

## Dialogue and Collaboration in this Complex Era

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Firstly, I would like to thank His Eminence Cardinal Tauran and the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue (PCID) for inviting me as a representative of the Jain community to participate and express our views.



Let's start with this picture.....What do you see? ~ A young lady? An old lady? A Big Nose? A moustache?

So, we accept that we can have differing views. Likewise, different faiths can have differing views on ontology, or perception of the nature of what is Reality. And everyone has a right to their own view point. Need for dialogue is important to understand each other's differences and viewpoints so that we can respect them with reason. On this basis we wish to present the Jain view of reasoning in dialogue called *anekantvaad* or multiplicity of viewpoints. This is a powerful tool for achieving peace and tolerance and we will discuss it later in this paper. This forum today on dialogue and collaboration is *anekantvaad* in practise!

As His Eminence Cardinal Tauran has pointed out in his invitation, societies everywhere have become multi-religious due to migration and other reasons, and we are faced with complex challenges. In this session we will first define 'dialogue' and 'collaboration'. Then we will look at the complex challenges that we face for living peacefully in this modern era, and finally we will talk about why it is important to have such a forum from the Jain perspective.

Dialogue is defined in Dictionary.com as 'an exchange of ideas or opinions on a particular issue, especially a political or religious one, with a view to reaching an amicable agreement or settlement' and collaboration is defined as 'working with another or others on a joint project'.

The fact that we are gathered together today is an acknowledgement that we have common challenges, whether in Italy, UK or back in our countries of origin, and we all wish to achieve a peaceful solution.

So what are the challenges we are facing in the modern era?

There are several but for brevity I have grouped them under these headings:

1. **Increased travel.** People are migrating from their homelands to other countries for various reasons like better economic prospects, security and freedom on humanitarian grounds. This has resulted in...
2. **Multi-faith neighbourhoods** and 'global multi-faith villages'.
3. **Reduced tolerance** between different faith groups and between nations giving rise to political and immigration issues. Religious reasons are often misused to justify violence forgetting humanitarianism and creating refugee crises and ethnic cleansing.
4. **Explosion in communication technology.** We have social media like email, tweets and Facebook which give snapshots and dramatic and often judgemental reporting, without moral foundations. For example, if there was an incident, it would become global within seconds, without giving time to the host country to deal with it. There is no respect for day or night and news travels through time zones in an instant. People don't sleep, and hence often make irrational decisions in haste!
5. **Language and educational issues.** Lot of Jains, and I am sure this is the case in other traditions who have been influenced by western culture, and especially second and third generations born in the west, are losing their faith due to the influence of complexities of modern life. Western educational institutions prepare students to be independent and be successful in their career and wealth, but fail to provide the infrastructure for positive traditional and religious values. Newer generations need appropriate literature written in a modern language, style, content and application.
6. **Consumerism and materialism** which have increased ego, greed, selfishness and instant gratification. Economic independence has resulted in split family units and the elderly have been the main casualties.
7. **Ecological issues and climate change** which have resulted from the waste products of increased travel, consumerism and materialism. This particular issue was addressed here

in the Vatican in 2016 when delegates discussed the topic of ‘Taking care of the Earth, the home of the human family’, where His Highness Pope Francis warmly welcomed the Jain delegates and acknowledged they have common concerns about the environment and ecology. He likened the earth as a caring mother or sister who gives unconditionally. To quote, he said: “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”. Jain delegate, Dr Mehool Sanghrajka, said that taking care of the earth is rooted at the heart of Jain preaching.

The points mentioned so far are inter-religious issues facing all faiths and nations. However, Jains have their unique **intra-religious** issues within the faith and here I will give two examples:

1. Emigrating out of the Indian sub-continent has deprived Jains of the four fold *sangha* or community, that of monks/nuns and male/female laity. Traditionally, the *sangha* supported each other with monks and nuns providing spiritual guidance, and laity providing sustenance for monks. The monks and nuns travel strictly on foot due to their vows of absolute non-violence even to the elements, so travelling abroad is out of the question. As a result, the lay diaspora community outside the Indian sub-continent lacks proper spiritual guidance and there is a trend towards commercialism within the religion and a bias towards rituals and raising funds.
2. The second example is about the concept of *Sallekhana* also known as *Samadhi maran*, which is a highly spiritual death, and is unique to the Jains. It is a practice of embracing natural death, voluntarily, at the end of one's lifespan which is often misunderstood as suicide or euthanasia. By giving up food and drink, which is the highest form of austerity, the aspirant is offering *abhay daan* to plant and water life forms. *Abhay daan* is the highest form of charity which gives freedom from fear of being killed or harmed and does not require any wealth, but requires will-power and strength. In recent years there have been a few cases where the families of the aspirants have faced criminal charges from the Indian High Court.

We will now discuss:

Why dialogue and collaboration is important from the Jain perspective

It is important because Jainism is a minority religion, which has strong principles on peace and harmony with all living beings, including the elements: earth, wind, fire, water and vegetation. Jainism is about ethical living and practising the three A's – *Ahimsa*, *Anekantvaad* and *Aparigraha*.

*Ahimsa* means non-violence and refers not only to wars and manifest acts of violence but also to violence in the hearts and minds of human beings, their lack of concern and compassion for their fellow humans and for the natural world.

The second A stands for *Anekantavaad* – Earlier when we looked at the slide, we saw how we can have different views of a certain aspect. Jains have this powerful tool where it is acknowledged that 'Reality' is known through multiple viewpoints or 'relative pluralism'. Everyone has a different view and Jains respect this right of having a view. Only through awareness of this concept, will we practise tolerance, peace and harmony. In the context of modern day problems facing all communities, nations and indeed the whole world, it is important to have mutual respect and understanding for each other through dialogue and collaboration. And again I congratulate the PCID for creating this platform.

The third A is *Aparigraha*, which means non-accumulation or limiting one's possessions. Consumerism and materialism is the 'new disease' which is gripping the modern world affecting our environment and ecology. Jains consider the elements earth, wind, fire, water and vegetation as simple life, possessing one sense. Respecting these elements, by consuming economically will definitely help our ailing ecology. **The Jain Declaration on Nature** initiated and formed by the Institute of Jainology in 1990 after consultation

with Jain communities internationally, defines the essential Jain values, and its concepts of nature, ecology and the environment.

You don't have to be born in a Jain family or be initiated. A true Jain is one who practices the 3 A's which anyone irrespective of caste, colour, creed or gender can follow.

Jains are generally peaceful and tolerant, so it is important that their faith and practise is not compromised by the challenges faced in the modern world. These forums can help others to understand Jainism's ideals and Jain monasticism which is the pinnacle of non-violent living. There have been some examples where Jain monks, especially from the Digambara sect, have faced animosity because they go around nude, due to their practise of non-possession to the utmost. Although Jains are not violent, violence is experienced by Jains. Jains are not known to engage in proselatysing or criminal and terrorist activities. On the contrary they are known for their philanthropy.

Because Jain principles are based on peace and non-violence, they practise vegetarianism, animal welfare and care for the environment.

### Conclusion

We all acknowledge that we are highly challenged with multiple issues due to an explosion in science and technology, global travel, fast communication, consumerism, media reporting and the high level of interaction between people of different faiths. The root of these issues lies in a difference in beliefs whether it be inter or intra religious or between generations and a lack of restraint. This is aggravated by the belief that what is mine is right rather than what is right is mine.

Although Jainism is one of the oldest religions and is seen as a microcosm in Indian society, its concepts have a direct relevance to many issues currently of concern to the east as well as the west through its practise of the three A's *ahimsa*, *anekantvaad* and *aparigraha*. Today's generation finds it difficult to apply these principles due to advances in technology, the fast pace of modern living, materialism and greed. So here we have a conundrum!

It is certain that the pace of change will accelerate and that the types of challenges will keep on changing over time. If we continue to have these interfaith dialogues and collaborate with each other, and jointly stress the practise of compassion and restraint, then we can help find solutions for a peaceful existence for all living beings.

Thank you!

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