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Is There Room for God in Jainism? *And if so, where does God fit?*

By Hunter Joslin

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I am writing now from Benaras in Uttar Pradesh. Since the beginning of my trip with the International School for Jain Studies (ISJS), I have wondered whether or not there is room for God in Jainism.

I am a Christian from the United States, and of course this is a very theocentric question. But I do believe there may be room for God in Jainism. That is, although God does not fit in Jain theory, God may in some way fit in Jain praxis. It is this that I would like to consider.

From the first lecture of ISJS, it was clear to me that Jains do not believe in a creator God. Yet, despite explicit statements about the non-belief of a God in Jain theory, there have been numerous situations in which God was evoked in Jain practice. Over two days in the Maharashtran city Jalgaon, I observed three instances where Jains specifically referred to God on a personal level.

- First, the esteemed Dalichand Oswal, uncle and philanthropic adviser to Bharvalal Jain, the founder of Jain Irrigation Systems, gave a moving speech on Jainism before a lecture by Professor Priyadarshana Jain. During his speech, he stated that he would “ask God for pardon” concerning his wrongdoings. What those wrongdoings were, I am not sure, but it seemed to me that Oswal was speaking generally, asking God for pardon in the way Jains seek forgiveness during the annual Day of Forgiveness (*Ksamavani*) for any harm caused, inadvertently or not, to others.
- Second, following Mr. Oswal's speech, Dr. Sukan Jain, the director of ISJS, stated that Mr. Oswal was not a “theoretical” man, but a “practitioner.” And, moreover, in his praises, he said with great affection: “May God bless you.”
- Third, during his talk at ISJS the following day, Bharvalal Jain stated that being born into the Jain religion was a “gift from God.”

These three statements demonstrate that although God is not a theoretical reality for Jain philosophy, God is still a major consideration in Jain life.

Furthermore, the invocation of God seems to indicate some individual need for God, given that each statement was personal in nature. The first was a petition to God for forgiveness; the second, for a blessing; and the third, an affirmation of God's benevolent giving.

Each vocalization was a certain avowal concerning the personal relationship between God and Jains. However, whether or not these avowals signify a deep theocentric need cannot be easily determined. What can be determined is that there is some reality of God for these three Jains.

But what could it be?

- Why does a Jain, whose religion professes non-belief in God, ask for God to forgive his sins?
- Why does another Jain ask for God to bless someone? and

- Why does a Jain claim his theoretically non-theistic tradition was “a gift from God”?

Does the religion uphold a theoretical belief contrary to that of the common believer?

- One possible answer is linguistics. Each man referred to God idiomatically. This would suggest that the statements were not implications of belief in God, *per se*, but common expressions.
- Another answer may be that these particular Jains personally believe that God is ultimately the supreme being, but, still, not a creator God who interacts with humans on a personal level.
However, given the present usage of God, that could not be the case. Each invocation suggested that God was indeed an active God who is capable of forgiving, blessing, and even gifting human beings and all three of these traits are acts of personal involvement of God, the divine, with individual humans.

- **A third answer may be that there exists a subconscious and basic need for God.**

As a Christian, I would like to believe the latter is true. And so, I ask, why would a Jain speak personally of God?

The answer is perhaps beyond the veil of religious philosophy. Dr. Jain claimed that his friend was a practitioner, not a “theoretical” person. What could that mean? Although many Jains profess non-belief in God, it seems there may be a tendency to profess belief through personal speech and action.

What was Dr. Jain suggesting about his friend? Let us look at the difference between theory and practice.

The main difference seems to be between thought and feeling, or mind and heart.

For Mr. Oswal and Dr. Jain, it appears that God is not something to be philosophized. Rather, God is something to be experienced from the heart.

I struggle with the lack of theistic principles in Jain theory for this reason. I find that much is said but very little comes from the heart.

My mentor Gordon Bennett, a Catholic bishop, SJ, once told a group of participants on a silent retreat that **everyone undertaking a spiritual journey must move from their head to their hearts, from logic to faith. And he said that although the distance is short, the journey is long.**

Writing as someone who believes in the message of Jesus, my understanding of ethics is founded on the notion that **all laws are summed up in love for God and love for neighbor — something which is also very Jain.**

In Christianity, the notion of love stems from belief in God and the dignity of all. Moreover, Christianity sees every person as a child of the one God. Each individual person is therefore together as one in the way one child is part of a larger family.

This system is supported in many religious traditions, including other Indic traditions, such as Vedanta, where the individual soul, *ātman*, is part of the much greater supreme soul, *Brahman* or God.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “theism” is the belief in one creator God of the universe. There is no such belief in Jain religion and thus it is quite reasonable to claim that Jainism is atheistic. However, Jainism is not like Charvaka and other Epicurean-type traditions because of a notion of morality.

Jainism supports that every living being (*jīva*) has a soul (*ātma*). Additionally, Jains strive to “conquer” the power of the body or non-living matter (*pudgala*) with the power of the soul, thus achieving liberation, whereby the soul first becomes an omniscient human (*arihanta*) and then free upon death and release of the karmic body (*siddha*).

Similar to Vedanta, these can transform into *paramātmān*, the highest unified soul. But in Jainism, release of the ātma from karmic bondage requires right belief, right knowledge, and right conduct. Called the three “jewels,” these three concepts suggest the most crucial point in understanding Jain ethics. Simply to have faith, knowledge, and conduct is not enough. These three jewels must be “right,” they must not be “wrong.” The notion of “right” and “wrong” is necessary in order to recognize how Jainism may be considered theistic.

Jainism believes in meritorious and demeritorious acts. Meritorious acts lead one to heavenly realms or, when perfected, to liberation (*mokṣa*). Demeritorious acts lead one to hell realms and rebirth. The fact that there is movement “up” or “down” between heaven and hell signifies that there is a universal truth that is somehow evaluative. According to Jain theory, the evaluation is *karma*.

This law, however, is impartial insofar as grace and supernatural intervention are concerned. Nevertheless, *karmic* law is a certain universal truth that upholds right action from wrong. The crux is liberation. Although *karmic* law is essentially impartial, there is growth within toward a truth or state which is essentially good. It is this state that creates a *karmic* ethic, which is significant for Jain theism.

Again, the key is the goal of liberation. Those who do what is right move toward liberation, and free themselves from bondage. *Karmic* law is thus an evaluative process. There is an ultimate that is considered idealistic. It is this ultimate that governs all activity.

Bondage is bad and freedom is good; meritorious acts are good and demeritorious acts are bad. Therefore, although Jainism may not be theistic in theory, it is not necessarily atheistic because it supports a system fundamentally moral insofar as it directs one to a higher good.

So, I return once more to the question: is there room for God in Jainism, and if so, where?

The observations that I have put forth are only speculative at best. Concerning the *karmic* ethic in Jainism, perhaps there is a certain theocentric law of morality that governs daily life. Concerning God, there is still much room for debate.

Why do Jains speak of God? But perhaps that is not the right question. In the argument I put forth, I stated that **God is to be believed, not rationalized**. And the examples that I gave show that this level of belief and behavior may in fact be linked to a certain desire or value of God within Jain praxis.

In the end, maybe the question is not whether or not there is room for God in Jainism. Rather, the question is **whether or not there is room for a personal God in the heart of Jains?**

End

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