

# JAINISM AND THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH: NON-VIOLENCE AND PLURALITY ACROSS TIME AND SPACE

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## Abstract

For the past two more years, the Covid-19 Pandemic has reshaped the world's frame, during which the extremities trend of thought swept across the continents, made populism and ultra-nationalism proliferate. However, it left tremendous aspects of Anthropocene for the whole world to reflect on, yet the (post) Pandemic era is indeed a transitional period for the globe. Jainism, an old Śramanic tradition rooted in India, is a stronghold of non-violence and plurality among the world's religious traditions. The Jain teachings of '*ahimsā*' and '*anekāntavāda*' are natural solutions for the dead knot of the whole world at the moment; the Jain viewpoints rationally and dialectically opened a door for humankind across time and space. In comparison, in the sphere of the world religions, the Bahá'í Faith is comparably a new thing. However, the Bahá'í and Jain teachings share some similarities. The Bahá'ís firmly believe that "The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens"; its vision is to create a relatively united world where violence is minimized, with the discrimination and unequal resource distribution eliminated from human society. Moreover, the Bahá'í faith conveys the essential information of "there is only one religion, the religion of God," wherein the plurality can be observed. This paper intends to conduct a comparative study of Jainism and Bahá'í Faith, finding their relevant similarities in non-violence and plurality across time and space.

## Introduction

The long-standing sacred tradition of Jainism, which has its roots in India, is indeed an enduring illustration of nonviolence and religious diversity among some of the world's religions. The Jain *ahimsā* and *anekāntavāda* are natural solutions to the world's current situation; the Jain perspective opens a rational and dialectical door for humanity across time and space. The Bahá'í Faith is relatively new. There are, however, some parallels between Bahá'í and Jainism. Since the Bahá'í Faith holds that the earth is but one nation, and humanity is its citizen, it seeks to build a relatively peaceful world, lessen violence, end discrimination, and distribute resources fairly in all human societies. The Bahá'í Faith teaches that there is only one religion, and that is the religion of God, demonstrating pluralism.

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## I

**Jain Concepts of Ahimsā and Anekāntavāda**

Jainism is a religion that places a strong emphasis on *ahimsā* (non-violence) in its doctrine, theory, and religious practice. The *ahimsā* principle underpins Jain philosophy as well as the entire ethical code of conduct. The Jain code of conduct for ascetics and followers aims to translate the tenets of *ahimsā* into practical conduct to the greatest extent possible (Sangave 23-68). *Ahimsā* refers to more than physical violence in Jainism; it also refers to a lack of empathy and compassion for others and other species. Jain philosophy is an initiation philosophy that emphasizes the principle of “non-violence” (Singhvi 1-3). Meanwhile, *anekāntavāda* literally means “multiplicity of viewpoints”. When we see an object, we can only understand its finite attributes and disregard other attributes that are equally deserving of attention. According to Jainism, every item possesses an endless number of characteristics. On the basis of this premise, the *anekāntavāda* doctrine gives necessary skills to respectfully debate conflicting viewpoints while maintaining a strong sense of self (Barbato 2-5).

The term ‘nonviolence’ is written as ‘*ahimsā*’ in various Indian languages, which means “no harm,” as opposed to ‘*himsā* (violence),’ which means ‘harm’. Whenever non-violent thoughts are mentioned, eminent historical figures, for instance, Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi, who have had significant influences, are often the focus of discussion. In reality, they never showed up the sentiment of scare or merged into the stream of violence when facing threats and skillfully used peaceful means to fight against injustice (Long 284-287). They finally reached a victory in the liberation struggle; their achievements were passed on as worldwide stories.

Jain traditions remain strong in this era of rapid change; the philosophy taught by Jainism is precious in a contemporary society where moral decay and narrow-mindedness are increasingly prevalent. In 2022, when the Covid-19 pandemic has not yet fully turned around, human beings must have a new perception of life and the world after more than two years of reflection. The decline of culture, human exchanges, and the weaponization of many issues for the past two years up until today, the already existing crisis has also led to unprecedented substantive thinking worldwide.

*Ahimsā* is the core teaching of Jainism; the adherence of Jainism to the idea of ‘non-violence’ and the untiring pursuit of this idea by Jain followers is an indication of its importance in Jain philosophy and its appeal among Jain followers. Hinduism and Buddhism, both of which are religions of Indian origin, constantly refer in their teachings to the importance of ‘non-violence’ in the process of practice and liberation from suffering. Furthermore,

Buddhism also derived from the 'Śramaṇic ideology', known for its 'non-violence' due to its 'Orientalist' imagination of Westerners and the popularization of benchmark figures like the Dalai Lama. The world is quite familiar with this Buddhist teaching of 'non-violence' (Carrithers 254-260). However, it is undeniable that the idea of non-violence in Jainism appears to be stricter and more in-depth than similar concepts in other Indian religious traditions, including Hinduism and Buddhism. The definition of non-violence permeates thought, speech, and behavior and involves the relationship between the behavior generator and other matters. Other issues include humans, animals, and various other life forms. Any form of violence by the creator of the act concerning his own body and mind is again unacceptable. The doctrine of *ahimsā* stands the supreme importance in Jain teachings. Throughout history, despite Jainism's divisions, downturns, and difficulties, the label of non-violence as an identity identified with Jainism and Jain followers has not changed. (Von Glasenapp 1-5)

In the era of Mahāvīra, he was the one who laid the foundational teachings of Jainism regarded as *ahimsā* (non-Violence) and *anekāntavāda* (pluralism) that are two equally prioritized core doctrines, as a matter of fact, the two complement with each other. *Ahimsā* guides Jains towards liberation from karmic bondage. In a word, the concept of *anekāntavāda* is born out of the idea of *ahimsā*. The strict observance of *ahimsā* makes the formation and practice of *anekāntavāda* possible. The idea of 'respect the others' viewpoint' initially derived from the 'respect the living rights.' (Shah 219-222)

The profound concept of non-violence deeply rooted in Indian philosophy and culture, particularly in Jainism and its committed practice in Jain community were instrumental in spreading non-violence throughout India. Later it spread throughout the world and played an essential role in forming non-violent cultural trends worldwide. It can be stated that without internalization of practice of non-violence in human society, it would be impractical to talk about pluralism no matter how high.

In a word, the concept of *anekāntavāda* is indeed the pragmatic extension of *ahimsā* itself. There was a variety of doctrines and ideas in ancient India's intellectual and cultural environment. In such an environment of habitual contention, naturally that one cannot learn from all without a non-radical and non-absolutist attitude, it is difficult to enrich its philosophical connotation. As an important part of the Śramaṇa movement, the philosophy and teachings of Jainism, and its original critical thinking produced a pluralistic tendency. The progressive "pluralism" tendency is undoubtedly the pillar of the Jain religious thoughts. Compared with the ancient society where ideas collided and cultures blended, today's modern society has increased globalization in terms of the homogeneity of lifestyles. In contrast, the diversity of lifestyles in the past decreases day by day. Although the amount of information

and knowledge has exploded in this generation, people's minds tend to be monotonous and become more intolerant of pluralistic views. (Tobias 5-8)

For this reason, Jainism, which does not believe in an omnipotent "Supreme God" or the doctrine of creation, does not oppose other attitudes and philosophies of life that are different from its own while adhering to its unique ideology and way of life under a strict doctrine. Just as when the author traveled and lived in India, the market chose to live in grounded neighborhoods, whether in South India or North India, where Jains are always more at peace with neighbors of other religious backgrounds in multi-faith communities. While out for a visit at the Kanheri Caves in a nearby suburb of Mumbai in the 2019 summer, the author met a group of young people who also came to the area, including Jains, Hindus, and Muslims, and who maintained a fraternal relationship with each other. The reason for this is India's multicultural and religious environment and the more open-mindedness of young people, and Jains' deep understanding of pluralism allows them to be more comfortable with different communities without weakening or losing their own identity and religious practices (Babb xi-xvii). In today's world, when religious and social conflict is on the rise, the idea of *anekāntavāda* in Jainism may serve as a reference and reference (Aukland).

With the movement of people across borders, immigrants from India have become one of the most widespread and numerous immigrants worldwide. At the same time, Jains, who were not previously keen to travel across the seas to foreign lands, are moving out of India to the Western world, including Britain and the United States, and other regions of the world in the process of global internationalization and world integration. The Jains who migrated from India have taken the initiative to integrate into their societies in the destination countries, bringing the knowledge and ethics of Jainism to their communities, making teachings such as *ahimsā* and *anekāntavāda* seem less mysterious and more grounded. The teachings of *ahimsā* and *anekāntavāda* are not impenetrable but are grounded in the realities of everyday life.

In a global environment full of disharmony, the relationship between people and nature has gone very wrong. The rise of ultra-nationalism, populism and terrorism are also highly related to the singularization of concepts. The *ahimsā* and *anekāntavāda* taught by the Jain faith are particularly valuable in today's world.

## II

### **The Bahá'í Teachings of "Oneness"**

The Bahá'í faith is a comparably young religion compared with the rest of the major ones worldwide precisely because of its short history of emergence, it leaves it with a lot less historical baggage and potential schism that may exist. The Bahá'í Faith emerged in the

mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in Iran when the entire world was changing dramatically, when the rise of the first industrial revolution brought about tremendous changes in world society, and when the modernization of humanity entered an unprecedented phase.

The life of Bab and Baha'u'llah, the saints and early leaders of the Bahá'í Faith, despite their trials and tribulations, did not affect the desire and pursuit of the beautiful ideas of hope, unity, and oneness in the Bahá'í Faith. Their resilience, peace of mind, and unwavering faith in the future have deeply inspired generations of Bahá'ís to strive toward its beautiful religious vision. The Bahá'í Faith, which is now one of the world's religions, is also in step with the changing world on the ground, and its image in the eyes of the world is one of keeping up with the times and modernity (Kourosch and Hosoda, 445-447).

The Bahá'í community, under the leadership of its global administrative center, the Universal House of Justice, believes in the universalist concept that "the earth is one nation, and all peoples are one people"; and that all human beings, regardless of ethnicity, religion, color, or gender, belong to the same race. Promoting the development of international governance institutions to meet the current challenges facing humanity is the priority for the world. The Bahá'í Faith has proposed the concept of 'religious homogeneity', believing that the founders and holy philosophers of the various religions were divinely inspired at different points in history to lead humanity in the right direction (Keene 223-230).

Among the narratives of the Bahá'í Faith, eight other religious figures such as Jesus, Buddha, and Kṛṣṇa are considered to be the ten prophets who appeared in human history, along with the Bab and Baha'u'llah. In contrast, Baha'u'llah is deemed the last prophet of this period (Cole 447-460). In addition, the Bahá'í Faith is detailed in its description of the equal rights of men and women, the harmony of religion and science, the universalization of education on a global scale, and the vision of a new order of world peace. He encourages his followers to strive tirelessly to realize these noble ideals (Buck 3-8).

It is clear that the Bahá'í Faith's understanding of the concepts of 'unity', 'oneness', and cosmopolitanism is not only present in its texts and teachings but is also constantly implemented in the daily and long-term planning of its communities and believers. The modernity of the Bahá'í Faith is linked to the context in which it emerged and the relatively young age at which it was founded. Its attitude toward the understanding and acceptance of different religions, its view and knowledge of all humanity as a whole, and its more avant-garde views on gender equality and universal education all demonstrate the pluralistic view of the Bahá'í Faith (Sharma 27-28). It is clear that Bahá'í, as a new religion born in modern times, presents a three-dimensional 'concept of pluralism' that coincides with the *anekāntavāda* taught by the ancient Jain religion.

In terms of the geographic space from which the religion emerged, Jainism emerged in the northern part of the Indian subcontinent in a form of Śramaṇic movement. In contrast, the Bahá'í Faith, born on the Iranian plateau, held on the Iranian table, is inextricably linked to Shi'ite Islam and even Sufism. Although there are many differences between the two in terms of time and space, it is undeniable that the similarity of the concepts they preach has indeed crossed time and space, taking root and developing in human society. The Bahá'í Faith's idea of modernity, universality, unity, and its wide acceptance and understanding reveal its attributes of 'pluralism' and delve into the concept and practice of 'non-violence' within its system.

In promotional materials and documentaries published and presented by relevant Bahá'í-related institutions such as the Universal House of Justice and National Bahá'í spiritual communities, the Bahá'í community, through multimedia campaigns, aims to unleash the religious concept of 'Unity in Diversity' in a 'still diverse but not particularly united' contemporary social reality. In the current social fact, which is 'still pluralistic but not particularly united', this is a rare occurrence. In these materials, it is clear that in countries with high levels of global immigration in Europe and North America, Bahá'ís of all colors and multicultural backgrounds appear in study circles, prayer meetings, and multi-faith forums as calm and confident, and joyful. Bahá'ís are from disadvantaged and marginalized communities in third-world countries, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In third-world countries such as Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the collective consultation and empowerment of women and children advocated by the Bahá'í Faith are also on display. The presence of Bahá'ís from disadvantaged and marginalized communities in local communities makes the social responsibility and community involvement of the Bahá'í Faith even more compelling (Bogzaran).

In the actual Bahá'í concept of 'Oneness', the unity of knowledge and action becomes a daily, everyday existence. The vitality of the Bahá'í Faith lies in the constant drawing on the strengths of all schools of thought and in self-reflection, which is necessary and justified not only for Bahá'í Faith but perhaps for each individual or society as a whole (Danesh). The search for unity in the Bahá'í context is similar to the core ideas of Jainism, like *ahimsā* and *anekāntavāda*. Both of them pursue the ideal of the human world across time and space. Initial exposure and subsequent conscious adoption and deepening of Bahá'í identities and worldviews for Bahá'í converts involves a network of personal relationships with Bahá'ís and the adoption of the role of religious seeker to define one's own faith-seeking behavior. However, knowledge of Bahá'í global ideology and Bahá'í texts, as well as participation in community activities, help to deepen the above (McMullen 15-16). This openness corresponds with the Jain faith's *anekāntavāda*, which evaluates its own social experience and trajectory of conduct in the world from a dualistic and critical standpoint. Violence and

nonviolence are both main concerns in the Jain religion and the Bahá'í Faith. The Bahá'í holy books consider world violence, which includes physical, psychological, and structural violence against all people, to be the result of human civilization's immaturity. Since its inception in the mid-nineteenth century, the Bahá'í Faith has been an outspoken supporter of nonviolence and has devised strategies to combat the global spread of violent ideas and behaviors (Stockman 1-2).

### III

#### **Non-Violence and Plurality across Time and Space**

The International Non-violence Day is celebrated every year on October 2, the birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, the leader of India's independence movement and a staunch practitioner of non-violent ideology. As a pioneer of the Indian independence movement, Gandhi pursued India's liberation from British colonial rule. Being a benchmark figure in modern non-violence thinking, he led India's dynamic movement, advocating non-violent struggle, and ultimately winning. The ways and means to celebrate this day should be through the universal meaning of the principles of non-violence, peace and tolerance, and the desire to establish such a culture.

According to the United Nations model, as the most important international organization globally, its membership covers most of its sovereign states. The establishment of this day requires the approval of the majority of member states following the custom of the United Nations General Assembly, which shows that non-violence is still a matter of great concern for all countries worldwide. Even though the real scenarios around the world may be different, recognizing the noble concept of non-violence by the delegates on the stage always has a positive and demonstration effect. When it comes to the more grounded reality away from elite spaces, in the daily lives of hundreds of millions of people, there is always a variety of violence in the corners of society. Therefore, some more effort is required on both individual and social levels to establish such a culture.

If we look at the world's religions, we can see that all faiths address 'peace and non-violence', and some religions also consider this a core doctrine. The Dharmic traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism all prioritize *ahimsā* (non-violence). As described in the Mahābhārata, India's grand epic, non-violence is the highest moral virtue<sup>2</sup>. In Buddhism, non-killing is the first of the five precepts (Pancasila);<sup>3</sup> committing such sin means it will lead to reincarnation in a worse form. Additionally, Jainism has taken the idea of non-violence forward, with

<sup>2</sup> “*ahimsā paramo dharmah*” (Mahābhārata, Anuśāsana Parva 117.37)

<sup>3</sup> “*pāṇātipāta veramaṇisikkhāpadam samādiyāmi*” (Khuddakapāṭha 1.2)

*ahimsā* being the first of the minor vows (*aṇuvrata*) for Jain laypersons and the great vows (*mahāvratā*) for Jain monks and nuns.

Additionally, the Christian concept of "Agape (divine unconditional love)" and the Islamic counterpart of "Mohabbat (loving-kindness)" are more or less share similar values of non-violence. Despite the religious differences, human nature is interconnected; this is why the idea of non-violence exists beyond time and space and why the major religions, as carriers of cultures around the world, carry the vision of unity in diversity among different civilizations. However, there have been many wars and conflicts triggered by religion in human history. For instance, the struggles between Christians and Muslims over Jerusalem in the Medieval days. Or the confrontations by Hindus and Muslims in the modern Indian subcontinent. It is enough to show that the more idealistic doctrines of religion will highlight the weaknesses of human nature when applied to different people (Omar and Duffey, 13-15).

The history which took place in the human past cannot be changed, but the future of humankind is auspicious. The history of humanity is based on the clash of civilizations that has been recorded in various ways, such as literature and art, that human society has been able to reflect on itself continuously. The expected progress of humanity lies not only in the rapid advancement of technology and modern infrastructures but also in the continuous improvement of spirituality. The Jain and Bahá'í faiths have elaborate discussions on the idea of non-violence, both of which illustrate the practical implications of non-violent speech and behavior for oneself and for external objects from the perspective of human nature, which is of great significance to humanity in the midst of the pandemic crisis (Gopin 31-32).

However, the conception of pluralism varies more among religions. The Abrahamic religions, which originated in the Levant, strongly believe in the One True God. The Bahá'í Faiths, a new religion inextricably linked to the Abrahamic convictions, are not far from the former in this respect. Still, they have a more open and tolerant attitude toward other religions in the world's traditions. Their openness and modernity allow them to view religious homogeneity, the unity of humanity, gender equality, and universal education with the same open and tolerant perspective. Mikhail Sergeev has argued that the theory of religious cycles within the Bahá'í Faith, as well as the intersection of enlightenment elements with all previous religions and the newer Bahá'í Faiths, takes the reader on a human journey through the ages in search of truth and understanding based on faith and mission (Etemad 426). The Bahá'í theory of the religious cycle is distinctive and insightful, and it recognizes humanity's commonalities. This concept, of course, includes openness and modernity.

In another line of spiritual development, the Dharmic tradition of religions, unlike Hinduism, which believe in Vedic enlightenment and divine grace, Jainism, an unorthodox sect of Indian



religion and philosophy, focuses its practice more on self-effort than on divine grace. This self-effort in life and practice is rooted in a profound understanding of non-violence and pluralism. It is a sincere and strategic approach to religion that considers the need to be strict with oneself and lenient with others while also looking at people, events, and values from a more pluralistic perspective (Maradia vii).

## Conclusion

Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic had brought devastation to the globe on a massive scale. Not only in the way of a global pandemic of respiratory infectious disease but also a test of all humanity in the last two years. While suffering, we can think further about whether society as a community should work tirelessly for a better future or continue to fall into the abyss. The road is right in front, but the key lies in what kind of adjustment and choice people will make as a stakeholder. The Jain principles of *ahimsā* and *anekāntavāda* echo with the Bahá'í solution of 'oneness'. They both speak in the same voice, share the same path and transcend time and space to offer a prescription for solving the current crisis of all human beings. The most effective remedy is to promote the ideas of non-violence and pluralism, to facilitate others when the situation allows, to improve the ability to empathize with others, and at the same time to respect nature and maintain the proper distance and bottom line.

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