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Inner Life, Politics and the Secular: Is there a ‘Spirituality’ of Subalterns and Dalits? Notes on Gramsci and Ambedkar.

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“It remains to be seen whether one can use the term ‘religion’ when referring to a faith that does not have a personal god for an object but only impersonal or indeterminate forces...” (Gramsci, *Notebook 6*, § 41).

Reflecting on literary criticism concerning Tolstoy, Shakespeare and Manzoni, Gramsci notes in his *Prison Notebooks* (Q23, § 51), that “in the novel *The Betrothed* there is not one common person [*popolano*] who is not teased or laughed at ... They are depicted as wretched, narrow minded and *with no inner life* [*senza vita interiore*]. Only the nobles have an inner life.” The concept of ‘inner life’ - or *vita interiore* and *vita spirituale* - can be in fact translated as spirituality, or ‘the life of the Spirit’. While it seems to be firmly rooted in Christian theology, one must remember that this concept was already present within Greek philosophy. Following the Enlightenment, when western philosophers make reference to ‘the spirit’, they are, in a sense, re-appropriating what theology had ‘borrowed’: this is the case with Hegel’s *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807), and also for Croce’s idealist ‘philosophy of spirit’. The ambiguity, however, between a human, immanent ‘spirit’ and a theological, eternal ‘Spirit’ has remained, and still troubles our understanding and interpretation of human history.

For the purpose of our discussion, following a brief clarification of concepts, we must return to Gramsci’s initial reflection so as to ascertain its validity within a specific milieu: rather than negating the existence of an ‘inner life’ for ‘nobles’, Gramsci seems to vindicate the presence of ‘inner life’ for common persons, the people (*popolani*), the masses, ‘the simple’ (*i semplici*). However, one basic question must be addressed: Why would Gramsci defend the concept of ‘inner life’ *per se*, extending this to the masses? As a committed historical materialist, he might have simply dismissed this idea altogether, unless his understanding of

‘inner life’ had something worth pursuing, notwithstanding substantial differences from both a transcendental and an idealist position. My contention is that, in fact, not only does Gramsci offer us an alternative reading of ‘inner life’, but by considering the ‘subalterns’ as worthy of ‘inner life’ he made a bold statement with revolutionary repercussions, even if today it might seem that he was stating the obvious. In order to make my point more transparent, in the second part of my paper I will expand Gramsci’s assertion to those groups of people who nowadays find themselves in the very precarious position of being considered unworthy and perhaps even ‘ontologically unable’ to possess an ‘inner life’: the (ex)-untouchables or Dalits of South Asia. A reflection on the work and thought of the Dalit leader B. R. Ambedkar will provide further evidence of a particular kind of a ‘spirituality of the subalterns’.

My second question is: Why might subalterns, Dalits – the masses, ‘the simple’ – expect, or indeed demand, that others recognise them to have ‘inner life’/spirituality? Are they really concerned with this, or is this rather an ‘intellectual’ preoccupation of scholars? On the one hand, it seems clear that subalterns affirm their spirituality despite what others might think, since they simply get on with living their spirituality as part of their daily life. On the other hand, when they reach consciousness of plain refusal by others to acknowledge their spirituality, subalterns seem to insist on asserting it and making it more manifest. The reasons behind this affirmative action which springs out of self-awareness – *consapevolezza*, in Gramscian terms - must lie in the motivations offered by the writings of the authors considered in our essay who lend their voice to all subalterns – and they themselves as subalterns - in order to affirm one fundamental truth: if ‘inner life’ and spirituality represent one of the highest peaks of human achievement, then subalterns, as humans, cannot be excluded from contributing to and being an integral part of this highest accomplishment. At stake here is the primary recognition that subalterns, though ‘at the margins of history’, cannot be deprived of being considered ‘fully human’, with all the dignity and even the ‘nobility’ that this implies.

It is now widely accepted that ‘spirituality’, having overcome the boundaries of Christianity, is present in all religions to the point of becoming a relevant trait of inter-religious dialogue, thus prompting also ‘inter-spirituality’ (Sheldrake 2012). It is equally recognised that spirituality is present also in non-religious contexts, hence giving origin to ‘secular spiritualities’ which mostly underline the historical, philosophical and sociological aspects of ‘spiritual life’ and experience. Without disregarding the many commonalities between ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’, the present paper intends to privilege the secular aspect of spirituality for two main reasons: 1. while religion as such seems to fall under the control of

those in power - religious and state power, including civil society – ‘secular spirituality’ allows for a possible negotiation of power. In other words, while state hegemonic power can be exercised (also) in the name of ‘religion’ – through sanctions, laws, hierarchy, etc. – secular spirituality tends to escape this control and, for this very reason, hegemonic power wishes to appropriate and domesticate the ‘spirituality of subalterns’; 2. While there is a tendency to interpret spirituality as an individual pursuit, thus adopting the singularising hermeneutics of those in power, I see secular spirituality as a unifying moment and a group/community effort, so as to achieve group/class consciousness. As shall be clarified, this is particularly true for subalterns/Dalits for whom real ‘hope-salvation-future’ can be achieved mainly as a group, hardly ever as individuals, but also collaborating with other groups rather than remaining confined to one single community. Both Ambedkar and Gramsci strive to achieve this deeper meaning of an innovative, transforming and immanent ‘spirituality’ which necessarily reflects the historical experience of subaltern groups. Moreover, while both are opposed to the type of (often official) ‘religion’ that enslaves subalterns – with the promise of a future salvation - they are not ready to give up the ‘human spirit’ which animates creativity as a source of present-day transformation and of ‘new politics’, especially for those excluded from transformative processes. Recently, when discussing the ‘Spirituality and the Secular in China and India’, Peter van der Veer (2013) has highlighted the role of western modernity in shaping the ‘spirituality’ of these two countries along the lines of what he calls the “syntagmatic chain of religion-magic-secularity-spirituality” (2013: 9). Although in general terms I would agree with the relevance of this ‘chain’, I also maintain that this materialises differently according to the historical milieu of a given group. Even considering, as van der Veer does, both Gandhi and Tagore as the towering figures of ‘Indian spirituality’, we must allow for alternative ways in which subalterns and Dalits conceive and express their own experience of spirituality.

I. The immanence of ‘spirituality’

The complementarity and opposition between the material and the spiritual aspects of human life and experience has had a long history in western thought and it can be summarised in the binomial *mythos* and *logos* which appeared very early in Greek philosophy, with *logos* becoming the ‘Word of God’ and being adopted by Christianity in order to convey the message to the Hellenistic audience. Although the ‘rationality’ of *logos* seemed to prevail over both philosophy and theology, the tensions present in the binomial were still felt by

Reformation authors, despite the imminent arrival of Enlightenment and Modernity. In fact, notwithstanding the efforts of both Greek philosophy and Christian thought, Christian authors were never able to totally dispense with *mythos*, not even when Aquinas adopted Aristotle's philosophy so as to translate the Christian message into philosophically reasoned discourse. This mood was emphatically captured by Nietzsche at the turn of nineteenth century, but with lasting effects well into the twentieth century.

At the very beginning of Western philosophy we are told the mythical story of Plato's *Allegory of the 'dark' Cave*, resembling the meaning of Sophia, or philosophical wisdom, as depicted in Gnostic mysticism as the 'Goddess of Darkness' "who inhabits the burning womb of the earth" (Krebs 2004: 142). However, "Sophia is later saved from the realm of Chaos and ascends again to the heavens, [but] she remains ever faithful to the material world and so divides herself into two beings... This contrast between wisdom as light and as darkness ... gives some more depth to how we conceive philosophical wisdom..." (ibid.). This contrast, already acknowledged in Plato's 'dark cave', is still very much part of our philosophical, but also historical and contemporary political experience, since "There is no *logos* without *mythos*" (Martin 2014). Regarding the politics of *logos* and *mythos*, I would propose here a general formula which will become more evident as we proceed into our discussion: it seems clear that while those in power aim at controlling the 'narrative of *logos*', so as to exercise a rational authority, this can be achieved only by skilfully taking hold of the *mythos* of the masses and subalterns, which is then used to feed into and to sustain the *logos* in power.

During the twentieth century, the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka, proposing a critical reading of Husserl's diagnosis of the European spiritual crisis (Husserl 1970 [1936]), suggests a return to the pre-reflective stage of Greek philosophy, found in the mythological framework, so as to discover the roots of a meaningful philosophy in '*caring for the soul*', in order to make "the human world a world of truth and justice" (Patočka 2002: 36), notwithstanding the violence of the two world wars. In the midst of this brutal, inhuman experience, Patočka invites us to rediscover "*the solidarity of the shaken*", positing an 'anguishing question': "Why has this grandiose experience ... not had a decisive effect on the history of the twentieth century... Why has it not unfolded its saving potential?" (Patočka 1996: 131).

Patočka responds to this with a new, audacious metanoia: "Here we encounter the abysmal realm of the 'prayer for the enemy', the phenomenon of 'loving those who hate us' – *the solidarity of the shaken* for all their contradiction and conflict" (ibid.). Within "an economic conception of history" involving 'class struggle', Patočka maintains that this is "a struggle *in*

the sphere of freedom for broader access to freedom. ...” Moreover, “If, though, the class struggle is not an economic but a ‘*spiritual*’ and ‘*existential*’ matter, then it cannot be isolated from other *spiritual dimensions* which erupt in the sphere of freedom. There is not only struggle but also solidarity, there is not only society, but also community, and community has other bonds besides a common enemy” (ibid.: 149).

Patočka died in March 1977 from a brain haemorrhage, following exhausting interrogations by the Czechoslovak secret police, having protested against the communist government for infringement of human rights. Although it might seem contradictory to juxtapose Patočka and Gramsci, I am inclined to do so primarily because of their intellectual integrity and the way they both strived to make their philosophy socially meaningful, often favouring an heterodox or even ‘heretical’ route to achieve this. Patočka’s ideal of *care for the soul*, revolving around truth and justice for humanity, moves towards a politically relevant philosophy able to propose a political model conducive to human freedom for a historically situated humanity. Despite substantial differences, Gramsci’s ‘philosophy of praxis’ moves in the same direction, “from the standpoint of the materialist philosophy of history” (ibid.: 154), particularly when compared to Patočka’s ‘*social being* of humans’ (ibid.): “With this interest, not solely in *being* but in *social being*, the Czech philosopher incorporates into his study of Husserl and Heidegger a Platonically inspired devotion to the reality of human beings in community – in other words, *to politics*” (Findley 2002: 5).

For the purpose of the present discussion, I am mostly concerned to highlight the deep interest both Patočka and Gramsci manifest towards ‘religion’ and related themes, such as ‘spirituality’, not solely in general terms but as part of a human-lived and historical experience. At a time when the idea of God had been increasingly abandoned, it became even more urgent to reaffirm those human, ‘moral’ values which once rested on divine intervention and now were to be entirely entrusted to human commitment and responsibility, in order for them to survive: “Patočka uses the term *spiritual*¹ knowing full well that it does not “«sound pleasant today.» «It sounds,» he continues, «in some way spiritualist and we don’t like such phrases nowadays: but does there exist a better expression for what I have in mind?»” (Patočka in Findley 2002: 208). In other words, on what grounds does the moral/ethical accountability supported by both Gramsci and Patočka rest? Are they postulating a different and new humanistic and historical ‘spirituality’? And, returning to our initial question, is

¹ Findley is here referring to Patočka’s manuscript “The Spiritual Person and the Intellectual” which Findley himself had translated.

there a spirituality for the subalterns? Are we in a position to discover in the history of subaltern groups those “spiritual dimensions which erupt in the sphere of freedom”?

Gramsci betrays a perplexity similar to Patočka’s when using the words ‘*spirit*’ and ‘*spiritual*’, as attested by an early expression, written in a letter to his sister in law, Tania (19 March, 1927), when providing an outline of his entire project, which later became the *Prison Notebooks*. Having listed four main subjects – the first one being “a study of the formation of public spirit in Italy during the past century” (specifying this as “a study of Italian intellectuals”)² – Gramsci proposes a common ground for the four topics, which he finds in the “creative spirit of the people (*spirito popolare creativo*) in its diverse stages and degrees of development, [which] is in equal measure at their [four subjects’] base” (Letter to Tania, 19 March, 1927, in Gramsci 1994, vol.1: 82-86).³ This expression is never to reappear again either in the *Letters* or the *Notebooks*. Bringing to an end his reflection on this expression, Baratta (2003: 28-32) concludes that: “It should be clear by now that, given the contradictory echoes it awakens, ‘creative spirit of the people’ represents a conceptual gridlock, even though a suggestive one, because of its somehow blasphemous closeness to the romantic-idealistic tradition” (ibid: 32). However, before dismissing the concept altogether, Baratta seems keen to underline that the ‘creative spirit of the people’ is “certainly a formulation not only bold but versatile ... clearly anti-Crocean, indeed even scandalous for Croce’s conception of spirit, creativity, history” (ibid.: 29), but with the danger, nonetheless, of being interpreted in either a neo-romantic or populist fashion. Rather than abandoning this concept altogether, Baratta sustains that Gramsci in the *Notebooks* translates it – through a “reflection on philosophy” - into a new, revolutionary tool destined to open the way towards an “intellectual progress for the masses” promoted by the “collective intellectual”, as we shall see below. In this sense, Baratta is right when he explains that the ‘creative spirit of the people’ “represents the irruption of the ‘subaltern social groups’ ... into the venerable temple of spirit and culture,” clearly referring to the philosophy of Croce and traditional Italian intellectuals (ibid.: 29). Equally revealing is the expression ‘popular spirit’, used by the young Gramsci, which he was later to label as ‘folklore’. Most importantly, in the very same

² The remaining three subjects being: 2. A study of comparative linguistics; 3. A study of Pirandello’s theatre and transformation of Italian theatrical taste; 4. An essay on the serial novel and popular taste in literature.

³ For the translation of ‘*spirito popolare creativo*’ I am adopting here the translation by R. Rosenthal in Gramsci 1994: 80, as ‘creative spirit of the people’.

letter to Tania of 19th March, 1927, Gramsci expresses his desire ‘to do something *für ewig*’: “I am obsessed (this is a phenomenon typical of people in jail, I think), by this idea: that I should do something *für ewig*, following a complex concept of Goethe’s ... In short, in keeping with a pre-established program, I would like to concentrate intensely and systematically on some subject that would absorb and provide a center to my *inner life* [*la mia vita interiore*]” (Gramsci 1994: 83). Given the closeness of expression (*vita interiore*) used by Gramsci when criticising Manzoni for denying an ‘inner life’ to the common person (‘the simple’), we must assume that Gramsci is here not solely claiming the right to possession of an *inner life*, but he is also ‘caring’ for it (as in ‘caring for the soul’) and giving weight to it with the systematic intensity of a prisoner. Later, while referring to his “very hasty and quite superficial essay on southern Italy” (Gramsci 1978), Gramsci affirms again his desire “to fully develop in depth the thesis that I sketched out then, from a ‘disinterested’, *für ewig*’ point of view” (Gramsci 1994: 83).⁴ As we shall see, the ‘cultivation of inner life’ for Gramsci is not a private pursuit pertaining to the intellectual as an individual, but it becomes a task of his as a ‘collective thinker’, so as to aid and promote the inner life of the masses, by inviting them to develop new ways of thinking and new politics, as a common effort.

Though in the *Prison Notebooks*, as we have seen, Gramsci is very cautious regarding the use of terms such as ‘spirit and spiritual’ – given their ambivalence – the younger Gramsci, writing in *Il Grido del Popolo* in 1916 on ‘Socialism and Culture’⁵, seems much less hesitant. Following a quote from Novalis, who talks about the ‘transcendental self’ (*io transcendentale – io del proprio io*), and Vico’s interpretation of Solon’s and Socrates’ dictum “*Know thyself*” (see also *Notebook* 11, § 12) - in relation to human equality between plebeians and nobles⁶ - Gramsci starts to define culture in relation to socialism as “organization, discipline of

⁴ As Frank Rosengarten has rightly pointed out, ‘disinterested’ here does not mean the achievement of a “serene and ‘olympian’ detachment from immediate concerns” but a “more comprehensive ... frame of reference for his studies than his early political and journalistic writing could have afforded” (Gramsci 1994: 85-86, n. 3).

⁵ ‘Socialismo e Cultura’, *Il Grido del Popolo*, 29 January 1916. Gramsci signed this article ‘Alfa Gamma’. I would like to thank Marcus Green for reminding me about this relevant short article.

⁶ “Vico maintains that in this dictum Solon wished to admonish the plebeians, who believed themselves to be of bestial origin and the nobility to be of divine origin, to reflect on themselves and see that they had the same human nature as the nobles and hence should claim to be their equals in civil law. Vico then points to this consciousness of *human equality* between plebeians and nobles as the basis and historical reason for the rise of the democratic republics of antiquity” (Gramsci 2000: 56).

one's inner self [*proprio io interiore*], a coming to terms with one's own personality..." and the role of "one's own will" in shaping culture, since "above all, *man is mind* [*spirito*], i.e. he is a product of history, not nature" (Gramsci 2000: 57). 'Mind' is rather weak when compared to '*spirito*' in the original. This tells us that, for Gramsci, the attainment by humanity of a (socialist) consciousness is an eminently 'spiritual' enterprise. But in order to achieve this fully (as humanity), we must recognise the presence of this very 'spirit' within subaltern (plebeian) groups, as the 'fighting spirit' of historical achievement (and not of nature – a given interpretation of nature is what makes them 'untouchables'!). This, of course, comes to life all the stronger in the empirical experience offered by Ambedkar and Dalits.

II. 'All men are philosophers': Language, common sense, religion and folklore

(*Notebook 11*)

Gramsci does not provide a systematic or direct answer to the question raised at the beginning of our discussion concerning the '*vita interiore*' or spirituality of the subalterns. We can nevertheless find - especially in the *Notebooks* - scattered notes and memos, at times in aphoristic form, intended for further expansion. This is the case of § 204, *Notebook 8*, in which Gramsci sets down some general principles in preparing "an introduction to the study of philosophy." On point 1) of the paragraph he remarks that:

One must destroy the prejudice that philosophy is a difficult thing just because it is the specific activity of a particular category of learned people, of professionals or systematic philosophers. It is therefore necessary to show that all men are philosophers, by defining the characteristics of this ["spontaneous"] philosophy that is "everyone's," namely, common sense and religion (PN III, 8, § 204, in Gramsci 2007: 351-52).

In *Notebook 11* § 12 Gramsci resumes the argument as 'Notes for an introduction and an approach to the study of philosophy and the history of culture', thus making a relevant connection, adding that

... [T]his philosophy is contained in: 1. language itself, which is a totality of determined notions and concepts and not just of words grammatically devoid of content; 2. 'common sense' and 'good sense', 3. popular religion and, therefore, also in the entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting [*modi di vedere e di operare*], which are collectively bundled together under the name of 'folklore'.⁷

⁷ I am using here the translation provided by the *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (SPN, Hoare and Nowell Smyth Eds. 1971), but refer to the original critical edition of the *Quaderni* in Gramsci 1975 (ed. Gerratana).

With this added explanation, not only does Gramsci clarify further his notion of ‘all being philosophers’, but he places this philosophy within three interconnected spheres of ‘everyday life’, namely: language, common sense and religion/folklore.⁸ Gramsci further elaborates on this by addressing the points enunciated in *Notebook 8* starting with the movement from a spontaneous, passive and non-reflective ‘intellectual activity’ to one characterised by critique and self-awareness [*consapevolezza*]. In the four Notes following the introduction (Q 11, pp. 1376-78), Gramsci delves into the starting-point of critical elaboration,⁹ the contextual historicity of this process (“the real present world”), the role of language and dialect in shaping a conception of the world, and the ‘creation of a new culture’ as a ‘philosophical event’ shared by the masses. While reclaiming the supremacy of philosophy over common sense and religion, Gramsci advocates a “secular sense of a unity of faith” – perhaps defined as ‘ideology’ or even ‘politics’? – as opposed to confessional religion.¹⁰ This is reflected also in the relationship between science, religion and common sense, and in the discrepancy found in ‘institutional philosophy’ between ‘thought and action’. For this very reason, for Gramsci “philosophy cannot be divorced from politics” (ibid.). Gramsci is keen to provide an explanation for his almost aphoristic affirmations – “Philosophy in general does not in fact exist. Various philosophies or conceptions of the world exist ...” – and how this can be clarified by analysing the history of philosophy, “how it happens that in all periods there co-exist many systems and currents of philosophical thought, how these currents are born, how they are diffused, and why in the process of diffusion they fracture along certain lines and in certain directions” (Q 11, p. 1379). Gramsci recovers also the ‘popular image of philosophy’ present in the “healthy nucleus that exists in common sense” (ibid., p. 1380), by addressing the central question of the ‘ideological unity’ between the philosophy of restricted intellectual

⁸ If we expand the role of language, common sense, religion and ‘the whole system of beliefs’ – including also folklore – all these become themselves different ‘languages’ through which people – the masses – express themselves. Gramsci’s effort in *Notebook 11* is to understand and explain the place of these languages in relation to philosophy, and in particular to the ‘philosophy of praxis’, given that common sense is the “Philosophy of non-philosophers” and, as such, “it is the ‘folklore’ of philosophy, and like folklore presents itself in many shapes and forms” (Q 11, § 13, p. 1396).

⁹ “The starting-point of critical elaboration, the historicity of this process, which is ‘the consciousness of what one really is’, and is ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. Such an inventory must therefore be made at the outset” (Q 11, § 12, p. 1376).

¹⁰ “Note the problem of religion taken not in the confessional sense but in the secular sense of a unity of faith between a conception of the world and a corresponding norm of conduct. But why call this unity of faith ‘religion’ and not ‘ideology’, or even ‘politics’?” (Q 11, § 12, p. 1378).

groups and ‘the mass of the simple’, which Gramsci finds epitomised in “the strength of religions, and of the Catholic Church in particular” since, “The Roman Church has always been the most vigorous in the struggle to prevent the ‘official’ formation of two religions, one for the ‘intellectuals’ and the other for the ‘simple souls’,” although success has not always been the sole outcome.¹¹ Gramsci laments, however, the failure of ‘immanentist philosophies’ to “create an ideological unity between the bottom and the top, between the ‘simple’ and the intellectuals” and for not “constituting [rather] a cultural and social bloc”, not solely in Italy but “on a European scale”, following both the Renaissance and the Reformation.

In other words, Gramsci opposes “a specialised culture among restricted intellectual groups” in favour of one that, while overcoming common sense, “never forgets to remain in contact with the ‘simple’ and indeed finds in this contact the source of the problems it sets out to study and to resolve” since “[O]nly by this contact does a philosophy become ‘historical’, purify itself of intellectualist elements of an individual character and become ‘life’ ”(Q. 11, p. 1382). While Gramsci recognises the role of the intellectual effort of the individual philosopher, the latter is invited to practise philosophy starting from common sense – as a ‘diffuse, uncoordinated ... generic form of thought common to a particular period and a particular popular environment’ – because this common sense

... is connected to and implicit in practical life, and elaborating it so that it becomes a *renewed common sense* possessing the coherence and the sinew of individual philosophies. *But this can only happen if the demands of cultural contact with the ‘simple’ are continually felt*” (ibid., p. 1382-3).

There is no doubt that Gramsci is fully aware – albeit confined in a Fascist prison - of his contingent role as party leader, intent at formulating plans for the success of his party. In his planning, nevertheless, he is looking beyond an immediate victory for the ‘philosophy of praxis’, while searching for the deeper causes of intellectual, philosophical and political failures which prevent the progress of a genuine democratic process. While the ‘philosophy of praxis’ presents itself as a criticism to both common sense and the philosophy of the intellectuals, he laments “the absence of a history of common sense”, thus having to rely solely on the evidence of the history of philosophy. His effort, however, is to provide at least a component of the history of common sense discussing the example of religion, religious

¹¹ Gramsci is here referring mainly to the Italian experience. In this respect, his reflection on the role of the Jesuits in establishing a connection between ‘intellectuals and the simple’ still seems pertinent today, given the presence of a very active ‘Jesuit Pope’ (See Q 11, p. 1381).

institutions and in particular the Catholic Church: “The relation between common sense and the upper level of philosophy is assured by ‘politics’, just as it is politics that assures the relationship between the Catholicism of the intellectuals and that of the ‘simple’ ” (Q 11, p. 1383). Gramsci promptly remarks that the Church must respond to the “split in the community of the ‘faithful’, ” that the Church “does not even envisage such a task” and in the past such divisions were ‘healed’ by mass movements and “the creation of religious orders centred on strong personalities (Dominic, Frances)” (ibid., p. 1384).¹²

In the remainder of *Notebook 11*, Gramsci tackles the necessary unity of theory and practice, still ‘at an early stage’ also within the philosophy of praxis, the role of the intellectuals in this process, a possible loss of contact with the masses and the danger of a “deterministic, fatalistic or mechanistic element” as a “direct ideological ‘aroma’ emanating from the philosophy of praxis, rather like religion or drugs ...” (Q 11, p. 1388). Notwithstanding the fact that Gramsci – as others before and after him - hoped for a more rapid overcoming of ‘common sense/religion’ by the masses, through a process of historical self-awareness, he keeps returning to propose a reflection on Christianity, both in relation to the popular masses and the role of its intellectuals, and to make use of religious vocabulary and metaphors, while wishing to overcome these. In fact, according to Gramsci, the “intellectual position of the man-of-the-people (*uomo del popolo*) ... is determined not by reason but by faith,” so that “in the masses *as such*, philosophy can only be experienced as a faith,” albeit a faith “in the social group to which [one] belongs” (ibid. 1391). However, if the end result is the overcoming of common sense and religion, these still remain, in the majority of cases, an unavoidable path ahead, given that the tension is towards the creation of “elites of intellectuals of a new type which arise directly out of the masses, [those very masses imbued with common sense and religion] but remain in contact with them to become, as it were, the whalebone in the corset” (Q 11, p. 1392). Although the “culmination of this process can be a great individual philosopher,” the optimum result of this Gramscian project is brought to fruition solely by a “collective thinker,” who “must be capable of re-living concretely the demands of the massive ideological community...” (ibid.). Elsewhere Gramsci explains more in depth the idea-experience of ‘re-living concretely’ by the collective thinker, when

¹² Undoubtedly, Gramsci would have welcomed and assessed the role of such movements as the *Latin American Liberation Theology*, initially promoted by local intellectuals but which soon became widespread among the ‘faithful’ and ‘the mass of the simple’, taking the illustrative name of ‘Ecclesial (Christian) Base Communities’.

addressing in *Notebook 4* “the passage from *knowing* to *understanding* to *feeling* and vice versa”:

The error of the intellectual consists in believing that one can know without understanding and, above all, without feeling or being impassioned [*essere appassionato*]: in other words, that the intellectual can be an intellectual if he is distinct and detached from the people. One cannot make history-politics without passion, that is, without being emotionally tied to the people, without feeling the rudimentary passions of the people, understanding them and hence explaining [and justifying] them in the specific historical situation and linking them dialectically to the laws of history, that is, to a scientifically elaborated superior conception of the world: namely, “knowledge” (PN 4, § 33, p. 173, in Gramsci 1996; Q 452).

Further down this passage, Gramsci clarifies this “organic attachment in which impassionate sentiment becomes understanding and hence knowledge (not mechanically but in a living manner).” It is precisely in this ‘journey through experience and back’ that the Gramscian intellectual encounters and comes to terms with the “spirituality of the masses of the simple” and the subalterns. To be properly substantiated this statement should be supported by a further reflection on at least two major sources: i) *Notebook 25*, ‘At the margins of history’, in which Gramsci discusses ‘the history of subalterns social groups’, as he specifies in the subtitle, starting with (§1) ‘the drama of Lazzaretti’ and his religious movement, which flourished in Tuscany in the 1860s; and ii) *Notebook 27*, ‘Observations on «Folklore»’ (see Boninelli 2007), so as to develop what was said above on folklore as part of ‘popular religion and systems of beliefs’, given that “folklore should not be conceived as bizarre, an oddity and a picturesque element, but as something that is very serious and should be taken seriously” (Q. 27, §1, p. 2314). Only lack of space prevents us here from illustrating our reflections thus far through the contribution of the Italian ethnographer and anthropologist Ernesto de Martino (1908-1965). It suffices to underline here how de Martino “succeeds in gathering the critical, dialogical and fruitful validity of Gramscian thought” and “the propulsive originality of the Gramscian laboratory on Italy” (Pizza 2013: 85).¹³ Among the themes discussed by de Martino are: ‘the problem of the relationship between Marxism and religion’; the Gramscian “creative Marxism” present within the ‘living tradition’ of the working class; new parameters in interpreting folklore and popular traditions, and, above all, “a new dimension of the southern question” as attested by de Martino in *La Terra del rimorso*: “In a wider sense, *La Terra del rimorso* is our whole planet, or at least that part which has entered into its bad past ...” (de Martino 1961: 13). As far as our reflection is concerned, Pizza’s findings regarding a novel interpretation of the Southern Question

¹³ Pizza’s article (2013) has now been reprinted and expanded in Pizza 2015.

originating from de Martino's own 'south' can only confirm that the incorporation of the 'many souths of the planet' is not a forcing of the Gramscian text.

A further comparison between Gramsci and Durkheim - proposed by Massimo Rosati (2013) and aided by Bruno Karsenti's work (2012) – would also bring interesting developments to our discussion. This too, however, must be postponed. Besides a generalised interest in 'religion' as a social fact, Durkheim and Gramsci share many other conceptual constructs which, notwithstanding many differences and styles of approach, point towards the achievement of a human freedom and emancipation which fundamentally resides within the 'thinking person' being motivated by society. If we can appreciate a more speculative instance in Durkheim, we can certainly recognise a similar component in Gramsci's motivation to value the unity of 'thought and action' in his formulation of the 'philosophy of praxis' and the role of the 'collective, organic thinker', albeit within a more direct political stance in Gramsci's case. For both, however, the force for transformation springs out of us as social, thinking beings. There is no external 'force' which motivates our ability to form concepts since, according to Durkheim, "the force is created by us... because of the mere fact that we are thinking beings. It is transcendence, but transcendence within immanence. Society is we ourselves as thinking beings, that is we ourselves *spiritually*" (Karsenti 2012: 424).

III. B. R. Ambedkar and Dalit 'spirituality'

So far, following Gramsci's dissent with Manzoni for not recognising the presence of 'inner life' for common people, I have sketched a brief development of the concept of 'spiritual/spirituality' as interlinked with the Greek idea of *logos* and *mythos*. Although appropriated by Christian theology, this concept returned to philosophy with Enlightenment and Modernity. Closer to our historical milieu, I have briefly highlighted the 'spiritual crisis in Europe', as portrayed by Nietzsche and Husserl, and emphasised by Patočka's 'care for the soul' and 'solidarity of the shaken'. With a reflection on *Notebook 11*, I attempt to substantiate Gramsci's translation of 'inner life' as the task of the 'collective thinker' who, starting from and challenging 'common sense, religion and folklore', endeavours to motivate the masses – the 'simple' and the subaltern – to actively participate in the creation of new and emancipatory ways of thinking. The anthropological work of de Martino, particularly in southern Italy, provides a striking example of the Gramscian attempt. In this final part, I would like to illustrate what has been discussed thus far through the experience of Dalit groups and in particular of one among their acclaimed leaders, B. R. Ambedkar.

My early work on ex-Untouchables/Dalits - the Rishi of Bengal/Bangladesh¹⁴ - provides me with useful insights into the multi-layered meaning of their experience of untouchability and the responses offered by the group to overcome it. While the Rishi counter 'religious exclusion' (e.g. temple entry) with varied religious imagery (e.g. building their own temples, celebrating separate *pujas*, having their own priests and gurus), their final target is to achieve recognition as 'humans' (see Zene 2000) and being entitled to human dignity. In other words, the 'interdiction' imposed on the Rishi 'not to enter the temple', as the most visible injunction which prevents them from accessing or getting 'closer to the deity', represents for them the sum of all other exclusions: from social and public life, from education, politics, the economy, from intermarriage with other castes and, in one word, from 'belonging to one society', or, in Gramsci's words, being relegated 'to the margins of history'. Even though some extreme cases of exclusion have disappeared, what remains - despite the abolition and hence illegality of 'untouchability' - is a generalised attitude attached to everyday experiences that a given group is *de facto* considered and hence treated as 'untouchable'. Should even all traits of 'being untouchable' disappear, the stigma – and hence continuous humiliation – both for individuals and communities is nevertheless hard to die. The variety of names used to designate 'untouchability' gives evidence of its ubiquity in all spheres of life.¹⁵ It is, however, the initial overriding scriptural and religious sanction of untouchability which governs and motivates all other aspects, although our terms religious/religion fall short when trying to encapsulate and render the idea of '*dharma*', as the principle or law governing the whole universe, but also as individual and group moral conduct conforming to this principle, and the resulting obligations with respect to caste (*varna*), social custom, civil and religious law.

From a Hindu perspective, this is better understood as '*Sanatana Dharma*' or eternal dharma, as opposed to religion as such, as a mere human endeavour. On the other hand, the totality of *dharma* is certainly closer to the idea of 'religion' as a (total) social phenomenon, as

¹⁴ This group, known all over Bengal and Bangladesh as Muchi-Rishi, are by tradition leather-workers, cobblers and musicians.

¹⁵ 'Untouchable' is the equivalent of the Sanskrit *asprasya* (*acchut* in Hindi). Another term, popularised by Gandhi, is *Harijan* (child of Hari/Visnu). This was refused by Ambedkar who preferred instead the name Dalit (crushed, oppressed).

underlined by Durkheim, and as the conjunction of ‘religion, common sense and philosophy’, as expressed by Gramsci. Be it as it may, the Rishi’s experience of exclusion – as untouchables, impure, polluted etc. – is felt primarily at the level of *dharma*, since their *a-dharmic* status is at the basis of non-recognition of their ‘being human’. All other exclusions are but a consequence of this primary ‘permanent state of exception’. Hence, their determination to return to the ‘one *dharma*’ which foretells the ‘oneness of humanity’.

Prevented from belonging to the Hindu community – except as outcastes, outlaws and outsiders – they revert even to a foreign religion which, ideally, allows them to be considered humans. Their search for a ‘humanity’ to be recognised (“*We too are humans*”) guided most of my subsequent historical and anthropological research into the group’s experience and, in particular, of their ‘conversion’ to Christianity (Zene 2002). Expanding on this, in a more recent article (Zene 2007), I discuss the role of myth and mythmaking in the formation of the group’s identity, drawing on a set of myths which purport caste ideology and according to which the Rishi in the past belonged to a ‘noble caste’ and, supposedly, were the descendents of the very compilers of the Vedas. But their ‘greed’ relegated them to the rank of skimmers and leather-workers. While recounting these myths, the Rishi themselves would seem to abide to this interpretation, allegedly expressing a consensus to this ‘hegemonic ideology’.

Another set of myths composed around the figure of Ruidas, however, maintains that the Rishi and other ex-Untouchables were tricked and deprived of humanity and dignity by dominant groups in society. Although recounted in the sphere of *mythos*, their struggle to regain ‘human dignity’ does not dispense with *logos*, but returns to its rational, secular and historical dimensions without trivialising the ‘power of *dharma*’. Thus, “the idiom of religion and myth becomes for these ex-Untouchables and subaltern groups a ‘place of resistance’ from which they can hope to better themselves also in the economic, social and political spheres, as part of their overall endeavour to achieve full human dignity” (Zene 2007: 257).

Most recently (Zene ed. 2013), involving a group of colleagues in a common reflection on the ‘Gramsci-Ambedkar encounter’, we uncovered how their political philosophies concur to provide viable answers to the many questions posited by the shared plea of those ‘at the margins of history’. Our common reflection has perhaps managed to only scratch at the surface of this ‘improbable encounter’, but some unexpected hints have come to light. One of these can be found in the interconnection and multilayered dialogue between Marx’s ‘Jewish Question’, Gramsci’s ‘Southern Question’ and Ambedkar’s ‘Caste/Dalit Question’, which “above and beyond their specific milieus, are questions related by the substantive (even ontological) question of ‘recognition’ as a task for global ethics and philosophy” (Zene 2013:

5). Following the common thread of emancipation for all three questions, “the Jews become a metaphor for all (*political*) subalterns ... southern peasants turn out to be a metaphor for all (*territorial*) subalterns... with Dalits becoming a metaphor for all (*social*) subalterns” (ibid.:

6). While “in all three cases we obtain universal metaphors, respectively of political, territorial and social subalternity”, which reflect a specific milieu, the political-historical, territorial and social subalternity are mostly common to all subaltern groups.

In the remainder of this discussion, I would like to concentrate on Ambedkar’s role, as a Dalit leader, in promoting ‘people’s emancipation as auto-emancipation’ and his understanding of the ‘religious question’ as part of the solution for the emancipation of Dalits and other subaltern groups. Here ‘emancipation’ stands for the attainment of an indispensable human freedom which can guarantee full human dignity across the spectrum of human history, experience and everyday life. Prior to moving into this, however, I must also specify that the status of universality attributed to the ‘three questions’ does not divest them of their singularity and specificity as questions which developed in a distinct social, historical, geographical milieu and concerning very concrete human groups. This is better explained by having recourse to Walter Benjamin’s concept of ‘monadological universality’ (1968), as “that universality which consists in valuing as absolute each singularity [and] constitutes a colossal undertaking that goes against all the established and dominant conventions” (Mate 2001: 258), bearing in mind that “In order to reconstruct the whole, in order to advance towards [monadological] universality, the *language of the slave* is fundamental and irreplaceable” (ibid.: 261). The slave, even beyond a sociological and historical subject, stands here as a ‘metaphor’ for all those excluded from or ‘at the margins of history’ and whose voices are not present within a ‘universal history’ thus representing an example of ‘bad, inadequate universality’.

From this perspective, Ambedkar’s attention to the voice of Dalits and other subaltern groups contributes to the extension of the ‘Southern Question’ being applied by de Martino to the ‘many souths of the world’. At the same time the ‘Caste/Dalit Question’ raised by Ambedkar is not a peripheral question being absorbed into wider questions (Jewish and Southern), but a question which complements and clarifies the two previous questions, since ‘caste/untouchability’ pushes to the limit the quest for recognition and emancipation, accentuates the role of ‘religion’ and becomes a paradigm for other subaltern groups even beyond the Indian Subcontinent.

Although ‘religion’ – including in particular ideological/theological and ritual dimension – plays a relevant role when addressing the ‘caste/Dalit question’, Ambedkar sought to tackle the question from a multidimensional perspective. Even when his reply to the situation was embedded within a religious/ritual ‘wrapping’, as in the case of publicly burning copies of the *Manusmṛti* or when prompting Dalits to enter Hindu temples, as in 1930 at Nasik, Ambedkar made it clear that: “It is not true that entry into Hindu temples will solve your whole problem. Our problem is very broad. It extends into the political, social, religious and economic spheres.” Using a term borrowed from Gandhi – *satyagraha* – but applying it to the Dalits’ plea, Ambedkar is challenging the ‘violence’ still present within Gandhian non-violence¹⁶: “Today’s *satyagraha* is a challenge to the Hindu mind. From this true *satyagraha* we shall see whether Hindu society is ready to treat us *as human beings*.”¹⁷ The end result of this action in the sphere of ‘religion’, is not meant to achieve ‘religious’ equality, but rather human equality and full human dignity. In fact, “Ambedkar often resorted in his Marathi writings to the word *manuski*, in English translated as ‘humanness’ ” (Jaffrelot 2005: 92). Ambedkar is very specific when addressing the ineffectiveness of familiar religious rituals which, in themselves, do not contribute to the solution of ‘the problem’: “... We know that the god in the temple is of stone. *Darsan* and *puja* will not solve our problems. But we will start out, and try to make a change in the minds of the Hindus” (ibid.: 50).

The complexity of the situation – when addressing the ‘Dalit Question’, i.e. ‘the problem’ – is abundantly reflected in the multidimensional paths followed by Ambedkar, both from a tactical and a scholarly point of view, and produce a constant interchange between his role as leader and political activist, and his relentless reflection and analysis of relevant issues, which again are approached from a variety of disciplinary standpoints, but with only one main purpose in mind: the Dalit Question. This is echoed by the many scholars who, in discussion of Ambedkar’s activity, emphasize his commitment to a polyhedric methodological approach. Besides devising a social theory of religion which took into account the sociology contemporary to him - namely Marx, Weber and Durkheim – Ambedkar underlines the shift from a utilitarian religion in antiquity to one based on justice during modernity, which was closer to the moral principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. With the intent to provide a

¹⁶ While Gandhi adopted *satyagraha* to fight British rule in India, he did not, according to Ambedkar, extend *satyagraha* to oppose the violence suffered by ‘untouchable’ at the hands of caste Hindus. Hence, Ambedkar’s appeal for a ‘true *satyagraha*’.

¹⁷ From the speech of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, 2 March 1930, at the Kala Ram Mandir, in Nashik (Maharashtra), in the presence of 15 thousand Dalits.

critical analysis of Brahmanic Hindu religion (especially in ‘The Philosophy of Hinduism’), Ambedkar strongly sustains how modernity contributed to “the creation/formation of a religion that treats God as universal, dissociated from a particular tribe and nationality, and which contains an equalitarian and universal morality...” (Omvedt 2004: 56). This allows him to address the pressing question of the lack of ‘social revolutions’ in India, as a direct consequence of the religious imposition of the *chaturvarṇa*, the caste system, as an unjust and pre-modern moral code. Morality will indeed become the real indispensable centre within the concept of ‘religion’ as Ambedkar expresses it, in particular in his vision and implementation of a ‘new’ Buddhism. Not a transcendental and ritualistic morality, however, but one rooted in a ‘secular and materialistic approach’, on ‘scientific rationality’ and ‘anti-mysticism’ (Gokhale 2004: 124). This, however, does not imply that ‘spirituality’ is absent from this sound moral basis (ibid.: 126-128). In order to address the novelty of approach to morality, religion and Buddhism, Fitzgerald (2004) proposes to discuss four main concepts which help to highlight Ambedkar’s originality: 1. Ritual, as legitimation of power, and hence opposing ‘ritual institutions’; 2. Politics, “connected to ideas about ‘scientific’ rationalism and social democracy”; 3. Economics, which is “embedded in caste hierarchy” and supports “bonded labour as a form of slavery”; and 4. Soteriology, as “liberation from inequality and exploitation.” Liberation, however, “is not merely individual, it is a social, collective concern, and it is given a distinctively political emphasis...” (ibid.: 274). Fitzgerald recognises also that for many followers of Ambedkar “soteriology is not only political and social activism ... but has an important ‘spiritual’ or transcendental element as well” (ibid.: 274-5). So much so, that Fitzgerald needs to clarify that:

The word ‘spiritual’ is unsatisfactory since its range of uses is so wide that it has no clear meaning. However, there is a sense which we all have that ‘there is something more’ to a situation, and, in the context of practices such as meditation, the sense of ‘something more’ that cannot be reduced to mundane experience or states of consciousness is significant and a powerful motivation (ibid.: 281).

As we have seen, the word ‘spiritual’ proved problematic also for Gramsci and Patočka. In Durkheim’s case we could say that there is transcendence, ‘but a transcendence within immanence’, when we consider ourselves as thinking beings, “that is we ourselves *spiritually*.” Should we perhaps also divest the ‘practice of meditation’ as a total ultra-mundane and solely transcendental experience to make it a very human and immanent activity, as in the case of the many ‘philosophical meditations’ with which we are acquainted? But there is also another major issue to be taken into account, which brings us back to our initial question: when individuals in power, and as part of institutions of power,

express the view that ‘the simple’ – the masses, the subalterns, the Dalits – have no ‘inner/spiritual life’, they are not only trying to prevent the latter from attaining the highest level of human potential – the ability as finite beings to think the ‘infinite’ – but they are also preventing them from attaining any other goal in life. In other words, the control over the (symbolic) power of the ‘spiritual’, within so-called both ‘religious’ but also ‘secular’ societies, is extended to every other sphere of life, thus making it impossible to gain power without securing access to the ‘spiritual’ as such. This explains why “at the end of his life Ambedkar was sceptical of whether anything much had fundamentally changed (he remained an Untouchable Mahar despite being a cabinet minister) and turned to Buddhism” (Fitzgerald 2004: 271). While in general terms I agree that “those who are ranked at the bottom of Indian society today are poor not because they lack any intrinsic qualities that others possess, but because of the power others enjoy over them under conditions of modern capitalism” (Chandra 2016: 30), a considerable degree of power and control over the economy remains in the hands of those who, controlling the ‘sphere of the spiritual’, are still able to weaken and subtract, however they can, the ‘intrinsic qualities’ of ‘the poor’. Ambedkar knew that in order to achieve a ‘true liberation’ for his people he needed power: “What I want is power – political power for my people – for if we have power we have social status.” Equally, he needed to secure social status in order to attain power, as he pointed out at the end of his life:

Before I die, I must establish a definite political direction for my people. They have remained poor, oppressed and deprived and because of that, now, a new consciousness and a new anger are growing among them. That is natural. But it is also natural that this type of community becomes attracted to Communism. I do not want my people to fall under the sway of the Communists” (Ambedkar, quoted in Jaffrelot 2005: 86).

Ambedkar’s dissent with left-wing parties seemed always to be for very contingent reasons: “... if the Socialists wish to make socialism a definite reality then they must recognise that the problem of social reform is fundamental and that for them there is no escape from it” (in Jaffrelot 2005: 76). At the same time, Ambedkar always kept his ‘universalistic stance’ open to dialogue with leaders of other parties, groups and communities, so as to create a political opposition with a broader mandate, in order to include, together with Dalits, the vast majority of those affected by the violence of the caste ideology, including Shudras. Although some of his historical hypothesis might be questionable, as for instance regarding the origin of the Shudras (Ambedkar 1970 [1946]), his commitment to responsibility and to uphold the principle of a ‘social and moral consciousness’ bestowed integrity on his leadership.

At the end of his reflection on ‘Subaltern social groups in the *Prison Notebooks*’, Joseph Buttigieg reminds us of “one of Gramsci’s most significant insights: one of the greatest difficulties that subaltern social groups face in challenging the prevailing hegemony is finding a way past the barriers that prevent them from being heard” (Buttigieg 2013: 41). Judging from the impressive amount of activity in every sphere of life that Ambedkar carried out in order to make the voices of Dalits heard, it is reasonable to believe that he was aware of, indeed he experienced, this very difficulty.¹⁸ Should we take then his ‘conversion to Buddhism’ at the end of his life as a final act ‘so as to be heard’, or is there more to this? To be sure, conversion to Buddhism for Ambedkar was much more of a process that spanned a good part of his adult life, rather than the single act which took place on 14 October, 1956 in Nagpur, when he officially converted to Buddhism. The process had intensified during his last twenty years, starting in 1935 at Nasik district, when he declared that “*I was born as a Hindu but will not die as Hindu.*” A year later, at a Mahar Conference in Mumbai, on May 30-31, 1936, Ambedkar explained to the Mahar masses his views on the need for conversion (‘What path to Salvation’), calling it a ‘class struggle’, given the constant fight against the caste system, the permanence of Untouchability and the unwillingness of caste Hindus to reform. Ambedkar insisted also on conversion as the only path to true ‘liberation’ and on the need to place social change before economic progress, in order to make the latter more effective, in terms of gaining essential political rights while securing with conversion both ‘material as well as *spiritual* gains’. The day following his conversion, Ambedkar delivered a historical speech in Nagpur, touching upon many topics, in order to justify his personal choice (“this oath I made earlier, yesterday I proved it true”), to motivate Dalits to follow him, and to value the cultivation of mind and education. He also explained the roots of Untouchability (dealing with dead cows and eating cow meat), distanced himself from Marx and reiterated his opposition to caste, Gandhi and Hindu religion (“The Chaturvarna system was not created haphazardly. It is not just a popular custom. *It is religion*”). Since Ambedkar sustained that “For the poor, religion is a necessity. Religion is necessary for people in distress. The poor man lives on hope”, he therefore finds in Navayana Buddhism the only solution, because only Buddhism can guarantee immanence and radical secularism (“There is

¹⁸ When invited by the anti-caste group Jat-Pat Todak Mandal of Lahore to deliver a speech, Ambedkar wrote *Annihilation of Caste* (2014 [1936]), but the text was found ‘offensive’ because it criticised the Vedas and other Hindu texts and the event was cancelled. Ambedkar, however, printed and distributed around 1,500 copies of the text.

no place for God and soul in the Buddhist religion”), it is based on a ‘social Dhamma’ and on principles rather than rules, while resting on human moral grounds and not on ‘revelation’. There is no doubt that Ambedkar’s conversion was “an act of the greatest responsibility” (Skaria 2015: 451). But conversion for Ambedkar meant also a sustained criticism at different but interconnected levels: towards Hinduism and caste ideology; towards ritualistic and dogmatic religions in general; towards Buddhism itself, thus proposing Navayana Buddhism as a social religion – as opposed to an individual pursuit – committed to the promotion of social and political justice. In Gramscian terms, Ambedkar proposed to convert ‘as a collective thinker’.¹⁹ His conversion also contained a criticism of an incipient, partial ‘Indian democracy’ in which Dalits and other subaltern groups did not enjoy the results of Independence and self-government. For this reason, criticism was extended to both Gandhian non-violence²⁰ – which still involved violence towards these minorities – and to modernity and ‘secularism’, very much in need of ‘re-figuring’ (Skaria 2015: 451). All these ‘criticisms’ seem to be motivated by a common thread: opposition to various degrees of ‘violence’ perpetrated against Dalits and minorities. This being the case, it seems very logical and morally motivated that, when offered a choice, Ambedkar would opt to convert to Buddhism, rather than subscribing to the permanent violence, as he understood this, present within Marxism and Communism, when offering freedom and equality to the masses. Recently Skaria (2015), in ‘framing Ambedkar’s conversion’, raises a set of questions – ‘why convert to Buddhism?’ – including ‘secular responsibility’ and ‘the liberal concept of minority’. Bringing together Marx’s ‘On the Jewish Question’ and Ambedkar’s ‘Dalit Question’ - both Jews and Dalits are “outside the political community” – Skaria maintains that, with political emancipation (North America) ‘the Jew disappears’ (is assimilated?) in a ‘spectral civil society’, the question becomes a ‘*secular* question’ and “liberalism must create its concept of minority” involving “tolerance ... as a supplement to equality” (2015: 462). Indeed, Ambedkar “could never have accepted this resolution of the minor ... 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” (ibid.). In Ambedkar’s terms “human emancipation must now be conceived rather as the challenge of constantly questioning and supplementing political emancipation”

¹⁹ “If you at all decide in favour of conversion, then you will have to promise me organised and en-masse conversion” (Ambedkar, Bombay Mahar Conference, 30-31 May 1936).

²⁰ See, Arundhati Roy’s ‘The Doctor and the Saint’, Introduction to Ambedkar 2014.

(ibid: 463), including Marxism requiring ‘a permanent regime of revolutionary violence’, as discussed in his posthumously-published essay ‘Buddha or Karl Marx’. Skaria returns to both this paper and *The Buddha and His Dhamma* so as to indicate how Navayana Buddhism “is such a religion of reason, or how reason works when it is not a civil religion but a refuge...”, by highlighting the narrative of Siddharta Gautama and his ‘responsible’ refusal to submit to the majority, i.e. to political and civil society – a “participation without a part, without sovereignty – this is the first statement of the Buddha’s religion” (ibid.: 465). Ambedkar is, of course, reflecting on his own situation and his ‘responsible act of conversion’ as a leader and a collective thinker, but he does this only partly having recourse to the *logos*, since he finds in Siddharta’s *mythos* a pertinent ‘refuge’ to unmask his ‘homelessness’ in his own country, and his yearning to be included, together with Dalits and other minorities, in that ideal of justice present in the country’s Constitution, to which he so eagerly contributed. Ambedkar’s effort in favour of an all-inclusive Constitution was itself a ‘religious act’ of the highest significance, since, as he made clear in his speech at Nagpur, his intention was not to betray the hope of the poor: “The poor man lives on hope. ‘Hope!’ [in English]. The source of life is hope. If this hope is destroyed, then how will life go on? Religion makes one hopeful, and to those in pain, to the poor, it gives a message...”.

Concluding Remarks

There is one pending question that remains unanswered, which is not new but keeps resurfacing, even at present: the willingness of caste Hindus to consider and keep ‘ex-untouchables’ as an integral part of the Hindu community. This goes hand in hand with the position of untouchables who by emulating the upper castes would supposedly share the latter’s ideology, thus giving their consensus to their own untouchability. To say that Brahmins have currently updated their views on untouchability and relaxed their stricter codes of conduct for mere self-interest would be to trivialise the problem. Recently Guru in dialogue with Sarukkai (2012) has addressed some of these issues, highlighting the relevance of the phenomenology of ‘un-touchability’ and in particular the difference between the ‘deferential or ideal untouchable Brahmins’ and the ‘despicable or real untouchable Dalits’, which come down to the ‘ritually pure and the eternally impure’, that is, the untouchables as ‘walking carrion’ to be ‘purified’ (and burnt) (2012: 202-10). Indeed, it is because Dalits do not necessarily believe in the pure-impure binary, or reject to constantly subsist as “the repository of the impurities of the touchable” (ibid. 213) that the ‘touchables’ find it

impossible to sit at the same table to negotiate. Even the ‘Context of the Archaeology of Untouchability’ (ibid. 218-222) becomes redundant, pace Foucault, if we wish to go to the very root of the problem, which is in Ambedkar’s terms ‘the Hindu mind’. In fact, Guru himself resorts to using the more Gramscian methodology of ‘traces’ of untouchability and casteism in rural and urban India. An even more Gramscian stance would help uncover the historical traces of Dalit responses to untouchability and subalternity, when refusing to remain eternally ‘despicable’. I agree with Guru that Ambedkar’s response was pre-eminently political and not moral. His conversion, however, was an eminently ethical act and a moral choice: given that Brahmins were (and are not) ready to undergo a metanoia/conversion in order to integrate and welcome the ‘despicable untouchables’ into the Hindu fold, Ambedkar resorted to undergo this metanoia himself, inviting other Dalits to follow him. In other words, rather than accepting to be the ‘walking carrion’ and the ‘carrier of sins’ for the ‘pure and ideal untouchables’, he performed a different and challenging ‘religious’ act/karma which represented a refusal of what was expected of him, an anti or counter-karma, so as to nullify the bad-karma imposed on Dalits. At the same time, the choice of Buddhism allowed him to respond with a widely accepted non-violent ‘religious symbol’ but also to remain committed to a liberation motivated by a secular ideological stance.

Even when subalterns are crushed and oppressed they manage to find a way to react so as to reaffirm their full humanity, including by means of making their religiosity and spirituality more manifest, as a further indication of humanness. At present, the chanting of ‘*Hindu-Hindu : Bhai-Bhai*’ (“All Hindus are brothers”)²¹ might sound very appealing to Dalits’ ears, but many of them are more than aware of their dignity in the cities and their land in rural India being taken away from them, thus being deprived of both, the spiritual and the material. Not only do those who hold power put the subalterns’ ability into question, but they also actively seek to prevent subalterns from achieving this and, when both tactics fail, the best way the powerful can hope to nullify the subalterns’ spirituality is to appropriate it for themselves. According to Frosini (2013: 183) “the bourgeoisie... takes hold of the religious myths of the subalterns and uses them as the engine of the passive inclusion of the masses in the state.”²² Once robbed of their myths, subalterns are then deprived also of the ability to

²¹ Arun Patnaik, personal communication.

²² In *Notebook 13* (Q13, § 1, 1555-1561), Gramsci compares the utopian characteristic of Machiavelli’s *Prince* to the concept of the myth-ideology applied by Sorel to trade unionism. The utopian myth becomes here a necessary incentive for the people (‘dispersed and annihilated’) so as to “arouse and organise their collective will.”

interpret and recreate these myths, losing hold of their 'privilege' to be humans, but still remaining appropriated by the state. So much so that "bourgeois universalism, devoid of any proper content, absorbs the common sense of subalterns and re-organises its meaning. In this way, bourgeois power incorporates the utopian energy of popular religious universalism, rendering it functional to its own expansion" (ibid.). At times, as we well know, both political and religious powers have played different subaltern groups against each other, with the same end result being to deprive them all of their most cherished possession: the power of thinking - thus weakening the popular religious myths which are their only source of a striving utopia. If I were to offer a salient metaphor - returning to Plutarch's quote, 'there are no cities without temples' - so as to enhance the worldly materiality of the subalterns' spirituality, I would dare to say that temples of all times, in all the cities of the world could not have been built without the contribution, the suffering and often the death of many subalterns. No doubt many subalterns were unwilling workers, perhaps even slaves in the construction of 'temples', but this in no way diminishes their involvement in such enterprises. It is a fact that temples could not have been possible without subalterns. Similarly and equally relevant, in my view, is the subalterns' contribution to the treasures of 'human spirituality' and the 'life of spirit' which sustain human thought and activity, a very human, immanent and 'secular' spirituality, of which religious and political leaders of every conviction, as well as all those who hold power in society, should be very aware.

It took me some time to come to terms and to accept that 'spirituality' was relevant, in different but complementary ways, to both Ambedkar and Gramsci. For both of them not only is spirituality the driving force behind the acquisition of consciousness of human equality and dignity, but it becomes indispensable for subalterns and Dalits in order to achieve this, in a variety of degrees and via a (spiritual) critical consciousness (*consapevolezza*). In other words, Ambedkar and Gramsci reaffirm the presence of spirituality within the secular, as the place (*seculum* - within history) within which moksha/liberation happens. Not the postponed moksha proposed by Gandhi and 'religions' in general, but a present-day, historical and local group-liberation. In this sense, we can also understand - and perhaps even justify - the limited and at times contradictory 'liberation' accepted by Dalits who compromise with right-wing parties so as to achieve power in some Indian states, or by Dalits who prefer not to annihilate caste in order to preserve 'reservations'. This is however, in Gramscian and Ambedkarite terms, a 'short-sighted' liberation, not informed by the spirit of consciousness and/or 'conversion'; almost an

individualistic ‘liberation’ as compared to the liberation achieved by the whole group and, possibly, in conjunction with other such subaltern groups, as Ambedkar tried to achieve.

Far from making ‘Dalit a singular homogeneous social actor’ - I hardly use Dalit in the singular - I am pointing exactly to the opposite: homogeneity exists in so far as all share a common condition, but all preserve historical, social, political and life-experience differences, with different degrees of ‘fractured’ consciousness. For this very reason, a strict definition of ‘spirituality’ would have become an ‘external tool’ so as to achieve liberation, rather than an ongoing transformative source arising from the daily, historical (secular) experience of the group. For Gramsci, this ‘spirit’ is so very present in the ‘healthy nucleus’ of common sense, religion, folklore etc. while for Ambedkar it reveals itself in the ‘hope of the poor’ and the impulse to ‘convert’ (and reconvert). For both, the ‘task of thinking’ – as a means to achieving consciousness and self-awareness – remains paramount, thus presupposing for subalterns and Dalits the ability to ‘philosophise’, i.e. to express a vision of reality and to be able to intervene so as to transform a given reality, even in the midst of many contradictory and limiting choices. This is the real root of the ‘spiritual’: for the human to be fully-human, in all its dignity.

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