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Ambedkar, Marx and the Buddhist Question

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This essay tries to frame one question, which at its most abbreviated can be posed thus: why does Ambedkar convert to Buddhism? Given Ambedkar's militant secularism, to ask this question is also to ask: what assumption of responsibility does that conversion enable which exceeds secular responsibility? This essay tracks how Ambedkar's religion questions both the liberal concept of minority, and the dissolution of the minor that is staged in Marx's critique simultaneously of religion and secularism. Buddhism becomes in the process a religion of the minor.

Keywords: Ambedkar; Marx; Navayana Buddhism; conversion; civil religion; principle; secularism; civil society; political society; Arendt

Around March 1956, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar completes the manuscript, published posthumously, of *The Buddha and His Dhamma*.¹ On 14 October, he converts to Buddhism. And on 2 December, just four days before he dies, he completes the manuscript of the famous short piece, 'Buddha or Marx', and gives it for typing up.

In this essay, I shall try to frame one question, which at its most abbreviated can perhaps be posed thus: why does Ambedkar convert to Navayana Buddhism? I say 'frame' because I will not be able to answer the question. But perhaps framing, reframing and even unframing the question is itself a most necessary task.

We could start by reminding ourselves how and why this question becomes a question. As Talal Asad has suggested, 'religious conversion needs explaining in a way that secular conversion to modern ways of being does not'.² That need and even demand for explanation becomes all the more powerful in the case of Ambedkar, whose radical secularism is exemplified both in his efforts in earlier years to institutionalise a liberal civil society and public sphere through the Indian Constitution, and in the fact that he converts without disavowing his secularism.

Moreover the demand (and here I might find myself in disagreement with Asad) is not an ethnocentrism or Eurocentrism; it is not the privileging of some exclusively European considerations of secularity. As a young Marx says right at the beginning of the 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right', 'the critique of religion is the prerequisite of all critique'.³ And such criticism of religion has often been especially empowering for marginalised groups. For example, it is precisely by drawing on secular categories that the

I thank Laura Brueck, Aishwary Kumar, Udaya Kumar, Gyanendra Pandey and Simona Sawhney for discussions and comments that have helped frame this essay. I also thank Anupama Rao and an anonymous reviewer for the detailed and thoughtful comments they provided as reviewers for *South Asia*.

¹ The full text of B.R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, is available online at http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealc/pritchett/00ambedkar/ambedkar_buddha/, accessed 6 Feb. 2015.

² Talal Asad, 'Comments on Conversion', in Peter van der Veer (ed.), *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 263.

³ Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'* (Joseph O'Malley and Annette Jolin, trans. and ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 131.

very category Dalit has been constituted; that upper castes have been held responsible for their violence against Dalits; and that Dalits have simultaneously assumed *and* universalised the responsibility of struggling against that violence. So when somebody—especially an already secular being—converts to a public religion, this can seem an abdication of the responsibility to question injustice.

And yet, that demand for explanation is turned upon itself here, for Ambedkar converts to Navayana Buddhism precisely as an act of the greatest responsibility. Here, there is not only a criticism of religion (most of all, Hinduism, but also prior traditions of Buddhism), but also of secularism, and that criticism is articulated moreover as a religion.

I

So, a first framing: when we ask ‘why does Ambedkar convert to Navayana Buddhism’, we are asking how does his conversion involve a responsibility greater than that which he already exercises as a secular being? As that reframing suggests, I ask the question ‘why’ only on a very limited register. I am not for example concerned here with Ambedkar’s conscious or unconscious intentions, with the social context of the conversion, or with the Dalit and lower-caste religions and conversions that precede his conversion and provide its genealogy. While attention to all these matters is absolutely essential, here I limit myself to the re-figuring of secularism involved in his conversion. This re-figuring, I would suggest, is at least as crucial to Ambedkar’s Buddhism as the critique of Hinduism that precedes and suffuses this Buddhism.

It is symptomatic of this greater responsibility that Ambedkar converts not only as an abstract individual, nor even as an individual Dalit, but also as a Dalit leader (or, in his early formulations, a Mahar leader), as one whose actions form a collective Dalit or Mahar identity. Thus in his May 1936 speech to the Bombay Presidency Mahar Conference, he says: ‘[J]ust as the boatman does not collect luggage unless he gets an idea of the number of passengers boarding the boat, so also is the case with me. Unless I get an idea as to how many persons are willing to leave the Hindu fold, I cannot start preparation for conversion’.⁴ He also insists there: ‘If at all you decide in favour of conversion, then you will have to promise me organized and en-masse conversion. If the decision is taken in favour of conversion, and the people start embracing any religion they like individually, I will not dabble in your conversion’.⁵

Ambedkar’s religion itself is social—this is why dhamma is both a religion and not quite a religion. *The Buddha and His Dhamma* notes that while dhamma is ‘analogous’ to ‘what European theologians call religion’, the latter is personal and ‘one must keep it to oneself. One must not let it play its part in public life’. In contrast to religion, he goes on, ‘Dhamma is social. It is fundamentally and essentially so.... [O]ne man, if he is alone, does not need Dhamma. But when there are two men living in relation to each other, they must find a place for Dhamma whether they like it or not. Neither can escape it’.⁶

And if I began by noting a distinctive concatenation of events in 1956, this was in order to indicate the two co-ordinates that frame the question here. First, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, published posthumously in 1957. As we know, Ambedkar worked feverishly and obsessively to complete the book. This intense textual engagement suggests, as Simona Sawhney has recently

⁴ B.R. Ambedkar, ‘What Path to Salvation’, speech delivered to the Bombay Presidency Mahar Conference, Bombay, 31 May 1936 [http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealc/pritchett/00ambedkar/txt_ambedkar_salvation.html, accessed 7 Sept. 2014]. I thank Laura Brueck for comments that stressed the importance of this social dimension of Ambedkar’s conversion.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Book IV, Part I, Section 2.

pointed out, that while Ambedkar's conversion is nothing if not deeply political, politicalness cannot here consist of the 'rational decision to achieve an external or prior end'.⁷

Ambedkar is of course aware of the 'material aspect' and even instrumental dimension of conversion. His May 1936 speech to the Bombay Presidency Mahar Conference describes this aspect as 'class struggle' and suggests that those who ignore it are 'stupid'; conversion will make Mahars part of the larger community and provide them with outside strength in case of a struggle. But this material or calculable aspect is for him itself framed by an incalculable aspect (and the incalculable cannot strictly speaking be an aspect)—the compulsion to respond in a consistent way (which is also to say rationally) to the challenges he faces as he questions the disempowerment and marginality of Dalits. This compulsion forces him to convert to Buddhism. Moreover, he does not convert to a pre-existing Buddhism, but to a Buddhism that he receives in the process of writing *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. If we are to get a sense of the late Ambedkar's politics, we must get a sense of his religion, this Buddhism that seizes him.

Second, to get a sense of this religion, we must attend to his engagement with Marx and Marxism. Ambedkar's most extended formulations on Marx occur in one very brief essay, 'Buddha or Karl Marx', which discerns a 'residue of fire' in Marx, and suggests that Buddha and Marx share a great deal. The essay reveals the stakes of this engagement for Ambedkar:

Society has been aiming to lay a new foundation [which] was summarised by the French Revolution in three words, Fraternity, Liberty and Equality. The French Revolution was welcomed because of this slogan. It failed to produce equality. We welcome the Russian Revolution because it aims to produce equality. But it cannot be too much emphasized that in producing equality society cannot afford to sacrifice fraternity or liberty. Equality will be of no value without fraternity or liberty. It seems that the three can coexist only if one follows the way of the Buddha. Communism can give one but not all.⁸

Both Marxism and his Buddhism work, in other words, towards the promise of a world organised by equality, liberty, and fraternity, with equality as the key term. And Marxism is a particularly intense moment of the striving to keep that promise, even the most intense moment he is familiar with.⁹

But Ambedkar's most sustained engagements with Marx do not occur when he explicitly reads the latter. They occur rather where Marx's and his responsibilities traverse the same terrain. Such a traversal marks especially Ambedkar's thinking of the minor—the figure who is less than equal, but claims equality. Ambedkar's thinking of the minor re-orient's Marx's simultaneous critique, articulated most forcefully in 'On the Jewish Question', of religion and secularism.¹⁰ That re-orientation occurs in two ways, which are not so much different paths as the flip side of each other.

⁷ Simona Sawhney, 'Ambedkar: The Inheritance of the Buddha', paper presented at the Annual South Asia Conference, Madison, 13 Oct. 2012. For an incisive interrogation of the scholarship that has read Ambedkar's conversion instrumentally, see Gauri Viswanathan, 'Religious Conversion and the Politics of Dissent', in Peter van der Veer (ed.), *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity* (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 89–114.

⁸ B.R. Ambedkar, 'Buddha or Karl Marx', in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches, Vol. 3* (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1987), p. 462, also available online [<http://www.ambedkar.org/ambcd/20.Buddha%20or%20Karl%20Marx.htm>], accessed 7 Sept. 2014].

⁹ As Gail Omvedt notes, 'in seeing the Dhamma as a solution to exploitation, he was asking Marxist questions' and providing 'Buddhist answers'. See Gail Omvedt, *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste* (New Delhi: Sage, 2003), pp. 1, 3.

¹⁰ 'On the Jewish Question', in *Karl Marx, Selected Writings*, David McLellan (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 2000), pp. 46–70.

Gyanendra Pandey and Anupama Rao amongst others have eloquently explored one of these ways. Rao writes how 'a new political collectivity was constituted by resignifying the Dalit's negative identity within the caste structure into positive political value'.¹¹ As her writing suggests, the concept of minority that organises the figure of the Dalit is quite different from that which Marx develops, since for the Dalit 'individual freedom was contingent on the emancipation of the community, rather than separation from it', or the dissolution of the minor that Marx envisioned.¹² Here, the Dalit as minority is constituted by a claim to equality that proceeds by secularising religion, or more precisely, by secularising and exploding caste. Both through the Constitution and through political struggles to demand that the state enforce Dalit rights, Ambedkar seeks to shore up the rights of this Dalit minority.

My concern in this essay is with the closely-related concept that Ambedkar intensifies by converting to Navayana Buddhism—that of the minor. If the minority is conceived in terms of measure, then the minor is conceived in terms of immeasure. The relationship between these two concepts—minority and minor—is excessive, rather than oppositional. To put it in Udaya Kumar's terms, even as the vocabulary of minority invokes measure and quantity, it 'exceeds them and turns them into signs of an intensive relationship. At the same time, the vocabulary of intensities has a relationship to what it rubs against, the world of measures and units'. Not only is 'the language of measure...challenged and affected by that of immeasure, but...immeasure nurses in its core a deep relationship to the impulse to measure'.¹³

One might add that what makes the pair 'minority-minor' so charged and destabilising, so unlike the pair 'majority-major' to which it could be opposed, is that the former is concerned constitutively with claiming equality as a minor. And since equality is not a transparent term, this claim involves not only thinking about what equality 'is', but also nurturing the life of both self and 'other' (whereas the pair 'majority-major' seeks to extinguish or subordinate the life of the other).

II

One way then of reframing the question could be: why in Ambedkar's writing must the minority of that radically secular figure, the Dalit, be supplemented by this radical religion of the minor, Navayana Buddhism?¹⁴ What is the universal equality that this religion offers, which the French and Russian revolutions have failed to offer?¹⁵

¹¹ Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 2. Gyanendra Pandey points out succinctly the sense in which the term Dalit signifies a negative identity: unlike Muslims, Sikhs or Christians, he notes, Dalits 'gained their distinctiveness—at least until they were constituted into a legally recognised minority—precisely from the fact of their untouchability, that is, the discrimination they suffered at the hands of Hindu society'. See Gyanendra Pandey, 'The Time of the Dalit Conversion', in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 41, no. 18 (6 May 2006), p. 1781.

¹² Rao, *The Caste Question*, p. 23.

¹³ Personal communication from Udaya Kumar, 10 Jan. 2015.

¹⁴ My concern here is thus not so much the 'phenomenology of faith' involved in Navayana Buddhism, as the related question of the work this faith does in excess of conventional secularism. For a fascinating, if all-too-brief reading of this 'phenomenology', see Debjani Ganguly, 'Buddha, Bhakti and Superstition: A Post-Secular Reading of Dalit Conversion', in *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 7, no. 1 (2004), pp. 49–62.

¹⁵ That Ambedkar's conversion is centrally about equality is forcefully recognised by Gauri Viswanathan, whose title for her chapter on Ambedkar is 'Conversion to Equality'. See Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, Belief* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998). Viswanathan suggests that Ambedkar's conversion 'produced a critique of secular differentiation as an ideology consistent with, rather than an alternative to, a social philosophy based on hierarchy' (p. 215). My essay elaborates on this theme of equality that Viswanathan's essay broaches.

Ambedkar's famous, never-delivered 1936 speech to the Jat Pat Todak Mandal, where he announces his desire to abandon Hinduism, already intimates what he sees as crucial to religion. There, condemning Hinduism as a 'religion of rules', he distinguishes between principles and rules:

Rules are practical; they are habitual ways of doing things according to prescription. But principles are intellectual; they are useful methods of judging things. Rules seek to tell an agent just what course of action to pursue. Principles do not prescribe a specific course of action. Rules, like cooking recipes, do tell just what to do and how to do it. A principle, such as that of justice, supplies a main head[ing] by reference to which he is to consider the bearings of his desires and purposes, it guides him in his thinking by suggesting to him the important consideration which he should bear in mind. This difference between rules and principles makes the acts done in pursuit of them different in quality and in content. Doing what is said to be good by virtue of a rule and doing good in the light of a principle are two different things. The principle may be wrong but the act is conscious and responsible. The rule may be right but the act is mechanical. A religious act may not be a correct act but must at least be a responsible act. To permit of this responsibility, Religion must mainly *be* a matter of principles only. It cannot be a matter of rules. The moment it degenerates into rules it ceases to be Religion, as it kills responsibility which is the essence of a truly religious act.¹⁶

By insisting on responsibility as 'the essence of a truly religious act', this passage politicises religion in a very distinctive way. As the greatest responsibility, religion must now attend to questions of justice—of how best to accomplish 'liberty, equality, and fraternity'. Now religion becomes a profoundly public matter, rather than something limited to the private sphere.

Such responsibility requires moreover that religion be organised around the principle. Ambedkar's Buddha tells his followers that they 'were free to modify or even to abandon any of his teachings if it was found that at a given time and in given circumstances they do not apply. He wished His religion not to be encumbered with the dead wood of the past. He wanted that it should remain evergreen and serviceable at all times'.¹⁷ Even *ahimsa* is a matter of principle: the Buddha 'did not make Ahimsa a matter of Rule. He enunciated it as a matter of Principle or way of life'. 'A principle leaves you freedom to act. A rule does not. Rule either breaks you, or you break the rule'.¹⁸

In insisting on a religion of the principle, Ambedkar makes a distinctive departure from modern conceptions of religion, and indeed of the principle. At least since Kant's insistence on autonomy, the principle has been a cardinal mark of the Enlightenment: to be principled is to retain the sovereign power of reason, and therefore to be able to modify one's convictions, and act in keeping with new circumstances. As such, the principle both institutes a distinction between the secular and the religious, and works primarily within the realm of the secular—religion, it is presumed, cannot be principled or a matter of public reason; it must be private.

¹⁶ B.R. Ambedkar, 'Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi', in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches, Vol. 1* (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1979), p. 75, also available online [<http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/ambedkar/>], accessed 14 April 2015].

¹⁷ B.R. Ambedkar, 'Buddha and the Future of His Religion', in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part 2* (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 2003), p. 98, also available online [<http://www.clearviewproject.org/engagedbuddhistwriting/buddhaandthefutureof.html>], accessed 7 Sept. 2014].

¹⁸ Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Book IV, Part II, Section 3.

And in the relationship between the secular and the religious, we could say at the risk of some simplification, the principle has worked in one of two ways. First, in its most institutionally influential form, often at work in liberal or republican democracies, the distinction and relationship between the secular and the religious has been organised as one between the immanent and the transcendent.¹⁹ Here, the implicit criterion is the degree to which religion can support the principle. For example, in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant, after insisting that ‘for its own sake, morality does not need religion at all’ and can be based on ‘pure practical reason’, goes on to suggest that the ends of religion ‘cannot possibly be matters of indifference for reason’. And so, ‘morality leads ineluctably to religion’. This moral religion moreover has a proper name: ‘[O]f all the public religions which have ever existed, the Christian alone is moral’.²⁰ Indeed, at this long inaugural moment of the modern concept of religion, as of secularism, for both Kant and Hegel in different ways, Christianity is the highest and most universal religion both because it gives birth to and institutes secularism and the principle in the public sphere, and because it recognises its own realm as that of the transcendent and therefore relegates itself to the private sphere. Here, religion is not opposed to the principle; each operates in its own realm and is complementary to the other.

Second, the more radical secularisms—such as those associated with Rousseau, Feuerbach and Marx—question the distinction between the immanent and the transcendent. They treat religion as always immanent, and consequently regard the immanent–transcendent distinction as itself an ideological mystification. Ambedkar makes this spirit his inheritance. Thus he insists in the late 1930s: ‘In life and preservation of life therefore consists the religion of the savage. What is true of the religion of the savage is true of all religions wherever they are found for the simple reason that...life and the preservation of life constitute the essence of religion’.²¹ Religion is now the realm of ‘rules’. Relatedly, not all religions are equal—they are rather evaluated by the degree of divergence between these rules and those principles that autonomous beings might give themselves.

(In this spirit, Ambedkar also attacks the ‘science of comparative religion’: ‘The science of comparative religion has broken down the arrogant claims of all revealed religions that they alone are true and all others which are not the results of revelation are false... But it must be said to the discredit of that science that it has created the general impression that all religions are good and there is no use and purpose in discriminating [between] them’.²² Comparative religion is here anti-colonial in that it refuses the claims of every revealed religion. And yet, anti-colonial relativism is not adequate for Ambedkar; his search for another universalism requires him to abandon not only Eurocentrism but also relativism.)

But as he makes radical secularism his inheritance, he also infuses it with a distinctive religion—a religion of the principle, or in other words a secular and immanent religion. This religion is difficult to think. It strives after all for the impossible: on the one hand to secure autonomy and sovereignty; and on the other hand to surrender precisely autonomy and sovereignty.

¹⁹ The distinction between the immanent and the transcendent has been systematically explored (and even, one might say, affirmed) most recently in Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

²⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson, trans.) (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1960), pp. 5, 47.

²¹ B.R. Ambedkar, *Essays on Untouchables and Untouchability: Religious* [http://www.ambedkar.org/ambcd/25.%20Essay%20on%20Untouchables%20and%20Untouchability_Religious.htm], accessed 7 Sept. 2014].

²² *Ibid.*

So perhaps our question could also be framed this way: what is the religion of the principle that Ambedkar converts to?

What such a religion of the principle involves at its most elemental is indicated in Ambedkar's 1950 essay, 'Buddha and the Future of His Religion'. The new world needs a religion because '[i]n all societies, law plays a very small part. It is intended to keep the minority within the range of social discipline. The majority is left and has to be left to sustain its social life by the postulates and sanction of morality. Religion in the sense of morality, must therefore, remain the governing principle in every society'. Such a religion, he suggests, must be 'in accord with science'; 'its moral code must recognize the fundamental tenets of liberty, equality and fraternity'; and finally, it 'must not sanctify or ennoble poverty'.²³

This religion of the principle, moreover, has a proper name: 'If the new world—which be it realized is very different from the old—must have a religion—and the new world needs religion far more than the old world did—then it can only be religion of the Buddha'.²⁴

The impossible bringing together of the principle and religion is signalled again in the closing sentences of the speech that Ambedkar gives in May 1936 to the Bombay Presidency Mahar Conference. Trying to convince them 'to leave the Hindu religion', and yet not wanting them to do so 'only because I say so', wanting them to consent 'only if it appeals to your reason', Ambedkar wonders: 'What message should I give you on this occasion?' And then he recounts the message given by the Buddha to the Bhikkhu Sangha:

'What does the Sangh expect from me? Ananda, I have preached the Dhamma with an open heart, without concealing anything. The Tathagata has not kept anything concealed, as some other teachers do. So Ananda, what more can I tell to the Bhikkhu Sangh? So Ananda, be self-illuminating like the lamp. Don't be dependent for light, like the Earth. Don't be a satellite. Be a light unto thyself...'

I also take your leave in the words of the Buddha. 'Be your own guide. Take refuge in reason'.²⁵

But of course, this begs the question: if one is a light to oneself, then what need does the principle have for religion? Why does the principle take *refuge* in reason? What is involved in making reason into a religion? In that transaction, what happens to reason's autonomy and to religion's surrender?

III

Ambedkar is scarcely the first to strive for a religion of the principle—secular traditions have long fantasised about such a religion. Kant, for example, after insisting that morality does not need religion, also adds: '[M]orality finds in the holiness of its laws an object of the greatest respect'.²⁶ And in the traditions of radical secularism, the famous penultimate chapter of Rousseau's *Social Contract* describes a 'civil religion'.

²³ Ambedkar, 'Buddha and the Future of His Religion'.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ For a discussion of Ambedkar's invocation of this passage, see Christopher Queen's superbly meticulous reading of *The Buddha and His Dhamma* in his 'Ambedkar's Dhamma: Source and Method in the Construction of Engaged Buddhism', in Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Beltz (eds), *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 132–50.

²⁶ Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, p. 7.

Our question then could also be framed thus: is Ambedkar's religion of the principle a civil or civic religion?²⁷

The compulsions that produce the conceptual space for civil religion are indicated by the paradoxical relationship between the rights of man and the rights of the citizen. Hannah Arendt suggests in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that the Declaration of the Rights of Man 'meant nothing more nor less than that from then on Man, and not God's command or the customs of history, should be the source of Law'.²⁸ But even though the rights of the citizen might seem derived from those of man, Arendt notes that the "inalienable rights of man" must nevertheless find their guarantee and become an inalienable part of the right of the people to sovereign self-government':

In other words, man had hardly appeared as a completely emancipated, completely isolated being who carried his dignity within himself without reference to some larger encompassing order, when he disappeared again into a member of a people. From the beginning the paradox involved in the declaration of inalienable human rights was that it reckoned with an 'abstract' human being who seemed to exist nowhere, for even savages lived in some kind of a social order.²⁹

Because of this paradox, the 'Rights of Man, supposedly inalienable, proved to be unenforceable even in countries whose constitutions were based upon them whenever people appeared who were no longer citizens of any sovereign state'.³⁰ Indeed, 'we become aware of the existence of a right to have rights'—what she describes as 'the right of every individual to belong to humanity, [which] should be guaranteed by humanity itself'—'only when millions of people emerged who had lost and could not regain these rights because of the new global political situation'.³¹ All of this is 'an ironical, bitter and belated confirmation' of Burke's assertion that 'human rights were an "abstraction", that it was much wiser to rely on an "entailed inheritance" of rights which one transmits to one's children like life itself, and to claim one's rights to be the "rights of an Englishman" rather than the inalienable rights of man'. 'The pragmatic soundness of Burke's concept seems to be beyond doubt in the light of our manifold experiences'.³²

Responding to the force of that Burkean critique, Arendt in her later work—especially in *On Revolution* in 1963—emphasises a certain constitutionalism. Here, like Burke, Arendt is more sympathetic to the American Revolution than the French Revolution. But unlike Burke, she recognises that both revolutions are organised around the rights of man, that their divergence lies more in their constitutional histories, and the way these modulate the rights of man. Arendt, it might be said, seeks to conserve the abstract rights of man by making the

²⁷ The argument that it is such a religion has been made most systematically by Martin Fuchs: see especially his 'A Religion for Civil Society? Ambedkar's Buddhism, the Dalit Issue and the Imagination of Emergent Possibilities', in Vasudha Dalmia, Angelika Malinar and Martin Christof (eds), *Charisma and Canon. Essays on the Religious History of the Indian Subcontinent* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 250–73.

²⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), p. 290.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 297, 298. It would take us too far afield to take issue with Jacques Rancière's simplifications of Arendt's arguments. Suffice it here to note that Rancière's description of the rights of man (that 'the Rights of Man are the rights of those who have not the rights that they have and have the rights that they have not') and Arendt's description of the right to have rights are both very far and very close to each other: they could even be said to be respectively the an-archic and archic description of the same right. See Jacques Rancière, 'Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?', in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 103, nos. 2–3 (2004), pp. 297–310.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 299.

constitution into an entailed inheritance, which through its publicness and gradualism, will clothe the nakedness of natural man. (As this distinction suggests, Arendt's public sphere, even if transparent, is anything but naked.)

This anxiety over the fragility of the rights of man (which leads to Arendt's emphasis first on the right to have rights, and later on constitutions)—is it not the same anxiety at work in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, striving to institutionalise civil religions? Is not the striving for a civil religion an anxious recognition—analogous to the right to have rights—of the inadequacy by themselves of constitutional rights (those rights that are simultaneously human rights and political rights, but that depend on the political to defend the human)? Civil religion does for its exponents the work of concretising the abstractness of rights of man in a way that still avoids the descent into the particularity of nationalism, that still retains the universality of man. Very briefly, consider John Dewey, one of the two proponents of civil religion who have had considerable influence in twentieth-century India.³³ Dewey (who in Ambedkar's words 'was my teacher and to whom I owe so much'³⁴) writes *A Common Faith* in the 1930s in his effort to articulate a democratic faith.³⁵ As Robert Westbrook notes, Dewey, unlike his associate William James, is not satisfied with a 'neutral public sphere, naked of all faith'. Dewey was 'a democrat and religiously so. And because Dewey believed that supernatural overbeliefs often threaten the democratic beliefs in which he vested his own faith, he tied the fate of democracy to the defeat of supernaturalism, and the growth of a catholic natural piety. His was a fighting faith'.³⁶

Through civil religion, Dewey seeks to rescue the rights of man from fragility and abstract nakedness, to enshrine these rights themselves as religious. He works with a distinctive understanding of religion: 'Faith in the continued disclosing of truth through directed cooperative human endeavor is more religious in quality than is any faith in a completed revelation with democracy'.³⁷ He also says of his later writings that they 'are devoted to making explicit the religious values implicit in the spirit of science as undogmatic reverence for truth in whatever form it present[s] itself, and the religious values implicit in our common life, especially in the moral significance of democracy as a way of living together'.³⁸ By these criteria, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the 'religion of religions', as one admirer of Dewey enthusiastically declares in 1950.³⁹

There is certainly enough textual warrant to treat Navayana Buddhism as one more moment in this tradition of civil religion. Like Dewey and Arendt, Ambedkar is acutely aware of the potentiality of the rights of man—the Indian Constitution is an extended testament to this. But perhaps even more than them, he emphasises the challenges of working it. Thus, in his Constituent Assembly speech on 25 November 1949, he stresses that 'however good a Constitution may be, it is sure to turn out bad because those who are called to work it, happen to be a bad lot. However bad a Constitution may be, it may turn out to be good if those who are called to work it happen to be a good lot. The working of a Constitution does not depend

³³ The other influential figure is William Salter, whose relationship with Gandhi is discussed in my *Unconditional Equality: Gandhi's Religion of Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016.)

³⁴ Ambedkar, 'Annihilation of Caste', p. 79.

³⁵ John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, [1934], 2nd ed., 2013).

³⁶ Robert Westbrook, 'An Uncommon Faith: Pragmatism and Religious Experience', in Stuart Rosenbaum (ed.), *Pragmatism and Religion: Classical Sources and Modern Essays* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), p. 199.

³⁷ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 24.

³⁸ Cited in H.M. Kallen, 'Human Rights and the Religion of John Dewey', in *Ethics*, Vol. 60, no. 3 (April 1950), p. 176.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

wholly upon the nature of the Constitution'.⁴⁰ Given this emphasis on the need to bring into being a society that can give force to the Constitution, one cannot rule out the possibility that Navayana Buddhism strives to create, in a spirit similar to and influenced by Dewey's, a civil religion that is also a 'fighting faith'.

IV

But even if Ambedkar were to explicitly set out to conceptualise a civil religion, his religion of the principle can never be only that, for the very presumptions he begins with exceed 'civil religion'. Most of all, Ambedkar questions the assumption—shared in different ways by Arendt and Dewey—that the rights of man are centred around natural man in his abstract nakedness, that it is these rights which need to be clothed. In order to elicit the distinctiveness of his questioning, perhaps we can take some cues from the young Marx. In 'On the Jewish Question', Marx conceives the relationship between the rights of man and the rights of the citizen in terms very different from those articulated by Burke. His implicit counterpoint is Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, which suggests secularism can emerge only out of a specific Christian past, and is indeed the highest form of Christianity.⁴¹

Drawing on and radicalising Feuerbach's materialist inversion of Hegel (though Marx is yet to write 'Theses on Feuerbach'), Marx quite comprehensively reworks this Hegelian problematic and narrative. 'On The Jewish Question' begins with the argument that Jews already achieve 'political emancipation' where a secular state—as distinct from a Christian state—is established. Such emancipation occurs because the state emancipates 'itself from the state religion, i.e. by not recognizing, as a state, any religion, by affirming itself simply as a state'.⁴² This political emancipation Marx describes as 'a great progress', as even 'the final form of human emancipation inside the present world order'.

But 'On The Jewish Question' goes on to point out that with 'political emancipation' or the establishment of secular states, religion not only proliferates, but is transformed by its repositioning. Thus, 'North America is the land of religiosity *par excellence*'; and 'the fact that even in the land of completed political emancipation we find not only the existence of religion but a living existence full of freshness and strength furnishes us with the proof that the existence of religion does not contradict or impede the perfection of the [secular] state. But since the existence of religion is the existence of a defect, the source of this defect can only be sought in the nature of the state itself'. The defect shows that 'the state can be a free state without man himself being a free man'. With this observation, 'On the Jewish Question' embarks on its famous reworking of the Hegelian distinction between civil society and state:

The perfected political state is by its nature the species-life of man in opposition to his material life. All the presuppositions of this egoistic life continue to exist in civil society outside the sphere of the state, but as proper to civil society. When the political state has achieved its true completion, man leads a double life, a heavenly one and an earthly one, not only in thought and consciousness but in reality, in life. He has a life both in the political community, where he is valued as a communal being, and in civil society, where he is active as a private individual, treats other men as means, degrades

⁴⁰ Speech by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in the Constituent Assembly, 25 Nov. 1949, *Constituent Assembly Debates: Official Report*, Vol. XI (New Delhi: Government of India, 1949), p. 975.

⁴¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (H.B. Nisbet, trans; Allen Wood, ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), § 270, pp. 291–303.

⁴² Marx, 'On the Jewish Question', p. 51.

himself to a means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers. The political state has just as spiritual an attitude to civil society as heaven has to earth. It stands in the same opposition to civil society and overcomes it in the same manner as religion overcomes the limitations of the profane world, that is, it must likewise recognize it, reinstate it, and let itself once more be dominated by it. Man in the reality that is nearest to him, civil society, is a profane being. Here where he counts for himself and others as a real individual, he is an illusory phenomenon. In the state, on the other hand, where man counts as a species-being, he is an imaginary participant in an imaginary sovereignty, he is robbed of his real life and filled with an unreal universality.⁴³

Here, I wish to draw attention to only three points about the unruly spectrality that rustles through this and related passages. First, the spectrality undoes Hegel's categories of civil society, where the bourgeois individual exercises his rights of man, and political society, where the rights of the citizen are exercised. In Marx's reading, by contrast, civil society is marked by an illusoriness—though here man counts for himself and others as a real individual, though here he is 'free for himself', civil society is concerned with 'egoistic life'. Religion itself is in the process transformed: it 'is no longer the spirit of the state where man behaves, as a species-being in community with other men albeit in a limited manner and in a particular form and a particular sphere: religion has become the spirit of civil society, the sphere of egoism, the *bellum omnium contra omnes* (war of all against all). Its essence is no longer in community but in difference'.⁴⁴ And this spectrality suffuses the political community too—only the state is free, not man. 'The state is the intermediary between man and his freedom. As Christ is the intermediary onto whom man unburdens all his divinity, all his religious bonds, so the state is the mediator onto which he transfers all his Godlessness and all his human liberty'.⁴⁵

Second, and relatedly, the spectrality also undoes Hegel's presumption of a complementary relationship between civil society and the rights of man on the one hand, and the higher universality of the state and the rights of the citizen on the other. In Marx's reading, political society must let itself once more be dominated by civil society—the very civil society that Hegel describes as concerned with ends that 'are in the first instance purely private, particular and contingent'. In other words, the secular state is not dominant where the modern complex of state and civil society establishes itself. Rather, civil society, organised around the pursuit of private freedoms (whether those involved in capital or in religion), dominates: the secular state must 'recognize it, reinstate it, and let itself once more be dominated by it'.

Third, in 'On the Jewish Question', the state is Christian again because of a distinctive spectrality (rather than because, as in Hegel's account, the concept of religion is the absolute truth of freedom and reason). Thus Marx argues: 'In the so-called Christian state it is alienation (*Entfremdung*) that is important, not man himself'. This is so because the most important man, the king, remains apart from other men and in direct contact with the divine. Nevertheless, 'it is not the so-called Christian state, that one that recognizes Christianity as its basis, as the state religion, and thus adopts an exclusive attitude to other religions, that is the perfected Christian state, but rather the atheist state, the democratic state, the state that downgrades religion to the other elements of civil society'.⁴⁶ And secular democracy is 'the perfected Christian state' because it spectralises this spirit of Christianity:

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

What makes a political democracy Christian is the fact that in it man, not only a single man but every man, counts as a sovereign being; but it is man as he appears uncultivated and unsocial, man in his accidental existence, man as he comes and goes, man as he is corrupted by the whole organization of our society, lost to himself, sold, given over to the domination of inhuman conditions and elements—in a word, man who is no longer a real species-being. The fantasy, dream, and postulate of Christianity, the sovereignty of man, but of man as an alien being separate from actual man, is present in democracy as a tangible reality and is its secular motto.⁴⁷

The implications of this spectral relationship between state, civil society and religion have often remained unexplored in the way we have thought these categories. Marx himself, as we shall see, turns away from it already in ‘On the Jewish Question’. And liberal traditions around the term civil society, of course, continue to remain within the tradition that Hegel elaborates with such precision. The spectrality identified in ‘On the Jewish Question’ remains largely unexplored also in current re-figurings of the Hegelian understanding of secularism as a sublation of Christianity (which term itself functions as shorthand for Western Christian traditions). Most of these re-figurings only invert the Hegelian sublation rather than spectralise it, as Marx does. When Carl Schmitt, for instance, argues that ‘[a]ll significant concepts of the modern theory of state are secularized theological concepts’ not only because of their historical origin, but also because ‘their systemic structure’, the sociology he uses to make this argument, is organised by the terms that were set out by Hegel.⁴⁸

There is however a curious affinity between Marx’s spectral reading and the arguments offered in Partha Chatterjee’s *Lineages of Political Society*. The book suggests that while ‘the new republic was founded on a liberal democratic constitution, universal suffrage, and competitive electoral representation’, ‘the space of politics became effectively split between a narrow domain of civil society where citizens related to the state through the mutual recognition of legally enforceable rights and a wider domain of political society where governmental agencies dealt not with citizens but with populations to deliver specific benefits or services through negotiation’. Indeed, ‘the domain of civil social institutions and modern representative politics was, in most parts of the colonial world, restricted to only a small section of the colonized population’.⁴⁹

Here, Hegel’s categories of state and civil society are fused into ‘civil society’, which is conceived in terms akin to Hegel’s state, and a new category, ‘political society’, is posited as outside civil society. Thus, ‘civil society’ itself continues to be understood in broadly Hegelian terms, or in terms of ‘normative political theory’, as distinct from the spectrality that comes to mark civil society in ‘On the Jewish Question’. Indeed, I would suggest that what Chatterjee describes as ‘political society’ is precisely the spectral logic that the young Marx sees as constituting ‘civil society’, where man is ‘active as a private individual, treats other

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁴⁸ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 50f. Elsewhere, Schmitt’s concept of the enemy is explicitly derived from Hegel. Cf. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (George Schwab, trans.) (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 63. Even in contemporary scholarship, this Hegelian reading continues to be influential. Taylor’s *A Secular Age* is not isolated in remaining deeply Hegelian, unmarked by Marx, or even Feuerbach. Much recent ‘post-secular’ scholarship, when it has criticised secularism for its Christianity, has done so by only inverting Hegel; it would not be unfair to say that this scholarship remains within the Hegelian problematic, practising what in Marx’s terms would be ‘critical criticism’, rather than critique.

⁴⁹ Partha Chatterjee, *Lineages of Political Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 13–4.

men as means, degrades himself to a means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers'. Perhaps then a careful reading of 'On the Jewish Question' might suggest a new set of questions: is it necessary today to revisit Marx's insistence that there is only a spectral civil society? If yes, why—and where—must this spectral civil society exist along with a more conventionally Hegelian civil society?

V

I have not yet been able to ascertain whether Ambedkar ever read 'On the Jewish Question'. But whether he did or not, the questions that Marx encounters would have been his too, at the very least analogously. Like Marx's Jew, the Dalit too is amongst those outside the political community. But Ambedkar cannot respond the way Marx does in his explicit formulations; Ambedkar cannot dismiss the rights of man as only abstract or formal. If indeed Ambedkar ever read 'On the Jewish Question', at least two things would have occasioned the most profound disquiet in him. First, there is the curious disappearance in the essay of the Jew. 'It is in the North American states—or at least a part of them—that the Jewish question loses its theological importance for the first time and becomes a really *secular* question. It is only where the political state exists in its complete perfection that the relationship of the Jew and of the religious man in general to the political state, and thus the relationship of religion to the state, can stand out in all its peculiarities and purity'.⁵⁰ With political emancipation, the only space left for the Jew is in civil society, as 'religious man in general'. 'Religious man in general', egoistic man, civil society—this is what becomes dominant with political emancipation. Unlike in a Christian state, the Jew now becomes indistinguishable from the Christian; he is resolved into 'religious man in general'; he is no longer a minor as a Jew.

We know our Indian history, or for that matter our European history, well enough to know that this resolution of the minor never occurs in the way that Marx's explicit formulations posit. Indeed, it is precisely because that resolution never occurs, because civil society is spectral, that liberalism must create its concept of the minority—the marked figure who has to constantly prove his or her citizenship, who requires always 'tolerance...as a supplement to equality rather than a mere extension of it'.⁵¹ And it is precisely because that tolerance is unstable that Arendt must return to the question of the rights of man and the rights of the citizen. (Aamir Mufti notes Arendt's response in her Lessing Prize Lecture: 'I cannot gloss over the fact that for many years I considered the only adequate reply to the question, Who are you? to be: A Jew. That answer alone took into account the reality of persecution. As for the statement with which Nathan the Wise (in effect, though not in actual wording), countered the command: "Step closer, Jew"—the statement: I am a man—I would have considered as nothing but a grotesque and dangerous evasion of reality'.⁵²)

Like Arendt, Ambedkar could never have accepted this resolution of the minor. Indeed, what is most thought provoking for Ambedkar as well as in Ambedkar, what may perhaps be described as the provocation that leads to Ambedkar's massive originality, is precisely his struggle with the question of the minor who remains after political emancipation.

⁵⁰ Marx, 'On the Jewish Question', p. 50.

⁵¹ Wendy Brown, 'Tolerance and/or Equality: The "Jewish Question" and the "Woman Question"', in *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Vol. 15, no. 2 (2004), p. 21. See also Gyanendra Pandey, 'Marked and Unmarked Citizens', in Gyanendra Pandey, *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 129–53.

⁵² Aamir Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Question of Postcolonial Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 54.

The second thing that will have occasioned disquiet: even though Marx has not yet arrived at his thinking of the proletarian revolution, or of class, he already affirms instead ‘human emancipation’. ‘It is only the critique of political emancipation itself that would be the final critique of the Jewish question and its true resolution into “the general problems of the age”’.⁵³ Ambedkar’s relationship with political emancipation is more tortured: he is only too acutely aware of the empowerment it also offers.

Perhaps because of these two divergences, Ambedkar is more faithful to the spectrality of ‘On the Jewish Question’ than Marx. For one could well ask: if political emancipation is spectral in the sense that ‘On the Jewish Question’ identifies, then does not political emancipation itself constantly produce, along with ‘religious man in general’, the figure of the minor—the Jew, the Muslim, or the ‘other’ who cannot be subsumed within the category ‘religious man in general’?

Conversely, in order to question the ascription of minority, is not a certain political emancipation always to come? And if political emancipation can in this sense never be completed (and this is not a horizontal incompleteness—the bad infinity of there always being more to accomplish, of pursuing a constantly receding goal), and must constantly be re-visited and re-formulated, then must not human emancipation itself be re-thought? Human emancipation can no longer overcome or sublate within it the moment of political emancipation—political emancipation is too spectral for sublation. Perhaps human emancipation must now be conceived rather as the challenge of constantly questioning and supplementing political emancipation.

An acute sensitivity to these questions ripples through that posthumously-published essay, ‘Buddha or Karl Marx’. There, Ambedkar articulates what makes him uncomfortable about the violent ‘means’ involved in communism. He is willing to accept revolutionary or law-making violence: ‘Dictatorship for a short period may be good and a welcome thing even for making Democracy safe’. But he is made hesitant by the apprehension (which he shares with Arendt) that revolutionary violence may continue without end—that unlike the project of political emancipation, which, after the revolutionary moment, requires law-preserving violence, the project of human emancipation envisioned by Marx(ism) requires a permanent regime of revolutionary violence: ‘a Russian Dictatorship would be good for all backward countries. But this is no argument for permanent Dictatorship’.⁵⁴

The essay contemplates quite another relationship with the founding moment of revolutionary violence: ‘Why should not Dictatorship liquidate itself after it has done its work, after it has removed all the obstacles and boulders in the way of democracy and has made the path of Democracy safe? Did not Asoka set an example? He practised violence against the Kalingas. But thereafter he renounced violence completely. If our victors today not only disarm their victims but also disarm themselves there would be peace all over the world’.⁵⁵ To that renunciation of violence, to that other universality, Ambedkar gives in the essay the names ‘religion’ and Buddhism.

What is involved in religion here is indicated by his remark in ‘Philosophy of Hinduism’, the typescript of which was found amongst Ambedkar’s papers after his death: ‘Philosophy is static because it is concerned only with knowing truth. Religion is dynamic because it is concerned with love of truth’.⁵⁶ Here, as Udaya Kumar suggests, love ‘may need to be

⁵³ Marx, ‘On the Jewish Question’, p. 49.

⁵⁴ Ambedkar, ‘Buddha or Karl Marx’, p. 461.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 459.

⁵⁶ B.R. Ambedkar, ‘Philosophy of Hinduism’, in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches, Vol. 3* (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1987), pp. 86–7, also available online [<http://www.ambedkar.org/ambcd/17.Philosophy%20of%20Hinduism.htm>, accessed 16 April 2015]. I thank Sanil V. for drawing my attention to and discussing this passage; my reading in what follows has also been shaped by a personal communication, cited earlier, from Udaya Kumar on 10 Jan. 2015.

understood in terms of a mode of subjectivation akin to that of passion, and “dynamic” in terms of “being affected by” as much as “acting on”. Involved here, as in the call earlier to take refuge in reason, is the acknowledgment that a certain surrender of autonomy may itself be most proper to autonomy. And Ambedkar comes to Navayana Buddhism as the articulation of how this surrender should proceed. (Thus, in the unpublished preface to *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, he says: ‘[I]f a modern man who knows science must have a religion, the only religion he can have is the religion of the Buddha’.)

If we are to briefly indicate how Navayana Buddhism is such a religion of reason, or how reason works when it is not a civil religion but a refuge, perhaps we should attend to Ambedkar’s rendering in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* of the moment when Siddhartha Gautama takes the oath of *parivraja* or wandering mendicancy and starts on the path that makes him the Buddha. Siddhartha is a member of the Sakya kingdom, which seems marked by at least some of the traits of political emancipation: ‘[T]he Sakyas had their Sangh (association). Every Sakya youth above twenty had to be initiated into the Sangh and be a member of the Sangh’.⁵⁷ The *sangh* moreover privileges fearless speech and truth-telling.

The *senapati* or warrior head of the Sakyas, the kingdom to which Siddhartha Gautama belongs, calls a meeting of the Sakya *sangh* to ‘consider the question of declaring war on the Koliyas’, a neighbouring kingdom whose inhabitants had been involved in clashes with the Sakyas over the waters of the river Rohini. Siddhartha opposes this, suggesting that both are at fault, and that the dispute should be settled. The *senapati* responds (and the spectre of Krishna is evident here) that ‘the Kshatriyas cannot make a distinction between warriors and strangers. They must fight even against brothers for the sake of their kingdom’. Siddhartha replies: ‘Dharma, as I understand it, consists in recognizing that enmity does not disappear by enmity. It can be conquered by love only’. The *senapati*’s resolution carries the day. At the next day’s meeting, the *senapati* proposes that ‘he be permitted to proclaim calling to arms’ every Sakya between the ages of twenty and fifty. Now ‘the minority who had voted against it had a problem to face. Their problem was—to submit or not to the decision of the majority. The minority was determined not to submit to the majority’.⁵⁸

In this moment, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* shears away dizzyingly from the problematic of political emancipation. By not submitting to the majority, the minority abandons the protocols of political society and civil society, for these require that the minority must—even if it protests against or criticises the law—also do what the law or political society enjoins.⁵⁹ By not submitting, the minority refuses its part in political society, becomes no longer a minority.

But this refusal to submit to the majority carries its own entailments. The *sangh* can impose a social boycott on Siddhartha’s family and confiscate his family lands. Wishing to avoid this, Siddhartha speaks to the *sangh*: ‘Please do not punish my family.... They are innocent. I am the guilty person. Let me alone suffer for my wrong. Sentence me to death or exile, whichever you like. I will willingly accept it, and I promise I shall not appeal to the king of the Kosalas’. The *senapati* says that the *sangh* may face reprisals from the king even if Siddhartha voluntarily undergoes the sentence of death or exile. Siddhartha then suggests: ‘I can become a Parivrajaka and leave this country. It is a kind of exile’.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Book 1, Section 13.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, Book 1, Section 15.

⁵⁹ These protocols are already implicit in Kant’s injunction, ‘Argue as much as you want and about what you want, but obey!’. See Immanuel Kant, ‘An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?’, in Ted Humphrey (trans.), *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1983), p. 42.

⁶⁰ Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Book 1, Section 15.

One must add: but only a kind of exile. Voluntary acceptance of death or exile: this would be to submit to the political community. Because that submission is not possible, Siddhartha becomes instead a *parivrajaka*, leaves the country. But as a *parivrajaka*, he submits not to the political community, but to the call to *parivraja*. If this is an exile, it is so only in the sense that it converges with the exile the *sangh* as a political community wants. Later in the narrative, moreover, his exile becomes only *parivraja*—the dispute is resolved, many in the Sakyan kingdom would like to have him come back, but now *parivraja* has seized him.

One must also add: Siddhartha can choose to appeal to the king of Kosala. If he successfully did so, he would re-make the political community, and become the majority. This option becomes even more forcefully available later in the narrative, when the king, Bimbisara, offers Siddhartha his army if necessary to fight foes. But Siddhartha again refuses. His defiance of the majority is in other words accompanied by a refusal to become the majority, or to overcome the existing majority.

In both these senses, Siddhartha Gautama seeks a curious role with the political society he questions. He does not destroy it; he does not have or want a part in it; he participates without a part. This participation without a part, without sovereignty—this is the first statement of the Buddha's religion.

That first statement must encounter and re-work itself through several questions. For now, in lieu of a conclusion, I wish only to note two. First, Ambedkar is acutely aware of his homelessness, his exile from India. The book is written after all by the man who famously tells Gandhi, 'Mahatmaji, I have no country'.⁶¹ What is the relationship between this exile and the Buddha's *parivraja*? Second, as one of the authors of the Indian Constitution, Ambedkar writes the protocols of what Marx would call political society, and makes sure the minority has a part in it. What is the relationship between the part which the minority has, and its being minor, or its partless participation in *parivraja*?

⁶¹ Cited in Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, p. 219.