Theme 5 – The Role of Religious Institutions

Presentation: Jainism

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The Jain perspective has to be understood in the context of the larger Indic perspective: the Vedic, the Buddhist and also latter-day developments such as Sikhism. This is because, in certain respects, all these perspectives have much in common, while also representing distinct traditions. In addition to having been the cradle of these various indigenous traditions, India has hospitably received other traditions from outside. In the very first century AD, there was the arrival of Christians who were typically hospitably received and have exercised their freedom of religion throughout two millennia. Similarly, Jews and Zoroastrians were received into India, providing a significant trans-cultural bridge. Islam too found a receptive host in India. So have other sects and denominations. The Bahai faith is a recent example. That is because the true Indic tradition uniquely provided for affirmative acceptance without loss of distinctive identity and without hostile confrontation.

Jainism is itself a particularly ancient indigenous perspective amongst all the faith traditions found in India. The last of the twenty-four exponents of Jainism (known as T✚rthankaras) lived in the sixth and seventh century BC, while the twenty-third lived in the ninth century BC. Between the successive t✚rthankaras, there was generally a space of a few centuries. If we worked our way backwards in this way, we would be going back a very long time. Of the two ancient Indian traditions, namely, the Vedic, and the non-Vedic tradition of the ■r▣m✪n✪s (which is represented by Jainism and Buddhism), the Jains are monastic. It was an austere tradition. Its guiding principle could be summarised in the aphorism 'non-violence, ✪hims▣, is the supreme religion'. Modern Indians have taken their inspiration from different aspects of the various religious perspectives encountered in the Indian sub-continent, and it is a matter of profound pride for the Jains that Mahatma Gandhi found in their religious teachings his own principle of non-violence - the principle message, in fact, of his momentous life and work.

It is important to remember that Jainism does not subscribe to the doctrine of a created universe, and instead believes in a beginningless universe without a creator. Moreover, it believes that the universe will never end, and so subscribes to a doctrine of continuous cosmogenesis. It is, however, fair to say that in spite of this distinctive difference which constitutes a significant point of departure, the Jain concept of the soul, its transmigration and the doctrine of *karma* (the generation of a soul's future destiny through its past actions) all correlate with the other perspectives of ancient India.

Jainism believes in an ethics centred not so much on rights but much more on ethics centred on obligations. This is a fundamental principle in the Indic traditions in general, and Jainism for its part, tried to establish that in the ultimate analysis, it is the individual's fulfilment of his or her own responsibility that is indispensable for the maintenance of the Virtue (*dharma*) in society. 'Society' is defined very broadly in Jainism, for flowing from its principle of non-violence is the tenet of reverence for *all* life, not simply human life but extending to animal life at different levels and in theory even to the vegetable kingdom. Jainism thus insists that there must be no destruction, and in so far as this is inevitable in practice, there must at least be no destruction which has not first been responsibly considered. In this context there are two principles which are decisive for Jains. One is the principle of self-restraint (*samyama*). The other is the principle of responsibility represented by the law of *karma*, which lays down that one pays for what one does, or fails to do. Implicit in this is the ethical motivation that springs from Jain belief in transmigration. In that perspective, non-injury will be motivated by the consideration that you yourself, in due course, could be identical with the being that you now harm. This transmigrationist framework thus leads the Jains to a very concrete and pervasive feeling for the universality of life.

The Jain ethic of non-injury *✪hims▣)* extends beyond its obvious physical and metaphysical implications and is intertwined with its epistemology. A little reflection will show that there are many ways of behaving violently, and so it is that we do violence to the truth as such, if we deny its universality and

many facets. To insist on a partial aspect of the many-faceted truth is to injure it and to undermine it. One must strive, if one is non-violent, for a holistic approach to truth and this demonstrates the important link between non-violence (*ahimsa*), pluralism (*anekantavada*) and tolerant understanding (*sahishnuta*). These many millennia-old principles of Jainism are relevant to the present-day situation in the world at large.

Jain ideas have a direct relevance to the modern context for many issues of our contemporary environmental crisis for Jainism is rooted in a profoundly ecological world-view. Jainism is quintessentially a religion of ecology, of reverence for life, of sustainable lifestyle. Cosmic interdependence animates Jain ethics. The whole emphasis is on a lifestyle which is in consonance with ecology. As far back as the ninth century BC and indeed for more than a millennia before, there was an emphasis on reciprocity and interdependence, principles that complimented the more 'individualistic' perspective based on private *karma*. Individual and collective aspects of well-being are very intimately related in Jainism. The insistence on vegetarianism, for example, radically equates private purity - and thus individual spiritual well-being - with the well-being of others, human and non-human. This also explains the heavy Jain emphasis on charity, philanthropy and community service, so that all lay-Jains must render community service and offer charity, while the members of the Jain monastic orders must take more austere vows and practise total restraint, self-denial and non-acquisitiveness.

In discussing Jainism in the context of our symposium on revelation and the environment, I am obliged, however, to make a crucial qualification: Jainism does not believe in revelation as such. This non-revelatory position distinguishes it as a 'religion' in addition to its non-theistic perspective. Insight is not acquired or received 'from above' in Jainism but on the basis of the inner illumination and development of the personality. This does not mean Jainism is merely non-theistic and rationalistic. Jainism certainly believes in the efficacy of reason but it is quite prepared to travel beyond the reason of the senses and of pure logic and into the supramental realms of consciousness. The Jains believe that individuals - in principle all individuals - may develop themselves to a point where the boundaries of consciousness are massively extended. Such powerful souls - the T✚rthamkaras, literally 'ford-crossers', the Jain equivalent of prophets - have a clairvoyant faculty, an extra-sensory perception, which gives them the ability to see beyond time and space. There is thus an ultimate expansion of cognition in the conventional sense, but it is called 'perception' and not 'revelation'.

Despite this caveat and proviso, Jainism clearly is deeply relevant to the apocalyptic concern for the environment evoked in this symposium in relation to the Revelation of St John. The Jain religion judges environmental irresponsibility as rigorously as the Biblical revelation. According to the Jain tradition, instead of divine punishment or angry retribution, the crisis ought to be understood in the more impersonal and ethical terms of the inexorability of the law of *karma*, the collective violation of which will inevitably engender a calamitous collective penalty. But the religious conscience of the Jain is overwhelmingly one with that of other believers on this issue; it shares the message of the imperative to live in harmony with the natural worlds and not in incremental conquest of nature. Ecological responsibility is at the heart of Jain faith which gives us a rational and secular framework of reciprocity and interdependence as the basis for a sense of the sacred in the inner and outer space.

I was delighted to hear of the concept of love for animals exemplified in the Christian context by St Francis of Assisi. St Francis of Assisi exemplified the Jain principle of universal compassion and empathy. The Ecumenical Patriarch said that St Francis of Assisi sang the song of a united human family. The revelation of a united human family is the hallmark of the Indic tradition which proclaimed the world as one family and declared that the alienating frontiers which seek to divide humankind trivialise common humanity. In the universal recognition of the revelation of common concern and common cause of cosmic ecology, humanity will find a new sense of purpose and a new sense of fulfilment.

A Jain and a Hindu are able naturally and spontaneously to enter into the experience of different traditions. A Jain or a Hindu thus enters the cave in Patmos in reverence and finds illumination and enlightenment in the awesome apocalyptic revelation which emanated from that cave in the trance of a saint. To understand its message and to relate it to our time and age, we need to go beyond the Biblical words and unravel and decode the imagery and symbolism of 1900 years ago for the comprehension of our generation.