



The role of religions in promoting fraternal love and non-violence for harmony and peace

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Amongst the statues of the many Prime Ministers and Presidents who stand augustly in Britain's Parliament Square, is a lone, *dhoti* and shawl clad figure of the Indian independence movement leader Mahatma Gandhi, directly opposite the House of Commons.

In the heart of Westminster, Gandhiji cuts a rather peculiar figure; neither a Prime Minister of Britain nor of its allies, but instead a freedom fighter who was imprisoned by the British on many occasions for his uncompromising adherence to peaceful resistance, and whose actions directly contributed to the independence of India.

Today we continue to honour this man, whose name has become synonymous with *Ahimsa* or non-violence, and whose influence on other great national and civil-rights leaders, like Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King, are well documented. Gandhiji credits Jainism and Lord Mahavir, the last Jain spiritual teacher, as the source of his inspiration. He said, "No religion of the world has explained the principle of non-violence so deeply and systematically, with its applicability in life as in Jainism.....Bhagwan Mahaveer is sure to be respected as the greatest authority on non-violence".

In fact, during his independence struggles, Gandhiji's daily spiritual practise included practice of the Jain lay vows of Non Violence, Truth, Non stealing, Non Possession and Celibacy.

In his autobiography, Gandhiji says that "Jainism was strong in Gujarat and its influence was felt everywhere and on all occasions". He was born into the Modh Vanik merchant community of Gujarat. I myself am also from the Vanik community, and know the significant contribution that the Vaniks has made to the promotion of Jainism through great historic saints such as *Acharya* Hemchandra, as well as the many Jain monks and nuns who continue to practice this ancient religion today.

Through his freedom struggles, Gandhiji looked to Srimad Rajchandra, who he referred to as his "guide and helper". Srimad was a contemporary Jain poet, mystic and philosopher, and it's fair to say that Gandhiji was aware of the Jain religion and its tenants from the abundance of his questions on subjects as diverse as the nature of the soul, on God as the creator of the universe, on karma and on moksha or liberation.

It is through understanding this interaction, that we can learn a considerable amount on the role of religions in promoting fraternal love and non-violence for harmony and peace.

Bhagwan Mahavir, lived in the 6th century BCE in what is now modern day Bihar in Eastern India. He lived at a time of immense change, and with remarkable parallels to today's society. The discovery of iron in the 6th-5th Centuries BCE had led to the development of implements such as the axe and plough. Eastern India around the Ganges basin was thickly forested around that time, and these new tools allowed massive and rapid deforestation to create towns and villages.

The people of that time had previously been largely nomadic, living harmoniously in wandering communities and with shared possessions. Theirs' was a life in harmony with both animals and nature. However, iron gave rise to an agricultural economy and a more settled lifestyle. It also concentrated wealth in a new class in villages and towns, causing economic inequalities, liquidating the previously held tribal ideals of kinship and equality. Many tribes of that period were affected by the concentration of private property in the hands of fewer persons. This naturally tended to strengthen the division of society, with social, legal and economic privileges for the higher castes.

It is within this environment that Mahavir preached his religion of non-violence and compassion. Mahavir distinctively taught that all life, including plants, insects and animals have a unique and individual soul which is capable of liberation or *moksha*. Many scholars believe, this was aimed at the environmental destruction around him. Since Jainism does not believe in a creator God, his message was not about preserving the creation but rather about love for all forms of life and non-violence towards them to minimise harm.

It is interesting to note that he also chose to classify air, earth, fire and water bodies as having souls and therefore also being sentient. By this act, he defined non-violence towards the environment in its broadest sense; from air and water pollution, to mining, deforestation and chemical pollutants, to exploitation of animals and the natural world. Even today, these are all considered by Jains to cause harm to forms of life, which are a mere extension of our human family.

Modern Jain monks continue to be characterised by their whisk broom and mouth covering cloths, both of which are purely intended to protect the smallest forms of life from harm.

During his freedom struggle Gandhiji dreamt of an ideal society which would be free from any form of exploitation, social differences, violence, and injustice. He aimed to create a class-less society characterised by universal brotherhood, truth, freedom, love, justice and equality of all. He said, “My notion of democracy is that under it the weakest shall have the same opportunities as the strongest”, a notion not unlike Mahavir’s attempt at restoring kinship and equality.

Today, we face multiple challenges largely through the revolutions of industrialisation, transportation and digitisation. They have all made this earth a much smaller place, but also increased the ability for individuals, corporations and governments to have massive impact through their actions; whether that be good or bad.

The role of religions as a concerned stakeholder in this picture is complex. However, its voice continues to be significant, and its path should be unflinching in driving peace and harmony in every situation. Gandhiji’s 150th birth anniversary is a timely reminder that the way of non-violence is powerful enough to shake the largest of empires, and that fraternal love towards our fellow man, and our environment, is not only necessary, but essential for living harmoniously on this earth.

In 2016 during a visit to the Vatican, a Jain delegation led by the Institute of Jainology was blessed to have an audience with HH Pope Francis. In a short speech, he thanked them for their commitment to the planet, and saying, "We all love mother Earth, because she is the one who has given us life and safeguards us; I would also call her sister Earth, who accompanies us during the journey of our existence. Our duty is to take care of her just as we would take care of a mother or of a sister, with responsibility, with tenderness and with peace".

I am grateful to the Pontifical Council for hosting this session on the 150th Birth Anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, and providing a forum for the many religions here today to discuss this important subject. I pray that our voices and efforts continue to be heard not just here, but through the wonders of the Internet, the world over.

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