

Ambedkar On Religion And Morality

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Citation: Mahender Singh Dhakad, (2024) Ambedkar On Religion And Morality, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(1), 1854-1859

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i1.6693

Introduction

Religion, an enduring facet of human civilization, deserves academic inquiry into its existence and contributions to humanity. The question of its presence in the world invokes profound reflections on its multifaceted impact on society. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, in his seminal work "The Meaning and End of Religion," offers valuable insights into the historical evolution of the term 'religion.' Smith elucidates that its etymological roots trace back to the Latin 'religio.' In the annals of Ancient Rome, religious practices permeated various spheres of life, transitioning from familial and kin-centric rituals to becoming integral functions of the state. These rituals, venerating a pantheon of deities, underscored communal ties and moral obligations. Over time, such religious observances became institutionalized, reflecting the intricate interplay between spirituality and governance. Moreover, beyond its historical manifestations, religion has exerted a profound and nuanced influence on human existence, offering avenues for moral guidance, communal solidarity, and existential contemplation. To delineate religion's constructive role in society, one might define it as a system of beliefs, rituals, and values that engender meaning, purpose, and communal cohesion among adherents. This definition encapsulates religion's dynamic nature, encompassing a spectrum of traditions, philosophies, and practices that shape individuals and societies alike. In essence, religion, as expounded by Smith and echoed through the annals of history, embodies a rich tapestry of human spirituality and cultural expression. Its enduring presence underscores its capacity to inspire, unite, and enrich the lives of humankind, beckoning scholars and seekers alike to explore its myriad dimensions with scholarly rigor and intellectual curiosity.¹

According to J. M. Yinger, A system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggle with the ultimate problems of human life is a religion.² In the same way, Sigmund Freud saw illusion in the religion. But Bronislaw Malinowski defines religion differently and says, religion born out of the real tragedies of human life and conflict between human plans and realities.³

Despite the diverse perspectives offered by scholars in their attempts to define religion, it becomes evident that these definitions fall short in encapsulating the full breadth and depth of human spirituality and its myriad manifestations across the world. The plurality of definitions underscores the inherent complexity of religion and the multifaceted nature of its impact on society. Indeed, the absence of a universally accepted definition highlights the inherent challenge in encapsulating such a complex and deeply personal phenomenon within the confines of language. Nevertheless, amidst the scholarly discourse surrounding the definition of religion, a pressing question persists: Why is religion deemed essential for society?

Karl Marx, in his critique of religion, posits a starkly contrasting view, contending that religion serves no practical purpose in societal advancement. According to him, religious sentiment merely reflects the tangible suffering experienced by individuals within society and serves as a symbolic protest against such suffering. Marx's perspective sheds light on the role of religion as a means of expressing and grappling with the existential realities of human existence, particularly in the face of social and economic injustice. From this vantage point, religion emerges as a poignant response to the challenges and inequities inherent in societal structures, providing solace and solidarity to the disenfranchised and marginalized. However, while Marx's critique underscores the socio-political dimensions of religion, it overlooks the multi-dimensional role of it. "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people."⁴

At least, one may infer from the Marxist perspective that religion retains a certain utility, particularly for those who have endured the callousness of oppressive systems. Across the globe, countless individuals have suffered at the hands of ruling elites, their spirits often shattered by centuries of subjugation. Consider the plight of these individuals were their innermost beings to be utterly broken. Indeed, while the 19th and 20th centuries witnessed a surge in scientific skepticism toward religion, the enduring presence of religious belief persists.

Emile Durkheim, a prominent sociologist, offers a compelling perspective on religion as a system rooted in the fabric of reality itself. According to him religion encompasses a collection of fundamental truths about

existence, truths that transcend empirical inquiry. Despite the advancements of science, these foundational realities remain beyond its purview. However, Durkheim also acknowledges that the role of religion in society is not static. Rather, he posits that it is destined to evolve, adapting to changing social dynamics.⁵ 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.⁶

Similar to other sociologists, Ambedkar holds the belief that religion plays a crucial role in shaping culture and fostering moral conduct. He staunchly advocates for the indispensable nature of religion in the progress of humanity. In contrast to Marxists who dismiss religion as a superfluous mindset, viewing it as inconsequential, Ambedkar offers a contrasting perspective. He critiques the Marxist stance, which he perceives as rooted in materialistic pursuits, such as indulging in opulent breakfasts, leisurely entertainment, and material comforts, without acknowledging the deeper significance of religion. Ambedkar's viewpoint diverges from the Marxist emphasis on economic development as the sole panacea for societal issues. Instead, he contends that comprehensive human development necessitates more than just economic prosperity. Religion, in his view, holds a pivotal role in addressing multifaceted human needs and fostering holistic development. He was not opposed to the pursuit of economic advancement; indeed, he recognized the importance of financial progress in human development. However, he maintained that mere economic prosperity was insufficient. In addition to material wealth, he advocated for a cultural revolution aimed at the reconstruction of Indian society.

He emphasized the cultivation and refinement of the mind, asserting that intellectual and cultural enrichment were indispensable facets of human progress. He articulated his vision by asserting that a sound body alone does not suffice for meaningful human interaction. Just as physical health is essential for social engagement, he contended that mental cultivation is equally imperative. He rejected the notion that the essence of human connection lies solely in material sustenance.⁷

In my opinion, Ambedkar uses the concept of culture in its descriptive rather than normative capacity, wherein it transcends mere expressions of music, art, dance, lifestyle, sartorial preferences, literature, language, customs, traditions, and festivities. In his view, culture pertains to the establishment of an environment conducive to universal knowledge dissemination, widespread education, unfettered freedom of worship and occupation, social commensality, preservation of human dignity, and the elimination of barriers to marital unions. Furthermore, he advocates for the implementation of numerous additional measures in alignment with these principles.

The inquiry arises as to who bears the responsibility for fostering such a culture. Is it the purview of the state and its governance structures to cultivate an environment conducive to the emergence of this new cultural paradigm? Alternatively, does religion hold the mantle for championing these foundational human values? Ambedkar posits that religion serves as the conduit for effecting societal transformation. He contends that the state, its laws, and governmental apparatus alone are insufficient for ensuring social justice within society.⁸

Ambedkar was not among those who rejected the utility of religion, according to him, 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. After long Experiences with Hinduism, He reached on this conclusion that abolishing inequality in Hindu society was impossible unless the existing foundation of the Smriti-religion was not demolished and new foundation did not replace the old one. Arguing with the caste Hindus, he said that he had strong religious sentiments according to his conception of religion, but he had no faith in Hinduism as he hated hypocrisy.⁹ According to him, Religion as a social force cannot be ignored. "To ignore religion is to ignore a live wire."¹⁰

It is imperative to recognize that for Ambedkar, religion did not serve as a mere pursuit of spiritual enlightenment or a quest for personal satisfaction through the attainment of truth for inner tranquility. Instead, it constituted a vehicle through which to actualize his overarching mission. Ambedkar harbored a clear vision aimed at constructing an exemplary framework of divine governance with the objective of unifying the marginalized untouchable populace, who endured segregation and ostracism across myriad castes and sub-castes dispersed throughout the nation. In his seminal work "Annihilation of Caste," written in 1936, Ambedkar emphasized the imperative of evaluating individuals and their religious affiliations based on their social ideals and ethical standards. He posited that no other criteria hold significance in terms of societal welfare if religion is to be deemed a necessary good. Concluding his argument, Ambedkar asserted that upon scrutiny against his standards, every established religion would inevitably fall short.¹¹

Every religion in view of Ambedkar, should be tested on the basis of justice. But in view of Monodeep Daniel, Ambedkar's method of assessing the religion was too simple to deal with the complexity of religion. However, there are three drawbacks of this thesis if religion be assessed from Ambedkar's perspective. The first is that Ambedkar's approach to the religious traditions is reductionist. In other words he has reduced religion merely to a function. His idea of an ideal scheme of divine governance would theoretically promote only one religion which fulfilled these ideals. The second point is that there seems to be a contradiction in Ambedkar's argument. As all religions has propounded a scheme of divine governance, they need a society, but we know that societies in their nature are inevitably diverse. It is not possible to have a homogeneous society with a

single religion. The third drawback is that Ambedkar has shown the only social role of religion at the cost of its transcendental nature.

22. Ambedkar posits that every religion should undergo scrutiny based on principles of justice. However, Monodeep Daniel critiques Ambedkar's method, suggesting it oversimplifies the complexity inherent in religious systems. Nonetheless, examining religion through Ambedkar's lens reveals three significant drawbacks.

Firstly, Ambedkar's approach to religious traditions appears reductionist. By conceptualizing religion primarily as a functional entity, he advocates for an ideal scheme of divine governance that inherently favors religions aligning with his prescribed ideals. Secondly, a fundamental contradiction arises within Ambedkar's argument. While religions articulate their own schemes of divine governance, societal diversity remains an inherent characteristic. Achieving homogeneity within a society under a single religion appears implausible given this inherent diversity. Thirdly, Ambedkar's focus on the social dimension of religion neglects its transcendental aspects. By emphasizing religion's societal role, Ambedkar overlooks its potential for spiritual transcendence and personal transformation.¹²

In my view, Ambedkar's approach of scrutinizing religion is right, operating under the premise that religion, akin to other facets of human existence, undergoes evolution and development over time. While the essence of religion remains constant, its adaptation to contemporary contexts becomes imperative. Progress is achievable through the creation or refinement of new institutions, often through the selective amalgamation of existing elements. However, this process necessitates meticulous and rational consideration of traditional components when incorporating new innovations.¹³ In 1935, he made it clear that religion is for man, not man for religion.¹⁴ In line with this perspective, Crawley contends that for humanity to advance, theological doctrines must exhibit flexibility. A genuine religion cannot be comprehended in its entirety unless its manifestations undergo continual transformation. The essence of religion is contingent upon its capacity to adapt and evolve with the changing dynamics of human society.¹⁵

Morality and Religion

Muhammad, the revered prophet of Islam, is often portrayed as an embodiment of compassion, a champion of the disadvantaged, and a proponent of patience in the face of adversity. However, it is a paradoxical reality that throughout history, adherents of Islam have invoked the singular truth of their faith as justification for various acts of violence purportedly carried out in the name of Allah.¹⁶

Both Judaism and Christianity appear to uphold parallel perspectives concerning morality, positing that without religion, a sustainable moral framework becomes untenable. Central to both faiths is the concept that the love of God serves as the cornerstone of virtuous living, fostering a continuous expression of one's character firmly rooted in devotion to the divine. According to Christian doctrine, humanity is called upon to exemplify love throughout earthly existence, as it reflects the inherent loving nature of God.¹⁷

Immanuel Kant scrutinized the relationship between morality and religion, challenging the premise of God's existence when conventional arguments failed to substantiate such claims. Kant responded affirmatively, asserting that indeed there is a foundation for religion. He posited that this foundation does not lie within speculative reason or empirical evidence but is rooted in morality. Kant contended that universally, humans acknowledge an inherent obligation to fulfill their moral duties, irrespective of their nature.¹⁸ Contrary to popular belief, according to Ambedkar, morality does not hold a fixed position within religion. Religion encompasses concepts such as God, the soul, prayer, worship, rituals, ceremonies, and sacrifices. Morality, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with human interactions. It becomes intertwined with religion as a supplementary force to uphold peace and order within society. Religion, in essence, is akin to a triangular structure. It advocates for goodness towards one's neighbor on the basis of shared divine lineage, portraying morality as an ancillary aspect. While every religion espouses moral principles, morality itself is not the foundational pillar of religion. "It is a wagon attached to it. It is attached and detached as the need is felt." Religion has rendered the act of morality isolated and sporadic. Morality in religion is therefore not effective.¹⁹

Ambedkar accepted the necessity of religion. He believes that a poor man does not go towards theft under the compulsion of hunger and the fear of the legal consequences, but it is the positive pressure upon him of his religion which makes him aware about the immoral acts. He believed that religion had a direct connection with the heart and emotions, and laws with reason. In life, emotion played a predominant part. Hence the importance of religion can not be ignored in the building of man's character. He often said that whatever good points he had in him they were the fruit of religion.

22. Ambedkar acknowledged the indispensability of religion in societal fabric. He posited that the impoverished individual does not resort to theft solely due to the compulsion of hunger or the fear of legal repercussions, but rather, it is the moral guidance provided by religion that instills awareness of ethical conduct. Ambedkar emphasized the profound connection between religion and the realm of emotions, contrasting it with the rationality inherent in laws. Given the paramount role of emotions in human life, he underscored the significance of religion in shaping one's character. Ambedkar frequently attributed his own virtues to the influence of religion, emphasizing its pivotal role in personal development.²⁰ Ambedkar

examined each and every religion from the point of view of morality and developed his critique of religions, including that of Hinduism.²¹

Morality in Hinduism and Buddhism

To understand morality in Buddhist terms, it is necessary to reveal the immoral character of Hinduism. Because, Ambedkar was born a Hindu; brought up in Hinduist ideologies; which prohibited him from receiving proper education; from entering the temples. For nearly two thousand years he and his community were constrained in the pigeonhole settlements. By 1950, Ambedkar had managed to break out of the Hinduist propaganda which enabled him to compare the stark contrast between Hindu and Buddhist moral upholdings and between social equality. He, thereby, concluded that Hinduism as a religion was not founded on morality, it was not an integral part of Hinduism. It was not embedded in this religion. Morality in Hinduism was an isolated force, sustained by social necessities, and was not mandatory. On the contrary, morality was embedded in and fundamental in Buddha's religion. The Buddhist religion is nonexistent without morality. Morality holds the place of God in Buddhism. What God is to other religions morality is to Buddhism. It must be noted that even for Krishna religion did not consist of morality. It consisted of Yagyas and sacrifices through the Nishkama Karmas category.²²

Thus, Ambedkar categorically argues that the Hindu social order is caste bound and rooted in a morality called the varnashrama dharma. Hence, it no more remains to be a moral order or dharma. It is, in fact, an adharmas or immorality.²³ Alongwith this, it should be borne in mind that Ambedkar was not satisfied with transcendental morality and attempted to make it secular. However, it is crucial to recognize that the concept of dharma has evolved over time, acquiring various meanings depending on the context. Monier-Williams' Sanskrit-English dictionary enumerates approximately seventeen interpretations of dharma (religion), encompassing customary practices of castes, sects, righteousness, duty, justice, morality, and more. Pandurang Vaman Kane, a renowned scholar of Dharmashastra history, has provided twenty-four distinct meanings of dharma, incorporating the duties associated with different social classes and castes.²⁴

Conclusion

Dhamma and Morality. By reading the all religion of the world, Ambedkar realized that the morality is not the essential part of any institutionalized religion of the world Whereas according to him, morality has prominent place in Buddhism. In Buddhism morality is the fundamental component without which Dhamma can not survive. In Ambedkar's words morality is the inseparable part of Dhamma and can be called morality is Dhamma and Dhamma is morality. Morality is the synonym of Dhamma without which it does not have any significance. Ambedkar put the morality parallel to the god in Dhamma even Dhamma has no place for god in Buddhism. Dhamma, according to Ambedkar, does not inscribe prayers, pilgrimages, rituals, ceremonies, or sacrifices. It has morality, arising from the direct necessity for humans to love each other, as its governing principle and without it Dhamma is nonexistent. Morality does not entail God's sanction for it is not for the appeasement of God. It is for his own good that man has to love man.²⁵

For Ambedkar, mere Morality is not Enough, he wanted it to be sacrosanct. In words of Ambedkar, morality constitutes the essence of religion, and it must be both sacred and universal. In every society, whether primitive or advanced, certain beliefs are categorized as either sacred or profane. Sacred beliefs, termed as "pavitra," are considered inviolable and holy, and any challenge to them is taboo. To violate these sacred beliefs is considered sacrilegious.²⁶

On the contrary, beliefs classified as profane (apavitra), signifying the unholy, may be subjected to dishonor. Ambedkar asserts that morality should be sanctified to safeguard the vulnerable and restrain the dominant. In ancient times, this moral framework was initially enforced by the dominant, namely the strongest members of society.²⁷ One thing should be borne in mind in this regard that as of now, no religion can have developed the universal concept of morality in the world. All moralities are territorial moralities.

Ambedkar contends that religion plays a pivotal role in societal governance, and its absence leads to uncertainty. He presents three alternatives for societal governance, from which individuals must select one. Firstly, a society may opt not to adhere to any Dhamma (moral law), inevitably resulting in chaos and anarchy. Secondly, society may choose to be governed by a political state, potentially leading to dictatorship and the loss of personal liberty. Thirdly, in such a scenario, Dhamma could serve as a mechanism for moral governance, enabling magistrates to maintain law and order within society. Only under the third alternative, within a democratic framework, can genuine liberty endure. Those aspiring to lead lives of liberty must, therefore, endorse the principles of Dhamma.²⁸

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