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JAINISM: AN INDEPENDENT RELIGION

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Abstract

Religion may be classified as living or dead. Those mentioned thus far are living religions. Many highly significant religions have come upon the world scene only to pass out of existence as the culture in which they survived lost their vitality and disappeared. Religions may be considered in terms of their aspiration to universality. There are only three that openly proclaim universal scope: Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. Other religions, including three originating in India, seem to be hereditary or national system.

Introduction

Religion is a universal fact of human experience. At no time or place in human history has it been absent. Its forms many vary as external and internal forces play upon it. The forms, moreover, are manifested in all societies in special if not unique expressions. But man, both individually and collectively, apparently can no more escape being religious than he can deny the existence of external world or eliminate his breathing. Man may be defined as the religious animal.

Hinduism Gave Birth to three religions: Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism. Jainism was its first offspring, and like any child it appears in a certain light to be somewhat like its mother. Yet, as will be seen, there are signs that this faith is indeed uniquely itself.

Jainism is an example of a heresy becoming an independent religion. Mahavira (599-527 B.C.), its nominal founder, was essentially a reformer. He did not reject the Hinduism into which he had been born, nor was he rejected by Hinduism. His efforts were primarily directed toward the establishment within Hinduism of certain teachings which he and his small body of sympathetic contemporaries thought to be essential Hinduism. He did oppose certain tendencies in Hinduism, and spoke so clearly for a select number

of others that in time the resulting corpus of teaching Cultic practice, and congregational organization became an independent religion.

Jainism may be paired with Buddhism, discussed in the next chapter, as a revolt against particular features of Hinduism. Hinduism in India and elsewhere is orthodoxy; Jainism and Buddhism are heterodoxy. Jainism and Buddhism originated as separate religions only in relation to Hinduism. They did not create absolutely new expressions of man's relations to nature, his fellow man, and to the divine. They are part and parcel of a particular cultural stream. Yet, can be understood only on their own terms.

Key Words

Jainism, Mahavira, Scriptures, Doctrine of Karma, Society.

Founder

Jainism is the oldest personally founded religion in India. Unlike Hinduism it looks to a person as its initial for and leader. Although the founder of a religion combines a number of charismatic elements in his leadership, he may be differentiated from other kinds of religious leaders, such as the prophet, the reformer, the saint, and the priest. Others may be impressed with a sense of their calling but the founder is characterized by an even more intense and grandiloquent conception of his mission, to which his own response is considered to be in every way mandatory and divine. Mahavira, the founder of Jainism, meets all the requirements of the founder of a religion.

Prior to these events, Mahavira had come upon a body of monks who followed the rule of Parshva. They lived in a district outside of the town and were readily accessible to him. Upon the death of parents and the ascent to power of his brother, Mahavira asked latter's consent to his own abandonment of the princely life. His brother agreed, on condition that Mahavira should remain in the palace for one more year, during which he could give up his possessions systematically and prepare himself for the monastic existence.

When the time came he retired from the world, joining the monks outside the town in a cell. By the terms of the initiation ceremony he discarded all his possessions except one white robe. According to tradition, he plucked out the hair of his head in five handfuls. He also took pledge to neglect his body and suffer all calamities that might befall him. Thirteen months later he discarded his robe and thenceforth went about completely naked in his wanderings through the villages of India. If possible, He never remain more than one night in a village or for more than five nights in a town. He was firm in his rejection of any attachment to people or places that might bind him sensual satisfactions. Gradually gave up being a solitary ascetic assuming the leadership of many monks. His teachings apparently were relatively simple and severe. He declared that no one can save his own soul without among other requirement, practicing the strictest

asterism. He also taught that this asceticism requires the practice of harmlessness (Ahimsa) toward any and all living forms. Although neither of these teaching originated with Mahavira, nor indeed with his predecessor, Parshva it was the genius of Mahavira to combine them with clarity and force, and in addition to exemplify them in his daily life.

He took great pains not to injure any living being. When walking he carried a soft broom for sweeping the path, since it might have on it tiny living things. He examined his bed on retiring to make sure that he would not crush anything that lived. He did not eat raw food, but rather food prepared originally for someone else and left over. Before drinking water he would strain it with a cloth. For twelve years he sought deliverance (moksha), wandering about in India and giving himself only to the austerities of severe self-denial. At last, during the thirteenth year, outside the town of Grimbhikagrama, on the northern bank of the River Rigupalika in the field of the householder Samaga, "facing" in a northeasterly direction from an old temple not far from a sal tree, and squatting with knees high and head low in the attitude of deep meditation, he reached nirvana. He had achieved the state of the Jina, the Victor, and thus it became known to his followers that victory over the constraints of the flesh was truly possible.

Upon reaching the state of nirvana, Mahavira began most actively to promulgate his faith. He felt he possessed a mission to inform everyone of the possibility of such an attainment. He was persuasive, and conversions in considerable numbers followed. Then for thirty years he organized his followers on the basis of his beliefs and experiences. At the age seventy two he died. He is no longer subject to rebirth, according to Jain doctrine, but blissfully exists in a place of reward called Isatpragbhara. As the twenty-fourth Tirthankara or Crossing-Maker, Mahavira by his own crossing of the bridge between time and eternity, and his subsequent teaching and organizing on the basis of his experience, gave to the world the new religion of Jainism.

Mahavira is not remembered primarily for his intellectual profundity. He was not essentially a philosopher or theologian. He expounded his ideas with severe clarity and intensity, but his teachings do not equal in depth those, for example, of the Upanishadic writers. Again, he was not primarily a social reformer. His teachings did have implications for personal and social living, but it was not his aim to create social unrest or a doctrinaire program or social amelioration. There were, in fact, significant social consequences, but these results were not at the forefront of Mahavira's intentions. Rather, his life was characterized by a deep personal striving for salvation. The path he sought was for himself; that it was also a path by which others could travel to the blessed state was a derivative gain. Thus Jainism for Mahavira, as it has been for countless others, was basically a highly individualized effort to overcome the negativities of the world of karmic existence.

As is true of the founders of other religions, Mahavira believed that no object exists that should be worshiped. Yet he himself became an object of supreme veneration in later times. The scriptures of Jainism attribute divine characteristics to him. They claim that he was the incarnate form of the divine and that he existed before his incarnation. They say also that he was sinless and omniscient. Jain temples today display statues of Mahavira, similar to the idols of other faiths, making his deification concrete.

Scriptures

The Jains, unlike the Muslims, Sikhs, and other religious groups of India and Pakistan do not have a language of their own. They use the language of the region. Far from having merely assumed the regional languages of the subcontinent, however, they have contributed in notable manner to their enrichment.

Mahavira taught in the Ardhamagadhi language of his own region, and as a consequence a number of the sacred scriptures of Jainism are written in that language. Jain scholars today must learn Mahavira's language in order to understand their sacred records. Some of the later scriptures were written in Sanskrit; therefore, scholarly Jains must learn it as well.

In southern India the history of Jainism has been bound to the development of the Kanada language in evident ways. Names of Jain writers such as Pampa, Ponna, and Ranna are inextricably interwoven with the best of Kanada literature. During the reign of the Gangas in that region, Jain-inspired literature received considerable stimulation through Political patronage. And Jainism has similarly contributed to other vernaculars, such as Prakrit and Apabhramsa.

A great part of the Jain literature has been preserved. It exists in large part, however, only in manuscript form, for few of the scriptures have been published. They treat of mathematics, medicine, astrology, grammar, vocabulary, prosody, and other topics, using various literary forms: poetry, prose, story, sutra, etc. It is to be hoped that before too long an extensive historical and literary analysis of the extant literature of Jainism will throw great light upon that religion.

The Jains, however, are not strongly attached to their sacred scriptures and do not look upon them in general as literally inspired. Usually they content themselves with reciting only the names of their books. Of these the Agamas (precepts) or Siddhantas (treatises) are the chief. (Although the Agamas are canonically divided into twelve sections, or Angas, the twelfth has been lost.)

The various sects within Jainism recognize different numbers of documents as canonical. The Shvetambaras sect, for example, recognizes forty-five, while the Sthanakavasis recognize only thirty-three. Other sectarian groups acknowledge the authority of more or fewer documents.

Teachings

The teaching of Jainism can be understood only in relationship to Hinduism, which is the doctrinal, cultic, and communal soil out of which Jainism grew. Practically all its teachings can be found in one form or another within the Hinduism that preceded Mahavira. This teacher originated a religion, but did not put forth essentially new truths. His teachings are in large measure a reaction or response to certain features of Hinduism which gave him cause for uneasiness. Of these, six may be mentioned briefly.

1. The doctrine of karma, the law of causation as applied to the moral sphere, seemed to him too rigid and restrictive, for within Hinduism its rule is absolute. He sought to lessen this rigidity and to find a practical measure of release from it.

2. The Hindu conception of rebirth came to mean, especially in the Upanishadic period, that individual souls do not possess real individuality. According to Hindu doctrine souls do not remain individualized in eternity, but become absorbed in Brahma. Mahavira strongly asserted the independence or autonomy of the individual soul.

3. Hinduism taught caste. In Mahavira's time these lines of social organization were still in the making, and he benefited to a considerable extent personally from the system. But he was strongly democratic, believing in the worth of all individuals. He taught the importance of a casteless society.

4. The priestly caste, as a result of the solidifying caste system, was clearly becoming the most influential group in Indian life. Mahavira was a member of the second or warrior caste. This had to lose as the priesthood became dominant in the society, and good deal of the impact of early Jainism was in opposition to the prominence of the priestly caste.

5. Particularly in the Vedic and Brahmanic periods, Hinduism was polytheistic. One hymn in the Vedic literature suggests that the gods may number as many as 3,333. Mahavira, in the simplicity of his character, was repelled by the extremes of Vedic polytheism. In fact, he did not teach the existence of a god at all.

6. Hinduism in the Vedic and Brahmanic period also taught the practice of animal sacrifices. These ceremonial occasions became public affairs with large numbers of animals slaughtered. Mahavira may well have developed his emphasis upon harmlessness (ahimsa) to all living things in response to the excesses of animal sacrifice in his time.

Yet his precepts were not an outright denial of the teachings of the Hinduism. Karma and rebirth, for example, were retained in modified form by Mahavira, as were other doctrines derived from the Hinduism of his time.

The teachings of Jainism are not philosophically developed or influential. Compared to the elaborate philosophical systems of Hinduism and Buddhism, it cannot claim distinction as a system of thought. From one point of view, it may be considered a religious or theological middle ground between Hinduism and Buddhism, both of which are highly developed. Jainism, on the contrary, is essentially a system of quiet contemplation and asceticism. Jains are persons who are free from any sort of attachment to the world because they have attained supreme knowledge and have subjugated their passions. It is a religion not essentially based upon the incarnation of a deity or a sacred book of nonhuman origin.

In brief Jainism is based upon four fundamental principles. First, man's personality is dual: material and spiritual. Second, he is not perfect because of the existence of karma in his soul. Third, by his spiritual nature he can and must control his material nature. Fourth, the separation of an individual soul from the obstructing matter combined with it is the responsibility solely of the individual himself, by his own efforts. These four principles undergird the whole of Jainism.

Conclusion

Jainism does not possess a highly developed set of teachings on society. Its doctrine of society may be simply stated: society should be renounced. The renunciation of the world depends upon a number of factors. The world, composed as it is of Spirit and matter, is essentially evil. The person is similarly composed, but by renouncing the world and himself he is able to settle down to the primary task of saving himself. There is no thought within Jainism that the evil of the world can be successfully challenged. Karmic matter in that sphere is too extensive and frustrating. It is enough for the Jain to take his own evil seriously. Also, Jainism denounces society because it finds no purpose in it. The world of nature and society has not been created by a divine force and is not proceeding in any course to a successful consummation. It simply is, and little can or should be done about it. Although Jainism originally possessed a world out look to some degree, it quickly lost it and any sense of the whole of humanity. This religion, furthermore, is nonprogrammatically so far as society is concerned. Aside from its social and health services it possesses no plan of social amelioration. It teaches no blueprint of an ideal society which will some day be achieved, through either human or divine effort or both. It is unconcerned with any devices instrumentalities by which a better world may be won.

Despite the fact that the teachings of Jainism are centered in salvation for the individual, it early developed a sense and form of religious community. This is known as the sangha and is the oldest voluntary religious organization in the world. It preceded the development of the Buddhist sangha. Probably in it was formed by a group of the monastic elite within Jainism who for reasons of self protection and edification withdrew together and constituted a corporate life for themselves. Gradually, however, the sangha was opened to all Jains as it is today. It represents a rough parallel to the church in Christianity.

The very existence of the sangha has had a number of consequences. A relatively deliberate body of knowledge or right beliefs had to be defined on which membership was based. This led to a continuing interest in the sacred scriptures of the religion. A place was required where the faithful could meet. Temples, therefore, were created for that purpose and to express in architecture, sculpture, and other art forms the essential ethos of the religion. Worship as an integrating experience for the faithful required delineation and establishment. Symbols of communication became important for the maintenance of the sangha. Another important factor was the priesthood. In Jainism one finds fully expressed the principle of ecclesiola in ecclesia: the inner group or devout believers within the larger group of the religious. In the full development of the sangha, this faith displays many features of religious organizations against which Mahavira originally protested in ancient Hinduism.

The meaning of the sangha, however, has been weakened in the historical development of Jainism through the strong propensity of the religion to split into sectarian groups. While Jains in the sangha may have a sense of unity and communion, they are unable to overcome their separateness from their own brethren. Thus the form which cohesion was to be secured among them turned out to be an agency for keeping them apart.

Jainism as an independent religion was an offshoot from Hinduism. Its philosophy and practice provided Indians with a significant alternative to Hinduism.

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