

Religion Debate and Cultural Studies

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Noted anthropologist E. B. Tylor defines religion as:

A system of beliefs and practices, found in every culture, that formalizes the conception of the relation between man and his environment. It helps explain difficult and seemingly inexplicable events. Religion embodies the idea of a supernatural power and of personified supernatural forces. Ceremonies, rituals, and observances are used to communicate with the supernatural, with certain persons believed to have greater access. Religion organizes a group's members in a condition of solidarity and gives a broad base to social interaction, being a symbolic statement of the social order. Religion suggests a system of authority, which enables one to know what is right. It permits imagination to express itself. (1991, 451)

Religion, as a cultural anthropological construct, systematizes the beliefs and practices implicit in every culture. The notion of religion has been regulating the life of its believers in a specific way. Religion is basically a code of good conduct for human being but in recent time it has become very sensitive aspect which does not even permit the critical discussion in social life. Religion not only regulates the power structure and social structure but it works as the dominant ideology. It is undoubtedly a part of culture and at the same time culture is part of it. Means, religion and culture are interdependent aspects. Indian social milieu has been witnessing the hierarchized social structures sanctioned by religion. Here religion plays the role as a system of gradation which allows certain castes or groups at the top and rest at the bottom. Religion has become the tool of domination and exploitation. But still religion and its functions have seldom been challenged and interrogated. If religion is necessary for the transformation of man into a good human being, then, there must be a socio-cultural audit to see whether religion has succeeded in it. If not, there must be the examination of religion itself.

Religion is a cultural product and vice versa. Religious practice and traditions are indispensable aspects of any culture. These practices and traditions strengthen the given culture. Every culture has certain religious practices which become the cultural identity

of that religion. This cultural identity becomes an inseparable part of certain community. Without this identity it is impossible to survive for the member of that community. This is the reason why people adhere to their religion though it doesn't suit, most of the time, to their geographical and national needs. Religio-cultural identity has become, in recent time, the emotional aspect of people; hence, any debate and discussion of religion hurts the sentiments.

Cultural Studies basically focuses on the issues of power structures which are associated and emerge through cultural practices. The very establishment of the discipline of Cultural Studies is based on the study of power relations in the given social system. It is not the discipline, where, just cultural practices, paintings, literatures, dances, drama, fine arts etc. are studied, but cultural hegemony, political domination and power relations are also studied. Rather, the issues of power politics and power relations are the central issues in Cultural Studies.

Religion, as we know, has been playing various roles such as ideology, philosophy and instrument of domination, therefore, there must be the debates on religion and its various aspects. But, it seems that, the discipline of Cultural Studies has not given adequate space to the discussion and debate on religion. The present paper insists on the need of such debate in cultural studies. It also focuses on a very interesting religion debate through which the relevance of such debates in cultural studies will be underlined. The religion debate that I intend to bring here is very much attractive though apparently seems to be incongruous in geographical and historical locations. This debate specifically focuses on the doctrines of Marxian creed and Ambedkar's perception of Buddha's doctrines.

Publication of *The Essence of Christianity* by Ludwig Feuerbach was the most important philosophical event in West. In this book Feuerbach argues that an individual belongs to a material world in which he is not alone. He is part of collectivity. This collectivity is the real being, real existence and the individual is just a specific instance of the life of the collectivity or species. For Feuerbach, God is an idealized form of this species. This idealized generic man is projected as God and considered as the object of worship by an individual. Therefore, Feuerbach believes, religion is human self worship. This belief in generic man as the object of worship results in individual's self-alienation.

An individual becomes a divided being. He is divided into the idealized generic self and the limited and imperfect individual self. Feuerbach says:

Religion is the disuniting of man from himself; he sets God before him as the antithesis of himself. God is not what man is—man is not what God is. God is infinite, man is finite being; God is perfect, man is imperfect; God is eternal, man is temporal; God almighty, man weak; God holy, man sinful. God and man are extremes. (1979, 16)

This must be taken as Feuerbach's theory of alienation in the religious life. Feuerbach's central argument can be encapsulated, thus, as the emancipation of man from religion is the only possible way of escape from alienation. This interpretation of Feuerbach has been termed by many thinkers as an anthropological reinterpretation of Hegelianism. Marx appreciates, to some extent, Feuerbachian criticism of religion but repudiates his solution for the ending of alienation. For him Feuerbach's is the unsuitable solution. Marx writes *Thesis on Feuerbach* in which he maintains that Feuerbach's doctrines are purely contemplative and not 'action oriented'. Then what should be the solution for human alienation? What should be the action oriented program? These questions become the very basis of Marx's whole interpretation of the concept of religion. Marx, in fact, has not given anywhere a systematic interpretation of the concept of religion but the sporadic arguments which are scattered in his writing can be considered as his comprehensive statement on the notion of religion.

For Marx, the critique of religion is the premise of all criticism. But, before going for Marxian critique of religion we must understand the fact that his indiscriminate attacks on religion are mainly based on Christianity only. Marx also strongly believes that religion is alienation. His interpretation of religion can be summarized as follows:

1. Religion is the manifestation of alienated life.
2. It is false consciousness.
3. Religion, throughout history, has done two things; a) justified established social order supported the dominant class. b) Consoled the exploited, at the same time, by offering them in heaven what they have been denied on earth. This is necessarily a reactionary role. Marx in his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*

maintains that he has 'unmasked' the true nature of religion. According to him religion must be destroyed because it comes in the path of historical development of human beings. He believes that religion is a product of alienated life. It is, the self consciousness and self- feeling of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself.

Marx believes that there are two historical phases in man's development in cultural anthropological context- first, not finding; second, losing oneself. Not finding oneself is a primitive stage of man where he is still tied with umbilical cord. At this stage he is not yet grown as an individual. Losing oneself is the second stage where human productivity increases. Man attains individual consciousness. At this social forces begin to be active forces which confront man as equally alien. Thus we have briefly discussed the alienation of man. Now we will focus on self- alienation which results in religion. This can be understood from a very famous passage by Marx in *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*:

Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of the heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people. (42)

Marx declares religion as the opium of the people because for him religion is to create illusory fantasies for the poor. Economic situations deny real happiness in this life, so religion assures them that they will find true happiness in the next life. Religion is like a drug which gives temporary relief from distress.

Marx believes that the causes behind the suffering should be destroyed and real happiness should be enjoyed. Religion gives false happiness and fails to eradicate the reasons behind distress.

Religion is controlled by dominant class; it works to maintain traditional social order. Religion always safeguards the dominant interests, and gives false consciousness to the poor. Hence this is opium of the people which provides the belief to seek happiness in fantasy from unbearable sufferings in the real world. Marx's solution to this alienation is the abolition of religion and abolition of

private property. This will lead toward establishment of socialism which will be transformed into communism. According to Marx communism is the ultimate stage in the development of history where no religion will be required because people will be truly happy in real life. For Marx communism is the best system for the human being where there will be no place for religion. Marx categorically repudiates the necessity of religion and God because they cause alienation for man.

Now it will be interesting to discuss Ambedkar's perception of religion which is deeply influenced by Buddha's doctrines. Ambedkar derives his perception of the Buddha's doctrines from *Tripitak*. He puts:

- 1. Religion is necessary for a free society.**
- 2. Not every religion is worth living.**
- 3. Religion must relate to facts of life and not to theories and speculations about God, or soul, or heaven or earth.**
- 4. It is wrong to make God centre of religion.**
- 5. It is wrong to make salvation of the soul the centre of religion.**
- 6. It is wrong to make animal sacrifice the centre of religion.**
- 7. Real religion lives in the heart of man and not in the Shastras.**
- 8. Man and morality must be the centre of religion. If not, religion is cruel superstition.**
- 9. It is not enough for morality to be the ideal of life. Since there is no God, it must become the law of life.**
- 10. The function of religion is to reconstruct the world and to make it happy and not to explain its origin or its end.**
- 11. That unhappiness in the world is due to conflict of interest and the only way to solve is to follow the Ashtang Marg.**
- 12. The private property brings power to one class and sorrow to another.**
- 13. That it is necessary for the good of the society that this sorrow is removed by removing cause.**

- 14. All human beings are equal.**
 - 15. Worth, and not the birth, is measure of man.**
 - 16. What is important is high ideals and not Nobel birth.**
 - 17. Maitri or fellowship towards all must never be abandoned. One owes it even to one's enemy.**
 - 18. Everyone has right to learn. learning is necessary for man to live as food is.**
 - 19. Learning without character is dangerous.**
 - 20. Nothing is infallible. Nothing is binding forever, everything is subject to enquiry and examination.**
 - 21. Nothing is final.**
 - 22. Everything is subject to the law of causation.**
 - 23. Nothing is permanent or Sanatan. Everything is subject to change. Being is always becoming.**
 - 24. War is wrong, unless it is for truth and justice.**
 - 25. The victor has duties towards the vanquished.**
- (442-43)

Ambedkar argues that Buddha's doctrine is human centric i. e. not God centric, it is highly scientific i. e. there is no place for any sort of superstition, it is the proclamation of social justice and equality. Maitri or fellowship is indispensable feature of Buddha's doctrine. We notice a bit resemblance in the positions of Marx and Ambedkar on the concept of religion. Ambedkar is insisting on the necessity of Buddha's doctrine for the real happiness and welfare of the humanity. It must be understood that Ambedkar's religious position has been formed after a long and in depth study of all existing religions, while Marx's position is restricted to Christianity. He has not adequately studied all the religions; therefore his generalized perception of the concept of religion is not applicable to Buddhism.

Certainly there are some analogous elements between Marx and Buddha, but there are certain fundamental differences which must be seen in comparative perspective as stated by Ambedkar himself. He says

Even when the communism- which is another name for the dictatorship of the Proletariat- came to Russia, it did not come as something inevitable without any kind of human effort. There was a revolution and much deliberate planning had to be done with a lot of violence and bloodshed, before it could step into Russia. The rest of the world is still waiting for coming of the proletarian Dictatorship.....

.....Nobody now accepts the economic interpretation of history as the only explanation of history. Nobody accepts that the proletariat has been progressively pauperized. And then same is true about his other premise. (444)

Ambedkar does not fully accept Marx's proposal of communism as the solution for religious distress, but pinpoints the four points from his doctrines which according to Ambedkar are the crucial aspects. He argues:

What remains of the Karl Marx is a residue of fire, small but very important. The residue in my view consists of four items:

- i. The function of philosophy is to reconstruct the world and not to waste its time in explaining the origin of the world.**
- ii. That there is a conflict of interest between class and class.**
- iii. The private ownership of property brings power to one class and sorrow to another through exploitation.**
- iv. That it is necessary for the good of society that the sorrow be removed by the abolition of private property. (444)**

According to Ambedkar the above four items are 'very important' and very close to Buddha's doctrine. Ambedkar has raised crucial doubts about the whole process of reaching towards communism. Marx's proposition of 'withering away of states' is the most important shift in the process of attaining communism. Ambedkar questions this proposition thus:

When will it wither away? What will take the place of the state when it withers away? To the first question they can give no definite time. Dictatorship for a short period may be good and a welcome thing even for making democracy safe.....

The communists have given no answer. At any rate no satisfactory answer to the question what would take place of the state when it withers away, though this question is more important than the question when the state will wither away. Will it be succeeded by Anarchy? If so the building up of the Communist State is an useless effort. (460)

Ambedkar pinpoints the inadequacies in the ultimate stage in human history as proposed by Marx. Necessity of religion is out rightly rejected by Marx, but Ambedkar seems to be thinking very seriously about it. Ambedkar argues that if establishment of communism is by force, then, what will happen after force is withdrawn? How communism will sustain? (460). If at all communist values are to survive force will not be a permanent solution. He states:

The only thing which could sustain it after force is withdrawn is Religion. But to the communists Religion is anathema. Their hatred to religion is so deep seated that they will not even discriminate between religions which are helpful to communism and religions which are not. The communists have carried their hatred of Christianity to

**Buddhism without waiting to examine the difference between the two.
(460)**

Further, continuing his argument Ambedkar puts:

The Russians do not seem to be paying any attention to Buddhism as an ultimate aid to sustain Communism when force is withdrawn. The Russians are proud of their communism. But they forget that the wonder of all wonders is that the Buddha established Communism so far as the Sangh was concerned without dictatorship. It may be that it was a Communism on a very small scale but it was communism without dictatorship a miracle which Lenin failed to do. (461)

Ambedkar emphasizes, again and again, on the need of communism without imposition of force. While focusing on the difference between Buddha and Marx he writes:

The Buddha's method was different, His method was to change the mind of man: to alter his disposition: so that whatever man does it voluntarily without the use of force or compulsion. His main means to alter the disposition of men was his Dhamma. The Buddha's way was not to force people to do what they did not like to do although it was good for them. His way was to alter the disposition of men so that they would do voluntarily what they would not otherwise to do. (461)

We have briefly discussed Marx's and Ambedkar's position on religion. There are certain essential analogies and differences which have to be seriously examined and brought in the purview of the discipline of Cultural Studies. This religion debate will definitely enrich the school of Cultural Studies and open a new intellectual area of religion discussion in comparative perspective.

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