

A Commentary on Ambedkar's Posthumously Published *Philosophy of Hinduism* – Part II¹

Rajesh Sampath¹

Abstract

This paper continues the commentary on Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's posthumously published *Philosophy of Hinduism*. Utilizing resources from various modern continental European philosophers and social theorists, particularly of religion, we elaborate on several key passages within Ambedkar's overall framework of analysis. The paper continues to explore how Ambedkar conceives relations between philosophy and religion, and how historical shifts in general human consciousness have occurred whereby altering both fields. At the core of his being, Ambedkar is concerned with a methodological justification that will enable him to venture into a penetrating critique of the immoral and amoral nature of Hinduism's social system of caste. In Part I of the commentary, we followed Ambedkar until he arrived at the criteria of 'justice' and 'utility' to judge the status of Hinduism. He wanted to test whether this Eastern world religion, which descends from antiquity, meets those criteria, which shape the modern conception of religion. In Part II of this commentary, we expand further on Ambedkar's thesis as to why Hinduism fails to meet the modern conception when those twin criteria are not met. This thought presupposes various underlying philosophical transformations of the relations of 'God to man', 'Society to man', and 'man to man' within which the Hindu-dominated Indian society forecloses the possibility of individual equality, freedom, and dignity. In making contributions to Ambedkar studies, the philosophy of religion, and political philosophies of justice, this paper sets up Part III of the commentary, which will examine Ambedkar's actual engagement with the classics of Hinduism's philosophy and thought in general. Ultimately, Ambedkar

¹Associate Professor of the Philosophy of Justice, Rights, and Social Change, The Heller School for Social Policy and Management, Brandeis University
E-mail: rsampath@brandeis.edu

¹The first part of this paper appeared in the first issue of this Journal: Vol 1, Issue 1 (2020). It can be viewed at <https://journals.library.brandeis.edu/index.php/caste/article/view/141/13>

is undeterred in his original critique of the social and moral failures of the caste system, thereby intimating ambitious possibilities for its eventual eradication.

Keywords

Hinduism, philosophy, religion, caste system, justice and utility

Introduction

Nevertheless, it remains true that we can on a very general plane perceive an equivalence between the two main systems of differences to which men have had recourse for conceptualizing their social relations. Simplifying a great deal, it may be said that castes picture themselves as natural species while totemic groups picture natural species as castes. And this must be refined: castes naturalize a true culture falsely, totemic groups culturalize a false nature truly.

(Lévi-Strauss, 1962)

We continue with our commentary of Ambedkar's posthumously published manuscript – *Philosophy of Hinduism* – in the collected works titled *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*.² At the end of Part I of the commentary, we left off on the opening moments of Ambedkar's truncated work. In the incipient moments, Ambedkar discusses the history of religion and the various revolutions in its grand conception. His aim is to establish what he calls his 'method' to make judgements about what constitutes a religion in the first place (Sampath, 2020, p. 8).³ This will serve as his overriding justification when deriving the criteria of 'justice and utility' to judge Hinduism's suspect status as a bona fide religion (Ambedkar, 2014a, p. 22). As we know from the end of the first part of our commentary, Ambedkar (2014a, p. 22) will ultimately conclude in the negative: Hinduism cannot justify itself as a religion if the concept of religion is formed by the pillars of 'utility and justice'.

In this moment of Ambedkarite disillusionment, one can say the theory of religion – in his mid-twentieth century Indian subcontinental context – is the theory of the dismissal of all possibility to be human precisely in that context. And this lies prior to any superficial, dogmatic distinctions between atheism and religion, or secularism and religion; not that these distinctions are the same. Therefore, the response to and responsibility for the possibility of being human is the acceptability of the proposition that religion offers an answer to the question – what does it mean to be human? This is also the pre-eminent philosophical question across all recorded cultures and civilizations irrespective of their dominant religions. Yet for Ambedkar, no answer can be found when posing the question of justice to Hinduism and its adherents in the

²The first edition was published by the Education Department, Govt. of Maharashtra: 14 April, 1987. See *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 3*, ed. Hari Narake, 2nd Edition (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014)

³Within the first few pages, we hear a very comprehensive definition of religion, as both 'natural' and 'revelatory' in non-contradiction relation. He says: "I take Religion to mean the propounding of an ideal scheme of divine governance the aim and object of which is to make the social order in which men live a moral order." (Ambedkar, 2014a p. 6).

South Asian context and its long civilizational history. Furthermore, all religions by nature are not exclusively theoretical as pointless abstractions that have no bearing on human experience and the human condition.

This is where we will resume our critical exercise in reading, again, Ambedkar's crucially important, unpublished manuscript – *Philosophy of Hinduism*. Religion, philosophy, and the history of each individually and their multifold relations across cultures and civilizations over historical time boggle human reason. Why and how religion and philosophy have arisen in human civilizations is irreducible to debates on the natural evolution of the human species, and the long-standing cherished distinction between human reason and animal sensorial consciousness. There is no simple answer to the birth of religion and philosophy, let alone their intertwining relations over historical time. In deep admiration of Ambedkar's genius and industriousness, we pay homage to a great mind that in fact tried to understand some of these opaque relations. The analytical clarity of his examinations is crystalline. That by itself is worthy of today's academic scholarly focus in the West and the East, global North, and South. Having said that, from our vantage point in our historical present, there are aspects of Ambedkar's thought that may seem limited, underdeveloped, or even logically inconsistent. But that is not the point either; namely a presumptuous or condescending dismissal of an early twentieth century subject of a colonial empire. We must guard against the insensitivity of Western neocolonial critiques of the historical presents in the global postcolonial South. We are not trying to historicize Ambedkar's thinking as something antiquated, or less than the enlightened period in the modern global history of ideas.⁴

Rather, we hope to appropriate in a critical reading buried presuppositions in his text so that *we today* can advance new ideas and propositions beyond Ambedkar's early to mid-twentieth century philosophical context. To repeat, this is a work of philosophical inquiry, not intellectual history or social-scientific South Asian studies. The quest is to find out why caste persists and what can be done to eliminate it; akin to ending Black American slavery and segregation in the history of the United States, or apartheid in South Africa. Some of those epochal shifts came through war and constitutional change. The question before us is whether there still remains a chance for a conceptual philosophical revolution and hence non-violent change. Law by itself does not have the power to change society; democratic legal systems are inherently slow to change and can succumb to anti-democratic, authoritarian tendencies.⁵ But what about India that is both Ambedkar's mid-twentieth century historical context and our second decade twenty-first century historical present? Today, in India's Hindu nationalist majority, caste is alive and well. India, therefore, is both modern and feudal, and hence a great complexity for philosophers of history who study historical time, continuities, discontinuities, and epochal shifts.⁶

⁴For more on the emergent field of 'global intellectual history', which is a response to postcolonial studies, see Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, eds., *Global Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

⁵The works of Carl Schmitt and his critical evaluations of the limits of twentieth century constitutional parliamentary democracies would be illustrative here. For recent work on the threats that Hindu nationalism poses to constitutional, secular, legal democracy in India, see Angana Chatterjee, Thomas Blom Hansen, and Christophe Jaffrelot, *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism is Changing India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁶At least in the modern Western European context, diverse figures dating back to Hegel, Marx, Dilthey, and Nietzsche come to mind for the nineteenth century and Bergson, Durkheim,

After discussing the various notions of religion as ‘natural, revelatory, and positive’, Ambedkar moves on to the issue of revolutionary change in history. As stated before, only from that vantage point, can the ‘method’ emerge to critically evaluate Hinduism’s status as a valid religious institution. Ambedkar, as we analyzed in the first part of our commentary, does not mince words about putting Hinduism on “trial” (Ambedkar, 2014a). Ambedkar’s prescient significance is that he was eminently aware of his historical present, how his present would require a reckoning of its history to arrive at a different future than the one that was unfolding in his time. For his time was the time of Gandhian decolonization and independence. Yet his adversarial intent is established from the beginning. Moving from God’s existence, and whatever ontology is available to probe the mystery of the being of God, to notions of determinations, predestination, and preordination of how God rules the universe to the third ‘dimension’ will be, according to Ambedkar, the most difficult to comprehend. This goes beyond political pressures of the present when forming a modern state from out of both European (British in this case) colonialism and precolonial religious civilizations. How to judge a religion, which proposes a form of ‘divine governance’ to order an ‘ideal scheme’ that passes itself off as ‘just’ and ‘moral’ becomes a question. As Nietzsche, and before him Kierkegaard, Schelling, and Hegel, did for Christianity; Ambedkar attempts to do for Hinduism in his time.

In his historical present, Ambedkar (2014a, p. 8) says that there is no indisputable method to tackle problems in the philosophy of religion, particularly as it relates to the issue of how religion tries to fashion a moral order for society. Since he is not proposing a sociology or anthropology of religion, but a philosophy of religion, then obviously philosophy must be reckoned first and foremost. What fascinates us is that Ambedkar, not unlike Hegel and Marx in their Western contexts, links the project of philosophy with movement and revolution. Ambedkar (2014a, p. 8) states:

As for myself I think it is safe to proceed on the view that to know the philosophy of any movement or any institution one must study the revolutions which the movement or the institution has undergone. Revolution is the mother of philosophy and if it is not the mother of philosophy it is a lamp which illuminates philosophy. Religion is no exception to this rule. To me therefore it seems quite evident that the best method to ascertain the criterion by which to judge the philosophy of Religion is to study the Revolutions which religion has undergone. That is the method which I propose to adopt.

Here we have a couple of entangled relations. Any ‘movement’ or ‘institution’ has a ‘philosophy’, and their philosophy has to do with the ‘revolutions’ that they have undergone. Philosophy does not descend from high; nor does it magically appear in

Dumézil, Kojève, Bataille, Klossowski, Hyppolite, Canguilhem, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Lévi-Strauss, Althusser, Lacan, Blanchot, Levinas, Foucault, Derrida, Weber, Husserl, Heidegger, Marcuse, Habermas, Blumenberg, and Koselleck for the twentieth century. This is not a random list. They comprise major figures in continental European thought, and not all from philosophy but all philosophical in some way, over the last two centuries. With and through them always, we intend to marshal their key insights and innovations for our ongoing theoretical and philosophical investigations into Ambedkar’s philosophical and sociological critiques of caste and Hinduism. That also means being cognizant of their epistemological limits as Western thinkers to handle the complexity of non-Western, Global South precolonial, colonial, decolonial, and postcolonial contexts.

the immanent flow of human events that get recorded as part of chronological and datable time. Philosophy becomes ideology when it is uncritically used to justify the existence of a certain religion and its refusal to reform itself. Religions therefore are not impervious to change. Yet the nature of this change and its temporalization is uncertain unlike political, economic, social, and cultural changes and events in history. As Heidegger (1962) would argue in his own revolutionary terms, the commonplace, worldly linear time of flowing 'now' points that forms our notion of empirical history and historical narrative is in fact derived from a more mysterious, primordial, ecstatic, finite, unified, authentic temporalization event.

Similarly, for Ambedkar, we must ask why he is so keen on linking any 'movement' or 'institution', for example society, religion, or the state, with a 'philosophy', and therefore why philosophy itself presupposes something like a 'revolution'. Ambedkar, unabashedly, is concerned with the nature and *enactment* of change and recreation. He must have that concern, as one of an oppressed class of historical people, given the weight of real and existential alienation that he sees constituting all of Indian civilization and its long duration from the very ancient *Vedas* to the birth of the caste system. For Ambedkar, it could be a matter of life and death, at any moment (colonial, decolonial, or postcolonial) unless the eternal order of caste is confronted once and for all. It must be vanquished.

What does this say about the nature of philosophy, let alone the philosophy of religion? Returning to the Ambedkar passage, revolution is the 'mother' and, if not that, the 'lamp that illuminates' philosophy. Philosophy can only occur as something that is of the nature of a revolution, either something from nothing or something that cannot be derived from a precedent. Philosophy is not only self-born out of the torment of recognizing its emergence from the womb of an historical present; but also, self-aborting of that present of identity to phenomenalyze something unheard; and that is because philosophy works at the level of abstraction and transcendence in any uncanny and non-divine way, and not ordinary intuitions that human beings have of their daily realities. It, therefore, is more of a surprise, like an uncanny event, or that which can never be anticipated unlike current events that journalism records. It literally is brand new, a self-creation, or something born out of itself. For example, a 'system' like Hegel's (1977) comes into being and challenges everything before it while it tries to recollect, absorb, run through again all of the history of thought before it while negating and raising itself – the self-conceptualizing movement of itself as thought – to a higher level. But somehow, also yet not simultaneous, it is this event that constitutes the transcendent, something new, and hence irreducible to all the pictures, forms, and 'shapes' of previous epochs.

Time turns out to be the mystery here for Ambedkar when it comes to saying that any entity, and in the case of this investigation, religion, has a philosophy; and that philosophy has something to do with revolutions, transmutations, and transmogrifications that the entity goes through. What will be difficult for Ambedkar's task is the critical destruction of the phenomenon of Hinduism as a religion. He will have to differentiate more general views of revolutionary changes in generic notions of religion in order to address the specificity, uniqueness, incomparability, and complexity of a religion, like Hinduism. No doubt, the passionate defenders of this faith have a history of their own pride in being Hindu, namely the ideology of the *Hindutva*.⁷ It

⁷Arguably one of the main architects of the Hindu ideology, one that still informs today's hyper-nationalist Hindu majority in India attempting to assert itself as a new world superpower, is the

proclaims itself to be the oldest, living continuous religion that has resisted all imperial invasions or colonizations to transplant their own religions and civilizations onto the subcontinent, say Islam or Christianity. Furthermore, this identity is the most unique, and therefore superior in value, than any other in human history; again it claims to be the oldest of the world religions. One can see a patrimonial attitude in claiming what is most ancient, as if that accords a special status to the religion.

To counter this specious, ahistorical eternity, philosophy is the movement of self-conceptualization in response to an event of injustice that reproduces itself as the core of an entity – in this case religion. Philosophy – as always revolutionary (which means everything that is non-philosophical is not revolutionary) – will inform Ambedkar's attempt at a critical judgement of religion. In this way, his demanding and acidic perspective will not appear to be disconnected, like an external observer, or biased, like an internal adherent, who consciously or unconsciously continues to propagate the faith. Pursuing a philosophy of religion for the sake of describing the essential features of a religion and how they – philosophy and religion – manifest and operate would be descriptive. Ambedkar's aim, of course, is far more exigent in his demand to completely reshape Indian society minus the caste system. Such a vivisection of society has never been achieved, and hence the persistence of caste today. The unthinkable is that caste endures in a secular, constitutional, liberal, and pluralistic democracy that claims to promote equality and liberty of all individuals regardless of background and birth. Ambedkar's desire for revolution does not arise from his fetishization of Western revolutions of society, say the French Revolution. His moment arises from within the deepest experiences of oppression in his own unique cultural and civilizational context.

Revolutions are bizarre phenomena, which are caught in paradoxes and aporias, when we try to imagine the relation between time itself and an event. If one assumes predestination and a foreshadowing of the revolutionary event, then nothing changes. If revolutions occur out of nowhere, then they could not occur. If revolutions did not occur, there would be no such thing as wonder and appreciation for the birth of something new. This is why Ambedkar needs to institute a changing conception within religion: one that makes it discontinuous from past epochs in ways not possible for this long, continuous duration of Hinduism starting deep in antiquity right up to India's current social and political economy, i.e. rampant Hindu nationalism. He is concerned with the mechanisms of internal resistance within Hinduism as a religion that pre-empt its possibility for revolutionary change as philosophically conceived.

Turning to the general conception of religion, and not a specific religion, like Hinduism, Ambedkar says we assume certain kinds of transformation. Religion as an all-encompassing explanatory framework of both physical and spiritual realities subsumes human knowledge within a mythological structure that transcends human

figure Sarvarkar and his text, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (Bombay: Veer Sarvarkar Prakashan, First Edition, 1923). Retrieved from <https://archive.org/details/hindutva-vinayak-damodar-savarkar-pdf/page/n19/mode/2up>. As far we are concerned, this dangerous and problematic event buried in the origins of modern Hindu ideology requires a strident deconstruction not only of its main propositions but the effects of power it can exude in shaping mass conformity today. We will postpone that endeavor of the critical theory of Hindu domination, ideology, and hegemony to a future work.

reason. Therefore, all ancient science and medicine (Ambedkar, 2014a)⁸ failed to achieve autonomy because its sole purpose was not the advancement of human improvement, but consolidating the sole dominion that religion had over all reality, all nature, including human nature. There is no such thing as autonomy itself because everything ensnares everything else whereby every phenomenon that can possibly exist is linked to a higher dimension that has the power to explain everything. This includes the very concept of God, not as an actual deity specific to a certain religion, say the Trinitarian unity of the Christian God, but as another element in this omnipotent, omnipresent, and omnitemporal expanse called religion.

Nevertheless, in an invisible revolutionary turn that cannot be isolated to a single event, this entire edifice – that is religion's unquestioned sovereignty – was destroyed and replaced with secular and scientific modernity (Ambedkar, 2014a, p. 8). The very question of sovereignty and religion, or who has the right to govern all life, reality, and the philosophy of both life and reality, is an open question, particularly when modalities of sovereignty change.⁹ Hence, the nature of change as neither the continuity nor discontinuity of events becomes a mystery when we try to fathom the infinite vortex known as historical time and those who wish to conceptualize it as a massively complex phenomenon.

As mentioned before, the purpose of our article is not to probe relentlessly these extremely intricate debates in the philosophy of history on the nature of epochal shifts, particularly at this scale. In the West, one can go back to Copernicus as Ambedkar (2014, p. 9) notes, which takes us to the mid-sixteenth century, as arguably one of, if not *the* cataclysmic event, responsible for the shift from geocentric antiquity and the Christological Middle Ages to heliocentric astrophysical pre-modernity.¹⁰ We need to move straight to the core that will provide the foundations of Ambedkar's unrelenting critique of the basic kernel of Hindu metaphysics, namely the social order of caste and the metaphysical problem of birth, death, and rebirth. The clear distinction between omnipresent religion that engulfs the primitive 'science' in antiquity and the middle ages and the modern scientific, empirical, and experimental methods born in the West and secular constitutional, legal democracy (also born in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries West) begins to dissolve.¹¹ It turns out that the Western historical

⁸*Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 3*, 8. Ambedkar's reflections are astonishing for his time period. For he would not have been privy to the incredible philosophies of history being developed by Anglo and continental European thinkers from the 1900s onwards. Therefore, the temptation for comparison and contrast between Ambedkar and this Western tradition is quite tantalizing. A foreseeable work would take these crucial moments in Ambedkar's manuscript and compare and contrast them with various philosophers of history who tried to contrast religion from secular modernity starting with Hegel. Figures in the twentieth century who cannot be ignored are Löwith and Blumenberg in Germany and Aron, Maritain, and Sartre in France.

⁹For a brilliant philosophical deconstruction of the question of sovereignty and how it is traditionally posed, see Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign, Vol. 1*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). We shall return to a critical reading of these later Derrida lectures just prior to his death, and how they can be appropriated for Ambedkarite studies.

¹⁰See Hans Blumenberg, *The Genesis of the Copernican World*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987).

¹¹For more on the problematic origins of the history of modern science in the West, see Michel Foucault's "Introduction" to Georges Canguilhem, trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett and Robert S. Cohen (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

and intellectual revolutions will not help us understand the nature of historical time when it comes to the past, present, and future of the Hindu-dominated subcontinent. Neither will the three-moment dialectics of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, which descend from dogmatic Marxian notions of historical materialism, suffice. And there are manifold reasons as to why this is the case that supersede Ambedkar's initial reflections here on religion and revolution. We will have to unfold this throughout our continuing commentary on the *Philosophy of Hinduism*.

Returning to Ambedkar, the step before secular and scientific modernity reveals this awesome yet terrifying cosmological expanse of religion as it engulfs all reality. Ambedkar (2014a, pp. 8–9) states:

...disease was either a divine visitation as punishment for sin or it was the work of demons and that it could be cured by the intervention of saints, either in person or through their holy relics; or by prayers and pilgrimages; or (when due to demons) by exorcism and by treatment which the demons (and the patient) found disgusting.

Ambedkar is speaking of a generic epochal expanse, in an opaque period of the history of human consciousness, which one traditionally sees as pagan antiquity, and perhaps its prehistorical, archaeological roots. Nevertheless, it is strangely ironic that he is describing elements that continue to sustain and compose the historical present of caste. His thought represents an intentional reproduction of the trauma stemming from the earliest religious consciousness of humankind and therefore not simply a present representation of the past; rather, it is a present enlargement of a past that never dies. Trauma is not simply reducible to either a past event that is remembered or a present enactment of the event, even a trace of the event. By exposing the pain of the present, he hopes to overcome it. If we interpret this passage from how this past structure of pagan antiquity lives in the present, we arrive at some startling observations.

The step before the epochal paradigmatic shift in the concept of religion – over the long duration of human history – is not easy to discern. It is a question of the threshold and rupture that is hard to perceive. Ambedkar revisits a time in the past that one would think is divorced from the historical present, but will turn out at least in the case of Hinduism, a past that is very much present, not just haunting the present, but is the present. There is a complex temporalization linking past and present that perhaps moves in another dimension irreducible to both. It is a present that refuses to present itself as past and to remain past as such; it lives on. Religion is the infinitely borderless expanse that engulfs everything and every branch of knowledge that would attempt separation and autonomy. In such a context, it is impossible to say that any concept or notion of being an 'individual', who is fully endowed with rights, liberty, and dignity, as an autonomous entity exists. It is difficult to understand such impossibility from the standpoint of our secular modernity based presumably on individual rights. But the truth of the matter is that this is very much the case for contexts that exist in our historical present: namely total social systems whereby the individual does not exist. A vacuum takes the place of the notion of the individual.

It is one thing to say that religion, epistemologically speaking, is the foundation of all forms of human knowledge (for example the social and natural sciences) confined within the constraints of human reason. It is entirely another to speak of that kind of omniscience and omnipresence as a pathological form of sovereignty

that mixes the problem of birth, death, and therefore the mystery of time itself, the relation between time and life, and the timing of one's death or passage with a whole host of other virulent extremes. And when such extremities are inscribed in the depths of stratified social structures, then change at the level required of revolution becomes imperceptible, if not impossible. This is where death, disease, and decay are confounded with metaphysical issues of time, motion, and passage, as the whole apparatus gets conflated with problems of purity, holiness, saintliness and that which is demonic and must be 'exorcised', castigated, cast out, outcasted, separated, and kept at bay. We will penetrate further into these mysteries following the great leads left behind by Ambedkar.

The inherent sadism in this modality of religion, which would otherwise promise salvation from human suffering, say, in a messianic way through notions of love, compassion, mercy, and justice, remains to be theorized in this Ambedkarite context. And this is not simply a matter of say pitting the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, where humility, justice, and mercy abound, with the cruelty and degradation inherent in the everyday social reality of life within the caste system. There will be spaces for comparative studies and the *philosophical* theorization of differences and relations, contrasts and comparisons of the world religions on issues of purity, impurity, sacred, profane, holiness/saintliness, and the demonic; these in turn inform social categories that structure actual relations that are hard to overturn, say categories of the pariah and caste.¹² We must come back to the whole ensemble of concepts presented in Ambedkar's passage just quoted.

For Ambedkar, when knowledge inside religion grows to consume all other branches of knowledge, say medicine, then all kinds of diabolical consequences follow. Think of a cellular mutation whereby an original cell can no longer tell the difference

¹²Weber's work on the sociology of religion would provide a great starting point, not just his famous reflection on the 'ethic' of Protestantism and the birth of capitalism, but the considerably long volumes dedicated to religions in China and India and a text on ancient Judaism. See Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993). In a future paper we plan a critical Ambedkarite reading of a very interesting section where Weber compares and contrasts the long history of gentile oppression of Jews, particularly after the destruction of the Second Temple, and the problem of caste in India's Hinduism. He states: "In our usage, 'pariah people' denotes a distinctive hereditary social group lacking autonomous political organization and characterized by prohibitions against commensality and intermarriage originally founded upon magical, tabooistic, and ritual injunctions. Two additional traits of a pariah people are political and social disprivilege and a far-reaching distinctiveness in economic functioning. To be sure, pariah people of India, the disprivileged and occupationally specialized Hindu castes, resemble the (ancient) Jews in these respects, since their pariah status also involves segregation from the outer world as a result of taboos, hereditary religious obligations in the conduct of life, and the association of salvation hopes with their pariah status." See Weber, p. 108–109. The issue is not simply taking the statements by an early twentieth century founding figure of Western sociology, such as Weber, to be indisputable historical facts. Obviously, the fields of sociology and anthropology have developed in very specialized ways since then and are decolonizing themselves in our present. Certainly, Weber's gentile Eurocentric assumptions can be deconstructed since he is an outsider to both Judaism and Hinduism. Furthermore, the history of these two world religions cannot be superficially conflated nor contrasted with predetermined senses and intuitions of differences. That seems obvious to state. Rather, starting with these germinal texts, we can open up a research program that compares today's modalities of social exclusion, for example Western and global South anti-Semitism and the question of caste in South Asia and the global diaspora. This can be brought into discussion with issues of racism, particularly anti-Black racism, not just in the West but everywhere.

between a natural origin and a replica that looks the same but acts for counter-purposes to the goal of health and well-being. Similarly, when judging a religion for its capacity to realize justice and liberation, we find that in Hinduism it begins to propagate the opposite. Religion mummifies a society as an external surface that refuses to peel away. Disease is linked to a divine retribution, a form of punishment for the sins of a previous life. Its manifestation is the demonic or deviation from the pure. What is the abhorrent caste system as the inner-beating of the ravenous heart of Hinduism? What is other than this frenzied linkage between hate, apathy, revenge, and vengefulness of those self-ordained as the pure, namely the Brahmanic, and the constructed other of the Dalit as the quintessence of impurity, namely carriers of human excreta and dead bodies, the complete synthesis of entropy, disease, and disorder culminating in the ritual worship of death as passage? It would appear that Hinduism is the only religion that not only turns human beings into less than or disabled beings, but perpetuates that injustice in an intergenerational, hereditary succession. The nucleus of this religiosity confounds us because it takes us into a realm of the inhuman, when human consciousness itself is no longer recognized. Here we need to revisit this question of peripatetic ‘saints, relics, pilgrimages’ and the complex negotiations they have with anything construed as ‘demonic and impure’ by which ‘disgust’ is reproduced.

This is the all-encompassing question captivating Ambedkar while he examines the history of revolutions in the concept of religion. Furthermore, we must explore this unavoidable delimitation. We find an intentional placing of limits on speculative theoretical imagination. It is difficult to understand why a certain revolution away from this matrix of illusory, transcendental consciousness of purity and real bodily horror failed to occur in the history of Hinduism, which itself appeared in a certain geographic region of the pagan world: from Vedic antiquity to Ambedkar’s mid-twentieth century historical present – that had just decolonized and given birth to a secular, modern democracy – lies a stretching abyss.

One can imagine a counterfactual moment in South Asian/Indian history, or the conditions of impossibility that pre-empted a type of ‘reformation’ born out of the individual liberty of conscience as we find in Luther’s Protestant Reformation in Western Christianity.¹³ Without simplifying either the Eastern historical context or the Western one, the philosopher of religion in particular must take great precautions to avoid any *orientalizing* tendencies. We bracket this question as we keep reading what would have and could have been the step, a discontinuous break, from this seemingly antiquated structure to a new conceptual structure of religion. The task is to turn this into a philosophical question. Indeed the latter failed to materialize in the Indian subcontinental context. In fact, the ideology of the Hindutva, which determines what it means to be a Hindu, has reproduced itself with great vigor and aggression given the dominance of Hindu nationalism today as a majoritarian will to power that is suffocating minority rights in our midst.¹⁴

¹³For a compelling investigation into problems of historiography (the history of historical representations on epochs and events), historical time, and epochal shifts strictly within the Western experience, see Reinhart Koselleck, *Future Past: The Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

¹⁴It is one thing for the Western media to start commenting on frightening issues of censorship, political arrests, crack-downs, and state persecutions of Dalit activists and thinkers, religious minorities, namely Muslims and Christians, and the farmers’ movements protesting the tyrannical reach of Modi’s neoliberal nationalist capitalist movement. As long as a free press continues to exist and can face the risk of speaking its conscience, even Indian presses are

In contrast, the conceptual revolution achieved in Western Enlightenment and secular, scientific modernity, at least the hard sciences, such as physics, chemistry, and biology, were eventually released from the yoke of religion and all religious and metaphysical cosmologies of the past millennia, particularly before the 1400 CE extending to the first three millennia BCE. This was a huge step in the history of consciousness, for Ambedkar. But Ambedkar does not valorize uncritically this Western threshold. One could place this extended Western event in the late eighteenth century¹⁵ with the French Enlightenment; the Kantian revolution in the critique of all dogmatic metaphysics given the limits of human reason; the early scientific beginnings of mathematics that would lay the foundations for eventual, late nineteenth and early twentieth century discoveries; the Industrial Revolution; and the birth of democracy, first in America (as the first decolonial event from British colonialism) and the French Revolution, or the self-fashioning of a new society and state by completely destroying the old structure of monarchy and aristocracy. The relation between divinity and sovereignty certainly undergoes a profound transmutation in the West.

One could assume that Ambedkar is drawing a simple contrast between this moment in Western history, which gave birth to global modernity as we know it, and what Ambedkar aspired to achieve in his present at the dawn of decolonial, secular, democratic India. Paradoxically, it was due to his own ingenious efforts that led to the drafting of the constitutional formation of India's democracy that promised a ban on 'untouchability' and caste discrimination; but as he knew, the social reality that followed independence was far from that constitutional truth when manifested in everyday life.¹⁶ Yet this is not the issue at hand, namely political-legal change, or at least not yet. Contrasting two planes of history – Western and Eastern – is not the immediate task at hand when considering the philosophy of religion, or rather the philosophy of *a* religion since there is no universal philosophy for all religions (Ambedkar, 2014a, p. 8).

The movement on the grand scale of human history from ancient mythologies, religions, and metaphysics (say the ancient philosophies in Greece, India, and China) and the nineteenth century positivistic leap to secular, industrial-technological, scientific, and democratic modernity is not the object of study. The task is not historical, or attempts to isolate a grand event and prove a cause-effect relation in past, linear, chronological, written recorded time. Ambedkar (2014a) happily acknowledges the individual freedoms of thought and the progress of science, when freed from the needs of religion, or the general 'process of secularization'.¹⁷ Instead, he is concerned with a deeper and more profound shift beneath the layers of social, political, economic, technological, and scientific change. No doubt, this arises from the long, intergenerational trauma of Dalit oppression, which is crystallized in a unique

questioning the current implosion of democracy. See for example, Aakar Patel, "India Today is neither liberal nor a democracy, so how does it become one?", *National Herald* (October 4, 2020). Retrieved from: <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/opinion/india-today-is-neither-liberal-nor-a-democracy-so-how-does-it-become-one>

¹⁵See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: The Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. New York: Routledge, 2005.

¹⁶See Sukhadeo Thorat, 'Ambedkar's Proposal to Safeguard Minorities against Communal Majority in India', *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies*, Vol. 5(2): 113–128, April 15, 2020.

¹⁷This is would be a good place to start another investigation utilizing resources in twentieth century continental philosophies of history, historical time, and epochal shifts on questions of the origins of secularism and modernity, such as the works of Blumenberg and Koselleck.

philosophical self-consciousness that demands an urgent response to an all-pervasive injustice known as caste. The fact that this injustice continues to remain invisible in the international community only adds to its urgency for Ambedkar's time and ours.

Again, Ambedkar is concerned with the emergence of a new structure of religion precisely in its contemporaneity with what we normally construe as secular modernity: namely the separation of the hard sciences and human (social) sciences from religious dogma, ritualistic institutions and practices, and theological branches of knowledge, and inversely the promotion of the eventual dominion that science and technology holds sway over law and policy in modern secular democracies, particularly in the West (For example, secular democracies would have a vested interest in proving empirically that the notion of 'individual equality' is rooted in our human biology. Whether this is possible or not is another matter.). At the base, the problem lies with a theory of historical change and the birth of a new epoch that applies to the future, not the history of religions up to this point. We speak of an unheard, unparalleled, singular, and non-relatable event. The challenge is how it can come to conception.

Indeed, Ambedkar must quickly accelerate his move to find the 'norm,' and not what is commonly understood as the transmogrification of religious metaphysics (above and beyond mere physical appearances and phenomena) to secular scientism and materialism. This 'norm' will allow him to judge quite sternly – in an idealized theory – a new conception of religion to replace the older one he just described. Only then can the quest for justice be truly fulfilled, and not simply promised by either dogmatic religion that descends from antiquity or scientific and secular democratic modernity that struggles everywhere to assert itself today. To reiterate, the old version of generalized human consciousness links religion's endless appetite to consume all forms of knowledge to reproduce the punitive mechanisms that subjugate bodies. Simultaneously, it extolls the metaphysical justification for such wanton cruelty and oppression in the name of supersensory, transcendental knowledge regarding actual birth and death and believed rebirth. And Hinduism is precisely this type of religion. Furthermore, that, in a nutshell, is one philosophical conceptualization of the phenomena of caste in Hinduism. But underneath the shell is an intricate set of evermore refined relations and distinctions. The question becomes what 'method' in a philosophy of religion has the power to crack the shell and make new discoveries.

Ambedkar gives us a succinct formulation of what this new 'norm' is, but also how it fails to fill itself up in a new conception of religion in Hinduism, which continues to cling steadfastly, to the dominion of caste hierarchy and inequality. Ambedkar (2014a, p. 9) states:

But for ascertaining the norm for judging the philosophy of Religion we must turn to another and a different kind of Revolution which Religion has undergone. That Revolution touches the nature and content of ruling conceptions of **the relations of God to man, of Society to man and of man to man**. How great was this revolution can be seen from the differences which divide savage society from civilized society.¹⁸

We shall remain with this passage for a while to complete this portion of the commentary. We will first unpack some of these preliminary distinctions, and then attempt to derive further interrelations within and between the relations and their basic

¹⁸The phrases in bold are my emphasis.

terms – ‘God, man, and society’.¹⁹ This requires a careful delineation, differing, and distending new distinctions within and between the terms and their relations. Let us not lose sight of this categorical imperative, this imperative to find the ‘norm’ to judge.

For Ambedkar, moving from religion dominating human reason by way of myth to secular, scientific, empirical modernity that privatizes religious belief to individuals and groups, which are protected in democratic states (like the US Constitution’s First Amendment) is certainly one type of revolution. But now he will describe another. Something that did not take place in the Indian subcontinent, given the long duration of Hinduism in the depths of mythological antiquity up to today’s right-wing nationalist Hindutva, reveals itself: a total rearrangement, not only of the relations of ‘God to man, Society to man, and man to man’, but more importantly the ‘nature and content’ of their ‘conceptions’ dawns. All of these hinges on how we understand the differences between a ‘savage society’ and ‘civilized society’.²⁰

What we have before us, which we will have to resume in a future section of our commentary, is quite vast and complex. Rethinking the ‘nature and content’ of the ‘conceptions’ of those three fundamental relations while linking it to a self-conceptualizing movement of revolution can materialize the passage or transition from a ‘savage society’ to a ‘civilized society’. Those phrases are Ambedkar’s words, which is not simply ascribing to ‘savage’ the idea of ‘backward’ and ‘primitive’, and to ‘civilized’ as ‘advanced’ and ‘developed’. If the project of a philosophy of religion to actualize the movement of revolution is real, then it is neither purely idealistic (the product of mind) nor reduced to the plane of material history (a sequence of factual, chronological events). We are also not interested in resonating with a Kantian project to delimit the content of conceptions within religion as to be cognizant of the limitations of human reason: that is, both as a moral imperative and a constraint on unwieldy metaphysical speculation. This is what makes Ambedkar’s text, *Philosophy of Hinduism*, so crucial in our mind. It is irreducible in many respects to what has already been put forth in the history of Western philosophy on religion and all other forms of knowledge and experience.

Ambedkar assumes that this revolution has occurred elsewhere since he makes a distinction between ‘savage’ and ‘civilized’. That means some societies *today* can be construed as ‘savage’ and others as ‘civilized’. The question, for him, is how to judge the religion and its relation with Indian society. When one considers how profound the epochal transformation in the shift of ‘God’s relation to man’, ‘Society’s relation to man’, and ‘man’s relation to man’ is, one is reminded of both the idealistic-speculative dialectical philosophy of Hegel and the dialectical materialism of Marx. Both continental European thinkers, no doubt, intended a revolution in thought and social reality to reconceive all history before them for the purpose of raising, elevating,

¹⁹As we have mentioned before, our commentary is multilayered. Much of what can be theorized further within Ambedkar’s corpus are inspired by great theoretical resources from twentieth century continental European thought, or the most philosophically-minded from the fields of sociology, anthropology, and archaeology. In particular, we have in mind Weber, Durkheim, Bergson, Lévi-Strauss, Bataille, Clastres, and Leroi-Gourhan. The movement from phenomenology and structuralism to post-structuralism while passing through existentialism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis serves as an intellectual horizon so to speak. When necessary, we can draw from its resources.

²⁰This passage alone invites us to engage some of the great critical theorists in sociological and anthropological thought in dialogue with philosophies of history. Hence, the initial quote we provided from Lévi-Strauss’s commanding *The Savage Mind* (1962).

and superseding the present in the creation of a new reality. Reading their texts very carefully while unpacking Ambedkar's corpus can be a lifelong quest.²¹ Juxtaposing these three great thinkers is no easy task.

But we must make a start. To imagine a reversal of God's sovereignty over man (or we can say 'human' to be gender inclusive, which Ambedkar would accept if alive today) does not simply mean a subsumption of God to the domain of human finitude and reason. Such a Kantian movement not only keeps religion alive but also realizes the failure of all dogmatic metaphysical conceptions to validate the truth of religious content. What is more granular is the set of moving *interrelations* between relations of God to human, Society to human, and human to human as those relations create new content from out of themselves and in relation to one another. The interrelations, or relations of relations, point to a complex event of movement. Caste would then be an anathema to such an undertaking, and not just because it instantiates a seemingly eternal and unchangeable social order and structure. For Ambedkar's recasting of Western principles of 'equality, liberty, and fraternity', famously espoused in many of his writings and the Indian constitution, to become a reality, something new must occur. We must reimagine the 'nature and content' of those interrelations that leaves open two possibilities.

One is a complete reformation of Hinduism so that the caste system is totally vanquished, leaving no trace behind. The other is to replace Hinduism with another religious conception entirely and assume that it will somehow take hold within Indian society. Neither has occurred thus far in the history of India, even with prior religious civilizational empires – Buddhist, Muslim, and Western European (British) Christian. We have to stay within the aporia of how to think through these two impossibilities or non-occurrences. If the idea of God was no longer rooted in an apathy for individual welfare and therefore civic conscience to uphold equal rights and enforce duties to protect those rights, then that would require a social and philosophical revolution. Such a revolution would have to be beyond what the Indian secular, post-independence, democratic constitution promises today. It would require a metaphysical transformation too. Because the one cosmic self (*Atman*) that seeks unity with the Absolute (*Brahman*) in an attempt to speak for the whole of Indian society in its Hindu unity as a nation is limited. Furthermore, it conceals its limitation; only through the transmigration of souls from bodies to bodies, whereby only one class of bodies (Brahmins) are deemed worthy of supersensory transcendence from body-hood and death itself, is obviously one-dimensional, asymmetric and contradictory. Simply put, while one part is moving, the other remains stationary across generations since one cannot leave the caste they are born into except through death. And as we know from the ancient Greek metaphysicians, say Xenon, Plato, and Aristotle, trying to derive motion from rest is fraught with all kinds of dialectical and logical inconsistencies; motion and rest would be tethered together in an indiscernible event irreducible to both.²² The whole – total transcendence and revelation of truth beyond our human intuitions of birth, death, and rebirth – only speaks from a part, a small protected class, which arrogates to itself the exclusive right to such transcendence. Neither Society to

²¹This is certainly part of an ongoing research and publishing effort by the Author.

²²We reserve for a future investigation a deep penetration into ancient Greek metaphysics on time, eternity, motion, and rest and the Ambedkarite quest to deconstruct caste in the heart of Hindu metaphysical conceptions of time, birth, death, transmigration, and reincarnation. This requires some facility with ancient Greek language even though we lack any knowledge of Sanskrit.

human nor human to human relations can be altered in that regard. That precisely is the issue for Ambedkar; hence the problem of the epochal shift or revolution from one type of society to another.

Let us try to imagine, perhaps as aspirational, in the name of Ambedkarite hope, such another or different society than the one that exists today. Changing the relations of Society to human and human to human by altering the metaphysics of time and movement, and the fundamental mysteries of human birth and death does not necessarily require replacing Hinduism with another religion, although that always remains a possibility. Reproducing what other great Western philosophers have said about the deepest matters, for example Hegel and Heidegger, is not the goal either. Rather, it requires a critical deconstruction, penetrating into the inner-depths of Hinduism's metaphysical structures for the creative expansion and evolution of concepts.²³ This way the true barometer of justice, equality, and liberation begins with a reconsideration of the practical issue of what society humans should create: but the endeavor unfolds in a manner that truly respects the equality and liberty of all human beings and all 'groups' that are other religious minorities and indigenous peoples who may assert group identities against their oppressors. This means abandoning the caste system by not classifying social and economic classes into compartmentalized units that not only divides labor from one another but also creates discrete segmentations within each laboring class. Differences within a class equals caste. Ambedkar, of course, sought an eradication of this division within divisions in his *Annihilation of Caste* (Ambedkar, 2014b).

Altering the relations of Society to human and human to human by altering the God-human relation would be an astounding feat for sure. Perhaps the way to overcome the inhuman and to truly *humanize* religion is a Nietzschean task to overcome all values we have inherited up to this point. For Nietzsche, the task was to question all moral systems, but mainly dogmatic Christianity, lodged in a mythic or uncritical distinction of good and evil. When a morality degenerates, it saps human potential for power and self-creation. For Ambedkar, it would be Hinduism rooted in the distinction of the pure and impure, the saintly and the demonic. In conclusion, we hypothesize a phenomenological account of how this new human being can be fashioned, a new being that respects not only the traditional mysteries, which metaphysics tries to ponder, but also attends to the issue of equality and liberty at the same time. That marks the final frontier and threshold and passage to a new epoch.

Conclusion

In concluding this section of our commentary, we can say the following. The simple replacement of Hinduism with another religion or the eradication of religion altogether does not seem practically possible if we examine the society, politics, culture, and economics of today's Indian subcontinent. Cutting out the caste system from

²³Great figures, such as Hegel and Heidegger, who tried to overcome their own histories of Western metaphysics and its onto-theological constitution in Christianity, cannot be superficially ignored. But this is not to say that naively appropriating their philosophies divorced from their disastrous periods in human history, and in the case of Heidegger's horrific historical present of Nazism, is justifiable and possible. In other words, we need to reckon their greatest philosophical works, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) and Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927), on time and motion while critically distancing ourselves from their attempts to materialize their philosophical revolutions. Hegel is tied to Napoleon, and most egregious of all, Heidegger is tied to Hitler.

Hinduism's social and metaphysical body is what Ambedkar sought. But what it means is that we must take seriously the philosophy of religion and the philosophy of epochal shifts so that the shifting relations between 'God to human', 'Society to human', and 'human to human' takes shape in the idea of transition as a revolutionary event within religion itself. That means religion has a unique materiality, which we must attempt to grasp. The tantalizing possibility is the invention of a new human being, liberated from all previous mythological conceptions of the origin of the human. When the new conception is rooted in the equality and liberty of individual human beings, whose birth is not predetermined in any mythic-hereditary terms, then, obviously, the entire social structure changes; but it does so outside of what we already know about the history of revolutions in the West. What remains undiscovered, however, is how a new religious structure is mapped to such a transformation of the Indian societal context. In the next section of our commentary, we will follow Ambedkar right into the heart of the 'content and nature' of the 'conceptions' of the 'relations' of the terms – God, society and human. We will try to understand what is at stake in revolutionizing those conceptions and relations. Ultimately, this will take us straight into the centrality of the Hindu texts, which Ambedkar critically deconstructs, on their deepest metaphysical questions.

References

- Ambedkar, B.R. (2014a). *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: writings and speeches, vol. 3*. In Narake, Hari (Ed.), 2nd edition, New Delhi: Dr Ambedkar Foundation.
- (2014b). *Annihilation of caste*. In S. Anand (Ed.), London: Verso Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1977). *Phenomenology of spirit* (trans. A.V. Miller). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. (1962). *Being and time* (trans. John McQuarrie and Edward Robinson). New York: Harper and Row.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. (1966). *The savage mind*. London: George Weidenfeld and Nicholson Ltd.
- Sampath, Rajesh. (2020). A commentary on Ambedkar's posthumously published "Philosophy of Hinduism". *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*, 1(1), pp. 17–28. Retrieved from <https://journals.library.brandeis.edu/index.php/caste/article/view/141/13>