Jainism and Sikhism: The Value of Being "Footnote" Traditions

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In the recently published *Norton Anthology of World Religions*, there were two notable omissions: the ancient nonviolent Indian tradition of Jainism, and the modern Indian tradition of Sikhism. I noticed the absence (1) because they are two traditions that I study, teach, and write about, and (2) because they are often overshadowed by their subcontinent cousins of Hinduism and Buddhism whose adherents are greater in number, more widely dispersed, and hence, have a more pervasive cultural influence. The exclusion in usually pragmatic. For example, *Anthology* general editor Jack Miles prioritized "major, living international religions" in the two-volume set that included Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Daoism, already in excess of four thousand pages! By these criterion, Jainism—though extremely influential in the history of the subcontinent—has too few adherents, while Sikhism—although the fifth largest world religion—is still relatively small and young to have achieved international impact on par with the selected traditions. Likewise, in Richard King's exceptional *Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought*, the author makes explicit apology for the limitations of space that necessitate the exclusion of Jainism in particular, as well as "contemporary Indian philosophers," among whom one might include Sikhism's founder Guru Nanak. The two traditions are also relegated to "footnote" status when a scholar feels unqualified to engage them. This was the case recently, when my colleague in comparative religions—who had previously skipped the chapters on Jainism and Sikhism, for fear of misrepresenting them—invited me, as a new arrival to campus, to speak for those class sessions.

Certainly, it is a tremendous loss when students and the public miss out on the philosophical insights and ethical practices that the Jain and Sikh traditions offer. Yet, I also wonder if the "footnote" position of these lesser known communities is indicative of the historic challenge that both Jainism and Sikhism posed to the dominant cultures in which they developed. As distinct reformer traditions, each in their own moments and contexts of India's complex history, Jainism and Sikhism challenged the status quo of the subcontinent in ways that never achieved the "middle way" mainstream popularity that Buddhism attained first in India, and in its later growth throughout Asia. Thus, although these two traditions are very different from one another—in worldview,

context, and social-spiritual aims—it may be their common marginalization that makes them all the more valuable for reconsidering their contribution to the norms of dominant society today, especially concerning crucial global issues of ecological destruction and sectarian violence.

First, both traditions offer distinct foundational visions that challenge dominant socio-political structures. Jainism asserts that every existent being—from elemental particles to plants, animals, and every class and category of person—is a perceptive and productive member of the planetary community with its own inviolable core authority. As part of the tradition of wandering *śṛamaṇic* monastics who rejected Brahmanic authority, animal sacrifice, and birth caste, Jainism offered an ethical path of knowledge and action open to all. Guru Nanak's fifteenth-century insight of one unified reality (*IkOnkār*) undermined exclusionary religious identities of "Muslim" and "Hindu," welcomed women as full members of society, and undermined class and caste distinctions by facilitating common meals and shared voluntary service.

Second, both traditions differently articulate the philosophical necessity of multiple perspectives. The Jain teacher Mahāvīra (sixth-century B.C.E.) utilized the concept of *anekāntavāda*, or non-one-sided perspective, to refute rival philosophers of his time. Complex reality could only be understood by integrating multiple, even seemingly contradictory, claims. Anekāntavāda required one to genuinely consider and debate competing assertions, rather than dismiss them out of hand. Sikhism also includes a plurality of voices in its primary text the *Guru Granth Sahib* which features, not only the words of Nanak and the nine subsequent teachers after him, but also the words of Muslim Sufi saints such as Kabir, or the Hindu bhakta Ram Dass. For Sikhism, those whose experience illuminated an integrated reality were included as sages, regardless of their community affiliation or cultural identity. The later Sikh community also militantly defended religious pluralism against political attempts to force conversions.

Third, both traditions emphasize the vital importance of daily living within the material world. Renunciation is the goal for Jain monks and nuns whose profound commitment to interfere as little as possible with other living entities leads them to ascetic practices such as walking barefoot, wearing a mouth-shield to prevent inhaling microorganisms, or carrying a feather broom to sweep the ground clear before sitting. The majority of Jains are not monastic, yet many actively strive toward non-harm in their own lives through vegetarianism, by cultivating lives of artful simplicity, and by engaging in social, environmental, or animal advocacy, medical service, and education. Jains affirm that daily life exacts a cost on real bodies and this cost can be mindfully reduced.

Historically, Nanak rejected the path of renunciation—even of the Jains. He, and the

community after him, uplifted the value of meaningful work in the world, celebrated the physical body as a divine gift without need for purity, elevated the common practices of cooking, marital sex, friendship as "this worldly" experiences of the divine without the mediation of priestly rituals. One's bodies, one's mindful daily activities, and one's service to others offered direct experience of Ultimate Reality.

Neither Jainism nor Sikhism are seamless traditions; theory and practice are always in conversation and debate, and continue to find myriad expressions in India, in the U.S., and in numerous countries where Jains and Sikhs live and contribute to their communities. Perhaps the fact that Jainism and Sikhism are not featured centrally in comparative religious texts and discourse preserves their historic ability to challenge dominant norms, exclusive identities, and social structures from the margins—which is increasingly important in a time of ecological violence, sectarian aggression, and the entrenchment of positions that stunt the evolution of listening, learning, and working together. Alternative political visions require insights that are not beholden to the status quo. It is here that footnotes become essential.

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