

Understanding Jainism and Sharing the Gospel

The origin of Jainism may be a matter of some debate depending upon whether you ask someone within Jainism or outside of it. Winfried Corduan begins his discussion of its origin with Nataputta Vardhamma, a royal son who left his life of privilege seeking enlightenment and who came to be known by the title “Mahavira,” meaning “great man.”¹ However, Jains believe Mahavira was merely one of many “Tirthankaras,” human beings who found the way to enlightenment, with twenty-three such men before him.² According to Jainism scholar Bhagchandra Jain Bhaskar, “These Tirthankaras are not the founders of Jainism. They are propagators of the supreme truth and spirituality. They had attained it through right conduct and penance. They were individual human souls and not divine personalities.”³ Accordingly, because Bhaskar sees Jainism as preceding Mahavira by at least twenty-three prior Tirthankaras, he also argues that “it is of pre-Vedic origin, belonging to the non-Aryan culture of India, and therefore Jainas may be indigenous to India.”⁴ This conclusion, however, seems unlikely. While Jainism certainly has significant distinctives (discussed below), it also has many things in common with Hinduism (such as an appreciation for karma, even though the Jain formulation of the concept differs in some respects from that of Hindus). As Corduan describes in detail, the origins of Hinduism (at least as generally believed by most scholars) can be found in the Aryan settlement into the Indus Valley and the religion they brought with them.⁵ If the Hindu religion

¹ Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions*, 2nd Ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 358-59.

² *Ibid.*, 366.

³ Bhagchandra Jain Bhaskar, “Spiritual disciplines and practices in Jainism,” *Dialogue & Alliance*, vol. 3, no. 4 (1990): 42.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths*, 269-71.

began with and was related to the Aryans, and Jainism is related to Hinduism (as it appears to be), then it is unlikely that Jainism preceded Hinduism and is completely unrelated to the Aryan civilization. Absent any historical record of these twenty-three prior Tirthankaras actually existing, it seems more likely that Jainism began with Mahavira.

While Jainism has some commonalities with other Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, it also has significant distinctions which make it a religion of its own and not merely a variation of one of the other systems. For example, Corduan explains that one of the foundational requirements for a religion to qualify as Hindu is for it to accept the Vedas “as divinely inspired and authoritative.”⁶ Jainism does not satisfy this requirement. According to Padma Agrawal, “Vedic religions accept the authority of the *Vedas* and vedic literature whereas Jainism accepts the authority of its own *agamas*.”⁷ The Agamas were a collection of twenty-two books dating to the time of Mahavira which allegedly included his teachings. However, for a time they were lost. There are two schools within Jainism which disagree as to whether any of the Agamas have survived, with the Shvetambaras saying all but the last continue to exist and the Digambaras claiming all have been lost.⁸

Corduan also explains that Jainism does not believe in “one universal world soul” as does Vedantic Hinduism or an “all-encompassing impermanence, let alone emptiness” as in

⁶ Ibid., 267.

⁷ Padma Agrawal, “Jainism: Mahavira as man-god,” *Dialogue & Alliance*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1988): 9.

⁸ Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths*, 364.

Buddhism.⁹ Instead, Jainism contends that all living things have an individual soul called a “jiva,” including the gods, humans, and even blades of grass.¹⁰

These souls are weightless, and if they were unencumbered they would float up and exist in nirvana. However, they are held down by “ajiva” (dead matter) which must be “purged in order for the jivas to rise.”¹¹ Karma is what causes this ajiva to stick to the soul. Violations of certain rules adds karma matter to your soul. Living a pure life removes it. A person’s status in the next life is determined by the amount of karma matter they have on their soul at the end of this one.¹²

The path toward this Jain idea of salvation is defined by “right faith, right knowledge and right conduct.”¹³ One must believe Mahavira’s teachings, understand their necessity, and act upon them.¹⁴ Thus, Jainism is a works based religion, with each soul needing to work toward its own salvation.

The specific demands placed upon adherents to Jainism depend upon whether they are a monk or a layperson. Monks must: (1) not harm any living thing (ahisma), (2) ensure not only that they tell the truth, but that nothing they say can be misconstrued, (3) not engage in theft (which has the practical effect of preventing monks from owning anything), (4) abstain from all

⁹ Ibid., 360.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

fleshly desires, and (5) detach themselves from the entire universe, including their family and even their own identity.¹⁵ In practice, this has been taken to mean that monks may only eat vegetarian meals that were not prepared for them but were destined to be disposed of anyway (that way the monk is in no way responsible for the ending of even plant life).¹⁶ In regard to never misleading another person, Jain philosophy claims that truth depends upon a person's perspective. Many descriptions may be possible for the same object (Corduan gives the example of a pot that could accurately be described as a "pot," "an article made of clay," or even "a fusion of molecules"). Thus, all formal assertions should include the word "syadvada," which is translated "maybe" or "somehow."¹⁷

In a modern context, some scholars have argued that the Jain concept of ahimsa has been expanded not only to living things, but also to competing ideas. In other words, as described by John E. Cort, "Just as all living beings are to be treated with respect and nonviolence, so the Jains adopted the stance that the perspectives of all beings are to be treated with respect and nonviolence – in this case, intellectual nonviolence."¹⁸ However, Cort claims that such a view of Jainism is incorrect and inconsistent with what one will see if they look beyond merely the Jain logic texts.¹⁹ He states, "If one looks at other aspects of the Jain religious worldview, in particular the Jain position on the proper path to liberation ..., one finds that the Jains accept

¹⁵ Ibid., 361.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 362.

¹⁸ John E. Cort, "'Intellectual Ahimsa' Revisited: Jain Tolerance and Intolerance of Others," *Philosophy East & West*, vol. 50, no. 3 (2000): 324.

¹⁹ Ibid.

other points of view as being at best only partially correct and therefore, inevitably, for the most part incorrect.”²⁰ This view of Jainism is perhaps borne more out of the modern cultural push for “tolerance” than it is out of traditional Jain religion.²¹

Laypeople in Jainism are not expected to adhere as strictly to the five requirements placed upon monks. While they continue to be generally bound by these five vows, they are permitted to eat a vegetarian diet and not one that was destined for the garbage. They are told not to lie but are not required to modify their statements with syadvada. However, the laity also has seven additional vows which they must obey, including limiting travel, setting aside specific times for meditation and giving alms.²²

Corduan critiques Jainism by observing that even though its intention may have been to elevate the importance of life forms such as grass, cockroaches and chickens, its practical effect is actually to reduce the value of humanity. After all, if all life is equal, then humans are no better than a mere blade of grass.²³ This also results in a difficulty with the Jain concept of reincarnation. Allegedly your form in your next life is determined by the amount of karma matter adhering to your jiva in this life. We work our way up through the echelon of births until we reach nirvana. However, if there is no fundamental difference between the life of a cockroach and the life of a human, then how can being born a cockroach be considered “lower” on that echelon than being born as a human?

²⁰ Ibid., 324-25.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths*, 365.

²³ Ibid., 370.

Another critique stems from the Jain notion of nonviolence. Bhaskar argues that the spiritual disciplines of Jainism “can play a pivotal part in giving a human approach to all our national and international problems. A spirit of coexistence and brotherhood based on non-violence can hardly be denied by any sane person.”²⁴ A question to be raised in response to Bhaskar, however, is how are we to behave until such time as the entire population of the world has accepted the premise of nonviolence? If a murderer slaughters an innocent family, are we, modeling the example of nonviolence, merely to look the other way? Bhaskar’s argument may sound good on first blush, but when we try to implement it in practical reality we see that it does away with any concept of justice. Justice may sometimes require that we do harm to others, not out of malevolence, but because their immoral actions require a response. As Corduan observed, the Jain standard of absolute nonviolence “usurps the absoluteness that belongs to God.”²⁵ “God, as the Creator of life, can also direct people to take life.”²⁶ God is just, and as such He punishes wickedness. While the Christian should work toward peace and love our neighbors, these commands do not come at the expense of standing for what is right and just. Jain nonviolence, when removed from the abstraction of the ideal and implemented in the real world, would result in the denial of justice.

In concluding his chapter, Corduan notes that “Jainism represents the extreme picture of a works-oriented religion with the concomitant lack of hope that such a religion can entail.”²⁷ Christianity can offer the hope that Jainism denies.

²⁴ Bhaskar, “Spiritual disciplines and practices in Jainism”: 50.

²⁵ Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths*, 370.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 371.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.²⁸

The door to sharing the gospel with a Jain may be through showing them the love and hope that is offered only by Jesus Christ.

²⁸ 1 Peter 1:3-6 (NIV).