

## RELIGION &amp; PHILOSOPHY

joy Heidegger so admired in the medieval Scholastics has drifted away.

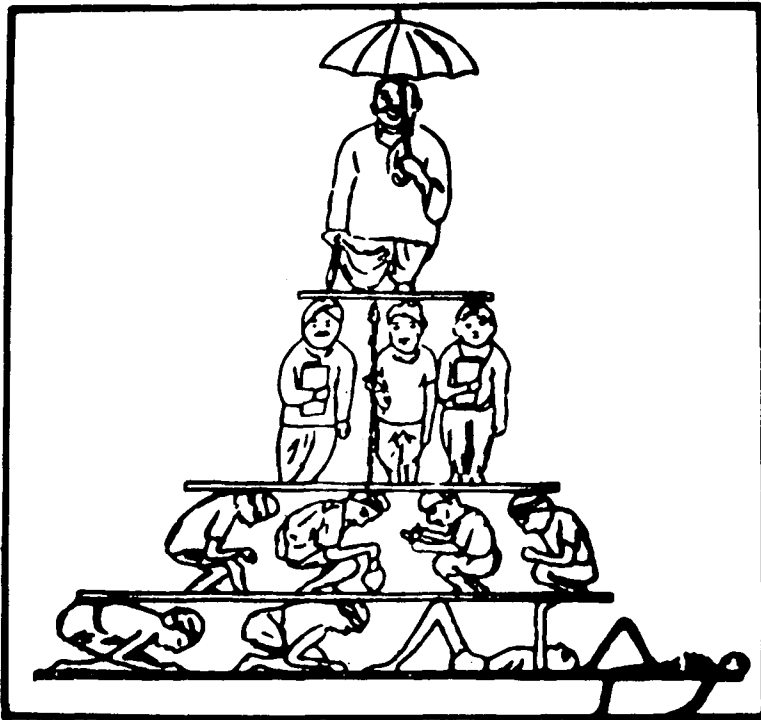
O'Meara warns that "any tradition which intends to survive in the world beyond the seminar and the library cannot live solely by words—no matter how sacred the text." Nor can anyone enjoy spiritual growth without the kind of insights Heidegger came to *outside of* religion.

*India's 'Downtrodden'*

"Castaways of Caste" by Jayashree B. Gokhale, in *Natural History* (Oct. 1986), Central Park West at 79th St., New York, N.Y. 10024.

Although India's 1949 constitution granted equal rights to all citizens, the dominant Hindu religion's rigid caste system endured. And so, too, did the miseries of the lowest caste—the Harijan or "untouchables"—even after a 1955 law provided tough penalties for Indians who bar them from religious, social, or educational institutions.

Indeed, observes Gokhale, a visiting research scholar at the University of Pennsylvania, the curse of caste has clung to those Indians, now numbering in the millions, who have sought to leave the life of a Harijan by



A depiction of the Hindu social castes by dalit artist Gobi David. A Brahmin priest or scholar stands atop warriors and merchants, who in turn are borne by laborers and peasants. At bottom: untouchables.

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converting to Buddhism.

The Hindu caste system, developed over 30 centuries, assigns society's "unclean" tasks (e.g., disposing of animal carcasses, tending funeral pyres, collecting garbage) to the untouchables. Born as Harijan, forced to live on the outskirts of town, and entirely dependent upon state largesse and contributions of grain from higher-caste townsmen, these wretched beggars lived with only the hope that "obedience and sublime faith" might raise their caste in the next life.

Then, in 1956, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar—the first Harijan allowed to go through the Indian educational system—led a half-million joyful untouchables from Maharashtra, his native state, in a mass conversion to Buddhism. It was, he said, like "walking away from hell."

Many more have followed since; in Maharashtra alone, there are five million converted Buddhists. Yet conversion has proved no panacea.

Loyal Hindus viewed the Buddhist converts as traitors and troublemakers. Community relations went from bad to worse as tasks suddenly spurned by former untouchables fell to other low-caste Hindus, the Mangs and Chambhars. And when the new Buddhists sought to keep the few privileges accorded untouchables, such as a quota of places in schools, they were reviled, says Gokhale, for trying to "have their cake and eat it too."

In recent years, the converts have been victims of arson, rape, and public beatings. In one village, Hindus with nightsticks attacked a group of Buddhists for trying to draw water from a communal well after the untouchables' well ran dry; in a suburb of supposedly cosmopolitan Bombay, a Hindu mob ravaged a Buddhist neighborhood. During 1986, caste riots broke out in two states. Anti-Buddhist violence does not seem of great concern to India's rural police and civil servants, whose ranks, Gokhale notes, are "overwhelmingly" composed of caste Hindus.

The ex-untouchables—who call themselves *dalits*, the "downtrodden"—have carved out a political and religious identity outside mainstream Indian society, rather as U.S. black Muslims did during the 1960s. *Dalit* writings, often angry and obscene, deride Hindu gods and superstitions—or, more positively, celebrate a certain pride. "I am a Buddhist now," wrote one recent convert. "I have become a human being."

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## SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

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### *Squaring the Age Curve*

"Biochemical Studies of Aging" by Morton Rothstein, in *Chemical and Engineering News* (Aug. 1986), 1155 16th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

At the beginning of the century, the U.S. population's median age was 24 years, and average life expectancy was 47. Today, the median age is 31.5 (it will be 39 by 2010) and life expectancy is over 70. While senior citizens become ever more numerous, what Rothstein, a biochemist at the State University of New York in Buffalo, calls the medical "ideal" remains elusive—"to reach a very old age in excellent health and then die quickly."