

*Catholics and Jains:
Non-Violence as Contributor to Peace*

Oshwal Community Centre, London

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These few words are intended as a response to Professor Balbir's eloquent paper and a gesture of thanks to this community for your welcome. It would not be right for me to propose some counter-position which we can then debate, still less to pick holes in his argument. I have long held that the purpose of dialogue is to learn – to engage with both commonalities and areas of difference for as long as possible, without making premature judgement. It may well be that in listening carefully to what is being said by 'the other' we come to appreciate more deeply the integrity of tradition – the truth kept in our own spiritual world. I find something of that thinking reflected in Jain life and teaching. Which makes me doubly grateful to be here.

My old friend and mentor – the late Brother Daniel, with whom I worked for many years – always exhorted us to 'listen *with all the senses*'. It's a good Catholic principle. We do not just hear the Word of God; we see it and touch it. In the words of the psalmist 'taste and see that the Lord is good'. That is why it is so important in the first place to acknowledge the significance for our conversation of being in this place here, surrounded by the iconography and ritual of an ancient tradition. It is not just what we say which is important – though our words are, of course, highly significant markers of where we come together and where we differ. Our words are always framed by the particularity of the moment; the depth of their meaning is opened up both by the links they keep with life-giving memories and through a living encounter with persons who – as Cardinal Hume never ceased repeating – share a common humanity.

It was, perhaps, that insight which most inspired the early Fathers of the Church to speak of the 'seeds of the Word' in the cultures and religious traditions they saw around them. What they inherited was a vision of a 'new Creation', of all things and all people gathered to God in Christ: God's Word, spoken with real power in the outpouring of the Spirit of Christ, was already at work transforming the world. It was this vision that served as an inspiration to communicate the Gospel message of peace and reconciliation, to make explicit something they knew intimately; something they knew to be profoundly true both in their lives – and in the whole of humanity.

Now that vision seems at first sight far removed from the austere personal asceticism of the Jain tradition. Mahavira and the earlier *Tirthankaras* fit within the *śramanic* or renouncer tradition of ancient India – sometimes characterised in modern surveys as the individualism of itinerant philosophers which challenges the communalism of the Vedic sacrificial tradition. Whatever the truth in the caricature, it has been – and, as Professor Balbir indicates – continues to be enormously creative. I like those words:

Jainism 'deserves to be credited for its exploration of the notion of life'. We are surrounded by all manner of living things; life in all its forms deserves our respect and is always in danger of being destroyed by human carelessness. It is easy to see in this way of thinking a fore-runner of the modern ecological movement. But something more profound is at stake, something which Catholic Christians can recognise and from which we can learn.

The two most important principles of the Jain tradition – *ahimsa* and *anekanta* – are correlates. Professor Balbir quotes an old scripture: 'first knowledge, then compassion'; an empathetic relation to what lives gives birth to virtues of serenity, watchfulness and non-violence. 'Listen with all the senses'. In dialogue intellect and affect must work together. If we do that, we overcome the tendency to stereotype people in terms of certain beliefs and typical forms of behaviour: Jains believe and do such and such, Catholics believe and do something else. Questions about identity are important. But for the sake of our wider world – the topic for us here today – the crucial question is about how truth motivates action, how a certain vision of things is instantiated in a way of life and leads to certain ways of relating to the world.

What do I as a Catholic Christian learn from the Jain *Dharma*? *Ahimsa* is usually translated as 'non-violence'. As Professor Balbir points out, that can so emphasise the 'non' that it attracts connotations of passivity, of *avoiding* any action which might destroy, disturb or upset. That is unhelpful. Link it with *anekanta* and something much richer emerges. We're not talking here of a naïve relativism – that no account of absolute truth can be given. Rather, all systems of thought *as they are realised and practised in this particular moment by this particular observer* can only offer partial views of the truth about the world.

And yet that *dharma* is realised by the wise whose strength of purpose and generosity to all beings serves to correct or guide all other viewpoints. As the *Acaranga Sutra* says, 'All breathing, existing, living, sentient creatures should not be slain, nor treated with violence, nor abused, nor tormented, nor driven away. This is the pure, eternal, unchangeable law which the clever ones, who understand the world, have proclaimed.' This is the *dharma*, it goes on, that is 'seen (by the omniscient ones), heard (by the believers), acknowledged (by the faithful), and thoroughly understood by them.'(1.4.1) There is an open-ended quality to this desire to participate in the tradition of the 'clever ones'.

If I may attempt my own gloss: to take refuge in one particular standpoint can short-circuit the arduous process of learning and give rise not to wisdom but to the sort of typically human carelessness which always risks doing violence to the delicate fabric of relations between all the many forms of living creatures.

Ahimsa as practised by the wise is a deliberate counter to that tendency. The form of the word in Sanskrit has a desiderative or volitional force. The root is

han, to kill; literally it means 'wishing not to kill' or, better perhaps, 'wishing well' to someone, that they may enjoy a life which is free of all forms of violence. Within Jain culture, then, *ahimsa* has more than a merely prescriptive force. It's the centre of a way of life made plain by those who are wise, those who have come to 'understand the world'. There's a principle of life here which insists that all beings are interdependent. The corollary is that nature is not to be abused – instrumentalised in pursuit of selfish gain. I find echoes here of that Patristic notion that a world made new by God's Word is itself shot through with 'seeds of the Word' which, if nurtured and supported may grow into the 'new creation'.

So how can the practice of *ahimsa* become a contribution to peace? Let me make one more comment in response to Professor Balbir before coming back briefly to the relations between our two traditions.

It would be easy to patronise *ahimsa*, and indeed the whole Jain tradition, as a quaint relic of an outdated religious world-view. Non-violence is an important virtue, essential indeed for achieving personal salvation, but it would be impractical to suggest that an ascetical culture of simplicity and restraint can form the basis of the political order. And yet, in a society all too much dominated by the spirit of acquisitiveness and the easy recourse to violence in pursuit of particular and partisan objectives, *ahimsa* does *at the very least* offer an important counter-witness.

Every society depends on achieving a consensus between its citizens in which coercion is kept to a minimum and freedom of movement and expression under the law maintained. Professor Balbir argues that for a healthy and non-violent society to flourish we have to begin with the individual's 'state of mind and attitude' towards others. He is quite right. As a wise old friend of mine, trade unionist turned Catholic priest, used to say when confronted with the idiocies of any organisation, especially government: 'Systems don't work; people work systems.'

That is not just to put our faith in personal conversion and hope for the best. It is rather to recognise that each and every one of us has a responsibility, to each other and to our world. Just last week Pope Francis was speaking about the environment and he drew attention to the opening chapters of the Bible, from the Book of Genesis – a text which with its reference to 'dominion' has all too often been interpreted as permission to exploit the world. Instead the pope notes that God placed man and woman on earth to cultivate and care for the world (cf. 2:15). For him this raises a question:

'What does cultivating and caring for the earth mean? Are we truly cultivating and caring for creation? Or are we exploiting and neglecting it? The verb "to cultivate" reminds me of the care that the farmer has for his land so that it bear fruit, and it is shared: how much attention,

passion and dedication! Cultivating and caring for creation is God's indication given to each one of us not only at the beginning of history; it is part of His project; it means nurturing the world with responsibility and transforming it into a garden, a habitable place for everyone.'

The point is that this is not *our* world; it is held in trust. In Christian terms whatever we have in this world comes from God as gift and is to be treated with reverence as a sign of God's love for humankind. And perhaps the most important of gifts is peace – the source of Christian motivation to act responsibly.

When Jesus greets his disciples after the Resurrection he says 'peace be with you'. Peace is not an absence, a lack of war, a period of quiescence when exhaustion temporarily takes over from upheaval and we can all relax. The Christian virtue of peace, like *ahimsa*, is much more positive than that. For the Christian peace, and acts of peace-making, speak of the very presence of God. Christians believe that to become persons of peace who can exercise real responsibility for their world, we need first to receive peace as a gift. And that can only happen when we have come to terms with our short-term desires and begun to recognise that only in the infinity of God's own promise can our world ever experience that vision of the 'new creation' made real in the person of Christ.

Let me finish with one final observation – this time about inter-religious relations. We tend to associate violence with physical acts in which persons get hurt or killed; the dreadful episode in Woolwich is just the most obvious recent example. Meanwhile our TV screens are filled night after night with the disaster unfolding in Syria. Yet there is plenty of violence of a more subtle kind in all societies, from prejudice against minorities to the more petty acts of oppression which entrench vested interests of all kinds. For all sorts of reasons human beings suppress 'the other', the stranger. Yet if otherness is suppressed or ignored or demeaned in some way it tends only to come back in another form; only this time alienated and dangerous.

Our contemporary society is more sensitive to the rights of minorities, to the varieties of culture and custom, to a pluralism of values, to different ways in which people negotiate that difficult nexus between truth and action. Which is not to say that we are better at dealing with 'the other'. To deal with the myriad forms of violence in our midst it is not enough that we exhort each other to non-violence – though that is, of course, a start. We also need to understand how different peoples and communities, sometimes with very different histories and traditional forms of belief, can learn *from each other* the virtues of co-existence. That is one of the great challenges of our time.

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