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Religious coping after the Gorkha Quake

Af stud. mag.
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Opgaven er valgt udgivet uden det oprindelige bilag, der indeholdt interviews

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Resumé

I denne opgave søges svar på, hvorvidt religion blev brugt som en effektiv copingmekanisme efter jordskælvet i Nepal 2015. Den empiriske data består af 7 semistrukturerede interviews, som blev foretaget i Nepals hovedstad Kathmandu i sommeren 2016. Den teoretiske ramme for opgaven er Pargament teori om religiøs coping, som værende enten hjælpsom, skadende eller neutral i en copingproces. Den empiriske data vil blive sat op imod denne teori med fokus på hvilke copingstrategier, der er synlige. Ydermere vil den empiriske data blive sat i forbindelse med hinduisme og buddhisme som religiøse rammer og undergå en vurdering af, hvorvidt der var sammenfald mellem disse to religioner indenfor den teoretiske ramme. Interviewene vil blive undersøgt med en mikroanalytisk tilgang, som sikrer fokus på individernes personlige svar og copingstrategier. Derefter vil disse svar blive sat op imod hinanden i et mindre korrelationsstudie for at inddrage et makroanalytisk perspektiv, som søger at finde generelle tendenser på tværs af den empiriske data og den religiøse ramme.

1. Introduction

In some ways some things were very beautiful after the earthquake, because during that time humanity was religion. The problems and inequality with caste, religion, economy and the like was gone. Everybody helped everybody. I thought that was very beautiful in all the disaster.

(Elizabeth Tiwari, Interview 5)

The 25th of April 2015 a massive earthquake hit the centre of Nepal. The country was left with massive devastation, thousands of casualties and millions of people affected. This led some people to seek comfort in their religion and to use it to cope with the disaster. In general, Nepal is a country with a flourishing, strong and unique religious landscape that is characterized by syncretism between Hinduism and Buddhism as well as respect for ancestors and history. The religious landscape made a strong foundation for turning to religion in the time of need.

I seek to find out whether the distinct religious landscape was used as a coping mechanism in the aftermath of the earthquake based on a short fieldwork made in the summer 2016. 7 interviews were conducted with inhabitants from Kathmandu. The IPs¹ had different backgrounds, ages and a wide range of religious beliefs. They were chosen with an emphasis on pluralism and with a wish of getting representatives with different opinions on how religion in Kathmandu might have been used as a coping mechanism. The IPs had some common features: all are inhabitants of Kathmandu and proficient in English, which suggests some educational level and some level of interaction with foreigners. Additionally they have all been exposed to urbanisation, for example through their interaction with foreigners in Kathmandu. The IPs represents a pragmatic laymen's faith characterized by their subjective perspective on religious issues and thus cannot be seen as representatives for the mainstream religions.

This paper will reflect on the different aspects of the religious beliefs found in the 7 interviews. Therefore, many key aspects of Hinduism and Buddhism might be found left out in this presentation due to a wish to solely focus on relevant aspects as seen in relation to the interviews. Hence, the presentation of Hinduism and Buddhism in Nepal will focus primarily on the view on nature, syncretism and some key aspects of the religions. The presentation of religion in Kathmandu is important as back-

¹ Interview person

ground, while the way religion is personally evaluated shapes the way individuals behave towards it and therefore shapes the way they might use it as a coping mechanism.

The section on religion will be the background for a further exploration of how the IPs perceived the earthquake, and how they might have used religion as a coping mechanism according to Kenneth I Pargament's theory on religious coping strategies as being either helpful, harmful or irrelevant in a stressful situation. Given the various natures of the interviews it is tempting to pass these of as suitable for evaluation on religion as a coping mechanism. However the empirical data offers a relevant insight to apply to religious coping as a theoretical framework, where it is seen how distinct religious beliefs and coping might be used in conjunction with each other.

The same stressful situation can affect two individuals very differently. One can see the situation as a challenge to be overcome, while it can cause another to react with passiveness or resistance. The personal perception of a stressful situation depends on the individual's stress tolerance and how the individual copes with it. Religious coping is only one of many coping strategies, but the empirical data for this paper is meant to distinguish religion as a distinct coping strategy used by the IPs. The theoretical framework, deducted from Pargament's article "Religion and Coping", is suitable in context with the earthquake in Nepal, since the earthquake can be seen as a highly stressful situation.

Thus the research question for this paper is:

How is religious coping, as a theoretical framework, applicable to the empirical data obtained and furthermore applicable when examining whether there is any coherence between the IPs religious perspective and their use of coping strategies?

2. The Gorkha Quake

April 25th 2015 a massive earthquake, with a magnitude of 7.8 on the Richter scale, shook Nepal. It was a devastating blow to the country; more than 9000 people were killed, thousand were buried under debris and approximately 8 million were closely affected by its aftermath. The epicentre of the earthquake was in Gorkha less than 50 km northwest of Kathmandu. The Gorkha Quake was situated only 11 km under the surface. Entire villages were completely destroyed and the damages in Kathmandu

were overwhelming with many homes and historical heritage sites crumbled to dust (Montgomery 2016).

The following pages will be a short introduction to Hinduism and Buddhism in Nepal with a special emphasis on the syncretism between these as seen in Kathmandu and the thought of Mother Nature as a goddess. The presentation will be insufficient in showing the grand magnitude of the religious diversity in Nepal, due to solely focusing on relevant aspects as seen in the interviews.

3. Religion in Nepal

Religion in Nepal is in many ways very unique. The religious landscape erupts from a long history, which evolves around Hinduism and Buddhism as the two main religions. They coexist in a strong syncretism, where they often merge into one another (Shastri 1968, 48). Doctrines, numerous different beliefs, traditions and hundreds of yearly religious festivals have affected the Nepalese society in a way, which makes religion the very core of everyday life. Graffiti on a wall at the British Embassy in Kathmandu sums it up: “The Valley has more temples than houses and more gods than men”. Religion is such an integrated part of society and cultural understanding that it is hard to distinguish between religious acts, ancient traditions and the flourishing culture. Hindus constitute approximately 80% of the population and Buddhists 11% (International Religious Freedom Report 2011, 1). Nepal was for decades famous for being the only Hindu Kingdom in the world, but in 2007 the Interim Constitution was passed and Nepal was officially declared a secular state (The Interim Constitution of Nepal 2063 (2007)).

3.1. Hinduism in Nepal

Definitions on Hinduism are often very complex. Gavin Flood argues: “Hinduism is not so much a religion, but a way of life” (Flood 2015, 1). In Kathmandu it is seen in the way that culture, respect for family traditions and ancestors are naturally intertwined with everyday chores and religious rites. Axel Michaels agrees with Flood in his perception of Hinduism “Hinduism is not a homogeneous religion at all, but rather a potpourri of religions, doctrines and attitudes towards life, rites and cults, moral and social norms” (Michaels 2004, 3).

Unlike Abrahamic traditions, where one monotheistic God is omnipotent and omniscient, there are numerous Hindu deities with different powers and areas of influence. The three main gods are Brahma the Creator, Shiva the Destroyer and Vishnu the Preserver. Brahma is not often worshipped on a daily basis since it is believed that his role as the creator of the universe is essentially finished until the next eon starts. He can though be seen as a power that flows through and embraces everything. Therefore Vishnu and Shiva are the two preeminent main gods of Hinduism (Fuller 1992, 32)². Most Nepalese non-ecclesiastical Hindus choose one particular deity as their favourite, whom they then worship daily. In the empirical data there is a significant tendency for the Hindus to refer to one Supreme Power. The Supreme Power is the centre of their prayers and also the first power they turn to in times of need. The deity affiliated with being the Supreme Power differs depending on which deity the individual IP holds as a favourite or it could be seen as the all-encompassing nature of Brahma. Fuller makes the argument that all Hindus at times, some even persistently, insist that there is in reality only one God. From this God all the other deities are formed (ibid., 30). This does not mean that Hinduism is not to be seen as a polytheistic religion, while it states that there are numerous deities, but that these are simply under the influence of a higher power. There is therefore a constant fluidity in the Hindu pantheon, which allows worshippers to shape their own religious views in regards to which deity to worship. This fluidity is an important aspect of Hindu polytheism and of importance when examining syncretism.

A key element of Hinduism is the thought of dharma. Dharma is said to be what holds the world together and supports it. It is the order of the universe and the human society ordained by the divine (Harvey 2013, 10). There are various understandings of dharma within the one concept. It is the duty for high-caste Hindus to live according to dharma when looking at caste, varna³ and social position in the society (Flood 2015,12). Michaels explains dharma as: “(...) life according to norms and rules, which ultimately depends less on an internal participation than on proper behaviour derived from the Veda.”⁴ (2004, 16). This could be a possible explanation to why there is such a big connection between culture, traditions and religion in Kathmandu, while the need

² Fullers research is mainly based on southern India, but is still relevant in a Nepali context.

³ Varna is a social strategy, which can help raise the social status of an individual and classify the unknown (Michaels 2004, 159-74).

⁴ The Vedas are considered a source of revealed truth. The Vedas were originally handed down orally and later fixed in Sanskrit writing (Michaels 2004, 18).

for internal participation is not as essential as the need for proper behaviour and respect for life, which was granted to you by the deities and your ancestors. Basically it means that practice takes precedence over belief within the Hindu tradition.

3.2. The Goddess Earth – Prithvi

There are several goddesses present in the practical religions of Kathmandu. One of them is the Earth Goddess. The Earth Goddess is a complex figure and she encompasses many key roles of society. Among many roles, she is the motherly source of life and the goddess of fertility. She has the Sanskrit name Prithvi and was first mentioned in Rig Veda with her male consort Dyarus - which means Father Sky. Prithvi and Dyarus are said to be the parents of Earth as the terrestrial sphere where humans live (Davis Kinsley 1986, 8). Generally in Hinduism each deity can possess various names, incarnations and manifestations, which are often grounded in the local communities (Fuller 1992, 41).

Shakti is a primordial cosmic energy that is both responsible for all creation and all change. This power is a female embodiment and is believed to be dynamic forces that can move the universe. It is the Mother Goddess in one of her many manifestations (Kanitkar 2010, 52). Prithvi can be seen as an embodiment of this power and thereby as having the ability to both create and destroy which is why she is capable of creating earthquakes. Furthermore, she has an ethical aspect being closely allied with divine law and truth. She is thus aware when someone is unrighteous towards her since she is founded on truth and thus cannot be deceived (Shaw 2006, 18).

Prithvi is not just described and worshipped in Hinduism - she is the first goddess to appear in Buddhism. She is described in the Pali Canon⁵ as being the witness for Guatama Buddha's enlightenment and as his protector (ibid., 27). Buddha is often depicted sitting in meditation with one hand touching the ground. This is seen as the "Earth witness", where Gautama Buddha asks Prithvi to be a witness to his enlightenment. By being his witness it was proved that Buddha had won Prithvi's approval to attain enlightenment, while having lived righteous upon her surface (ibid., 17). She furthermore possesses a ferocious side when she is distressed by unlawfulness and mischief. She is sometimes depicted as "capable of tremendous heaving and quaking and at times she shakes the wicked from her surface" (ibid., 19). Therefore she could

⁵ The Pali Canon is the first known collection of scriptures in the Theravada Buddhist tradition (Harvey 2013, 3)

be perceived as the one causing the earthquake in Nepal due to unbearable injustice towards her.

3.3. Buddhism in Nepal

Tibetan Buddhism was the path of the two IPs, who related the most to Buddhism. It is the most popular variety of Buddhism in Kathmandu. Normally it is categorized as a subcategory of Mahayana Buddhism (LeVine 2005, 2). Mahayana Buddhism originally started as a reform movement within the Theravada tradition. The name derives from Sanskrit and means “The Big Vehicle” (Lopez 1999, 56).

It can be argued that Mahayana Buddhism started as a compromise between Hinduism and Buddhism. This is visible in Kathmandu, where many iconic heritage sites include syncretised iconography from both Hinduism and Buddhism⁶. Mahayana Buddhism furthermore incorporated a pantheon with numerous deities. The pantheon of Mahayana deities is subordinate to the Buddha and is not to be seen in the same light as the pantheon in Hinduism (Singh 2006, 166). The purpose of a deity in Tibetan Buddhism can vary from practitioner to practitioner, Richard E. Farkas explains: “(...) in general they are used as an aid to focus on a particular aspect (such as compassion), personified by that deity, during meditation, leading to transformation, and eventually liberation and enlightenment” (2013, 73). Enlightenment ultimately means a release from dukkha, which is the mental and physical pains of life and the aspects of life, which keep a person attached to this world (Harvey 2013, 50). The various deities are not used as supreme powers in which to put all of one’s faith, but as guides to motivate the practitioners towards different individual goals. The power of the mind is the only true source of spiritual attainment and can ultimately be seen as the seed of true enlightenment, which everybody holds within (Harvey 2013, 85). It is however important to emphasize that most layman Buddhists uses the pantheon in a similar way as in Hinduism, while they seek guidance and comfort from the deities. The deities come in a number of different forms and manifestations and can be categorized as meditational deities or protector deities (Farkas 2013, 15).

Another important aspect of Buddhism is the cyclic understanding of life, as well as karma. It is the idea that actions in this life have an effect on one’s following reincarnations with personal karma as the determiner of this. Karma is determined by ones

⁶ E.g. visit the Bouddhanath Stupa or the Swayambhunath Temple.

actions, but also by ones thoughts. Escaping from rebirth ultimately means escaping from dukkha.

4. Religion and coping

The theory of coping is orientated towards a functional aspect of religion, which could be examined after the earthquake, and is therefore applicable to the obtained empirical data. Pargament's definition of coping theory is as follows: "We cope in an effort to maximize what is of value or significance to us in difficult situations" (Pargament 1998, 116). Thus religious coping involves an attempt to maintain those things in life that we deeply care for in times of significant distress. Pargament primarily works within a context of religious coping and health, but his studies are highly applicable in connection to the earthquake, since the earthquake and it's aftermath can be seen as a time causing significant stress similar to illness.

Pargament differentiates between a macroanalytical and a microanalytical approach to the studies of religious coping. Pargament argues that macroanalytical studies on religion is where "religion is measured as a stable, global, personal disposition – a part of an individuals orienting system" (Pargament 1998, 14). He postulates that in the perspective of coping theory the adjustment to stressful situations has more to do with the specific and individual use of certain coping mechanisms than with a general religious orientating system. Thus, instead of examining religion and coping in a global perspective it is more useful to examine it in microanalytical studies, where it is possible to view functionally oriented aspects of religion in times of stress (*ibid.*, 117). Subsequently it would be possible to gather results of the microanalytical studies and use them in a correlations study, where deductions can be made about a general religious orienting system. While adopting a microanalytical approach to the studies of religion and coping Pargament discovers that religion can be helpful, harmful or irrelevant to adjustment after the stressful situation.

4.1. Helpful coping-strategies

Helpful coping strategies are often problem-focused and thereby focused on overcoming the stressful situation as quickly and painlessly as possible. Pargament argues that when there is a high level of personal religious belief it is often closely related to a positive outcome of the coping strategy used (*ibid.*, 116). It can be when the practi-

tioner achieves a sense of partnership and guidance from the supreme power in times of distress. Another helpful coping strategy is linked to the possibility of support from a religious group. This unity can have the same effect on the individual in need as the enhanced connection to a supreme power, while also giving a sense of security, which can be beneficial for the individual (*ibid.*). A third helpful coping strategy is the option of benevolent religious reframing where all responsibility for the stressful situation is attributed to the will of a higher power. By putting all responsibility in the hands of the supreme power the practitioner can achieve a sense of control. Pargament argues that attributing negative life events to the will of a supreme power is generally tied to a positive outcome of the situation. The individuals in Pargament's study, who attributed significant amount of control in the higher powers, showed higher self-esteem and better adjustment to the critical situation (*ibid.*, 119).

4.2. Harmful coping strategies

Pargament argues that there are two coping strategies, which can have a poor outcome for an individual. The harmful strategies can result in both physical and/or mental distress. The harmful strategies are most often emotionally focused and can make the individual dismiss all sorts of comfort and help thus leading to additional distress.

A harmful strategy could be when the practitioner starts showing discontent about the religion. This discontent is most often towards the clergy or the religious group and more rarely about the higher power. Negative utterances can be uttered due to the feeling of being betrayed or left behind by the religious group or the higher power (*ibid.*, 120). The other harmful strategy is closely related to the previous notion on benevolent religious reframing. Harmful religious reframing has a negative outcome; it can cause thoughts of personal guilt and blame towards the higher power that have chosen to punish you. In general, Pargament argues that harmful coping strategies are not very common and often have weak results and they can eventually lead to helpful outcomes (*ibid.*).

The individuals in Pargament's study, who attributed a significant amount of control in the higher powers, generally showed higher self-esteem and better adjustment to the situation. In opposition to this Pargament argues that individuals, who show a high amount of negative religious reframing, are more likely to experience high levels of distress (*ibid.*).

4.3. Mixed implications and the need for control

Religious coping can be used as a way to attain control in stressful situations. Aaron C. Kay argues that religious actions can have a positive effect on one's performance, if it enhances the feeling of control (Kay 2009, 267). Ralph W. Hood defines the need for control as often illusory but none the less of great significance in the coping process (Hood 2009, 463). Pargament addresses the need for control by testing three methods of gaining control in a stressful situation: the self-directing, the deferring and the collaborative methods (ibid., 121). These methods can have mixed implications depending on the specific situation. The self-directing method has a special emphasis on the individual's personal responsibility to solve a given problem. It is mainly a positive method, since it enhances the changes of the individual bettering the situation for itself, but it can furthermore diminish the need for a higher power. The deferring method places all responsibility of solving the problem with the higher power without any active help from the individual itself. This method can have negative implications if the stressful situation is seen as a punishment from the higher power, but it can also have a positive outcome, offering relief from the stressful situation. The collaborative method is based on a joint responsibility of solving the problem between the higher power and the individual. Both the individual and the higher power can be seen as active participants in the process (ibid.). Pargament's studies showed that psychological competence, being the general resource of an individual in a stressful situation, were generally higher when using the self-directing and collaborate methods, whereas the deferring method often left the individual with a lower level of psychological competence. Pargament notes: "For instance, in situations in which the individual does indeed have very little control, the most appropriate thing to do may be to defer control to God" (ibid.).

Pargament is trying to stress that it is possible to find mixed implications within all coping methods and strategies, which leaves the need for micronanalytical studies in order to determine whether a specific situation and coping strategy implies a helpful or harmful outcome to an individual.

5. Method and empirical data

The following will be an elaboration on my empirical data and the methodical choices made when obtaining this data. The methodical considerations were made with a background in Steinar Kvale and Alan Bryman's books on qualitative research.

To investigate my thesis on religious coping I conducted 7 interviews in the summer of 2016, which should be a sufficient amount of subjects to find out what is needed (Kvale 2015, 140). 6 of the interviews were individual semi-structured interviews (ibid., 365). Interview 7 was a conversation between interviewee and interviewer on a bus, which was written down short after to ensure memory of the key dimensions of the conversation (Bryman 2012, 47). Kvale describes the semi-structured interview as follows: "It is defined as an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena" (Kvale 2015, 6). I have chosen to conduct qualitative interviews in order to obtain the subjective views of the IPs. My goal with the interviews was to examine whether religion was used as a coping mechanism after the earthquake in a Hindu and Buddhist context. My choice of method is relevant, since it defines the subjective character of the empirical data (ibid., 150). It is possible through the semi-structured interview to determine coherence, but also contrasts in interpretations from the IPs.

5.1. Interviewees and prior reflections on interviews

The 7 IPs were chosen with an emphasis on a broad perspective both in regards of religious views, gender and age, which could justify the need for only a few IPs. The framework for my study thus became: two women and five men in the ages ranging from the mid-twenties to sixty. Two of the IPs were Buddhists, four Hindus and one saw himself as similar to an agnostic. Prior to the interviews I orally obtained the IPs' informed consent to participate in my study (ibid., 93-94).

Despite my effort in trying to find various IPs there are still some critical aspects of the obtained empirical data. Some of these are:

1. The interviews do not paint a sufficient picture of the differing perspectives between Kathmandu and for example a small village in Nepal. If the interviews had been conducted in a remote area in the mountains of Nepal, which would not be inhabited with people as well educated as the 7 IPs and people whom

had not been exposed to the urban world or exposed to different religious views, it is very much likely that the empirical data would be very different.

2. The interviews were conducted a year after the actual crisis. The IPs could during this time have changed their perception of events and have forgotten essential aspects of the situation.
3. Due to the high syncretism in Nepal it is difficult to find adequate IPs to cover the broad span of religious views, which could have lead to differences in connection with coping theory.

Even though there are obvious margins of error the interviews still provide an impression of some of the relevant aspects and makes it possible to apply Pargament's theory on religious coping with religion in Nepal.

The interviews were regulated with an interview guide that I had made prior to the meeting, which was the same throughout all interviews. Since I am not an experienced interviewer, I chose to make an interview guide, and it made obtaining relevant information from the IPs easier. Furthermore, I saw it as an advantage in the later comparison between the interviews if similar questions were answered throughout them all. The interview guide was created with advice from Kvale and Bryman's research guides and with a special wish to avoid leading questions and instead to encourage the IPs' own tales (Kvale 2015, 160). It was not a rigid guideline and I decided to follow the direction of the conversation and ask specifying questions along the way. The questions were asked in a simple English, being aware of the difficulties of conducting an interview in a foreign language and also the difficulties for the IPs to answer in a foreign language. Prior to the interview I tried to reflect on the significant cultural differences and take these into consideration when making the interview guide and while conducting the interview. I tried to be aware of my appearance towards the IPs, while I wanted to appear both respectful and trustworthy. I was aware my appearance and the questions I asked could provoke a certain point of view from the IPs and therefore tried to stay neutral in the interviewing process. All interviews were recorded and afterwards transcribed in a formal written style to ensure the reporting of the IPs' accounts to be in a readable version (*ibid.*, 207). They are found in the appendix.

6. Analysis and discussion

The interviews will subsequently be analysed in a microanalytical study while applying it to coping theory as a theoretical framework, where some of the key aspects of the different interviews will be emphasized. Thereafter it will be analysed in a correlation study to determine whether an overall tendency for the participants to use religion as a coping mechanism is visible and whether this was helpful, harmful or irrelevant in the current context. Furthermore, comments on whether there was a tendency for religious coping to be more clearly relevant to some orientating systems than others will be conducted thereby including a macroanalytical approach. In the analysis I will draw on the aspects of religion in Nepal, which was presented in section 3.

6.1. IP introduction

The following will be some general information on the different IPs. The information is an overall frame of their religious viewpoints even though these differ greatly. The IPs does not represent a mainstream religious view, but are analysed with an emphasis on their distinctive religious views.

1. IP1 is a Tibetan Buddhist. He is a monk and the only IP having continuous attachment to a religious institution.
2. IP2 is a Tibetan Buddhist. He represents a pragmatic laymen religion, which is also coloured by syncretism.
3. IP3 comes from a Hindu background, but expresses that he has tried to find his own personal religious view and thereby dissociated himself with the norms and traditions of his family's religious history. He shows very low religious attachment.
4. IP4 is a Hindu, but emphasizes that he tries to be unique in his own personal belief.
5. IP5 is a Hindu from a Brahman family, but due to syncretism, and a rather secular life, she embraces different aspects of other religions as well.
6. IP6 is a traditional Hindu from a Brahman family.
7. IP7 is a traditional Hindu.

6.2. Applied coping strategies

IP1's use of religion as a coping mechanism tends to have mixed implications. He stressed that the everyday life in the monastery, in regards to prayers and religious ceremonies, did not change after the earthquake. Instead the monks continued orchestrating the same prayers as prior to the earthquake. By not changing the prayers towards being exclusively earthquake related the coping strategy could be both helpful and harmful depending on how the situation is analysed. The sense of control could be strengthened, since the prayers could be a controllable thing in an uncontrollable situation, and therefore have a helpful effect on the practitioner. Furthermore, the unity of the congregation can be seen as a helpful coping strategy. In opposition, this assumed indifference towards the earthquake could also be seen as a harmful coping strategy, putting all the blame on a higher power. This though seems rather unlikely in the current situation, while IP1 stresses how the earthquake is to be seen as nothing but a natural disaster. If looking at it from this point of view, it seems that IP1 did not clearly use religion as a specific coping mechanism after the earthquake. This might be due to him, as clergy, not wanting to show negative thoughts towards his faith, while having a desire to keep his outer faith pure and not expose the gods to negative thoughts about them (Pargament 1998, 113).

IP2 had a very different approach in regards to religion and coping. He prayed both during and after the earthquake: "It helps, you know, the prayers, it helps (...) it encouraged me a lot to be more strong and to help people that I had God with me" (IP2). He used prayer as a tool to collaborate with the supreme power and thereby get guidance in the process of overcoming the stressful situation. He furthermore argues that: "(...) so it encouraged me a lot to be strong and to help people to know that I had God with me". The simple thought of having God with him gave comfort and helped him in his post earthquake work.

IP3 was the only one who did not clearly use religion to cope with the earthquake and its aftermath. He had a very secular religious view, acknowledging that he did not tend to favour the traditions brought to him by his family heritage as a Nepali Hindu. He explained: "I could be an agnostic maybe, like more spiritual you know, more of a believer. The mainstream religion doesn't make sense at a certain point to me". While not attributing the earthquake to a benevolent or ferocious deity nor explicitly stating that he gave a higher power any thought during or after the disaster, he does

not seem to use religion as a coping mechanism. Instead he refers to the unity of the country during times of distress as his main focus and thereby uses this as a sort of religious reframing technique. He even mentions how that was kind of the religion at the time. It is possible to see this in the light of Pargament's theory on congregational support as a helpful coping mechanism, but this point of view might be a far stretch, when taking into consideration IP3's weak religious connection.

IP4 talked a lot about karma. He said: "I thought there is something behind the power for example justice". He believed that he had not done anything intentionally bad in his life and therefore the supreme powers saved him. Through this thought he expressed collaboration with the supreme power, which ultimately saved him and his family. He explained: "God will look at me. God knows. (...) ultimately the human beings will come to punishment for what they have done". This partnership and support from the higher power was helpful for him, while it gave him a means of support in handling the situation.

IP5 explained how she was born into a Brahmin background, but furthermore how her family was very secular and therefore not rigid in their faiths. This encouraged her to explore different religions and pick what she thought was most beneficial for her. She said: "I don't feel like any religion is less, there is beauty in every religion". Despite of embracing the best aspects of different religions, she still turned to her primary Hindu deity during the crisis. When asked what her first reaction after the earthquake was, she replied: "And at that moment I remembered my God and said that whatever from here on will happen and will happen for good". She used a deferring coping method by attributing all responsibility for future events on the supreme power and in return the supreme power offered her relief in the stressful situation. The deferring method can have mixed implications, but Pargament explained how it in uncontrollable situations could be beneficial to defer all control to God, since there are not many other options (Pargament 1998, 121). She elaborates how the experience has made her connect to a supreme power in a different way and how it has made her become a little closer to God. IP5 is the only one who explicitly expressed a stronger attachment to the higher powers after the earthquake. The issue of religious attachment after a significant crisis could be an interesting premise for further studies.

"(...) what happens will happen and we just have to accept it. We have to thank God that we are still alive. Mother Earth and the sky is still there, the sun is still shining" (IP6). IP6 puts a great effort into emphasizing the positive aspects after the crisis

and shows a great deal of gratitude toward a higher power, which he believes has saved his life. This can be seen as a benevolent religious reframing strategy, which allows him to achieve a sense of control, helping him overcome the aftermath of the earthquake. IP6 furthermore believes that it is human nature to turn to a higher power for support during a time of crisis. He said: “Actually, in a way it is in the human nature. When you have a hard time you call the almighty to help you”. It thereby seems natural for him to use religion as a coping mechanism.

IP7 also showed signs of using a helpful coping strategy. She argued: “The gods just wanted to make a statement. They wanted to tell us that they did not agree with the way we live our lives and the way we treat Mother Earth”. She furthermore argues that the gods wanted new houses, which is why the many temples were destroyed. IP7 could therefore be said to use a collaborative coping strategy, while placing the responsibility of the earthquake on the supreme powers, but at the same time acknowledging the responsibility of humans to make significant changes in order to improve the situation.

In general, Pargament argues that it is always possible to find mixed implications and different coping strategies, which leaves the need for a microanalytical approach in order to derive helpful from harmful coping methods (Pargament 1998, 121). The previous shows that his point is relevant, while the different aspects of the IPs’ religious coping methods had to be examined separately in order to determine what kind of coping strategy was used. In the following, I will turn to a different aspect of the interviews, examining the IPs’ answers on why the earthquake might have happened.

6.3. Who is to blame?

During the interview the IPs were asked what they believed to be the reason for the earthquake. The different answers for the question were rather interesting, including both secular explanations and thoughts of the earthquake as a punishment from Mother Earth.

IP1-6 explained how they believed the earthquake to be a natural phenomenon. IP1 said: “We monks usually say that it was a natural disaster, so there is no other reason. Just an earthquake”. An aspect to be taken into consideration, when examining the answers of IP1, is the notion that he is a Buddhist. Unlike Abrahamic traditions, in which a single omniscient and judging God is thought to be responsible for allowing

e.g. natural disaster, Buddhists can have a different way of looking at tragic events. Some blame can be put in personal karma, like IP4 does, but many just see earthquakes as amoral events, which are not caused by angry deities and which are without a cosmic reason. Some tragic events are simply to be seen as random occurrences that just happen. 6 out of 7 IPs⁷ declared that they did not believe that there was a specific religious reason for why the earthquake happened, but at the same time IP4, IP5 and IP6, who prior stated this secular point of view, expressed how the earthquake could be seen as a warning or payback from Mother Earth. This shows a tendency to underestimate the influence of religious thought in everyday life in Kathmandu, which emphasises religion being so intertwined with society and cultural understanding that it is hard to distinguish these from each other.

IP2 also expressed a solely secular explanation for the earthquake: “It is not like a power or anything you know, it is just like a natural disaster”. He does not put any blame for the earthquake on a higher power, but still he has an urge to pray to find protection from future harm. This is in some ways contradictory, with his secular explanation not corresponding with the religious belief of higher powers having control over it and being able to save him from it. He is using a collaborative and helpful coping mechanism when praying, but furthermore he could be seen using a deferring method when using the scientific explanation for the earthquake. The same tendency is visible with IP4, whom first explains the earthquake to be “kind of a justice done by God. A super power or natural power. I believe in some nature-power or something. There is something there”, but when asked directly what he believes to be the reason behind the earthquake, his answer is quite different: “I don’t believe a higher power had anything to do with it”. This can additionally be explained as a general insecurity in his religious views and it is also important to take into consideration that he might never have thought about this beforehand and therefore does not give a judicious answer. IP4 expresses a thought of nature as a religious power, which can correct human errors. This can be put in connection with Prithvi.

IP5 explained, how she believed the Earth to be Prithvi, who gave payback for what humans had done towards her. She believes that it is a law of nature that everything that has been made must be destroyed in order for something new to appear. It is a cyclic understanding of life, which corresponds well with her religious background.

⁷ IPs 1-6.

Where IP5 has religious grounding in her point of view, IP3 expresses that earthquakes purely are a part of a natural system, which keeps the human population in order. Where IP5 uses religion as a coping mechanism and explanation for the earthquakes including the Earth as a divine power, IP3 does not seem to do so, while simply referring to Earth as a secular phenomenon.

IP4-7 all saw the earthquake as some sort of punishment, but does not seem to be affected by severe guilt, which means that the guilt is not directly in relation to a harmful coping strategy. They believe that the earthquake was a necessary reminder that the human race should start taking better care of Mother Earth, but the blame is to be put on everyone and not a single person. It can therefore be seen as a collaborative and helpful coping strategy, where humans and the supreme power both have to be active partners in changing things for the better. IP6 puts it in relation with the thought of dharma. He explains: “There is only one dharma and that is that non-violence is the greatest thing. (...). All violence is bad, both human and natural violence, but natural violence might very well occur because of the human violence against nature, the human violence against Mother Earth”.

The explanations on why the earthquake happened were many and diverse throughout the interviews. The most common was to call on Mother Earth as a contributing factor. It is though important to state that “Mother Earth” in some cases could be seen as a secular reference to Earth in general. 5 out of 7 IPs⁸ were humble towards the Earth and 4⁹ saw the earthquake as a fair sort of payback after having treated Mother Earth so badly. The three IPs, who did not connect the earthquake to Mother Earth, were IP3, whom in general had a weak religious attachment, and the two Buddhist IPs. This might be because Tibetan Buddhism does not use a pantheon in the same way as Hinduism, as explained above, and therefore does not use deities as explanations for tragic events.

6.4. Religious coping as helpful, harmful or irrelevant

When looking at the interviews for this paper there is no clear signs of the participants using negative coping strategies. Pargament argues that harmful coping strategies are not as common as positive and that they mostly concern an individual’s attachment to

⁸ IPs 3-7

⁹ IPs 4-7

a religious group (Pargament 1998, 120). IP4-7 all expressed the earthquake as a sort of punishment from Mother Earth, but none of them seemed to put any negative thoughts towards the Goddess Earth despite of this. IP6 said: “We have to thank God that we are still alive”. So, despite the massive destruction and suffering he does not utter any negative thoughts about the higher powers.

None of the participants uttered any negative thoughts towards a religious group either. Only IP1, who is a monk, had a direct connection with a specific religious group. Even though none of the other IPs showed a direct attachment to a religious group in the time following the earthquake IP3 said: “(...) helping people out. I guess that was kind of our religion at the time” and IP7 said: “(...) Nepal was standing together at the time”. The thought of standing together as a nation is emphasized by 5 out of 7 IPs¹⁰. The nation had to work together as a group to overcome its massive challenges. This could be seen as a different coping strategy, which does not necessarily have religious connotations.

If examining whether religious coping can be seen as helpful, harmful or irrelevant we find the need for microanalytical studies. There is, however, a significant problem with Pargament’s theory, since there is a tendency for religious coping to always have helpful outcomes for an individual. While a possible harmful outcome can be turned into a helpful coping strategy by helping an individual process the different aspects of a stressful situation turning it from something negative to something positive. It can therefore be questioned if a harmful outcome of religious coping is even possible. Bjerrisgaard and Geertz are also sceptical of Pargament’s research, which primarily studies the relationship between religion and health, because they think there is a lack of scientific results to back up his thesis on helpful and harmful outcomes (Bjerrisgaard 2007, 871). This critique might be overthrown if Pargament chose to use other technical terms than “helpful” and “harmful”, since these do not leave the possibility to see possible indirect outcomes, while having mainly direct, scientific and psychological connotations. Instead it might be beneficial for him to use terms such as positive/negative strategies or indirectly helpful/harmful strategies, seeing that these concepts are wider in their connotations.

Pargament himself admits that his theory faces some difficulties. He states that the need for longitudinal studies is essential to further investigating the subject and,

¹⁰ IPs 3-7

furthermore, that there is a need for studies that for example examines which specific orienting systems might have more tendencies to use religious coping strategies. He also emphasises the need for research regarding which significant groups uses religion with a focus on e.g. women vs. men, ethnicity, educational level, age etc. (Pargament 1998, 123). If looking at these issues in connection with the analysis made previously it is possible to state that there were no significant differences found in a macroanalytical study comparing Hindus and Buddhists from the empirical data, since all used helpful coping strategies. There was no notable significant coherence within a particular orienting system, since the results were similar across these.

7. Conclusion

In this paper I sought to examine whether religious coping as a theoretical framework could be applicable to the empirical data obtained after the Gorkha Quake in 2015 and if there was any coherence between their religious perspectives and their use of coping strategies. Working with a background in religious coping strategies as a theoretical frame and the IPs' religious view as an empirical frame, relevant aspects of the empirical data have been emphasised and applied to the theoretical framework. It is possible to derive from the analysis that religious coping is clearly visible in the interviews, but furthermore that this was used as a solely positive and helpful tool for the IPs. Furthermore, the analysis showed that there was coherence between Hinduism and Buddhism in regards to using religion as a coping mechanism, but that there were no significant differences in the use of coping strategies between the two orienting systems. Pargament's theory was definitely applicable to the empirical data, whilst it gave a picture on how religion could be an effective coping mechanism during a significant crisis.

The need for microanalytical studies leaves a need to determine causality within the study and can thus be seen as a significant theoretical flaw, but still the interviews gave a solid foundation for further comparisons between them. Furthermore, the analysis emphasised the syncretism found in Nepal and the distinct nature of an individual's personal belief, which is hard to examine in a macroanalytical study. Religion in Nepal is characterized by being intertwined with the culture, history and system of the country and therefore several IPs had difficulties separating their secular and religious

views. This resulted in difficulties when examining which coping strategies were used, while it gave mixed implications.

Due to the span of this study further investigations are necessary, while the empirical data obtained for this paper only provides a small amount of answers. Further studies could definitely be made from the same interviews while cross-examining for example ages, caste, occupation etc. Furthermore, it could be interesting to compare coping theory and placebo, for example with a background in T.J. Kaptchuks theory on placebo, in order to determine common ground between these theories.

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