

Ambedkar's Philosophy Of Religion : A Evolutionary Perspective

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Introduction

According to Feuerbach, Just as light is essential to the eye, as air is essential to the lungs, as food is essential to the stomach, likewise Religion is essential to man. Religion is nothing but the expression of man's own conception.¹ The fundamental inquiry arises: Can mankind endure devoid of aspiration? I staunchly assert such a notion to be untenable. Correspondingly, according to Gerardus Van Der Leeuw, humanity fundamentally resists mere acquiescence to the circumstances bestowed upon it. Instead, it perennially seeks agency, striving for empowerment. Should one's pursuit of authority be thwarted, the individual inevitably endeavors to seize it, steadfast in one's convictions. Yet, a pivotal question emerges: What impels humanity's relentless pursuit of power? Undoubtedly, the impetus lies in the necessity to actualize desires throughout one's existence.² In nutshell, it can be said that religion becomes the vehicle of power for a man to emancipate himself from the sufferings in the day to day life.

Ambedkar was not among those who discarded the religion, he believed that religion was essential to society. Religion as an establishment was deemed necessary by him for life in general and for the practical working of society in particular. Even though this is true that he rejected Hindu social system in toto as prescribed in the Manusmriti. But religion for him was very essential to establish the just order in the society.³

It is imperative to note that, for Ambedkar, religion did not represent a spiritual journey or a mere pursuit of mystic enlightenment for personal gratification or mental serenity. Rather, driven by his mission, he harboured a distinct vision aimed at establishing an exemplary framework of divine governance. His vision's core objective was to unify the marginalized untouchable communities, fragmented and marginalized across myriad castes and sub-castes throughout the nation. In his 1936 pamphlet, 'Annihilation of Caste,' Ambedkar emphatically argued that the evaluation of individuals and their religious affiliations should hinge upon their societal principles and ethical standards. He contended that no other criterion carries greater significance concerning the welfare of society than the notion of religion being deemed a requisite good. In conclusion, he asserted that by his standards, every established religion would falter under scrutiny.⁴

Ambedkar's perspective on religion is elucidated in his essay 'Away from the Hindus,' composed between 1936-1937, subsequent to the pivotal conference of Mahars on May 31, 1936, wherein the decision to renounce Hinduism and embrace another religion was taken. Further expounding on this theme, the subsequent essay, 'Philosophy of Hinduism,' was written in 1941. In these foundational works, Ambedkar's viewpoints was reflected within the broader international intellectual discourse on religion. In these essays, Ambedkar extensively references four seminal works to formulate his philosophy of religion: W. Robertson Smith's 'The Religion of the Semites,' Ernest Crowley's 'The Tree of Life,' Charles Ellwood's 'The Reconstruction of Religion,' and Emile Durkheim's 'The Elementary Forms of Religious Life.'⁵

Ambedkar's approach to religion diverged significantly from that of his contemporaries. Unlike M.G. Ranade's emphasis on the theistic perspective, Ambedkar did not depict religion in such terms. Similarly, his stance did not align with Deism, as articulated in Jotirao Phule's conception of religion. Through an exploration of the historical development of religion, Ambedkar discerned that theism and deism merely represented phases in the evolution of religious thought throughout human history. Contrary to Maharshi

V.R. Shinde's belief in the universal truth across religions, Ambedkar did not espouse a comparative religious perspective. While his understanding of religion undoubtedly benefited from Marxist insights, his approach remained distinct from Marxism. Rather, Ambedkar synthesized his understanding of religion from various sources, including the sociological, anthropological, and philosophical works of Durkheim, Spencer, Robertson Smith, McDougall, Huxley, Crowley, alongside contributions from Indian scholars such as Professor Dharmanand Kosambi, Dr. Daphtari, and Dr. P.V. Kane.

Central to Ambedkar's approach were two overarching perspectives: a historical-evolutionary framework and a philosophical lens applied to religion. Notably, Ambedkar departed from conventional understandings of the "philosophy of religion," offering his unique interpretation instead. He systematically scrutinized each

religion through the lens of morality, thereby formulating critiques that encompassed various religious traditions, including Hinduism.⁶

Ambedkar advocated for the examination of every religion through the lens of justice. However, Monodeep Daniel argued that Ambedkar's method of evaluating religion was over simplistic to adequately address its complexities.⁷ But in my opinion, Ambedkar was not erroneous in scrutinizing religion under the premise that, like all else, it has evolved and continues to evolve in the world. Despite this evolution, the essence of religion remains constant, although it is apparent that adaptation to contemporary contexts is necessary. Progress may be sought through the creation or refinement of new institutions, achieved by the judicious selection and re-combination of existing elements. However, with the emergence of the new, there must be a cautious and rational consideration of the old.⁸

In 1935, he made it clear that religion is for man, not man for religion.⁹ Similarly, Crawley posits that for humanity to progress, theological frameworks must exhibit flexibility. According to him, a genuine religion cannot be fully grasped unless its manifestations continuously adapt and evolve.¹⁰

Ambedkar's Philosophy of Religion

What constitutes the philosophy of religion? Historically, philosophy has grappled with fundamental inquiries concerning the purpose of existence, the presence of a divine entity, the nature of evil, morality, immortality, and more. These inquiries, categorized as metaphysical, have delved into realms beyond empirical science. However, contemporary philosophy places significant emphasis on observation, experimentation, and induction. Consequently, religious assertions are frequently regarded as devoid of meaning within this framework.¹¹ In view of Karl Marx, philosophy and religion constitute distinct domains, with each often diametrically opposed to the other.¹² Hence, the philosopher's task is not merely to elucidate the world, but rather to bring the transformative change upon it.¹³

In elucidating his philosophical stance, Ambedkar asserts that every individual ought to cultivate their own philosophy of life, as it provides a yardstick to gauge their conduct. He posits, "And philosophy is nothing but a standard by which to measure." Nevertheless, Ambedkar staunchly refuted the Hindu social philosophy enshrined in the Bhagavad Gita, which is founded on the Triguna theory of Sankhya philosophy. He deemed this interpretation a complete distortion of Kapila's philosophy, asserting that it has institutionalized the caste system as the cornerstone of Hindu social structure. Instead, he espoused a social philosophy epitomized by three fundamental principles: Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. He further added that his philosophical framework finds its roots in religion rather than politics, his philosophy has a mission.¹⁴ It is noteworthy in this context that there is one point where Ambedkar appears to agree with Marx that the task of philosophy is to transform the world not merely to explain it.¹⁵

To grasp Ambedkar's philosophy of religion, it is imperative to recognize his departure from the notion that a universal philosophy of religion exists. While he disagreed with the notion of a generalized philosophy of religion, Ambedkar did concur with Prof. Pringle Pattison, who posited that the philosophy of religion could be understood as a synoptic view of phenomena. From this perspective, disciplines such as the philosophy of art and the philosophy of law could serve as exemplars for understanding its broader implications and interpretations.

In Ambedkar's view, all religions, whether extant or extinct, civilized or uncivilized, are imbued with historical and psychological dimensions. Consequently, the philosophy of religion must encompass both normative and descriptive inquiries. Ambedkar contended that each religion possesses its unique philosophy, thereby rejecting any notion of a universal philosophy applicable to all.¹⁶

From this perspective, it becomes evident that there may indeed exist a distinct philosophy associated with each religion, such as the philosophies of Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism, among others. If such a philosophy of religion does indeed exist, as Ambedkar suggests, then there ought to be a separate designation for this field within the broader realm of religious studies. Ambedkar proposes that this specialized field be known as the department of comparative religion, tasked with uncovering the underlying principles shared by all the world's religions.

According to Ambedkar, the term 'philosophy' encompasses two distinct dimensions. Firstly, it can denote the specific doctrines attributed to individual thinkers, as seen in the philosophies of Socrates or Plato. Secondly, it can be understood in a broader sense as involving critical analysis of events and individuals. From this perspective, Ambedkar views the philosophy of religion not merely as a descriptive science, but also as a normative science. When the philosophy of religion engages with the teachings of a particular religion, it assumes a descriptive role. However, when it employs critical reasoning to assess and pass judgment on these teachings, especially in relation to specific thinkers, it transforms into a normative science. Drawing on this distinction, Ambedkar developed his own philosophy of religion to assess critically the all religions of the world. To assess the all major religions of the world and their worth, Ambedkar did put different religions on their trial.¹⁷ In brief, he took all major religions of the world in their evolutionary nature not in their existing forms.

While Ambedkar indeed rejects the notion of a universal philosophy of religion, Dr. Jatava contends that there exists a distinct Philosophy of Religion with its own unique perspective and methodology. Dr. Jatava

suggests that Ambedkar may have overlooked this possibility and its significance. However, Ambedkar implicitly acknowledged this when he referred to the Philosophy of Religion as a 'normative' science. This implies that the descriptive and normative aspects of the Philosophy of Religion are intricately linked and cannot be separated from each other.¹⁸

In the study of the Philosophy of Religion, Ambedkar identifies three key components essential for comprehending its domain. Foremost among these components is Religion itself, a term impregnated with ambiguity due to the absence of a universally accepted definition. Ambedkar, therefore, adopts a theological perspective in his examination of religion. However, it is noteworthy that this theological approach may prove inadequate for precise definition, given the diversity within theological frameworks. To elucidate this complexity, Ambedkar delineates two historical facets of theology: Mythical theology and Civil theology. The ancient Greeks, recognizing this distinction, treated each theology as distinct entities worthy of separate consideration.

However, Ambedkar does not use the term "theology" in either of the senses outlined above. Rather, he uses it to signify 'natural theology', which revolves around the theory of nature, with God and divine governance at its core. Traditionally, according to Ambedkar, natural theology embodies three fundamental tenets as elucidated by various thinkers. Firstly, it posits that God is the creator of the world, known as nature or the universe. Secondly, it asserts that all events within the world are directly governed by God, thus constituting nature. Thirdly, it postulates that God, being sovereign, administers His governance over humanity through His moral law.¹⁹

In light of the three facets of natural theology—namely, (1) the existence of God, (2) God's providential governance of the universe, and (3) God's moral governance of humanity—Ambedkar propounded the concept of religion with the aim of constructing an ideal framework for divine governance. The main goal is to foster a societal order wherein individuals lead morally decent lives. It is within this framework that Ambedkar employs and contextualizes the term 'religion.'²⁰

For a rationalist, philosophy serves as an indispensable tool for comprehending any religion and the ideal framework of divine governance upon which it is built. However, Ambedkar places greater emphasis on the criterion of philosophy than on the philosophy of religion itself when evaluating the worth of the ideal framework of divine governance underpinning a specific religion. From Ambedkar's perspective, understanding the criterion precedes the exploration of a particular religion. This raises the question: what criterion should be employed to assess a religion? The answer to this question defines the normative framework. Ambedkar observes that while considerable discourse exists on the philosophy of religion, no definitive method has emerged to effectively address this issue. Now it becomes evident here that Ambedkar found the existing criteria or methods for assessing religion inadequate. Consequently, he formulated his own criterion, norm, or method—namely, 'philosophy'—as the basis for evaluating religion. To underscore the significance of the philosophy of religion, Ambedkar reflected on the philosophy of social movements or institutions that have undergone historical revolutions. He posits, "Revolution is the mother of philosophy, and if it is not the mother of philosophy, it is a lamp that illuminates philosophy." Religion, therefore, is not an exception of this principle. Hence, it is imperative to determine the criterion by which the philosophy of religion should be evaluated. According to Ambedkar, to accomplish this task, one must not avoid the study of revolutions which religion has undergone.²¹

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