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The “Untouchable” Who Touched Millions: Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Navayana Buddhism, and Complexity in Social Work Scholarship on Religion¹

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Abstract

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was a twentieth century socio-political and religious reformer whose activities impacted millions of lives, especially among India’s Dalit community. This article illustrates his lifework and its lessons for social work scholarship on religion. Using the examples of Ambedkar and Navayana Buddhism, I discuss three sources of complexity for social work scholarship on religion: 1) religion may function as both oppressive and emancipatory; 2) religion is malleable, not monolithic; and 3) religion is situated in and interactive with contexts. I conclude with suggestions for how social work scholarship on religion may account for complexity.

Keywords: Ambedkar; Navayana Buddhism; India; Dalit; Caste; Social Justice; Religion

Introduction

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was a twentieth century socio-political and religious reformer whose work and thought have impacted millions of lives, especially among the Dalit community in India. Despite his eminence, there is little information about him in current social work literature. Dr. Ambedkar and Navayana Buddhism (the religious tradition that he birthed) are a worthy focus for social work attention because they offer a compelling example of the relationship between social justice and religion and of the complexity inherent to this relationship. This article helps fill the gap in social work literature on this influential activist and the lessons that his life offers disciplinary scholarship on religion.

First, I review current social work literature on Dr. Ambedkar and make the case that disciplinary scholarship on religion may benefit from a closer examination of his life, work,

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3 and thought. I briefly summarize these in the second section of this article. The third section
4
5 uses the examples of Ambedkar and Navayana Buddhism to discuss sources of complexity
6
7 that social work scholarship on religion may need to account for. These sources are: 1)
8
9 religion may function as both oppressive and emancipatory; 2) religion is malleable, not
10
11 monolithic; and 3) religion is situated in and interactive with contexts. Finally, I suggest ways
12
13 of accounting for complexity in social work scholarship on religion that are based on
14
15 strategies for establishing the rigor/validity of qualitative research (Crewsell & Miller, 2000).
16
17 While I limit the focus of this discussion mainly to Buddhism, I believe that the claims that I
18
19 make are relevant for social work scholarship on religion in general.
20
21
22

23 24 **Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and social work scholarship**

25
26 It is surprising that social work scholarship has not yet directed its gaze toward the
27
28 lifework of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, whom Christopher Queen (1996) describes as “the
29
30 Untouchable leader who earned advanced academic degrees in the West; launched a civil
31
32 rights movement, newspapers, service organizations, colleges, and political parties for the
33
34 outcastes; drafted India’s constitution; and led millions to a revitalized Buddhism” (p. 63).
35
36 Despite Ambedkar’s tremendous influence as a social justice activist and religious reformer,
37
38 all but a few Western scholars have glossed over his life and work (Queen, 2008). This
39
40 tendency is noticeable in social work literature. Searching the databases *Academic Search*
41
42 *Complete*, *Social Service Abstracts*, and *Social Work Abstracts* for articles that contain
43
44 “Ambedkar” anywhere in the body of the text and “social work” in the abstract or journal
45
46 title yields fifteen results. Of these, eight (Anand, 2010; Bhardwaj, 2019; Bhatt & Jamil,
47
48 2012; Dash, 2014; 2018a; 2018b; 2019; Tambe, 2006) only mention “Ambedkar” in
49
50 reference to an eponymous institution (e.g., Ambedkar College, Ambedkar Hospital). Four
51
52 others (Kumar, 2011; Singh, Gumz & Crawley, 2011; Sjöberg, Rambaree & Jojo, 2015;
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1
2
3 Wronka, 2016) make passing reference to him but do not offer information about his life or
4
5 thought.

6
7 The remaining three articles provide helpful, but limited, detail. Dunajeva and Ciaschi
8
9 (2017) demonstrate that Ambedkar’s anti-oppressive vision has spread beyond India to
10
11 influence the lives of other populations (in this case, Roma people in Hungary), but their
12
13 description of his lifework and views is confined to a short endnote. Barik’s (2000) book
14
15 review of *Ambedkar’s Role in Economic Planning and Water Policy* (Thorat, 1998) and
16
17 Singh’s (2009) article on post-Ambedkar Dalit leadership both offer insights into
18
19 Ambedkar’s life as a political reformer. Barik (2000) briefly describes Ambedkar’s
20
21 developmental vision, which focused on infrastructural advances that would “open a new era
22
23 of prosperity for the poverty stricken millions of [India]” (p. 511). Singh provides a helpful
24
25 sketch of the political parties that Ambedkar formed and describes his successors’
26
27 accomplishments and struggles.
28
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32

33 ***What makes B. R. Ambedkar important to social work scholarship?***

34
35 A reader of current social work literature might form an inkling of Ambedkar’s
36
37 relevance. However, this reading would leave almost completely untold the story of one of
38
39 the foremost social justice activists of the twentieth century. The story of B. R. Ambedkar
40
41 and Navayana Buddhism holds implications for social work because it exemplifies the
42
43 relationship between social justice and religion and the complexity inherent to this
44
45 relationship.
46
47
48

49 This relationship and complexity are important to examine considering that social
50
51 work scholars and practitioners, especially in North America, have paid increasing attention
52
53 to the topic of religion over the past two decades (Graham & Shier, 2009; Moffatt &
54
55 Oxhandler, 2018; Vetvik, Danbolt, Furman, Benson, & Canda, 2018). This expansion,
56
57 however, has generated ambivalence and tension. Social work literature includes perspectives
58
59
60

1
2
3 that emphasize religion’s positive contributions to social justice (e.g., Carlson-Thies, 2017;
4
5 Hodge, 2012) and also perspectives that point out religion’s role in perpetuating oppression
6
7 (e.g., Brown, 2019; Dessel et al., 2017; Kahn, 2015; Vanderwoerd, 2010). One may cite
8
9 examples in support of both perspectives, which highlights the importance of our professional
10
11 mandate to “seek to understand the nature of social diversity *and* [emphasis added]
12
13 oppression with respect to... religion” (NASW, 2017, p. 10). The multiplicity of perspectives
14
15 and tensions in regards to social work’s relationship with religion demonstrates that this topic
16
17 is one of complexity; complexity that rigorous scholarship must explore and account for.
18
19

20
21 It is difficult to imagine a better example of the complex relationship between social
22
23 justice and religion than that of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Navayana Buddhism. Ambedkar’s
24
25 life, work, and thought, which I discuss in the following sections of this article, illuminate
26
27 important considerations for social work’s treatment of religion.
28
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30 *A note on terminology*

31
32 The coherence of this discussion, however, requires early clarification of a term that I
33
34 use in this paper: *Dalit*. A variety of terms have been applied to the peoples whom the Hindu
35
36 caste system historically deemed “Untouchable:”¹ Dalits, oppressed castes/classes, backward
37
38 castes/classes, depressed classes/castes, scheduled castes/tribes, and Gandhi’s term
39
40 “harijans,” or “children of god,” which is typically considered patronizing and invalidating
41
42 by those whom it sought to describe. Lokamitra (1999) points out that using the term
43
44 “Untouchable” may imply that there is validity to the egregious construct of untouchability.
45
46 The term *Dalit*, while coming with its own limitations, is unequivocally a preferable
47
48 alternative. *Dalit* is a word that Dr. Ambedkar helped popularize and that gained ubiquity in
49
50 the 1970s and 1990s (Jodhka & Ponniahm, 2017). Mukherjee (2009) explains that “the term
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58
59 ¹ Although untouchability was constitutionally abolished in 1950, caste-based oppression continues in
60 India. For more information, see Human Rights Watch (2007, 2014a, 2014b).

is derived from the Sanskrit root *dal*, which means to crack open, split, crush, grind, and so forth” (p. 369). The word has the connotation of brokenness, and Webster (1999) points out that “Ambedkar chose the term ‘broken men’ [sic] [as] an English translation of ‘Dalit’” (p. 11). Zelliott (2013) notes the important fact that “Dalit is a self-chosen word [whose use] means that outside factors determine the status of Untouchables, not any inherent pollution” (p. 11). Thus, the community’s choice to name itself broken validates the cruelty that it has faced, while identifying systemic oppression—and not personal deficiencies—as responsible for doing the “breaking.”

An introduction to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar’s life, work, and thought

It was against this systemic oppression that Ambedkar fought, and, in order to appreciate Ambedkar the *person*, we must understand the *environmental* reality that shaped his life; namely, the Hindu caste system. The origins of the caste system and the nature of its relationship to other aspects of Hinduism are contested among scholars. However, there is agreement that this system, which stratifies society based on ancestral occupations, figured prominently in the ancient Hindu text *Manusmriti*, which was likely composed between the second and third centuries CE (Jodhka, 2016; Olivelle & Olivelle, 2005). While the caste hierarchy is complex and includes many subdivisions, its fundamental structure consists of four *varnas* (castes) corresponding to vocations: *brahmins* (priests), *kshatriyas* (soldiers), *vaishyas* (merchants), and *shudras* (servants). Roy (2017) points out, “The top of the caste pyramid is considered pure and has plenty of entitlements. The bottom is considered polluted and has no entitlements but plenty of duties” (p. 7).

Beneath even the bottommost stratum of the *chaturvarna* (four-caste) schema are the peoples historically called “Untouchables:” non-caste Hindus (*avarna*) and tribal peoples who are not part of the hierarchy and, consequently, are seen from the standpoint of this system as inherently contaminated and contaminating (Gannon, 2011). Kshīrasāgara (1994)

calls this structure, into which individuals are born and then locked into their social position, “a most venomous evil of Hindu society [that] has dehumanized a sizable section of humanity” (p. 9). The dehumanization of Dalits has included: widespread deprivation from drinking water, food, and healthy living conditions (Kumar, 2016); relegation to “physically and ritually dirty jobs that have been used, for generations, to justify their oppression, exclusion, and humiliation” (Coffey et al., 2017, p. 60), such as removing feces by the gallon from toilet reservoirs without the benefit of any protective clothing; and targeting for extreme violence and humiliation, including murders that often go uninvestigated and unpunished, public beatings, and epidemic rates of sexual assault and exploitation (Patil, 2016; Roy, 2017; Sharlach, 2016).

Overcoming an inheritance of inequality

Against this backdrop, B. R. Ambedkar was born on April 14, 1891 into an “Untouchable” family, thus immediately encountering ubiquitous social injustice. Jaffrelot (2005) describes young Ambedkar’s puzzlement over barbers’ refusal to touch his hair (i.e., to avoid defilement) and how, on a trip to see his father, the only drinking water available to him and his siblings was from a muddy stream next to the roadside eatery that served “Touchable” patrons. Such conditions followed Ambedkar into his school years. British law enabled Ambedkar to attend the same school as caste-Hindu children, but one that had him sit away from other students and on a burlap scrap in order not to pollute the floor (Roy, 2017). Even from such gloom, young Ambedkar’s luminous mind allowed him to succeed in a prestigious high school and college, after which he received scholarships to study at Columbia University and the London School of Economics. In an era when even a rudimentary education remained inaccessible for most Dalits, Ambedkar earned doctorates in economics from both institutions while also finding time to pass the bar exam in London.

Reform: socio-political and religious

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3 By 1919, Ambedkar had embarked on his life’s work of channeling his intellect and
4 passion to erode the oppressive, degrading role of the Hindu caste system in Indian society.
5 He approached this end via the interrelated means of socio-political and religious reform.
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10 Dr. Ambedkar’s socio-political reform efforts toward the abolition of caste-based
11 oppression were numerous and diverse, corresponding to multiple domains of social work
12 practice: social development, policy practice, political action, consciousness raising,
13 advocacy, and community organizing (Hare, 2004). Thus, only a fragmentary overview is
14 possible in this article. A prolific writer and incisive scholar, Ambedkar published an
15 extensive catalog of texts aimed at sparking socio-political awareness among Dalits and, to
16 this end, also founded several newspapers, such as *Mooknayak* (Leader of the Voiceless) and
17 *Janata* (The People) (Kshīrasāgara, 1994). In tandem with raising consciousness, Ambedkar
18 founded multiple civic organizations with anti-oppressive missions. Examples include the
19 *Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha* (Depressed Classes Institute), which served as a mouthpiece for
20 Dalit grievances to the government, and the Depressed Classes Education Society, which
21 provided housing and opened reading rooms for Dalit secondary school students (Zelliot,
22 2013). Blurring the divisions between organizing, advocacy, and activism, Ambedkar headed
23 large-scale non-violent agitation for water and land usage rights for Dalits (Thorat, 1998).
24 These issues—along with others, such as labor rights and equal representation for Dalits in
25 India’s legislative bodies—were central points in Ambedkar’s agenda as he fulfilled several
26 state- and national-level political positions. Ambedkar’s political engagement included
27 forming three political parties, appointment as India’s Minister of Law, and serving as the
28 head of the post-partition committee tasked with drafting the Indian Constitution (Jaffrelot,
29 2005; Singh, 2009).

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56 *The inseparability of justice and religion for Ambedkar*. Examining Dr. Ambedkar’s efforts
57 and perspectives quickly brings us to the relationship between social justice and religion; a
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relationship that, due to the uniqueness of caste and casteism, is especially forceful in India. Considering that the caste hierarchy is rooted in ancient Hindu sacred texts, it predictably follows that Ambedkar’s campaign against this system brought him into conflict with Hinduism and Hindus. Indeed, Ambedkar’s most influential acts of protest included publicly burning the *Manusmriti* and organizing for Dalits to enter Hindu temples—an act forbidden to them based on their supposed impurity (Zelliot, 2016). Queen (1996) notes Ambedkar’s external and internal tensions with Hinduism, evident in his frustration with caste Hindus’ opposition of his socio-political reform efforts² and also in his existential struggle to reconcile his—and other Dalits’—identity as a Hindu degraded by Hinduism. The resolution that Ambedkar found for this dissonance was to renounce Hinduism altogether, following through on the proclamation that he made to an audience of ten thousand people:

Because we have the misfortune of calling ourselves Hindus, we are treated thus. If we were members of another Faith, none would dare treat us so. Choose any religion which gives you equality of status and treatment. We shall repair our mistake now. I had the misfortune of being born with the stigma of an Untouchable. However, it is not my fault; but I will not die a Hindu, for this is in my power. (Ambedkar, 2003, p. 94)

A revival of Buddhism in India. Ambedkar did not only “not die a Hindu” but, moreover, initiated a massive movement of Dalit conversion to Buddhism. On October 14, 1956, Ambedkar and his wife, Savita, formally converted to Buddhism by taking vows and receiving precepts from a venerated Buddhist monk, Bhikku Chandramani (Stroud, 2017). Far from a solitary undertaking, this conversion took place in front of an audience of approximately half-a-million people, mostly belonging to the Dalit community. Ambedkar

² This frustration with caste Hindus’ perspectives is especially alive in Ambedkar’s strained relations with M. K. Gandhi, of which Roy (2017) and Singh (2014) provide excellent accounts.

then faced the crowd and offered to extend conversion to anyone seeking it. Almost everyone in attendance stood, giving birth to an entirely new Buddhist community in India. Queen (1993) points out that as many as twenty million Dalits have since converted to Buddhism, significantly transforming India’s religious landscape.

Several names have been used to describe the specific form of Buddhism that B.R. Ambedkar articulated and that is practiced by parts of the Dalit community in India, including Navayana Buddhism, neo-Buddhism, Dalit Buddhism, and Ambedkar/Ambedkarite Buddhism. The suitability of such labels is a complex topic.³ I rely on the term Navayana Buddhism in this paper and discuss several of its attributes in later sections.

While Ambedkar birthed the Navayana Buddhist movement, his own life ended before he could witness and guide its evolution. Dr. Ambedkar passed away only seven weeks after the initial mass conversions. One of his foremost priorities in the period preceding his death was finalizing the words of his magnum opus, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (Skaria, 2015). Nanda (2001) and Queen (1996) describe *The Buddha and His Dhamma* as the Bible of Navayana Buddhism, referring both to its structure (i.e., organized by parables and homiletic commentaries) and its function in the community of followers (i.e., a text for devotional study and for educating newly converted Buddhists into important rituals and practices). This work provided the doctrinal foundation for the distinct tradition of Buddhism that Ambedkar envisioned.

³ Senauke (2010) points out that such labels can often “carry a subtle odor of condescension—that [Dalits’] kind of Buddhism is something less than real” (p. 74). To this point, examining the text of *The Buddha and his Dhamma* and Ambedkar’s other collected essays and speeches demonstrates that he consistently referred to the system of thought that he presented as simply “Buddhism” or “*Dhamma*,” eschewing other descriptors (Ambedkar, 2011, 2014b). However, he did, at times, differentiate the type of Buddhism that he expounded, stating that “The New Buddhists will follow the teachings of religion which have been given himself by Bhagwan Buddha. They will not entangle themselves in the schism of Buddhism. It is because it has created sects like Mahayan and Vajrayan. This is in a way ‘Navayana’ (New Path)” (Ambedkar, cited in Mankar, 2009, pp. 491-492). Scholars such as Rathore and Verma (in Ambedkar, 2001) and Queen (1996) also seem to agree that the term Navayana is useful in that it implies the emergence of a new *yana* (the Sanskrit word for “way” or “vehicle”) in the evolution of Buddhism.

Sources of complexity for social work scholarship on religion

The story of B. R. Ambedkar and Navayana Buddhism is relevant to social work scholarship on religion not simply because it demonstrates the relationship between social justice and religion, but also because it highlights sources of complexity inherent to this relationship. Given the expansion of social work scholarship on religion and the resultant tensions and ambivalence, it seems necessary to understand and account for this complexity. In the following sections, I use the example of Ambedkar and Navayana Buddhism to illustrate three sources of complexity for social work scholarship on religion: 1) religion may function as both oppressive and emancipatory; 2) religion is malleable, not monolithic; and 3) religion is situated in and interactive with contexts.

Religion may function as both oppressive and emancipatory

That religion is a form of both oppressive and emancipatory power seems too obvious to mention and, simultaneously, too important to neglect discussing. Dr. Ambedkar’s life provides an especially compelling example of this fact. It was against injustices rooted in religion that he fought. Yet, harnessing religion’s potential for social transformation became his life’s work. For Ambedkar, the difference between oppression and justice was as clear as the difference between Hinduism and Buddhism.

Ambedkar on Hinduism as oppression

Few would deny that world religions—including Hinduism—have served and continue to serve as a guiding light for countless individuals. For Ambedkar and the Dalits for whom he spoke, however, it is exquisitely clear that Hinduism presented “a veritable chamber of horrors” (Ambedkar, 2014c, p. 296). There is no ambiguity in Ambedkar’s (2014e) charges that “the official gospel of Hinduism is inequality” and that “the doctrine of *Chaturvarna* is the concrete embodiment of this gospel of inequality” (p. 100). In his speech, *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar (2014a) offers multiple examples of such inequality:

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2
3 “...the Untouchable was not allowed to use the public streets if a Hindu was coming
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5 along, lest he [sic] should pollute the Hindu by his shadow. The Untouchable was
6
7 required to have a black thread either on his wrist or around his neck, as a sign or a
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9 mark to prevent the Hindus from getting themselves polluted by his touch by
10
11 mistake... The Untouchable was required to carry, strung from his waist, a broom to
12
13 sweep away from behind himself the dust he trod on, lest a Hindu walking on the
14
15 same dust should be polluted. [The Untouchable] must render services without
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17 demanding remuneration, and must accept whatever a Hindu is pleased to give. (pp.
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19 213-214)

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24 Continuing, Ambedkar chronicles oppression against entire communities, citing the example
25
26 of a village in which the Dalit residents were prohibited from drawing water from wells,
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28 allowing their cattle to graze, or even passing through Hindu-owned lands in order to access
29
30 their own. In consequence, the whole Dalit community was forced to abandon their ancestral
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32 home.

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35 *Ambedkar on Buddhism as emancipation*

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37 As the solution to such oppression, Ambedkar’s contemporary—and oftentimes
38
39 adversary—Mohandas K. Gandhi envisioned a non-stigmatizing, non-hierarchical system
40
41 that accords respect to people of all castes, despite confining them to hereditarily-determined
42
43 occupations (Roy, 2017). Ambedkar (2014a) saw such suggestions for reforming caste as
44
45 grossly out of touch with reality and, instead, adamantly posited a complete break from
46
47 Hinduism as the only viable option for Dalits. Simultaneously, he understood religion as a
48
49 central aspect of Indian life and as a force for the society-wide consciousness change that was
50
51 an indispensable precondition for meaningful political reform. Therefore, he did not call for a
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53 turn to secularism and, after surveying multiple religions, devoted himself to championing
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3 Buddhism as Dalits’ basis of emancipation from caste-based oppression. Stroud (2017) writes
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5 that

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8 Ambedkar was direct and clear about the need of this audience to embrace or convert
9
10 to Buddhism. In a Marathi speech entitled ‘I Shall Devote [the] Rest of My Life to the
11
12 Revival and Spread of Buddhism...’ Ambedkar extends his [recurring] point... that
13
14 the problems of India were not merely political; they were primarily those of religious
15
16 orientation. (p. 325)

17
18
19 Ambedkar’s adoption of Buddhism had everything to do with his perception of the
20
21 religion as all-inclusive and anti-caste. In his essay titled, *Buddha and the Future of his*
22
23 *Religion*, Ambedkar (2014e) writes, “The religion of the Buddha is morality... Buddha stood
24
25 for equality. He was the greatest opponent of *Chaturvarna*... Buddha wanted to take concrete
26
27 steps to destroy the gospel of inequality” (pp. 98-100). He elaborates on his claim by pointing
28
29 out that Siddhartha Gautama—the historical Buddha— admitted people into the monastic
30
31 order regardless of caste distinctions and, taking another step that was revolutionary for the
32
33 time, also admitted women into his religious community. By converting out of Hinduism and
34
35 into Buddhism, Dalits found “a strong ideological basis for questioning their subordinate rank
36
37 in the caste system... as Buddhism offered them an egalitarian doctrine” (Jaffrelot, 2000, p.
38
39 760). Said simply, for Ambedkar, Buddhism was a vehicle for social justice.

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45 Clearly, a reader of Ambedkar might form an exceptionally positive perception of
46
47 Buddhism and a correspondingly sunless view of Hinduism. But would this judgment
48
49 sufficiently integrate the complexity of religion? Roy (2017) points out that Ambedkar was
50
51 “wary of classical Buddhism, of the ways in which Buddhist philosophy could, had and
52
53 continues to be used to justify war and unimaginable cruelty” (p. 123). Indeed, one need not
54
55 imagine. Buddhist doctrine has been deployed to support the ongoing atrocities against
56
57 Rohingya people in Myanmar (Human Rights Watch, 2017), genocide in Sri Lanka
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(Tambiah, 1992), and Japanese imperialism in the decades preceding the Second World War (Ives, 2009). How are we to make sense of the seemingly polar difference between these realities and Ambedkar’s Buddhism of emancipation and social justice? Additionally, how can we reconcile the contrast between Ambedkar’s anti-caste depiction of Buddhism and other scholars’ claims “that the Buddha’s doctrine did not aim at transformation or improvement of the social conditions” (Krishan, 1986, p. 71) and that Hinduism did not actually engender the caste system (Nadkarni, 2003)?

Religion is malleable, not monolithic

Questions such as these evade simplistic answers and, instead, impel us to acknowledge that religious concepts and doctrines are malleable, rather than monolithic. Ives (2008) describes this malleability, noting that religions’ foundational principles—including compassion and non-harming in Buddhism, the Biblical Ten Commandments, and Judaism’s 613 mitzvot—have been the subjects of numerous, diverse interpretations. Religion, rather than existing as something uniform and immovable, has always reflected the values and perspectives of those who practice and transmit it.

We may appreciate this malleable quality of religion by focusing on Navayana’s emphases. Rathore and Verma (in Ambedkar, 2001) affirm, “Scholars have read Ambedkar’s writings on Buddhism as exhibiting a *political* reorientation that is significantly discontinuous enough with the history of Buddhist thought and literature to be aptly labelled—as Ambedkar himself did—a new *yana*, ‘navayana’” (p. ix). One example of this socio-political emphasis is Ambedkar’s rearticulation of Buddhism’s “three jewels”—buddha, dhamma, and sangha⁴—as “liberty, equality and fraternity... three fundamental

⁴ The concepts buddha, dhamma, and sangha are also malleable and—to use another of Ives’ (2008) descriptors—multivalent. *Buddha* may refer to the historical figure Siddhartha Gautama, and also each being’s potential for enlightenment. *Dhamma* may refer to the teachings of the Buddha, and also the fundamental nature of reality. *Sangha* may refer to the community of Buddhist practitioners, and also all beings as they exist in a state of interconnectedness.

principles of social life [without which] religion will be doomed” (Ambedkar, 2014e, p. 104). In the same essay, titled *Buddha and the Future of his Religion*, Ambedkar elaborates that this liberty is not only the existential or psychological freedom that individuals may experience, but, more critically, “intellectual freedom, economic freedom and political freedom” (p. 105). He clarifies further that equality and fraternity are values that must encompass all people, regardless of caste, class, or gender. In the same spirit, Ambedkar adds a socio-political edge to Buddhism by relying not only on its traditional methodology for salvation—the noble eightfold path⁵—but, furthermore, by exhorting his fellow Buddhists to “Educate! Agitate! Organize!” (Queen, 1996, p. 62). Clearly, Navayana is a marked departure from any interpretation of Buddhism that would prioritize individual growth over societal transformation or the harmonious functioning of a social order over struggles for justice.

Navayana also offers examples of religion’s malleability in what it eschews in comparison with other presentations of Buddhism. In the course of articulating a Buddhism of morality and justice, Ambedkar departed from the metaphysical and ritualistic quality of other Buddhist traditions. He instead made clear his standpoint that Buddhist doctrine is fundamentally rational and in accord with modern, scientifically-informed thought (Nanda, 2001). It is easy to understand the inclination toward rationalism and modernity, given Ambedkar’s unsparing criticism of the Hindu caste system as an evil arising from pre-modern religious dogma (Sumant, 2004). In contrast, Ambedkar advances the Buddha’s quest as a rational and systematic inquiry into the causes of and remedies to human suffering. As Queen (1996) observes about Navayana: “Missing... [are] the miraculous trappings of the old scriptures—the divine intervention of buddhas and bodhisattvas, the practice of magic and ritual, and the cosmic realms of time and space. Missing are the philosophical and

⁵ The noble eightfold path, one of the earliest teachings in Buddhism, includes right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. For a thorough explication, see Bodhi (2010).

psychological speculations of the Abhidhammikas, Madhyamikas, and Yogacharins” (p. 47).

Instead, the vision is that of a Buddha who “was nothing if not rational, if not logical”

(Ambedkar, 2014d, p. 350) and whose core doctrines, while concerned with liberation from suffering, keep in step with modern scientific thought.

Religion is situated in and interactive with contexts

That any religion contains an enormous breadth of perspectives is related to the fact that every religious tradition is situated in and interactive with contexts. Beyond simply acknowledging religion’s malleability, we may account for complexity by identifying these contexts. Referring specifically to Buddhism, Loy (2003) speaks to religion’s interactive quality by pointing out the influence of Chinese Taoism on the development of Chan/Zen, the Tibetan Bon religion’s role in shaping tantric Vajrayana Buddhism, and the influence of psychology and psychotherapy on Buddhism in the West.

Dr. Ambedkar and Navayana Buddhism provide a compelling example of religion as situated in and interactive with contexts. Sumant (2010) explains that, “being a product of the Enlightenment, Ambedkar shared the historical and rationalistic insights of the nineteenth-century reformers” (p. 67) and contemporary leaders in sociology, anthropology, and philosophy.⁶ An easily identifiable example of these influences is Ambedkar’s incorporation of the French Revolution’s tripartite slogan: *liberty, equality, fraternity*.⁷ And among the modern thinkers who informed his thought, John Dewey was especially significant.

⁶ Santosh Raut, scholar and teacher of Navayana Buddhism, points out that Ambedkar’s thought, while deriving inspiration from these influences, is not synonymous with them or reducible to a form of rationalism (S. I. Raut, personal communication, September 7, 2019). Ambedkar valued rationality not as an end in itself, but as a necessary condition for the flourishing of individuals and societies.

⁷ Ambedkar’s use of these terms is interesting in that he does not claim to echo or fully agree with the spirit of the French Revolution, but, instead, frames liberty, equality, and fraternity as modern concepts for articulating Buddhism’s original emphasis on morality. For example, in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar (2011) writes, “What is fraternity? It is nothing but another name for the brotherhood of men—which is another name for morality. This is why the Buddha preached that Dhamma is morality” (p. 173).

Dewey—one of Ambedkar’s professors at Columbia University—clearly made an impact on his Indian mentee, who later claimed that he “could reproduce every lecture verbatim” (Ambedkar, as cited in Kadam, 1997, p. 1). We see the strength of this influence in *Annihilation of Caste*, in which Ambedkar quotes *Democracy and Education* to characterize the Hindu social order as an obstacle to India’s progress:

Every society gets encumbered with what is trivial, with dead wood from the past, and with what is positively perverse... As a society becomes more enlightened, it realises that it is responsible not to conserve and transmit the whole of its existing achievements, but only such as make for a better future society. (Dewey, 1916, p. 24, as cited in Ambedkar, 2014a, p. 313)

Drawing on the Deweyan idea of “social efficiency,” Ambedkar denounces the caste system as not only immoral and evil, but also as an abject failure to harness human potential. As Mukherjee (2009) notes, “Both for [Ambedkar] and for Dewey, this efficiency can be achieved not by coercing individuals, but by providing them with a choice of vocation and education that will enhance their ‘original capacities’” (p. 364). This choice of vocation and education is, of course, precisely what the caste system removes.

And so, Ambedkar turned to Buddhism. But, as noted earlier, this Buddhism is neither metaphysical nor cosmological but, rather, a moral compass to guide society’s progress. As Nanda (2001) points out, this is an egalitarian and humanistic Buddhism that bears noticeable resemblance to Dewey’s (2013) “religious faith that shall not be confined to sect, class, or race... [and] has always been implicitly the common faith of mankind” (p. 80). And the Buddha of this Buddhism is neither supernatural nor superhuman but—in beautiful consonance with Deweyan religious thought—an ethical person applying rational means toward human flourishing.

Reflecting on the need to account for complexity

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3 Dr. B. R. Ambedkar’s story provides inspiration and, moreover, valuable lessons for
4 social work. In order to appreciate the importance of accounting for complexity in social
5 work scholarship on religion, we may reflect on the potential dangers of making unelaborated
6 claims based on a casual exploration of Navayana Buddhism.
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12 First, we might assume that Buddhism, on the whole, is a force for social justice. As
13 discussed, this would be inaccurate due to the fact that religions—including Buddhism—may
14 function as both oppressive and emancipatory. Making the unqualified claim that religion
15 promotes justice or human rights risks invalidating the experiences of the many people who
16 have felt its oppressive potential firsthand.
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24 Second, if we were to present Navayana Buddhism as a generalizable representation
25 of Buddhism *as a whole*, then our professed claims would be inaccurate. This is in no way a
26 criticism of Navayana Buddhism, which commands the same credibility of any Buddhist
27 tradition. I simply wish to point out the error that we would make if we were to generalize the
28 perspectives of any one branch of a religion to the entirety of that religion. The fact that
29 religion is malleable, and not monolithic, obligates us to make contextualized claims that
30 avoid overgeneralization.
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40 Finally, we would again risk inaccuracy by presenting Dr. Ambedkar’s vision of
41 Buddhism without accounting for the multitude of influences that nourished his thought. This
42 is no way a criticism of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. My intention is, instead, to emphasize that,
43 without identifying the contexts that interact with religion, social work scholars again run the
44 risk of overgeneralizing claims. As with any religion, Buddhism offers a cadre of social
45 justice luminaries. But scholars would err if presenting as simply “Buddhist” the thought of
46 Thich Nhat Hanh without mentioning the influence of Christian liberation theologies, or of
47 Joanna Macy without considering her integration of system theory and deep ecology, or of B.
48 R. Ambedkar without appreciating his admiration for John Dewey.
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Strategies for accounting for complexity

My hope is that this article—in addition to showcasing an eminent activist and a religious tradition that, for millions of people, is intimately connected to social justice—has also created the impression that social work scholarship, in order to present religion in a nuanced and rigorous way, must account for its complexity. What are some practicable ways to approach this task? The following strategies, far from being novel, are among those used to establish the rigor/validity of qualitative research (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I believe that they may also be helpful in advancing our discipline’s treatment of religion.

Triangulation

Creswell and Miller (2000) describe triangulation as “a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study” (p. 126). We may apply the principle of triangulation to social work scholarship on religion by using a diverse array of primary and secondary sources to illuminate specific principles or doctrines. Canda and Gomi (2018) provide an example of such triangulation in their description of Zen Buddhism’s *ox herding pictures*, which draws on ancient texts, scholarly treatments of Zen, and contemporary Buddhist teachers. Furthermore, their citations include both Eastern and Western voices. The result is a more informative and nuanced presentation than would be possible if relying only on contemporary, or Western, or non-scholarly perspectives. Considering religion’s malleable and interactive qualities, such triangulation seems a necessary step for crafting substantive arguments.

Disconfirming evidence

In addition to triangulation, acknowledging the contexts in which propositions are *not* applicable may increase the rigor of social work scholarship on religion and protect authors from making precarious claims. This is akin to searching for disconfirming evidence, which

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3 Creswell and Miller (2010) describe as “the process where investigators search through the
4 data for evidence that is consistent with or disconfirms [preliminary] themes... [while
5 remaining mindful of] the proclivity to find confirming rather than disconfirming evidence”
6 (p. 127). One example to consider is the claim that “Buddhism and Hinduism are not only
7 conducive to the values and principles of social work, such as respect for human dignity and
8 social justice, but also to the rebalancing of economic, social, political, and environmental
9 arenas of social organization and construction” (Carrington, 2010, p. 302; also cited in
10 Ramsundarsingh, 2019, p. 68). There is much evidence for this claim but also plenty to the
11 contrary. Previous sections of this article highlight how Hinduism has been deployed to deny
12 the human dignity of Dalit people and perpetuate extreme social injustices against them. As
13 noted earlier, Buddhism, too, has provided justification for violence and oppression (Ives,
14 2002; Tikhonov & Brekke, 2012). The fact that religion is malleable and may function as
15 both oppressive and emancipatory creates the need for social work scholarship to provide
16 specific, contextualized claims that are balanced by disconfirming evidence.

35 ***Collaboration & member checking***

37 Admittedly, identifying disconfirming evidence and triangulating sources are time-
38 and labor-intensive processes. Interdisciplinary collaborations may lighten the burden of
39 these endeavors. Since social work scholars’ primary concern is the knowledgebase of their
40 own field, it seems unlikely that they will possess the topical expertise of scholars of religion
41 in fields such as religious studies, philosophy, and anthropology. This highlights the potential
42 value of collaborating with specialists who are equipped to provide detailed information
43 about the historical, social, and political forces that shape our shared topics of interest
44 (Praglin, 2004). At present, it is difficult to find social work texts on religion that are co-
45 authored with scholars from other fields or that mention having incorporated feedback from
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3 such scholars. Pursuing such collaborations presents a growth opportunity for social work’s
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5 exploration of religion.
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8 Relatedly, social work scholars who make claims about religion may derive rich
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10 insights from consulting with members of the respective religious community. In a process
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12 similar to “member checking” in qualitative research, social work scholarship on religion
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14 may benefit from the verification of practitioners who “can confirm the credibility of the
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16 information and narrative account” (Creswell & Miller, 2010, p. 127). Furthermore, as lived
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18 religion is idiosyncratic and dynamic, collaborating with practitioners may illuminate
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20 different perspectives than those reflected in academic sources (Wisner, 2011).
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23 24 **Conclusion**

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26 It is ironic, but seemingly unavoidable, that this article—a call to account for
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28 complexity in social work scholarship on religion—only scratches the surface of its own
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30 subject matter: Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Navayana Buddhism. I have provided only a rough
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32 sketch of this champion of social justice who, for too long, has escaped the notice of social
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34 work literature. Undoubtedly, I have not accounted for domains of complexity that are
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36 important to this topic but, perhaps, beyond the scope of this article, such as Ambedkar’s
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38 differentiation between “religion” and the “*Dhamma*” that he articulated and, more broadly,
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40 where religious traditions fall on the spectrum between orthodoxy and orthopraxis (C. R.
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42 Strain, personal communication, September 3, 2019). Looking to the future, exploring how
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44 faith traditions and their practitioners have interpreted and shaped the relationship between
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46 religion and social justice presents rich opportunities for social work scholarship, especially
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48 in light of the religious convictions of Jane Addams and other eminent figures in the field’s
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50 development. This article only begins to touch on these rich topics, but, as social work’s
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52 conversation about religion continues to grow, my hope is that this introduction to Dr. B. R.
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Ambedkar and his extraordinary lifework provides encouragement, rationale, and a few practical ideas for advancing our treatment of complexity.

For Peer Review Only

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