

**Mitsuru Niwa. 2020. *Fushin no Sasaeru Shinkō Kyōdōtai: Nepāru no Purotesutantizumu ni tsuite no Minzokushiteki Kenkyū.* (A Community of Believers Maintained by Distrust: An Ethnographic Study on Protestantism in Nepal). Tokyo: Suiseisha.**

This book is an ethnography of Christians in Nepal, based on the author's 2017 doctoral dissertation, submitted to Hitotsubashi University, Tokyo. Niwa conducted fieldwork in Kathmandu from 2008 to 2016, focusing on communities of Protestant Christians in the country. The book describes the way Nepali Christians interact with each other and maintain their faith and their "community of believers," amid mutual distrust and rivalry.

The book is divided into two parts, each consisting of three chapters. The first part, "Community of Faith," describes the formation of communities through faith, while the second part, "Community of Distrust," reveals the prevailing mutual distrust within various levels of the community.

Chapter One, "Protestantism and *viśwās*," focuses on the concept of *viśwās* (faith, trust) which is at the core of Nepali Protestantism. It is done by tracing different implications of related concepts, like "*dharma*" and "*āsthā*." *Dharma* is another word for religion, such as in "*Hindu dharma* (Hinduism)" and "*Bouddha dharma* (Buddhism)." *Āsthā* refers to the inner state of mind and is translated as worship, devotion and trust, directed towards religion or gods, but not towards humans. *Viśwās*, on the other hand, means faith, trust, or reliance based on personal judgment and choice in a wide range of social contexts including business or friendship. Niwa argues that Protestantism

in Nepal brought in a new concept of individual choice and concomitant religious exclusivity in religious attribution with this word *viśwās*, in sharp contrast with other *dharma* that have been practiced in Nepal.

Chapter Two, “Magic and Protestantism as *Dharma*,” highlights a characteristic of Protestantism in Nepal that is derived from both magic and *dharma*. The chapter firstly portrays the magical nature of Protestantism in Nepal. Witnessing the healing of the sick presents an occasion for non-Christians to come into contact with Protestantism, and for those who are already converted, to strengthen their *viśwās*. Conversely, Christians are likely to face personal, internal conflict and have their faith shaken, if their illnesses are not healed. Then the chapter goes on to describe Protestantism as having a nature of *dharma*, with its emphasis on the “sense of obeying the rules.” Smoking, drinking, eating sacrificial meat, and participating in non-Protestant religious practices are prohibited. Participation in worship services, prayer meetings, church events, weddings, and funerals in the church are strongly encouraged. According to Niwa, the rule of abandoning non-Protestant religious practices is a precondition of faith for Nepali Protestants. The abandonment of local practices is inevitably seen as a betrayal of relational and “caste/ethnic” ties, leading the believers to rely on their new community to share religious as well as daily practices and to seek relationships and mutual help.

Chapter Three, titled “In Search of Strong *Viśwās*,” describes various Nepali Christian communities including churches, inter-church networks, and private networks. The chapter shows how Christians evaluate their own *viśwās* in comparison with other Christians through their vibrant activities based on *viśwās*. Niwa notes that church-related activities came to be conducted freely in Nepal after the democratization in 1990, with considerable overseas financial support. Seen as a “blessing of God,” such financial offerings are used to launch diverse activities for the glory of God. Christians seek to attain others’ recognition of one’s strong faith by devoting themselves to such activities, which results in their further vigorous involvement in such activities.

In the second section, Chapter Four, “Prevailing Mutual Distrust,” shows how Christians distrust one another within their own communities, and how this mutual distrust is making communication difficult for them. Specifically, the chapter outlines three discourses, a discourse of “*calākh*,” a discourse of criticizing instrumentalism, and a discourse of distrust. According to Niwa,

people often use the word *calākh* to describe fellow believers, which means “wise and clever” as well as “cunning.” The discourse of instrumentalism accuses Christians of using religion as an instrument for their own benefit, or of having hidden motives behind religious activities, such as making money and enhancing prestige. He argues that these two discourses lead to the rise of a discourse of distrust. With the prevalence of these discourses within communities, a person becomes prone to be interpreted based on them. In other words, people are likely to distrust, rather than trust, each other, making communication even more difficult.

Chapter Five, “*Viśwās* Activities amid Mutual Distrust,” describes how even amid the mutual distrust, *viśwās* activities such as seeking positions as a pastor and an elder, a secession of church for acquisition of posts, or establishment of parachurch organizations continue to be vigorously carried out. According to Niwa, while Christians actively participate in *viśwās* activities to gain good reputations, which is always provisional, as faithful believers, such behavior carries the risk of being interpreted as instrumentalism. Still, the *viśwās* activities do not stop but rather intensify, which in turn ends up deepening mutual distrust in the community, despite the fact that *viśwās* in God can be anchored in a community of Christians alone. As a result, mutual criticisms or even ridicule based on jealousy become widespread in Christian communities.

Chapter Six, “The Nature of the Christian Communities,” focuses on how Christian communities have been maintained amid distrust and blame. Specifically, Niwa traces the historical proliferation of umbrella organizations in Christian communities through conflicts and secessions, contesting for the position as the truly authentic and representative umbrella organization of Nepali Protestants. The first umbrella organization, the Nepal Christian Fellowship (NCF), was formed in the 1960s, but gradually lost its influence. In the 1990s, it was renamed the National Churches Fellowship of Nepal (NCFN), and several new umbrella organizations such as the Nepal Christian Society (NCS) and National Council of Churches of Nepal (NCCN) were organized, one after another. In the 2000s–2010s, some others came up like the Christian Federation of Nepal (CFoN), the United Christian Alliance of Nepal (UCAN), and the Federation of National Christians, Nepal (FNCN). Interestingly, in spite of this confusing state of affairs, Christians would not stop participating in such organizations, at times multiple of them, which resulted in the making and maintaining of complex networks across

organizational lines, enabling the balance between overall connectedness and internal diversity across Christian communities in Nepal even in the presence of mutual distrust and ridicule.

The concluding chapter summarizes the thesis of the book, how Christian communities in Nepal have organized themselves to maintain their *viśwās* through multidimensional and multilayered networks rife with mutual distrust.

This book is an interesting work in ethnography. In particular, the focus on distrust in believer's communities is unique. The title, *A Community of Believers Maintained by Distrust* is paradoxical and impressive. However, whether or not distrust is key to maintaining Christian communities in Nepal is arguable. In other words, are Christian communities in Nepal really sustained by disbelief among their believers? Surely, there will be distrust or blame among people in any communities to one extent or another. No community is free from that. While the author seems to be struck by the abundance of "*aviśwās*" (which is *viśwās* with a negative prefix "*a*," meaning "distrust" or "doubt") in the communities of *viśwās*, his description of current Nepali Protestant communities in this respect seems hardly peculiar, but rather broadly applicable to other (ethnic, caste, political, or other) communities as well.

Also, from Chapter Five onwards, Niwa often uses the Japanese word *shishō*, meaning ridicule, to describe cases of distrustful behavior. In fact, the cases presented do not give the impression of ridicule but of plain criticism or blame. In my opinion, *shishō* is perhaps too strong a word to describe those cases.

Furthermore, individual Christians who appear in this book, most of them vying for positions while criticizing others behind their backs, are men. Though gender construction of Christians in Nepal, congregation or clergies, is not presented in this book, it is unlikely to be all male. In other words, the struggle for positions within communities may not be an effect of their strong desire for *viśwās*, which Niwa claims is peculiar to the Protestant communities in Nepal, but may be an effect of the gender issue of men found more often than not across broad socio-cultural differences.

On the other hand, it is important to clarify how Christian communities in Nepal foster a positive and active willingness of Christians to serve God and their communities, because that is a clue to explain the significant increase in believers and churches as well as their vigorous *viśwās* activities

in Nepal from the 1990s onwards. For reference, empirically, in Japanese churches, many believers do not hope to take up the position of elders or pastors. Serving church is so difficult, both in terms of time and spirit, that few believers are willing to take up those responsibilities. In extreme cases, some people wish to leave the church to avoid the unpaid burden of work. Such a situation seems foreign to Nepali Protestants described in this book; the book describes believers actively and vigorously trying to serve. While Niwa explains this from the strong need for proof of *viśwās* amid “distrust” within the communities, this must be further questioned.

Although prevalent distrust and resulting communication difficulties may have some unintended, ironic effects to help sustain communities, it means neither that the communities stand on those negative emotions and behaviors nor that there is no mutual trust in communities. It should rather be interpreted as that the communities are maintained in spite of strife or negative emotions. Other aspects should be considered as the basis for their remarkably vigorous *viśwās* activities. Actually, the book’s ethnographic description of concrete community activities and individual participation is rather thin. It is not clear from the book how churches conduct worship, prayer meetings, regional home meetings, bible study groups, Sunday school for children, seasonal events, and so on, and how individual Christians pray, worship, and participate in these occasions. In other words, the attraction and enjoyment that churches bring to individual Christians is not clearly described. Most laities in churches do not necessarily want to take a responsible role to prove their strong *viśwās*. Each Christian’s diverse practices based on their *viśwās*—how individual Christians live out their belief and how their faith is rooted in their lives—should have made an important part in the discussion. Surely, the current Christian communities in Nepal are formed by a combination of various factors, not limited to seeking for the proof of “strong *viśwās*” and “the prevalence of distrust.”

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