

Christianity & New Religious Movements

**AN INTRODUCTION TO THE
WORLD'S NEWEST FAITHS**

DEREK COOPER


P U B L I S H I N G
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*To my dear friend and colleague Justin Gohl,
seeker of truth, keeper of wisdom, defender of faith.*

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Foreword

WHEN I WAS growing up in an evangelical Protestant family, religious pluralism might have meant living next door to Roman Catholics or Mormons. But I can't take the dog for a walk today without expecting—or at least hoping—that I'll run into one of my Muslim neighbors for another enjoyable conversation.

It is always welcoming when non-Christians demonstrate some familiarity with Christianity. And the same is true when we exhibit even rudimentary knowledge of the beliefs and practices that our neighbors hold dear. In both cases, separating fact from fiction is a significant advance beyond suspicion and distance. Even in the context of persecution, the apostles reminded believers, “But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame” (1 Peter 3:15–16). This is a crucial but often difficult balance: to be ready to offer a defense of the faith *and* to do it “with gentleness and respect.” On the first day of class, I tell my students that their papers must first of all represent a view sympathetically, in terms that the advocate would acknowledge as his or her position, before earning the right to offer a challenge. The ninth commandment requires that we defend not only the truth but the honor and good name of our neighbor. With exactly that combination, Derek Cooper's previous book *Christianity and World Religions* provides a terrific map for understanding the beliefs and practices of an increasingly diverse society.

Cooper employs the same skill in *Christianity and New Religious Movements*. If it requires humility and knowledge to summarize world religions, explaining new religious movements presents additional challenges. In the first place, many of these new movements claim not to be religions at all but something closer to a spiritual philosophy that

eschews formal institutions, dogmas, and rites. And yet in increasing numbers people today identify as “spiritual but not religious.”¹

Whether or not they describe themselves with this phrase, most people in the United States are open to views that both modern science and traditional religions—particularly Christianity—consider “superstitious.”² A 2018 Pew Research study found that 62 percent of U.S. adults affirm at least one New Age tenet (spiritual energy in material objects, reincarnation, astrology, and so on). The number rises to 77 percent among the “spiritual but not religious.”³ The number of U.S. adults who believe in astrology is larger than the membership of all the mainline Protestant denominations combined. Overall, 58 percent of American 18- to 24-year-olds believe that astrology is scientific.⁴ Reincarnation is affirmed by 33 percent of U.S. adults, more so by younger generations (40 percent of those age 18–29 vs. 23 percent of those 65 or older). Twenty-nine percent say that they have experienced a “direct revelation from God or other higher power.”⁵

Wicca is “technically the fastest-growing religion” in America, and interest in witchcraft among the educated is rising.⁶ Among political conservatives, the influence of mind-science theosophy is evident in

1. According to a 2017 Pew Research study, more than a quarter of Americans (27 percent) identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” up from 19 percent in 2012. According to a western European survey, over a mere five years, the percentage of “spiritual but not religious” jumped 8 percent (19–27 percent) from 2012 to 2017 (<https://www.pewforum.org/2018/05/29/attitudes-toward-spirituality-and-religion/>, accessed May 1, 2020). A June 2005 study found that 70 percent of Europeans considered astronomy scientific and that 41 percent considered astrology to be so. See https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/ebs/ebs_224_report_en.pdf, accessed June 20, 2020. Significantly, 53 percent claim to be “neither spiritual nor religious.” Yet I offer evidence below for the conclusion that even among these, spirituality (or at least interest in the “supernatural,” particularly the occult) is quite high.

2. Among U.S. evangelicals, 47 percent hold one or more New Age tenets, compared with 78 percent of “nones” (those who identify as having “no religion in particular”). See <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/01/new-age-beliefs-common-among-both-religious-and-nonreligious-americans/>, accessed June 22, 2020.

3. Thirty-three percent of evangelicals believe in psychics, and 36 percent of Roman Catholics believe in reincarnation. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/01/new-age-beliefs-common-among-both-religious-and-nonreligious-americans/>, accessed June 22, 2020.

4. <https://www.nsf.gov/statistics/seind14/index.cfm/chapter-7/c7h.htm>, accessed May 1, 2020.

5. Moreover, the statement “Things happen that can’t be explained by science or natural causes” is affirmed by 83 percent (34 percent of atheists; 65 percent of agnostics). Seven in ten respondents agreed that the living can experience the presence of the dead, and half say that they have been personally helped by them (even two-thirds of nones). Although Protestants traditionally deny the assistance of souls in heaven, 38 percent of evangelicals believe that one may receive help from the deceased, and 35 percent believe that they can communicate with the dead. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/11/23/views-on-the-afterlife/>, accessed August 1, 2022.

6. Bianca Busker, “Why Witchcraft Is on the Rise,” *Atlantic*, March 2020. See especially Tara Isabella Burton, “The Rise of Progressive Occultism,” *American Interest* 15, no. 1 (June 7, 2019). See Burton’s considerable documentation and explanation of the rise in *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2020).

the popularity of positive-thinking and prosperity-gospel movements.⁷ Fascination with shamanism has returned with considerable force in Western culture, from academic studies to movies and video games. Christian apologetics is often focused on atheism, but only 4 percent of American adults identify as atheists. We are clearly living not in a disenchanted age, but in an increasingly post-Christian one.

In this context, it is crucial not only that Christians know what they believe and why they believe it, but that they gain some familiarity with the views of people they encounter at work, in the neighborhood, and, increasingly, in their own families.

Christianity and New Religious Movements is concise and accessible, but don't let that fool you. Beneath each chapter is a wealth of research. I will be using and recommending both of Cooper's books. After reading this one, I'm sure you will feel the same way.

Michael S. Horton

J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics
Westminster Seminary California

7. On the evolution of the prosperity gospel (and much else in American religious culture) from New Thought, see the superb study by John S. Haller Jr., *The History of New Thought: From Mind Cure to Positive Thinking and the Prosperity Gospel* (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2012). The prosperity gospel (also called "Word of Faith") has been enormously successful abroad, especially in Africa and South America. Though the object of a barrage of evangelical critiques in the past thirty years, many recent advocates (including, at the time of my writing, close advisers of President Trump) are now considered by the media—and political allies—as mainstream evangelicals. The list of evangelical critiques of the movement is too lengthy to include here. For one example, see D. R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel: A Historical and Biblical Analysis of the Modern Faith Movement* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994).

A Word from William Edgar

AS A YOUNGER man, I was introduced to books and documentaries on the world's greatest religions. Usually featured were Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Fairly typical examples are J. N. D. Anderson's *The World's Religions* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 1955) and the more recent *The World's Religions* by Huston Smith (New York: HarperOne, 1991). But I remember early on wondering why there were no books on the world's *not-so-great* religions. I admit that this was a bit peevish, but today I recognize that my question had considerable pertinence. Religion is a huge category, encompassing far more than the rigid grouping of the older books.

There is an increasing understanding of the breadth of religious awareness. Johan Herman Bavinck (1895–1964) (Herman Bavinck's nephew) has effectively guided us through the matter of universal religious consciousness. Among other things, he was a missionary to Indonesia, taught biblical studies at Kampen, and became chair at the Free University of Amsterdam. A recently published English translation of his essays is a well-kept secret, full of insights.¹ His primary interest is in the psychology of religious consciousness.

Bavinck's views in no way slouch into traditional natural theology. Rather, he makes the assumption that God's revelation gets through and can be measured, taking fully into account the perversion of revelation that human beings construct. Bavinck has extensively studied Hinduism, Islam, and various other religions encountered by him on the field. He concludes that the awareness of God, being the *principium essendi*, can be measured in various cultures. This view can be verified in such biblical texts as Acts 17:27ff. and Romans 1:18ff.

Presupposing such an understanding, all kinds of religions, *great* and *not-so-great*, can be studied and compared to orthodox Christianity. One

1. *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, ed. John Bolt, James D. Bratt, and Paul J. Visser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

example among many of such enquiries is the series *A Journey through New York City Religions* by Tony Carnes. Topics include Central Park as a repository of many religions, the perils of secularism in Brooklyn's Bushwick Park, persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses, Korean-American religion in Flushing, Queens, Pastor J. Johansson, and the theology of the Coney Island roller coaster.²

Modern sociologies are increasingly aware of "minor" religions. They often struggle to categorize them. An example (among many) of this kind of research is *Sociology of Religion: A Reader*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018), edited by the team of William A. Mirola, Michael O. Emerson, and Susanne C. Monahan. These essays tend to organize religious organizations according to their size and influence.

The volume you hold in your hands is a bold venture into the multifaceted phenomenon of *new* religious movements. Many of the subjects scrutinized are not new in the sense of novel or recently emerged (though some are). Unlike the pioneering work of Phillip Charles Lucas and Thomas Robbins or Danièle Hervieu-Léger, who wrestle with the challenges of new religious movements in the face of Western modernity, Derek Cooper has a broader reach. Lucas and Robbins study church-state relations, nonconventional religions, and the opposition to the cults.³ Hervieu-Léger has studied the underlying reasons for the resurgence of the cults in our world. She avers that the explosion of traditional religions today creates a vacuum, to be filled by more personal views, supposedly free of dogma, open to "à la carte" constructions.⁴

Cooper's concerns are different. He looks deeply into smaller offshoots of Hinduism, Islam, and so on. He also studies the tenacity of unaffiliated religions, and even the "nones." He surveys the "new atheists," Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and company. Cooper's analyses are deep, historically responsible, and full of facts and details usually unknown to the average person.

Understandably, there is something disjointed or messy about these studies. From spiritual communities to agnostics to religious zealots, Cooper includes a large diversity of religions without sacrificing details. The book is an apologetics treasure trove. It should equip believers not only to observe more carefully but to engage adherents and bring them the gospel, with both accuracy and compassion.

2. See <https://www.linkedin.com/in/tony-carnes-b26b3a34>.

3. *New Religious Movements in the Twenty-First Century: Legal, Political and Social Challenges in Global Perspective*, ed. Phillip Charles Lucas and Thomas Robbins (New York: Routledge, 2004).

4. Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *La religion en miettes ou la question des sects* (Paris: Calmann-Lévi, 2001).

This work allows Cooper to put into question popular views of “the cults.” Most importantly, he ends each section with a “point of contact” whereby we may not only compare the religions to the Christian faith but find entrance points for conversation. This is a marvelous book. It needs to be read by many people.

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Introduction

Humanity is not limited to the small set of better-known “world religions” that dominate the planet today. People across history have recurrently generated new religious ideas, movements, experiences, and practices.

*Christian Smith*¹

War in Waco

The relatively unknown city of Waco, Texas, captured national headlines on February 28, 1993, when ATF agents raided a compound that housed a new religious movement called the Branch Davidians. Agents had no idea of the amount of resistance that they were soon to encounter. The compound’s charismatic yet controversial leader, David Koresh (1959–93), was almost instantly wounded. And tragically, several ATF agents and Branch Davidians were killed within minutes. For the next fifty days, the world watched with bated breath on national television as the FBI replaced the ATF and proceeded to blockade the compound, attempting to negotiate the release of the faithful members inside, especially its leader.² In fact, despite his gunshot wounds and his lack of medical treatment, David Koresh led regular talks with the FBI, sometimes elatedly so. Framing the standoff in apocalyptic terms that were inaugurating the end of days prophesied in the Bible and interpreting himself to be the second coming of Christ, Koresh earned the epithet “wacko from Waco.”³

1. Christian Smith, *Religion: What It Is, How It Works, and Why It Matters* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 235.

2. Although the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF or BATF) initially led the siege at Mount Carmel against the Branch Davidians, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) quickly took over and remained in control for the duration of the operation, ultimately receiving approval from the U.S. Attorney General for the use of tear gas on April 19.

3. Eugene Gallagher, “The Branch Davidians,” in *Controversial New Religions*, ed. James R. Lewis and Jesper Petersen, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 67–68.

Things, however, eventually came to a standstill. The FBI was embarrassing itself in front of millions of onlookers, being bullied by a wounded anarchist eking out an existence in a house filled with mothers and children. The agency had to act soon. And so on the fateful day of April 19, the FBI fired tear gas into the compound as a final attempt to force the Branch Davidians to surrender and vacate the premises. As the hours passed that day, fire erupted inside the compound and swiftly expanded. Although a few escaped, almost all the faithful members remained trapped inside and died—including Koresh and his right-hand man, Steve Schneider (1949–93), who apparently shot and killed Koresh at very close range upon Koresh’s orders before then killing himself. No children escaped. In total, seventy-six members of the community perished.

I grew up in East Texas, not far from Waco. My most distinct memories from 1993 are from the hours I spent watching the Waco siege unfold from February 28 to April 19. The images of ATF agents courageously entering and then shamelessly exiting a second-story window on the first day of the siege—and the consuming flames and thick black smoke ascending from the compound to the heavens on the last day—are forever cemented in my mind. David Koresh, born Vernon Howell, had set up his Branch Davidians base in nearby Palestine, Texas, only a few miles from my house, before building the infamous compound (called Mount Carmel) outside Waco. And unbeknownst to most people, Koresh—in contrast to the international fanfare that his movement had provoked for weeks on end—was quietly and discreetly buried in a cemetery in my hometown, mere minutes from where I lived.

As a kid watching the Waco siege, I was profoundly saddened, yet strangely fascinated, wondering why anyone would follow a leader such as David Koresh to the death, especially given the stories—notoriously, “The Sinful Messiah” series as reported by the *Waco Tribune-Herald*⁴—alleging Koresh’s long-standing exploitation, religious manipulation, sexual coercion, and delusions of grandeur. Decades later, as a historian of religion, I still marvel at these questions and ponder why Koresh’s followers were willing to sacrifice everything for him and the cause he championed. But today, in contrast to when I was a kid, I have a much deeper understanding of the brokenness of the human condition, I am acutely familiar with the hope and healing that religion pledges, and I can empathize with those who see nothing but confusion surrounding all the different religious traditions that exist.

4. “The Sinful Messiah” was a seven-part investigative series appearing in the *Waco Tribune-Herald* about David Koresh. The first part of the series appeared on February 27, 1993, the day before the Waco siege began.



Fig. I.1. The relatively unknown city of Waco, Texas, captured national headlines in 1993 because of a government standoff involving a new religious movement called the Branch Davidians.

Cults, Sects, and New Religious Movements

The emergence of the Branch Davidians in the early 1990s from obscurity to international notoriety raises many questions, to be sure, including when the Branch Davidians emerged, where David Koresh entered the picture, why their members reacted the way they did during the siege, and how they understood themselves in relation to the world. Regarding the latter, although the Branch Davidians believed themselves theologically to be the true body of Christ in contrast to their Seventh-day Adventist Church cousins who had lost their way, most people just characterized them as a cult or a sect led by a madman whose real motives proved much more fleshly than spiritual: centering on having sex with as many women as possible, exploiting others as an abuse of power, and building an arsenal of weapons.

This is possibly very accurate, but it is also short-sighted. As historian of religion Eugene Gallagher explains, “The application of the very simplified ‘cult’ stereotype to the Branch Davidians did more to obscure who they really were, what they cared about, and how and why they lived their lives the way they did.”⁵ He has a point. For the most part, the average person is unable to articulate exactly what a cult is,

5. Gallagher, “Branch Davidians,” 74.

other than to assume that it is sinister in nature and that you would never want anyone from your family to be in one. Cults, after all, are commonly interpreted to be breeding grounds of mind control, social isolation, financial manipulation, and even sexual exploitation. According to scholar of religion Philip Jenkins, the media commonly perceives cults to embody “blind fanaticism, megalomaniacal leaders, and the following of incomprehensible dogma.”⁶

In fact, few people today can precisely distinguish a cult from a sect or differentiate an established world religion from a new religious movement. More often than not, these terms are used interchangeably, or simply inaccurately, which only reinforces misunderstanding. This is compounded by the fact that no cult accepts such a label or would ever entertain the notion that it might be one. Instead, the moniker *new religious movement* has become the agreed-upon term that better describes “all of those leftover groups” that fall neatly under neither the category of “world religions” nor the culturally outdated categories of *cults* and *sects*.⁷ To be sure, the term *new religious movement* boldly attempts to encompass a rather broad—and arguably disjointed—hodgepodge of spiritual communities ranging from those who believe in aliens to those who are atheists to those who consider themselves the only true body of Christ. I concede that it is far from perfect. But then again, what scholarly term is?

What Is a New Religious Movement?

The terms *cult* and *sect* are no longer used by scholars of religion. Several terms have emerged as replacements, including *new religion*, *alternative religion*, *fringe religion*, *new religious tradition*, and *nontraditional religion*. These all have merit. Yet the term that has become most widespread is *new religious movement* (often abbreviated as NRM).

Classifying New Religious Movements

Historically, scholarly research in new religious movements has been dwarfed by the study of world religions, even though the former increases with no indication of stopping. As sociologist of religion Christian Smith argues, “humans will continue to generate new religions” as mankind marches on.⁸ In fact, it is precisely because religions continue to be formed, continue to be spread, and continue to be neglected by scholars that more needs to be written about them. In this way, this present book is meant to serve as a companion to my prior book *Christianity and World Religions: An Introduction to the World’s Major Faiths*,⁹ which discussed global religions having widespread cultural and societal

6. Philip Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 5.

7. J. Gordon Melton, “An Introduction to New Religions,” in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, ed. James R. Lewis, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 20.

8. Smith, *Religion*, 235.

9. Derek Cooper, *Christianity and World Religions: An Introduction to the World’s Major Faiths* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012).

acceptance and recognition. Just as *Christianity and World Religions* provided a user-friendly and experience-based engagement of the world's most dominant faiths from a confessional yet compassionate Christian disposition, so, too, *Christianity and New Religious Movements: An Introduction to the World's Newest Faiths* aims to lay bare the essence of the most dominant new religious movements in the world as well as offer a way for committed Christians to engage them.

In *Christianity and World Religions*, I organized the world's most widespread religions into Indian world religions (Hinduism and Buddhism), Chinese world religions (Confucianism and Daoism), and Middle Eastern world religions (Judaism and Islam). In this book, I organize each faith into Hindu new religious movements (Jainism and Sikhism), Muslim new religious movements (Baha'i and Nation of Islam), Christian new religious movements (Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses), Pagan new religious movements (Wicca and Scientology), and uncommitted new religious movements (nones and atheism). These religions are not exhaustive, and they are not universally recognized. Nor are they perfectly precise. After all, every major religion has produced hundreds of offshoots, and many new religious movements have sprouted from hybrid trees. Sikhism, for instance, developed out of both Hinduism and Islam, though I discuss the religion primarily in the context of the former.

In total, there are thousands of new religious movements. They exist in virtually every country, and they are constantly being created, being adapted, and being readapted. Some countries, such as the United States, are up to their eyeballs in them. Some are illegal, some are clandestine, and some are outlandish. In fact, some new religious movements are pernicious organizations that threaten human flourishing, while others are culturally accepted and claim to promote a healthy and happy lifestyle. Still others make national headlines because of their extreme practices, bizarre rituals, or illicit activities. Most new religious movements represent groups that you have never heard of and are populated by people whom you might least suspect. Rather than sift through thousands of smaller movements, however, we will focus our attention on the most historic, most prominent, and most recognizable, including ones with members that we have a higher chance of meeting. This is intentional.

The goal of this book is to learn about new religious movements in order to actually engage both them and the people who are part of them from a confessional and compassionate Christian perspective. I am not interested in dissecting them like an impartial scientist or degrading them like an overbearing bully. On the contrary, I believe it more

helpful to isolate faith movements that most intersect with our cultural contexts, theological beliefs, and daily lives—for a specific and practical purpose. After all, when the apostle Paul entered Athens in Acts 17 and began engaging the seekers there, he did not cite Scandinavian gods or offer a discourse about Aztec religion. Instead, he appealed to beliefs and practices most germane to the Athenians, with the result that some connected with his message and embraced Christianity.



PART 1

Hindu New Religious Movements

In this section, we discuss the two most influential religious traditions emerging out of Hinduism (other than Buddhism, of course, which also arose from Hinduism): Jainism and Sikhism. Although spread apart historically by centuries, these two religions owe their geographic origin to Greater India. This region of the world has produced one of the most fertile religious soils on the planet, and it offers a great place to begin our study of new religious movements. If you would like a refresher on Hinduism and Buddhism, be sure to read the chapters dedicated to them in my prequel, *Christianity and World Religions*.¹

1. Derek Cooper, *Christianity and World Religions: An Introduction to the World's Major Faiths* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012).

Jainism: The Story of Nonviolence

The main thrust of . . . Jainism is nonviolence (ahimsa). One should not injure another [whether in] mind, speech, or body.

Saman Srutaprajna¹

Right path, right knowledge, and right conduct together constitute the path to moksha.

Tattvartha Sutra²

The goal of Jainism . . . is the removal of the karmic matter that obscures the true nature of [a soul] and causes it to be bound to the cycle of rebirth.

Jeffrey Long³

Part 1: The Beginning

There was no beginning. There is no middle. And there will be no end. Nor is there any god who intervenes in the meantime. What exists is a timeless universe among universes whose beings circulate through the cosmos one life at a time like a slowly moving yet eternally revolving door. When it comes to our realm, there is an axis at the center called Mount Meru sitting atop a flat disc. From the center radiates a concentric series of rings of islands separated by the waters. What we

1. Saman Srutaprajna, *The Path of Purification* (Gujarat, India: Peace of Mind Training Center, 2005), 151.

2. Tattvartha Sutra 1.1. This is the first verse of the most authoritative religious text in Jainism.

3. Jeffrey D. Long, *Jainism: An Introduction* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 96. The original word is *jiva*, which, as I will discuss below, is variously translated in Jainism as “life,” “soul,” or “spirit.”

call the *world* mirrors the shape of a human being who is standing with each hand touching the waist and each leg outstretched and firm like an athlete about to do squats. This realm consists of three worlds, each of which has sublevels or subislands. And it also consists of a series of realities that contain beings who live in various stages of existence based on their karma from former lives.

Above the waist is the higher world—what some might call *heaven*—which houses beings who have accrued exceptionally good karma. Here there is no suffering. And the gods dwelling here are mindful and mobile. At the very top of this realm are those who have reached the highest peaks of enlightenment and so contain no karma. Here they remain in a conscious, complete, and contented state of understanding. Meanwhile, the lower that one descends through the realms, that is, below the waist, the worse the plight of the beings residing here. This lower place is what some might call *hell*. This dreadful place contains beings whose grievous actions in their former lives weighed them down with bad karma that will take eons to burn off. For them, every day is a living hell. Their existence includes extreme temperatures, horrid smells, conscious suffering, and constant conflict. There are seven layers of this hellish abode. The beings here are tortured by hellish deities who have also committed horrid deeds. But despite the horror they experience, the beings in hell will eventually be reborn in a better place where they can ideally make better choices. And the same is true of the gods—they also will eventually be reborn. The place they might be reborn next is what some might call *earth*. Located near the anatomy of the waist, it is the place that you and I currently call home. This is where animals, plants, and humans live, only the latter of which are capable of enlightenment.

Nonetheless, other than the enlightened beings remaining at the very top of the universe, all the rest of the living beings will eventually complete their time in whichever realm they inhabit and thereby take on another form as a human, god, hell-being, plant, or animal. Exactly what their existence will look like in their next life—as well as the exact place they will live—is completely dependent on one impersonal, indifferent, inescapable, and infinite factor: karma. In a word, karma is the glue that binds all the universes together. And unless you have exhausted all your bad karma and attained complete understanding, you cannot overcome it. It will win in the end—and in the beginning, and in the middle, and in the end again.⁴

Road Map to Jain Creation Story. Every religion conceives of creation differently. Jainism visualizes the three temporary realms of existence as a person whose head and torso represent the highest realm (a temporary Heaven), whose waist represents the middle realm (a temporary Earth), and whose legs represent the lowest realm (a temporary Hell).

4. This description of the Jain cosmos is taken from Tattvartha Sutra, especially the third chapter.



Fig. 1.1.
Representation
of the universe
in Jain
cosmology in
the form of a
lokapurusha or
“cosmic man.”

Part 2: Historical Origin

Jainism is the lesser-known sibling of the Indian religious family of Hinduism and Buddhism. This means that its historical roots run deep into the religiously fertile soil of Greater India. The long religious history of this region makes Jainism difficult to describe in full detail, including capturing its exact beginning. Like Hinduism, for instance, which is called *sanatana dharma*, or the “eternal religion,” Jains maintain that Jainism has always existed. And although Mahavira is often regarded as the “founder” of Jainism, we should apply that term only if we understand it to really mean “forebear,” since Jains believe that Mahavira was one among many who discovered the same path to enlightenment. In fact, Mahavira was the twenty-fourth spiritual master in a millennia-long series of guides. This is similar to many other religious traditions. For instance, neither Siddhartha Gautama in Buddhism, nor Abraham in Judaism, nor Muhammad in Islam is believed by practitioners to have

actually founded his respective religion. Instead, the religions of these men predated them by millennia. Thus, these spiritual leaders simply reconnected people to eternally existing truths that never should have been forgotten.

The Fordmakers—The Jinas

The religious tradition of Jainism is connected to twenty-four mysterious figures called *fordmakers*, *ford finders*, or *builders of the ford* (*tirthankaras*) who lived before the advent of historical record and who formed a chain of unbroken knowledge. These fordmakers were so called because they were the ones who had learned “the way across the river of rebirth to the further shore of liberation [to] build a *tirtha*, or ‘ford,’ that others [could] use to make their way across as well.”⁵ This is a common concept in Indian religious traditions. It symbolizes the shallow water through which one can safely cross to the other side of a river. And it parallels the Buddhist figure of the Bodhisattva—with the most famous example being the Dalai Lama (“Ocean Teacher”)—who agrees to be reborn again and again in order to liberate others rather than achieve nirvana and therefore liberate only himself.



Fig. 1.2. Statues of Jinas in Jaisalmer, India.

Another name for the fordmaker was *jina*—“victor” or “conqueror”—and over time, the one who followed a jina’s teaching was called a *Jain*

5. Long, *Jainism*, 3.

(or *Jaina*).⁶ Naturally, the victory referred to here was not a physical victory won at war but a spiritual victory won in the ego. This involved strenuous commitment. The twenty-four fordmakers are believed to have existed since the beginning of time and, in fact, will continue to live on age after age in human forms not yet known. When visiting a Jain temple, you will often see them prominently displayed in statues and iconography. Of these, the last fordmaker in our current life cycle or epoch was a man named Mahavira. His accomplishments—as well as those of the twenty-three preceding him—were exceptionally rare, and there will not be another fordmaker or jina on this earth for tens of thousands of years.⁷

Mahavira (6th Century B.C.)

Mahavira serves as a foundational figure within Jain history. Precise dates vary, but it is generally believed that Mahavira was a contemporary of Siddhartha Gautama—better known as *Buddha*. In this way, Mahavira lived roughly twenty-five hundred years ago in the same region of northeastern India (sometimes called Greater Magadha). In my chapter on Buddhism in *Christianity and World Religions*, I described the Four Signs of Buddha, in which the young prince successively saw old age, disease, death, and an ascetic on his way to becoming who he was destined to become.⁸ Jainism shares a similar history. But rather than being the Four Signs of Buddha, it is the Five Auspicious Events of Mahavira. They comprise Mahavira's (1) conception, (2) birth, (3) renunciation, (4) enlightenment, and (5) demise. These were important developments in Mahavira's life that illustrate how he achieved enlightenment.

Similarities between Mahavira and Buddha

In truth, this is not the only similarity between Mahavira and Buddha. There are many additional commonalities between the two, seven of which I will mention.⁹ First, like *Buddha*, *Mahavira* is a title, not a name.

6. Though the terms mean slightly different things, I will use *fordmaker*, *tirthankara*, and *jina* interchangeably to refer to any of the twenty-four spiritual masters who traditionally serve as the object of adoration and study in Jainism.

7. But here it is important to distinguish between what may happen on earth and what may happen in some other currently existing universe. For it is very possible that another fordmaker is alive and teaching the way of liberation in another universe.

8. Derek Cooper, *Christianity and World Religions: An Introduction to the World's Major Faiths* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012), 29–30.

9. This history comes from the Kalpa Sutra, the Jain scriptures focused on the life and miracles of Mahavira.

Five Auspicious Events of Mahavira. Jains celebrate five “auspicious” moments from Mahavira’s life: conception (*garbha*), birth (*janma*), renunciation (*vairagya*), enlightenment (*kevalajnana*), and demise (*nirvana*). Each offers a model of emulation in which believers reflect on their own spiritual development.

It means “Great Hero” or “Great Man,” indicating his spiritual authority; his childhood name, however, was Vardhamana. Second, Mahavira and Buddha were both Indians who were reacting against the dominant religious system of Hinduism. They were connected to a similar movement called Shramana, but their way of teaching developed into distinct religions that we refer to today as Jainism and Buddhism. Third, both were from the same warrior caste in India called the Kshatriya caste. This was one of the most revered castes in Indian society, second only to priestly Brahmins, and it ushered the two young boys into a life of luxury and status unknown to virtually all their contemporaries. Like Buddha, Mahavira married a princess and fathered a child, though adherents of the more traditional of Jain denominations (the Digambaras) believe that he was a lifelong bachelor who eschewed such worldly pleasures.¹⁰



Fig. 1.3. Statue of Mahavira in Jain temple in Rajasthan, India.

10. Padmanabh S. Jaini, *The Jaina Path of Purification* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 11.

Fourth, Mahavira and Buddha were the same age—the age of thirty—when they renounced their worldly possessions and left their families in search of enlightenment. (Ironically, both Jesus and Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, whom I will discuss in the next chapter, were also thirty when inaugurating their ministries.) According to tradition, Mahavira renounced all his possessions at this time and demonstrated it by removing his clothes,¹¹ pulling out his hair (one hair at a time), and assuming the life of a wanderer rather than remaining with his family in luxury (again, almost exactly paralleling the renunciation of Buddha). Fifth, during this time, both Mahavira and Buddha experimented with various spiritual practices such as yoga, meditation, and fasting. And it was the latter, in particular, that characterized Mahavira, since he would regularly go days at a time without food or water (even more austere than Buddha). Sixth, after years of experimentation and almost to the point of physical death from lack of eating, they both attained enlightenment while meditating under a tree. Seventh, there are countless legends about the birth, signs, and death of Mahavira and Buddha. For instance, both were prophesied to become either great warriors or great saints—the latter of which happened. Subsequently, both attracted disciples who recorded their teachings and enlarged their communities. And in fact, the religions that formed in the wake of their lives eventually divided over the issue whether these two were spiritual saints to be venerated or gods to be worshiped.

Twelve Similarities between Mahavira and Buddha

1. Both lived countless lives and accrued untold good karma before being born.
2. Both were historical contemporaries, living roughly twenty-five hundred years ago.
3. Both spent their whole lives in northeastern India and likely spoke the same local language.
4. Both were born in the Kshatriya caste, the revered warrior caste in Indian society.
5. Both were princes and raised in luxury.
6. Both married princesses, and each fathered one child.

11. The intentional removal of clothes is a point of contention within the two denominations in Jainism. In short, the Digambaras (or more traditional Jains) believe that Mahavira renounced all clothing at this time, while the Svetambaras (those of the more recent tradition) maintain that Mahavira wore a white loincloth that eventually fell off and that since Mahavira was so unattached to material things by this time, he did not notice that he was naked. For more about this, see Jaini, *Path of Purification*, 12–14.

The Movement That Inspired Mahavira, Buddha, and Others. Mahavira and Buddha were figures within a much larger and more ancient movement called *Shramana*. This movement was active thousands of years ago in India. Their teachings and lifestyles were very similar, but for reasons that are not completely clear, entire religions only developed around a few of them.

7. Both renounced their lives and family at the age of thirty.
8. Both wandered and experimented with austere spiritual practices for many years before “starting” their own religions.
9. Both achieved enlightenment while meditating under a tree.
10. Both gathered disciples and formed a new religious community.
11. Both were attested by signs and miracles from infancy to death.
12. Both were given important titles and are worshiped or venerated by millions.

Why Does Jainism Embrace Swastikas? The swastika is an ancient Indian symbol used for centuries before Nazism. In Jainism, the four lines of the swastika symbolize the four classes who have not attained moksha: humans, gods, hell-beings, and animals and plants. The three dots stand for the three jewels of Jainism (right path, right knowledge, and right conduct).

As the last of the fordmakers in our cycle, Mahavira exerts tremendous influence over Jainism—not completely unlike the influence of Muhammad in Islam (though, to be sure, Muhammad is never worshiped). For instance, Jains regard Mahavira’s life as a model for how to live their own; thus, each stage of his story, particularly after renunciation, is intensely studied and debated. This includes his teachings, practices, and lifestyle. Naturally, Mahavira would have accrued eons of good karma to be in the place he was to attain what he did, but he is the guide to follow (and, in the case of some Jains, worship). And having attained enlightenment or supreme knowledge (*kevala jnana*), Mahavira officially became the twenty-fourth fordmaker or jina. This means that when he died on earth at the age of seventy-two, he attained nirvana, thereby exiting the cycle of birth and rebirth, victorious over karma and reincarnation—the bonds that enslave all other living beings. But Mahavira will not be the last fordmaker; others will eventually follow.

Mahavira established four *fords* or *tirthas*, which are very important to Jainism and continue to play a role today. This includes monks (*sadhus*), nuns (*sadhvis*), laymen (*shravikas*), and laywomen (*sravakas*). And together they constitute the core of the Jain community or *sangha*. Surprisingly for many, this fourfold model is symbolized by the swastika—and when I lead groups overseas to South and Southeast Asia, travelers are shocked to see the swastika appearing prominently in countless ways, especially during Jain religious rites. It is crucial to recognize, however, that the swastika has its origin in the Indian religious tradition, not Nazism. There is no similarity in belief between the two.

Mahavira’s division of the Jain community into four roles persists to this day and also remains the source of confusion among outsiders. In short, most Jains fall under the latter two roles: laymen and laywomen. Only a small percentage of Jains are able—or, more accurately, sufficiently buoyed by eons of good karma—to be in a place where they can renounce everything and focus exclusively on liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth that characterizes life. Only the *sadhus* and *sadhvis*

practice this. Although they are highly revered in India, and reliant on the resources of the *shravikas* and *sravakas*, they constitute only a tiny percentage of the Jain community. This is similar to other religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, in which most practitioners are ordinary people trying to live their lives to the best of their ability, while only a precious few become ascetics. To state it differently, the overwhelming majority of Jains today are laypeople who materially support the small number of Jain monks and nuns with food, water, and other resources. And in turn, they receive moral guidance and good karma. In this way, it is an essential reciprocal relationship. Each needs the other. But each has different religious aims. And the majority do not pretend to be able to renounce everything as the monks and nuns do.



Fig. 1.4. The swastika is an ancient Indian symbol preexisting Nazism by hundreds of years. In Asia, the symbol has nothing to do with German Nazism.

Jainism Today

Today, the Jain religion contains about six million adherents. Most still live in their homeland of India, where they are overshadowed by the overwhelming Hindu majority. But this small number is slightly offset given that Jain practitioners have traditionally specialized in business and received higher education, and so achieved a higher financial status in comparison to their Hindu counterparts.¹² They are also highly literate

12. Lawrence A. Babb, *Understanding Jainism* (Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2015), xiii.

in comparison to their Hindu or Muslim peers, particularly male Jains. The historical Jain relationship to education and business is, of course, related to the caste system—which, though not officially endorsed by the government, still exercises considerable influence over Indian society. On the one hand, it is interesting that a religion so intent on nonattachment would come to be associated with the merchant class, which is highly educated and often the recipient of top jobs. On the other, this class allows lay Jains—again, the vast majority within the religion—to abide by the key concepts of ahimsa (“nonharm” or “nonviolence”) and vegetarianism, as well as other core teachings, which I will discuss below. Interestingly, it also allows the laypersons to be able to finance the lifestyle of ascetics.

The Caste System. Coming from the Portuguese word *casta*, “color,” the caste system was a racial framing of the Sanskrit term *varna*, which refers less to skin color and more to the stratification of society into classes, dating back to the Rig Veda. Though unsanctioned, caste is a hereditary system that remains an everyday feature of Indian society.

In the diaspora, that is, outside India, virtually all Jains are of Indian descent, and they have not yet created submovements appealing to Westerners to the degree that other Indian religious traditions have done in the West through yoga, meditation, and mindfulness. Scholar of Jainism Paul Dundas has categorized Jains today into one of three orientations or mindsets: (1) orthodox, (2) heterodox, and (3) neoorthodox. These are not universally accepted terms, and they have their limitations. Yet they do provide a helpful framework from which to understand what may be regarded as contradictions or tensions within the Jain community. The orthodox encompass traditional Jains, mostly in India, who accept the authority of Mahavira and follow the accustomed rituals and teachings. They are more exclusivist in practice. The heterodox are those who have adopted a more theistic worldview in which jinas (sometimes also called *gods* or *deities*) can and do intervene in human affairs. An example could be Dada Bhagwan (1908–88), who founded the Akram Vignan movement, which offers “instant salvation” to its Jain followers through the mediation of Simandhara—a jina living in another universe.¹³ Finally, the neoorthodox include more progressive Jains who accept modern science and Western ways of thinking and living.¹⁴ An example could be Chitra Bhanu (1922–2019), who established a more modernized form of Jainism in the United States. In truth, the same phenomenon can be said of all other Indian-based religions as well as practically all other world religions. There is always a tension between the traditional (or conservative) and the progressive (or liberal), with a good percentage of practitioners falling somewhere in between. But in the West, it is much more common to find Jains who would fall into the heterodox or

13. Peter Flügel, “Present Lord: Simandhara Svami and the Akram Vignan Movement,” in *The Intimate Other: Love Divine in the Indic Religions*, ed. Anna King and John Brockington (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2005), 196–97.

14. Paul Dundas, *The Jains* (London: Routledge, 2002), 272.

neorthodox category—without at all, of course, implying that they are not good Jains or not in good standing.

Part 3: Religious Writings

As with most other holy scriptures in religions around the world, the sacred writings in Jainism were transmitted orally by their seminal leader's disciples before being recorded in written form decades or centuries later. But here an important issue arises. Were the oral sayings of jinas such as Mahavira written down accurately? Of the two major denominations within Jainism, which I will discuss in depth below, only one of them (Svetambara) accepts most of the written record. The other (Digambara) believes that much has been inaccurately recorded in written form, and so its canon is much smaller.

The holy scriptures within Jainism are called *agamas* (“that which has come down”). And they were written in what is called a Prakrit language—a language that Mahavira either spoke in everyday affairs or used only for specialized purposes, but that, significantly, was decidedly not the sacred and high-caste-based language of Sanskrit (with its echoes of and deference to the Brahmins and Vedas in Hinduism). As in Christianity, the number of scriptures varies according to denomination. According to the Svetambaras, members of the less traditional denomination within Jainism, the Jain holy writings are almost three thousand years old. The oldest portions—fourteen texts called *Purvas* or “Old Texts”—date to the twenty-third jina, but they are no longer in existence. Instead, what survives are dozens of texts customarily divided into six portions that cover a range of genres and topics: rules for monks, philosophical teachings, doctrinal beliefs, descriptions of different beings within the Jain worldview, and so on. The exact number is usually given as forty-five or thirty-two—but again, only the Svetambaras accept these scriptures. Of these, the oldest are eleven *angas*, or “limbs,” which are more than two thousand years old and serve as foundational texts that describe the life and legacy of Mahavira.

Besides these holy scriptures within the Svetambara denomination, a postcanonical text has become authoritative for both major denominations within Jainism. It is titled *Tattvartha Sutra* (“On the Nature of Reality”), dating to the 300s or 400s.¹⁵ And unlike the original holy scriptures in Jainism, it was written in the sacred language of Sanskrit. Composed of ten chapters, it is philosophical in nature and offers an excellent summary of Jain teaching. It begins with a now-famous phrase:

15. Babb, *Understanding Jainism*, 29.

“Right path, right knowledge, and right conduct together constitute the path to moksha.” And it ends with instructions on how to achieve enlightenment: “Omniscience or perfect knowledge [*kevala jnana*] is attained through destruction of delusion and destruction of knowledge-covering, perception-covering, and obstructive actions [*karmas*].” Once this occurs—that, is, upon one’s following all the teachings contained in the book—liberation from the endless cycle of birth and rebirth is achievable: “Owing to the absence of the cause of bondage [*bandha*] and with the functioning of dissociation of actions [*karmas*], the annihilation of all actions [*karmas*] is liberation [*moksha*].”¹⁶



Fig. 1.5.
Palm of hand
symbolizing
ahimsa in
Jainism.

Five Core Ethical Teachings of Jainism

1. Nonviolence (*ahimsa*)
2. Nonlying (*satya*)
3. Nonstealing (*asteya*)
4. Noncarnality (*brahmacarya*)
5. Nonattachment (*aparigraha*)¹⁷

16. Tattvartha Sutra 1.1, 10.1, and 10.2, respectively.

17. Tattvartha Sutra 7.

One other important notion taught in Jain scriptures is a strong dualism that characterizes the religion. According to Jainism, there are two types of a being or entity: one is *soul (jiva)* and the other is *matter (ajiva)*.¹⁸ In a pure state, a soul possesses three qualities that are unhindered by matter: consciousness (*caitanya*), bliss (*sukha*), and energy (*virya*).¹⁹ Although these exist when a soul is joined with matter, the matter darkens our consciousness, deflates our bliss, and diminishes our energy. The opposite of soul is matter (*ajiva*). Existence is essentially understood as follows. Matter—in the form of karma, and so often called *karmic matter*—attaches to or binds to a soul. Or, to state it differently, the soul is sticky, and matter effortlessly sticks to it. In this way, the goal of a human being is to return to that state of being a pure soul without having any stickiness. This means that there is no longer any karmic matter sticking to the soul and binding it to the unrelenting cycle of samsara. When this happens, through the steps outlined in Jain scriptures, a person loses stickiness and experiences moksha.

Part 4: Beliefs

Jainism naturally shares many common beliefs with its more famous religious family members of Hinduism and Buddhism. To begin with, like the assumed reality of gravity among the scientific community, Jains have always taken for granted the universal moral principle of cause and effect known throughout the world as *karma*. Based on the Sanskrit term for “action,” karma reigns as a sort of cosmic and impersonal judge and king that dispenses justice across the universe based directly on the actions of the living. In this way, every time we think or act, we are generating karma that will return to us in either a positive or a negative way. In Jainism, karma takes on a physical force—highlighting how our physical actions (in addition to our mental intentions) can do either good or bad—but many subtypes of karma are mentioned in Jain scriptures. Or, to change metaphors, karma operates like an unrelenting, unrivaled, and unfeeling tennis player who always returns the ball with the same intensity, nuance, and force as it receives it. You cannot outsmart or outplay it. What you give, you get. For what goes around comes around. But here, it is important to underscore that it is not some personal God who dispenses karma. Jains do not believe in a God that corresponds in any way to the God of the Bible.

18. There are, of course, different ways to translate these words. For instance, *jiva* could be translated as “life” or “soul”; and *ajiva* as “nonlife” or “nonsoul.”

19. Jaini, *Path of Purification*, 104–5.

Key Differences between Jainism and Hinduism. Despite many similarities between Jainism and Hinduism, there are also differences. Historically, two of these distinctions revolve around the Vedas and the caste system. While Jainism does not regard the Vedas as authoritative and it questions the caste system, Hinduism has traditionally ascribed a sacred status to the Vedas and accepted the caste system.

Belief in karma coincides with another foundational assumption within Indian religions: reincarnation. As the Jain scriptures teach, “The mark of a substance is existence.”²⁰ In other words, nothing really dies—it just takes on a new form. Unlike monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that envision human life as linear, temporal, and unrepeatable, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism believe that life is cyclical, eternal, and recurring—a concept called *samsara*. And in fact, it is karma, in proportion to a person’s own decisions, that determines how many lives a living being will have as well as the quality of each life lived.

The Goal of Jainism

The way to eliminate karma is to follow the so-called three jewels of Jainism: right path, right knowledge, and right conduct. This is based on Tattvartha Sutra 1.1, the opening of the most authoritative religious text among Jains. The three jewels are practiced in a sequential order. First is “right path,” which is belief in the jinas who have gone before and who taught the true path to enlightenment. Second, “right knowledge” refers to the actual understanding of what the jinas taught. And third, “right conduct” includes behaving in a way that is consistent with and reflective of these core teachings. In short, as scholar of Jainism John Cort summarizes it, “The Jain who wants to travel the path to liberation must have faith in the Jain worldview, must have knowledge of the details of that worldview, and must act properly in accordance with that worldview.”²¹ And what exactly is this worldview? It is a worldview codified in Jain scriptures, and it has nine components. These nine truths encompass the existence of a soul, matter, attachment of the two, the soul’s bondage to karmic matter, the opportunity to accrue either good or bad karma, and the ability to diminish karma, which is practiced through detaching one’s soul from it in the hope of one day—perhaps after eons and eons of former lives—experiencing complete liberation from it.

Nine Truths in the Jain Worldview

1. Soul (*jiva*)
2. Matter (*ajiva*)
3. Karmic matter contacting the soul (*asrava*)

20. Tattvartha Sutra 5.29.

21. John E. Cort, *Jains in the World: Religious Values and Ideology in India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 18.

4. Bondage of the soul by karma (*bandha*)
5. Good karma (*punya*)
6. Bad karma (*papa*)
7. Blockage of karma (*samvara*)
8. Detachment of the soul from karma (*nirjara*)
9. Complete liberation from karma (*moksha* or *nirvana*)²²

Briefly stated, those who successively and successfully pass through these stages may reach the last and final one—what is called *moksha* in Hinduism, *nirvana* in Buddhism, and *salvation* in Christianity. Unlike Christianity, however, but very much like Hinduism and Buddhism, Jainism assumes that freedom from the principle of cause and effect is reached only by those who have undergone countless lives, have accrued immeasurably good karma, and are now ready to be at one with the universe. In Jainism, the one who is able to achieve this is often called *Nigantha*, “one who breaks bonds,” referring to the bond of karma that historically enslaves all living beings. But the overwhelming majority of people are not ready for this, so their goal in life is essentially doing good deeds in keeping with their station in life and so ideally accruing enough karma to return to earth one step higher in their next life.



Fig. 1.6.
Mahatma Gandhi was a champion of *ahimsa*.

22. Uttaradhyayana Sutra 28.14.

In addition to these shared religious concepts with Hinduism and Buddhism, Jainism also, of course, has its own distinct beliefs and practices. The first is called *ahimsa*, which is often translated as “nonharm” or “nonviolence.” It is the cardinal theological distinctive of Jainism, offering the dominant narrative from which to frame the entire religion. And it is most famous for being the doctrine that Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) most deeply incorporated into his campaign against the British Empire in the first half of the twentieth century. Rather than being passive, *ahimsa* is active. After all, Jains believe that violence attracts negative karma, which, in turn, keeps us in bondage to a cycle of birth and death. By contrast, the cultivation of *ahimsa* repels bad karma and nurtures good karma. This is the goal of Jainism, and it is what distinguishes it from every other religion.

Historically, Jains illustrate *ahimsa* through the care they take in walking and even breathing, both gently brushing aside any living organisms they might otherwise tread on and wearing a face mask to refrain from accidentally inhaling a microscopic bug. But the majority of those who practice Jainism today—what are traditionally called *laypeople*—are fully committed to *ahimsa* without ever using a whisk to brush away insects before walking or wearing a mask to avoid inhaling a microscopic organism. And in fact, not even all monks or nuns are required to go to these extremes. Only certain sects do, and so it is less common than one assumes. But what unites all the disparate practices is the unified cultivation of *ahimsa*.

Another important doctrine within Jainism is fasting to death. The technical term for this is *sallekhana* (or *santhara*). As you might imagine, it is controversial. According to tradition, virtually every jina fasted to death as a perfect embodiment of *ahimsa*. Following in their footsteps, several Jain ascetics—and some *laypeople*—have adopted their practice. Jains are quick to point out, however, that this practice is not equivalent to suicide. In other words, it is not performed as a desperate measure or as a way to terminate the pain of depression, loneliness, or sickness. Instead, it is performed—by a very rare number of individuals—out of compassion for all living things and simultaneously in complete detachment from worldly things. Proceeding in stages, it is a willful choice that is premeditated. And in fact, it is not altogether different from martyrdom—as practiced in Christianity, and that was very common in the early centuries of the church.

Finally, I also want to mention one more important doctrine in Jainism that plays an important role. It is called *anekantavada*, and it means something like “non-one-sided” or “multifaceted reality.” The

concept sounds postmodern, but it is actually premodern. In a nutshell, the doctrine of *anekantavada* maintains that there are countless valid perspectives on any given matter, since truth is ascertained in context and in part. For instance, in a multireligious context such as India, it was necessary to explain why and how Jainism was distinct from Hinduism, Buddhism, and other religious and philosophical traditions. Thus, only a jina is really able to view the whole picture and know the whole truth. But when applied in normal life, the doctrine means that truth cannot be reduced into one single concept; instead, it can be approached from many angles.

Two Historic Denominations in Jainism

Jainism is historically divided into two denominations that are just as divisive and critical of each other as denominations within Christianity (and of course, each denomination has lots of subdivisions). Both comprise mostly laypeople, but monks and nuns are found in both and play a prominent role. And although I will focus on the role that monks and nuns have played, it is important to recognize that most Jains are laypeople. The names for adherents to these denominations are the “sky-clothed” (Digambaras) and the “white-clothed” (Svetambaras), and as you will see, their names get to the core of the historical dispute between them: namely, clothing. What, you might be thinking, is the relationship between clothing and liberation? In Jainism, the two have a long and contentious history. As religious scholar Padmanabh Jaini explains, “the history of Jainism is rather remarkable for the almost total lack of doctrinal accommodation between [these two denominations] . . . regarding the issue of nudity.”²³

The *Digambaras*, meaning “sky-clothed,” are Jains—specifically, only the male monks within this denomination—who go naked as Mahavira did. Rather than donning clothes, Digambara monks are clad in the sky and so wear nothing. In fact, they own no possessions and eat only what they can hold in their hands. They do not receive medical care, brush their teeth, or participate in society. Their decision to wear no clothes derives from their belief that clothes signify attachment, shame, and violence against life (in the plant fibers used), none of which can lead to liberation—moksha. Even the laypersons within the Digambara denomination—who do wear clothes—believe this, thereby sealing their fate that they cannot attain moksha in this lifetime like their (male) monk brothers. In fact, for Digambaras, “nudity remains

23. Jaini, *Path of Purification*, 5.

*the necessary condition for moksha.*²⁴ Although it seems strange and even bizarre that only a tiny fraction of the denomination can achieve liberation—and perhaps it is—it must be stressed that the Jain worldview is cyclical in contrast to the Christian worldview, which is linear. This means that, to put it bluntly, Christians get only one lifetime to get things right, while Jains have ceaseless lifetimes to do so. In this way, most Jains are content to forgo attempting to achieve moksha in this life and, instead, simply hope to be born into a better situation in their next life—perhaps then considering moksha a viable or even preferable option.



Fig. 1.7.
Jain pilgrimage site in Mehsana, India, where both Digambaras and Svetambaras visit.

What about Digambara (female) nuns? Are they able to achieve moksha in this lifetime? Female nun Digambaras do exist, but they wear clothes and, as a result, are believed to be “incapable of practicing non-attachment to the degree of which a man is capable.”²⁵ Consequently, female Digambaras—as well as laymen Digambaras—must be reborn as male Digambaras to achieve moksha. And so they strive to lead an exemplary life in the hope of returning to earth as males capable of attaining the highest spiritual goal. Moreover, Digambaras revere Mahavira, believing him to be more than a human.

The other traditional denomination within Jainism is less strict. Its adherents are called *Svetambaras*, meaning “white-clothed,” since they

24. Jaini, 20.

25. Long, *Jainism*, 17.

wear white clothing rather than go naked like the Digambara monks. Monks and nuns within the Svetambara denomination travel with a begging bowl in which they collect food to return to their religious communities to eat. And they may also wear a face mask and carry a whisk to refrain from harming any insects or small creatures. Svetambaras include males and females, both of which are able to achieve moksha in this lifetime—a concept that is, of course, rejected by Digambaras. Svetambaras even recognize two groups of male monks within the denomination: one that lives alone and naked in the forest and one that lives clothed and in a religious community. Most Jains today are part of this denomination, and they mostly reside in Northern and Western India.

Part 5: Worship Practices

Jain worship practices are not as austere as some of their distinct beliefs may suggest. And their worship of gods appears quite similar to that of most other modern religions. In fact, Jain services and temples present joyful experiences that reflect a zeal for living and a worshipful devotion to their revered ones. I will classify Jain worship practices into three categories: personal piety, corporate worship, and mendicant life.

First, there is personal piety, which is usually practiced in the home. For instance, Jain families have a small shrine at home that contains images of their preferred figures that have renounced the world—such as one of the five groups mentioned in the figure below—often simply called *gods* or *deities*. The specific ones vary, and not surprisingly, Mahavira is quite common. As in Hinduism, these images may be ceremonially fed, bathed, adorned, and even put to sleep. The family shrine centralizes family devotion each day, typically in the morning, with this traditional prayer:

I bow before the worthy ones.
 I bow before the perfected ones.
 I bow before the leaders of the Jain order.
 I bow before the teachers of the Jain order.
 I bow before all Jain monks in the world.²⁶

All five of these figures are former or current mendicants who lived countless lifetimes to be in a place to renounce everything and detach themselves from the things of the world.

26. This foundational Jain prayer is usually called the *Mahamantra*, and various translations are offered. Such mantras are common in Indian religions.

Where Do Most Jains Live? Today, Jains can be found anywhere in the world. But historically in India, the Svetambaras are clustered in Gujarat and Rajasthan, with the Digambaras in Karnataka and Maharashtra.

Five Supreme Beings in the Mahamantra

English (Prakrit)	Referent
Worthy ones (<i>arhats</i>)	Those who achieved nirvana (jinas)
Perfected ones (<i>siddhas</i>)	Those who attained moksha
Leaders (<i>acaryas</i>)	Those who oversee monastic communities
Teachers (<i>upadhyayas</i>)	Those who teach in monastic communities
Monks (<i>sadhus</i>)	Those who are in monastic communities

Second, corporate devotion takes place in Jain temples, at pilgrim sites, and on specific holy days during festivals. When visiting these temples, you should remove your shoes, dress modestly, and act respectfully. In Jain temples, people gaze at, bow before, and pray to the images of the jinas or deities depicted. And most Jains illustrate this through adoring and praising representations of them in the form of *murtis*, or “images.” Murtis, as in Hinduism, offer a material embodiment of a being worthy of respect and honor, and they are depicted in human forms either seated or standing. Temples usually have a primary murti of a jina in addition to side shrines of others. And unlike Christianity, no priests or ordained clergy are needed to intercede between the worshiper and the image.



Fig. 1.8. Jain temple in Ranakpur, India.

Jains pray to these murtis for the same things that people around the world pray for regardless of religious affiliation: health, favor, prosperity, protection, wisdom, and so on. In this way, a Jain service may appear to outsiders as worship of an image of an actual god—just like devotional Hinduism. And for all practical concerns, this is accurate. Other Jains, however, may be less inclined toward praising an image of a jina and instead show their devotion to a living guru who offers advice, teaching, and blessings to devotees. What’s more, pilgrimages are also important in Jain spirituality. It is common for Jains to visit sacred sites where jinas achieved enlightenment. And there are also several famous shrines that pilgrims visit—one of which is the sixty-foot statue of Bahubali, the first person to attain moksha in our epoch. What is more, probably the most popular festival for Jains is *Paryushana* (“coming together”), which is an eight-day ritual that re-creates the life of a monastic.

A third type of worship takes place among the mendicant (monk and nun) communities. Although they receive the bulk of scholarly attention, Jains who take the five vows to become monks or nuns—whether in the Svetambara or Digambara denomination—are very much in the minority.²⁷ Their devotional practices differ in many ways from those of lay Jains. For instance, as mendicants, Jain monks and nuns do not cook their food but rely exclusively on laypeople,²⁸ have no possessions, wear distinct clothing (or, in the case of Digambara male monks, wear nothing), practice meditation, refrain from any sexual activity, offer blessings and teachings (especially during the rainy season in India), perform daily rituals, and follow more austere spiritual practices.

One common spiritual practice in Jainism, regardless of station in life, is meditation. This is commonly done daily in a practice known as *Samayika*, which is designed to last twice the number of formakers, thus forty-eight minutes. The ultimate purpose of meditation is, as in Buddhism, to remember and cultivate our true self—in which we are neither bound to nor shaken by the vicissitudes of life. In this way, meditation allows one to foster and nurture a disposition toward detachment no matter what circumstances are encountered. This is related to a concept called *equanimity*. Literally meaning “even soul” or “even mind,” it refers to the disposition of being so aware of life’s transience that it does not get shaken or stirred.

Outside India, and particularly in the United States, it is common for Jain communities to share space with Hindu ones. This is a strange concept

Who Are the Jain Gods?

Although Jainism does not claim a personal and creator God as in Christianity, there are references to “gods” and “deities” in Jain literature. These gods temporarily live in another realm, and so will eventually be recirculated through the cosmos like every other being.

27. Their numbers are only in the thousands. And they are really found only in India. For more, see Babb, *Understanding Jainism*, 65.

28. It goes without saying that Jains are vegetarians. The central tenet of ahimsa proscribes the eating of an animal.

from a monotheistic perspective—after all, it would be quite shocking to attend a mosque, for instance, that also housed a church. But this is not strange from an Indian religious mindset, particularly in the United States, and you should not be surprised if you attend a Jain worship service only to find that most of the people there are Hindus who are worshipping their own gods and simply share holy space with Jains. This is not to imply that Jainism and Hinduism are identical or follow the same rituals. Nor is it to imply that this arrangement exists or is accepted in India. It is merely to indicate that—particularly in a foreign context—there are many more similarities than differences between the two religions, and that the pooling of resources from such a small community is needed to afford a worship space at all. In India, however, the differences are more pronounced, meaning that you will not as often encounter such an arrangement.

Part 6: Point of Contact

Probably the most distinct teaching of Jainism is ahimsa. As I discussed, the term is variously translated as “nonviolence,” “nonharm,” or “noninjury.” In my conversations over the years with Jains, both in India and in the United States, this is the topic that I most often return to. After all, when you first learn the concept, it is attractive and sounds surprisingly modern. Essentially that message is: “Do no harm.” Yes, we think, *that is a mindset that I can incorporate into my daily life!* In fact, it is a mindset that one of the world’s most famous leaders, Mahatma Gandhi, adopted in his colossal struggle to nonviolently liberate India from British rule in the first half of the twentieth century. But as you dive deeper into ahimsa, moving away from the theoretical and entering into the mundane realities of the practical, it is shocking to learn that the most notable figures in the Jain religion—all twenty-four jinas—were revered because they took the teaching of ahimsa to the extreme by willingly starving themselves of food and water so as not to harm any living creature, including microscopic organisms that we cannot even see in plain sight. This occurred in a practice called *sallekhana*.

As a Christian, I am fascinated by how an otherwise completely foreign concept in another religion relates to Christianity. For instance, I believe that Jainism’s practice of *sallekhana* aligns closely with Christianity’s practice of martyrdom. At the heart of the Christian faith, after all, is Jesus’ death on the cross, which ensured salvation for those who believe in his sacrifice. We live because he died. In addition, Jesus encouraged his followers to take up their crosses and be willing to put their lives on the line for their faith. In this way, I resonate with Jains who willingly

risk their lives for their beliefs. This is, in fact, how most of the Christian disciples died, and there has hardly been a generation since in which missionaries, clerics, and even laypeople have not died for Christ.

But here is the primary difference between Jain *sallekhana* and Christian martyrdom. Those practicing *sallekhana* actively participate in their death, while those undergoing martyrdom passively participate in their death. One is done in foresight, the other in faith. One is done for oneself, the other for Another. One is done to forever renounce the body, the other to eventually resurrect the body. But let me get more to the point: Is it not the case that *ahimsa* is actually violated by *sallekhana*, since the persons doing it are intentionally harming themselves? Are they not simply substituting the life of insects and microscopic organisms for a human life?

Jesus presents what I believe to be a more authentic version of *ahimsa*. For example, Jesus did not hand himself over to the authorities; he was arrested. Jesus did not climb the cross; he was put on it. And Christ did not plunge a spear into his heart; he was stabbed. In this way, I would contend that Jesus demonstrated *ahimsa* more effectively than Mahavira. That is to say, Jesus remained faithful to *ahimsa* from beginning to end. He preached that when being taken advantage of, a person is to turn the other cheek. And when he himself was unlawfully arrested and put on trial, he taught to not use the sword. In short, I think we can round out our understanding of *ahimsa* within Jainism by realizing that Jesus illustrated his glory by transcending nature rather than opposing it. For instance, like Jains, Jesus believed in fasting. But he practiced it occasionally and temporarily to symbolize that we do not live by bread alone. And when he had made his point, he resumed eating. Similarly, when Jesus healed the sick, exorcised the demons, and calmed the waters—however momentarily, selectively, and remotely—it was done symbolically to illustrate that it was God’s ultimate design for humankind to be whole, for spirits to be clean, and for nature to be domesticated. Although there is great value in temporarily opposing nature by fasting from food and water, it is our ultimate design to eat from the tree of life in a restored nature that lovingly provides for its creatures.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you explain what Jainism is in a conversation with a friend?
2. What characteristics or features of Jainism do you think believers and seekers find attractive?

3. What commonalities and differences are there between Jainism and Christianity?
4. What is the difference between Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism? Which do you believe has been most influential in the West? Why?
5. Why does clothing (or lack thereof) play such an important role in Jainism? As you think of worldwide Christianity (including all its denominations), how is clothing used to differentiate or set apart certain individuals? Why is this?

For Further Reading

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