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On Interpretation and Appropriation in Modern Buddhism

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In his essay “Dr. Ambedkar and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation”, Christopher S. Queen refers to Ambedkar as a “postmodern man.” Ambedkar was among the most influential figures in Indian national politics in the 20th century. His intentional conversion to Buddhism near his death was followed by an unprecedented number of mass conversions among the Untouchables of India, those of the caste he was born into and whose oppression under India’s caste system he strove to end. Six weeks after his conversion, Ambedkar passed away, leaving a book which interpreted Buddhism for the Untouchables: The Buddha and His Dhamma. Among Buddhist scholars, the book drew controversy—the Four noble truths were omitted, and the Buddha’s original messages of personal, spiritual liberation from craving were replaced with calls for social liberation from suffering caused by social injustice. Analyzing Ambedkar’s reimagined Dhamma, Queen writes:

[Ambedkar was] one driven not only to choose a religious tradition, but to dismantle and reassemble it with elements of faith and practice appropriated in his wide-ranging studies and travels in Asia and the West. This was a hermeneutic task, a critical assessment of ancient and modern meanings, their interplay, and their applicability to the exigencies of the age. (Queen 46).
Queen points out that such a rereading is not only consistent with canonical evolution of Buddhist scripture (61), but that Buddhism opens itself to being reconstructed to fit the needs of the historical moment, making Ambedkar’s interpretation of the Pāli Canon a legitimate rereading of, rather than a break from, the scripture. As Hozan Alan Senauke quotes Ambedkar in his epilogue to Bhikkhu Bodhi’s anthology of Pāli Canon excerpts, *The Buddha’s Teachings on Social and Communal Harmony*,

[The Buddha] told Ananda that his religion was based on reason and experience and that his followers should not accept his teachings as correct and binding merely because they emanated from him. Being based on reason and experience they were free to modify or even to abandon any of his teachings if it was found that at a given time and in given circumstances they do not apply. (Bodhi 200)

So, if Buddhism opens itself up to reinterpretation, then what are limitations on the liberty that can be taken in reimagining Buddhism? As Buddhism’s goal is toward personal liberation from the cycles of suffering, then any reinterpretation of Buddhism would appear to be legitimate, even if it rejected Buddhism itself, so long as it successfully facilitates the elimination of suffering among its audience. With these criteria in mind, a question that emerges is how writers like Sam Harris, who popularize Buddhist teachings to wide American audiences, deploy Buddhism in their social and political contexts, and to what effect? Harris is a New York Times’ best-selling author whose book *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion* suggests that atheists can use Buddhist techniques which are compatible with science to explore the nature of human consciousness and achieve meaningful existence. Given that Harris is widely criticized for the implicit and explicit misogyny, islamophobia, and elitism of his platform (Bianco; Robertson & Massey; Wright), it is troubling that he is, at first glance, rhetorically very similar
to Ambedkar. How can two people be attracted to Buddhism for similar qualities—empiricism, rationality, social benefit—yet generate ideologies with near-opposite effects social effects? A closer look will reveal the extent to which the social and ideological context the Buddha’s teachings are placed in vastly determines their effects. By putting Sam Harris in conversation with Ambedkar and the Buddha, I hope to establish what constitutes an efficacious interpretation of the Buddha’s teachings and what amounts to misuse of those teachings.

On the back cover of *Waking Up*, the book describes itself as “a guide for the millions of Americans who want spirituality without religion.” Within which “[…] Harris explores the scientific underpinnings of spirituality and argues that there is more to understanding reality than secular culture and science generally allow. No other book marries contemplative wisdom and modern science in this way.” (Harris 2014). In the book, Harris takes the reader through accounts of his spiritual awakening via the drug MDMA and his mentorship with such renowned Buddhist teachers as Sayadaw U Pandita and Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, stopping to argue for the scientific legitimacy of the Buddhist nonduality of self and to illustrate how meditation provides empirical instructions by which anyone can experience truths about the mind which have been “shrouded in fallacy and superstition for all of human history.” (15). Sam Harris’ message is clear: science, rationality, and empiricism are the only responsible tools for bringing the mind into closer register with reality, and much that stands in the way of peaceful, healthy, humanistic, rational society lies in our failure, “generation after generation, to abolish the delusions and animosities of our ignorant ancestors.” (202). To Harris, religion is nothing more than, at best, sets of stories recounting the insights of our wisest ancestors—“bundled with ancient confusion and perennial lies”—which harden and defy revision. To Harris, the most profound religious experiences which alter states of consciousness can and should be reduced to mental events in the brain, and
the disciplines of secular culture—science, medicine, and history—has begun to “scour our culture” of dangerous religious ideas (203).

In many ways, important facets of Harris’ ideology align with the writings of Ambedkar and the teachings of Buddha. Ambedkar would say, for example, that Buddhism is not a ‘Religion,’ built on the worship of a god, but a fundamentally atheistic *Dhamma*, a practice of understanding and love, sought through the empirical analysis of facts of life (Rodrigues 57-59).

In his essay “Buddha or Karl Marx,” Ambedkar lists his reading of the Buddha’s main tenets as follows:

“(1) Religion is necessary for a free society. (2) Not every Religion is worth having. (3) Religion must relate to facts of life and not the theories and speculations about God, or Soul or Heaven or Earth. […] (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 a cruel superstition. […] (10) The function of Religion is to reconstruct the world and to make it happy and not to explain its origin or its end. […] (20) Nothing is infallible. Nothing is binding forever. Everything is subject to inquiry and examination. (21) Nothing is final. (22) Everything is subject to the law is causation. (23) Nothing is permanent or *sanatan*. Everything is subject to change. Being is always Becoming. […]

(Rodrigues 174-5)

It would be easy to cast rhetorical differences between Ambedkar and Harris—religion centered on humanism and morality, with and built-in awareness of fallibility, versus the abandonment of religion for the sake of those same principles—as merely semantic. Ambedkar’s ‘religion’ looks a lot like Harris’ ‘spirituality without religion,’ so much so that the appeal of merging secular
values with Buddhist practices could seem to come from the same place (awareness of the secular causes of suffering) and move toward the same ends (the removal of the secular causes of suffering). Harris would seem to agree with Ambedkar that, call it what you will, some way of being and thinking which relates to facts of life and not speculation about god, soul, or afterlife is necessary for a free society. Looking back at Senauke’s quote of Ambedkar (Bodhi 200), it seems clear that Sam Harris, too, is attracted to Buddhist teachings for their basis in reason and experience, their being valid through empirical inquiry rather than through the Buddha himself, and by the authorization to modify or abandon teachings that do not apply to his circumstances.

But the differences between them are not merely a matter of what to call a system of ethics or ideas—science, philosophy, religion, etc.—but lie Ambedkar’s assessment that no existing religion or philosophy in the West or India could suit the social and spiritual needs of the Untouchables (Queen 66). Ambedkar views all existing spiritual and secular ethics as incomplete, and strives though his rereading of the Pāli Canon to achieve an ethical system that allows for the Untouchables to march toward material, social, and spiritual liberation. Ambedkar’s assessment that “not every religion is worth having” is in line with Harris’ sentiment that no religion is worth having, although it reflects a greater awareness of the importance of a religion’s social context. Ambedkar’s justification for making omissions, editions, and rearrangements in presenting the Pāli Canon to his people were made by the claim that the Buddha only spoke with authority with rationality, about topics which concerned human welfare, and about which he was certain. Therefore, per Ambedkar, any material that did not fit these criteria could be adjusted (59). These adjustments were made to fit Ambedkar’s own criteria for a satisfactory religion, namely that it “must foster morality; accord with scientific reason; offer liberty, equality, and fraternity; and not sanctify or ennoble poverty.” (Queen 47).
While I suspect that Harris might agree with applying these criteria to his own moral philosophy, there lies a major, unspoken criterion in Ambedkar’s work that contextualizes and defines his entire project. As Queen writes:

These criteria [rationality, social benefit, and certainty] must be transparent to the life needs and sensibilities of the community from which Ambedkar and his Buddhism arose—narrowly, the Mahars of Maharashtra, more broadly, the Untouchables of India, and ultimately, the oppressed of every age. This means that the rationality, social benefit, and certainty of the Buddha Dhamma must be intelligible and relevant to these people first and foremost. (Queen 59)

In other words, Ambedkar reinterprets Buddhism specifically for the accessibility, utility, and relevance it may have for oppressed peoples. If Ambedkar’s effect on his audience and his society defines the efficacy of his interpretation of Buddhist scripture, then we must ask of Harris the following questions: Who is his audience? How does his use of Buddhism effect his audience? How does his use of Buddhism effect society through his audience?

But to pinpoint science and secular culture as the ‘objective’ root of truth, as if it is free of dogma, delusion, and cultural contingencies does not absolve Harris from the need think critically. To reduce global conflict to a “war of ideas,” as Harris does, is to ignore the social, political, and economic factors that underpin sectarian conflicts, most of which were agitated by colonial powers. Moreover, Harris’ approach to religion does more to perpetuate, or at least legitimize, traditions of colonial superiority and appropriation. As Nicholas Scrimenti, writing for Georgetown University’s Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, writes, “[…] atheists in America are 78 percent white, 68 percent male, and highly educated. […] A meditation practice that is traditionally exclusive to monks who have led a life of renunciation
and concentration for many years […] eventually made its way to America, where the vacuum of Buddhist tradition birthed McMindfulness.” By taking Buddhist practices put of the context of their teachings and presenting them to his fanbase, a base who, as Scritenti notes, represent “the only group of people who, because of a lack of religious affiliation, are compelled to pick and choose objects of culture from civilizations around the world that appeal to them” (Scritenti 2017), Harris is empowering a group who enjoy immense benefit from social hierarchy to use Buddhism to their own ends: deploying Buddhist teachings in a ‘war of ideas’ of secular rationality against any the world ‘deluded’ by any non-secular codes of ethics or metaphysics.

This gets at a more fundamental difference between Harris in Ambedkar, which lies in their comparative understanding of the actual secular causes of suffering. Harris’ idea that conflict begins with religion leads him to attack religion wherever it arises, no matter the context, on the assumption that to be religious is to be complicit in all religious atrocity (Harris 2006). Under this assumption, Harris fails to recognize other factors that are always present with atrocity where religion is present—factors which may be much more fundamental to the root causes of the violence than religion, such as colonial/neo-colonial political tensions, global capitalism, or patriarchy. The possibility that religious ideology may only appear incidentally to be a source of human conflict never seems to occur to Harris. By his logic, if any of these other factors are at the root of human conflict, then by pointing toward religion the issue, he is avoiding how, by blissfully acting within to these more deeply problematic socio-political systems, he is “complicit in the world’s violence and ignorance to an unacceptable degree.” (Harris 2006) These are problems that Ambedkar does not share, for his deployment of secular values derives from a deeper awareness of the political, economic, and ideological intersections of human oppression. Ambedkar’s Buddhism is one of liberation and social justice, wherein
religions are seen as viable or non-viable options due to their specific socio-political contexts (Queen 61-66). Harris, on the other hand, sees delusion as the source of human suffering, and pinpoints science and secular culture as the ‘objective’ root of truth to be used to address delusion. He appropriates Buddhism for this secular culture, as if secularism is free of dogma, delusion, and cultural contingencies. Harris seems to expect deference to science to absolve him from the need think critically. To reduce global conflict to a “war of ideas,” as Harris does, is to ignore the social, political, and economic factors that underpin sectarian conflicts, most of which were agitated by colonial powers.

It seems, then, that two factors which set empiricists like B.R. Ambedkar and rationalists like Sam Harris apart have to do which who they are empowering and what their audiences are empowered to do. Ambedkar preserves Buddhism not just as for its empiricism, but for its ethical and spiritual context. Ambedkar gives it to the oppressed Dalit of India in a form designed to move them toward the end of their oppression, that they may have fiscal equality and social dignity, and from there be enabled to live spiritually enriching lives. Sam Harris empowers groups who benefit from social inequality to tell others how to live and think. By removing the empirical practices of Buddhism from their cultural contexts, he assumes the cultural superiority of secularism and does nothing to enrich it, as Ambedkar does. In doing so, Sam Harris puts Buddhist ideas in a context which unnecessarily enables harmful social hierarchies, while Ambedkar does the opposite. If we are to return to the question of where the limits are in taking liberties while interpreting Buddhism, it would seem there is a hard limit to be found in how your contextualization of Buddhism ultimately impacts the social realities of other people. Where Buddhism is used to empower others toward social justice and an end to the social causes of
suffering, then it is warranted. If it empowers others to misuse Buddhism for their own sense of moral superiority, then it has gone astray.

There are many of the Buddha’s teachings that could be instructive to Sam Harris which he neglects. For example, the Buddha warns that those who creates quarrels, disputes and arguments are in danger of the following: “(1) He does not achieve what he has not yet achieved; (2) he falls away from what he has achieved; (3) a bad report circulates about him; (4) he dies confused; […]” (Bodhi 79-80). It seems Harris suffers, so far, at least three of those consequences, the most dangerous of which is that he is unable to learn beyond what he thinks he knows. Per the Buddha, this has effects on the kinds of communities you can have: if your community is vain, it will be shallow and not deep; if it is quarrelsome, it will be divided and not harmonious (Bodhi 111). If we are to reconstruct, rediscover, and reimagine the Buddha’s insights, we need to do so responsibly. This means developing and awareness of our social context, how this social context informs our use of Buddhist teachings, and how our appropriation in turn develops our social context. As Bodhi said in an interview in 2013, “[…] absent a sharp social critique, Buddhist practices could easily be used to justify and stabilize the status quo, becoming a reinforcement of consumer capitalism.” Bhikkhu Bodhi (Eaton 3013) If the Buddha endorsed tailoring his message to an audience, we need to pay attention to which modern audiences these messages are tailored to, and how. As Buddhism continues to be filtered through a growing diversity of platforms, sharp critiques will be necessary to preserve Buddhism’s primary objective of addressing and eliminating human suffering. In looking at the continuity between these messages and the Buddha’s teachings, we can say something about what ideas these modern interpretations are trying to pass on, what they are changing, and why.
Works Cited


