Book Review - The Jains

*The Jains*, by Paul Dundas, is the leading general introduction to Jainism and part of the *Library of Religious Beliefs and Practices* series by Routledge Press. The author, Paul Dundas, is a Sanskrit scholar in the School of Asian Studies at the University of Edinburgh. He is probably the foremost Western scholar on Jainism, and also lectures on Buddhism, Prakrit, and Indian cultural history. As such, Dundas is well qualified to pen this book.

Summary

Dundas begins with the Fordmakers, the twenty-four founders of the Jain religion from Rishabhanatha in prehistory to Mahavira (599-527 BC). Jainism adopted many of the Hindu beliefs, including reincarnation and the concept of release from the cycle of rebirth (moksha). It resulted in part from a reaction against violence, such as Vedic animal sacrifices in Hinduism, and came to maturity at the same time as Buddhism. Asceticism, denying desires and suppressing senses are major themes of Mahavira’s teaching. He emphasized the Three Jewels of Jainism; right faith, right knowledge and right practice.

The two major sects of Jainism are the Svetambaras and the Digambaras. Monks and nuns from the former wear white robes, predominate in the north of India, and form the largest sect of Jains. Digambara monks go naked, while the nuns wear robes, and predominate in the warmer south of India. The sects have no large doctrinal differences, although Svetambaras believe that women can achieve deliverance (moksha) while Digambaras believe that deliverance from the cycles of rebirth is only available to men. A woman must be reborn as a man to achieve moksha. The sects generally get along, but there have been sharp disputes over sacred sites. Both use writings from the fordmakers, especially Mahavira, as scripture, but the canon differs somewhat. In any case, holy writings do not have the same function or authority in Jainism as in the Abrahamic religions. Dundas’ chapter on the history of the Jains was disappointing primarily because he failed to clarify how the major events in Indian history, such as the Muslim invasions, impacted the sect. His explanation that Jains allow violence for self-preservation was enlightening.¹

The life of a Jain monk is primarily spent wandering in gacchas (small groups of monks), punctuated by periods of stationary living in temples or among the lay community. Ascetics ascend fourteen “stages of quality” from ignorance and superstition through the “correct view” and ultimately to austerity, suppression of the passions, and deliverance.² Monks (and sometimes nuns) can attain every step, but Jain laymen cannot progress beyond the fifth or

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1 Dundas, 118-119, 163
2 Dundas, 151
sixth stage. Jains generally follow Hindu ceremonies for their rites of passage (birth, marriage, death), but the initiation ceremony for ascetics is Jain-specific and called Diksa. Jain monks take the Great Vows: 

1. Reject killing any living thing, including insects, and adopt non-violence.
2. Avoid lying.
3. Reject theft.
4. Renounce sexual activity.
5. Reject any attachments, to possessions, to other people, or to anything else.
6. Avoid eating after dark, for fear of killing something accidentally.

Jain ascetics follow three protections (disciplining themselves to curb thoughts, words and actions). They also perform the “Careful Actions”: 

1. Care in motion – avoiding abrupt movements that might inadvertently hit and kill a life form.
2. Care in malevolent statements or excessive laughter – avoiding words that might discourage a person and indirectly cause death to a life form, and avoiding excessive mirth.
3. Care in seeking alms – Jain monks are vegetarians but also cannot eat certain foods such as root vegetables. What they eat must be prepared carefully.
4. Care not to put something down on something else – lest they lay an object down and crush a life form.
5. Care in checking the ground before emptying one’s bowels – lest they step or defecate on a life form.

As they progress, Jain monks and nuns obey the Obligatory Actions (equanimity, praise of the fordmakers, homage to the teacher, repentance, laying down the body, and abandonment of the world). Ascetics may rise to the rank of acarya (teacher) and are called upon to end their lives with prolonged fasting (sallekhana).

Jain laypersons support monks and nuns through donations, both of alms and of money for temples and religious events. Historically merchants, Jains have financed kings and emperors as well as art and architecture. Jain laymen take the “Lesser Vows”:

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3 Dundas, 158-159
4 Dundas, 164
5 Dundas, 170
6 Dundas, 179
7 Dundas, 189-190
1. Regulate your livelihood so that you minimize the chance of killing another life form. Agriculture is not prohibited but is problematic.
2. Avoid sharp (unscrupulous) business dealings.
3. Do not steal.
4. Have only one wife, and abstain from intercourse after having enough children to carry on the family business. Avoid intercourse whenever possible to avoid killing sperm.
5. Do not become overly attached to possessions.

The Lesser Vows are followed by the “Subsidiary Vows” (avoid excessive travel, avoid frivolity and avoid self-indulgence). Finally, laypersons have the “Vows of Instruction”, regulating one’s religious practices. Jains bid to fund religious projects such as temple furnishings and festival costs, thus establishing their moral and financial status in the community.⁸ Jain women often use fasting to demonstrate their chastity.⁹ Jain worship includes bejeweling idols (puja), yearly festivals (caturmas, Paryusan), and pilgrimage to holy places.

The author writes that Jains ostensibly believe that all paths lead to the One Being, but like other faiths feel that their religion is the best. Jains object to the violence in other scriptures (such as the Vedas) and object to the idea of impermanence for fear that such beliefs lead to anarchy.¹⁰ Dundas’ last chapter discusses Jainism in the past 200 years but spends precious little time on the modern era.

Conclusion

_The Jains_, by Paul Dundas, is a comprehensive and authoritative book on this important and ancient Indian religion. It is not easy reading. Wading through the innumerable Sanskrit terms and Indian names is taxing but important. At times Dundas’ writing is dry. His treatment of Jain history is lacking and that of modern Jainism is almost non-existent. Nonetheless, Dundas has written a book worth reading and worth keeping. Anyone interested in Jainism should save a space on their shelf or in their E-reader for _The Jains._

Questions

1. How has Jainism changed under the influence of modernism and postmodernism?
2. How are Jains reacting to the increasing Hindu nationalism in India under Modi?
3. How can American Christians better understand Jains and demonstrate Christ?

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⁸ Dundas, 198
⁹ Dundas, 199
¹⁰ Dundas, 242