

## **A Roman Catholic's Reflections on Jain Wisdom**

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I am honored and pleased to be here today to meet with so welcoming a Jain community here in Maryland. This is certainly a key time in the Catholic Church, a time for retrospective and reflection. The Second Vatican Council, a global meeting of the bishops of the world intended to renew the Church, ended in 1965. Approved by all the bishops of the world and published at the command of the Pope in the last year of the Council (1965), the document known as *Nostra Aetate* ("In Our Times") called all Catholics to a new relationship with the Jewish people, and to a new understanding of our relationship with our Islamic Muslim brothers and sisters. It also offered a clear invitation as well to rethink our relationship with our brothers and sisters who are Hindu and Buddhist and, indeed, with all our religious neighbors globally. We Catholics were called to a new relationship with all the different faiths traditions of the world, instead of competition and one-upmanship. *Nostra Aetate* made it clear that the Catholic stance on the world's religions had changed, and would henceforth be one of respect and mutual regard, even and especially when each tradition's particular core beliefs and practices differ.

As we gather here today, 50 years later, we can see that the many dialogues under way — Jewish and Muslim and Catholic, the Hindu and Buddhist and Catholic; and yet these are still only a few, a beginning. In particular, we Catholics are now being called to a new relationship with the very ancient tradition of Jainism, to rethink on a very spiritual level and a very philosophical level of who we are and what we stand for, and how we can share spiritually and intellectually and in our work. These are uncharted waters, so many questions we are not sure how to answer.

To be honest, I know that I have so much to learn from a Jain tradition, because I'm only a beginner, a novice. I was told just a few minutes ago that it's a good thing in Jain tradition to be humble — to not claim to be best, though perhaps second best or third best is ok. So if I'm only "twenty-fifth best" in saying something about Jain tradition today, please be patient!

I have of course had some awareness of Jainism over the years. As a grad student I studied in Chennai, in Mylapore, the old part of the city. Riding my bicycle along a Kutchery Road — if you know Mylapore, you will know this street well — there's a small Jain temple there, not far from the center of town. I was there when it was being built. On the little side streets you have the jewelers' shops, the goldsmiths, and so on. I used to go in once in a while just for a moment of meditation. It was wonderful to see this temple come to life and thus make evident the very ancient Tamil Jain community in today's world.

Since I'm a professor, my memories of Jainism are also academic. Years ago, early in my career, I met the Professor Padmanabha Jaini in Berkeley. He was one of the great scholars of Jainism in the twentieth century. I still remember how kind he was and generous offering his help in the study of Jainism and related matters. While I haven't seen him for a long time, I remember him as a kind and generous beacon, shedding light on this ancient tradition. So too, like any student of Indian intellectual traditions, I have

long appreciated Motilal Banarsidass, the great Indian publisher and bookseller to which we all are indebted for so many books. The shops in Delhi and Kolkata and Chennai, made it possible to buy so many books that would not otherwise have been available. I remember to the courtesy and generosity of the Jain family. Once I had the honor of having dinner with Mr. Jain in his house in Delhi, and I fondly recall our conversation about books and matters related to religious wisdom. Surely there is more to be said on the Catholic and Jain traditions of learning, reading, preserving and publishing books, and about why we all care about matters of mind and heart.

Perhaps the most vivid early memory I had of the Jain religion is from 1982. I was going to Mysore for a Hindu wedding. We went out one day to visit Shravana Belagola, which I am sure is well known to you. I recall it as an impressive hilly region out in the desert area; on top of a tall hill is this magnificent statue of Bahubali. You go up the steps to it and suddenly you're there. You can stand in the shadow of those great feet. This magnificent figure dominates the area, spreading, you might say, a radiance of detachment, wisdom, and compassion; it has stayed in my memory very vividly.

My Catholic tradition is not entirely unfamiliar with this ideal of a great saint who has nothing but is everything. I think of the Church's very early era of the desert saints, when key men and women saints lived as celibate ascetics in the desert, fasted and did penances, and studied the word of God. They lived as hermits, sometimes for decades, having no possessions, only the presence of God. In their solitude, they wrote some of the early Christian classics. I think too of St. Francis of Assisi in the Middle Ages. One day his father challenged him and said, "Everything you have, even the clothes on your back, comes from me. You owe it to me to give up this foolish ascetic life, to return home and work in the family business." But Francis just stripped off his clothes and said, "Father, take back what is yours then, and I will trust in God." He was clothed only in the grace of God, nothing else — the most famous Digambara Catholic! Such accounts of ascetical renunciation and total dedication to the things of the Spirit resonate deeply with us Catholics. I think of Jesus himself. He did not cling to his heavenly majesty, and ended up without nowhere to lay his head, as he said. He died, without any possessions at all, stretched out on the cross. From that nothingness, came Resurrection.

So there are already points of resemblance between Catholic and Jain tradition, right back to St. Francis, back to Jesus himself. Indeed, as we Catholics consider some basic and beautiful ideals from Jain tradition, we become able to think of and remember over and over again what is most important to our faith. In an age when the world is fragmented, when we are worried about global warming environmental degradation, Jain respect for nature becomes all the more important. When we think of how poorly we treat each other as humans, how we mistreat animals and are oblivious to the smallest forms of life, then we appreciate all the more fully the great Jain ideal that we are all interconnected, all life forms from the highest of the deities to the most invisible microbe.

Even now I can visualize the monks who live entirely nonviolent lives, who move gently and deliberately, sweeping gently in front of them, wearing masks too, and caring for even the smallest living beings. It will be a long journey for us as Catholics to be able to live up to so radical a nonviolence. In a world that is so violent — think of the violence we read about every day — where better can we go than to the Jain tradition, if we are to see the deep grounding and roots of *ahimsa*? To learn from the Jain community, is to

remember how you have adhered to nonviolence for so very long a time, with remarkable perseverance, such a small community scattered through the world. Quietly and humbly, your living out this ideal of non-violence summons from us the best in the Catholic tradition. We've certainly had our violent eras in Catholic history. We know that. But we also see great figures. Jesus himself said, "Do not resist evil, turn the other cheek, have no enemies." St. Francis again comes to mind. He saw himself in unity with all nature, recognized every being as his brother and sister. He knew there could be no room for violence. Think of that famous and daring journey he took, when he went to North Africa and went to see the Sultan, to disown the Crusades and disown interreligious fighting. He could have been killed, but he brought a spirit of non-violence to his encounter with the Sultan, who respected him and listened to him with respect. In our time, we often think of the Rev. Martin Luther King, and we honor Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker Movement, who held to nonviolence as a virtue needed for the betterment of society, since violence — among individuals, by governments against their citizens, country against country — is never the answer to our problems. Today too, we who are Catholic and Jain will do well to find the ways to work together. As you, the Jain community, take the lead, we Catholics can better find the roots of non-violence in our tradition.

Certainly, we have our Catholic traditions of fasting. Our Catholic traditions of penance but I think we can go much further and we need the help of the Jain community to say when we stop victimizing the world and give ourselves over what kind of people when we can be. We need your help and that's why I think it's wonderful that we work here today. To begin, we Catholics might even learn to expand the vegetarian traditions of Christianity. This is a very simple and very correct idea, not eating animals anymore. To be sure, there are many meat eaters among Roman Catholics! I know this growing up Irish Catholic in New York. But for some forty years now I've been vegetarian myself. What began for me as a kind of social concern about the poor, when I was living in Nepal in the 1970s, has also grown into a sense of the interconnectedness of all life. Who are we, the more powerful and larger life forms, to take advantage of and prey on the smaller forms when we do not have to?

Indeed, I think even of the practice of Sallekhana, an ancient Jain ideal. As I understand it, late in life a saintly person sees that it is time to become one with nature, letting go of the ego of this body, and to respect even the simplest forms of life, no longer even eating vegetables, giving oneself entirely to the self. Then one is no longer an eater, and the world no longer the eaten. While this is a lofty ideal that I can imagine how that would go for me. Nonetheless, let us take Sallekhana as a holy reminder in today's world that when there are so many victimizers, so many killers, and so many who take advantage of other people, there are still these occasional great saints who refuse to victimize or consume, and set for us radical examples of self-giving.

I'm also interested in *anekantavada*, which I see as marking a kind of intellectual non-violence. You know the seven perspectives better than I: *syād-asti*, *syān-nāsti*, *syād-asti-nāsti*, *syād-asti-avaktavya*, *syān-nāsti-avaktavya*, *syād-asti-nāsti-avaktavya*, *syād-avaktavya*. These are seven different ways of recognizing that what things are and how they are to expressed, can never be reducible to one expression. To affirm *anekantavada* is not simply to be tolerant, and certainly not to be intellectually lazy. It is a disciplined ability to see things from many angles, and to be aware too of the limits of what we can

ever say about reality: what we say, can always be said another way. It is a discipline and a spiritual path, to be able to see from all different sides. These are opportunities for disciplining and educating our minds. And it is this that really opens up the world of intellectual non-violence. In 1965, Vatican II was calling the Catholic Church to a similar intellectual and spiritual nonviolence; no longer competition, no longer dichotomies that insist that if I am right, you must be wrong. If we Catholics can learn from *anekantavada* and nurture this ability to see reality from many sides, then we will be better off as human beings, as we work together.

Because words are so limited, we of course cannot just talk about the deeper realities. If I had a more time, I would want us to meditate for a while, because I realize we don't get anywhere by just giving speeches. Because time is limited, I can only read to you several of the verses attributed to lord Mahavir in his instruction of his disciple Gautam:

As the fallow leaf of the tree falls to the ground when its days are gone, even so the lives of men come to a close. Gautam, be careful all the while!

When your body grows old, and your hair turns white, all your powers decrease. Gautam, be careful all the while!

Cast aside all your attachments as the leaves of a lotus fall into the autumnal water, exempt from every attachment. Gautam, be careful all the while!

Going the same way as perfected saints, you will reach the world of perfection, Gautam, where there is safety and perfect happiness. Gautam, be careful all the while.

All these beautiful meditations echo what in Catholic tradition is the tradition of *memento mori*. You see the monks in the monastery sometimes having a skull on their study bench, to remind them that all the things we have the things and we hold on to at the moment, all will be gone in the near future. Our mouths will be silenced, our books gone, our actions finished. Things will crumble will be nothing. On Ash Wednesday, the beginning of our penitential season, we hear the priest say, "Remember, you are dust, and unto dust you shall return." We Catholics can then share the wisdom of Mahavir, that life is a precious but short opportunity, and that we should not be afraid of transitoriness of life and approach of death. Death becomes a friend not an enemy. This is all the more reason that we can work together, to remind the world how things truly are, and how limited the promises of material reality turn out to be.

Because our time is short, I close by going to just one more example, another of those early instances where I learned something of Jain tradition. I was reading in Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, the famous passage where he speaks of Shri Rajchandrabhai, the Jain merchant and spiritual master. Gandhi admired him first of all for his detachment:

Raychandbhai's commercial transactions covered hundreds of thousands. He was a connoisseur of pearls and diamonds. No knotty business problem was too difficult for him. But all these things were not the center around which his life revolved. That center was the passion to see God face to face. Amongst the things on his business table there were invariably to be found some religious book and

his diary. The moment he finished his business he opened the religious book or the diary. Much of his published writings is a reproduction from this diary. The man who immediately on finishing his talk about weighty business transactions, began to write about the hidden things of the spirit, could evidently not be a businessman at all, but a real seeker after Truth. And I saw him thus absorbed in godly pursuits in the midst of business, not once or twice, but very often. I never saw him lose his state of equipoise. There was no business or other selfish tie that bound him to me, and yet I enjoyed the closest association with him.

Cannot we all learn from this ideal of detachment in the midst of action, the cultivation of a spiritual attitude, no matter what else we are doing? Gandhi then reflects on the larger meaning of his friend and guide:

I have since met many a religious leader or teacher. I have tried to meet the heads of various faiths, and I must say that no one else has ever made on me the impression that Raychandbhai did. His words went straight home to me. His intellect compelled as great a regard from me as his moral earnestness, and deep down in me was the conviction that he would never willingly lead me astray, and would always confide to me his innermost thoughts. In my moments of spiritual crisis, therefore, he was my refuge.

Had we more time, I would read with you some passages from Rajchandrabhai's *Atmasiddhi*. I have only read the English translation of it, and not had time to go back to the simpler and more elegant Gujarati. Here are just two verses:

One aim alone is a passion, to find a guru who is sterling.  
Once, possessed with this yearning, the seeker eschews other cravings.  
When all passions are surmounted, and moksha is the only aspiration,  
Where compassion for all creatures is felt, there God takes up his residence.

Still more simply, we have the prayer that Gandhi says was always on Rajchandrabhai's lips: "I shall think myself blessed only when I see Him in every one of my daily acts; verily he is the thread which supports Muktanand's life."

Both the Jain and Catholic traditions have existed for a long time, and come through hard times and good times. We have survived and we flourish, blessed in so many ways. Now it is time for us to share our blessings more intentionally with one another, marking the next millennium with a true Jain-Catholic companionship on the pilgrimage of life.

May we all be safe, in harmony, and at peace.

Jai Jinendra.