

Is Ethical Religion Possible?

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Article Info

Article type:

Research Article

Article history:

Received 10 May 2024

Received in revised form
19 May 2024

Accepted 25 May 2024

Published online 07
September 2024

Keywords:

religion(s), concept of
God, faith, subjectivity,
intuition, transformation,
social emancipation,
reformation.

ABSTRACT

The paper concentrates on the philosophical discourses of four thinkers – Soren Kierkegaard, M. K. Gandhi, R. D. Ranade and B. R. Ambedkar on Ethics and Religion. Soren Kierkegaard, whose journey in philosophy made him pass through the aesthetic stage to ethical stage and ultimately religious stage landing in the realm of “faith”; where an individual arrives at without any rational commitment. M. K. Gandhi, whose journey in life encompassed politics, economics, and social realms where the underlying paradigm has always been religion. He did not consider ‘truth’ and therefore ‘morality’ as segregated from religion. R. D. Ranade, while mentioning the criteria of mystical experience, very empathetically mentions that a mystic (a saint) has the element of universality, is intellectual, emotional, has the intuitive experience of ‘spiritual realization’ and cannot be devoid of morality. B. R. Ambedkar, instead of accepting Christianity or Islam, consecrated into Buddhism; that befitted Indian contextual situation critiquing the popular Brahmanism, believed that religion must be in amalgamation and consonance with reason and scientific temperament. And this criterion was fulfilled by Buddhism (indeed with other criteria). His adopting Buddhism was more of a political movement rather than spiritual; therefore, his Buddhism in the transformed format, is called Neo-Buddhism. The research article concludes by comparing these masters’ views and ideologies in the context of ‘a possibility of ethical religion’ that has appealed my conscience.

Cite this article: Valmiki, A. (2024). Is Ethical Religion Possible? *Journal of Philosophical Investigations*, 18(48), 147-160. <https://doi.org/10.22034/jpiut.2024.61535.3762>



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<https://doi.org/10.22034/jpiut.2024.61535.3762>

Publisher: University of Tabriz.

Introduction

It is very evident in history that ethics/morality has a strong connection with religion. And religion or religious thought is said to be the first systematic thought of human beings. The so-called formal religions with their respective scriptures are laden with laws, norms, customs, traditions and forms of prayer and rituals. Are these norms and customs ethical? Ethics itself stands on the ground of subjectivity. Who decided what is 'right' and what is 'good'? How the word 'ought' to be significant in religion? Is the word 'ought' itself ethical? Religions of the world claim to be moral; be it Semitic or Oriental – morality is what according to majority of theists is by religion, for religion and of religion.

Again, religion does not have a single definition. The term religion comes from Latin 'religare', that is binding together, this makes the term religion more complicated and indefinable – the approach can be binding 'all', or binding human beings, or bind human beings with God(s). Again, we land up on troubled waters as soon as the term 'God' is introduced. Is He/She/It (the Supra Power) deistic or pantheistic or popular theistic (the Creator God concept)?

In the history of religious development, human beings have evolved religions granting it to be righteous; and partaking to this, the central concept – 'God' (be it deistic, pantheistic, or theistic) must be righteous and benevolent. In fact, when the concept of evil is discussed, according to Plato, David Hume, and J. S. Mill – God is benevolent but not omnipotent. (Tooley, 2015, Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy) The concept of God, according to these philosophers, is – God is good but not all powerful; therefore, evil exists in the world. (But this is again criticized by theists who believe God is both, omnipotent and benevolent. Then the question again arises – why there is evil in the world? There are many ripostes to this question, but ultimately one can find solution in some form of mysticism!)

De facto, it seems religion has also evolved in search of righteousness and religion has a strong connection to ethics. According to David Muzzey, "First, Ethical Culture is a creedless religion. The bond of union among its members is a common devotion to the cultivation of moral excellence as the chief duty of man. Contrary to the widely accepted teaching that right conduct depends as a corollary on correct religious belief, we hold that it is the conscientious striving for righteousness in thought and action that has constantly refined and humanized the dogmas of the creeds in a word, that it is not the church that makes good men, but good men who make the church." (Muzzey, 1967, 02)

In the process the concept of God emerged. This outlook was popularized by naturalists. Paul Tillich argues that religious language is symbolic, thereby suggesting that the religious symbols are like art forms, fabricated by human beings. Therefore, the concept of God is evolving and striving towards perfection. Though he does not deny God, God still is a human construct; and humans strive towards righteousness. So, what does my God want from me?

*“What doth the Lord require
of thee, but to do justly, and
to love mercy, and to walk
humbly with thy God?” (Micah 6:8)*

Especially looking back in the history of Semitic religions, these religions has aspired some kind of religious revolutionary reforms to instil ethical values in their respective religion. These values have been put on high pedestal than rituals (that seems secondary), though not side-lined. The same procedure follows in Brahmanism (popularly known as Hinduism) – from *Vedas* to *Brāhmaṇas* to *Araṇyakas* to *Upanishads* (the *Vedānta*) – the move has been more philosophical; and the paradigm shift from rituals to philosophy encompassing ethics is quite evident.

Therefore, religion does not remain just a quest to find solution to haunting questions like - why of creation of the universe? Why this life? What are these events of nature? And so on and so forth. But in course of its evolution religion has turned into an applied science (if I am permitted to use this term). In the book *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World* (2012), Dalai Lama proposes ‘a third way’ that transcends conventional religion and ethics for improving future human lives. This ‘third way’, is sort of ‘secular belief system’, a realm that goes beyond conventional religion. In fact, Dalai Lama holds the views of Buddha that relate ethics to ethics, and ethics to religion. In the former it is the ‘a priori universal ethics (or, ‘metaethics’) in relation to individual ethics and the later speaks of acceptance of ‘diversified religions of the world with the base of common ethics.’

So, the dilemma is – are these two power structures – a. Ethics and b. Religion – indispensable to each other or are they independent of each other? (Personally, I would prefer the second option.) There are two main versions of this dependence: according to the first, morality is impossible without religion, which is another way of saying that God is the source of morality and the only basis of its validity. According to the second, morality can be independently valid, but is contingent on religion for its implementation. This rational approach seems to be quite appealing.

The first version was formulated as one of the options in the famous dilemma posed by Socrates in *the Euthyphro dialogue* (hence forth: ‘*the Euthyphro dilemma*’) (*sic*). The dialogue concerns the meaning of piety, and Euthyphro suggests the following definition: *What is dear to the gods is holy, and what is not dear to them is not holy. (Euthyphro, 7a)*

Socrates then asks: *Is that which is holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved by the gods?”* (Sagi & Statman, 1995, 13)?

This dilemma is often discussed not when we consider ‘metaphysical attributes of God’ but a potent question posed while considering ‘ethical attributes of God’. Since God being central to religion, we come back to our former discussion – is ethics and religion connected? Or (going with the title of the paper), ‘Is Ethical Religion Possible?’

There are philosophers who have contemplated upon the issue of the relation between ethics and religion; the paper discusses the views of four such thinkers – namely – Soren Kierkegaard, M. K. Gandhi, R. D. Ranade, and B. R. Ambedkar. Why I selected these thinkers? Precisely because they raise a possibility of ethical religion.

2. Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)

A Danish philosopher and the father of Existentialism, to be more precise – Theological or Theistic Existentialism is worth mentioning now. [I would like to mention that Existentialism as philosophy is divided in two phases: a) Theological or Theistic Existentialism championed by Soren Kierkegaard and Secular or Atheistic Existentialism under the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche. The contemporary Existentialism was quite influenced by Nietzsche and made in vogue by Martin Heidegger and Jean Paul Sartre. While theological existentialism was kept alive by Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, Martin Buber, and Paul Tillich. Neither Kierkegaard nor Nietzsche believed in institutionalized school or belief system. For them existence, freedom, authenticity, choice, anxiety, ‘the process of becoming’ is more important than ‘being’ and existing individual was vital.]

Kierkegaard’s philosophy is a theological movement that led existentialism on the path of Christian theology. Considering Kierkegaard’s philosophy, it runs quite parallel to theistic mystics’ philosophy, those who have a strong hold on ethical tradition of religion. His philosophy talks about ethics not giving up theology completely. Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche – in their own poise renounce the formalized, institutionalized, and universal moral decree. They were indeed attracted to Kant’s creative will, and their anticipation was - that only the creative will can be judged as moral or otherwise. Though Kierkegaard and Kant differed in their philosophies on ethics and religion, and the connectivity of the two, Kant seems to influence most of the philosophers who came in post Kantian era; and therefore, Kierkegaard was no exception. No doubt, Kant’s concept of God is keeping with his axiology – the moral realm; and the related postulates, namely, Freedom of Will, Immortality of Soul and Existence of God are inevitably related to each other. And these postulates are the products of reason. While ‘faith’ plays a pivotal role in Kierkegaard’s moral philosophy and philosophy of religion; and God is realized not through formalized and institutionalized religion but through the ‘virtue of absurd’ and ‘leaps of faith’. As a matter of fact, Kierkegaard is considered a supra-rationalist. Does it mean he is completely against reason? According to Roe Fremstedal, Kierkegaard being supra-rationalist does not mean he is anti-reason. In fact, faith supersedes reason. Therefore, to say Kierkegaard is against reason is invalid argument. His justification of faith being above reason is only to go against the dogmatic acceptance of theological justification of religious principles that undermines the value of divine revelation and the concept of incarnation (Fremstedal, 2022, 9). Kant and Kierkegaard converge at one point where Kant’s postulates are of rational outcome while Kierkegaard’s ethical level of existence is also based on reason. And precisely for this he takes a leap, a leap of faith to reach the highest level

of existence, which is the religious level. The following paragraph deals with Kierkegaard's three levels of existence.

Kierkegaard passed through different experiential stages (though Kierkegaard has not explicitly mentioned these stages, it was the interpretation of Kierkegaard's work by American scholars] – the first stage is 'the aesthetic stage', this level is very explicitly mentioned in his pseudonym authored work *'Either/Or'* published in 1843. "The aesthetic stage of existence is characterized by the following immersion in sensuous experience ... nihilistic wielding of irony and scepticism.....and flight from boredom" (McDonald, 2017, Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy). But one cannot remain at this level only. The individual must move to 'the ethical level' which is – one, a limited sphere, or stage, which is superseded by the higher stage of the religious life; and second an aspect of life which is retained even within the religious life. According to Kierkegaard, the distinction between good and evil cannot be understood by only social norms and duties but can be understood only through 'God'. For example, if Abraham must sacrifice his son Isaac - cannot be justified through social norms, but is understood in the form of duty towards God. The question is – was Abraham right in accepting God's command to sacrifice his son? This cannot be decided by 'popular reason' as this is decided on the basis of 'religious faith'. Here the individual adopts 'a tolerance for paradox'. Therefore, to achieve one's ultimate spiritual identity, according to Kierkegaard, the individual must cultivate 'mores' like hope, patience, co-operation, excellence, devotion, and love. This takes us to the last level, that is 'the religious level'; which is based on "faith"; and as noted by Dexter Amend, "only on the basis of faith does an individual have a chance to become a true self. This self is the life-work which God judges for eternity" (Mendaglio [ed.], 2008, 111). For Kierkegaard, ethics and religion are concerned with 'the subjective', and inner, immediate consciousness of one's own existence. 'Self-contemplation' is the only contemplation that is needed for ethics; and 'God is not an externality either.' One can have ethical and religious truth by inwardness, going deep in one's own self. Kierkegaard's experiential stages rise on an ascending order – the aesthetic stage where Kierkegaard observes human being fancy the concept of freedom and dwells in that illusory world; the ethical stage where he witnessed the illusion of morality and humanism. The choice of Kierkegaard was to hurl both the first two stages and to convert into Christianity, finally adopting the standpoint of 'faith'. This being theistic existentialism it allows the individual to be guided by inner a-moral aspect (where immorality has no place). For Kierkegaard existence, freedom and in particular 'existing individual' is prior to reason. In his philosophy, ethics and religion cannot be separated; and like a theistic-mystic, Kierkegaard's approach turns social, and like a social reformer he approaches human existence, not bound in rules and regulations but freely accepting 'love' and 'hope' through faith.

As noted by Kierkegaard in his book *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), ".....nature, the totality of created things, is the work of God. And yet God is not there; but within the individual

man there is potentiality (man is potentially spirit) which is awakened in inwardness to become a God relationship, and then it becomes possible to see God everywhere” (Swenson [trans.] 1941, 182). Therefore, Kierkegaard seems to believe in strong the possibility of ethical religion.

3. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948)

Gave immense importance to religion in human life. He came from an affluent caste of *Vaishya* (the merchant and traders’ community). And his mother, the ardent follower of *Vaishnavism* (the popular form of Hinduism where there is acceptance of devotion to *Lord Vishnu* and his *avatars* [incarnations]). Gandhi lost his father at a very young age, so his mother rendered tremendous influence over him. Therefore, religion remained a primal factor in his life, a guide to moral life and paradigm for practical life. For him religion was a synthesis of *a priori* (ethical paradigm) and *a posteriori* (the moral paradigm). Religion, therefore for Gandhi was theory and practice in simultaneity. He can be described as ‘a saint of religious theory and practice.’ The theistic element was always predominant in him; therefore, philosophy of *Bhagavad Gita* (the holy text of Hindus) encompassed his moral realm where ‘working and performing one’s duty without expecting fruits’ was/is a prime virtue. For him, ‘a man without religion is life without principles and life without principles is like a ship without a rudder’ (Datta, 2020,124). His journey in life encompassed politics, economics, and social realms where the underlying paradigm has always been religion. He did not consider ‘truth’ and so ‘ethic’ as segregated from each other; and religion is intrinsically related to these virtues.

It is quite well known that Gandhi’s home in Porbandar, Gujarat, in Western India, was frequented by Muslims and Jains. His study abroad and working abroad brought him face to face with Christian friends and so with Christian ethics. Therefore, unity of religion was ingrained in him. Though being proud of being a Hindu and against conversion, ethics of all religions attracted him to accept that ‘religion is truth’ and ‘truth is religion’ [Often Gandhi is been criticised on his regressive attitude towards caste system in India that was intrinsically related to Hinduism. Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd notes,

Gandhi was not a caste abolitionist. He was an abolitionist of untouchability. Gandhi was against abolition of caste and varna order because he knew that the caste/varna institution is the soul of Hinduism. (Shepherd, 2019)

And he was all for Hinduism. Was it right on the part of Gandhi to keep up with this dual personality? Scholars are debating this issue till date.

Nevertheless, the basic principles that governed Gandhi’s whole life were ‘truth’ and ‘non-violence’. “For Gandhi, truth is the relative truth of truthfulness in word and deed, and the absolute truth is God (as God is also Truth) and morality – the moral laws and code – its basis.” (Murphy, 1991)

Living religions interested Gandhi and his deliberate attempt to arrive at the truth of all religions made him say, “I believe in the fundamental Truth of all great religions of the world. And I believe if only we could, all of us, read the scriptures of the different faiths from the stand-point of the followers of those faiths, we should find that they were at the bottom, all one and were all helpful to one another.” [Gandhi, *Harijan*, 1934]

As noted earlier, Gandhi has his say in matter of politics, economics, and social issues; underlying all these diversified issues there was this religious fervour to it. This was because of his quest for ‘truth’. His autobiography – ‘*The Stories of My Experiments with Truth*’ (published in serialized form, 1st US Edition published in 1948) – also concentrates on his struggle in search of Truth. For him, this ‘truth’ is nothing but ‘God’; this unique understanding is ultimately associated with his extreme acceptance of *ahimsa* (‘non-violence’). Therefore, his famous dictum, ‘I am not against evil doer, but the evil itself.’ (Datta, 2020,124)

If we are to talk about Gandhi’s most essential socio-political-economic ideologies – the first and the foremost – the ideology of ‘*Satyagraha*’ (‘the idea of non-violent resistance’), his concepts of ‘civil disobedience’ and ‘non-cooperation’, his ideal state concept – ‘*Rāmarājya*’ (the rule of Lord Ram) (thought debatable in present context) and ‘*Swarāj*’ (i.e. ‘Home-Rule’), the base for all this was his religious philosophy, especially Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Christianity. According to M. V. Nadkarni, “Though the Gandhian view of Hinduism put primacy on personal conduct and ethics, it did not eschew faith in God. But truth was God for him, and seeking truth was religion. Hinduism for him was a process of search after truth. As such, rituals found no place in his religion, though he did not object to others following rituals of worship, provided it was non-violent. Non-violence was basic means of search for truth. It needed no ritual. But *bhajans* or prayers with *bhakti* (devotion) without any sectarian bias were encouraged by him as the means of purifying mind, and strengthening one’s resolve to pursue truth.” (Nadkarni, 2006, xv)

From the above discussion on Gandhi’s ideas on philosophy of religion, one thing that comes out strikingly is he was never bent towards ritualistic religion. Though criticised of using terms like ‘God’, ‘Soul’, ‘Self’, ‘Truth’ interchangeably and therefore his philosophical discourses on religion had conflicting ways of argumentations; he still maintained his stance that was morality or ethics being intrinsic to religion. He does not seem to be considering religion in an institutionalized form mainly because then every individual religion will have its fixed mould; which Gandhi could not accept. So, he repeatedly maintained the ‘truth’ and, in that matter, ‘morality’ is his ‘second name for religion.’ So, the above-mentioned criticism is not justified.

Gandhi said (*Ethical Religion* 1930), “There is no religion higher than Truth and Righteousness.” (Kripalani [Compiled and Ed.] 1980:71) Explicitly it can be declared that for Gandhi it was not just possibility of ethical religion but religion and ethics are two sides of the same coin.

4. Ramachandra Dattatray Ranade (1886-1957)

(also popularly known as Gurudev Ranade [*Gurudev* meaning Master]) is considered a philosopher, a scholar and saint from Maharashtra. His philosophy of mysticism is central to his philosophy of religion. According to him, mysticism is a type of religion that brings people of all faiths together. Mysticism cannot be devoid of ethics. According to Harold Coward, "His writings are many, and especially known among them are his *Constructive Survey of the Upanishadic Philosophy* and his *Pathways to God Studies in Hindi, Marathi, and Kannada Literatures*. Ranade believed that mysticism is the real essence of religion and that in it all religions meet. 'The mystics of all ages and countries form an eternal Divine Society and there are no racial, no communal, no national prejudices among them.'" (Coward 1987:181)

Gurudev Ranade has given an elaborate description of 'mysticism'. He was of the firm opinion that mysticism is totally different from occult practices or mysterious or weird phenomena. As he believed that, "Mysticism denotes that attitude of mind which involves a direct, immediate, first hand, intuitive apprehension of God." (Ranade 1982:1) Bhakti-margins (the followers of the path of devotion) or mystics have complete experience of God through 'intellect', 'feeling' and 'willing'. They form eternal Divine Society in all times and in every country. In Gurudev Ranade's words, "There are no racial, no communal, no national prejudices among them. Time and space have nothing to do with the eternal and infinite character of their mystical experience." (Ibid 2-3)

There are few criteria of mystical experience as explained by R. D. Ranade (Ibid). They are:

1. The element of Universality: Mystics may belong to different faiths, places and come at different eras, and have different mentality, nevertheless there is element of universality that is common in all mystics of the world; there is no difference in the quality of their mystical or intuitive realization. Immanuel Kant confers upon this criterion of universality of mystical experience – objectivity, necessity, and validity. (Ranade 1982, 25)
2. The Intellectual aspect: As said by Shri Ranade, "It is not without reason that great mystics like Shankaracharya, or Yagnavalkya, or Spinoza, or Plotinus, Augustine, or St. Paul, or Gnaneshwar produced the great intellectual work that have lived after them." (Ibid 25-26)
3. The Emotional aspect: A mystic's emotional aspect is 'pure' or 'refined' emotions, completely controlled, and regulated by intellect. Spinoza's view on this matter is important as he talks of transcending this aspect of emotion to 'the intellectual love of God.' Therefore, knowledge or *Gnana* is very important.
4. The Moral aspect: As mentioned in Enneads 6.9.9. by Plotinus, a great mystic, 'The vision is not to be regarded as unfruitful. In this state the perfect soul begets – like God Himself – beautiful thoughts and beautiful virtues.' Moral life goes along with mystical life. Sant Gnaneshwar too, talks of high moral values and virtues in *Gnaneshwari (Bhagavad Gita in Marathi that Gnaneshwar authored)*. Gurudev Ranade says, "Then, again, so far as the utility of the mystic to the society is concerned, we may almost regard it as a truism of

Mysticism that a Mystic who is not of supreme service to the society is not a Mystic at all." (Ibid 28) In this context Ranade distinguishes between two types of mystics – a. Activist type, and b. Quietist type. In both the cases morality is nowhere comprised. The concern of the mystic is always ethical.

5. The Intuitional aspect: The personal aspect of mysticism is the ‘spiritual realization’ of a mystic. According to Mrs. Padma Kulkarni, in her book *Prof. R. D. Ranade as a Mystic* says, “Mysticism is a unifying principle of all religions. Mystics all over the world ‘have the same teaching about the Name of God, the fire of Devotion, the nature of Self-realization’” (Kulkarni 1986,19).

These criteria of mystical experience are a clear indication of morality relevant to mysticism that which is integral part of religion, according to R. D. Ranade. As a matter of fact, for Ranade, religion has to ethical.

5. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956)

who revolted against, and renounced the Brahmanical Hinduism to accept Buddhism as “Ambedkar understood Buddhism, religion, kinship and nationalism as or related set of terms with social and political interpretation, and that Ambedkar drew upon Indian cultural resources as well as ‘Orientalist’ interpretations of Buddhism in order to create a model for a moral community ideologically co-existent with, although not subordinate to, Brahmanical Hinduism and Indian nationalism” (Blackburn, 1993, 1-2).

Instead of accepting Christianity or Islam, Ambedkar consecrated into Buddhism; that befitted Indian contextual situation critiquing the popular Brahmanical Hinduism. He believed that, “Religion, if it is to survive, it must be inconsonance with reason, which is another name for science” (Singh, 2023). Categorically speaking, he believed that religion must be in amalgamation with reason and scientific temperament. And this criterion was fulfilled by Buddhism (indeed with other criteria). His adopting Buddhism was more of a political movement rather than spiritual; therefore, his Buddhism was metamorphosized into Neo-Buddhism. Ambedkar had endured the atrocities himself as he was born in a Dalit (the outcaste, the subalterns, also called untouchables in his times) family. Their estrangement from main stream Hinduism was the primary reason that he baptized himself and the Dalit community into Buddhism.

Though his father was a *Kabirpanthi* (follower of medieval mystic-saint Kabir from Banaras, North India), Ambedkar opted for Buddhism. Why? In fact, Kabir followed the path of devotion to ONE, Unqualified Ultimate Reality and his was a secular religion where any one religion was not in a privileged position. For Ambedkar this was quite befitting to Indian scenario. But in *Kabir panth* (the path of Kabir) did nor galvanize the movement for lower castes in India, and lived a subordinate and subjugated lives. Also, the path of Kabir was bhakti (the path of devotion) that was always humble and believed in surrender to the Ultimate One. Precisely Buddhism was other way round. Buddhism had a revolutionary background. The zeal of Buddhism can be characterized

as rebellious and antagonistic to mainstream Hinduism. And Buddhism was installed on rational outlook, equality, and humanitarian outlook. The religion believed in compassion and *metta bhavana* (loving kindness). Overall Buddhism provided all that Hinduism or any other oriental religion could not grant. Therefore, it was obvious for Ambedkar to convert into Buddhism. (Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism in especially India could not bereft itself from caste dogma; therefore, they were not suitable to the whole purpose for which Ambedkar fought.)

According to R. S. Khare, Ambedkar's choice of Buddhism was precisely against the back-drop of Hindu caste system, 'the presence of multiple "evaluative and decision-making structures" within the contemporary "Indian social order"' (Khare, 1993, 2); and Buddhism came from the same soil as Hinduism that took a bold stance against the later religion. The source from where Hinduism originated, the same socio-political-economic background, rose Buddhism, which made Ambedkar accept the religion for the suppressed classes in India. Buddhism having Indic origin was/is well eligible in place of Brahmanical Hinduism that too has Indic origin. The Semitic religions will not be able to feel the pulse of people here in India. Ambedkar therefore used strong 'polemical critique of Brahmanical religio-social dominance as the foundation upon which to develop an Indic based alternative to the Brahmanical social order.' (Khare, 1993, 5) Therefore, instead of displacing the traditional with the new was not his intention but to take resort to already co-existing religion, i.e. Buddhism; and to place it at par with existing Hinduism in a popular framework. This act of his would become the eye-opener for not only in India but also outside India.

In *Buddha and His Dhamma*, narrating Gautam Buddha's life, Ambedkar mentions the conversation between King Suddhodhana (who is a Hindu *Kshatriya*, the second in caste system, the warrior and noblemen's community) with Asita in Part I, 4, where Asita declares that the child (Siddhartha [popularly known by the name of Buddha]) will become Buddha, the enlightened One. In stanza 26, Asita says to Nardatta (Asita's nephew), "When thou shalt hear, Nardatta, that the child has become a Buddha, then go and take refuge in his teachings. This shall be for thy weal and welfare and happiness" (Ambedkar, 2006, 8)

From the above quotation, Ambedkar was very clear that parallel to Hinduism which has degraded in all ways – socially, politically, and spiritually, was provided with alternative religion, oriental in its origin, and that is Buddhism; and from the book – the welfare and moral aspect hitherto has been described.

As mentioned by K. R. Rao, "To Ambedkar, then, religion is a foundation of human life and society. This is because morality, and without moral foundations society cannot survive as a human society. Religion, then, is conceptualised by him as a system of moral values, a system of injunctions and prohibitions designed to promote a harmonious human life.....in which there is equality and brotherhood among members and one which is rationalistic in rejecting superstitions,

mysticism, irrationality, blind belief, and of course, God, who symbolized all these rejected elements” (Rao, 1993, 66-67).

Therefore, Buddhism for Babasaheb Ambedkar was not just a revolutionary religion but politically motivating, socially egalitarian in nature and most importantly anti-Hindu as for him Brahmanical Hinduism was unscientific as it accepted casteism (the gradation in society, in social order) and degrading spiritualism as it offered spiritual privileges only to upper caste people.

Therefore, for Ambedkar, the ethical religion is Buddhism.

Conclusion

All the four thinkers opted for religion as to uplift human life. And all four of them also showed the pathway to the possibility of ethical religion; but their ‘ideal religion’ (that is ethical in nature) varied from each other completely.

Somewhere there is a link between the views of Kierkegaard and Ranade, where ‘subjectivity’ is given due importance keeping aside reason (but arriving at this by reason) and no boundaries are drawn that can make an individual fundamentalist or fanatic. Kierkegaard gave utmost importance to ‘subjectivity’, and like Socrates, Kierkegaard felt that when one overcomes illusions, one move towards light; and this baptism is not rational or intellectual but like a mystic, an emotional and ethical one. This is so obvious even in Ranade’s philosophical elucidation of mysticism as religion.

Both Ranade and Kierkegaard would agree on the point that the religion they are talking about is the religion of mystics. These mystics (or mystic-saints) may differ temperament-wise or in their approaches, but their ultimate realizations are identical in content. This is quite explicitly seen in their writings, and other art forms that they have produced. Speculative philosophies may differ in their approaches as well as in conclusions. This is avoided by Ranade and Kierkegaard in their ethical religion; that is the non-formal religion of the mystics. The mystics’ vision is the experience of ‘identity’. The mystics and their experiences of unity are entirely independent of advancements in learning or civilization. Therefore, advancements of science or stratification found in society in the name of religion, caste, creed, race, class, and gender has no significance for them.

The point where Ranade and Kierkegaard differ is – Kierkegaard’s main interest in philosophy was not theoretical but practical. Therefore, he is a spiritual or existential pragmatist, who emphasizes more on the will, than either on intellect or on intuition. Ranade gives lot of importance to intuition. In fact, he considers the aspect of intuition as the most important criterion of mystical experience. The personal experience is judged by mystic by himself/herself. As put by Plotinus, in *Enneads* 6.6.18, ‘And yet, we here see but dimly, yonder the vision is clear. For it gives to the seer the faculty of seeing, and the power of higher life, the power by living more intensely to see better, and to become what he sees.’

Both Ranade and Kierkegaard brought high formal religious/theological philosophy down to earth and broadcast the seeds of mutual love, understanding concord and peace among people by raising the possibility of ethical religion. Here, I would like to put Kierkegaard and Ranade on one

hand and Kant on the other. Both Kierkegaard and Ranade celebrate the concept of faith and intuition respectively. (I take this opportunity to put faith and intuition in simultaneity.) Therefore, it seems obvious that Kant is on the other extreme, emphasising on the role played by reason. Kant's concept of God is an automated entity, the outcome of rational analysis of the first two postulates of religion (as mentioned earlier – 'freedom of will', 'immortality of soul' and 'existence of God'.) While in Kierkegaard and Ranade, in the levels of existence, faith and intuition supplant reason. However, neither Kierkegaard nor Ranade give up reason per se; but in levels of existence Kierkegaard accepts reason at ethical level (devoid of faith), and Ranade accept that a mystical experience is characterized by intellectual aspect. Both of them do not deny reason but at the highest stage it is only leap of faith and intuition that reigns supreme. So the distinction between Kierkegaard/Ranade and Kant can be understood from the following quote by Steven M. Emmanuel, "Against the traditional reading of Kierkegaard, according to which his view of revelation gives rise to an irrationalist conception of faith, I contend that he puts forward a suprarationalist account of revelation, and a pragmatic account of justification of religious belief. The absolute paradox is interpreted as a conceptual expression for the total incommensurability between an infinite God and infinite human intellect." (Emmanuel 1996:x) (So, neither intellectual nor scientific approach would do any kind of justification to divine revelation and the concepts of resurrection or incarnation.) [Though, many philosophers are of the opinion that Kant's ethics is heavily based on reason, while Kierkegaard's approach is of an irrationalist. I completely differ from this view. Kierkegaard is not against conventional wisdom at human level, but when one elevates to religious level, faith is sovereign.] Therefore, 'faith' becomes very important to raise the ethical kingdom of God. Again, giving 'hope' for actuality and possibility of ethical religion.

Gandhi and Ambedkar on the other hand, have one commonality, that is aspiring for ethical religion, and that is religion is not a segregated realm of human beings' life but completely connected to social, political, economic, and spiritual life of the individual.

Apart from this Gandhi respected all religions as he respected his 'own' Hinduism. (This can be criticised as it is a paradoxical statement, nevertheless understood as ethical taking whole of Gandhian philosophy). According to Bhikhu Parekh, three important concerns are to be addressed in contemporary times: 1. The need for intra-religious dialogue. 2. The need for inter-religious dialogue and 3. The need for dialogue on conflicts between religious groups having complex causes – say political or economic interests. Gandhi tried to address these issues, though one can critique those arguments. But he tries to initiate the dialogue and address these fragile and intricate issues. (Douglas [ed.] 2008) Dr. B. R. Ambedkar explicitly states the moral conflict between Brahmanical Hinduism and Buddhism. For him if the out-casted wanted to end their social isolation, they need to get associated with another community or religion. This kinship needs to be developed. According to him, "It is kinship which generates generosity and invokes its moral indignation which is necessary to redress a wrong.....Kinship with another community is the best insurance

which the Untouchable can effect against Hindu tyranny and Hindu oppression” (Ambedkar, 1989, 415).

The non-oriental nature of Semitic religions made Ambedkar give up adopting them as his own. He even thought of accepting Sikhism [known as the religion of Saints where Hinduism and Islam meet] but realized that the Dalit (the outcaste) community will be always given the position of second grade Sikh in the community. So, he thought of Buddhism and said to his supporters that you must ‘select only that religion in which you will get equal status, equal opportunity, and equal treatment (Ramendra, 2010).

While Gandhi said, “I came to the conclusion long ago... that all religions were true and also all had some error in them, and whilst I hold by my own, I should hold others as dear as Hinduism, not that a Christian should become a Hindu... But our innermost prayer should be a Hindu should be a better Hindu, a Muslim a better Muslim, a Christian a better Christian.” (*Young India* 1928).

But one thing is clear, both Gandhi and Ambedkar aspired for an ethical religion(s) that would emancipate the down-trodden, uplift the standard of living of those oppressed communities and bring about positive social reformation or transformation. According to Suhas Palshikar, “...the Gandhi-Ambedkar clashes resulted from their personalities, as well as their respective positioning in the contemporary political contexts. However, beyond these classes and differences of assessment of contemporary politics, there exists some ground where the agenda of Gandhi and Ambedkar might actually be complementary.” (Palshikar, 2014)

Finally, all four great thinkers accepted – 1. – Religion, 2. - With noble goals and 3. – Leading to the possibility of ethical religion.

As Kabir (the medieval mystic-saint from North India) says –

*‘Do not go to the garden of flowers!
O Friend! go not there;
In your body is the garden of flowers.
Take your seat on the thousand petals of the lotus, and there gaze on
the Infinite Beauty.’* (Kabir, 2022, 17)

As Rumi (Sufi-saint) says –

*‘Words are a pretext. It is the inner bond that draws one person to another, not
words.’* (Akṣapāda, 2019, 30)

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