

## Christians and Jains: To build a better future, by embracing diversity and inclusivity

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The world is a house on fire. When wars are not raging, nations experience social turmoil, especially with conflicts arising over immigration and the broader negotiation of living in a local-yet-global society. In this context, the values of inclusivity and respect for the other are more critical than ever.

It is our collective responsibility to contribute to improved ways of connecting with one another.

In 1974, following the fundamental teaching of Umāsvāmin in *That Which Is*, the Jains adopted as a global community the motto: "the function of souls is to support one another".<sup>1</sup> For me who grew up in a Catholic family, this motto immediately resonated like an echo to the "love one another" of John's *Gospel*, which is similarly at the core of the practitioner's relation to the world around them.

Today is a significant occasion to bring together the thousands of years old wisdom and practices around compassion and collective support of these two faiths who might be considered as decidedly others, but who share so much more than what initially meets the eye.

### 1. Recognising the divine in the other and in oneself

In this dialogue, the contribution of Jainism develops from Mahāvīra's seminal quest for "non-violence" (*a-himsā*). More precisely, at the heart of Jainism is the belief according to which each living being – you, me, this infinitesimal bacterium that I should be careful not to crash when I move – is the transitory embodiment of a permanent divine-like Soul (*jīva*). Acknowledging that it is crucial to avoid harming these Souls, all Jain religious practices are oriented towards this aim.

Now, this has many implications. To begin with, this implies a constant awareness of the presence of souls everywhere around us, combined with the recognition of their true nature – no living being is little, each should be treated as equally sacred, each is both different and exactly like me, that is, a soul on their way to liberation. In such a conception, to fully appraise the fact that, in the midst of our diversity, our sacred character is precisely what we have in common, creates an empowering sense of inclusivity and of solidarity.

Such a core stance is seen from the very beginning of Jainism, as the religion emerged as a protest against the caste exclusiveness, with the Jain spiritual teachers insisting on the fact that what matters is not one's birth, but the moral qualities that one cultivates. This is why, despite the fact that this religion emerged and developed in a society in which the castes system has a prominent position, Jain Scriptures never sanctioned castes and that in most cases, no restrictions exist on the social intercourse between the members of different communities.

Here, let me stress also the fact that this inclusivity does not hold sway at a theoretical level only, but that it leads Jains to be actively committed to the well-being of others, not only of the proximate others, but of all others. This will be the scope of the second talks to assess in more depth the concrete outcomes of this, including the fact that Jain practices are in harmony on many levels with the contemporary environmental fight, so let me just give you one taste of it now, by mentioning the many philanthropist projects that Jains undertake notably through the religious prescriptive practice of charitable giving (*dāna*), like building hospitals for all, including animal shelters and bird hospitals.

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<sup>1</sup> *That Which Is (tattvārtha-sūtra)* 5.21: *paraspara-upagraho jīvānām*.

Mentioning this leads me to my second point, as the Jain inclusivity concerns not only people from all faiths and cultures, but also animals, up to the tiniest bacteria, as well as plants. This was probably the main difference between the Jain "the function of souls is to support one another" and the Catholic "love one another". But today, as we all face a common challenge, namely, that we need to combat the damages caused to the animals and the environment by the modality through which humanity populates the planet, both faiths cultivate a broader sense of inclusivity, and the Catholic prescriptions have moved from an appraisal of the animals and the earth as being created for the sake of humanity, to a sense of responsibility for human beings to look after the animals and the earth inasmuch as all are created by God and, as such, are equally sacred. Building a shared vision between both faiths in order to assess this contemporary challenge in light of their respective principles and practices will have a decisive impact.

I started by reminding us of Mahāvīra's seminal quest for non-violence following the realisation that each living being is the transitory embodiment of a permanent divine-like Soul. The first implication of this situation on inclusivity revolved around this very recognition of the divine nature of all the living beings around us. A second implication for inclusivity lies in the implications of this new sense of myself as a permanent divine Soul, because the way I treat myself has implications on the way I treat others. More precisely, irrespective of the specific lineage to which they belong, Jains perform ritual practices with a mindset oriented to overcome a wrong sense of ego. Whether one recites a prayer; whether one listens to a sermon preached by a member of the ascetic community or another teaching figure; whether one sings or meditates, alone or as a group, using sacred verses (*mantra*) and diagrams (*yantra*) or not; whether one studies the Scriptures; or whether one performs *pūjā*, the ritual worship of a live image of the liberated beings by circumambulating around it, by looking at it, by anointing it, by waving incense, a lamp, or a whisk in front of it, or by offering rice, sweets, or fruits; in each of these cases, one must *first* keep a mind set on the spiritual progress of overcoming a wrong sense of ego. Even the more ritualistic acts of the *pūjā* are performed with the mind directed towards the qualities which the image embodies. Even the central prayer, the namokar mantra, or "fivefold salutation", is not about a named worshiped figure, but about a type of worshiped figure as embodying given qualities to help in this overcoming a wrong sense of ego.<sup>2</sup> By the way, note that this focus on the qualities to enhance in each of us, instead of a focus on a named worshiped figure is also a powerful tool to bypass the tensions that might arise between worshipers of different sacred figures. Note also that in a society that constantly generates incitation to acquire more and more material wealth, more and more prestige of the individual, the fact that Jain religious practices are oriented towards getting rid of a wrong sense of ego is both invaluable and challenging for the one who identifies as Jain, as one must go against the tide of the times.

Now, all this is relevant to a discussion on inclusivity, as the Jain practices listed above are steady guidelines to help me deconstruct a harmful focus on myself as an embodied character who craves more possessions, more power and dreads their loss. In concert, as I advance on this realisation, I will see in others not the accumulation of possession and power that I lack and envy, nor the differences between myself and them, that may provoke my jealousy, hatred, contempt, or other destructive passion. Instead, I will see in them the implementation of trends similar to those that I experience. To say it differently, I will look at others as being in the same whirlpool of blinding ignorance and karma, I will be able to recognize their existential suffering. All in all, instead of preparing for wars, I will be ready for compassion.

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<sup>2</sup> "I bow before the worthy ones [the Jinas, also called Tirthankaras, Ford-makers], I bow before the perfected ones [all those who have attained *mokṣa*], I bow before the Patriarchs, I bow before the spiritual teachers, I bow before all Jain monks and nuns in the world" (*namo arihantānam, namo siddhānam, namo āyariyānam, namo uvajjhāyānam, namo loe savvasāhunam*).

To conclude, wars and, in general, conflicts arising from a failed negotiation of living in a local-yet-global society, arise when people have these destructive emotions towards one another. But Jain principles and practices, when followed with a constant mindfulness, self-mastery and careful behavior, help overcome these destructive passions. One concrete example is the impact that Jain meditation called *prekṣā dhyāna*, or “insight meditation”, has on dispositional forgiveness<sup>3</sup>.

A final discussion on which Jains spearheaded inclusivity and that I wanted to bring to our attention today is that of the status of women. More precisely, discussions concerning the different monastic practices of different lineages included debates on the relevance, or absence thereof, of the nudity of their renunciants. For those prescribing nudity, this was a sign that in their path to liberation, the monks successfully relinquished all possessions, as well as all destructive emotions, including shame. Now, women are not supposed to practice nudity.<sup>4</sup> This brought the question whether women were fit for liberation to serious scrutiny at times at which such considerations were usually not even considered. The earliest mention of a controversy on the question of liberation of women is to be found in Kundakunda’s *Offering of Sacred Teaching* in the 2<sup>nd</sup> CE.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly enough, the first person of this time-cycle to reach liberation was a woman, Marudevī, the mother of Rṣabha, the first Jina. Besides, there are controversies concerning the gender of Mallinātha, the 19<sup>th</sup> Jina of the current time-cycle, in their last embodied life.

Today, in the Śvetāmbara Terāpanthī tradition, an order of not-fully ordered monks and nuns has been created. This order is meant to overcome the fact that fully ordained monks and nuns cannot travel in airplanes or cars, while the diasporic communities need them all over the world. One outcome of the creation of this order is that some of these not-fully ordered nuns, called samanis, have PhDs from universities from India or from abroad, they became active participant in the scholarly debates in international conferences and journals and they are revered members of the community. A telling sign of the gender inclusivity in contemporary Jainism is that in this very congregation in which two main speakers represent the Jain stance, there is two women, Samani Niyoka Amal Pragya ji and me.

Contemporary discussions on inclusivity also include transgender identities. Interestingly, linked with questions of classification of advancement of different embodied souls on the path to liberation and on practices to get to higher levels, Jain canonical texts also recognize, next to male and female genres, the existence of a not strictly male nor strictly female gender (*napuṃsaka*), as well as three types of sexual orientation, towards men, towards women, or towards not strictly males nor strictly females. Of course, this ultimately has no effect on our ability to attain liberation, since liberation supposes the cessation of passions.

To conclude on this, the principle of ‘non-violence is the highest religion’ (*ahimsā paramo dharmah*) lies at the heart of Jain practices and led them to recognise the worth and community of all living beings in all their diversity.

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<sup>3</sup> On this, see the work of Samani Niyoka Amal Pragya.

<sup>4</sup> This is notably addressed in a famous episode of the Śvetāmbara canon that relates the 8<sup>th</sup> and last heresy. This heresy started 609 years after the death of Mahāvīra when Śivabhūti, a self-initiated monk practiced nudity and convinced his sister to also adopt it. Hopefully, a prostitute convinced the sister to renounce to this idea. This accounts for the fact that Digambara male renunciants practice nudity, although Digambara female ones do not.

<sup>5</sup> *Offering of Sacred Teaching (sutta-pāhuḍa)*. Kundakunda’s texts are considered sacred in some Jain Digambara lineages, who worship these texts in temples as incarnation of the teaching. Another seminal text in this discussion is the *Treatise on the liberation of women (strī-nirvāṇa-prakaraṇa)* and its auto-commentary by Śākaṭyāna in the 9<sup>th</sup> CE.

## 2. Jain philosophy as the embracing of diversity

The second line of thought that I would like to discuss today concerns the fact that in Jainism, a rich and complex textual tradition of philosophy was composed by authors desiring to make sense of the teaching of Mahāvīra also at an intellectual level. This textual tradition develops in a context in which thinkers from different religions also attempt to give an account of what truly exists, what truly matters beyond the appearances of empirical reality. Surely, there is more to our lives than our material belongings and social positions. At one extreme of the debate, some Hindus believe that everything in the world is the transient manifestation of a unique all-pervasive divine consciousness, we are all the same permanent dough; while at the other extreme of the debate, some Buddhists believe that all there is are flows of instantaneously perishing bits of phenomena that our mind gathers in recognizable clusters, thinking that we are a separate entity existing from a moment to another is an illusion. Let us just remember that in this pan-Indian debating hall, a lot of deeply revisionary metaphysics co-exist, and that the diverse religious traditions differ by the way in which they answer to the question “what ultimately exists?”.

In this framework, Jain teachers explain the vast diversity of conceptions by claiming that fundamental reality *is* actually made of essentially complex things, which are at the same time essentially persistent and essentially changing. Doing so, they follow what Mahāvīra teaches us in the sūtra. More precisely, in the canonical *Venerable Exposition of the Teaching*, it is said that: “the disciple Indrabhūti Gautama asks the Monk Jamāli:

– Is the soul eternal or is it, Jamāli, non-eternal?

Being asked in this manner, Jamāli was doubtful and wanted to know, but he was overwhelmed with confusion. He was unable to speak in reply and he remained silent. When Jamāli was confused, Bhagavān Mahāvīra addressed him as follow:

– The soul is, Jamāli, eternal. For it did not cease to exist at any time.

– The soul is, Jamāli, non-eternal. For it becomes an animal after being a hellish creature, a man after becoming an animal, and a god after being a man”<sup>6</sup>.

From this, hermeneutical and interpretative tools aimed at handling a plurality of perspectives within a single coherent framework when describing or evaluating a claim, an object, or a practice, become central in Jain religious practices. The famous philosopher Akalaṅka (c. 720-780 CE) opens his *Three Short [Treatises] (Laghīyas-traya, hereafter LT)* on knowledge, perspectives and Scripture, with a benedictory verse that presents the Jain spiritual teachers, and the aim of Jain religious practice, as *firstly* focused on this plurality of perspectives:

Homage to the Builders of the Ford of Religion, Teachers of the Doctrine of Perspectives, beginning with Ṛṣabha and ending with Mahāvīra, for the sake of accomplishing [the true nature of] one’s self.<sup>7</sup>

Shortly after, his commentator Prabhācandra defines a correct perspective as the one that is effective without refuting other perspectives:

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<sup>6</sup> *Venerable Exposition of the Teaching (bhagavāi-sutta)*, v. 9.386.

<sup>7</sup> LT 1. *dharmā-tīrtha-karebhyo ’stu syādvādībhyo namo namaḥ | ṛṣbhādi-mahāvīrāntebhyaḥ svātmōpalabdhye ||* My translation, after consulting the French translation of Anne Clavel in her PhD dissertation *La théorie de la connaissance dans le Laghīyāstraya d’Akalaṅka*; and the English translation of Shree Nahata in “In Some Ways: Syādvāda as the Synthesis of Anekāntavāda and Nayavāda in Akalaṅka’s Philosophical Treatises” in Marie-Hélène Gorisse and Anil Mundra (eds.) *Anekāntavāda: Sources and Varieties*, Special Issue of the *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, Springer, to appear.

A “perspective” is the point of view of a knower, it grasps a part of the thing, and it consists in an alternative which does not refute [other alternatives]. On the other hand, an erroneous perspective is an alternative which refutes [other alternatives].<sup>8</sup>

Now, these philosophical doctrines have been brought to the foreground in contemporary Jain religious practices. In temples, the theory of the complexity of reality and of the necessity and relevance of a plurality of perspectives on it, is regularly used in sermons by a member of the monastic community or represented in little plays by groups of children. The most popular parable to express this is that of seven blind men attempting to describe an elephant while each having a partial approach to it. In this story, each blind man fails at capturing the whole of the phenomenon, states true and constructive claims on one aspect of it and disregards the claims of the other blind men.

The main teaching of this popular parable is that even if they do not believe what the others believe in, it is important that they acknowledge their position as a viable one.

Today, these doctrines have become an incentive to be tolerant of other views and is called “intellectual non-violence”.

> Another trigger of wars is when people refute the perspective of the other.

Non-violence and the politics of non-aggression is what we need today.

> Jains promotes mindfulness, not conversion

In conclusion, the urge to co-exist, and to do so without imposing one’s perspective on the other was, is and will be present. It is naturally part of the faith today. In this context, the Jain promotion of an “intellectual non-violence” allied with this constant practices enhancing mindfulness, is a precious contribution to a value essential today, that of mutual respect and appreciation.

Thank you for your attention!

Jai Jinendra

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<sup>8</sup> [...] *anirākṛta-pratipakṣo vastv-aṃśa-grāhī jñātur abhiprāyo nayaḥ | nirākṛta-pratipakṣas tu nayābhāsaḥ* | My translation in “Prabhācandra: *The Sun that Makes the Lotus of the Object of Knowledge Blossom*” in Mohammed Rustom (ed.). *A Sourcebook in Global Philosophy*, Equinox Publishing, to appear.