, like Jonah.

Nishan's division between dreams and callings proved a productive one in understanding the way my interlocutors talked about their future and reimagined Nepalianness. While dreams come from the self and serve the self, calling comes from God and serves God and His purposes, which aligns with the origin of prophecy. In my interviews, discussions of dreams seemed to point outside of Nepal, while thoughts around calling more often pointed inwardly—also a prophetic orientation. While dreams seemed to serve as a way to reimagine the self (e.g. going to the U.S. to study and become wealthy), calling had a wider scope, reimagining much more than just the individual (e.g. serving the youth of Nepal that they may transform their nation). While Nishan intentionally did not judge those who are following their dreams, his own sense of calling did seem to be a marker or expression of his genuine faith. Nishan, Bibek, and others, who have their own strong sense of calling, seemed to hope that by patiently encouraging and living alongside dream-directed youth that they would open the door for God to refine those dreams into callings.

While calling can be associated with traditional ministry jobs, I was surprised that many of the Christian business people I spoke with also seemed to have an aspect of calling in their work and life in Nepal. Ayush was another interlocutor who demonstrated his deep commitment to life in Lalitpur, running his local

business in addition to his many hours helping at Naya Jiwan Church. He said he would want to get a bit more Biblical training in the U.S., but ultimately would want to stay in Nepal. “It's our country, it's my country. I have to look after my own people.” Part of this “looking after” involves his work at the church, but he said that he now understands his business as part of his “ministry.” Seeing his business as ministry meant subtle things like putting up paraphrased Bible verses in the office, but, even more importantly, being trustworthy and uncorrupt in accordance with good Christian “character” and “attitude.” The Christian business people I spoke with, men and women, indicated that, though Christians *can* have a reputation as ethical business-people, Christian identity is not actually a guarantee of moral uprightness. Bibek even went so far as to say he would rather do business with a non-Christian than a Christian because he has been “betrayed” by more Christians than non-Christians. Thus business people like Ayush and Bibek have the opportunity to work towards a Nepal where Christians are recognized as morally responsible, ideally promoting a broader change of greater honest investment in Nepal.

### **Cosmopolitanism and Defining a Modern Nepal**

People like Bibek, Ayush, and Nishan have chosen to stay in Nepal even when they could leave, and they can readily talk about their calling that led them to this commitment. Nishan's description of calling versus dreams would seem to draw a line between this group and the young women of Naya Jiwan who showed me their Tiktok and shared their dreams of moving out of Nepal. I hesitate, however, to draw a sharp distinction. Even some of the youth who presented as most “Western” and “modern” seemed to be possibly and gradually developing a calling to Nepal, perhaps through the mentorship and example of people like Bibek, Ayush, and Nishan. The young woman, Maya, who said she would need to do her PhD outside of Nepal, for example, later shared with me, one-on-one, that she wanted the PhD precisely so she could come back and fill a specific felt need in her Christian community in Nepal.

I argue that rather than understanding these outward-looking Nepali Christians as “corrupted” or “deserters”, we should instead interpret their actions as challenging and expanding the imagined boundaries of being a Nepali person. In this sense of reimagination, they have the potential to prophetically reimagine their

communities and nation even as they look out at and engage with the world. The world becomes a source of new ways of thinking and being that can be recontextualized into Nepal. A drum kit (kick drum, cymbals, etc.) can take up the rhythmic *ghin-tang* language of the Nepali *madal*<sup>15</sup>, as I heard during a worship practice at Naya Jiwan. A white wedding dress can become a symbol of Christian distinctiveness. The practice of Nepali Christmas caroling can become a fascinating mash-up of the European Christian tradition and Nepali Tihar festivities.

I propose that the language of cosmopolitanism gets to the heart of these reimaginings of being Nepali. Ulf Hannerz defines cosmopolitanism as “an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness towards divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity. To become acquainted with more cultures is to turn into an *aficionado*, to view them as art works” (Hannerz 2019, 487, italics in original). In this sense, cosmopolitanism represents a continuation of the issue of choice outlined in the previous section. Cosmopolitanism becomes the power to choose between cultures, to discuss and dissect cultural beliefs and artifacts in order to claim and reject different pieces of cultural identity and experience. The young women of Naya Jiwan Church seemed eager to demonstrate the breadth and depth of their cultural palate, not just blindly express allegiance to “Western” culture. Lydia, another young Christian woman, observed that “before this, we had the concept that we want to be foreign,” but in more recent years, “we want to be Nepali, we are proud now.” She has seen some young women wearing a traditional Nepali hair ribbon (called *chulthi dhago* or *lacha dori*) in their everyday lives, an act that previously would have been viewed just as “something old people would do.” Selectively reclaiming parts of Nepali fashion is the act of a cultural connoisseur.

I nonetheless hesitate a little in calling my interlocutors “cosmopolitan.” Although these young people do seem to represent a version of cosmopolitanism, it is not the cosmopolitanism of, say, wealthy American teens who jet-set between Tokyo, Paris, and Marrakesh. As Hannerz notes, cosmopolitanism is a seemingly paradoxical mix of “mastery” of and “surrender” to other cultures (Hannerz 2019, 488). Many young Nepalis, starting from a subaltern

position, clearly bear the competing demands of mastery and surrender more heavily than those who come from a position of global power and affluence. I hypothesize that this unequal dynamic is part of why, among my interlocutors, “the West” evoked both bitter resignation and longing admiration, sometimes even in the same conversation.

This ambivalence towards “the West” and growing sense of cosmopolitanism is likely not unique in Nepal to the Christian young people that I came to know. However, their status as Christians in Nepal does give them a particular proximity to notions of Western-ness and cosmopolitanism. According to my interlocutors, many Nepalis perceive Christianity as a *bideshi* or Western religion. Although many of my interlocutors strongly rejected this idea when leveled as an accusation, some saw the benefits of Christians being perceived as “Western” (or, more fairly, cosmopolitan) and “modern.”

When I asked her about whether Christianity is seen as a modern religion in Nepal, Maya said that Christianity is a “Pinterest religion,” especially around Christmas time, where many people, Christian and non-Christians alike, take aesthetic Christmas photos. She noted wryly how 11 months of the year non-Christians bash Christians, but in December everyone copies “Justin Bieber and Ariana Grande” with a Christmas look in pursuit of “fame.” In a similar vein, Lydia quipped that “the malls celebrate Christmas more than churches.” She is not wrong: the malls and churches I visited did rival each other in terms of which had the taller and shinier Christmas tree. Although this tie to a “modern” global culture perhaps has more to do with the globalization of a consumerist Christmas than the specific actions of Nepali Christians, there are ways that Nepali Christians—especially the second and third generation—clearly choose to be “modern” or “Western.”

Music is one such way that some churches in Lalitpur have intentionally presented themselves as “modern.” One of the youth leaders I spoke with described how important he thought it was to translate Christian songs from “different genres” (i.e. English songs that are not from the traditional Nepali hymn book) to keep youth interested and happy. Some of the youth did talk about how Naya Jiwan Church’s worship is well-known for its musical excellence. Naya

<sup>15</sup> Although it is a simple drum, the Nepali *madal* can produce various distinct sounds, described with onomatopoeia like *ghin-tang*.

Jiwan Church, with its drum kit, guitars, bass, and keys clearly follows the Hillsong-esque mold that has been reproduced in many countries around the globe (Wagner 2013, 76). By engaging in these instances of global Christian culture, young Nepali Christians use their cosmopolitanism to participate in the process of defining what a “modernizing” Nepal actually looks like. From their prophetic position on the periphery of Nepal, they synthesize a variety of influences from both inside and outside Nepal to reimagine Nepaliness.

In many ways, Nepal is still a nation-in-progress: a long heterogeneous collection of people only recently organized into a secular, democratic state. What it means to “be Nepali” is thus still being negotiated. In these stories, we can see two different ways that Nepali Christians conceptualize themselves as part of the Andersonian “imagined community” of Nepal and its future. One perspective highlights Christian connections outside Nepal and thereby plays into trends of globalization in Nepal: the outward migration of people and the importation of cultural forms and practices. The other perspective utilizes the Christian understanding of calling to affirm that Nepali Christians are deeply Nepali by virtue of their commitment to shaping and uplifting Nepal from the inside. This loyalty and feeling of connection to Nepal may seem to be at odds with an outwardly-looking cosmopolitanism, but many of my interlocutors held these two in tension.

In this way, many of the young Nepali Christians I got to know have particular potential to transform Nepal from a position of intentional rootedness even as they have the sweeping vantage point of the periphery, not unlike the archetype of the biblical prophet. They have the potential to be (and some already are) the odd-one-out people, but not in a bad way: honest business-people in the midst of a culture of corruption, youth discerning their calling in a modernizing city of dreams—distinctively Christian in the midst of a country known for its Hinduism. Their differences do not need to sideline them in the project of nation-making in Nepal or identity-making among members of the global Nepali community, but potentially can make them utterly integral, uniquely perceptive of both the current realities and future possibilities of being Nepali.

## Conclusion

By exploring this idea of cultural reimagination, I do follow in the spirit of Anderson’s “imagined community.” Anderson’s focus on imagination makes sense of how my interlocutors have engaged in creating the nation of Nepal, in both explicit and implicit ways. In another sense, however, I take a hard turn away from Anderson. Anderson stops short of saying religious communities are irrelevant in the world today, but he accepts a historical narrative that places “the dawn of the age of nationalism” after “the dusk of religious modes of thought” and “the ebbing of religious belief” (2006, 11). To the contrary, I claim that Christian calling/vocation is an essential, growing component of imaginative nation-building work. In a country like Nepal, where a strong social current pulls young people away from their nation and into globalized migratory flows, some countercurrent has to provide the imaginative impetus and inspiration to stay. In the case of my interlocutors, that countercurrent was their Christian calling to Nepal.

As my interlocutors discerned this calling, it did not lead to cultural rupture or to continuity, but a combination of the two. They held on to a historical or traditional Nepaliness, both in symbolic and practical ways, but they also envisioned a transformed future Nepal where they could be globally connected, visibly Christian, and yet no less Nepali. Because the core of their identities rested in their Christian convictions and community, they could freely reimagine the Nepali part of their identity without feeling shaken.

In the midst of significant change, humans can have a tendency to hunker down to protect “us” from “them.” The ever-shifting trends of globalization and international migration have evoked such a reaction from certain Christians, especially those living in Old Christendom where Christianity has had a long history of political and social dominance. However, the example of my interlocutors offers a different way. I witnessed young Nepali Christians who are choosing to invest in and commit to Nepal while still looking to engage with a variety of global influences. They do not idolize some narrow ideal of Nepal, stirring up in themselves a nationalistic loyalty, nor do they accept anything and everything in their vision of a future Nepal. Rather, their positions on their society’s periphery and their cosmopolitan taste gives them a discerning perspective, brimming with both optimism and critique. They engage with the changes in their

communities, nation, and world as fodder for the creative work of reimagination.

Reimagination is not the work of a select few with particular political power, special divine inspiration, or serendipitous historical positioning. Prophetic imagination, as Brueggemann observes, is not merely the work of certain preachers. Clearly it is the work of young men and women in the Nepali Church whether they work as businesspeople, students, or youth leaders. Some are chasing dreams, but the “born to build a nation” passion of people like Bibek offers them a compelling alternative.

This example of reimagination can and should compel Christians outside of Nepal as well. Philip Jenkins specifically applies this argument to churches of the global North: “In the present day, it may be that it is only in the newer churches that the Bible can be read with any authenticity and immediacy, and that the Old Christendom must give priority to Southern voices. If Northern churches cannot help with clergy or missionaries or money, then perhaps they can reinterpret [or, dare I say, reimagine?] their own religion in light of these experiences” (Jenkins 2019, 433). The ever-more internally-driven growth of Christianity in countries like Nepal has not absolved Christians from Old Christendom from engaging with Christians and churches in that part of the world. On the contrary, Christians of North America and Europe need to open themselves to being transformed by the Christianity practiced and preached by the rest of the world. Engaging with a global variety of theologies, expressions of faith, and biblical hermeneutics can be uncomfortable or even shocking, but the challenge can reinvigorate Christians and Christian communities, especially those that have lost their dynamism and sense of calling.

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