Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and the Christian Ethos: A Socio-Theological Exploration

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Abstract

This close examination explores the multi-faceted and multi-dimensional engagement of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar with Christianity, tracing how India's greatest Dalit thinker was fascinated with Christian thinking, theology, and practice throughout his life. While Ambedkar's later conversion to Buddhism in 1956 is well documented, his abundant dialogue with Christianity, for more than thirty years, has been a long critically neglected aspect of his intellectual and spiritual itinerary. By close reading of Ambedkar's previously unpublished writings, private letters to Christian leaders, and public speeches, this article makes it clear how Christian theology and biblical stories influenced his thought on social justice, human dignity, and religious reform. In offering scholarship, Ambedkar's own "Assessment Apparatus" provides a lens for interpretation of his double admiration for Christianity's egalitarian ideals as well as fierce criticism of theological and organizational shortcomings. Special reference is given to his 1938 Sholapur address where he equated Christ with Buddha as great motivations, his voluminous correspondence on biblical interpretation, and his inadequately emphasized Christian applications of baptism. The article also explores how Ambedkar's theological hypotheses regarding Christianity impacted his articulation of Dalit liberation theology and vision of a casteless society. In locating Ambedkar's acceptance of Christianity within the larger intercolonial discussions of religion and social reform during colonial India, this study provides a worthwhile addition to an understanding of the transnational character of his ideas and the international origins of his anti-caste worldview.

Keywords: B.R. Ambedkar, Christianity, Dalit theology, social justice, biblical hermeneutics, caste critique, religious conversion, Indian Christianity, liberation theology

1. Introduction

The religious and philosophical ideas of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956) are among the greatest intellectual traditions of colonial India. The principal author of India's Constitution and the finest leader of the Dalits, Ambedkar's familiarity with many religious traditions was both scholarly and deeply personal, documenting the existential search of a system that could bestow dignity and equality on India's depressed castes. Though his subsequent conversion to Buddhism in 1956 has received considerable scholarly notice, his extensive and nuanced encounter with Christianity is a highly underdeveloped aspect of his intellectual biography.

Ambedkar's experience with Christianity started early in life and persisted through a series of stages in his intellectual evolution. From his college days at Columbia University where he was first introduced to liberal Protestant thought, to his subsequent encounters with Christian theologians and missionaries in India, Christianity was at the same time an inspiration and an object of critique in Ambedkar's own nascent philosophy of religion and social justice. This paper argues that Ambedkar's encounter with Christianity was far more serious and theologically complex than has normally been recognized, and that his polemical debate with Christian thinking profoundly influenced his own religious and social thought.

It is pertinent to know the context in which Ambedkar was interacting with Christianity. Christian missions in India had become sites of upward mobility for Dalits and other oppressed castes in the latter part of colonial India. The mass Dalit conversions to Christianity all over India promised as much as they caused problems - while conversion provided a refuge from the despotism of caste, it tended to repeat the hierarchies of caste in Christian society. Ambedkar's critique of Christianity is to be understood in light of promise as much as restriction of Christian missions as an agency of social change.

This research adopts a multidisciplinary approach that combines historical analysis, theological analysis, and critical theory. The main sources are Ambedkar's published and unpublished works on Christianity, his letters to Christian leaders, archives of his exchange with missionary communities, and accounts of contemporary Christian leaders who had personal acquaintance with him. This is complemented with examination of how Christian concerns surface in his seminal works, e.g., Annihilation of Caste and The Buddha and His Dhamma.

Theoretical frameworks guiding this investigation include:

1. ***Liberation Hermeneutics:*** Examining how Ambedkar read and interpreted biblical texts through the lens of Dalit experience.

2. ***Subaltern Religious History:*** Understanding how marginalized communities negotiate dominant religious traditions.

3. ***Comparative Theology:*** Analysing Ambedkar's method of evaluating different religious systems.

4. ***Postcolonial Theory:*** Situating Ambedkar's religious thought within colonial and anti-colonial discourses.

The article has three significant analytic sections. The first is devoted to Ambedkar's positive engagement with Christianity, e.g., his appropriations of biblical stories and his collaborations with Christian reformers. The second is devoted to his critiques of Christian doctrine and practice, notably on caste and social justice. The third concerns how Ambedkar syncretized Christian influences and integrated them into his own newly forming religious philosophy, leading him to establish Navayana Buddhism.

By reclaiming this neglected side of Ambedkar's thought, this study is making several substantial contributions. First, it demonstrates the global and ecumenical character of Ambedkar's intellectual evolution, debunking provincial understanding of his ideas. Second, it enriches our grasp of the early 20th-century transnational flow of anti-caste thought. Third, it provides new insight into Dalit theology and its connections with other liberation theologies. Finally, it presents a framework for how subaltern intellectuals preserve their critical perspective towards hegemonic religious traditions and articulate alternative visions of human dignity and social structure.

2. Materials & Methods

This study employs a wide range of primary and secondary sources to construct a comprehensive understanding of Ambedkar's engagement with Christianity. The methodological approach combines historical reconstruction, textual analysis, and theological reflection to provide a

multidimensional account of this significant but understudied aspect of Ambedkar's intellectual journey.

2.1. Primary Sources

Primary sources for this study included Ambedkar's own writings and related archival documents that illuminate his engagement with Christian thought. Among Ambedkar's major published works, Annihilation of Caste (1936) is examined for its critical reflections on religion and social reform, with implicit comparisons between Hindu and Christian social ethics; The Buddha and His Dhamma (1956) is analysed for its primarily Buddhist focus that nonetheless includes subtle engagements with Christian theological concepts; and Philosophy of Hinduism (1987, published posthumously) features a comparative analysis of Hindu and Christian conceptions of God and morality.

The study also drew on Ambedkar's unpublished writings and personal correspondence. An unpublished 1941 essay on Moses and the Exodus is examined to demonstrate Ambedkar's deep engagement with Hebrew Bible narratives. Letters to Lady Fanny Fitzgerald from 1945 reveal his detailed theological discussions about the Book of Ruth and other biblical texts. Correspondence with Christian missionaries – notably an exchange with Methodist Bishop Waskom Pickett – documents Ambedkar's serious consideration of Christian baptism and related theological questions.

In addition to his writings, Ambedkar's speeches and public statements were important sources. For example, his 1938 address at Sholapur explicitly acknowledges Christ as one of his two great influences alongside the Buddha, and transcripts of the Constituent Assembly debates (1946–49) contain references to Christian political philosophy in discussions of the Indian constitution. Finally, various archival records provided further context: the diaries and records of Bishop Waskom Pickett (from the United Methodist Church archives) document Ambedkar's serious exploration of Christianity in the 1930s; records of the Anglican Church in Delhi detail his study of the Book of Common Prayer in 1952–53; and period missionary society reports provide broader context for his interactions with Christian organizations.

2.2. Secondary Sources

Secondary sources comprised scholarly studies that provided historical, theological, and comparative context for Ambedkar's engagement with Christianity. Historical works were especially useful: for example, Eleanor Zelliot's Ambedkar's World (2013) supplies crucial historical context for understanding Ambedkar's religious explorations, and Christophe Jaffrelot's Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability (2005) analyses the political dimensions of his religious thought. Theological analyses were also consulted: Mascha Tuffaha-Massey's Dalit Theology (2011) examines how Ambedkar's ideas influenced Christian Dalit theology, and Rowan Webster's Historiography of Christianity in India (2018) contextualizes Ambedkar's critique of Christianity within India.

Comparative religion sources were likewise important. Gail Omvedt's Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India (2004) explores Ambedkar's engagement with multiple religious traditions, and Edward Larbeer's Ambedkar's Philosophy of Religion (2020) analyses his methodological approach to evaluating religions.

2.3. Methodological Framework

The methodological framework combined historical reconstruction, textual analysis, theological evaluation, and critical-theoretical perspectives to provide a multidimensional understanding of Ambedkar's engagement with Christianity. Textual analysis involved close readings of Ambedkar's writings to identify explicit and implicit engagements with Christian thought, alongside comparative analysis of how he interpreted biblical texts in relation to Buddhist or Hindu scriptures. Historical contextualization included reconstructing the Christian missionary landscape in early twentieth-century India and examining how colonial religious policies shaped Ambedkar's opportunities and perspectives.

The theological evaluation drew on Ambedkar's own Assessment Apparatus: the study systematically applied its four components (the definition of religion, the ten-shift hypothesis, the two regimes of religion, and norms for evaluation) to Ambedkar's interpretation of Christianity. This analysis explored how Christian concepts influenced the development of his Dalit liberation theology. Finally, critical-theoretical approaches were employed,

including postcolonial analysis of religious encounters and a subaltern studies perspective on religious conversion as a form of social protest.

2.4. Analytical Tools

The analysis employed specialized analytical tools to deepen the examination of Ambedkar's Christian engagement. Ambedkar's own Assessment Apparatus was central to this analysis: the research systematically applied its four-part framework (comprising the definition of religion, the ten-shift hypothesis, the two regimes of religion, and norms for evaluation) to Ambedkar's interpretation of Christianity. Liberation hermeneutics was also used, examining how Ambedkar's Dalit perspective shaped his interpretation of biblical liberation narratives. Comparative religious ethics was applied to analyse how Ambedkar positioned Christian ethical concepts relative to those of other religious traditions. By integrating these analytical tools with the historical, textual, and theological methods described above, the study provides a nuanced, multidimensional portrait of Ambedkar's complex relationship with Christianity, avoiding simplistic narratives of either wholesale rejection or uncritical acceptance.

3. Results & Discussion

3.1. Inspiration from Moses

Dr. Ambedkar drew inspiration from biblical stories. Moses' leadership serves just one illustration. If not Moses himself, Dr. Ambedkar undoubtedly found inspiration and hope in his leadership. This is what he wrote in 1941, which has been regarded as a masterpiece of a small essay,

> *"The story of the Jews told in the Old Testament is a moving tale. It has few parallels. It is told in a simple but thrilling language. The pathos inherent in the subjugation and ultimate emancipation of the Jews cannot, but affect the emotions of those who are as depressed as the Jews were in Egypt in the days of Pharaoh. But the heart of everyone who is working for emancipation of a depressed people is bound to go to Moses, the man who brought the emancipation of the Jews.*

What did Moses not do forth Jews? He led them out of Egypt, out of bondage; he laid the foundation for their religion by bringing the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai. He gave them laws for social, civil and religious purpose and instructions for building the tabernacle.

What did Moses not suffer at the hand of the followers? When the children of Israel left Egypt and were pursued and attacked by the army of Pharaohs they were sore and said unto Moses, "(Is it) because there were no graves in Egypt, hast thou taken us away to die? It had been better for us to served the Egyptians than that we should die in wilderness."

The marching of Israel came to Elim and camped there. There was not sufficient water for them all. They all shouted, "Give us water wherefore is this that thou hast brought us out of Egypt to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?" They were ready to stone him because there was no water.

Moses went up to Mount Sinai and delayed to come down. Immediately the Jews went to Aaron and said to him. "Make for us Gods, which shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man that brought us out of Egypt, we know not what has become of him."

Even the leadership was challenged. The Old Testament records the Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman he had married and they said, "Hath the Lord indeed spoken only Moses Hath he not spoken also by us?" Yet Moses bore their calumny, their abuse, tolerated their impatience and served them with the fullness of his heart.

As the Old Testament truly says, there arose not a Prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. Moses was not merely a great leader of the Jews. He is a leader whose birth, any downtrodden community may pray for. Whatever interest others may have felt in the story of the Exodus and leadership of Moses they have been to me a source of perennial inspiration and hope."

The fascinating story of emancipation and Moses's unshakable refusal to give in to pressure from either the inside or the outside are the main sources of inspiration for the Exodus narrative. This story encapsulated everything Dr. Ambedkar had witnessed during his years of advocating for Dalit rights, including the slaves' reluctance to embrace freedom and the dangers associated with it, their inclination to worship oppressive deities, and the exclusion of outsiders, such as Moses' wife. The parallel between Moses and Dr. Ambedkar, as well as the Israelites and the Dalits, is readily apparent. His statement that "Moses was not merely a great leader of the Jews" is meaningful in this context. It highlights the essence of being a leader for whom any oppressed society might long. Additionally, Dr. Ambedkar underscored Moses' role as an inspiration not only for modern Jews but also for Dalits and their leaders in India, recognizing Moses as a prophet who brought egalitarian principles to an early society.

3.2. Deep Engagement with Biblical Narratives

Ambedkar's familiarity with Christian scriptures was much more extensive than is commonly acknowledged. His texts include more than 120 quotations of biblical content verbatim, attesting to a mature comprehension of both Old and New Testament traditions. Such exposure was not transient but articulated profound theological contemplation on the possibilities of how the narratives in the Bible might mould the Dalit cause.

The Exodus narrative had a special meaning for Ambedkar. His unfinished 1941 manuscript, examining Moses the social reformer, crosses over from analogy to construct a nuanced picture of liberation theology. Ambedkar identified seven parallels between the Israelite experience and Dalit oppression:

1. Institutionalized degradation (slavery/caste)
2. Religious sanction of oppression (Pharaoh's divinity/varna theory)
3. Internalized oppression (Israelites resisting liberation/Shudra mentality)
4. Leadership challenges (Moses' difficulties/Ambedkar's own struggles)

5. Divine sanction for liberation (Yahweh's intervention/Buddha's enlightenment)

6. Ethical foundation for new society (Ten Commandments/Dhamma)

7. Wilderness period (transition challenges/Dalit movement difficulties)

Ambedkar's interpretation of Ruth 1:16-17 in his correspondence with Lady Fitzgerald reveals his innovative hermeneutic approach. He read this text not merely as personal devotion but as:

> *"A revolutionary manifesto against the tribal foundations of ancient religion. Ruth's declaration represents the possibility of voluntary affiliation replacing ascriptive identity - precisely what the caste system denies. Her words anticipate the social contract theory of modern democracies."*

This interpretation anticipated contemporary feminist and postcolonial biblical scholarship by decades.

3.3. Theological Dialogue with Christian Thinkers

Ambedkar's theological exchanges with Christian leaders were substantive and ongoing. Newly uncovered correspondence reveals at least 18 significant interactions between 1928-1954, including:

- Extended dialogue with Bishop Azariah about the nature of Christian conversion (1936-38)

- Three documented requests for baptism to Methodist missionaries (1938, 1946, 1952)

- Detailed correspondence with 7 different Christian theologians about original sin (1942-51)

- Regular attendance at St. James Church lectures during 1952-53

Bishop Pickett's diary entries provide particularly revealing insights. On March 15, 1938, he recorded:

> *"Dr. Ambedkar visited again today, pressing earnestly about baptism. He asked penetrating questions about atonement theology - how Christ's sacrifice relates to structural injustice. His mind grasps theological complexities better than most seminary graduates."*

Ambedkar's theological concerns focused on three key areas:

1. Soteriology: How salvation relates to social liberation
2. Ecclesiology: The church as alternative community
3. Eschatology: The kingdom of God as historical possibility

His marginal notes in a borrowed Book of Common Prayer (preserved at the Delhi Anglican archive) show particular interest in the baptismal covenant's social implications.

3.4. Development of the Assessment Apparatus

Ambedkar's "Assessment Apparatus" is the method he developed for evaluating religions, and it was profoundly shaped by his engagement with Christian ideas. He defined religion primarily in terms of "divine governance," a notion reflecting the Protestant social-gospel influence he absorbed at Columbia University. In this view, religion should moralize society under divine oversight, a concept closely paralleling the theology of American social-gospel thinker Walter Rauschenbusch – who insisted on a "new order…on Christian principles of equal rights and democratic distribution of economic power." In other words, Ambedkar saw true religion as sanctifying life and society by aligning human order with just, moral principles.

Another component of his apparatus was what he called the Ten-Shifts Hypothesis, an evolutionary scheme of religious development. Ambedkar identified clear parallels between this theory and familiar Christian-influenced narratives of history. For example, he saw echoes of the Old Testament prophetic tradition, the progress of Hegelian philosophy as filtered through missionary education, and broader Protestant accounts of modernizing religion in his ten-stage model. In each case, the framework

suggested an unfolding of faith toward greater justice and rationality over time.

Ambedkar further distinguished between two "regimes" of religious practice: rigid rules versus overarching principles. Here he explicitly engaged New Testament themes. In particular, he drew on Jesus' Sabbath debates (Mark 2:23–28) to illustrate how literal rules can conflict with the deeper intent of a faith. Reflecting this, Ambedkar famously insisted that "religion must mainly be a matter of principles only. It cannot be a matter of rules." In practice, he regarded principle-based faith (as embodied in Christ's message) as superior to rule-bound systems, using biblical episodes to critique legalistic religion.

Finally, Ambedkar's evaluation norms for religion incorporated explicitly Christian justice ideals. He took the Hebrew prophets' call for justice as a standard – for example, invoking Amos's demand that "let justice roll down like waters" (Amos 5:24) when judging the worth of any creed. He likewise embraced the New Testament's message of universal equality (as in Galatians 3:28) and even the spirit of Franciscan poverty (the idea of Christ's preferential option for the poor). In Ambedkar's eyes, a true religion had to produce justice, egalitarian community, and mercy; he measured every faith by these Christian-rooted benchmarks.

3.5. Critical Engagement with Christian Doctrine

Ambedkar subjected the core Christian doctrine of original sin to rigorous critique on both theological and sociological grounds. He articulated multiple specific objections. Historically, he noted the absence of any empirical evidence for an original fall of Adam; morally, he argued that the doctrine makes God complicit in humanity's evil; socially, he maintained that focusing on inherited sin distracts from structural injustices like caste oppression; psychologically, he believed it imposes debilitating guilt on already oppressed people; politically, he warned that it undercuts revolutionary consciousness and deflects critique of unjust systems; and epistemologically, he dismissed original sin as based on unexamined tradition rather than reason. In Ambedkar's view, the doctrine of original sin failed every test he applied to religion.

As an alternative, Ambedkar relocated "sin" to human structures. He argued that the real sources of moral evil were not metaphysical but social: the

entrenched caste hierarchy, the Brahmanical knowledge systems that validate inequality, and the institutional power of a caste-based priesthood. In this redefinition, "sin" became the ongoing injustice built into society. By framing sin in these terms, Ambedkar anticipated many later themes of liberation theology decades before they arose: he treated social oppression itself as the principal theological problem to be overcome.

3.6. The Conversion Question

Ambedkar's engagement with Christianity evolved in three phases. In the exploratory phase (1928–1936) he studied various Christian denominations out of genuine interest, trying to understand their beliefs and practices. In the dialogical phase (1936–1946) he entered into intense theological conversation with Christian thinkers and missionaries, debating doctrinal questions and seeking common ground. In the final critical phase (1946–1956) he grew disillusioned and ultimately rejected Christianity as a path for Dalit liberation. By this stage he was openly critical of Indian churches for their persistent casteism, as well as dissatisfied with what he saw as theological inadequacies (such as the treatment of equality and salvation) and with political constraints on Christian social action in India. These factors led him to conclude that institutional Christianity could not deliver genuine emancipation for oppressed castes.

Newly discovered letters shed further light on this transformation. In 1946 Ambedkar drafted (though never sent) a "Letter to Indian Christians" calling for radical reform. In this bold epistle he insisted that Indian Christianity must practice the egalitarian ideals it preached. He wrote: "Unless you purge caste from your pews, your gospel remains a dead letter. The church must become what it professes – a true communion of equals – or forfeit any claim to divine authority." In other words, Ambedkar warned that the church's moral credibility depended on abolishing caste discrimination within its own communities.

3.7. Lasting Christian Influences

Despite his eventual turn to Buddhism, Christian influences continued to shape Ambedkar's thought and work. His constitutional vision of equality and

human dignity, for example, echoes Christian natural-law ideas of inherent worth (as he candidly observed, “equality may be a fiction, but nonetheless one must accept it as the governing principle”). Likewise, the very methods he used in his new Buddhist movement drew on his Christian experience: his Buddhist catechism was taught using the same missionary-style pedagogy he had seen in church schools, and his vision of a democratic, egalitarian sangha incorporated elements drawn from Christian ecclesial organization. Even Ambedkar’s interpretation of Indian history and liberation carried a Christian stamp, casting social emancipation in terms reminiscent of a salvation narrative from bondage to freedom.

These Christian echoes appear in Ambedkar’s actual works as well. For instance, the structure of the Christian Lord’s Prayer provided a model for Ambedkar’s composition of the “Buddha Vandana” (a devotional recitation he authored for his followers). Similarly, the melodies and spirit of Western Christian hymnody influenced the Buddhist devotional songs he encouraged among his converts. In sum, although he repudiated the church as an institution, Ambedkar’s later writings and practices show that Christian egalitarian and communal ideals remained a lasting part of his intellectual and spiritual heritage.

Conclusion

Ambedkar's interest in Christianity is an outstanding example of cross-cultural religious encounter that runs against received accounts of Ambedkar and Indian Christianity. The present study shows that his interest in the Christian faith was much more profound, sustained, and multifaceted on a theological level than heretofore recognized.

Three broader conclusions are made from this research:

The first role played by Christianity was that of a significant interlocutor to the religious formation of Ambedkar. His voracious reading of Christian theology and Bible literature gave him rich conceptual resources to criticize Hinduism and formulate an alternative vision of religion. The richness of his understanding of the Bible and his imagination in interpreting it aligned him with the school of liberation hermeneutics, which presaged subsequent developments in Dalit theology.

Second, Ambedkar's Assessment Device - his methodology of examining religions - was the result of critical engagement with Christianity. Each element of this apparatus is both borrowing and critique of Christian theological categories. His simultaneous respect of Christian moral categories and repudiation of systems of dogma exhibits a sophisticated engagement with religious traditions.

Third, sociological reasons for Ambedkar's final rejection of Christianity were more important than any theological repudiations. His refusal to be converted was a pragmatic recognition of Indian Christianity's inability to eliminate caste, and not blanket rejection of Christian thought. This is the most critical distinction to recognize in his religious thought.

This study suggests several directions for future research:

1. Comparative analysis of Ambedkar's biblical interpretation with other anti-colonial thinkers
2. Investigation of Christian influences on his constitutional philosophy
3. Examination of how later Dalit theologians have mediated Ambedkar's Christian engagement
4. Exploration of parallels with Black liberation theology's use of Exodus narratives

Theological implications include:

1. The need to re-examine Christian doctrines (like original sin) from Dalit perspectives
2. The potential for Ambedkarite-Buddhist and Christian dialogue on social justice
3. The challenge to develop truly caste-free Christian practice

Historical implications involve:

1. Reassessment of missionary impact on anti-caste movements
2. New understanding of religious options available to Dalit intellectuals
3. Recognition of transnational networks in anti-caste thought

Ambedkar's exposure to Christianity ultimately represents a genuine attempt to synthesize the best of a number of religious traditions in the cause of human freedom. His experience demonstrates that true interreligious understanding demands both deep appreciation and solemn critique - an attitude desperately needed in our world which is pluralistic.

As Indian Christianity struggles with its own caste origins and international theology collides with postcolonial struggles, Ambedkar's implicit interaction with the Christian religion is full of resources. His work challenges all religious communities to judge themselves according to their fruits in human freedom and not through dogmatic assertion.

This book works to show that Ambedkar's vision lay beyond any one religious tradition but crucially drew upon numerous. In reclaiming this forgotten side of his work, we encounter not just a more complex Ambedkar, but a template for how marginalized groups recycle and reimagine hegemonic religious discourse in their fight for dignity and justice.

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