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Jainism and Nonviolence: From Mahavira to Modern Times

Today, Jainism has about five million followers, the majority located in India although some have migrated to the United States and Africa (Johnson, 2009, Number of Adherents Worldwide section). Wherever it is practiced, most would agree that Jainism has some of the most stringent and demanding religious practices centered around the principle of *ahimsa*, or nonviolence. In a religion that entails a strict vegetarian diet, daily meditation, and taking vows that most would see as impossible to uphold, it may prove difficult to see how Jainism can relate to the modern concept of nonviolence. On the contrary, though, Jainism has come to be identified as one of the main influences for nonviolent practices and theory, and has even been cited as the principle philosophical structure for more modern movements, like environmentalism, in the Western world (Tucker and Grim, 1994, p. 36). Jain ideals have gone on to inspire such prominent thinkers and pioneers of nonviolence as Thoreau, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. In addition, the newer generations of Jains, who are striving to make Jainism fit better with 21st century values, are making it easier to recognize how one can integrate the principles of Jainism into daily life. Finally, Jainism has been considered one of the oldest and most enduring religions in the world, although in the past Western scholars often confused it with Buddhism and Hinduism (Tucker and Grim, 1994, p. 138). In more recent times, however, Jainism has received attention for its distinct practices, and has become more prevalent than ever in a world where equality and nonviolence movements have sprung up around the world.

A key point in the long history of the Jain religion is that no one person or being has ever been credited with founding Jainism; in fact, Jains do not believe in a single, all-knowing and all-powerful god. Instead, there are twenty-four figures, known as *jinas* or *tirthankaras* (ford-makers) who are revered as the originators of the religion for having reached the highest realm of knowledge and understanding. The major founder is considered to be Mahavira, who lived in Bihar from 599 to 527 BCE. A contemporary of Gautama Buddha, Mahavira started his journey as a spiritual leader out of respect for his parents after they died. For the next forty years, he wandered around India as a naked monk, preaching peace. It is claimed that Mahavira was finally reborn as the twenty-fourth *jina* after starving to death in his previous life as a lion, because he refused to eat another living being (Tucker and Grim, 1994, pp. 141, 147). After Mahavira's death, two sects emerged among Jains. The Digambaras, or the "sky-clad," believe that clothing shows too much attachment to the material world, and thus choose to wear nothing: Svetambaras (the "white-clad"), on the other hand, hold the belief that true purity exists in the mind. Svetambaras are the biggest sect and consist of both men and women. The Digambara sect consists of monks only; they believe that a soul cannot be freed from a woman's body, which would defeat the purpose of striving for greater purity (Johnson, 2009, History & Geography section, para. 2). Despite this split, all Jains adhere to the five *anuvratas*, which are vows that one must take in the path to renunciation. They are *ahimsa* (nonviolence), *satya* (truth), *asteya* (not stealing), *aparigraha* (non-possession), and *brahmacarya* (sexual abstinence).

There are also eleven stages of spiritual progress, known as *pratimas* and eight basic restraints, or *mulagunas* (Tucker and Grim, 1994, p.142).

Another element essential to the practices of Jainism is karma. Jains see karma as a negative matter that, bit by bit, covers the soul and inhibits one's ability to reach *moksha*, the highest stage of purity in which one is finally released from the cycle of death and rebirth. As Tobias points out in his essay in *Worldviews and Ecology*, karma may include things like "material goods, passions, ill-will toward others, complexity, haste, narcissism, [and] ego in all its phases" (Tucker and Grim, 1994, p. 142). In order to avoid this, Jains have adopted a very strict way of living that strives to eliminate as much violence, ill-will, and selfishness as possible. This includes a strict vegetarian diet that prohibits the consumption of root vegetables, like onions, potatoes and garlic, as uprooting them kills the whole plant. Other rituals include meditating 48 minutes a day and giving offerings to the twenty four *jinas* (Flaccus, 2013). Flaccus (2013) commented that many of these rituals are so intricate that "some Jains carry a small booklet with illustrated instructions" to ensure that they execute the process properly (para. 13). While Jains attempt to uphold all of these vows, it is clear that the majority of the energy is given to complying with the most complex vow of all: *ahimsa*.

Ahimsa, or nonviolence, has proven to be a difficult concept to grasp as Jains understand it because it does not just refer to nonviolence in the physical or social sense, but also to a number of mental processes which tie into the elimination of karma, breaking out of *samsara*, and entering *moksha*. The basic structure of *ahimsa* is formed around the idea that every living thing has a soul that is stuck in a state of *samsara*, which refers to the cycle of death and rebirth through reincarnation. Each living being's goal is to break out of this cycle to enter *moksha*, or liberation. Jains do not consider this an enjoyable journey, and the process is often described as one of suffering and *himsa*, or violence (Evans, 2014, p. 204). In this view, *ahimsa* is interpreted as a process of withdrawal and renunciation in which Jains shelter themselves from the violence of the world outside in order to prevent the buildup of karma. James Laidlow, the author of *Riches and Renunciation: Religion, Economy, and Society*, referred to this traditional sense of *ahimsa* as the "ethic of quarantine." He has said that "one cannot stop the constant cycle of death and rebirth. All one can do is temporarily keep it at bay...These practices, which are central pillars of non-violence in Jainism, function neither to minimize deaths, nor, in the normal sense, to save life" (as cited in Evans, 1994, p. 207). In other words, the traditional Jain concept of nonviolence is not necessarily used to make the world a better place, but as a reminder that the outside world is a cruel place and one must refrain from engaging in it. Even sacred Jain texts, such as the *Acaranga Sutra*, written between the fifth and fourth century BCE and based on Mahavira's teachings, condone the practice of withdrawing from the world and not interfering in the inevitable cycle of *himsa* (Evans, 2014, p. 208). In recent times however, the meaning of *ahimsa* in the Jain religion has evolved to reveal a more cooperative sense of nonviolence that focuses on helping others.

There are still orthodox Jains who lead their lives according to the ancient meaning of *ahimsa*, but others, especially younger people in the Jain faith, have chosen to redefine this

principle for the changing times. These people argue that there is another side to *ahimsa* that is more positive and open, and that endows Jains with the duty to love, protect, and support others in order to conquer violence. This relatively new view on *ahimsa* is most evident in the environmental movements that have emerged in India, especially where animal cruelty is concerned. Generally, Jains renounce professions that would cause any harm to nature or animals, but they have also taken this a step further through philanthropy and activism. For example, the Jains have become very well known for their *panjorapors*, or animal welfare centers, located throughout India. Many Jains even go to markets and buy animals that otherwise would have been slaughtered, and care for them at these shelters.

Unfortunately, sometimes believers can pay with their lives for advocating *ahimsa* (Evans, 2014, p. 141). Evans (2014), who wrote an interesting piece on Jains and social nonviolence, tells the story of Akash and his family. His mother was a well-known animal rights activist who became the victim of a gruesome murder, perpetrated during a raid on animal smugglers. The killers wanted the murder of Akash's mother to serve as a warning to other animal activists who dared to do what she had done (pp. 202-3). Despite the threats, not many have been deterred, as this more open definition of *ahimsa* also involves stopping violence in its tracks, even at the cost of one's own life. Another part of *ahimsa* that finds itself changing is the role of Jain lay people and Jain monastics, and the passage of karma. Sadhvi Shilapiji, the first female leader of a monastic order in Jainism's history, created a movement known as Veerayatan, which aims to "empower people through *seva* (service), *shiksha* (education) and *sadhana* (inner development)" (Evans, 2014, p.211). In the traditional sense of social *ahimsa*, the monks and nuns serve by teaching lay people about Jainism, while the lay people go out into the community to spread this message through kind acts that aim to lessen violence. In contrast, Shilapiji has a different idea with Veerayatan: she tries to foster an engaging environment in which monks and nuns can teach and serve at the same time, and the desire to help others and solve worldly problems takes precedence over the personal goal of reaching *moksha*. Another of her radical thoughts is that instead of lay people taking on karma for monastics, the monastics should be helping the lay people by taking on their bad karma. Taking on bad karma for monastics includes lay people doing such things as giving food or clothing to them, turning on lights and other electronics, and even holding up cell phones to their ears. However, Shilapiji wants to aid others in reaching their highest level of spiritual development. She would like to say to people: "you are doing so many karmas, so please take all of your bad karmas from inside and give them to me, and you live with good life and good karmas, and bad karmas can be on me because I have a lot time [as a monastic] to remove the bad karma" (Evans, 2014, p. 213). It is essentially this concept of *ahimsa* that has become the driving inspiration for nonviolence movements. Leaders like Shilapiji however, have also used this eye-opening and transformational period of *ahimsa* to point out some negative and outdated points, like the lack of inclusion of non-Indians and gender inequality within the religion.

In his essay on Jainism and ecology, Michael Tobias comments that "The Jains always granted equal status to women. There was never a caste system among the Jains. How could

there be given the Jain conviction that all people can become enlightened?” (Tucker and Grim, 1994, p 141). Although Jains do not practice the caste system, it is not quite accurate to say that women are granted equal status. In fact, many identify the religion as having a bias towards males. In Digambara Jainism, for example, it is taught that in order to ascend higher, Jain nuns must be reborn as men first (Johnson, 2009, Rites, Celebrations and Services section, para. 5). Jain nuns agree that Jainism needs to evolve further to reflect the more prominent roles that women take on today, as well as in societies that are more liberal with gender roles, like the U.S, where Jainism is gaining popularity in certain communities. Sadhvi Siddhali Shree is one of these figures. Formerly known as Tammy Herbster, she is the first American-born Jain nun in history. She originally grew up Catholic and converted after witnessing terrible violence as a U.S army medic in Iraq. She credits the religion with helping her to overcome post-traumatic stress disorder (Flaccus, 2013, para. 21). Currently, she is the director of a spiritual retreat in Texas called Siddhyatan Tirth. As the author of many spiritually based books and CDs that she promotes through her YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook accounts, as well as her own website, she represents the true embodiment of the modern Jain nun, mixing technology with the teachings of Jainism (Shree, n.d). Shree has commented that if Jainism is going to spread, “they need to raise women’s status” (Flaccus, 2013, para. 22). Although more orthodox Jains in India do not approve of mixing modern conventions with the religion, in the United States Jains are often more liberal and believe that the most important part of Jainism is spreading the message of nonviolence to young people.

Jainism has grown immensely since Virchand Gandhi, apparently the first Jain to arrive in the United States, settled in the country in 1893 (Johnson, 2009, History and Geography section, para. 8). Today, a number of states have considerable Jain communities, and Jain temples have also been established throughout America. It is estimated that there are 150,000 Jains in the United States, most of whom immigrated in the 1960s (Flaccus, 2013). The spread of Jainism around the world is generally considered a positive thing. On the other hand, however, this also poses a challenge to those who fight to balance the demands of Jainism with the activities of the modern world. One worry in particular is how to teach the younger generations of Jains these religious practices, especially *ahimsa*, which gets harder to uphold as young people have a desire to live a less restrained life than their parents did in India.

In July of 2012, J.J Craig (2013), author of the article “Jain Wisdom in Cultivating Nonviolence in a New Era,” witnessed firsthand the process of getting young people to listen to their Jain elders. She attended the Young Jains of America Convention in Tampa, Florida that year, and listened to former Jain monk and spiritual leader Gurudev Shri Chitrabanuji talk to hundreds of Jain teenagers about perpetuating the practice of *ahimsa* in their own lives. Chitrabanuji took a more personal approach with his audience, emphasizing the small things that keep this principle of nonviolence alive in everyday life. Craig (2013) has written that “The Jain diet and practice of worship, he suggests, moves closer to the value of nonviolence when veganism replaces vegetarianism... If creative or new approaches to *ahimsa* are encouraged, then children will become personally involved in deepening and developing the practice of

nonviolence in their own lives” (para. 5). Some ways that young people can strengthen their value of *ahimsa* may include joining organizations that promote peace, giving up dairy products, and reducing the amount of violent movies, music, and videogames that they are exposed to (Craig, 2013, para. 7). The overarching lesson in this modern approach to teaching *ahimsa* encourages people to find their own way to practice it, even if it does not coincide exactly with those more traditional teachings. As Craig (2013) argues, it does not matter how one practices *ahimsa*, as what is important is “the value of *ahimsa* that lies behind their choice” (para. 8).

Vastupal Parikh, author of the book *Jainism and the New Spirituality*, backs this more secular view of *ahimsa* as well. In 1967, Parikh had an experience that changed his view on religion. That year, a fellow colleague who taught religious studies asked him to speak to her students about his religion. Parikh, who was originally from India but raised in a Presbyterian school, did not know much about the practice of Jainism as a child and knew even less as an adult. As a non-practicing Jain, the former professor had to study Jainism intensively before giving a successful presentation to students. Even after that, Parikh did not act on his study and continued to be a non-practicing—though self-identified—Jain. It actually was not until decades later, when he heard a mother reprimand her son at a local temple that his interest renewed in Jainism. The woman explained to her child that if he acted badly, he would go to hell. Of this experience Parikh explained, “The mother didn’t know how to satisfy her child’s curiosity in a way that wouldn’t turn him off religion” (Csillag, 2002, p. K14). This was the main inspiration for what Parikh calls the “new spirituality.” He defines it as what youth are interested in today. In another part of the interview, he commented, “I find youth a lot more dedicated to the environment, democracy, human rights, peace, and animal rights...And that is also the Jain philosophy. It ties into future happiness” (Csillag, 2002, p. K14).

Like Chitrabanuji, Parikh wants to take away the rigidity and limiting nature of the rules of Jainism. Instead, the focus should be on the principles of Jainism themselves, such as *ahimsa*, and teaching young people to use those principles for good in everyday life. It is no wonder that many devout Jains in the United States, but especially in India, would worry that this approach does not teach youth the deeper meaning of Jainism, as was expressed by the vice president of the Jain Center of Southern California, Hamendra Doshi. In an interview, he echoed the importance of those traditional rituals: “All of the rituals have a real meaning that we’re supposed to bear in mind when we’re doing it. When I’m doing the cleansing with the water for the idol, my thought process is I’m also cleansing my soul that way” (Flaccus, 2013, para. 15). This, in the view of many Jains, is what fosters the growth of *ahimsa* from the inside out. This conflict also brings to light a little-discussed principle of Jainism known as *anekantavada*, which encompasses the concept of having many viewpoints at the same time. Parikh said of this principle that, “This teaches that other viewpoints should be explored and respected...We don’t say other religions are wrong and that we’re right” (Csillag, 2002, P. K14). Perhaps this open-minded concept of Jainism now needs to apply to the religion itself as it makes way for a fusion of modern customs and ancient traditions.

So, how is the evolution of *ahimsa* mainly reflected in today's world? An overwhelming consensus points to environmental movements as being strongly influenced by the concept of Jainist nonviolence. It is also agreed upon that the environmental movement may not have grown to the extent that it has if it were not for the mix of cultures that second-generation Jains have promoted throughout the United States. Because of its tendency toward withdrawal and renunciation, Jainism in India did not promote the spread of environmentalism and ecology (Evans, 2012). But as the idea in Jainism of lending a hand to others in need to stop violence together, *ahimsa* is now shared with others in a way that encourages a united fight against harmful environmental behavior.

Evans (2012) cites another potential cause for this generational difference in Jains. Through his research on Jain communities in the United States, he pointed out that “when the first-generation immigrated, their concerns related to employment, education, and establishing themselves within a new country. Seen in this way, it may be understandable why environmental ethics were not primary priorities, as they are today among many second-generation Jains” (p. 81). Although no environmental protest group or movement in particular has been associated with Jainism, many scholars argue that the foundations of ecology and environmentalism were built first and foremost on *ahimsa*. The book *Worldviews and Ecology* echoes this sentiment. It contains various essays on the evolution of environmentalism and an in-depth look at several ecological viewpoints. Although Tucker and Grimm (1994) have mentioned that no single religious philosophy has the ideal solution to the environmental crisis, they do agree that Eastern religions, above all, have been responsible for molding environmental consciousness in Western culture. Michael Tobias, the author of the featured essay “Jainism and Ecology: Views of Nature, Nonviolence, and Vegetarianism,” explained that Jainism is the perfect mix of ecology and spirituality that preaches universal love and the sacrifice of self-interest for the more pressing issues in the world. In fact, it is so unique that this mix of ideas is often referred to as Jain ecology. Most importantly he says, the ecological message of Jainism is easily available to any individual who wishes to study or practice it (Tucker and Grim, 1994, p. 145-6).

It is clear that Jainism has come a long way, and it is still evolving. From a view of complete renunciation and solitude to a fervent and refreshing philosophy of active participation in the fight against all types of violence, Jainism has inspired many around the world, and its number of adherents is growing rapidly. Its main philosophy of *ahimsa*, or nonviolence, has experienced a radical change in meaning, as the younger generations of Jains are continually finding innovative ways to balance Jainism with Western culture and values. Although this new perspective on Jainism is gaining speed and has proven a successful way of keeping Jain philosophy and *ahimsa* alive, there are still various issues with the religion, such as gender inequality, that Jains are seeking to change. However, no matter the problems that Jainism faces in the future, it has shown its longevity all the way into the 21st century, and its message of nonviolence and love has heavily influenced modern environmental movements in the United States and beyond. It is this philosophy of loving one another, and treating all beings with respect, that has resonated with many in an increasingly violent and individualistic world. As

Jainism reminds us, in the end we are all connected and have a responsibility to look out for the Earth and every individual on it. As Dr. Padmanabh S. Jaini affirms, one Jain monk recited in a temple: “I forgive all beings, may all beings forgive me. I have friendship toward all, malice towards none” (as cited in Tucker and Grimm, 1994, p. 147).

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