

## Philosophical Interpretation

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*Abstract: The last century has seen a Reinterpretation and expansion of Buddhism throughout the Asian country. This attempt was to give an ethical foundation to the dalit movement Buddhism emerged from this transformation imbued with nationalist associations and political aspirations that anchored it in many civil movements in India. B R Ambedkar's Philosophical reinterpretation of Buddhism gives us an account of action that is based on democratic politics of contest and resistance. Ambedkar declared his intention to convert to a religion that did not endorse caste hierarchy but would provide the framework of a society based upon principles of non-discrimination, equality and respect. It relies on a reading of the self as a multiple creature that exceeds the constructions of liberal autonomy. Over the years he considered Christianity, Islam and Sikhism in his search for a new religion, but from relatively early on his choice was Buddhism. Insofar as Buddhist groups do not jeopardize or restrict their members' capacities and opportunities to make any decision about their own lives, they do not risk violating democratic principles. But to remain socially relevant they must continue to contribute to a practical impact on the social world which is so neatly intertwined with the political in present-day India.*

*Keywords: Ambedkar, Liberal Autonomy, Nation, Religion, Choice, Liberty, Equality...ect.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

A structure of gradually increasing inequality was the foundation upon which Hindu society was created. The four 'Varnas', together with thousands of castes and sub-castes, were ranked one above the other, with scorn for those who were lower than one's Varna or caste and veneration and awe for those who were higher than one's Varna or caste. The term "untouchability" encapsulates the most severe form of contempt. The upper castes were defiled if the Untouchables came into contact with them in any way, including simply casting their shadows. Even the gods themselves were corrupted since the Untouchable was allowed to touch them and enter the temples. Dr. Ambedkar exerted a lot of effort toward the goal of bringing about Hindu societal transformation. He converted to Buddhism after coming to the conclusion that it was impossible for him to effect change or reconstruction from within the Hindu community. He had high hopes that Buddhism might serve as a balancing force for Hinduism. Neo-Buddhism is a term that refers to the Buddhist

revival movement that was ignited in 1956 when Dr. Ambedkar and his followers converted to Buddhism. It was highly unique in the annals of the history of any religion for such a large number of individuals to convert to a particular faith at the same time, and this was especially true in the instance of our one person. Even after the unfortunate passing of Dr. Ambedkar, the campaign to convert continued without interruption. He had the ambitious goal of reorganizing the social order that had been in place for centuries according to democratic principles such as freedom, equality, fraternity, and social justice.

### II. SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

Approximately around March 1956, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar finished the text of The Buddha and His Dhamma, which was released after his passing. On October 14, he decides to become a Buddhist. And on December 2nd, only four days before he passed away, he finished the draft of the

famous short article, "Buddha or Marx," and handed it over to be typed out. In this essay, I will try to frame one issue, which, at its most shortened, can potentially be stated as follows: why does Ambedkar switch to Navayana Buddhism? Navayana Buddhism is an offshoot of Mahayana Buddhism, which was founded in India. I use the word "frame" because I will not be able to provide a satisfactory response to the question. However, arguably the most important duty is not answering the question at all but rather framing, reframing, and even unframing it. To get started, we could refresh our memories on how and why this question was posed in the first place. "Religious conversion needs explaining in a way that secular conversion to modern ways of being does not." Talal Asad has proposed that this distinction be made. This need, and even demand, for an explanation, becomes all the more potent in the case of Ambedkar, whose radical secularism is exemplified both in his efforts in earlier years to institutionalize a liberal civil society and public sphere through the Indian Constitution and in the fact that he converts without disavowing his secularism. Ambedkar's efforts in earlier years to institutionalize a liberal civil society and public sphere through the Indian Constitution.

In addition, the requirement is not an example of ethnocentrism or Eurocentrism, nor is it intended to give priority to a set of solely European perspectives on what it means to be secular. "The critique of religion is the prerequisite of all critique," a young Karl Marx writes at the very beginning of his "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right." And this kind of critique of religion has frequently been particularly powerful for underrepresented groups in society. For instance, the very category of "Dalit" was created by drawing on secular categories; upper castes have been held accountable for the violence they have perpetrated against Dalits; and Dalits have simultaneously assumed and universalized the responsibility of fighting against that violence. All of these things have been accomplished by drawing on secular categories. When someone, especially one who was already secular, turns to a public religion, it may appear as though they are evading their responsibilities to question unfairness. Ambedkar's decision to become a follower of Navayana Buddhism might be seen as an act of the utmost responsibility; yet, this need for an explanation is thrown back on itself in this context. In this instance, there is a critique not only of religious belief but also of the secular worldview, and this critique is formulated in the form of a religion itself.

To begin, let's frame the question: when we ask, "Why does Ambedkar convert to Navayana Buddhism?" What we're really trying to figure out is how his conversion involves a responsibility that's larger than the one he already fulfills as a secular human. Because of the way that you have reframed the problem, you may have noticed that I only raise the question "why" in a very restricted register. I am not concerned here, for instance, with Ambedkar's conscious or unconscious goals, with the social context of the conversion, or with the Dalit and lower-caste religions and conversions that preceded his conversion and offer its genealogy. Neither am I interested in the social context of Ambedkar's conversion. Although consideration of all of these issues is obviously necessary, for the purpose of this discussion, I will limit myself to discussing

how his conversion required a re-figuring of secularism. This re-figuring, I would think, is at least as important to Ambedkar's Buddhism as the critique of Hinduism that comes before and permeates this Buddhism. This critique of Hinduism is a central tenet of Ambedkar's Buddhism.

### III. CONSIDERING THE CONCEPT OF RESPONSIBILITY

It is emblematic of this increased responsibility that Ambedkar converts not only as an abstract individual, nor even as an individual Dalit, but also as a Dalit leader, as one whose acts build a collective identity for Dalits or Mahars. This change in Ambedkar's status as a Dalit leader is symptomatic of this larger obligation. Therefore, he says the following in his speech to the Bombay Presidency Mahar Conference in May of 1936: "Just as the boatman does not collect luggage unless he gets an idea of the number of passengers boarding the boat, so also is it the case with me." I am unable to begin making preparations for conversion unless I get some indication of the number of individuals who are willing to abandon their Hindu faith. In addition to this, he is adamant that "if at all you decide in favor of conversion, then you will be required to promise me organized and en-masse conversion." If it is decided that conversion should take place and people begin practising whatever religion they choose on an individual basis, I will not participate in your conversion.

Religion in and of itself is social for Ambedkar. This is the reason why Dhamma can be considered both a religion and something that is not quite a religion. It is mentioned in "The Buddha and His Dhamma" that although "religion" is "personal" and "one must keep it to oneself," "dhamma" is "analogous" to "what European theologians call religion," and that while "dhamma" is "analogous" to "what European theologians call religion," it is imperative that this not be allowed to become a factor in public life. He continues by saying that, in contrast to religion, Dhamma is social. It is true at the most fundamental and essential level. If there is only one man, there is no requirement for Dhamma. However, if there are two men living in close proximity to one another, they are obligated to make room for Dhamma in their lives, regardless of whether or not they like it. Neither one can get away from it. And if I started by mentioning a unique sequence of events that took place in 1956, it was because I wanted to point out the two coordinates that are used to frame the inquiry in this context. First, there is a posthumous edition of *The Buddha and His Dhamma* that was released in 1957. It is common knowledge that Ambedkar labored assiduously and persistently till the book was finished. This extensive interaction with the text suggests, as Simona Sawhney has just recently stated, Second, in order to gain an understanding of this religion, we need to focus on his interaction with Karl Marx and Marxism. Ambedkar's most extensive ideas on Marx may be found in one relatively small essay titled "Buddha or Karl Marx." This essay recognizes that Marx possesses a "residue of fire" and indicates that Buddha and Marx have a great deal in common with one another. This essay sheds light on the stakes at play for Ambedkar in this engagement:

#### IV. TRUTHS THAT ARE UNIVERSAL

The goals of society, which have been summed up by the French Revolution in three words—"Fraternity, Liberty, and Equality"—have been to establish a new foundation. This slogan contributed to the positive reception of the French Revolution. It was not successful in producing equality. We applaud the Russian Revolution because it works toward the establishment of equal rights. On the other hand, it is impossible to place enough emphasis on the fact that, in order to achieve equality, society cannot afford to forego either liberty or fraternity. Without fraternity and liberty, equality will be meaningless and pointless. It would appear that the only way for the three to cohabit is for one to adhere to the teachings of the Buddha. Communism can provide certain benefits, but not all of them. 8 In other words, the promise of a world organized by equality, liberty, and fraternity, with equality serving as the central concept, is something that is worked toward by Marxism as well as by Buddhism. And Marxism is a particularly intense moment in the effort to uphold that commitment; in fact, it is the most intense moment with which he is familiar. However, the most prolonged contact that Ambedkar has with Marx does not take place when he expressly reads Marx. In most cases, they take place in areas where Marx's responsibilities overlap with one another. This sort of traversal is particularly significant in Ambedkar's understanding of the minor, which refers to a figure that is sub-equal but asserts equality. Reorienting Marx's simultaneous condemnation of religion and secularism, which is voiced most forcefully in 'On the Jewish Question,' Ambedkar's way of thinking about the minor rethinks the minor. 10 That reorientation can take place in two distinct ways, which are not so much alternative routes as mirror images of one another.

One of these avenues has been deftly investigated by individuals such as Gyanendra Pandey and Anupama Rao, amongst others. Rao describes how "a new political collectivity was constituted by resignifying the Dalit's negative identity within the caste structure into a positive political value." He does this in the context of writing about how "a new political collectivity was constituted." According to her writing, the concept of a minority that organizes the figure of the Dalit is quite different from that which Marx develops. This is due to the fact that for the Dalits, "individual freedom was contingent on the emancipation of the community rather than separation from it," which is equivalent to the dissolution of the minor that Marx envisioned. In this context, the Dalit community is defined as a minority by a claim to equality that is based on the secularization of religion, or, to be more specific, on the secularization of caste and its subsequent dissolution. Ambedkar's goal is to strengthen the rights of the Dalit minority by protecting those rights through the Constitution and by engaging in political struggles to demand that the state uphold Dalit rights.

In this essay, my focus will be on a closely connected idea that Ambedkar deepens by intensifying his practice of Navayana Buddhism, and that concept is that of the minor. In the event that the minority is conceived of in terms of measurement, then the minor will be conceived of in terms of immeasurement. The relationship between the concepts of

minority and minority is one that is more synonymous with excess than it is with opposition. Even though it makes reference to units of measurement and quantities, the vocabulary of minorities "exceeds" these concepts and transforms them into indicators of a close connection. At the same time, the lexicon of intensities has a relationship to the world of measures and units', which it constantly comes into contact with. 'The language of measure' is not only 'challenged and impacted by that of immeasure, but 'immeasure nurses in its heart a deep link to the drive to measure,' which is another way of saying that immeasure challenges and affects the language of measure. One may add that what makes the pair "minority-minor" so charged and unstable and so different from the pair majority-major," to which it could be opposed, is that the former is preoccupied constitutively with claiming equality as a minor. This is in contrast to the fact that the latter is concerned with claiming equality as a majority. And because equality is not a clear concept, proving this claim requires not just contemplating what equality "is," but also fostering the growth of one's own life as well as the life of the "other."

The topic could be rephrased as follows: why in Ambedkar's writing must the minority of that profoundly secular figure, the Dalit, be supported by this radical religion of the minor, Navayana Buddhism? This is one possible way to reframe the question. What exactly does this religion bring to the table in terms of universal equality that the French and Russian revolutions were unable to offer? Ambedkar's famous speech to the Jat Pat Todak Mandal in 1936, in which he proclaims his desire to quit Hinduism, already alludes to what he sees as essential to religion. However, the speech was never delivered. In that passage, in which he criticizes Hinduism for being a "religion of rules," he makes the following distinction between principles and rules: Rules are useful; they are customary approaches to carrying out activities in accordance with a prescription. But principles are not abstract; they are practical ways of evaluating different aspects of the world. The purpose of rules is to tell an actor exactly what course of action to take. The application of a principled standard does not mandate a particular course of conduct. Rules, much like food instructions, specify exactly what must be done and how it must be done. A principle, such as that of justice, supplies a main heading by reference to which he is to consider the bearings of his goals and aims; it leads him in his thinking by suggesting to him the important factor that he should keep in mind. This is because a principle like that of justice supplies a primary heading by reference to which he is to consider the bearings of his desires and purposes. Because of this distinction between rules and principles, the deeds that are performed in pursuit of each of them are distinct in both quality and content. There is a distinction to be made between doing what is deemed to be good because of a rule and doing what is deemed to be good because of a principle. Although the underlying idea could be flawed, the action itself is aware and accountable. It's possible that the rule is correct, but the action is just routine. A religious act need not be right, but it should at least be responsible for the consequences of its actions. Religion needs to focus primarily on core ideas if it is to be open to the possibility of bearing this responsibility. It can't be a question of following the rules. As soon as it

becomes a set of regulations, it ceases to be religion since doing so eliminates accountability, which is the central component of really religious behavior.

This text introduces politics into religion in a very specific and unique manner because it emphasizes responsibility as "the essence of a truly religious act." Religion must now focus its attention on concerns of justice, specifically how to most effectively achieve 'liberty, equality, and fraternity, because this is its most important obligation. Now more than ever, religion is not something that can be confined to the private domain; rather, it has become a deeply public affair.

In addition, such a responsibility necessitates the organization of religious practice according to the principle. According to Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism, the Buddha instructed his disciples that they "were free to modify or even abandon any of his teachings if it was found that, at a given time and in given circumstances, they did not apply." He hoped that His faith would not be weighed down by the stale doctrines and traditions of the past. He intended for it to always be useful and relevant in the future as well as the present. Even nonviolence, or ahimsa, is a matter of principle, despite the fact that the Buddha did not make ahimsa a rule. He articulated it as a matter of principle or a way of life' in his statement. "A principle gives you the authority to act on your own." A rule does not You can either let the rule break you, or you can break the rule yourself.

Ambedkar makes a fundamental break from modern concepts of religion as well as modern conceptions of the principle when he insists that there should be a religion of the principle. At the very least, since Kant's stress on autonomy, the principle has been a key mark of the Enlightenment: to be principled is to preserve the sovereign power of reason and, as a result, to be able to adjust one's views and behave in a manner that is consistent with new circumstances. As a consequence of this, the principle both establishes a separation between the secular and the religious and operates primarily inside the realm of the secular. It is thought that religion cannot be either principled or a subject of public reason; rather, it must be private.

We could say, at the risk of oversimplification, that the idea has functioned in one of two ways with regard to the interaction that exists between the secular and the religious. First, the distinction between the secular and the religious, as well as the nature of the relationship between the two, have traditionally been framed in terms of an opposition between the immanent and the transcendent. This kind of framing is most commonly found in liberal democracies and republican democracies. The extent to which religious belief can be used to support the idea is the unstated criterion in this case. For instance, in his work entitled *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant argues that the goals of religion "cannot possibly be matters of indifference for reason" after first stating that "for its own sake, morality does not need religion at all" and that it can be founded on "pure practical reason." Kant goes on to imply that the goals of religion "cannot possibly be matters of indifference for reason." According to this logic, "morality inexorably leads to religion." In addition, this moral religion has a specific name: "Of all the public religions that have ever existed, the Christian is the only moral

one." In fact, at this long inaugural moment of the modern concept of religion as well as of secularism, Christianity is the highest and most universal religion for both Kant and Hegel in their own unique ways. This is true both because Christianity is the religion that gives birth to and institutes secularism as a principle in the public sphere and because Christianity recognizes its own realm as that of the transcendent and, as a result, relegates itself to the private sphere. In this context, principle and religion do not stand in opposition to one another; rather, each acts in its own sphere and complements the other.

Second, the dichotomy between the immanent and the transcendent is called into question by more extreme forms of secularism, such as those connected with Rousseau, Feuerbach, and Marx. They view religion as always being immanent, and as a result, they consider the division between immanent and transcendent to be an ideological mystification in and of itself. This ethos became Ambedkar's legacy when he passed away. Therefore, he maintained in the late 1930s that "the religion of the savage consists in life and the preservation of life." What is true of the religion of the savage is true of all religions wherever they are found, for the straightforward reason that 'life and the preservation of life comprise the essence of religion.' What is true of the religion of the savage is true of all faiths, wherever they are found. The sphere of 'rules' now includes religion. In a related vein, not all religions are created equal; rather, they are compared based on the degree of dissimilarity that exists between the laws that they follow and the principles that autonomous humans may assign themselves.

In the same vein, Ambedkar criticizes the so-called "science of comparative religion," stating that it "has broken down the arrogant claims of all revealed religions that they alone are true and all others, which are not the results of revelation, are false." (The "science of comparative religion has broken down the arrogant claims of all revealed religions that they alone are true and all others that are not the results of revelation are false.") However, it is necessary to point out, to the detriment of that science, that it has contributed to the widespread belief that all faiths are valid and that there is no point or function served by differentiating between them. The field of comparative religion is anti-colonial in this context since it rejects the claims made by every revealed religion. Ambedkar's quest for another universalism demands that he give up not only Eurocentrism but also relativism; anti-colonial relativism is not sufficient for him in his search for a better worldview.

But at the same time that he is making radical secularism his inheritance, he is also imbuing it with a particular religion. This religion is a religion of the principle, or, to put it another way, it is a religion that is both secular and immanent. It is challenging to think about this faith. In the end, it attempts to achieve the unachievable by, on the one hand, securing autonomy and sovereignty while, on the other hand, surrendering autonomy and sovereignty.

Therefore, perhaps our question could also be rephrased in the following way: What religion is the principle that Ambedkar chooses to convert to? Ambedkar's article titled "Buddha and the Future of His Religion" was published in 1950 and gives an indication of what a religion based on

principles entails at its most fundamental level. Because the rule of law plays such a minor role in all cultures, the new world desperately needs a religion. It is hoped that this will keep the members of the minority within the bounds of social discipline. The majority has been left behind, and it must continue to be left behind in order for its social life to be supported by the postulates and sanctions of morality. Because of this, religion, understood in the sense of morality, must continue to serve as the guiding force in each and every civilization. It is his contention that such a faith ought to be "in accord with science," that "its moral code ought to recognize the fundamental tenets of liberty, equality, and fraternity," and that it "ought not to sanctify or ennoble poverty." This religion of the principle, moreover, has a proper name: "If the new world, as it is realized, is very different from the old world, and the new world needs religion far more than the old world did, then it can only be the religion of the Buddha." [If] the new world, which, as it is realized, is very different from the old, must have a religion, and the new world needs religion far more than the old world did, then it can only be the religion of the Buddha.

In the final phrases of his address that he delivered in May 1936 to the Bombay Presidency Mahar Conference, Ambedkar signals once more that it is difficult to bring together principle and religion. Ambedkar is asking, "What message should I give you on this occasion?" He is attempting to persuade them "to leave the Hindu religion," but he does not want them to do so "only because I say so." Instead, he wants them to consent "only if it appeals to your reason." Then he narrates the message that the Buddha conveyed to the Bhikkusangha, which is as follows:

"What are the expectations that the Sangha has of me?" Ananda, I have proclaimed the Dhamma with a pure intention and without hiding anything from anyone. The Tathagata has not withheld anything, contrary to the practices of certain other gurus. So, Ananda, what else is there that I may share with the Bhikkhusangha? Therefore, Ananda, you should strive to illuminate others much like the lamp. Avoid being dependent on light, as the Earth is. Don't float around like a satellite. 'Shine as a light unto yourself...' The words of the Buddha are how I will also take my leave of you." You should act as your own guide. Reason should be your safe haven. But this, of course, begs the question: if one is a light to oneself, then what use is there for religion if one is already a light to oneself? Why does the principle hide under rational explanations? What are the steps required to turn rationality into a religion? What happens to the independence of reason and the submission of faith as a result of this transaction?

## V. CONCLUSION

Ambedkar accomplishes much of the work of establishing his new Buddhism through the construction of his reconceptualization of the Buddhist sagha. The story of Buddhism in the West has often been told through the lens of the contemplative, filtered by the discourses of modernity and the biases toward individualism and meditation that come with them. In this reading, the sagha is a support for the individual to achieve personal liberation through self-cultivation and is

often ancillary to that project. The reception of Buddhism could perhaps be as compellingly told through the lens of sagha as its monastic orientation has given incredibly detailed thought about how to function in intentional social settings via the vinaya, an exhaustive treatment of pragmatic ethics as applied in monastic communities. This is how Ambedkar is approaching the tradition, with the sagha at the center. His decision to favorably position the Dalit community in India within a long historical arc, that of the civilization struggle between a "religion of rules" called Brahminism and a morally-oriented, egalitarian Buddhism, supplies much-needed ground for his nascent pragmatic religious movement. He appeals to the early Sagha to demonstrate that, as Buddhists, they were once dominant in India and commanded the respect and fear of the Brahminical religionists. In his reading, they articulated a universalizable ethic of care that, thanks to the Buddha's rationality and commitment to compassion, is as applicable today as it was 2500 years ago. Ambedkar's historical reconstruction project, which seeks to read a universalizable ethic back into ancient Indian history, was not limited to his movement alone. Many of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Indian Renaissance figures, such as Vivekananda and M. K. Gandhi, were engaged in similar reconstructive projects. Where their projects sought to ground their ethical frame in Vedantin non-dual spirituality, Ambedkar appeals to a pragmatist-inspired universalizable morality grounded in the Ramaa tradition's critique of Brahminist religion. Ambedkar's commitment to a meliorative new Buddhism places the sagha on a pedestal in an effort to model a community composed of individuals who are working toward egalitarianism and a just social order. As such, Ambedkar's chief conversation partner is Marx, with whom he agrees about the endthe dissolution of private property but not about the means. For Ambedkar, the means is the Buddhadharma, with its therapeutic project for the individual and its social program in the form of the sagha that can affect real change at the base. Ambedkar's sense that religion, in the form of an enlightened religion of principles, is necessary for moral orientation marks the divergence of his thought from that of Marx.

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