

**Hinduism through the Eyes of Dalitness:  
A Postcolonial Reading of  
Three Non-Hindu Perspectives**

Tiia Orpana  
Master's Thesis in Religion, Conflict and Dialogue  
November 2019

<b>HELSINGIN YLIOPISTO</b>		
Tiedekunta/Osasto – Fakultet/Sektion <b>Teologinen tiedekunta</b>		Laitos – Institution -
Tekijä – Författare <b>Tiia Orpana</b>		
Työn nimi – Arbetets titel <b>Hinduism through the Eyes of Dalitness: A Postcolonial Reading of Three Non-Hindu Perspectives</b>		
Oppiaine – Läroämne <b>Religion, Conflict and Dialogue</b>		
Työn laji – Arbetets art <b>Pro gradu -tutkielma</b>	Aika – Datum <b>Marraskuu 2019</b>	Sivumäärä – Sidoantal <b>55</b>
Tiivistelmä – Referat  <p>Nimi 'dalit' kuuluu kastittomille ja kantaa mukanaan kastisyrjinnän pitkää historiaa. Keskeinen osa tätä historiaa on se, kuinka kastisyrjintää on perusteltu hindulaisuudella. Tässä tutkielmassa tarkastelen kolmen intialaisen dalitin käsityksiä hindulaisuudesta jälkikoloniaalin teoreettisen viitekehyksen läpi. Kaikki kolme valitsemani dalitia – valtakunnanpolitiikko B.R. Ambedkar, sekä dalit-teologit A.P. Nirmal ja V. Devasahayam – tulkitsevat kastijärjestelmää sisäpuolisina mutta hindulaisuutta ulkopuolisina. Tutkimuskysymykselläni on kaksi aiempaan tutkimukseen perustuvaa apukysymystä. Ensiksi, tarkastelen dalitiutta erityisenä sarron kontekstina, josta käsin hindulaisuutta luetaan. Toiseksi, tarkastelen kolonialismin epistemologista vallankäyttöä 'hindulaisuuden' käsitteellistämässä. Tutkielman metodina on käsiteanalyysi. Lähteenä on yhteensä viisi tekstiä: Ambedkarin puhe, sekä kaksi teologista tekstiä Nirmalilta ja Devasahayamilta.</p> <p>Hindulaisuus näyttäyty valitsemilleni dalit-lähteille olemuksellisesti sortavana uskontona. Heidän tapansa rakentaa sarron olemus etenkin pyhistä kirjoituksista, bramiini-pappiskastin auktoriteetista, sekä kastin opillisista perusteluista ei tule tyhjistä, vaan sen voi nähdä liittyvän laajempaan kolonialistiseen tapaan käsitteellistää 'uskonto'. Kuitenkin, valitsemieni dalit-lähteiden voisi nähdä käyttävän kastisyrjinnän 'uskonnollista' olemusta strategisena keinona painottaa syrjinnän pysyvyyttä ja kokonaisvaltaisuutta. Kaikki lähteeni pitävät hindulaisuutta olemuksellisesti sortavana, mutta heidän tapansa suhtautua omaan dalitiuteensa eroavat toisistaan, mikä näkyy myös heidän yksilöllisissä painotuksissaan hindulaisuuden käsittelyn suhteen. Siinä missä kristityille dalit-teologeille dalitiudella on vapautettu ja ensisijainen asema suhteessa Jumalaan, demokraattisen ja modernisoidun Intian rakentamiseen sitoutunut valtakunnanpolitiikko Ambedkar pyrkii ennen kaikkea kasti-identiteettien hävittämiseen. Heidän erilaiset tapansa käsitteellistää 'uskontoa' suhteessa vapautukseen näkyvät tässä.</p> <p>Dalit-lähteeni eivät näe, että kääntymys yhdestä uskonnollisesta traditiosta toiseen olisi riittävä ratkaisu kastisyrjinnän kivuliaaseen todellisuuteen. Heille raja sarron ja vapautuksen välissä ei kulje kahden uskonnon välillä. Sen sijaan, he vaativat ja rakentavat kokonaisvaltaisempaa kastitodellisuuden transformaatiota, jossa transsendentit ja maalliset vapautukset sekoittuvat.</p>		
Avainsanat – Nyckelord <b>dalit-identiteetti, dalit-ideologia, dalit-teologia, hindulaisuus, kasti, postkolonialismi</b>		
Säilytyspaikka – Förvaringställe <b>Helsingin yliopiston kirjasto, Keskustakampuksen kirjasto, Teologia</b>		
Muita tietoja		

## Contents

<b>1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>1.1 Aim and Structure of this Thesis</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>1.2 Previous Research</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>1.3 Research Question, Selected Sources and Method</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>2 Central Concepts and Contexts</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>2.1 Postcolonialism as a Tool of Reinterpreting Caste and Hinduism</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>2.2 Jati, Varna, and the Caste System</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>2.3 Dalits and their Liberation</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>2.4 Hinduism as a Contested Category</b> .....	<b>23</b>
<b>3 Oppressive Hinduism</b> .....	<b>28</b>
<b>3.1 Historical Oppression</b> .....	<b>28</b>
<b>3.2 Scriptural Oppression</b> .....	<b>33</b>
<b>3.3 Doctrinal Oppression</b> .....	<b>38</b>
<b>4 Liberative Alternatives to Oppressive Hinduism</b> .....	<b>42</b>
<b>4.1 Liberative Reform and Reconstruction</b> .....	<b>42</b>
<b>4.2 The End of Exodus: Liberative Conversion</b> .....	<b>48</b>
<b>5 Conclusion</b> .....	<b>55</b>
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	<b>59</b>
<b>Sources</b> .....	<b>59</b>
<b>Literature</b> .....	<b>59</b>
<b>Online Sources</b> .....	<b>63</b>

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Aim and Structure of this Thesis

“Caste is about dividing people up in ways that preclude every form of solidarity, because even in the lowest castes there are divisions and sub-castes, and everyone’s co-opted into the business of this hierarchical, siloed society. This is the politics of making a grid of class, of caste, of ethnicity, of religion. And then making the grid ever more fine is very much part of how you rule the world, saying, ‘You’re a Muslim, you’re a Hindu, you’re a Shia, you’re a Sunni, you’re a Barelvi, you’re a Brahmin, you’re a Saraswat Brahmin, you’re a Dalit, you’re gay, you’re straight, you’re trans – and only you can speak for yourself, and there’s no form of solidarity being allowed.’ So what people think of as freedom is really slavery.”<sup>1</sup>

This definition of caste is from Arundhati Roy (2017), an internationally recognized Indian author and political activist. She views caste as a form of slavery, a fundamental division of people and an obstacle to solidarity. In her definition, religion belongs to the same net of societally dividing factors as caste.

A few years ago, I was active in a Finnish but internationally oriented human rights organization called Dalit Solidarity Network in Finland.<sup>2</sup> In my experiences, the caste system and especially caste-based discrimination is relatively well-known in Finland. In the Finnish context, it is quite common to wonder why the caste system *still* persists. Often the implicit or explicit idea behind the question is that the caste hierarchy is something ancient and totally foreign to the Finnish, Western, secular or Christian ideal of equality. Thus, caste as a global human rights issue is closely linked to the theme of ethnic, cultural and religious difference.

I wrote my bachelor’s thesis on Arvind P. Nirmal’s theological concepts of “no-humanness” and “full humanness” of Dalits.<sup>3</sup> My conclusion was that in Nirmal’s theology, Dalitness is primary to being Christian. Yet, Nirmal talks about the collective Dalit conversion from Hinduism to Christianity as a liberative event.<sup>4</sup> Back then, the scope of my bachelor’s thesis did not allow me to delve deeper into the fascinating questions of Dalits and Hinduism.

In *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Brian K. Smith (2005) claims that the caste system persists in India mainly because of its religious basis.<sup>5</sup> This claim raises further questions. Does Hinduism cause caste oppression and violence? The question is similar to the questions of Islam and modern terrorism, Christianity and the medieval crusades, and so on. In this

---

<sup>1</sup> The Guardian 2017

<sup>2</sup> Dalitien Solidaarisuusverkosto

<sup>3</sup> Nirmal introduces the concepts in Nirmal 1991a, 62 and Nirmal 1991b, 139. See the conclusions of my bachelor’s thesis in Orpana 2015, 26–27. My sources were Nirmal 1991a and Nirmal 1991b.

<sup>4</sup> See Nirmal 1991a, 63 and Orpana 2015, 25. My sources were Nirmal 1991a and Nirmal 1991b.

<sup>5</sup> Smith 2005, 9524.

thesis, I aim at starting from the oppressed subjects themselves. How does Hinduism and caste appear to Dalits? What aspects of Hinduism do Dalits interpret as oppressive? Do they see conversion from Hinduism as their only way out of caste oppression? Instead of discussing religion as a coherent universal concept behind oppression, I aim at specifying different aspects of religion and problematizing the concept of religion itself.

I find the topic of Dalits and Hinduism relevant to my field, theology, as well as my specialization in Religion, Conflict and Dialogue. The perspective of the oppressed challenges idealized images of religious traditions. Contrarily, the claims about religious oppression lead to asking: what is this religion behind oppression? Being a student of Christian theology, I need to re-examine my pre-understanding of religion in general and Hinduism as ‘the other’ religion. I do not claim to be an expert of the Hindu tradition. Neither am I able to assess, to what extent the claims of my sources do justice to Hinduism. Instead, my approach is an explicit outsider-perspective and rooted in my Dalit and non-Hindu sources. I would claim that by acknowledging my limits of understanding religion, I am able to go deeper into the theme of religion and conflict.

This thesis includes five chapters. The introduction chapter continues with Section 1.2, in which I build up my research question by presenting relevant previous research on Dalits and Hinduism, as well as the colonial effect on conceptualizations of caste and Hinduism. In Section 1.3, I formulate my primary research question with two secondary research questions emerging from the previous research. In addition to that, I introduce my sources and method. Chapter 2 begins with theoretical background, which delineates my perspective and literature throughout the thesis. The other sections in Chapter 2 build the contextual and conceptual foundation of my analysis: *jati*, *varna*, the caste system, Dalit, Dalit liberation, and Hinduism. Chapter 3 is focused on the ways in which my sources construct their ideas of oppressive Hinduism. Chapter 4 is focused on their constructive responses to this oppression. In Chapter 5, I sum up my conclusions in relation to my research question and compare the three thinkers with each other. I also connect my conclusions to a broader discussion and ponder the need for further studies.

## 1.2 Previous Research

In *Dalits and Christianity – Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India* (1998), Sathianathan Clarke calls the general relationship between Dalits and the Hindu community “complex” and “volatile”.<sup>6</sup> However, he finds the idea of fundamental division between Dalits and caste Hinduism distorted:

“We cannot glorify Dalit religion as being completely independent of and, thus, at all points contradictory to caste Hinduism. This binary structure of opposition of subject–object, foreign–native, colonizer–colonized, self–other, and Hindu–Dalit, even while useful to analytically dissect the problem, hardly does justice to the complexity of the relationship between caste Hindu and Dalit religion.”<sup>7</sup>

Clarke’s observation in his article “Dalit Theology: An Introductory and Interpretive Theological Exposition” (2011) is that Dalit theology – a particular Dalit-centered form of Christian theology – aims at supporting the subjectivity of the Dalits and protecting the oppressed Dalits from the dominance of other caste groups. According to Clarke, reclaiming the right to choose an outsider position in relation to Hindus, caste Christians, homogeneity and traditional truth claims is part of Dalit theological thinking.<sup>8</sup>

In his work *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Problems, Paradigms and Possibilities* (2010), Peniel Rajkumar recognizes a methodological binary that Dalit theologians tend to construct between dominating Hindu caste communities and Dalit victims. In addition to that, they tend to create polarizations between ideal religions and cultures in contrast to non-ideal ones. Rajkumar argues that Dalit theology tends to characterize non-Christian Dalits and non-Dalits as ‘Others’. As a response, Rajkumar suggests that postcolonial theory would be a useful tool for recognizing the existing hybridity of caste identities. According to him, the complexity of the caste system creates a state of religious inter-relatedness between the caste communities and Dalits.<sup>9</sup>

The way in which Rajkumar links caste identities to postcolonialism catches my attention. I discuss the theme of colonialism and postcolonialism further in Section 2.1, but a short introduction is needed here. In short, postcolonialism refers to transformational and critical reading of colonialism. In postcolonial theory, colonialism is not limited to a formal colonial settlement, such as the British colony in India 1858–1947.<sup>10</sup> Ashis Nandy (1983, quoted by King 2010) argues that colonialism is able to conquer minds. Nandy argues that in

---

<sup>6</sup> See Clarke 1998, 48, note 1.

<sup>7</sup> Clarke 1998, 126.

<sup>8</sup> Clarke 2011, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Rajkumar 2010, 168–170, 172.

<sup>10</sup> McLeod 2010, 38–40; Doniger 2015, 73–75.

the conquering, the West becomes a universally pervasive element of minds and structures.<sup>11</sup> Richard King (2010) calls the continual colonial transformation of minds and institutions “the epistemological power of colonialism”.<sup>12</sup>

In the context of Dalits and Hinduism, the epistemological power of colonialism concerns the ways in which caste and Hinduism are conceptualized. In general, postcolonial theorists regard Hinduism as a colonial construct.<sup>13</sup> Postcolonially oriented research on caste questions the simplified relation between caste and inherent oppressiveness. In her work *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity* (2005), Debjani Ganguly aims at recognizing caste oppression but questioning the normative modernity in the academic and political discussion about caste. Ganguly explains her approach:

“Further, my critique of ideological readings of caste as just a means of social and cultural oppression does not at any time and under any circumstances suggest that caste practices have not been oppressive. It merely suggests that not all aspects of living with the reality of caste are oppressive and that it is the normative modernity of academic social sciences and political activism that makes us brand caste practices as ‘relics’ of the past, as ‘backward’, ‘feudal’ and hence necessarily ‘oppressive’.”<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to an ideological reading in which caste is labeled as a synonym for oppression, Ganguly aims at offering a phenomenological approach to caste. She focuses on the heterogeneity of living in the caste society of late modern India – oppression being part of it. According to Ganguly, the normative modernity is a biased and inadequate perspective of analyzing caste and its persistence. The history of colonialism in India – as well as other Western stances towards themes such as nation and progress – has influenced the ways in which caste has been theorized as non-modern.<sup>15</sup> Ganguly’s theoretical perspective challenges superficial claims about the essence of caste and caste oppression. Through which lens are we looking at the heterogeneous caste context?

I acknowledge the need for profound sensitivity when analyzing the ways in which the oppressed Dalits read caste and Hinduism. Based on my pre-understanding of Dalits, I am aware of their material as well as epistemological marginalization. They have not been in the dominant positions of knowing, reading and writing. In the particular context of Dalits, I intend to remain critical towards postcolonial theory, too. Taking this carefulness into

---

<sup>11</sup> King 2010, 95–96.

<sup>12</sup> King 2010, 95.

<sup>13</sup> Bloch & Keppens 2010, 1–2.

<sup>14</sup> Ganguly 2005, Prologue X.

<sup>15</sup> Ganguly 2005, Prologue IX–XI.

account, I am interested in reading the concepts of Hinduism and caste from critical angles that challenge my pre-understanding of caste oppression as inherently ‘Hindu’.

### **1.3 Research Question, Selected Sources and Method**

My primary research question is to examine how the three selected Dalit and non-Hindu thinkers conceptualize Hinduism in their selected texts. I have two secondary research questions that are based on the previous research. 1. Based on previous research, Dalits link Hinduism to their oppression and aim at distinguishing themselves from Hindus. Does this apply to my sources and why? 2. Based on previous research, the epistemological power of colonialism is visible in the ways in which Hinduism is conceptualized. Does this apply to my sources and why?

My Dalit sources consist of five articles by B.R. Ambedkar, A.P. Nirmal, and V. Devasahayam. I now introduce the authors and the texts and justify my choices. I also explicate the possible risks and limitations of my choices.

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956) was a Dalit Hindu who experienced an increase in his socioeconomic status and became an Indian icon. After a long personal and political conflict with Hinduism, as well as a process of comparing different religious options, he converted to Buddhism just before his death. The conversion happened at a public ceremony in Nagpur, and approximately 200,000 Dalits converted with him. The birth caste of Ambedkar’s family, the *Mahar* caste, was a well-esteemed Dalit caste. Yet, his Dalitness put him in an inferior position in relation to non-Dalits. However, he managed to rise into the Indian elite. Thanks to receiving scholarship-supported education both in India and abroad, he became a jurist, economist, professor, and national politician. Ambedkar has been given the status of the Dalit leader from the 1920s to 1956, a hero of the oppressed, and one of the remarkable characters of modern world history. He was an eminent architect of the Constitution of India (1950). Caste discrimination became outlawed in the Constitution. According to K. Nagappa Gowda (2011), Ambedkar’s criticism towards the Hindu society was uncompromising. For an example, Ambedkar led a public protest, in which the *Laws of Manu*<sup>16</sup> was burned.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> The *Laws of Manu* (composed around the beginning of the Common Era) is a colonially codified, highly influential and pervasive Hindu scripture. It represents a philosophy of law and a normative state of living beings. Doniger 2015, 212.

<sup>17</sup> Rodrigues 2004, 7–17; Fitzgerald 2007, 132; Nagappa Gowda 2011, 222; Doniger 2015, 607.

According to Debjani Ganguly (2005), Ambedkar was the one who discursively<sup>18</sup> re-imagined and re-invented modern Dalit identity. Ganguly argues that especially Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism and his mythographic<sup>19</sup> counter-versions of India's past were powerful elements of the re-imagination and re-invention of Dalitness. Ananya Vajpeyi (2012) states that Ambedkar strove to reconstruct an inclusive and integrating Indian citizenship without a caste hierarchy. Ambedkar's goal was to create an Indian understanding of selfhood that would transcend the boundaries of caste and religion. This task led him to study various religious traditions of India – Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Sikhism, and Christianity – in a comparative manner. Ambedkar is indeed a peculiar character in the history of India. Valerian Rodrigues (2004) claims that the heroic heritage of Ambedkar has been treasured by the Dalits in India and the diaspora, as well as helping other Indian downtrodden groups in their political struggles. In addition to that, the state politics of independent India has appropriated Ambedkar for causes such as favoring Dalits and lower castes. According to Rodrigues, the utilization of Ambedkar is primarily symbolic. He points out that the attitude of the mainstream Indian civil society is negative towards Ambedkar. On my visit to a Dalit village in the North Indian countryside in 2016, I noticed pictures of Ambedkar hanging in poor and uneducated Dalits' homes. In the Indian public space, his national authority is visible in the statues made of him.<sup>20</sup>

Ambedkar poses an interdisciplinary challenge to my analysis. To be honest, it would have been simpler to analyze only Dalit theologians. Even so, including Ambedkar seemed like a fruitful choice. He is a central character in the history of Dalits and Hinduism. L. Jayachitra (2011) claims that as a part of Dalit culture and literature, Ambedkar's work has been influential in Christian Dalit theology and biblical hermeneutics.<sup>21</sup>

Arvind P. Nirmal (1936–1995) was an Indian Dalit Christian, theology professor, and priest of the Church of North India<sup>22</sup>. He did his career as a professor of systematic theology and worked at the theological colleges of Bangalore (United Theological College) and

---

<sup>18</sup> Ganguly clarifies the concept of discursivity (Ganguly quotes Foucault, see Ganguly's footnote 4, p. 257): "I use the phrase 'founder of discursivity' here in the Foucauldian sense of a figure who provides a 'paradigmatic set of terms, images and concepts that organize thinking and experience of the past, present and future of society, doing so in a way which enigmatically surpasses the specific claims ... [he/she] puts forth'." Ganguly 2005, 131.

<sup>19</sup> Ganguly clarifies the concept of mythography: " – – an unorthodox genre of writing on caste. This genre engages with the past and present on caste and untouchability by abjuring the protocols of academic research and turns instead to myths, legends and other ancient textual sources. I use the term 'mythographies' as shorthand to describe such writing." Ganguly 2005, 129. The concept of mythography is originally Ashis Nandy's, see Ganguly's footnote 1, p. 257.

<sup>20</sup> Rodrigues 2004, 36–38; Ganguly 2005, 131–132; Vajpeyi 2012, 208–209.

<sup>21</sup> Jayachitra 2011, 121.

<sup>22</sup> CNI represents Protestant Christianity, see Church of North India.

Gurukul (Gurukul Lutheran Theological College). At Gurukul, he served as a dean of the Department of Dalit Theology. Before that he studied and worked in Oxford. Nirmal did a long academic career on Indian theology before publishing his writings on Dalit theology. The search of Dalit theology determined his late career and life. Despite Nirmal's relatively short work with Dalit theology, Hans Schwarz (2005) and Mikko Malkavaara (1999) regard him as the leading proponent of Dalit theology.<sup>23</sup>

Nirmal became one of the main proponents of Dalit theology during a relatively short but intensive era. He formulated an early form of Dalit theology already in 1981, when he gave a speech titled "Towards a Shudra Theology" at the United Theological College of Bangalore. Back then, Nirmal did not yet define his theology as 'Dalit'. Yet, his plea for ending theological passivity in the context of Dalit oppression was already present. According to Peniel Rajkumar (2010), Nirmal's speech was a milestone in the emergence of Dalit theology.<sup>24</sup>

Nirmal had only little time to publish his work on Dalit theology before his death. His explicitly 'Dalit' theology did not have time to mature, as he wrote his central Dalit theological texts around 1986–1991. According to Vedanayagam Devasahayam (interviewed by Mikko Malkavaara in 1996), Nirmal's commitment to Western philosophy and Brahminic Indian theology may have been an obstacle for producing a comprehensive volume on Dalit theology. Nirmal's central methodological finding is that exclusively Dalit experiences have to become the basis for Dalit theology. According to Nirmal, the methodologies of other liberation theologies had to be replaced with authentically Indian methodology of liberation. Andrew Wyatt (2010) claims that the primacy of the Dalits in Nirmal's theology diminishes the gap between Dalit theology and non-Christian Dalits. Yet, not all Dalit theologians support Nirmal's methodological exclusivism. For example, certain Roman Catholic Dalit theologians emphasize their commitment to Catholicism in contrast to Nirmal's primacy of Dalitness.<sup>25</sup>

As I presented earlier, I wanted to continue with the open questions of my bachelor's thesis and delve into the issue of Dalits and Hinduism. Nirmal was an easy choice. He represents pioneering Dalit theology with notable concepts to analyze. I also find Nirmal's commitment to both Dalit Christianity and Dalit political struggle interesting. According to

---

<sup>23</sup> Malkavaara 1999, 245–259; Schwarz 2005, 529.

<sup>24</sup> Rajkumar 2010, 38–39.

<sup>25</sup> Malkavaara 1999, 259–260; Schwarz 2005, 529–530; Wyatt 2010, 134.

Malkavaara (1999), Nirmal merged Ambedkar's philosophy with Indian liberation theology in his Dalit theology.<sup>26</sup>

Vedanayagam Devasahayam (b. 1949) is an Indian Dalit Christian, theology professor at Gurukul (emeritus), and bishop of the Madras diocese in the Church of South India<sup>27</sup>. He was Nirmal's student. After Nirmal's death, Devasahayam continued his work as the professor of systematic theology and head of the Department of Dalit Theology at Gurukul (1990–1999). In addition to his theological education, he has focused on academic sociology. Malkavaara (1999) describes Devasahayam as one of the most important social analysts among Dalit theologians. He also claims that Devasahayam's theological contributions are less radical than Nirmal's, whereas Devasahayam's perspective to social reality is more pervasive than Nirmal's. His perspective to the caste system could be called socioreligious, since he focuses both on social structures and religious notions behind caste. The concepts of pollution and hierarchy determine Devasahayam's Dalit theology. He regards the stigma of pollution as the feature that distinguishes Dalits from other oppressed groups in India. He also interprets the caste context through the Bible.<sup>28</sup>

Keith Hebden (2011) defines Devasahayam as a central theologian at Gurukul Lutheran Theological College. He writes that Devasahayam's Dalit theology challenges the individualist and over-spiritualizing interpretations of sin. According to Hebden, Devasahayam's theological critique of structural oppression represents a counter-perspective to evangelical missionaries in India, who preach a gospel of private sins and their atonement.<sup>29</sup>

Devasahayam may not have Ambedkar's remarkable authority or Nirmal's notable theological concepts, yet he is a notable character in early volumes of Dalit theology as well as Dalit leadership (being a theology professor and bishop).<sup>30</sup> I am specifically interested in Devasahayam's mixture of sociological and theological analysis of caste.

I chose the text sources based on two criteria. Firstly, the texts had to discuss Dalits and Hinduism. Secondly, the texts had to be central in the personal bibliography of the authors. Ambedkar's bibliography is large-scale with forty years of writing, and therefore

---

<sup>26</sup> Malkavaara 1999, 259.

<sup>27</sup> CSI represents Protestant Christianity, see Church of South India.

<sup>28</sup> Malkavaara 1999, 260–267; Schwarz 2005, 530–531.

<sup>29</sup> Hebden 2011, 137, 151.

<sup>30</sup> Devasahayam is the associate editor of *A Reader in Dalit Theology* (1991) and the editor of *Frontiers of Dalit Theology* (1997).

choosing the representative text(s) was not easy.<sup>31</sup> I ended up choosing “Annihilation of Caste” (1936), which is actually an ungiven speech.<sup>32</sup> The published speech had eminent influence: it provoked a debate on the nature of Hinduism between the two great Indian characters: Ambedkar and Gandhi. According to Rodrigues, Ambedkar had lost his faith in the Hindu reform by 1935. I wanted to analyze this hopelessness and Ambedkar’s alternative to it. Nirmal’s “Towards a Christian Dalit Theology” and “Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective”, as well as Devasahayam’s “Pollution, Poverty and Powerlessness” are part of *A Reader in Dalit Theology* (1991). In Nirmal’s bibliography, these two texts represent his most elaborated Dalit theology. Devasahayam’s “The Nature of Dalit Theology As Counter Ideology” is part of *Frontiers of Dalit Theology* (1997). In the text, Devasahayam both outlines the nature of Dalit theology and offers a Dalit theological commentary of Luke 23:32–46<sup>33</sup>. According to Malkavaara (1999), Devasahayam’s personal approach is most visible in his Dalit theological exegeses on the Bible.<sup>34</sup> I wanted to accentuate Devasahayam’s role as a socioreligious analyst of the caste contest by choosing a biblical exegesis (Devasahayam 1997) and a more sociologically oriented text (Devasahayam 1991).

My method of analyzing the sources is conceptual analysis, which focuses on concepts and relations between them.<sup>35</sup> In this thesis, I analyze the ways in which Ambedkar, Nirmal, and Devasahayam conceptualize Hinduism in their texts. I began my analysis from choosing the texts, reading them thoroughly and sorting out the claims about Hinduism. Formulating the conceptual framework of the analysis chapters – oppressive Hinduism in contrast to liberative alternatives to it – was a central part of the analysis itself. I have chosen to use a selection of postcolonial literature for connecting the conceptualization of Hinduism to a broader discussion. I wish to accentuate the contested nature of talking about ‘Hinduism’ and caste oppression as a ‘Hindu’ phenomenon. I clarify postcolonialism as a theoretical framework in the following Section 2.1.

I am aware of the risks and limitations of comparing these three thinkers. Firstly, the selected texts represent different historical contexts: Ambedkar’s text is from 1936, Nirmal’s 1991, and Devasahayam’s 1991 and 1997. Secondly, the thinkers represent different

---

<sup>31</sup> Valerian Rodrigues elaborates Ambedkar’s texts and the difficulty of choosing the essential ones, see Rodrigues 2004, 1–6.

<sup>32</sup> Ambedkar refused to give the speech in *Jat Pat Todak Mandal*’s (a social reform organization) conference because of the disagreement on the content. Rodrigues 2004, 13.

<sup>33</sup> Luke 23:32–46 is a biblical passage about the crucifixion and death of Jesus. See *the Holy Bible* English Standard Version.

<sup>34</sup> Malkavaara 1999, 246–259, 261; Rodrigues 2004, 12–13.

<sup>35</sup> As a philosophical and theological method, conceptual analysis examines concepts and conceptual systems, origins and/or relations of concepts in selected text sources. Hallamaa 1997, 108–109.

positions: Nirmal and Devasahayam have created liberation theology from confessional standpoints, whereas Ambedkar was a multieducated national politician. Thirdly, Ambedkar's collection of speeches and writings is abundant and abundantly analyzed compared to Nirmal and Devasahayam. Nirmal and Devasahayam, too, refer to Ambedkar in their texts.<sup>36</sup>

However, I found fruitful intersections that made me choose the three thinkers. Firstly, despite the historical gap between them, they have constructed pioneering ideas of public Dalit identity, Dalit politics and Dalit theology. Secondly, their approaches to caste and Hinduism bring transcendental and societal spheres together. Thirdly, all of them process Hinduism through a non-Hindu ideal: Nirmal and Devasahayam through liberative Christianity and Ambedkar through his idea of the true religion. This true religion can be classified as a peculiar interpretation of Buddhism – Ambedkar's Buddhism.<sup>37</sup> Fourthly, they all are Dalits themselves. Their contexts of analyzing Hinduism are explicitly Dalit contexts. For them, the Dalit struggle for liberation is political and spiritual on a personal level.

---

<sup>36</sup> Nirmal 1991a, 53; Nirmal 1991b, 144; Devasahayam 1997, 56, 65.

<sup>37</sup> Rodrigues 2004, 25.

## 2 Central Concepts and Contexts

In this chapter, I present definitions for the central concepts that I use throughout my analysis of the selected texts by Ambedkar, Devasahayam and Nirmal. These concepts are *jati*, *varna*, the caste system, Dalit, Dalit liberation, and Hinduism. First, I clarify postcolonialism, the theoretical framework of my analysis.

### **2.1 Postcolonialism as a Tool of Reinterpreting Caste and Hinduism**

Ania Loomba (2005) defines colonialism as “the conquest and control of other people’s land and goods”<sup>38</sup> and argues that this pattern has been repeated throughout human history.<sup>39</sup> In the context of this thesis, I focus on a historically specific European colonialism, which was primarily an era of gaining European wealth at the cost of non-European peoples. Colonialism and capitalism can be held responsible for delivering European modernity.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, John McLeod (2010) claims that “ – – colonialism is absolutely at the heart of Europe’s modern history.”<sup>41</sup>

The means of the historically specific European colonialism were unequal and violent. The European military-administrative colonizers were in a dominant position to colonized Asian, African, South American, Canadian and Australian lands and peoples. The European progress towards capitalism needed the imbalanced power relation between the colonizers and the the colonized. The studies of colonized contexts produced useful knowledge for controlling the natives. The controlling of beliefs and practices was often hidden behind so-called reform and welfare. Colonial discourse refers to the colonial constructing of natives through a non-contextually aware and stereotyping lens. In the colonial discourse, natives are portrayed with adjectives such as primitive, immoral, and vulnerable. This discourse becomes visible in concrete colonial evaluation and politics that is directed towards the non-Europeans.<sup>42</sup>

The colonial settlement by the British Raj existed in India from 1858 to 1947. Decolonization, which India achieved formally in 1947, refers to the process in which the colonized natives reclaim the governing over their land. Nationalist movements ranging from non-violent resistance to warfare are a form of decolonization. Obviously, changes in global power relations influenced the local processes of decolonization. In general, the European

---

<sup>38</sup> Loomba 2005, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Loomba 2005, 8.

<sup>40</sup> McLeod 2010, 8–9.

<sup>41</sup> McLeod 2010, 9.

<sup>42</sup> Loomba 2005, 9–10; Nayar 2010, 1–2.

colonial governing was not total, since it faced notable resistance from the natives in the colonies. Despite the unequal power structure, the colonized Indians should not be regarded as passive objects or a homogeneously oppressed group. Special attention needs to be paid on intrastate inequalities in decolonized areas. For example, the post-independence national development of India has included patronizing and hostility towards tribal peoples. The colonized are not a unified community with unified interests. Decolonization has not marked the end of inequality and oppression. Pramod K. Nayar (2010) also points out that anti-colonial movements have expressed xenophobia towards the outsiders in contrast to romanticizing pre-colonial native identity.<sup>43</sup>

The sources of this thesis represent different eras of colonialism in India. Ambedkar wrote “Annihilation of Caste” (1936) in formally colonized India, 11 years before the formal independence. The texts by Nirmal and Devasahayam are from the 1990s (1991 and 1997), 44–50 years after the end of the British Raj. In the Analysis Chapters 3 and 4, my perspective to colonialism is that it is not limited to the formal colonial settlement in India. I focus on the ways in which the epistemological power of colonialism<sup>44</sup> is visible in the constructions of oppressive Hinduism and its liberative alternatives by Ambedkar, Nirmal, and Devasahayam. At the same time, I acknowledge that these thinkers represent colonized or formerly colonized natives, as well as the underprivileged of India.

The postcolonial theory emerged from concrete anti-colonial movements. According to the definition by Nayar, decolonization is a continuing process of critical thinking instead of a past victory. Decolonization aims at liberation from colonial ways of thinking and engages in creating native alternatives to them. In general, the concept of postcolonialism is committed to transformation. A central practice of transformation is questioning the colonial ways of knowing by ‘writing back’. The colonial ways of knowing are not considered as the past, but their influence in the formally decolonized present is acknowledged. Postcolonialism itself is a contested movement instead of a united approach to colonialism. Reading in its broad meaning and with a special emphasis on the mode of reading is at the center of postcolonialism. Colonialism is somehow part of the selected objects of reading. These objects can be cultural products by the authors from formerly colonized countries or diaspora. They can also be readable elements from the colonial period, by the colonizers.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Loomba 2005, 14–16; McLeod 2010, 10–12; Nayar 2010, 5; Doniger 2015, 73–75.

<sup>44</sup> King 2010, 95.

<sup>45</sup> McLeod 2010, 38–41; Nayar 2010, 3–5.

Loomba compares postcolonial theory to feminist theory. Both need to balance between universal and particular aspects of oppression. ‘Postcolonial’ should be interpreted as a generalizing concept, which encloses multiple forms of decolonization and describes them instead of evaluating them. The colonizers or the West should not be understood as uniform concepts, since the parties involved, resources, and other local factors influence essentially to each form of colonialism.<sup>46</sup>

As religion and theology are central parts of this thesis, a critical remark by R.S. Sugirtharajah (2003) needs to be noted. Sugirtharajah argues that postcolonial theorists tend to disregard the manifold role of religion and theology in colonial and postcolonial societies by favoring the secular approach.<sup>47</sup> According to him, postcolonial theoretical themes have been discussed in the context of certain religious traditions instead of “understanding religion”.<sup>48</sup>

## **2.2 *Jati, Varna, and the Caste System***

Ambedkar, Nirmal, and Devashayam belong to the complicated network of caste positions. The concept of caste itself is manifold. Debjani Ganguly (2005) illustrates an incoherence between “caste as an academic concept”<sup>49</sup> and indigenously Indian words for categorizing the world. The approximate, imprecise translation of *jati* would be ‘genera’ or ‘species’, but a closer look at the term reveals its manifoldness.<sup>50</sup>

Inden and Marriott (1977, cited by Ganguly 2005) define *jati* in the following way:

“*Jati* means a whole range of earthly populations that we call families, kin groups, genders, occupational categories, speakers of the same language, regional populations, religious communities, nations, races; it encompasses the categories of gods in their heavens, demons, etc.”<sup>51</sup>

The definition above seems pervasive and difficult to grasp. Its correspondence with the commonly used English concepts such as the caste hierarchy and the caste system seems difficult. The sources of this thesis come from explicitly Dalit, i.e. hierarchically outcaste,

---

<sup>46</sup> Loomba 2005, 21; Nayar 2010, 5.

<sup>47</sup> Sugirtharajah 2003, 157–158.

<sup>48</sup> By “understanding religion”, Sugirtharajah seems to refer to reading religious systems themselves from the perspective of colonialism instead of how these systems are colonially represented. Sugirtharajah 2003, 157, footnote 14.

<sup>49</sup> “Caste as an academic concept” refers to the socio-anthropological reading of caste, in which caste is understood as an institution of occupational groups that are hierarchical, inherited and endogamous. Inden and Marriott (1977, quoted by Ganguly 2005) claim that this kind of academic concept of caste does not originate in the South Asian context. See Ganguly 2005, 3.

<sup>50</sup> Ganguly 2005, 3.

positions. My hypothesis is that for the three thinkers, caste is a moral conflict that provokes them to argue for the oppressive nature of Hinduism. Therefore, the broadness of *jati* raises questions. Of which ideas and practices does caste oppression stem from?

Even though I aim at reading the relation between caste oppression and Hinduism (as a system of beliefs grounded in scriptures) critically in this thesis, certain Hindu beliefs need to be identified here. These central concepts are *varna*, *dharma*, and *karma*. In addition to *jati*, another indigenously Southern Asian word related to caste is *varna*. The literal translation of *varna* is “color” as a characteristic. Its common translation is ‘order’, ‘class’ or ‘kind’. There are four interdependent *varnas*, which belong to the *varna* hierarchy. In a hierarchical order, from the highest position onwards, these *varnas* are: the Brahmins (priests), the Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors), the Vaishyas (merchants and agriculturists), and the Shudras (servants). The Dalits are outsiders or parallels in relation to the *varna* hierarchy.<sup>52</sup>

The notion of *varna* can be found in certain central Hindu scriptures. I discuss the theme of scriptural oppression especially in Section 3.2. The earliest text of Indian history, the *Rigveda* (ca. 1500–1000 BCE) includes the myth of Purusha, the First Man (the Purusha Sukta, the *Rigveda* 10.90.11–12). In the myth, Purusha represents an ideal society. As Purusha is sacrificially divided into four body parts, the society is divided into four *varnas*. The *Laws of Manu* (ca. 1 CE) offers a more detailed description of the caste hierarchy and puts caste in the context of a universal law of life.<sup>53</sup>

In the *Laws of Manu*, the special duties of different *varnas* are discussed through the concept of *dharma*, which refers to the ‘code of duty’, ‘religious law’, and ‘right human conduct’. The *Laws of Manu* portrays a divine creator that specifies *dharma* for each *varna*. *Dharma* sets the boundaries of individual wealth (*artha*) and pleasure (*kama*), meaning that each individual needs to recognize their specific position in the whole and interdependence in relation to other beings. In the *Bhagavad Gita* (ca. 100 CE, quoted by Bayly 2001), caste preserves the stability of the humanity.<sup>54</sup>

“...when lawlessness prevails, ...the women of the family become corrupted, and when women are corrupted confusion of castes arises. And to hell does this confusion bring the family itself as well as those who have destroyed it...By the misdeeds of those who destroy a family and create confusion of *varnas* (castes), the immemorial laws of the race and the family are destroyed.”<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> Ganguly 2005, 3–4.

<sup>52</sup> Srinivas 1992, 28; Bayly 2001, 8–9.

<sup>53</sup> Srinivas 1992, 28–29; Bayly 2001, 13–14; Doniger 2015, 70–71.

<sup>54</sup> Bayly 2001, 13–14; Rambachan 2008, 114; Doniger 2015, 71.

<sup>55</sup> Bayly 2001, 13–14.

As I indicated in the introduction, caste hierarchy is often presented in contrast to the non-Indian or non-Hindu ideal of equality. According to Arvind Sharma (2004), *dharma* could be seen as the primary basis of human rights in Hinduism. He focuses on *sādhāraṇa dharma*, which refers to the universal duty that does not depend on one's caste or stage of life. Sharma claims that *sādhāraṇa dharma* is often disregarded in relation to the caste-based *dharma*. Sharma also points out that the Hindu approach to human rights starts from the cosmos and emphasizes duties in relation to the greater good, such as the broader society and the environment. However, its challenge is to recognize the rights of an individual.<sup>56</sup>

*Karma* is an essential concept supporting the permanence of *jatis* and *varnas*. The idea of *karma* emerges from Vedic and non-Vedic Hindu sources. The translation of *karma* is “action”. This meaning extends in many directions. An action can be ritually oriented. Its emphasis can be on morality. Certain moral actions influence the future re-births. *Karma* is also a result of a previous life, which determines one's actions in one's life. Good or bad *karma* can also be transferred between human beings in this life. The traditional belief is that one is born into a caste as a result of the *karma* one has collected in the past life. Therefore, one cannot change their birth-given position in this life.<sup>57</sup> Compared to the broadness of *jati*, *varna* seems to denote coherence, control, and scripturality. Commingled with religion (such as the concepts of *dharma* and *karma*, as well as the scriptures), *varna* seems to be a potential sign of eternal hierarchy, as well as systematic oppression.

However, there are various relevant critiques that question the readings of caste oppression as inherently religious oppression. Hira Singh (2014) is concerned about the way in which *varna* and caste (as *jati*) are mixed in the study of caste. According to him, this applies especially to the scripture-centered interpreters of caste. However, the empirical research tends to distinguish *jati* from *varna*. In addition to Singh's relatively recent critique, also M.N. Srinivas (1992) argues that sociologists should stop interpreting caste through the ideal *varna* hierarchy. The reason is that the concrete caste system does not follow the ideal *varna* hierarchy totally and literally. The Dalits who have no name in the ideal *varna* hierarchy are concrete agents in the caste system. In contrast to the invariant *varna* model, the lower castes (even the Dalits, as Ambedkar's story shows) may gain political and economic wealth, though their invariant *varna* position would be subordinate. Srinivas claims that *varna*

---

<sup>56</sup> Sharma 2004, 13–14, 36.

<sup>57</sup> Smith 2005, 9524; Doniger 2009, 168–169.

has served as a common social language of what is good and familiar. It is noteworthy that also the practical *jatis* tend to express their belonging to *varna* identities.<sup>58</sup>

The epistemological power of colonialism is significantly present in the past and present definitions of caste. The central debate in the Indian social science is this: is caste a coherent system of thought and practice or a colonial creation? The question that follows is this: how similar or different caste is compared to other social systems? Bayly (2001) claims that despite the non-fixedness of *varna* and *jati*, the basic ideas behind them existed already in the pre-colonial India. Bayly and Gupta (2004) argue that the idea of caste as simply a colonial construct or an orientalist fiction is false.<sup>59</sup>

According to Singh, *Homo Hierarchicus* (Dumont 1970, 1980) by Louis Dumont is the dominant sociological work on the caste system. Singh points out that there are more studies than competing theories of the caste system. Caste seems to be an intriguing object of studying, but the paradigm of these studies is often taken for granted. In *Homo Hierarchicus*, Dumont regards the four-fold *varna* model as the basic model of caste and interprets the hierarchy of *jatis* in correlation with the *varna* hierarchy. According to the theory, the power that unifies the multiple *jatis* into a coherent system is the distinction between purity and pollution. The Brahmin *jatis* are in the purest and highest position in the hierarchy, and the state of pollution grows towards the bottom of the hierarchy.<sup>60</sup>

Dumont's theory of caste has been widely honored but also criticized. Singh presents the following critical viewpoints towards Dumont's theory, presented by Indian scholars: the problematicity and partiality of comparing modern West and traditional India (Beteille 2006), constructing fake unity (Beteille 2006), focusing on hierarchy and ignoring difference (Gupta 2000), mixing *varna* and *jati* (Srinivas 2006), focusing on the ideal before the material (Beidelman 1959), concentrating on consensus (Bailey 1960), as well as giving attention to the Brahmins and ignoring the Dalits (Berreman 1963). The theoretical and methodological critique by Singh is that Dumont discusses caste as an idea and detaches it from material realities. Dipankar Gupta (2004) criticizes Dumont's theory for its ideological reading of caste. According to him, Dumont viewed the caste system through the Brahmin-led unity and failed to recognize the self-esteem of the non-Brahmin castes.<sup>61</sup>

As *Homo Hierarchicus* shows, caste is a phenomenon that raises questions of the essence of caste. I predict that Dumont's paradigmatic approach to caste is at least to some

---

<sup>58</sup> Srinivas 1992, 30–34; Singh 2014, 106.

<sup>59</sup> Bayly 2001, 3–4, 9; Gupta 2004, xi–xii.

<sup>60</sup> Srinivas 2006, 93–97; Singh 2014, 1, 17.

extent visible in the ways that Ambedkar, Nirmal and Devasahayam discuss the caste system. The European colonizers modified and systematized the already existing traditions from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The systematized caste norms benefited both the colonial governing and the native intrastate alliances. The crucial point is that there has not been a constant caste system from the ancient times to the present. Ideals and practices of both *jati* and *varna* have been transformed over time and in the middle of the notable diversity of India. Nicholas Dirks (2001) contrasts the pre- and post-colonial caste system sharply. In the pre-colonial India, there were various context-dependent units of social identity. According to Dirks, the colonial era made the social order of India significantly more homogeneous and pervasive. A part of this colonial modification was the interpretation of caste as an essentially religious institution, which ignored its pre-colonial political aspects.<sup>62</sup>

Sharma compares caste to the Western idea of citizenship. People are born into a certain nationality or caste, which later guides their marrying and provides the basic source of their social security. Different nationalities or castes are in a hierarchical relationship with each other, but people are at least in principle born equal within a nationality or a caste.<sup>63</sup>

To sum up, caste can be understood as a phenomenon that is ancient yet flexible, and religious yet secular. Bayly describes that during the history of India, caste has been a tool for building loyalty between disconnected regions, faiths, languages, and socioeconomic positions. At the same time, it has been a tool for excluding and oppressing other people.<sup>64</sup>

### **2.3 Dalits and their Liberation**

Outside the four-fold *varna* hierarchy and among the outcaste *jatis* exists the reality of being a Dalit. Estimatedly 16 % of the total Indian population are Dalits. The name Dalit originates from the Sanskrit root *dal*. It carries the meanings of being burnt, split, broken or torn asunder, downtrodden, crushed, or destroyed. Despite the bleak meanings of the word, the outcastes have transformed it into an empowered and active identity.<sup>65</sup>

A lower-caste social reformer Jotirao Govindrao Phule (1827–1890) started using the name Dalit for anti-Brahminical, anti-upper class and anti-patriarchal political purposes in the late nineteenth century. Dalitness became a more common political topic in the 1970s. In addition to the Dalits, the Dalit Panther Manifesto of 1972 included various other politically,

---

<sup>61</sup> Gupta 2004, x–xi; Singh 2014, 1, 17–18.

<sup>62</sup> Bayly 2001, 4–5, 25; Dirks 2001, 13.

<sup>63</sup> Sharma 2004, 63–64.

<sup>64</sup> Bayly 2001, 5.

economically and religiously oppressed groups in its liberation agenda. The rising Dalit movement of the 1970s was inspired by its global counterparts: the Black Panthers in the United States, the South American liberation movements in South America, and the South African antiapartheid activism. The themes of race, class, colonization, Christianization, and discrimination were present in these contexts. 'Dalit' refers to a political subject, as well as a broader political vision. Debjani Ganguly (2005) states that since the 1980s, the name Dalit has broadened into the Dalit *bahujan*, meaning 'Dalit majority'. In this meaning, Dalits form a political and discursive community against Hindu nationalism. The community consists not only of outcastes, but also of lower castes, peasants, and women. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the fight for Dalit rights has become transnational, including global activism ranging from the UN to NGOs. The increased attention to the Dalit situation has gained increased media coverage as well as translations of Dalit literature.<sup>66</sup>

As I mentioned earlier in Section 1.3, caste discrimination became illegal in the Constitution of India (1950). Nevertheless, the Dalit suffering has been noted in the global human rights movement, such as the Human Rights Watch reports. For example, the report of 1999 calls the situation of the rural Dalits "hidden apartheid" because of the caste-based village segregation. According to the report, Dalit discrimination takes various forms: no access to land, forced work, bad working conditions, as well as police and upper caste brutality.<sup>67</sup>

Peniel Rajkumar (2010) distinguishes two main theories of the history of Dalit discrimination. According to the Aryan invasion theory, which is inspired by certain ancient texts such as the *Rigveda*, the Dalits originate from the indigenous black race natives of India. According to the theory, the white and Sanskrit-speaking Aryan invaders (around 1,500 BCE) saw the Dalit natives as a threat. Thus, the Dalits were treated with hostility and isolated from the community. Another version of the story claims that the Aryans were the indigenous people of India. Both versions have been utilized for various political identity-building. Whereas the Hindu nationalists have tended to support the idea of Hindus as the indigenous inhabitants of India, anti-Brahmin Dalit activists have aimed at proving their separatedness from the Hindus.<sup>68</sup>

Another theory that Rajkumar presents is the theory of purity and pollution. Rajkumar recognizes the general weakening of the principles of purity and pollution. Yet, he claims that

---

<sup>65</sup> Clarke, Manchala & Peacock 2011, 5–6.

<sup>66</sup> Ganguly 2005, 130, 132–133; Melanchton 2009, 200; Rao 2009, 1–2, 12.

<sup>67</sup> Clarke, Manchala & Peacock 2011, 5.

in the particular position of the Dalits, the idea of impurity is a pervasive and defining factor behind the discrimination. The Dalits are regarded as pollutive people, the untouchables. They pollute not only by touching but also by existing close enough to purer castes. Even their shadow is believed to pollute. Therefore, they have their own wells as well as residential areas in the villages. The most pollutive societal tasks are reserved exclusively to the Dalit *jatis*. Traditionally, only Dalits are in touch with impure elements such as leather, human waste, and corpses.<sup>69</sup>

Religion plays a significant and two-fold role in the history of Dalits. Bastiaan Wielenga (2007) summarizes that the role of religion has been relevant in both the justifications and objections of caste oppression. As a protest to Hinduism, Dalits have converted to Neo-Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. Felix Wilfred (2005) argues that Dalit conversions to Buddhism have had the biggest importance, primarily because of the symbolic value. ‘Symbolic’ here refers to the public conversion of Ambedkar and his followers in 1956. Ambedkar’s public conversion marked the birth of a new form of Buddhism, Ambedkar’s Buddhism. Ambedkar constructs his commentary of Buddha’s teachings and contemporary challenges in his last work, the posthumously published *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1957). His deep engagement in social justice defined his engagement in Buddhism that he regarded the highest form of religion.<sup>70</sup>

Although Christianity has been an appealing option for the oppressed Dalits, the history of Indian Christianity is also the history of caste within Christianity. The Syrian Christians represent the privileged among Dalit Christians. They have been granted the social status of an upper caste Hindu for centuries (according to James Massey, since around 1020 CE). Their churches are regarded as the strictest practitioners of caste discrimination among Christian denominations in India. The Roman Catholic Mission in India began in the 16<sup>th</sup> by the Portuguese missionaries, who adopted the caste hierarchy to their newly established churches. The Roman Catholic missionaries interpreted the caste system as a primarily Indian and religiously neutral structure. The Protestant missionaries entered India in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Protestant Christianity became popular among Dalits, which is visible in the mass conversions of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the Protestants were not uniform in their reactions to caste. Whereas the Lutheran Pietists had focused on individual piety and adopted caste, the majority of Protestant missionaries began to oppose caste as

---

<sup>68</sup> Rajkumar 2010, 5–6.

<sup>69</sup> Rajkumar 2010, 14–18.

<sup>70</sup> Rodrigues 2004, 25–26, 559; Wilfred 2005, 123; Wielenga 2007, 42.

fundamentally incompatible with Christianity. By 1850, almost all of them supported the idea of caste as an evil and Christians as totally separated from the Hindu society. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, nearly two-thirds of Indian Christians were Dalits. Yet, those Dalits who converted to Protestant Christianity hoping for the end of caste identities and caste discrimination ended up disappointed. Rajkumar (2010) argues that caste continued to affect the lives of the Dalit converts because of the insufficient interference in the Indian churches, pervasiveness of caste itself, and the social tensions towards the conversions.<sup>71</sup>

Christian Dalit theology has its roots in the political Dalit liberation movement and the disappointment of the converted yet oppressed Dalit Christians. After Indian contextual theologies that utilized Brahminical Hindu philosophy, certain Indian theologians started raising the oppressed Dalit majority of Indian Christians to the center of Indian theology. Dalit theology engages in the methodological approach by other liberation theologies: it is a theological expression that is grounded in the historical experiences of Dalits themselves and the encounter of Dalits and the Christian God. The indigeneous Dalit traditions such as myths, folk stories, songs, proverbs and festivals are part of the resources of Dalit theology. Simultaneously there is a need for reconstructing Dalit history, culture and religion, because of their destruction during the long history of oppression. Dalit theology interprets the situation of Dalits in the light of the Christian Bible and especially from the perspective of hope and liberation. According to Dalit theological interpretation, the poor and oppressed – including the Dalits – are categorically primary in front of God. Dalit theology includes two main aspects: recognizing the Dalit identity and constructing a broader vision of liberation from oppression.<sup>72</sup>

## ***2.4 Hinduism as a Contested Category***

As my research question is to examine how the three Dalit and non-Hindu thinkers conceptualize Hinduism, it is necessary to provide a basic framework on it. I have structured this section based on what my sources claim about Hinduism in Chapter 3. I am aware that the elements I present do not form a universally approved image of Hinduism.<sup>73</sup> This applies also to the interpretation of these elements. Firstly, I delineate historical perspectives on Hinduism. Secondly, I present the relevant scriptures of Hinduism. Thirdly, I outline the theology of

---

<sup>71</sup> Forrester 1980, 42–43; Rajkumar 2010, 25–30.

<sup>72</sup> Wielenga 2007, 52; Melancton 2009, 200–201; Rajkumar 2010, 35–36.

<sup>73</sup> For example, Julius Lipner (1996) has considered Indian traditions to be ‘polycentric’. King 2010, 108.

Hinduism. Finally, I point out the scholarly debate on how reasonable it is to talk about Hinduism as one religion.

The concept of Hinduism has an English background. Yet, the etymology of 'Hindu' goes back further than that in history. 'Hindu' originates from the word '*Sindhu*' that refers to the inhabitants of the Indus river area. The word was used by Herodotus already in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE and the Persians in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The name Hindu came from the outsiders of the Indus river population, and yet, the population adopted it over time. Wendy Doniger (2014) claims that most present-day Hindus still include geography to their self-definitions. Klaus K. Klostermaier (2007) argues that there are critical stances among Hindus towards the idea of Hinduism as their religion. Instead, these critics regard the concept of *dharma* as more suitable for representing the whole cultural tradition of the Hindus.<sup>74</sup>

The name 'Hindu' did not have a specifically religious meaning until the colonial period in India. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the term 'Hinduism' became to refer to the religious belief system of the Indian people. Naming and defining Indians through 'Hinduism' meant that their diversity of myths, beliefs, rituals, and laws were transformed into one religion. Doniger (2014) argues that in contrast to the British colonizers who categorized Indians based on their religion, the Indian people had prioritized locality, language, caste, occupation, and sect over religious beliefs. She claims that these identity markers tend to be more primary than religion (as religious beliefs) even today.<sup>75</sup>

Tracing the ancient history of the Hindu religion is difficult. Unlike Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Hinduism is not rooted in certain historical events. On the other hand, certain Hindus and colonial agents have shared a distorted image of history of the Hindu religion: exaggerating its age, generalizing religiosity of certain Hindus, as well as falsely regarding Hindu concepts as unchanging. Doniger (2015) marks the birth of Hindu religion to the 2500 BCE or the 1500 BCE. The former refers to the Indus Valley Civilization of which there are archeological but no textual evidence. The latter refers to the composition of the *Rigveda*, the oldest Hindu Scripture. Some elements of the Indus valley culture have notable resemblances with later Hinduism, although similar functions of these elements should not be assumed. For example, the imagery (seals, figures, decorations, art forms etc.) seems to have been partly preserved and developed to the later images of Hindu gods and goddesses.<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> Klostermaier 2007, 17; Doniger 2014, 6–8.

<sup>75</sup> King 1999, 98–100; Doniger 2014, 3.

<sup>76</sup> Doniger 2009, 18–19; Doniger 2015, 55–59.

Klostermaier claims that the Hindu tradition is superior in the age, quantity and conservation of the scriptures. Orality is a central part of the Hindu scriptures. The texts were transmitted to the next generations orally before scriptural form, and their usage is still grounded in recitation in a worship context. Another central part of the scriptures is an idea of revelation. Klostermaier argues that despite the Western secular scholarship on the Hindu texts, their role of revelations remains among Hindus. From early on, Hindu scholars have created a Hindu theological epistemology, in which certain texts are more revelatory and authoritative than others.<sup>77</sup>

As the collection of Hindu scriptures is abundant, I focus on the ones that Ambedkar, Nirmal, and Devasahayam discuss in their selected texts. One of them is the *Rigveda*, which is the oldest of the four *Vedas*. The *Vedas* are focused on the practice of the Vedic religion, especially performance of the sacrifice. Klostermaier claims that regarding the *Vedas* as revealed scriptures would be the principal criterion for a Hindu. In addition to that, the *Rigveda* is given a special importance as revealed. Ananatnand Rambachan (2008) links the orthodoxy of Hindus and the belief in the revealed nature of the *Vedas* together. Yet, Doniger (2014) claims that ‘orthodox’ as ‘correct belief’ is a foreign idea to mainstream Hinduism, in which orthopraxy as ‘correct practices such as ritual’ is more characteristic. The common Hindu term for a person who is excommunicated from the Hindu community is *vedabahya*, which means ‘outside the *Vedas*’. Because of the emphasis on orthopraxy, the opposite of *vedabahya* is some kind of practical loyalty to the *Vedas*. Doniger describes that expressing loyalty to the *Vedas* allows a wide variety of acts and beliefs.<sup>78</sup>

In addition to the *Rigveda*, the three thinkers discuss the *Laws of Manu*, which is the most important Hindu scriptural authority on *dharma*. It has a special position as not revealed but remembered tradition. The third discussed scripture is the *Shastras* (‘texts’, ‘teachings’, ‘sciences’) that were composed around 100–600 CE. They both are describing and proscribing texts that structure diversity from a hierarchical Brahmin perspective. Yet, none of these three scriptures – the *Vedas*, the *Laws of Manu*, the *Shastras* – seem to be central from the perspective of modern Hindus. Klostermaier argues that certain other Hindu scriptures have affected them more deeply. These are the epics *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Purāṇas* (‘the Hindu Bibles’), and the *Bhagavadgītā* (scripture that almost all Hindus know and that includes central characteristics of Hinduism).<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> Klostermaier 2007, 45–46.

<sup>78</sup> Klostermaier 2007, 15, 47; Rambachan 2008, 113; Doniger 2014, 8, 37–38, 48.

<sup>79</sup> Klostermaier 2007, 15–16, 50–51; Doniger 2015, 210.

Doniger (2014) points out that since the canonical collection of Hindu scriptures (such as the *Rigveda*) has been inaccessible to the Hindu majority, there exists a nearly endless reinterpretation of doctrine in Hinduism. The inaccessibility refers to the fact that traditionally the non-twice-born *varnas* (the Shudras and the Dalits) have been excluded from studying the *Vedas* and constructing scripture-based Hindu theology. Rambachan (2008) claims that those Hindus who were excluded from studying sacred texts could not shape the text-centered Hindu theologies. Correspondingly, these theologies remain ‘theologies from above’ and are unable to recognize the perspectives of the oppressed and excluded. However, Doniger (2015) challenges the polarizations of local versus pan-Indian, oral versus written, vernacular versus Sanskrit, and non-textual versus textual traditions of Hinduism. According to her view, Brahmins have not been totally isolated from folk traditions, although they have a generally authoritative and privileged position in scriptural Hinduism. Women and non-Brahmins have not been totally isolated from the composition and interpretation of Hindu texts, and the Brahmin authority has not been total or all-powerful. For example, the lowest castes have had their own non-Vedic and non-Brahmin priests.<sup>80</sup>

Doniger (2015) argues that there is no clearly defined Hindu dogma. She analyzes the concepts, beliefs and practices of Hinduism through a Zen diagram. Such diagram means that there is no essential center of Hindus: a religious element that every Hindu would share. Instead, every Hindu has a combination of concepts, beliefs and practices. The Hinduness of these concepts, beliefs and practices is based on a claim they link the Hindus loosely together despite the vast historical and geographical diversity. Some of these Hindu elements in the Zen diagram are related to the literary tradition of Hinduism and some to popular Hinduism.<sup>81</sup>

Klostermaier argues that the development process of a shared Hindu worldview among Indians was facilitated by the relatively isolated location of the Indian subcontinent. The worldview of Hinduism can be called polytheistic based on its exceptionally rich variety of gods, goddesses, semidivine beings, demons, and so on. Simultaneously, the great variety of Hinduism includes the idea of One Supreme Being who creates, preserves, and destroys the universe, as well as saves the believers. Both the Hindu scriptures and practices support the idea of simultaneous polytheism and ultimate oneness of divine. Over history, certain Hindus have wanted to silence either polytheism or Oneness of their tradition, which has led to intra-religious and also politically motivated conflicts.<sup>82</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> Rambachan 2008, 121; Doniger 2014, 36–37; Doniger 2015, 59–62.

<sup>81</sup> Doniger 2015, 55–56.

<sup>82</sup> Klostermaier 2007, 16; Doniger 2014, 10.

Among scholars of Hinduism, there are competing theories on the functionality of the concept of Hinduism. In the middle of the vast variety of Hinduism, several scholars in the field of religious studies have claimed that it should not be seen as one religion. Instead, Hinduism should be seen as a collection of many religions or faiths. Timothy Fitzgerald (2000) argues that calling Hinduism a religion is a theoretical misinterpretation. He recognizes the existence of systematic values and institutions of India but underlines the importance of combining theories with ethnographic data. According to Fitzgerald, interpreting Hinduism as a world religion is a creation of inter-faith promoters that detach 'religion' from 'society'. Following *Orientalism* by Edward Said (1978), critics of Western colonialism have highlighted the essentialist conceptions of foreign India in the construction of Hinduism. These essentialist concepts are linked to the actual colonial domination of the natives.<sup>83</sup>

However, other scholars emphasize the idea of an Indian Hindu identity that existed before the colonizers entered India. The emphasis is more on Hinduness as an identity marker in relation to the Indian Muslims than an essentially 'religious' identity. In addition to that, the critics of the abovementioned theoretical approach have claimed that constructionism highlights the agency of colonizers and elite natives and ignores the vast indigenous agency. Moreover, the point is that although the concept of religion is undeniably Western, the religiosity of India should be studied in its own terms.<sup>84</sup>

In the context of this thesis, my theoretical framework represents generally critical readings of 'Hinduism' as a colonial construct. In contrast, my Dalit sources represent particularly critical readings of Hinduism because of caste oppression. In the following analysis chapters, I aim at recognizing the both stances.

---

<sup>83</sup> Fitzgerald 2000, 134–135; Bloch & Keppens 2010, 3–4.

<sup>84</sup> Bloch & Keppens 2010, 9.

### **3 Oppressive Hinduism**

This chapter begins my analysis of the selected texts by Ambedkar (1936), Nirmal (1991a & 1991b), and Devasahayam (1991 & 1997). I analyze their claims about Hinduism thematically. I have constructed three concepts to describe their ideas of oppression in Hinduism: historical, scriptural, and doctrinal oppression. As I presented in Section 1.3, constructing these concepts has been part of my systematic analysis: the three thinkers do not use these concepts themselves. The questions related to these concepts are 1) how the long history of Dalits and Hinduism is interpreted, 2) which parts are re-interpreted from the Hindu Scriptures and how, and 3) which doctrinal elements are chosen from Hinduism and how they are interpreted.

I would like to point out that the claims about scriptural and doctrinal oppression are somewhat intertwined, since the doctrinal elements are found in the scriptures. Nevertheless, I wanted to clarify the ways in which the three thinkers construct the Hindu doctrine out of scriptural and other elements.

I shall first present and analyze the stances emerging from Ambedkar, Devasahayam and Nirmal and then problematize their interpretations with the selected literature on colonialism, caste and Hinduism.

#### ***3.1 Historical Oppression***

In this section, my goal is to analyze the ways in which the three thinkers construct history in their texts. Instead of assessing the historical reliability of their claims, I aim to analyze the constructions and the ways in which they are utilized for supporting the idea of oppressive Hinduism.

Nirmal states that there is a lack of Dalit historiography, which can be explained through an ideological bias. Firstly, he claims that the dominant historiographer excludes Dalits. Whereas this un-named historiographer demands written or archaeological historical sources, Dalit sources tend to be oral. Secondly, Nirmal refers to the conquerors who have systematically destroyed Dalit history and culture. Thirdly, he accuses the present academic historians for using historical sources that are hostile to Dalits.<sup>85</sup> Nirmal does not clarify who these groups that ignore and spite Dalits are, but he clearly interprets systematic oppression behind the lack of Dalit historiography. Devasahayam and Ambedkar do not discuss the lack of written Dalit histories.

---

<sup>85</sup> Nirmal 1991b, 143–144.

Nirmal's response to the lack of adequate written and archaeological Dalit histories is "the historical dalit consciousness"<sup>86</sup>. According to Nirmal, the historical dalit consciousness reveals Dalit suffering in its incomparability. The historical Dalit consciousness is the primary basis for Nirmal's Christian Dalit theology. Nirmal regards the Dalit suffering as deeper than that of the biblical Israelites, who suffered in the slavery of Egypt (Deuteronomy 26:5–12)<sup>87</sup>. Gustavo Gutiérrez, a pioneering Latin American liberation theologian has defined the biblical Exodus as paradigmatic, meaning that the Israelites of Exodus represent a larger collective of the oppressed. Gutiérrez interprets the Bible through a coherent message of liberation. Liberation and salvation come from God, but people have a strong role in God's salvation history. Opposing oppression means participating in the salvation history.<sup>88</sup>

Nirmal underlines the *Savarna* responsibility for Dalit oppression. *Savarnas* are the three highest *varnas* (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya). Nirmal mentions several religion-related village practices in which *Savarnas* have used violent oppression and exclusion towards his Dalit ancestors. Learning Sanskrit, as well as entering "their" temples and places of worship have been prohibited from Dalits.<sup>89</sup> By using the pronoun "their", Nirmal seems to speak of Hindu Savarnas who are separate from the Dalit collective.

For Nirmal, Dalitness becomes a theological position. According to him, the particular situation of Dalits requires theological analysis. Nirmal states that his primary competence to speak of Dalit theology is his own position as a Christian Dalit.<sup>90</sup>

In "Pollution, Poverty and Powerlessness – a Dalit Perspective" (Devasahayam 1991), Devasahayam writes about Dalits as "them". He focuses on Dalits as members of the caste society. In the biblical exegesis "The Nature of Dalit Theology as Counter Ideology" (Devasahayam 1997), the pronoun "we" seems to refer to 'we Dalits' as well as 'we Christians'. In his version of Dalit history, Devasahayam focuses on Brahmins as the systematic oppressors of Dalits. According to his interpretation of history, Brahmins began to rule villages by ruling temples. Devasahayam links Brahmins to the sacred structure of

---

<sup>86</sup> Nirmal 1991, 59.

<sup>87</sup> Nirmal refers to Deuteronomy 26:5–12 but quotes 5–9. Deuteronomy 26:5–9 in *the Holy Bible* English Standard Version: "And you shall make response before the Lord your God, 'A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.'"

<sup>88</sup> Nirmal 1991a, 59–61; Pears 2010, 64, 73–74.

<sup>89</sup> Nirmal 1991a, 61.

<sup>90</sup> Nirmal 1991a, 57–58, 70.

Hinduism: the sacred hierarchy of pure and pollutive. He refers to Louis Dumont in his theoretical approach. According to Devasahayam, pure Brahmins perpetuated this sacred structure in the past. He ends up claiming that Brahmins intentionally founded the caste system, so that they could guard their privileges.<sup>91</sup>

Devasahayam's theological approach to the historical Dalit oppression is the concept of sin. On the one hand, he compares the oppressors of Dalits to the biblical counterparts who fail to recognize their sin: "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'we see' your sin remains." (John 9:41)<sup>92</sup> Thus, the oppression is a consequence of active wrong-doing that Devasahayam understands as practicing sin. On the other hand, he recognizes the difficulty of changing the wide-spread and pervasive attitude behind caste oppression. He claims that the concept of pollution prevents benevolent feelings towards Dalits.<sup>93</sup> Therefore, Devasahayam aims at studying the particular situation of Dalits through the concepts of "pollution", "poverty", and "powerlessness".<sup>94</sup>

Ambedkar does not emphasize his own Dalitness or write on behalf of the Dalit collective.<sup>95</sup> Instead, he discusses "the Hindus" as a collective and explains the historical birth of the caste system through "a perverse section of the Hindus". Perversity is based on social authority and privilege, as well as greedy willingness to force this hierarchy over others. In Ambedkar's version of the caste history, these greedy Hindus have established the caste practice, which has later spread and ruined the collective moral basis of all Hindus.<sup>96</sup>

Ambedkar's approach to the ills of the caste system is primarily societal and national. According to him, there is no Hindu society or nation, since one's consciousness is based on caste instead of Hinduness. Ambedkar is concerned about two specific moral responsibilities that the caste Hindus refuse to fulfill because of caste boundaries. According to him, "the savages" of India should be civilized and Brahmins should share their intellectual and social heritage with their inferiors. However, supporting one's fellow men is not included in one's own caste-based duty. According to Ambedkar's interpretation of the missionary history of Hinduism, conversions to Hinduism ceased simultaneously with the rise of the caste system. Converts have no reserved positions in the caste system. Ambedkar regards this phenomenon

---

<sup>91</sup> Devasahayam 1991, 5–6; Devasahayam 1997, 58.

<sup>92</sup> Devasahayam 1997, 57.

<sup>93</sup> Devasahayam 1991, 8; Devasahayam 1997, 57, 61.

<sup>94</sup> Devasahayam 1991, 3.

<sup>95</sup> Yet, Ambedkar seems to regard himself as inferior: "If you allow me to say, these views are the views of a man, who has been no tool of power, no flatterer of greatness." Ambedkar 1936, 304.

<sup>96</sup> Ambedkar 1936, 266–267.

as keeping others in darkness, which is morally worse than the violent ways of spreading Islam and Christianity to India.<sup>97</sup>

For all three thinkers, the reality of caste oppression seems to be the starting point – not a result – of analyzing caste history. Nirmal and Devasahayam focus on Dalitness as a collectively oppressed identity. Ambedkar focuses on Hindu society as a context of oppression. It needs to be noted that they discuss the roots of caste oppression beyond academic study of history. All three thinkers construct their systematic versions of caste history: they portray a coherent and uniform essence of it. Their divisions between the oppressed and the oppressors are sharp. Colonialism seems to play a relatively mute part in the constructions by Ambedkar, Devasahayam, and Nirmal. They do not discuss the role of colonialism in the systematization of caste. Instead, they emphasize the role of caste Hindus (Nirmal) and especially the Brahmins (Devasahayam, Ambedkar), the sacred structure of Hinduism (Devasahayam), the sin of the oppressors (Devasahayam), as well as the lack of Hindu moral responsibility beyond caste (Ambedkar). Whereas the research on caste seems notably complex and contested, the three thinkers present caste as a uniform and uniformly oppressive structure. In their readings of caste history, there seems to be an unchanging essence of the caste system. This essence appears as oppressive to the three thinkers, since certain Hindu agents create this oppressiveness on purpose.

The assumedly true ‘essence’, which consists of static, fixed and defining features has been a relevant concept in postcolonial discussion about the colonized natives. In postcolonial theory, ‘essentialism’ refers to the practice of reducing the natives to the assumed African, Indian or Arabic essence.<sup>98</sup> In the context of this thesis, I am interested in the ways in which my sources seem to create a ‘Hindu essence’ behind caste oppression. This essence pervades the Indian context – both Hindus and non-Hindus. Because this essence is inherently oppressive, the members of the Indian society are polluted and, at least, to some extent involved in oppression.

Hira Singh (2014) discusses Dumont’s *Homo Hierarchicus* as an example of reducing Indian history and society to caste. In Dumont’s theory, the traditional essence of caste society is religious and hierarchical, whereas the modern Western hierarchy is essentially non-religious and egalitarian. Dumont starts from his own position as a member of the modern French society but reads the Indian context through a ‘traditional’ lens. Therefore, Singh criticizes Dumont’s theory for applying an ahistorical comparative method between the

---

<sup>97</sup> Ambedkar 1936, 267, 270–272, 275.

<sup>98</sup> Postcolonial Studies at Emory 2017b.

civilizations. Detaching ideas and ideologies from their material and historical contexts is part of this problematic. Dumont's essentialist reading of caste leads to regarding caste as a permanent part of Indian history. More specifically, Dumont claims that economic and political changes in the caste system are exterior, whereas the interior essence of caste persists over time.<sup>99</sup> Dumont himself (Dumont 1980, quoted by Singh 2014) states in *Homo Hierarchicus*:

"If, to be called historical, a study has to be aimed primarily at detecting changes between one period and another, then this study should not be called historical, for, on the contrary, it is concerned in the first place with something permanent."<sup>100</sup>

Obviously, my sources should not be equated with Dumont as analyses of caste. Ambedkar, Nirmal and Devasahayam write about the Hindu essence of caste as insiders, who are committed to transforming the reality of caste oppression. Dumont's theory was part of a broader European academic interest in 'traditional' and 'modern' societies. According to Debjani Ganguly (2005), Dumont's ethical merit was in recognizing the need for distancing oneself from one's values in order to understand the 'Other'. However, Dumont's theory has also been applied to the intellectual project of modernizing and developing the 'underdeveloped'.<sup>101</sup> At least to some extent, Ambedkar seems to discuss the Indian "savages" as the underdeveloped. Ambedkar argues that unwillingness to civilize these savages is a sign of demoralization of the Hindus.

However, the colonized natives should not be seen as mere objects of colonial essentialism. According to Gayatri Spivak (1985), positivist essentialism can work as a conscious political strategy, as an empowering self-consciousness of a collective.<sup>102</sup> For my sources, the 'Hindu essence' behind caste oppression seems to influence the ways in which the Dalits and non-Hindus define – or essentialize – their own context as inherently oppressive. Dalitness and non-Hinduness are possible essentialist strategies for Ambedkar, Nirmal, and Devasahayam. These strategies are engaged in transforming the caste context.

Nirmal and Devasahayam write on behalf of the essentially oppressed Dalit collective, as well as Dalit Christians. According to Y.T. Vinayaraj (2011 & 2016), Dalit theologians tend to create an essentialized Dalit category. Especially their way of comparing Dalits to the oppressed in the Bible strengthens the essentialist Dalitness and ignores the diversity of Dalit

---

<sup>99</sup> Singh 2014, 9–10, 19–20, 27–28.

<sup>100</sup> Singh 2014, 27–28.

<sup>101</sup> Ganguly 2005, 52–53.

<sup>102</sup> Spivak 1985, 214–215; Postcolonial Studies at Emory 2017b.

realities. The essentialized Dalits become privileged by God but also dependent on the caste epistemology. Are Dalits forever dependent on their inferiority in relation to other people and God? In contrast to transcendental Dalit identities – such as Gandhi’s *Harijan* (Dalits as the children of God) –, Vinayaraj (2016) recognizes a need for recognizing the materiality of being a Dalit. He challenges ‘missionized theology’, in which Dalit bodies are offered transcendence and Dalits are made ‘missiological Others’.<sup>103</sup> Ambedkar writes on behalf of the Indian citizens, whose nation is morally corrupted. Whereas Nirmal and Devasahayam locate the historical oppression into the essentialized Dalit category, Ambedkar focuses on the Hindu society and essentializes its dominant members. He marks the difference between himself and the negative essence of the Hindu society by writing about ‘the Hindus’.

### **3.2 Scriptural Oppression**

The conceptual mixing of ‘caste’ and ‘*varna*’ is a central part of how the three thinkers construct their arguments of the scriptural oppression in Hinduism. A powerful Hindu myth of human origins is written in the *Rigveda* (ca. 1500–1000 BCE<sup>104</sup>), the oldest of the *Vedas*. In the myth, Purusa represents the first human being. Four types of human beings are born out of Purusa’s four body parts. The *Rigveda*, X, 90:11–12, quoted by Nirmal:

”‘When they divided the *Purusa*, into how many parts did they arrange him? What was his mouth? What were his two arms? What are his thighs and feet called?’ . ‘The *brahmin* was his mouth, his two arms were made the *rajanya* (Warrior), his two thighs<sup>105</sup> the *vaisya*, (trader and agriculturist), from his feet the *sudra* (servile class) was born.’”<sup>106</sup>

The short quote from the *Rigveda* reveals a significant element of how Nirmal interprets caste. In the *Rigveda*, the created groups with certain responsibilities are called *varnas*. Nirmal identifies the concept of *varna* with caste: the scriptural *avarnas* (‘non-*varnas*’) correspond to the contemporary Dalits. In this quote from the *Rigveda*, outcastes are not mentioned by name. However, Nirmal counts Dalits in the same myth of creation. They exist as the worthless people – no people at all. Nirmal explains:

---

<sup>103</sup> Vinayaraj 2011, 99; Vinayaraj 2016, 98.

<sup>104</sup> Doniger 2015, 70.

<sup>105</sup> Misspelling in Nirmal’s text, thighs = “things”

<sup>106</sup> Nirmal 1991a, 53.

“For the *Sa varnas*, humans were divided into the four castes – the *Brahmins*, the *Kshatriyas*, the *Vaisyas* and the *Shudras*. But we were the out castes, the *Avarnas*, no human, below even the *shudras* in the social ladder.”<sup>107</sup>

The idea of man introduced in the *Rigveda* is repeated in another Hindu scripture, the *Laws of Manu*. The *Laws of Manu* VIII, 413–414, quoted by Nirmal:

“But a *Sudra*, whether bought or unbought, he may compel to do servile work; for he was created by the self-existent (svayambhu) to be the slave of a Brahmin.’ ‘A *Sudra*, though emancipated<sup>108</sup> by his master, is not released from servitude; since that is innate in him, who can set him<sup>109</sup> free from it?’”<sup>110</sup>

Christianity as an interpretative key to Hinduism is visible in the way in which Nirmal introduces the Hindu Scriptures (the *Rigveda* and the *Laws of Manu*) next to three quotations from the New Testament and Ambedkar. The passages from the New Testament – John 4:7, 9–10, Galatians 3:28, and John 9:3 – portray Jesus as the liberator from human hierarchies and discrimination. The famous quote by Ambedkar links the unwanted status as a Dalit to the wrongness of Hinduism.<sup>111</sup> The quotes that Nirmal presents seem to offer alternatives to the passages of the *Rigveda* and the *Laws of Manu*:

“I had the misfortune to be born with a stigma of “untouchable”. but it is not my fault, but I will not die a Hindu, for this is within my power.” Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

“There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, ‘give me a drink’ .... The Samaritan woman said to Him, ‘How is that you a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman<sup>112</sup> of Samaria?’ ‘For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.’” John 4:7, 9–10

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Galatians 3:28

“Jesus answered, ‘It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him.’” John<sup>113</sup> 9:3<sup>114</sup>

Devasahayam creates a correspondence between the contemporary caste system and an Upanishadic scripture about different *varnas*. The Upanishadic passage, quoted by Devasahayam, orders:

”Those who are of pleasant conduct enter the womb of a Vaisya (or one of the three aryan varnas) and those of stinking conduct enter the womb of a dog or swine or an outcaste.”<sup>115</sup>

---

<sup>107</sup> Nirmal 1991a, 62.

<sup>108</sup> Misspelling in Nirmal’s text, “emanicipated” = emancipated

<sup>109</sup> Misspelling in Nirmal’s text, “his” = him

<sup>110</sup> Nirmal 1991a, 53.

<sup>111</sup> Nirmal 1991a, 53.

<sup>112</sup> Misspelling in Nirmal’s text, ”women” = woman

<sup>113</sup> Misspelling in Nirmal’s text, ”Johu” = John

<sup>114</sup> Nirmal 1991a, 53–54.

According to Devasahayam, this scripture is an example of the incomparably malevolent nature of the caste system.

Devasahayam claims that the idea of pollution differentiates the caste hierarchy from other social hierarchies. He bases his argumentation in the *Laws of Manu*, where the Dalits are demarcated as untouchable to the extent that their touch, shadow and sight are believed to pollute other castes. According to him, Manu the lawgiver codified and sanctioned the idea of pollution. In addition to the *Laws of Manu*, Devasahayam refers to Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* as a proof of purity and pollution in the caste system.<sup>116</sup>

Based on the *Laws of Manu*, Devasahayam creates a contrast between religious gender oppression of Hinduism and religious gender equality of Christianity. He regards the *Laws of Manu* as a perfect example of hostility towards women. Devasahayam refers especially to the texts about the fundamental impurity of women. According to his interpretation, there is a generally Indian anti-woman culture, and Indian violence against women is unparalleled. Devasahayam argues that from the perspective of progress, the modern India and India in the time of Manu can be compared. The reason for this is the caste system, "status quoist". In contrast to the Hindu and Indian inequality, Devasahayam claims that because of their essence, women hold a privileged position in Christianity. According to his interpretation, women have followed Jesus with the greatest loyalty and have never joined the enemies of Jesus.<sup>117</sup>

Ambedkar's interpretation of caste and *varna* is both detailed and mixed. On the one hand, he recognizes that the numerous castes (*jatis*) are based on birth whereas the four *varnas* are based on worth. The *jatis* function practically through birth-given positions, whereas the *varnas* constitute a more theoretical hierarchy of worth. On the other hand, Ambedkar claims that the both categories originate from a same source. He claims that both caste (*jati*) and *varna* are discussed in certain Hindu scriptures: the *Vedas* and the *Smritis*. The *Vedas* belong to the 'heard' (*shruti*) and the *Smritis* to the 'remembered' (*smriti*) scriptural categories. In Ambedkar's argumentation, this scriptural basis leads to a fundamental conclusion. According to Ambedkar, the two scripture-based concepts cannot be interpreted rationally, since the Hindus are not allowed to interpret their holy texts rationally. He refers to

---

<sup>115</sup> Devasahayam 1997, 55.

<sup>116</sup> Devasahayam 1991, 4, 21.

<sup>117</sup> Devasahayam 1997, 60–61, 65

Manu the lawgiver, who has declared the *Vedas* and the *Smritis* unquestionably authoritative. Also, the *Shastras*<sup>118</sup> condemn the rational interpretation of caste and *varna*.<sup>119</sup>

Ambedkar creates a sharp contrast between the *Laws of Manu* and other laws. He describes the *Laws of Manu* as a code of laws that is the most hostile towards social rights. The reason is that it maintains the *varna* hierarchy (*Chaturvarnya*) and restricts the rights of the lower castes. They are disallowed to rebel and fight for their rights with arms, as well as to receive education or achieve religious salvation.<sup>120</sup>

Ambedkar's approach to certain Hindu scriptures reveals his approach to the nature of Hinduism in total:

“What is this Hindu religion? Is it a set of principles or is it a code of rules? Now the Hindu religion, as contained in the *Vedas* and the *Smritis*, is nothing but a mass of sacrificial, social, political and sanitary rules and regulations, all mixed up.”<sup>121</sup>

Thus, Ambedkar claims that the whole religion of Hinduism can be found in the *Vedas* and the *Smritis* – including the aforementioned *Rigveda* and *Laws of Manu*. According to his interpretation, the *Shastras* – the ‘teachings’ – are the scriptures that teach the Hindus “religion of caste”<sup>122</sup>. For Ambedkar, the causality between certain religious beliefs introduced in the *Shastras* and the phenomenon of caste is straightforward, natural even. Ambedkar claims that breaking the commands of the *Shastras* signifies sin. The annihilation of caste requires annihilating the authority of the *Shastras* and the *Vedas* that are believed to be divine and sacred.<sup>123</sup>

All three thinkers present Hindu scriptures or passages from the scriptures that assumedly justify the caste positions and practices. Nirmal and Devasahayam focus on the *Rigveda* through the *Purusa* myth and the division of the four *varnas*. Ambedkar discusses the *varna* names that originate from *the Rigveda*. All three emphasize the *Laws of Manu* as a scriptural legitimation of oppressive caste practices. In addition to that, Ambedkar regards the *Shastras* as religious textbooks of caste. Ambedkar offers an explicit interpretation of the scriptures and the essence of Hinduism. According to him, Hinduism can be found in the *Vedas* and the *Smritis*. Nirmal and Devasahayam do not analyze the position of texts in the

---

<sup>118</sup> *The Shastras* (translation: ‘texts’, ‘teachings’, ‘sciences’) were composed around 100–600 CE. In short, *the Shastras* can be interpreted as both describing and proscribing texts that structure diversity from a hierarchical Brahmin perspective. The *Shastras* portray hardened attitudes towards women and the lower castes. At the same time, the *Shastras* are dialogical and argumentative. Doniger 2015, 210-211.

<sup>119</sup> Ambedkar 1936, 278–279, 294–296; Doniger 2014, 514.

<sup>120</sup> Ambedkar 1936, 281–283.

<sup>121</sup> Ambedkar 1936, 298.

<sup>122</sup> Ambedkar 1936, 289.

essence of Hinduism. However, they both refer to certain passages from the Bible and compare the two traditions based on the example passages. It seems that Nirmal and Devasahayam regard scriptures as representative when it comes to assessing the beneficiality for the Dalit liberation.

Going back to Section 3.1, the three thinkers seem to create a Hindu essence behind caste oppression. Obviously, the Hindu scriptures include descriptive and prescriptive scriptures about caste. However, from the perspective of the Hindu essence, I am interested in the position given to the scriptures. Where does the idea of texts representing Hinduism come from? Sharada Sugirtharajah (2010) is concerned about the institutionalization of Hindu religiosity and the valuation of texts as modern and progressive sources. In contrast to texts, orality is labelled as backward. Sugirtharajah argues that the process of translating, modifying, classifying, and canonizing certain texts is a form of “textual colonization”. This textual colonization included both scholarly curiosity towards the Hindu texts and ignorance towards the Hindu conceptions of scripture and non-textual religious practices. Yet, Richard King (1999) emphasizes that the colonial construction of Hinduism should not be understood as a one-way process. Certain native authorities took part in the colonial knowledge-making, too. Especially the Brahmin castes supported the idea of Brahminical forms of religion – including the Vedic and Brahminical texts – as the essence of Hinduism.<sup>124</sup>

The Protestant emphasis on text is clearly visible in the theological thought of Nirmal and Devasahayam. Ambedkar, who does not come from the Protestant tradition, claims that the *Shastras* teach the religion of caste. King claims that defining Hinduism based on certain Sanskrit texts as well as the normative Judeo-Christian paradigm are intertwined colonial practices. In fact, he claims that they both belong to the same phenomenon, “the Westernization of Indian religion”. Especially Protestant Christians have emphasized text as the locus of religion and downplayed oral and vernacular forms of Indian religion. One of the practical examples of textual imperialism has been interpreting the *Dharmasastras* as a binding law-book, although the scripture represents the Brahmin perspectives instead of all Hindus. Furthermore, the *Dharmasastras* (including the *Laws of Manu*) portrays a decentralized image of Hinduism instead of a uniform Hindu community. The decentralization is based on the different caste contexts.<sup>125</sup>

---

<sup>123</sup> Ambedkar 1936, 289, 291; Doniger 2015, 210-211

<sup>124</sup> King 1999, 102–103; Sugirtharajah 2010, 71–72.

<sup>125</sup> King 1999, 101–102.

Nirmal and Devasahayam compare the *Rigveda* and the *Laws of Manu* to the selected passages of the New Testament. For them, interreligious scriptural reading seems to be a tool for proving the equality in Christianity in contrast to oppressive Hinduism. King argues that there is a “textualist bias” that concerns the whole world-religions paradigm. Its assumption is that certain religious traditions represent the whole religiosity of humankind. The so-called world religions are constructed based on certain Christian presuppositions, which means an emphasis on texts, salvation and universalism.<sup>126</sup>

The epistemological power of colonialism seems to be visible in the position given to the Hindu scriptures. We may question the straightforward relation between the scriptural *varna* and the societal caste. The latter has been systematized by the British colonizers and influenced by various contextual factors, as Section 2.1 revealed. The former includes elements that can be used for arguing for the inherent oppressiveness of caste. The aforementioned remarks of the construction of scriptural Hinduism reveal unavoidable contradictions. Firstly, the emphasis on Hindu texts as the locus of Hinduism seems to be significantly Brahmin-centered. Secondly, the idea of scriptural Hinduism seems to imply that there is a normative interpretation of what is religion after all.

### **3.3 Doctrinal Oppression**

In this chapter, ‘doctrinal’ refers to the elements of Hinduism that the three thinkers view as structural, sacred, or dogmatic. Nirmal claims that the essential humanness of Dalits is denied in the *varna* system of the Hindu society. As I presented earlier in the previous section, Nirmal regards the Rigvedic division of the four *varnas* as the scriptural basis for Dalit oppression. In his caste epistemology, he combines the Rigvedic text and the historical Dalit consciousness of their situation. Nirmal translates the scriptural and experiential outsider-position of the Dalits into a theological concept: the Dalits of India have been “no humans”.<sup>127</sup> According to Nirmal, the concept of no-humanness has its roots in the New Testament: “— once we were no people but now we are god’s people”.<sup>128</sup>

Nirmal opposes *karma* as a categorical legitimation of Dalit suffering. He refers to the New Testament, John 9:3<sup>129</sup>, as a counter-argument for the Hindu notion of *karma*: “It was

---

<sup>126</sup> King 1999, 66–67.

<sup>127</sup> Nirmal 1991a, 62; Nirmal 1991b, 139.

<sup>128</sup> Nirmal 1991a, 62. Nirmal does not mention the exact biblical passage, but he seems to refer to 1 Peter 2:10: “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” *The Holy Bible* English Standard Version.

<sup>129</sup> Misspelling in Nirmal’s text, “Joh 9:30” refers to John 9:3.

not that this man sinned<sup>130</sup>, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him.”<sup>131</sup> In the biblical passage, the disciples of Jesus ask him the reason for blindness. In his answer, Jesus opposes the idea of blindness as a punishment for sin. Nirmal presents Dalitness as a parallel to blindness: Dalitness is not a punishment but a privilege in the eyes of God.<sup>132</sup>

“Non-dalit deities” is a concept that Nirmal uses for describing certain Hindu deities as unfavorable or unsuitable for Dalits. His example is Rama, a widely worshipped Hindu deity. In a Hindu myth, Rama kills a Dalit called Shanbuka. Shanbuka has chosen a lifestyle of prayer and ascetism, which is forbidden from Dalits according to the dominant religious tradition. According to Nirmal, the act of killing Shanbuka reveals two aspects. Firstly, a Hindu god is a murderer of Dalits. In Nirmal’s interpretation, Shanbuka seems to become a symbol of the Dalit collective. Secondly, Nirmal states that killing Shanbuka was a religious act according to Rama’s *dharma* (duty).<sup>133</sup>

In Devasahayam’s theological reading of the Indian context, the caste system is Satan and the original sin – the opposite of kingdom of God. Devasahayam’s interpretation of caste and humanness is similar to Nirmal’s. However, Devasahayam emphasizes that the Hindu caste system makes all of its members – not only Dalits – slaves of their castes. Devasahayam calls the caste system explicitly Hindu and claims that Hinduism is responsible for the hierarchy of pollution and purity. According to him, this hierarchy pervades both earthly and divine domains.<sup>134</sup>

Devasahayam argues that the *karma* theory legitimizes Dalit oppression and makes Dalits submit to it. He holds Brahmins responsible for making Dalits accept and enjoy their slavery based on *karma*. In contrast to the *karma* consciousness, Devasahayam presents Jesus on the cross as an oppressed victim and a compassionate opposer of oppression. According to Devasahayam’s interpretation, Jesus opposed submitting to oppression as well as practicing of oppression.<sup>135</sup>

Ambedkar constructs a Hindu idea of human being and its harmful consequences to an individual Hindu and the Hindu community. He claims that caste is completely based on “the dogma of predestination”. This dogma allows no individual preferences in choosing of occupation. Ambedkar states that overall, a Hindu’s life is an anxious attempt to maintain a

---

<sup>130</sup> Misspelling in Nirmal’s text, “sincere” = sinned

<sup>131</sup> Nirmal 1991a, 70.

<sup>132</sup> Nirmal 1991a, 70; John 9:1–3, *The Holy Bible* English Standard Version.

<sup>133</sup> Nirmal 1991a, 63.

<sup>134</sup> Devasahayam 1991, 5; Devasahayam 1997, 55, 66.

certain caste position and caste has had only bad influence on the ethics of the Hindus. According to him, caste has destroyed responsibility beyond their caste positions.<sup>136</sup>

Ambedkar describes caste as “a sacred institution” and “a religious dogma”. According to him, caste is primarily a notion and a state of mind instead of a physical boundary. Ambedkar claims that the Hindu religion is responsible for indoctrinating the notion of caste. The Hindus obey caste because of their deep religiosity, not individual moral choice or opinion. He argues that religion orders the Hindus to treat the caste division as a virtue. For non-Hindus, caste is mere practice. Whereas religion prohibits rebelling against caste from Hindus, non-Hindus do not have this restriction.<sup>137</sup>

All three thinkers name ideas and concepts that originate from the Hindu tradition and maintain the existence of caste. These ideas include the non-humanness of Dalits based on the *varna* hierarchy (Nirmal), non-Dalit deities (Nirmal), *karma* as the legitimation of Dalit oppression and suffering (Nirmal & Devasahayam), the hierarchy of purity and pollution from earthly to divine domains (Devasahayam), the dogma of predestination behind the inherited castes (Ambedkar), as well as the sacred and dogmatic nature of caste (Ambedkar). Nirmal and Devasahayam interpret the situation of Dalits in the light of the Christian doctrine: the primality of the poor. Ambedkar compares Hindus to non-Hindus and concludes that the latter are free from the religious bond of caste.

Ambedkar, Nirmal, and Devasahayam seem to link the abovementioned doctrinal elements to the Hindu essence behind caste oppression. Their ways of discussing the doctrinal oppressiveness seems to delineate their understandings of Hinduism as a unified religion. Richard King (2010) argues that the idea of a centripetal Hindu theological framework is incompatible with Indian pluralism. He emphasizes that the construction of ‘Hinduism’ as a unified religion resulted from a colonial encounter. In this encounter, both colonizers (primarily the British) and natives were active participants. Instead of defining the Christian West through ‘bad exclusivism’ and the Indian traditions through ‘good inclusivism’, the challenge is to interpret the diverse traditions on their own terms. Timothy Fitzgerald (2010) highlights that although no one denies the existence of pre-colonial and native systems of beliefs and practices that were formulated in Indian languages, the very act of labelling them ‘religious’ can be questioned.<sup>138</sup>

---

<sup>135</sup> Devasahayam 1991, 6; Devasahayam 1997, 62.

<sup>136</sup> Ambedkar 1936, 264, 270, 275.

<sup>137</sup> Ambedkar 1936, 286, 289.

<sup>138</sup> Fitzgerald 2010, 127; King 2010, 100–103, 108.

The three thinkers seem to emphasize the doctrinal oppressiveness of Hinduism in the context of their lived realities. In their readings of Hinduism, certain doctrinal elements outweigh the vast internal plurality. As S.N. Balagangadhara points out, *Purusha* behind the caste system, the idea of untouchability, or *dharma* as the concept for goodness are undeniably pre-colonial elements of Hinduism. However, categorizing these elements ‘religious’ is where the epistemological power of colonialism becomes relevant. Fitzgerald underlines that ‘religions’ exist as classificatory categories that result from collective imagination and lead to practical consequences. In the context of the three thinkers, it seems that their imagination is doctrine- and caste-centered and their wished practical consequences are linked to the weakening of the doctrinal justifications of caste. Moreover, Fitzgerald points out that in general, religion has become a descriptive and analytical category, which is detached from its ideological background. Perhaps the three thinkers are part of this general change of paradigm.<sup>139</sup>

Werner Menski (2012) challenges the idea of a fixed Hindu doctrine of hierarchy. He claims that the ancient (pre-colonial, already Vedic) Hindu conception of cosmic and earthly interconnectedness of all beings does not essentially favor Brahmins or Hindus over others. Moreover, this conception implies that the religious cannot be separated from the secular. In fact, Menski claims that many missionaries and colonizers became aware of the fluid nature of Hinduism, in contrast to mere monotheism. In contrast to this recognizing of fluidity, scholars of political science and human rights have tended to analyze Hinduism as unified ‘religious’ system, which is contradictory to human rights, irrational, and a justification of backward customs. In this kind of a narrow reading, caste as ‘religious’ is not analyzed critically.<sup>140</sup>

It may be concluded that the doctrinal elements are part of the vast diversity of Hinduism. At the same time, reducing Hinduism to certain doctrines is not a neutral practice but a use of power. It seems that for the three thinkers, labelling caste and especially caste oppression as ‘Hindu’ or ‘religious’ is a strategy of highlighting its pervasiveness and permanence. In the following Chapter 4, I analyze at the ways in which they discuss religion as a liberative way out of caste oppression.

---

<sup>139</sup> Balagangadhara 2010, 137; Fitzgerald 2010, 117, 127.

<sup>140</sup> Menski 2012, 79–82.

## **4 Liberative Alternatives to Oppressive Hinduism**

In this chapter, I will analyze the constructive stances on Dalits and religion by Ambedkar (1936), Nirmal (1991a & 1991b), and Devasahayam (1991 & 1997). Based on the content of the selected texts, I have noticed two different ways in which the thinkers aim at creating an ideal religion that is beneficial for Dalit liberation. The first concentrates on reformation and reconstruction of Hinduism and vernacular Dalit religion. The second abandons Hinduism and focuses on liberative conversion to Christianity and Ambedkarite Buddhism. I will first present and analyze the stances emerging from Ambedkar, Nirmal, and Devasahayam, and then move on to problematizing their stances with the selected postcolonial literature.

### **4.1 Liberative Reform and Reconstruction**

Ambedkar claims that achieving the anti-caste reform of the Hindu social order is nearly impossible. According to him, the plea to end caste means asking people (the Hindus) to oppose their fundamental religious notions. He distinguishes two particular structures that stand in the way of the anti-caste reform. The first is the Brahmins who hold the power, the privileges, and the intellectual authority among the Hindus. Therefore, they are hostile towards the anti-caste reform. The second is the hierarchical caste division. The caste-based positions enslave people and prevent the collective anti-caste reform beyond caste boundaries.<sup>141</sup> Moreover, Ambedkar considers the status of individual Hindu reformers to be fragile. According to him, the orthodox Hindus use caste as a tool for persecuting and preventing the reformers.<sup>142</sup>

On an essential level, Ambedkar regards the anti-caste reform as a reform of the fundamental religious notions of the Hindus. In contrast, he claims that there are reforms which are purely secular or are in accordance with certain religious principles. According to Ambedkar, the collective rejection of inter-caste marriage and dining reveals that caste is fundamentally a notional, not physical, boundary. Caste is a religious matter: a construction of what the Hindus regard as sacred beliefs and dogmas. At the same time, caste has a pervasive effect on the Hindu society. In fact, Ambedkar argues that the existence of caste makes the Hindu society a non-existent society.<sup>143</sup>

Yet, Ambedkar sees a possibility of reforming Hinduism from within. He challenges the Hindus for negotiating with their own social heritage and choosing the parts that are beneficial for the future generations. Ambedkar takes a critical attitude to worshipping the

---

<sup>141</sup> Ambedkar 1936, 288, 290–294.

<sup>142</sup> Ambedkar 1936, 274–275.

<sup>143</sup> Ambedkar 1936, 267, 289–291.

ideals of the past and demands that the Hindus need to recognize the pervasive change of life: nothing lasts. Even though Ambedkar holds the Hindus primarily responsible for the reform, he argues that non-Hindus need to tell about the wrongness of the Hindu religion, because the idea of caste as sacred stems from it.<sup>144</sup>

Ambedkar presents a three-part plan for the reform of the Hindu social order. Firstly, those scriptures that are not accepted and recognized by all Hindus have to be outlawed and replaced with one standard book. For example, the *Vedas* and the *Shastras* belong to this category, which means that the varna division of the *Rigveda* and the caste rules in the *Laws of Manu* should be outlawed. Secondly, the Hindu priesthood should ideally be abolished or at least made open for all citizens. The priesthood should be controlled by the state. Thirdly, the doctrinal basis of the Hindu religion should be reformed based on democracy (liberty, equality, fraternity). According to Ambedkar, the *Upanishads* include the principle of democracy, at least to some extent.<sup>145</sup> Ambedkar's approach to potentially Dalit-friendly Hinduism remains unclear. He does not point out any explicitly 'Dalit' forms of Hinduism.<sup>146</sup>

Devasahayam elaborates the refused resources of Dalit religiosity: places of worship, traditional Dalit priesthood, liberating literature, songs and ritual practices. He claims that the Dalit heroes, intellectuals and martyrs have been replaced, which has caused damage to Dalit liberation. Devasahayam seems to refer to Hinduism by writing about 'religion' that the dominant castes misuse against Dalits. Nevertheless, he argues that since Dalits are divided into different religious communities, Christian Dalit theology should become a pluralistic and inclusive form of theology. Simultaneously, Devasahayam regards Jesus Christ as the ultimate manifestation and epistemology of God.<sup>147</sup>

Nirmal bases his Dalit theology to Jesus Christ, who is a Dalit and reveals the Dalitness of Christian God as a whole.<sup>148</sup> Simultaneously, he demands that being 'Dalit' should be prior to being 'Christian' in Dalit theology. When it comes to Hindu philosophies, Nirmal argues that the Brahminic Christian theology has suppressed the three traditional categories of Hinduism: the *jnana marga*, the *bhakti marga* and the *karma marga*. In short, these three categories are introduced in the *Bhagavad Gita* (circa 100 CE). The *Bhagavad Gita* expresses a Hindu tension between ascetism and hierarchical societal order, and the rise of Buddhism.

---

<sup>144</sup> Ambedkar 1936, 290, 303–304.

<sup>145</sup> Ambedkar 1936, 300–301.

<sup>146</sup> See Ambedkar in Rodrigues 2004, 105. In "Caste and Class", Ambedkar states that the *Avarna* (Dalit) Hindus are an unknown group in general, and they should be paid attention to. The text is an extract from Ambedkar's proposed work *Can I be a Hindu?*, which was probably written in the early 1950s and first published in 1987. Rodrigues has titled the extract "Caste and Class". See Rodrigues 2004, 56.

<sup>147</sup> Devasahayam 1991, 21; Devashayam 1997, 53–54, 63.

The tension between *dharma* ('moral obligation') and *moksha* ("release", "freedom", 'spiritual liberation from material life') engenders *bhakti* ('worship', 'love', 'devotion') as a mediator and a third part of a triad. The *jnana marga* refers to the path of knowledge or meditation, the *karma marga* to the the path of rituals and actions and the *bhakti marga* to the path of worship, love and devotion. Nirmal's motive of presenting these Hindu paths seems a bit ambiguous to me. On the one hand, he criticizes the tight union between Indian Christian theology and Brahminic Hindu tradition. It seems that the three *margas* represent Hindu alternatives to Brahminic tradition. On the other hand, Nirmal does not elaborate, how these three *margas* are inclusive towards Dalits and their liberation. On what ways do the three *margas* challenge the Hindu ideas of Dalits that Nirmal regard as oppressive (Chapter 3)?<sup>149</sup>

Nirmal introduces four Indian theologians who have combined philosophical and theological elements of Hindu and Christian thought. Interestingly, Nirmal distinguishes certain Hindu philosophies and philosophers from each other, whereas he presents Christian theology as a unified source. His perspective to these theological combinations seems to be critical, based on his claim of Indian Christian theology being obsessed with Brahminic tradition that has been forced to the Dalit majority of Indian Christians. In contrast to Brahminic tradition, Nirmal talks about "the wholistic tribal vision", which is "suppressed in the name of national integration and the mainstream culture".<sup>150</sup> He states that Dalit realities are more primary to Dalit theology than coherent philosophies. In contrast, in his earlier work *Heuristic Explorations* (1990), Nirmal claims that Indian Christian theology has settled for a superficial understanding of Hindu philosophies and focused narrowly on Indian spirituality and interiority. As a response, Nirmal aims at combining the materialist, unorthodox<sup>151</sup> and atheistic philosophical ideas of *Lokayata* with Indian Christian theology. Nirmal claims that this combination engenders reconstruction of both Hindu and Christian tradition.<sup>152</sup>

The three thinkers present varying constructive responses to the oppressiveness of Hinduism. Ambedkar's solution is the anti-caste reform of Hinduism. On the one hand, he regards it nearly impossible because of the fundamental religious notions that are guarded by the orthodox and Brahmin Hindus. On the other hand, he holds all Hindus responsible – with the assistance of non-Hindus – for reforming their tradition. Finally, Ambedkar would subjugate Hinduism to the state of India. Devasahayam focuses on recollecting liberative

---

<sup>148</sup> Nirmal 1991a, 63–65. Note that I elaborate Nirmal's idea of Dalit God in Section 4.2.

<sup>149</sup> Nirmal 1991a, 54–56, 59; Doniger 2015, 176–177, 188.

<sup>150</sup> Nirmal 1991b, 143.

<sup>151</sup> *Lokayata* rejects the authority of *the Vedas* as revealed (*shruti*). See Nirmal 1990, 108.

<sup>152</sup> Nirmal 1990, 105–108, 112–113; Nirmal 1991a, 54–55; Nirmal 1991b, 140, 143.

resources of Dalit religiosity. Dalit religiosity could be seen as a vernacular form of Hinduism, with an emphasis on criticism and resistance. At the same time, Devasahayam argues that Jesus Christ is the ultimate knowledge of God. Nevertheless, he demands pluralism and inclusiveness from Dalit theology. Nirmal's approach to the reconstruction of Hinduism is ambiguous. He criticizes the union between Indian Christian theology and Brahminic Hinduism. He contrasts Brahminic tradition with the wholistic tribal vision of Dalits and prefers Dalit realities to coherent philosophies. Yet, he also presents certain Hindu philosophies resources of Dalit liberation. Finally, Nirmal refers to Christian God as *the* God of Dalits.

Whereas Ambedkar's standard for the reform of Hinduism is the modernization of India, the standard by Devasahayam and Nirmal is Dalit liberation. In the following paragraphs, I focus on two postcolonially relevant themes. The first is the union that Ambedkar constructs between reformed Hinduism and the modernized state of India. The second is the relationship between Dalit liberation and the boundaries of religions that Devasahayam and Nirmal approach from their Dalit theological perspectives.

Going back to Section 2.1, the process of decolonization is not free from colonial attitudes towards fellow natives.<sup>153</sup> Ambedkar seems to regard the backwardness of the Hindus as a hindrance to the national progress of India. He discusses 'the Hindus' as a uniform collective and 'Hinduism' as a uniform system that should be saved through reformation.<sup>154</sup> Based on "Annihilation of caste", Ambedkar's stance towards marginalized Hindus and non-dominant forms of Hinduism remain unclear.

Ambedkar's way of subjugating the Hindu religion to the state of India is relevant for the question of the internal power relations of colonized contexts. According to Keith Hebden (2011), Ambedkar's role in Dalit liberation is ambivalent. As a representative of Dalit liberation, he underrated the radical side of the Dalit movement. By presenting the Dalit cause as a national cause, Ambedkar displaced Dalits from their communities. Hebden regards this as a continuing colonial practice in the South Asia.<sup>155</sup>

Gayatri Spivak (1988) offers in-depth theoretical tools for analyzing power and oppression in the caste context.<sup>156</sup> Spivak discusses the Indian practice of *sati* – widow

---

<sup>153</sup> Loomba 2005, 14–16.

<sup>154</sup> Ambedkar uses expressions such as "The Hindus hold on to the sacredness of the social order." (Ambedkar 1936, 291) and "You will succeed in saving Hinduism if you will kill Brahminism." (Ambedkar 1936, 301).

<sup>155</sup> Hebden 2011, 105, 114.

<sup>156</sup> By borrowing Spivak's concept and famous question of subalternity, I do not intend to use the concept as a loose word for any kind of oppression. Instead, I intend to recognize the existence of Hindu subalterns from among the Hindus. See Postcolonial Studies at Emory 2017a.

sacrifice – as a context of subalternity. Her idea is to unlearn privilege by learning to speak to the historically silenced subaltern woman. Spivak prefers “speaking to” to “speaking for” or even “listening to”. She distinguishes two opposites in the discussion on the Indian tradition of widow sacrifice, *sati*. The one portrays the British colonizers as the white saviors of the subaltern women in the danger of *sati*. The other represents Indian nativism by claiming that the *sati* women were willing to die. According to Spivak, none of these stances reaches the consciousness and voice of the subaltern woman herself.<sup>157</sup> Spivak summarizes the silencing of the subaltern agents in the following way:

“Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization.”<sup>158</sup>

Ambedkar’s demand of the democratization of Hinduism is a modernist suggestion. The open question is, what to do with non-modern beliefs and practices, such as caste. As a response to the silencing of the subaltern agents, Spivak argues that they should be allowed to speak for themselves.<sup>159</sup>

According to Debjani Ganguly (2005), the idea of leaving caste behind has its roots in the union of social sciences and the modern nation-building of India. For example, Louis Dumont (1960, quoted by Ganguly 2005) summarized this stance by stating that the caste society is far away from a nation.<sup>160</sup> Ambedkar seems to share this view, since he claims that the Hindu ‘society’ cannot be called a society because of caste.

Devasahayam and Nirmal seem to aim at constructing a new Dalit-centered approach to both Hinduism and Christianity, as well as the boundaries of religions in general. The liberative resources that Devasahayam and Nirmal mention – the refused resources of Dalit religiosity (Devasahayam), the wholistic tribal vision (Nirmal), non-Brahminic Hindu philosophical traditions (Nirmal) – transcend normative religious boundaries of ‘choosing one religion’. Devasahayam supports pluralism and inclusivity of Dalits theology based on varying religious backgrounds of Dalits. Nirmal argues that Dalitness should be more primary than being a Christian in Dalit theology. These stances seem to be compatible with typical characters of Dalit religion. Keith Hebden (2011) claims that Dalit religion represents decentralization of God and politics. Nationalism, centralized control, or categorized morality do not characterize it. Dalit religion questions the type of theology that distances itself from

---

<sup>157</sup> Spivak 1988, 295, 297.

<sup>158</sup> Spivak 1988, 306.

<sup>159</sup> Postcolonial Studies at Emory 2017a.

the vernacular reality as well as the Vedic Hinduism that excludes the Dalits from the presence of god. Dalit religion seems to prioritize Dalit liberation over general coherence of a religious tradition.<sup>161</sup>

Whereas Ambedkar presents an explicit reform of Hinduism, Devasahayam and Nirmal do not seem to express their definite stances on what to do with Hinduism. They seem imply that there were non-Brahminic and non-conquered form(s) of Hinduism that could be rehabilitated. Nirmal's suggestion of restoring non-Brahminic Hindu philosophies has a connection with the Hindu tradition. However, the link between Hinduism and the refused religious resources of Dalits remains ambivalent.

Devasahayam and Nirmal regard Jesus Christ as the ultimate epistemology of God. Do they imply that Christianity is in a hierarchical or competing relationship with other traditions, such as Hinduism?<sup>162</sup> In contrast to the fluidity of Dalit religion, the idea of hierarchical superiority is part of the Christian tradition. The question by Alan Race (1982, quoted by Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen 2003) expresses the traditional Christian stance to other truths: "Can Christianity maintain its traditional hold on being the one true absolute religion, intended for all mankind, if it also recognizes authentic and sincere faith in other guises?"<sup>163</sup> The theological approaches by Devasahayam and Nirmal seem to be combinations of Dalit-centered relativism and Christ-centered absolutism. Their views resemble Christ-centered syncretism. M.M. Thomas (1916–1992) was a prominent interreligious theologian of this stance. Thomas commingles the absolute centrality of Christ with pluralistic consciousness and contextual needs of liberation. In contrast to theological exclusivism, Thomas argues that Christian liberation movements have failed to recognize the liberation in other religions. In Thomas's theology, syncretism is not an opposite of Christocentrism but a tool for making the Christian message relevant in the Asian context.<sup>164</sup>

Being committed to Dalit liberation, Devasahayam and Nirmal seem to approach the abovementioned traditional Christian conception of truth in an alternative way. In relation to that, they balance between the materiality and transcendentality in their theologies. Vinayaraj highlights the painful relationship between Dalits and transcendence. The dominant caste

---

<sup>160</sup> Ganguly 2005, 5.

<sup>161</sup> Hebden 2011, 127, 129.

<sup>162</sup> From among Christian theologians, Wolfhart Pannenberg has argued that the essence of truth is universal and ultimate, and different religions represent competing interpretations of this truth. Kärkkäinen 2003, 235–236.

<sup>163</sup> Kärkkäinen 2003, 17–18.

<sup>164</sup> Kärkkäinen 2003, 256–257, 259–260.

epistemologies of untouchability exclude Dalits from transcendence.<sup>165</sup> However, Vinayaraj does not suggest that Dalit resistance to transcendental caste epistemologies would be based on their willingness to reclaim the transcendental Dalitness. Instead, he claims that Dalit epistemologies are primarily materialistic. Based on this claim, Vinayaraj delineates a materialist and post-transcendentalist form of Dalit theology. In Vinayaraj's model, Dalit theology respects native Dalit epistemologies such as *Lokayata*, breaks free from Christian and Hindu transcendentalism, and is radically political.<sup>166</sup>

From the perspective of colonialism, Christian Dalit theologies represent imported colonial epistemology in relation to Indian Dalit epistemologies. The transcendental emphasis of the Christian theological tradition is an example of this. I would claim that this is a descriptive claim about the history of Christianity – not an ethical statement of the inherently colonial or oppressive essence of Christianity. I find that the tension between the long existence of native Dalit epistemologies and more recently imported Christian theologies is a topic that Dalit theologies need to acknowledge. Does Dalit theology imply that the imported Christian epistemology had to perfect the Dalit liberation? However, the Dalit cause seems to challenge postcolonial theory, too. Vinayaraj argues that as “a typical postcolonialist”, Spivak returns to Brahminical Hindu resources in her construction of a “mundane transcendence” of the self.<sup>167</sup> Vinayaraj interprets Spivak's choosing of these Hindu resources (such as *Advaita*) as choosing anti-colonial epistemologies and identities over Dalit epistemologies and liberation from caste oppression.<sup>168</sup>

#### **4.2 The End of Exodus: Liberative Conversion**

On a collective level, Ambedkar distinguishes Brahminism<sup>169</sup> from Hinduism and claims that killing Brahminism will save Hinduism. He argues that Brahminism has ruined Hinduism. According to him, the Hindu priesthood is based entirely on birth-based rights and privileges and is separate from law, morality or duties.<sup>170</sup> Ambedkar seems to imply that Brahminism does not belong to the somehow ideal essence of Hinduism. Saving Hinduism requires a sort of an intrareligious conversion. Ambedkar describes:

---

<sup>165</sup> Vinayaraj 2016, 73. By writing about the untouchability of Dalits, Vinayaraj seems to refer to the hierarchical purity and pollution, which is a feature of caste. The feature has been discussed earlier in this thesis, in relation to the debated theory by Louis Dumont. See Sections 2.2, 3.1, 3.2, and 4.1.

<sup>166</sup> Vinayaraj 2016, 73, 99, 106–110.

<sup>167</sup> Vinayaraj 2016, 102.

<sup>168</sup> Vinayaraj 2016, 73, 110.

<sup>169</sup> The general definition of Brahminism is “the system or practices of or imputed to Brahmins”. See Merriam-Webster: Brahminism.

“This means a complete change in the fundamental notions of life. It means a complete change in the values of life. It means a complete change in outlook and in attitude towards men and things. It means conversion; but if you do not like the word, I will say, it means new life. But a new life cannot enter a body that is dead. New life can enter only in a new body. The old body must die before a new body can come into existence and a new life can enter into it.”<sup>171</sup>

On a personal level, Ambedkar has decided to convert from Hinduism: “I am sorry, I will not be with you. I have decided to change.”<sup>172</sup> With this announcement of the upcoming conversion, Ambedkar detaches himself from both caste and Hinduism and continues to oppose caste as a non-Hindu outsider. He argues that the Hindus have the primary responsibility for the ‘infection’ of caste that has spread beyond religious boundaries. Moreover, Ambedkar calls caste a national cause, of which the Hindus are in charge of.<sup>173</sup>

Although Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism was a public ceremony, the liberative or otherwise beneficial essence of Buddhism is not in the center of “Annihilation of Caste”. Instead, Ambedkar focuses on his ideal society as a constructive response to the caste problem. As I discussed in Section 4.1, Ambedkar’s guiding principles to the reformed society and religion are liberty, equality and fraternity that he equals with democracy. He seems to demand that the progressiveness of a religion needs to be in line with the progressiveness of a society. According to Ambedkar, “true religion”, i.e. “a Religion of Principles” is an essential element of the ideal society.<sup>174</sup> In contrast to Hinduism that Ambedkar regards as a collection of rules or law, the ideal religion is based on universal and timeless spiritual principles. Finally, Ambedkar argues that people have misinterpreted Hinduism as a religion. According to him, a religion should be treated as unchanging. Instead, Hinduism is an outdated law that needs to be destroyed.<sup>175</sup>

Nirmal utilizes the Exodus narrative for discussing the collective Dalit conversion to Christian faith: “Our status has changed. Our exodus from Hinduism – which was imposed upon us – to Christianity or rather to Jesus Christ is a valuable experience a liberating experience.”<sup>176</sup> The end of the Dalit Exodus is Jesus Christ who transforms the ways in which the Christian Dalits see God and themselves. The Dalits have recognized their God through

---

<sup>170</sup> Ambedkar 1936, 301.

<sup>171</sup> Ambedkar 1936, 301–302.

<sup>172</sup> Ambedkar 1936, 304.

<sup>173</sup> Ambedkar 1936, 304–305.

<sup>174</sup> Ambedkar presents these concepts in Ambedkar 1936, 300. Note that by using the concept of “true religion”, Ambedkar refers to Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1910).

<sup>175</sup> Ambedkar 1936, 275–277, 298–302.

<sup>176</sup> Nirmal 1991a, 63.

Jesus Christ. Their goal is to realize their God-given full humanness and full divinity after the non-humanness given by the three highest castes (the *Savarnas*).<sup>177</sup>

Methodological exclusivism is the center of Nirmal's Dalit theology. It means that Dalit theology has to be produced exclusively by Dalits in order to oppose the influences and control of the dominant theologies. This means that also non-Dalit Christians are excluded from the primary agency of Dalit theology. Nirmal's methodological exclusivism is based on his understanding of Christian God who participates in human pain. According to the idea of liberation theologies, all knowing is practical. Nirmal argues that for Dalit theology, knowing is primarily pathetic – based on the Dalit *pathos* (suffering) – and only secondly practical. Before anyone else, a Dalit knows God through suffering. In Nirmal's thinking, this creates a hierarchy of knowing. Exclusively the Dalits own the pathetic knowing. From the Dalit perspective, the other oppressed people can attain empathetic knowing. Finally, the rest of the people may achieve sympathetic knowing.<sup>178</sup>

Nirmal specifies the liberative nature of Christian God by stating that God is a Dalit. The nature of God was disclosed in the person of Jesus Christ and especially in his practice of serving others and suffering for it (Isaiah 53, the Suffering Servant). According to Nirmal, the social heritage of Jesus as well as his public mission includes aspects of life that are typical for the Dalits: disgrace, rejection, mockery, contempt, suffering, and finally death. Jesus was on the side of the oppressed of his context. The primary symbol of the Dalitness of Jesus is his crucifixion. Nirmal argues that Dalitness and even the suffering of the Dalits is a meaningful part of Christian God's salvation of the humankind. God's salvation is manifested through the weakest and the oppressed. In the middle of caste oppression and Dalit suffering, Nirmal is not content with passive theology. Christian Dalit theology should be able to end Brahminism.<sup>179</sup>

Devasahayam utilizes the Exodus narrative for depicting the societal situation of Dalits. Dalits are liberated by law from the caste Devil. Yet, the caste Devil tries to enslave them back in vain. The hope of Dalits is Jesus Christ, who represents the oppressed collective. The cross of Jesus symbolizes counter-consciousness against the oppressive structures and culture. Counter-consciousness challenges an individualistic interpretation of sin and salvation. The cross symbolizes the power of the oppressed and challenges the Christian community to invite and include those who are labelled as outsiders, impure or inferior. These

---

<sup>177</sup> Nirmal 1991a, 62–63.

<sup>178</sup> Nirmal 1991a, 58–59; Nirmal 1991b, 141–143.

<sup>179</sup> Nirmal 1991a, 62–70.

people should be invited first. Devasahayam follows Nirmal's methodological exclusivism by stating that a relevant Indian Christian theology cannot be a theology of the *janata* (people in general).<sup>180</sup>

Devasahayam claims that the Christian Gospel confronts especially caste Christians who participate in the Dalit oppression. According to him, this denotes participating in sin. He also claims that participation in oppression degrades one's theological work – also if an oppressor is a Dalit. Devasahayam holds the oppressed responsible for indifference in front of oppression. Finally, the Dalits as well as the non-Dalits are invited to participate in liberating each other. More specifically, Devasahayam argues that the Dalit suffering has a redemptive value in relation to the whole caste society. Nevertheless, he opposes Christian theologies that sacralize the Dalit suffering instead of supporting Dalit independence and pride.<sup>181</sup> Finally, Devasahayam opposes the idea of total reliance on God's salvation:

“Traditional theologies have reduced humans to utter incapacity and encouraged people to look for a savior from outside, sometimes even looking to heaven. Jesus' call and example should particularly inspire Dalits to take on their historical task on their shoulder and strive to achieve it trusting in their potential.”<sup>182</sup>

Ambedkar's approach to conversion emerges from an upcoming moment in history, whereas Nirmal and Devasahayam discuss conversion as a collective event that is both past and present. In 1936, Ambedkar has “decided to change”<sup>183</sup>, which was realized twenty years later in his formal conversion to Buddhism.<sup>184</sup> Ambedkar's personal conversion from Hinduism can be interpreted as departing from both Hinduism and caste. After his decision to convert, he analyzes them both as an outsider, which differentiates him from Nirmal and Devasahayam who underline their own Dalitness. In addition to that, Ambedkar's topical approach seems to be linked to the building of democratic India.<sup>185</sup> He distinguishes Brahminism from Hinduism and argues that the collective conversion denotes changing the fundamental notions and values of life. Thus, he seems to challenge his Hindu audience to convert from oppressive Brahminism but not Hinduism in total. For Ambedkar, the end of Exodus is the true religion that is simultaneously universal and a valid basis of democratic society. Nirmal's approach to conversion is collective and focused on reconstructing the Dalit

---

<sup>180</sup> Devasahayam 1991, 19–22; Devasahayam 1997, 55, 64–65.

<sup>181</sup> Devasahayam 1997, 57–59, 62–63, 66.

<sup>182</sup> Devasahayam 1997, 67.

<sup>183</sup> Ambedkar 1936, 304.

<sup>184</sup> Rodrigues 2004, 17.

<sup>185</sup> In 1936, when “Annihilation of Caste” was written, Ambedkar established the Independent Labour Party. Rodrigues 2004, 13.

identity. The end of Exodus is the recognition of Jesus Christ as the Dalit God and receiving the full humanity and divinity from God. In addition to that, conversion concerns Indian Christian theology, which becomes a Dalit-centered movement of ending Brahminism. Devasahayam's conception of conversion emphasizes continuance. Although the cross of Jesus already represents counter-consciousness to the caste society, it is a constant call to the active ending of caste oppression.

Conversion is an interesting theme from the perspective of the assumed essence of Hinduism and religion in general. How does it solve the problem of caste oppression? Hebden (2011) argues that the Dalit conversions should not be interpreted through a typical Western (dominantly Christian) pattern of converting from the control of one religion (such as Hinduism) to another (such as Christianity or Buddhism). According to him, Dalit conversions are primarily local and collective acts of resistance. Dalit religion is fluid and critical towards normative restrictions of worship and belief, such as Brahminism and "orthodox"<sup>186</sup> Christianity.<sup>187</sup> Within certain limits, this description of conversion is compatible with especially Ambedkar's conception of conversion. Ambedkar seems to express primarily his frustration with the Hindu society. He has concluded that he 'annihilates caste' by converting away from Hinduism. Resistance to caste seems to be the primary interest of conversion. Ambedkar challenges the Hindus to create an intrareligious conversion, in which the religious justification of caste is abolished. Hence, Ambedkar does not seem to suggest that there were 'one tradition' that would be the ultimate truth or salvation to the oppressed. Instead, 'the true religion' seems to represent societal standards for different traditions. Religion is 'true' as long as it is compatible with the democratic society. In contrast to lawful Brahminism which pervades the Hindu society, the essence of the true religion is universal and timeless spirituality.

A feature that distinguishes Ambedkar's idea of conversion from the fluidity of Dalit religion is normative modernity. Both collectively Dalit and Ambedkar's idea of conversion seem to include an idea of opposing Brahminism. However, exclusively Ambedkar seems to interpret conversion as converting from anti-modern Brahminism to the normatively modern true religion. Ambedkar's suggestion of the intrareligious conversion of Hinduism seems to

---

<sup>186</sup> Hebden 2011, 133: "Conversion for Dalits does not mean the same as conversion in orthodox Christianity. The false assumption that conversion implies leaving off entirely of a cultural and religious worldview in favour of an alien one was promoted as a paradigm by readings of Paul's autobiographical accounts of conversion in which he considers all things as loss compared to knowing Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:8). Western anthropology, where it does not examine its methodology in the light of postcolonialism, remains in danger of reading religion through the Christendom lens so it is vital to highlight this difference of meaning at the outset."

<sup>187</sup> Hebden 2011, 132–134.

include a “pedagogical approach to non-modern life-worlds”, as Ganguly describes it, referring to Ashis Nandy (1995).<sup>188</sup> The pedagogical approach to non-modernity comes primarily from the fields of activism, social sciences, and social justice. The idea is that the oppressed need to be educated for their rights in the modern world. However, Nandy criticizes this approach for normative secularism, which is inadequate for analyzing non-modern beliefs as else than abnormal. At least to some extent, I would conclude that Ambedkar’s conversion denotes choosing colonial normative modernity over non-modern Hindu Brahminism.<sup>189</sup>

Although Ambedkar hoped that converting from Brahminical Hinduism to the modern nation-state would annihilate caste, the progress of India after Ambedkar proves the opposite, as the texts by Nirmal and Devashayam show. Neither changing of religion nor political regime has been able to annihilate caste. Therefore, Ganguly (referring to Homi Bhabha) interprets caste a crucial and dynamic element of the Indian forms of life that cannot be subjugated to the nation-state and the discourse of law, rights and progress. Instead of religious conversion, Ganguly regards the awareness of both colonial and Brahminical epistemological<sup>190</sup> power behind caste oppression as a way of taking the oppression seriously.<sup>191</sup>

On the one hand, the epistemological power of colonialism seems to be visible in the ‘orthodox’ Christian approach to conversion.<sup>192</sup> On the other hand, R.S. Sugirtharajah (2003) argues that dominantly secular postcolonial criticism ignores the religious and theological approaches coming from postcolonial contexts.<sup>193</sup> In the context of this thesis, Nirmal and Devasahayam represent Christian theologians coming from a postcolonial context. I would claim that their perspective to conversion are Christocentric but not normatively Christian. Within certain limits, Nirmal and Devasahayam seem to assume that the oppressiveness of caste can be overcome with certain theological ideas of Christian God: recognizing the God of Dalits in Jesus Christ (Nirmal), the primality of Dalits in front of Christian God (Nirmal and Devasahayam), Christian God as the Dalit God (Nirmal), and Jesus Christ as the counter-consciousness to the caste consciousness (Devasahayam). These ideas seem to imply that the

---

<sup>188</sup> Ganguly 2005, 18. Note that Ganguly refers to Ashis Nandy (1995).

<sup>189</sup> Ganguly 2005, 17–19, 115.

<sup>190</sup> Note that Ganguly does not use the term epistemological or epistemological power. Instead, she writes about recognizing the complex and contested histories of conceptions behind caste. Ganguly refers to Spivak’s (1990) concept of “textuality of the socius”, which focuses on the societal connection between the actual Dalit suffering and discursive productions of caste. See Ganguly 2005, 10.

<sup>191</sup> Ganguly 2005, 7–10. Note that Ganguly mentions the idea of caste as a “performative”, which comes from Homi Bhabha. However, Ganguly does not mention any specific source by Bhabha.

<sup>192</sup> Hebden 2011, 133.

<sup>193</sup> Sugirtharajah 2003, 157–158.

nature of caste oppression is transcendental. From the transcendental perspective, Nirmal and Devasahayam seem to convert from caste consciousness to Christian consciousness. They do not articulate, what to do with Hindu deities. Yet, their choosing of Christian God at the ultimate Dalit liberation is explicit.

Do the two Dalit theologians imply that without Christian God, there is no Dalit liberation? Especially Devasahayam argues that Dalits should not wait for a savior but strive for their own liberation. As I mentioned in Section 4.1, Nirmal underlines the primarity of Dalitness in relation to being Christian. They both demand that Christian Dalit theology should end Brahminism. Therefore, they do not seem to fit in Hebden's model of 'orthodox Christian' conversion. I would claim that for Nirmal and Devasahayam, orthodox Christianity represents a potential obstacle of achieving Dalit liberation. For them, Jesus Christ represents primarily Dalitness and the end of Brahminism. If orthodox Christianity denotes neutrality in front of caste oppression, it has no salvific value.

## 5 Conclusion

How does Hinduism appear to Dalits? A simple question includes many implications. Firstly, 'Dalit' is a political name and identity. Outcastes have transformed their given position as broken and oppressed people into collective resistance of caste oppression. Secondly, the question implicates a tension between a particular group and a particular religious tradition. The oppression of Dalits is commonly linked to the essence of Hinduism. Therefore, it would be tempting to claim that leaving Hinduism is a solution to caste oppression. However, another question emerges. How is 'Hinduism' behind the oppression conceptualized?

In this thesis, I have analyzed how the three selected Dalit and non-Hindu thinkers conceptualize Hinduism in their selected texts. In addition to this primary research question, I have had two secondary research questions based on previous research. Firstly, I have aimed at examining the particular and oppressed position from which Dalits read Hinduism. Secondly, I have aimed at examining epistemological power of colonialism embedded in the conceptualizations of Hinduism.

My source material has included five texts by Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1936), Arvind P. Nirmal (1991a & 1991b), and Vedanayagam Devasahayam (1991 & 1997). My method of analyzing the texts has been conceptual analysis. In this thesis, conceptual analysis started from collecting the claims about Hinduism in my sources. Based on my analysis, the unitive concept of Chapter 3 became "oppressive Hinduism". Then, I organized the claims under three other concepts: historical, scriptural and doctrinal oppression. In Chapter 4, I analyzed the concept of oppressive Hinduism in relation to liberative alternatives to it. I classified the alternatives under three concepts: liberative reform, reconstruction and conversion.

In the following paragraphs, I present my central findings to the research question, along with the secondary research questions that link my thesis to broader discussion. I have organized my conclusions under three main themes: Dalitness as a position of discussing Hinduism, the Hindu essence of oppression, and the preconditions of ending caste oppression.

All three thinkers view Hinduism from a Dalit perspective, but their approaches to Dalitness differ. Ambedkar does not express his own Dalitness or pain of being oppressed. In his thinking, Dalitness connotes active disengagement from "the infection" of caste, as he calls it. Instead of transforming his position as an outcaste, Ambedkar aims at destroying the whole system of caste positions. Nirmal writes from an explicitly Dalit and Christian perspective. In his theology, Dalitness means involvement in "the historical Dalit consciousness" full of *pathos* but also transformation. In Nirmal's theology, Dalitness has a particular value in front of God: God is Dalit and Dalits are essentially the people who are

closest to God. Devasahayam writes as a Christian Dalit and an Indian social analyst. In his theology, Dalitness represents commitment to the transformation of caste structure that is social and transcendental.

The ways in which the three thinkers identify with Dalitness are visible in their ways of conceptualizing the 'Hindu' essence of caste oppression. Ambedkar's disapproval of caste positions is linked to his hostility towards the 'religiosity' of caste. In Ambedkar's thinking, this religiosity of caste is associated with orthodoxy, fundamental notions, non-rationality, non-morality, non-progressiveness, and non-democracy. Ambedkar is the most explicit thinker of the three in defining Hinduism as the "religion of caste". Nirmal's emphasis on the Dalit subject is linked to his resistance to the Hindu idea of human being (the *Purusha* myth of the *Rigveda*). In Nirmal's theology, 'the non-humanness' of Dalits is 'Hindu' based on scriptural justification, which includes the idea of certain Hindus (*Savarnas*) as hierarchically superior. Unlike Ambedkar, Nirmal does not oppose the 'religiosity' of caste. Instead, he offers a form of counter-religiosity, which is grounded in God who is Dalit. Devasahayam's structural approach is visible in the way in which he opposes the sacred structure of Hinduism. In the structure, Dalits are classified as impure in relation to other earthly and divine beings. Devashayam does not reject the 'religiosity' of the structure. In his theology, the kingdom of God triumphs caste as 'Satan' and 'original sin'.

The epistemological power of colonialism is visible especially in the forms that are chosen to represent Hinduism as oppressive. Although research on caste reveals that the concept of caste is profoundly complex, all three thinkers link its essence to Hinduism and the Hindu scriptures in particular. Nevertheless, the idea of text as the center of religion is not 'natural' but a result of manifold colonial knowledge-making of what is Hinduism. Same applies to Brahmins as the central religious authorities. In the theologies by Nirmal and Devasahayam, the scripturality of Hinduism is contrasted with the scripturality of Christianity as a way of highlighting the fundamental difference in the value given to Dalits. In Ambedkar's thinking, the ideal society and national progress collide with the backwardness of Hinduism. From the viewpoint of postcolonial theory, the central problematicity with sharp conceptions of oppressive Hinduism is the ignorance of ideological mode of reading – both the claims 'about religion' and 'religion' itself. I would conclude that for the three thinkers, the ideologically essentialist linkage between Hinduism and oppression works as a strategic tool for demonstrating the pervasiveness and permanence of caste oppression. Interpreting Hinduism starts from actual oppression and continues in the middle of it.

All three thinkers present relevant nuances to the “oppressive Hinduism” when they discuss the preconditions of ending caste oppression. Although Ambedkar has decided to convert from Hinduism as a personal disengagement from caste and oppression, he distinguishes Hinduism from Brahminism on a collective level. In his reform of Hinduism, he defines Brahminic Hinduism as a societally damaging system of laws, which is finally no religion at all. For Ambedkar, a sort of pure Hinduism without caste is possible, if Hinduism goes through an intrareligious conversion and becomes suitable with democratic societal ideals and universally “true” form of religion. Yet, caste itself remains inherently oppressive – it does not fit into the true religion. By criticizing explicitly Brahminic Hindu philosophies, Nirmal seems to leave room for other forms of Hindu thought. Whereas Ambedkar regards democratic societal ideals as the standard of the liberative reform of Hinduism, Nirmal commits to the primality of Dalits as the standard of a liberative religion. On the one hand, Nirmal interprets the Dalit God manifested in Jesus Christ as the end of the Dalit Exodus. On the other hand, Dalitness is prior to being Christian and Dalit experiences are prior to coherent philosophies. Therefore, Nirmal’s idea of conversion is particularist and dependent on Dalitness. Unlike Ambedkar, Nirmal does not claim to provide a universal model of conversion. An open question is, what happens to the primality of Dalitness if the caste hierarchy ceases to exist. For Devasahayam, conversion connotes overturning the caste consciousness. His counter-consciousness emerges from the Cross of Jesus, but he highlights the need for an inclusive of counter-identity and reconstruction of Dalit religion that is not essentially Christian. Yet, the need to challenge the caste consciousness seems to transcend religious boundaries. Devasahayam does not explicate if the sacred structure of Hinduism is an essential part of Hinduism or mere Brahminic Hinduism. He, as well as Ambedkar emphasizes the inherent evilness (sin) of caste. Therefore, a religion that accepts caste cannot be liberative.

My findings to the research question reveal that the selected Dalits discuss Hinduism as oppressive, but for them, the line between oppression and liberation does not run between different religious traditions. Although they conceptualize Hinduism based ‘the Hindu essence’ of caste which reflects colonially normative boundaries of religion, their conceptions of conversion are not confined to any tradition. Therefore, my conclusion is that for the three thinkers, converting to another religious tradition is not the final solution to caste oppression. Instead, they demand a more wholistic ending or transformation of caste. The demand implies that the phenomenon of caste transcends the normative boundaries of religions, as well as transcendental and secular.

What is left of my postcolonial reading of the three thinkers? I would conclude that there is a need for criticizing Hinduism from a particularist Dalit perspective and challenging the epistemologies behind 'Hinduism'. In their process of decolonization and search for native epistemologies, postcolonial theoretical approaches may overlook the violence of caste epistemologies. At the same time, an essentializing approach to 'Hinduism' or 'the Hindus' as homogeneously oppressive fails to notice specific forms of oppression as well as intertwining colonial epistemologies beyond different traditions.

The research question turned out to be intellectually demanding and meaningful. From the perspective of my field, I would like to accentuate the need for further studies on Dalit conversions from the perspective of plural commitments. My conclusions suggest that Dalits express fierce criticism and detachment in relation to Hinduism, but their agency cannot be reduced to a still image of a liberated and saved convert. Instead, the conversion seems to be a continuing process of resistance. Moreover, it would be necessary to study contemporary Dalit resistance in relation to the political *Hindutva* movement.<sup>194</sup>

---

<sup>194</sup> The Hindu 2016

# Bibliography

## Sources

Ambedkar, Bhimrao Ramji (1936). Annihilation of Caste. Valerian Rodrigues (ed.) (2004), *The Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar*. New Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 263–305.

Devasahayam, Vedanayagam (1991). Pollution, Poverty and Powerlessness – a Dalit Perspective. Arvind P. Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader in Dalit Theology*. Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College & Research Institute, 1– 22.

Devasahayam, Vedanayagam (1997). The Nature of Dalit Theology as Counter Ideology. Vedanayagam Devasahayam (ed.), *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*. Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College & Research Institute, 53–67.

Nirmal, Arvind P. (1991a). Towards a Christian Dalit Theology. Arvind P. Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader in Dalit Theology*. Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College & Research Institute, 53– 70.

Nirmal, Arvind P. (1991b). Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective. Arvind P. Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader in Dalit Theology*. Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College & Research Institute, 139–144.

## Literature

Ambedkar, Bhimrao Ramji in Rodrigues, Valerian (2004). Caste and Class. Valerian Rodrigues (ed.), *The Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar*. New Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 99–105.

Balagangadhara, S.N. (2010). Orientalism, Postcolonialism and the ‘Construction’ of Religion. Esther Bloch, Rajaram Hegde & Marianne Keppens (eds), *Rethinking Religion in India: The Colonial Construction of Hinduism*. London; New York: Routledge, 135–163.

Bayly, Susan (2001). *The New Cambridge History of India: 4, 3, Caste, Society and Politics in India From the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*. Repr. Cambridge: Cambridge U. P.

Bloch, Esther & Keppens, Marianne (2010). Introduction: Rethinking Religion in India. Esther Bloch, Rajaram Hegde & Marianne Keppens (eds), *Rethinking Religion in India: The Colonial Construction of Hinduism*. London; New York: Routledge, 1–21.

Clarke, Sathianathan (1998). *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

- Clarke, Sathianathan (2011). Dalit Theology: An Introductory and Interpretive Theological Exposition. Sathianathan Clarke, Deenabandhu Manchala & Philip Vinod Peacock. (eds), *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-First Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 19–37.
- Dirks, Nicholas B. (2001). *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Doniger, Wendy (2009). *The Hindus: An alternative history*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Doniger, Wendy (2014). *On Hinduism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Doniger, Wendy (2015). Hinduism. Wendy Doniger & Jack Miles (eds), *The Norton Anthology of World Religions: Vol. 1, Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism*. New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 53–722.
- Ganguly, Debjani (2009). *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity: Notes on a Postcolonial Hermeneutics of Caste*. London: New York: Routledge.
- Gupta, Dipankar (1992). Caste. Dipankar Gupta (ed.), *Social Stratification*. 2nd and enlarged ed. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Gupta, Dipankar (2004). *Caste in Question: Identity or Hierarchy?* New Delhi: Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.
- Fitzgerald, Timothy (2000). *The Ideology of Religious Studies*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fitzgerald, Timothy (2007). Ambedkar, Buddhism and the Concept of Religion. S.M. Michael (ed.), *Dalits in Modern India: Vision and Values*. 2nd ed. Los Angeles, Calif: Sage Publications, 75–84.
- Fitzgerald, Timothy (2010). Who Invented Hinduism? Rethinking Religion in India. Esther Bloch, Rajaram Hegde & Marianne Keppens (eds), *Rethinking Religion in India: The Colonial Construction of Hinduism*. London; New York: Routledge, 114–134.
- Forrester, Duncan B. (1980). *Caste and Christianity: Attitudes and Politics On Caste of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions in India*. London: Curzon Press.
- Hallamaa, Jaana (1997). Mitä systemaattisen teologian tutkimus on eli metodia koskevia huomautuksia. Päivänsalo, Ville (ed), *Prosessia ja rautalankaa: gradun tekijän opas*. Helsinki: Helsingin yliopiston systemaattisen teologian laitos, 108–113.
- Hebden, Keith (2011). *Dalit Theology and Christian Anarchism*. Farnham, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Jayachitra, L. (2011). Jesus and Ambedkar. Exploring Common Loci for Dalit Theology and Dalit Movements. Sathianathan Clarke, Deenabandhu Manchala & Philip Vinod Peacock (eds), *Dalit theology in the twenty-first century: Discordant voices, discerning pathways*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press., 121–135.

- King, Richard (1999). *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'the Mystic East'*. London; New York: Routledge.
- King, Richard (2010). Colonialism, Hinduism and the Discourse of Religion. Esther Bloch, Rajaram Hegde & Marianne Keppens (eds), *Rethinking Religion in India: The Colonial Construction of Hinduism*. London; New York: Routledge, 95–113.
- Klostermaier, Klaus K. (2007). *A Survey of Hinduism*. 3rd ed. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matti (2003). *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical & Contemporary Perspectives*. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press.
- Loomba, Ania (2005). *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- Malkavaara, Mikko (1999). *Intialainen dalit-teologia: Vapautuksen teologiaa ja ihmisoikeuskamppailua*. Tampere: Kirkon Tutkimuskeskus.
- McLeod, John (2010). *Beginning Postcolonialism*. 2nd ed. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Melanchton, Monica Jyotsna (2009). Liberation Hermeneutics and India's Dalits. Pablo R. Andiñach & Alejandro F. Botta (eds), *The Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation*. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 199–211.
- Menski, Werner (2012). Hinduism and Human Rights. John Witte, Jr. & M. Christian Green (eds), *Religion & Human Rights: An Introduction*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 71–86.
- Nagappa, Gowda, K. (2011). *The Bhagavadgita in the Nationalist Discourse*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Nayar, Pramod K. (2010). *Postcolonialism: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London; New York: Continuum.
- Nirmal, Arvind P. (1990). *Heuristic Explorations*. Madras: Christian Literature Society.
- Orpana, Tiia (2015). Dalitien ei-ihmisyys ja siitä vapautuminen Arvind P. Nirmalin teologiassa. Systemaattisen teologian kandidaatintutkielma. Helsinki: Helsingin yliopisto.
- Pears, Angie (2010). *Doing Contextual Theology*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Rajkumar, Peniel (2010). *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Problems, Paradigms and Possibilities*. Farnham, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Rambachan, Anantanand (2008). Hinduism. Miguel De La Torre (ed.), *The Hope of Liberation in World Religions*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 113–129.
- Rao, Anupama (2009). *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Rodrigues, Valerian (2004). Introduction. Valerian Rodrigues (ed.), *Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar*. New Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1–43.
- Schwarz, Hans (2005). *Theology in a Global Context: The Last Two Hundred Years*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.
- Sharma, Arvind (2004). *Hinduism and Human Rights: A Conceptual Approach*. New Delhi: Oxford U. P.
- Singh, Hira (2014). *Recasting Caste: From the Sacred to the Profane*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Smith, Brian K. (2005). Varna and Jāti. Lindsay Jones (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion: Vol. 14, TRANSCENDENTAL MEDITATION-ZWINGLI, HULDRYCH*. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 9522–9524.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1985) *Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography*. Donna Landry & Gerald MacLean (eds) (1996), *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. New York: Routledge, 203–235.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1988) Can the Subaltern Speak? Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 271–313.
- Srinivas, M.N. (1992). Varna and Caste. Dipankar Gupta (ed.), *Social Stratification*. 2nd and enlarged ed. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 28–34.
- Srinivas, M.N. (2006). Some Reflections on the Nature of Caste Hierarchy. R.S. Khare (ed.), *Caste, Hierarchy, and Individualism: Indian Critiques of Louis Dumont's Contributions*. 2nd ed. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 93–109.
- Sugirtharajah, Rasiah S. (2003). *Postcolonial Reconfigurations: An Alternative Way of Reading and Doing Theology*. London: SCM Press.
- Sugirtharajah, Sharada (2010). Colonialism and Religion. Esther Bloch, Rajaram Hegde & Marianne Keppens (eds), *Rethinking Religion in India: The Colonial Construction of Hinduism*. London: New York: Routledge, 69–78.
- Vajpeyi, Ananya (2012). *Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Vinayaraj, Y.T. (2011). Envisioning a Postmodern Method of Doing Dalit Theology. Sathianathan Clarke, Deenabandhu Manchala & Philip Vinod Peacock. (eds), *Dalit Theology in the Twenty First Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 93–103.
- Vinayaraj, Y.T. (2016). *Dalit Theology After Continental Philosophy*. Palgrave Macmillan: Springer Nature Switzerland AG.

Wielenga, Bastiaan (2007). Liberation Theology in Asia. Christopher Rowland (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 39–62.

Wilfred, Felix (2005). *On the Banks of Ganges: Doing Contextual Theology*. Revised ed. Delhi: ISPCK.

Wyatt, Andrew (2010). Dalit Theology and the Politics of Untouchability among the Indian Christian Churches. Mikael Aktor & Robert Deliège (eds), *From Stigma to Assertion: Untouchability, Identity and Politics in Early and Modern India*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 119–146.

## **Online Sources**

Church of North India <http://new.cnisynod.org/about-cni-2/> Accessed 18.3.2019.

Church of South India <https://www.csisynod.com/aboutus.php> Accessed 18.3.2019.

Dalitien Solidaarisuusverkosto <https://www.dalit.fi/> Accessed 18.4.2019.

Merriam-Webster: Brahminism <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Brahminism> Accessed 4.11.2019.

Postcolonial Studies at Emory 2017: Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty.  
<https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/postcolonialstudies/2014/06/19/spivak-gayatri-chakravorty/> Accessed 26.4.2019.

Postcolonial Studies at Emory 2017b: Essentialism.  
<https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/postcolonialstudies/2014/06/20/essentialism/> Accessed 28.4.2019.

The Guardian 2017: ‘Fiction takes its time’: Arundhati Roy on why it took 20 years to write her second novel. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/27/arundhati-roy-fiction-takes-time-second-novel-ministry-utmost-happiness> Accessed 18.4.2019.

The Hindu 2016: The Dalit-Hindutva paradox. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/The-Dalit-Hindutva-paradox/article14068231.ece> Accessed 4.11.2019.

*The Holy Bible* English Standard Version.  
<https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/English-Standard-Version-ESV-Bible/#copy> Accessed 19.4.2019.