

What is Jainism?



There are now more than 25,000 British Jains forming a small yet significant religious community in many parts of the country. Most Jains came to Britain as second migrants from East Africa in the late 1960s and 1970s having originally migrated to East Africa from the state of Gujarat in western India at the beginning of this century. The largest communities in Britain are centred on London, Leicester, Coventry and Manchester with major Jain Centres now established in Oxford Street in Leicester and at Potters Bar in north London. Here and in Jain homes and community centres, the ancient Jain values of non-violence and non-possession are treasured, valued and celebrated in worship and in family life.

What is Jainism?

Jainism is one of the most ancient surviving religious traditions of India and still has more than four million followers in the subcontinent. It takes its name from a series of 24 human teachers called "Jina" (literally "victors") who taught and demonstrated the path of peace and purity of living which Jains believe leads to spiritual liberation. The history of these teachers stretches far back into the prehistory of India and may

well have its roots in the Indus Valley Civilisation which flourished between 3000BCE and 1700BCE. There is clear historical evidence for the last two of these teachers Parsva (877-777BCE?) and Mahavira (599-527BCE) who reformed and restated the religion in the shape it has been handed down today.

Parsva and Mahavira rejected Hindu teachings of caste and sacrifice. Mahavira, the last of these teachers, was a contemporary of the Buddha and taught in the same area of north India (modern Bihar), where he lived an extraordinarily ascetic life which modern Jains take as a model for their own life-style. He taught that the path to purity and peace lies in complete detachment from the physical life by abstaining from all forms of violence, speaking untruths, stealing and seeking after possessions. Mahavira stressed the need for sexual purity. Mahatma Gandhi, himself much influenced by Jain teaching, described Mahavira's life as "the incarnation of non-violence".

Three Jewels and Five Great Vows

The Jains see life as a painful and unending cycle of birth, decay and rebirth. To break

free of this cycle Jains follow the path afforded by the Three Jewels of their religion : Right Faith; Right Knowledge; and Right Conduct. There can be no Right Conduct without Right Knowledge and no Right Knowledge without Right Faith. The religious community is divided into ascetics (monks and nuns living deeply spiritual lives) who teach the Three Jewels and demonstrate the spiritual path to the laity who whilst living in the world attempt to fulfil as much of Jain teaching as is possible. At the centre of the lives of the monks and nuns are five Great Vows:

AHIMSA - NON-VIOLENCE OR NON-INJURY

SATYA - SPEAKING THE TRUTH

ASTEYA - NOT TAKING ANYTHING NOT GIVEN

BRAHMACHARYA - CHASTITY

APARYGRAHA - NON-POSSESSION OR NON ATTACHMENT TO PEOPLE, PLACES AND THINGS

Non-Violence and Tolerance

Jains see non-violence as a universal and eternal law at the very heart of their tradition. Mahavira taught ahimsa as “the pure unchanging law . . . that all things living, all things breathing, all things whatever, should not be slain or treated with violence or insulted or injured or tortured or driven away”. Jains today teach that we should treat others as we would like them to treat us and since nobody likes pain we should not cause pain to anyone. Jains see violence being of three kinds: physical violence; spoken violence in harsh language; and mental violence. Ahimsa is not just seen as a negative value. Jains believe that it requires positive acts of goodness shown through caring, sharing, helping and loving

other people to fulfil the requirements of ahimsa. Acts of kindness, compassion and charity should be offered to everyone including our enemies so that one’s own soul may be purified and uplifted to peace and perfection. The result of this teaching is that all Jains are strict vegetarians and in India (and in Britain) are noted for their social concern and their commitment to service in hospitals, dispensaries for animals and in schools and colleges.

The Jains have a distinctive way of thinking about reality which breeds tolerance and mental non-violence. They teach that because we can never know the whole truth about anything, as we are looking at things from one particular point in time and space, we should preface our thinking with “Maybe” in any statement that we make. We should listen to all viewpoints sympathetically and never make harsh judgements. The spirit of this approach has guarded the Jains from extremism of all kinds and ensured that they have been able to live harmoniously alongside Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Jews, Parsees and Christians in India. One of the great Jain festivals each year, Paryusana (August/Sept.), involves all Jains in seeking forgiveness from friends and enemies for any injury or hurt they may have caused in the previous year.

Non Possession and Wealth

The absolute commitment of the Jains to non-violence has inevitably barred them from many occupations (e.g. the armed forces or farming) and as a result their skills and talents have been channelled into business activity at which they excel. Not unlike the Quakers in Britain, the Jains are trusted because they are known to speak the truth and to care for their workers and society at

large. The result has been that Jains are among the richest and most highly educated communities in India. Yet their tradition has always warned against the spiritual dangers associated with possessions and wealth. Throughout Indian history, Jains have been great supporters of the arts and charitable concerns. Some of the finest temples in India (at places like Ranakpur, Chittor and Mt Abu in Rajasthan and at Satrunjaya and Kathiawar in Gujarat) are Jain and many schools and hospitals have been built with Jain donations.

Jainism and God

Many westerners have inaccurately labelled Jainism as atheistic because the Jains do not believe in a creator god. The Jains see space and time as eternal so there can be no concept of a creator. But this does not mean that Jainism is atheistic. Jainism teaches

“Man thou art thine own friend

Why lookest thou for a friend beyond thyself?”

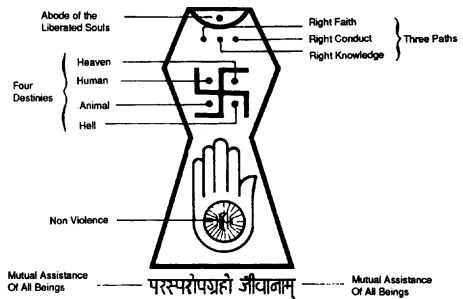
Jains see the purity of the perfect soul as divine. There is no God except the soul in its ideal integrity, they claim, for to conceive of God in any other way is to make the divine finite. Jain temples contain images of their great teachers but these are not worshipped as God rather they are adored because of their qualities - qualities that all Jains are seeking to acquire for themselves as they seek to purify their own souls.

Jains in Britain

British Jains are at a disadvantage from their relatives in India because they do not have regular access to the monks and nuns who so enrich Jain spirituality in India. Jain monks and nuns may only travel on foot and wear very limited clothing (in the

Digambara sect some monks go entirely naked) so it is impossible for them to travel to the UK to support the community here. Nevertheless the Jain community in Britain is strong and closely knit and makes great efforts to keep the tradition alive. A thriving “Young Jains” organisation in London is striving to help a new generation of British Jains to interpret their tradition to understand faithfully what it means to be a Jain in UK in the 1990s. Jains welcome Christians to their temples and functions. They have no intention of conversion but they are always keen to share their teaching on non-violence with everyone they meet. Many Christians have been inspired by Jain teachings. Their ahimsa doctrine which so influenced Mahatma Gandhi, also inspired Martin Luther King, much impressed Albert Schweitzer and has had considerable impact on peace movements across the world.

THE JAIN SYMBOL



In 1973 (2500 years after the nirvana of Mahavira) this symbol was adopted as the Jain symbol. It represents the principles of Jainism. The outline of the figure is that of the Jain description of the shape of the universe. The swastika symbolises the four types of births (as gods, humans, lower beings and hell creatures) which one has to take. The three dots are the three jewels. The half-moon is the sign of the place of the siddhas (liberated souls). The hand is raised for protection and blessing. The wording under the sign says 'Mutual help for the survival of all lives'.

Questions for discussion

1. Are the five great vows of Jainism entirely compatible with a Christian lifestyle?
2. The Pope in his brief visit to India in 1986 affirmed that: "The Catholic Church recognises the truths that are contained in the religious traditions of India" and that "God is present in the cultures of India". How do you understand this in the light of what you have just learned about Jainism?

This is part of the series of leaflets prepared for the Catholic community by the Committee for Other Faiths. Understanding and friendly relations with those who believe in God and live their lives with religious principles and purpose contribute to the harmony of society and the happiness of all. The series offers useful information to those who want to overcome the obstacle of ignorance and promote through dialogue, prayer and action the Catholic Church's teaching of respect and love for all peoples.

The Committee is grateful to the late Kenneth Oldfield for this contribution.

+ Charles Henderson
Chairman

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Further information and copies of these leaflets can also be obtained from:
The Multi-Faith Centre, Harborne Hall, Old Church Road, Harborne, Birmingham B17 0BE .

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