Religious Traditions In Jainism

Jainism is a religion that traces back to Ancient India and is practiced by around 5 million people today. The majority of Jains live in India, but there are also small populations living in Europe, Canada, the United States, and Australia. Like Hindus and Buddhists, Jains believe in a cycle of birth and rebirth, with the ultimate goal of liberation (Moksha). Breaking the cycle is dependent on the individual's actions throughout their life and eliminating karma from the soul.

There are 5 great vows or “mahavratas” in Jainism: truthfulness, not stealing, not being possessive, non-violence, and chastity. Along the concept of non-violence (ahimsa) is their belief that all living things—humans, plants, and animals—contain a soul and should not be harmed. For this reason, Jains follow a strict vegetarian diet. Some of the Jains I know also refrain from eating root vegetables. Upon researching the reason why I found that it is because root vegetables are considered to be “ananthkay” (infinite) and uprooting involves killing the plant.

The primary leading figure in Jainism is Mahavira (599-527 BCE), and he is credited for giving rise to Jainism as we know it today. He was a prince who became a monk and then lived the life of an ascetic until he finally attained Moksha. His teachings are contained in texts called Agamas. I was surprised by the fact that Jains do not believe in a singular creator God, but rather believe in beings called Jinas who have reached Moksha and are worthy of devotion. Nevertheless, Jains still go to temples to worship the tirthankaras that represent the Jain ideals they hope to achieve.

I chose to explore Jainism because of the many shared concepts with my religion, Hinduism. Since both traditions share a common background, I wanted to see how the two have evolved and find the similarities and differences between them. Many of my friends, primarily with the last name “Shah”, practice Jainism. In fact, they are from the same part of India like me, celebrate some of the same holidays, and speak the same native language that I do (Gujarati); therefore, I have always been intrigued by how Jains can be very culturally similar to Hindus, yet still practice a different religion. I am now aware that while Jainism and Hinduism both have a similar point of origin, and believe in reincarnation and the existence of a soul, they still differ in their beliefs regarding a Creator and central teachings. Jahanvi Patel