

Critique of Conversion – Conversion as Critique: M. K. Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar and the Prerogative of Interpretation

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Abstract

Although the notion of ‘conversion’ strongly refers to a Christian origin and meaning, conversion came to generally signify a process, in which individuals (or groups) adopt a particular religion, or abandon the adherence to one religion (or religious denomination) and affiliate with another. This article takes up debates regarding conversion in colonial and early post-colonial India. In the first half of the 20th century and in particular in the context of both the nationalist movement and the self-assertion of Dalits and their struggle for liberation, conversion became a highly contentious topic in the Indian political arena. The article discusses the positions of two protagonists of the conversion debate, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Bhimrao Ambedkar – the first voicing serious doubts with respect to conversion, while the second not only supported conversion, but, being himself a Mahar and belonging to an “untouchable” jati, led a mass movement of conversion to Navayana-Buddhism he himself had designed. To provide the intellectual background necessary to understand Gandhi’s and Ambedkar’s contrasting positions on conversion the article focuses on their concepts of religion, human sociality, equality and morality.

Introduction

The story of the experience of Paul on the road to Damascus has often been taken as prototype of ‘conversion’. Paul himself did not refer to this incident as conversion, however the descriptions and references in various books of the New Testament (Galatians, Philippians, Ephesians, Acts) suggest that Jesus Christ’s revelation to Paul “converted” the latter in the sense that it changed his commitment, values and identification. It “radically reversed the scale of his values and made his vision of all things utterly new” (Uwineza 2011: 2).¹

¹ Quoted by Marcel Uwineza from Marrow, S. B. 1986. Paul. His Letters and His Theology: An Introduction to Paul’s Epistles. New York: Paulist Press, p. 30. Marrow’s book was not available.

Paul's experience has several important implications vis-à-vis the significance and understanding of conversion as a Christian phenomenon: Firstly, getting converted was not the decision of Paul (the convert). Revelation, leading to conversion, was alone god's doing, a gift of the divine.² Secondly, with his universalistic message of "brotherhood of love" and "equality of all", Christ approaches Paul individually, as an individual person.³ Thirdly, conversion goes along with extreme emotional upheavals, leading to a complete change of life.⁴ Fourthly, conversion in its original (Pauline) meaning indicates the shift from paganism to Christianity. Fifthly, the revelation of Christ to Paul bears fruits insofar as it implies to proclaim the "good news" of Jesus to the Gentiles (Galatians 1). Paul's conversion goes along with an explicit missionary mandate: with the instruction to bring the Christian message to the world.

Regardless of its original Christian context and meaning, the notion of conversion came to generally signify a process, in which individuals (or groups) adopt a particular religion, or abandon the adherence to one religion (or religious denomination) and affiliate with another. Accordingly, conversions as widespread religio-historical phenomena have their particular reasons, histories, contexts and consequences, which may diverge from the Christian framework and therefore need to be meticulously explored. This contribution will take up *debates* regarding conversion in colonial and post-colonial India. We concentrate on two protagonists of the conversion debate, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Bhimrao Ambedkar – the first voicing serious doubts with respect to conversion, while the second not only supported conversion, but, being himself a Mahar and belonging to an "untouchable" *jati*, led a mass movement of conversion to Navayana-Buddhism he himself had designed.

In the following we start by briefly discussing the notion of religion and the question of the applicability of the idea of religious conversion in the historical contexts of multi-religious Indian life-worlds. In a next step we introduce Gandhi and Ambedkar, who both were central political players, but also socio-political thinkers with an ethical message. By focusing in particular on their

² "It is by grace that you have been saved, through faith; not by anything of your own, but by a gift of God: not by anything that you have done, so that nobody can claim the credit" (Ephesians 2: 8). <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+2:8-9&version=NIV>; accessed 17.02.2018.

³ See Sharma, S. 2015: 458. Sharma refers to Louis Dumont, who argues in his 'Essay on Individualism' that Christianity is seen to signify for the first time the emergence and fusion in relation to God of "absolute individualism and absolute universalism".

⁴ For William James conversions are "striking instantaneous instances of which Saint Paul's is the most eminent, and in which, often amid tremendous emotional excitement or perturbation of the senses, a complete division is established in the twinkling of an eye between the old life and the new" (James 1985: 217).

concepts of religion, we intend to give the background necessary to understand their contrasting positions on conversion. The last part will be dedicated to the presentation and discussion of their views, which is – in the case of Ambedkar – linked with the practice of conversion.

‘Religion’ and ‘Conversion’ in India – A Few Conceptual Reflections

It seems difficult to talk about conversion in the strict sense of the term with regard to India. The praxis of conversion presupposes the existence of clearly structured and distinguishable religions, the involvement of religions with missionary activities being an additional factor. Both conditions were not always given in India.

In western, Christian-influenced parlance and understanding ‘religion’ designates systems of belief with clear-cut boundaries. Paradigmatic are the Abrahamic or ‘Semitic’ religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These religions can be traced back to a founding figure (a prophet), they have a holy book, a uniform doctrine of faith, they are monotheistic, and followers congregate as community. Although Hinduism is classified as one of the ‘world religions’ and religion became a census category in British India, a number of scholars argue that Hinduism cannot be easily subsumed under the notion of ‘religion’: What has been essentialized as ‘Hinduism’ by the British colonizers but also by Brahmanic intellectual elites in the 19th century is a set of spiritual and ritual traditions, differentiated regarding divinities, ritual practices and teachings, some of which had taken the form of *sampradayas*, often translated as ‘sects’;⁵ the boundaries between such ‘denominations’, but also the boundaries to other traditions are often blurred.

Throughout its history India was characterized by an enormous plurality of religious and philosophical traditions and perspectives with fluid boundaries, and people often acknowledged more than one position, engaging in multiple religious activities across the different strands. They even shared sacred spaces, worshipped the same divinity or saint under different names or developed other forms of religious inclusivism respectively hybridity.⁶ All this did not exclude religious controversies and disputes, but assertion of one’s own convictions was in the majority of cases not connected with attempts to suppress or even annihilate other religious forms. In such situations where religious orientation was inherently flexible it did not make sense to speak about ‘conversion’

⁵ For this debate see e.g. Stietenron 1989, Shulman 1989, and many later authors.

⁶ Convincing examples of multiple religious orientations and blurred religious boundaries are provided by the studies of Dominique-Sila Khan 1997, Shail Mayaram 1999, and Peter Gottschalk 2000 on Hindu-Muslim interaction.

in the strict sense of the term. Shail Mayaram, for example, uses the term in a more casual, informal way, indicating the possibility of movement between religious traditions at a time and in an environment without bounded religious universes:

“Conversion did not mean a conception of irretrievable entry / exit with respect to a fixed religious universe. Rather there was a constant movement back and forth across sects and also possibilities of multiple affiliation. ... Identities were thus dynamic, subject to making and unmaking as they were renegotiated, re-assembled and drew upon several intersecting ethnic pluralities” (Mayaram 1999: 385).

Colonial classification of Hinduism as a bounded religious universe has greatly changed the place and the relations of the traditions assembled under this term as well as the religious world and self-perception of the practitioners.⁷ Increasingly conceived as a distinct entity, Hinduism was meant to exist alongside Sikhism, Jainism and Buddhism, and the belief systems of non-Indian origin, Zoroastrianism, Islam and Christianity. While the flexibility in religious orientation and the practices of multiplying or changing religious allegiances were (and still are) often in place on the level of everyday interaction, the political rationale demanded for clear categorization. Governing the (colonial and national) subject requires demographic evidence of religious and social affiliation, of majority and minority status. As a consequence, *religion* and *caste*⁸ have become important markers of identity and, increasingly, key drivers for identity politics. In this religio-political environment many of those who were at the lower end of the caste hierarchy (the so called ‘Untouchables’) and experienced Hindu religion as root cause of social discrimination and inequality, considered a change of religious affiliation to a non-Hinduist religion as realistic option when striving for social recognition.⁹

⁷ In contemporary India religion has been politically charged and instrumentalized. Communalistic rhetoric as well as activities of groups following the Hindu-nationalist ideology and willing to resort to violence have a strong media presence, dominate the political discourse in India and shape the perception of the country in the national and international public.

⁸ In pre-British India caste was a fluid social category with often fuzzy boundaries and high regional variability. Under British colonial rule caste became a census category. Castes were ranked on a pan-Indian hierarchical scale, headed by the Brahmins (see Cohn 1987; Dirks 1992 and 2001).

⁹ For scenarios and motivations of conversion of Dalits to Christianity see e.g. Oddie 2015, Robinson 2015, Oommen 2015. In earlier times, into the 19th century, several varieties of *bhakti* had provided spaces in which also members of the lower castes could experience basic forms of recognition as equal human beings (Fuchs 1999 and forthcoming b).

Under political conditions where religious boundaries, identities and demographics gain strategic relevance, conversion acquires a completely new meaning and importance. Gauri Viswanathan describes the social eruption caused by conversion as follows:

“Conversion is arguably one of the most unsettling political events in the life of a society. This is irrespective of whether conversion involves a single individual or an entire community, whether it is forced or voluntary, or whether it is the result of proselytization or inner spiritual illumination. Not only does conversion alter the demographic equation within a society and produce numerical imbalances, but it also challenges an established community’s assent to religious doctrines and practices. With the departure of members from the fold, the cohesion of a community is under threat ...” (Vishwanathan 1998: xi).

In the first half of the 20th century and in particular in the context of the nationalist movement and the self-assertion of Dalits and their struggle for liberation, conversion became a highly contentious topic in the political arena in India. Two political key figures and influential leaders of those days, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Bhimrao Ambedkar, had strong, but contrary views regarding the role and meaning of religion as well as the idea and practice of conversion. Let us now consider these views, which gained prominence in the public discourse of the time.

M. K. Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar, and the Significance of Religion

M. K. Gandhi (1869–1948) started his career as a practicing lawyer in South Africa after his graduation in London. The time in South Africa (more than 20 years) was formative for his personal development: having experienced humiliating treatment as a non-white person himself, he engaged in anti-discrimination politics and evolved into a civil rights activist and self-conscious political leader; he developed *satyagraha*, the idea and method of non-violent resistance, which he would use during the Indian struggle for independence to mobilize the masses.

Back in India (since 1915), Gandhi travelled the country in order to learn about Indian realities, about the socio-religious diversity, the political situation, but first and foremost about the everyday life of the people in their rural or urban environments. Only years later he started to actively intervene in politics on a broad base. With public actions like the non-cooperation movement in 1920, the civil disobedience campaign initiated with the salt march to Dandi in 1930, and the Quit India movement in 1942 he successfully challenged the colonial power. As key word and slogan for the Indian independence movement

Gandhi adopted the term *swaraj*, a translation of ‘home rule’ and already used in the Irish freedom struggle against the British. For Gandhi however, *swaraj* did not only indicate the demand for political liberation, but also for economic, intellectual and spiritual emancipation (see also below: *swadeshi*). This brings us to the core of Gandhi’s work and message. His campaigns, strategies and methods were inspired by ethical convictions, by a philosophy of a good and moral life (as individual, but also as group, community, or nation), which was grounded in a critical stance regarding social imbalances and modern civilizational developments. Gandhi was a social reformer, envisioned an alternative modernity and was engaged in a life-long struggle for self-discipline and truth.

“The concept of Truth (*Satya*) is fundamental to the thought of Gandhi”, states Glyn Richards (1991: 1), and Gandhi himself subtitled his autobiography ‘The story of my experiments with Truth’. When once asked “what is truth”, Gandhi replied: Truth is “what the voice within tells you” (Ibid.: 9). Scholars agree that with his answer Gandhi does not refer to a self-authenticating subjective principle, an individual conscience detached from all reference to a particular life-world; rather he recognizes that the way a person thinks and acts is deeply influenced by religious and ethical concepts embedded in the respective environment. Truth, for Gandhi, therefore can only be aspired and sought-for within the context of a particular culture and way of life. Moreover, it is beyond possibility to reach absolute truth; human beings can only try to get closer to it.¹⁰ The same applies to an individual’s relation to God, because “Truth is God”. Truth seems for Gandhi the “most correct and most fully significant term that could be used for God” (Ibid.: 2), and God is perceived as “unseen power pervading all things”. The concept of an impersonal Absolute. Truth, and God, can be only contextually approached.

Understanding God as an appellation for Truth had consequences for Gandhi’s perception of *religion*. In the same way as (absolute) Truth is only approachable through relative truth, (perfect) Religion is perceivable only through historical religions:

“The one, true and perfect Religion Gandhi refers to is beyond predication and not capable of being realized within finite existence. No particular religion can ever embody the perfection of Religion or lay claim to a monopoly of Truth. Yet particular religions, it might be said, are necessary to convey the meaning of Religion in the same way as particular truths are necessary to convey the meaning

¹⁰ Certain practices laid down in Hinduist traditions Gandhi regarded as “paths” of getting closer to Truth: *bhakti* – personal devotion; *yoga* – disciplined action; *ahimsa* – non-violence.

of Truth. But as particular truths do not embody the fullness of Truth so particular religions do not embody the fullness of Religion” (Richards 1991: 17–18).

Gandhi believes that all existing religions possess some truth, but at the same time they are also erroneous to some extent. All religions – though imperfect – are different ways to the same goal; and herewith Gandhi’s approach can be compared with that of Hindu reformer Vivekananda, who is convinced that the different viewpoints of historical religions manifest different facets of Truth. Consequently, all religions have legitimacy and deserve respect and it is an essential part of a person’s freedom to live socio-cultural and religious difference (see Dharampal-Frick 2015: 268). Gandhi’s take on conversion is very much influenced by this attitude, as we will discuss below.

B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) was born into the (‘untouchable’) Mahar community, but he later became one of India’s most prominent leaders and statesmen during the struggle for independence and the first decade of post-colonial India. Ambedkar was highly educated; he received two doctoral degrees in economics from prestigious universities in New York and London and he was widely read in the Humanities, Social Sciences, and in cultural and political history. Besides being a scholar, lawyer, publicist and statesman, he was a political activist and leader and the founder of a major religious movement.

Ambedkar had strong convictions concerning the condition and the future perspectives of society, the political development of India, and the struggle for Indian independence. In all his actions and decisions he was spurred on by the desire to achieve equality *and* social recognition for every member of society and to overcome segregation within Indian society. The main issue and driving force behind his efforts was, of course, the hope for emancipation and full recognition of the people called Untouchables, many of whom today prefer the designation ‘Dalits’ (‘broken people’). Ambedkar succeeded in creating self-awareness and a sense of self-assertion among large sections of Dalits as well as in mobilizing them to fight against the oppressive caste system and for recognition and respect. In 1927 he led spectacular actions like the burning of the *Manusmriti*, and protest marches demanding temple entrance for Dalits and equal use of water sources. Politically he (unsuccessfully) fought for separate constituencies of Dalits, in the context of which he clashed with Gandhi (see below with regard to the ‘Poona pact’ of 1932).

The agenda of thorough social reconstruction led Ambedkar, towards the end of his life, to concentrate all his energy on two very different but at the same time closely related endeavours, the drafting of the Indian Constitution (adopted on 26 Nov. 1949; becoming law on 26 Jan. 1950), to which he prominently contributed as the chairman of the drafting committee, and his initiative

to revive a universalist religion of Indian parentage, i.e. Buddhism. Both seemingly very different enterprises were in Ambedkar's views meant to essentially support each other: the Constitution would provide the legal framework of (social) cohabitation, while Buddhism would teach the social values, actions and beliefs that lie at the heart of human relationships, in order to create a good life and generate concepts of the common good.

Ambedkar's take on religion is inherently linked to his ethical, moral and social outlook.¹¹ The way he conceived of the individual in relation to society frames his ideas of religion and possible futures. For Ambedkar it is the mode of human coexistence, of sociality, that is decisive for whether an individual can live a decent life in dignity and develop her/his capabilities, or has to suffer non-recognition and insecurity in many areas of life. It is also the mode of coexistence that determines the ability of a society to function and thrive, securing well-being for all its members. Ambedkar's ideal society has first and foremost to be *just* – and justice in his view encompasses ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity (Ambedkar 1987: 25). This has implications also for his view on democracy (Linkenbach forthcoming). Though having an eye on all dimensions of a just society, it is fraternity that for Ambedkar stands at the heart of his vision. An integrated, cohesive society is based on social bonds, commonalities, common activities, solidarity and communication. This stands in clear opposition to a religious outlook that supports the segregated caste society which fosters an 'anti-social spirit' and precludes fellow-feeling, emotional imagination, and sympathy especially with the deserving and the sufferer.

While Ambedkar's deep humanist convictions, his ideas of equality, liberty as well as fellow-feeling were implied in his very concept of the human being and in what scholars today call the primary sociality of humans, he discovered the final grounding of his thought in Buddhism. Here he found the humanist values comprehensively expressed for the first time: in the concepts of *karuna* (translated by him as loving kindness) and *maitri* (which he translated as fellow feeling for all living beings), and in the messages Buddha gave to the world to overcome suffering and inequality, to change and reconstruct the world and to erect a moral order.

Ambedkar's concept of religion thus mirrors the opposition between a humanist and an anti-humanist order. He distinguishes between 'true' and untrue religions. In his view, religious ideals in general have a hold on mankind that secular ideas never have. What concerns him is the moral dimension of religions. It is not religion as such that is moral in his eyes, but only such religion

¹¹ For an extended discussion of Ambedkar's concepts of sociality and religion see Fuchs (forthcoming b).

that is true to what should be the centre of religion: true to universal “spiritual” (Ambedkar 1989a [1936]) or “moral” (Ambedkar 1992 [1957]) principles. Ambedkar opposes religions that are predominantly prescriptive, enforce “commands and prohibitions”, claiming eternal validity of their laws, and are not based on universalist ethical principles (Ambedkar 1989a [1936]).

At the same time he considers the idea of religion as an individual, private and “purely personal matter between man and God”, as one-sided, being based on aspects of religion that are “purely historical and not fundamental” (Ambedkar 1989b: 406, 409). Religion for Ambedkar is social in several respects. Like language it is “essential for social life[,] and the individual has to have it because without it he cannot participate in the life of society”; true religion is also social with regard to its main message, as it is emphasizing and even “universalizing” social values (Ibid.: 407, 409). In the context of debating conversion Ambedkar’s plainly states: “... religion exists not for the saving of souls but for the preservation of society and the welfare of the individual” (Ibid.: 420–421).

Gandhi’s and Ambedkar’s Views on Conversion: Significant Differences

If one looks at *M. K. Gandhi’s* various statements regarding conversion, it seems that they oscillate between approval and rejection. To kick off his discussion of Gandhi’s thoughts on conversion, Sudhir Chandra contrasts two different statements of the Mahatma: the one in which he says, “I am against conversion, whether it is known as *shuddhi* by Hindus, *tabligh* by Muselmans or proselytizing by Christians”, the other in which he declares, “It [religion] is a matter for every individual to decide for himself to which faith he will belong” (Chandra 2005: 184). These statements, obviously, were made in different contexts.

Under the premise that none of the existing (historical) religions embodies absolute but only relative truth, no religion can claim to be better than the others. All religions are legitimate, though imperfect ways to God and to Truth. Why then should a person change religion – especially given the fact that religion is part of the cultural life-world in which this person is rooted? Moreover, when being bothered by certain shortcomings of one’s religion, instead of converting, the follower should try to reform the religious system. Concerning his own religion – Hinduism – Gandhi is ready to admit serious weaknesses, and he refers in this context to untouchability, which he considers an ethical aberration. Instead of leaving Hinduism because of this defect, he suggests that the critical follower should “serve it by purging it of its defects” (from ‘The Gospel of Swadeshi’, quoted in Chandra 2005: 189).

However, there seems to be a moment when Gandhi nevertheless accepts conversion: this is when a person deep in his/her heart feels, when the “inner

voice” tells him or her, that changing religion would be the right thing to do. Conversion, Gandhi says, is “a heart-process known only to and by God”. *Only* in the case of deep conviction and as result of a truly autonomous decision conversion seems an understandable and righteous move in the eyes of Gandhi, but not if it is triggered by human agency (see Chandra 2005: 185–186).

Gandhi vehemently rejects conversion motivated by outside influences, and in this context Christian missionaries in particular were targeted; and this despite (or probably because of) the fact that he stood in continuous and intensive exchange but also dispute with them. Gandhi’s aversion against conversion is very much grounded in his experience with missionaries and their activities in colonial India. He saw Christian Missions indissolubly linked with colonial rule and foreign power, imperialistic exploitation and western materialism. Al-though Gandhi had to acknowledge Christianity as one path on the search for Truth and respected, even accepted, some Christian ethical ideals¹², he had strong reservations regarding the way Christianity and Christians performed in India. One of his arguments against proselytizing was that conversion damages the social fabric of a society, since it leads to cultural alienation and denationalization.

Even the thought of an indigenized version of a religion of non-Indic origin, as that of an Indian Christianity, went against Gandhi’s idea of *swadeshi*, a concept that was originally developed as an economic strategy against British rule in the 19th century in Bengal, and after 1918 adopted by Gandhi and also applied to the realms of politics and religion:

*“Swadeshi is that spirit in us which restricts us to the use and service of our immediate surroundings to the exclusion of the more remote. Thus, as for religion, in order to satisfy the requirements of the definition, I must restrict myself to my ancestral religion. That is, the use of my immediate religious surrounding. If I find it defective, I should serve it by purging it of its defects.”*¹³

The idea of religious *swadeshi* results in Hinduism taking on a double legitimation: as pan-Indian national religion it is shared by the majority of Indian people; and, as the most tolerant and inclusive religion it accepts other religions as equally valid paths to God, is ready to incorporate positive elements of

¹² *Ahimsa*, understood as soul-force, nonviolence, “reflects a great deal of the teaching of the New Testament on love and it is not really surprising that Jesus should be referred to as one who manifested ahimsa in its perfect form” (Richards 1991: 34). Gandhi admits that the Sermon on the Mount “competes almost on equal terms with the Bhagavad Gita for the domination of my heart” (quoted in Chandra 2005: 192).

¹³ See <https://www.mkgandhi.org/indiadreams/chap31.htm> (The Gospel of Swadeshi). Published as E-book: Gandhi, *India of my Dreams*; accessed 11/03/2018.

other religions, and does not engage in missionary activity. With that Gandhi brings Hinduism to a position of superiority and thus in the end undermines his own thoughts of equal paths to Religion and Truth.

To round off the topic of conversion in the thoughts and works of Gandhi, we have to address two further aspects: the issue of mass conversion, and Gandhi's understanding of conversion as persuasion. Both topics provide a bridge to our subsequent discussion of Ambedkar's approach to conversion.

Gandhi rigorously condemned so-called 'mass conversion' – regardless which religion the converts chose. The debate was triggered in 1935 by the conversion of a whole village predominantly of Harijans to Christianity.¹⁴ While Gandhi claimed to fully understand why a Harijan, experiencing untouchability, would want to change his religious affiliation as an individual and out of personal conviction, he strongly argued against conversion of a whole group or a village of Harijans. He basically denied most of the Harijans the capacity to understand the Christian message and "what change of religion can mean"; and in a debate with the Methodist missionary J. R. Mott he asked: "Would you, Dr. Mott, preach the gospel to a cow?" He continued: "Some of the untouchables are worse than cows in understanding. I mean they can no more distinguish between the relative merits of Islam and Hinduism and Christianity than a cow" (quoted in Chandra 2005: 201). Gandhi's outburst had apparently two reasons. Firstly, he reacted to a speech given by B. R. Ambedkar in October 1935, in which the latter announced to break with Hinduism¹⁵ and encouraged other Dalits to do the same. Secondly, accepting Dalits leaving the Hindu fold meant conceding that efforts to reform Hinduism from within had failed. Gandhi himself engaged genuinely in attempts to remove the excesses of untouchability (*not* caste as such) through influencing the mind-sets of the upper castes; but with his engagement he consciously denied Dalits to stand in for themselves and fight for their rights.

This leads us to the issue of conversion as persuasion, as change of mind and reform. Such an understanding of conversion predominates for example in the context of Gandhi's reflections on *ahimsa* (see Iyer 2000, chapter 8). For Gandhi the "votary of *ahimsa*", that is the person who decides to follow the path of non-violence and changes his/her moral and practical attitude accordingly, experiences a "second birth" or conversion. Such a person, standing for example up against political or economic injustice, will be able to attempt for

¹⁴ *Hari-jan* – 'persons of God' – the name Gandhi gave to the so-called Untouchables.

¹⁵ Ambedkar oscillates between considering 'Untouchables' as outside the Hindu fold, and excluded from many areas and practices, and seeing them as encompassed by Hinduism in its modern shape.

“peaceful conversion” of the adversary: “Ahimsa is intended to replace coercion by persuasion and to result in the conversion of a violent opponent” (Iyer 2000: 209). Conversion as persuasion is not meant to result from an appeal to reason, “but rather through *tapas* and self-suffering” (Ibid.: 333). Gandhi himself admitted that non-violent strategies, like fasting, exert moral pressure, and here one has at least to pose the question how far such strategies imply a certain element of coercion (see Richards 1991: 61).

This question is relevant in the context of Gandhi’s ambivalent relation to *B. R. Ambedkar*, which resulted from contrary views regarding how to eliminate untouchability, the question of the representation of Dalits, and conversion. In 1932 Gandhi undertook a fast unto death to cause Ambedkar to drop his demand for separate electorates for Dalits. Ambedkar comments that this fast placed him in a great and grave dilemma, that he was made the “villain of the piece” (Ambedkar 1989b: 341), as he had to decide whether Gandhi lived on or died. Naturally, Ambedkar stated, he responded to “the call of humanity” and saved Gandhi’s life by negotiating the ‘Poona Pact’, which satisfied Gandhi, and gave reserved seats to the Untouchables, instead of separate electorates. One may assume that experiences like this one confirmed Ambedkar in his conviction not to die as a Hindu – a decision he first voiced publicly, as mentioned, in 1935.

B. R. Ambedkar’s approach to conversion links theory and practice. He voiced strong support of “conversion to equality” and he headed the biggest ‘conversion’ movement, or movement to change one’s religious affiliation, in independent India. The new religion that he and his followers adopted at a ceremony on October 14, 1956 was Buddhism, more precisely, a particular form of Buddhism, sometimes called Navayana, that he himself had shaped with his book *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, which appeared posthumously in 1957. For all of those who participated in the ceremony, conversion from Hinduism indicated the exchange of the old for a new body; it was meant helping to achieve a “new life”, a “complete change of values of life” (Ambedkar 1989a [1936]: 78).

Why did Ambedkar consider such a tremendous shift being necessary? The answer lies in the way Hinduism treats those who as Untouchables are on the one hand considered part of the fold, but on the other hand and because of their subordinate position are excluded from many areas of life and regularly experience humiliation. He rhetorically asks:

“Does Hinduism recognize their worth as human beings? Does it stand for their equality? Does it extend to them the benefit of liberty? Does it at least help to forge the bond of fraternity between them and the Hindus? Does it teach the Hindus that the Untouchables are their kindred? ... Does it tell the Hindus to

love them, to respect them and to do them no wrong? In fine, does Hinduism universalize the value of life without distinction?” (Ambedkar 1989b: 412)

The definite answer to all the question would be ‘no’, and Ambedkar locates the reason for it in the traditional teachings of Hinduism: “That Hinduism is inconsistent with the self-respect and honour of the Untouchables is the strongest ground which justifies the conversion of the Untouchables to another and nobler faith” (Ibid.: 412). It goes without saying that the new religion had to be carefully chosen, as it must allow to end the social isolation, remove the inferiority complex and raise the general status of those so far called ‘Untouchables’ (Ibid.: 412ff).

For Ambedkar these fundamental requirements were to be fulfilled by Buddhism.¹⁶ According to his interpretation, *dhamma*, the teachings of the Buddha, emphasizes morality and thus represent what is, or should be, true in religion. With its focus on morality, *dhamma* stands in opposition to (the other) religions with their fixation on God: “Morality is Dhamma and Dhamma is Morality. In other words, in Dhamma morality takes the place of God although there is no God in Dhamma” (Ambedkar 1992 [1957]: 322). It is the relationship between humans on which morality has to centre: “Morality in Dhamma arises from the direct necessity for man to love man. It does not require the sanction of God. It is not to please God that man has to be moral. It is for his own good that man has to love man” (Ibid.: 323). On the basis of morality human beings are free to establish kinship and form a community, to meet as fellow human beings and become part of a brotherhood; in this way they can gain self-respect and can start seeing themselves as no longer degraded, worthless outcastes (Ambedkar 1989b: 413ff).

Ambedkar’s renderings of Buddha’s insights and teachings look like a very modern concept of religion, a post-religious religion (Fuchs 2001: 261). Ambedkar dismisses God, as well as religion in a conventional sense of the term. But what he emphatically emphasizes is that morality, to be socially accepted and valid, has to be made or regarded as not just universal but *sacred*.

As far as conversion is concerned, Ambedkar was adamant that the decision to convert was an active choice, and search, of each Dalit and therefore absolutely ‘genuine’. The new religion emphasizes community, mutual recognition and respect as values, and signals a social awakening of a previously oppressed group. That is why it seems appropriate that the actual conversion ceremony could be held as a group event. Religion in the sense of *dhamma* is to help human

¹⁶ For a discussion of Ambedkar’s Buddhism see Fuchs 2001. Ambedkar is quite critical of the fact that conversion to Christianity did not raise the status of Untouchables, but perpetuates humiliating practices and status inequalities even among Christians.

beings to organize, and thus revolutionize, their mode of social co-existence: While the purpose of religion is to explain the origin of the world, “the purpose of Dhamma is to reconstruct the world” (Ambedkar 1992 [1957]: 322).

Concluding Remarks

Conversion as it is debated and assessed by both M. K. Gandhi und B. R. Ambedkar is strongly connected with their respective ideas and concepts of religion, human sociality, equality and morality.

At the heart of *Ambedkar's* endeavour lies a *social project* in which pre-existing, anthropologically given, transcendently grounded universalist values, grasped with the concepts of fellow-feeling and solidarity between equals, are considered the glue of sociality and human interaction. This social project can only be realized by sacralising it through a religion supporting these values. With his re-interpretation of Buddhism Ambedkar designs a religion, which is not about the relationship between humans and God but about the relationships between human beings. This post-religious religion has a paradoxical status, differing from that of all other religions. The core of Navayana Buddhism (or Ambedkarite Buddhism) is *karuna* and *maitri* – mutual love and brotherhood.

Ambedkar does not tolerate any form of social hierarchy, inequality, oppression and degradation of any member of society, and he also does not accept or want to be part of a religion that inherently allows such discriminatory ideas and practices. Living in a context where the ancestral religion sanctions social discrimination against certain groups, casting away such a religion seems for him a precondition for social emancipation; and he feels urged to convince others to do the same and establish allegiance with a universalist religion based on recognition and respect for all human beings.

Gandhi's core project is an *individualist* one: searching for and living according to Truth (or God). It is a religious project that requires a strong ethical stance and moral commitment of the individual, namely recognizing and lovingly accepting all human beings regardless of their status in social life. Gandhi's project at the same time has a *social impact* in a twofold sense: it has a social message and it demands devotion to this message from everybody, since for him a cohesive society can only be built if all its members follow the same path – and it is Gandhi who claims to show the path, expressed by his repeated statement that “my life is my message”.

In difference to Ambedkar, Gandhi's idea of justice and sociality does not radically question hierarchical social (inter)dependencies, but considers them necessary for the functioning of society. As long as wealth serves public wel-

fare and people on all levels of society get recognition and respect in their respective positions and occupations, as long as they get the chances to develop themselves (to a certain degree) social stability is guaranteed. Implicit in Gandhi's approach is the conviction that social positions in society are somehow congruent with people's social and intellectual capacities and therefore everybody has the place in society, which he or she deserves and should accept.

The religious teachings of Hinduism are congruent with the sociocultural life-world of the followers. Therefore Gandhi demands that one should stick to one's ancestral religion as long as it does not hinder personal growth and reform.¹⁷ Gandhi deeply believes in inner reform and in the capacity of Hinduism to incorporate new ideas, which improve religious and social life.¹⁸ It is because of this that he understands Hinduism as a non-sectarian and inclusive religion, which on the one hand provides a historical path to Truth like all the other religions, but on the other hand seems to deserve a superior position.¹⁹

The contrary views of Ambedkar and Gandhi concerning the question of conversion, or of adopting a new religion, reflect their extremely different experiences with Hindu traditions and practices and the differences of their social positionalities within or, in Ambedkar's case, rather vis-à-vis the Hindu fold. Both critically evaluated the colonial impact, as well as the Hindu traditions. While Gandhi, in view of the humiliating practices of untouchability, which he saw as more recent negative excesses of an otherwise benign religion, criticised and demanded to reform Hinduism, Ambedkar targeted Hinduism in its entirety as a religious system built on systematic oppression and disregard of large groups of people. Given this background, Gandhi took a critical attitude towards conversion (to a non-Hindu belief system), while Ambedkar activated conversion as an act of critique, and as a signal of hope for a future of equal dignity.

¹⁷ "I prefer to retain the label of my forefathers so long as it does not cramp my growth and does not debar me from assimilating all that is good anywhere else" (Young India, 02 September 1926, p. 308).

¹⁸ "Not being an exclusive religion, it enables the followers of that faith not merely to respect all the other religions, but it enables them to admire and assimilate whatever may be good in the other faiths" (Young India, 20 October 1927).

¹⁹ Kumkum Sangari (forthcoming) claims that in his later years (1940s) Gandhi moved from a synthetic Hinduism to a discourse of multiple belonging. He started to claim to be everything – Hindu, Muslim, Christian –, but this discourse rested firmly on an I-claim and an ethical universalism grounded in the hope for a religiously pluralist nation.

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