

Answers To Some Frequently Asked Questions

(Reprinted from 'Religious Ethics: A Sourcebook', edited by Dr. Arthur B. Dobrin, published by Hindi Granth Karyalaya, Mumbai, 2004.)

(Continued from July 2005 Issue)

by Duli Chandra Jain

33. Is the theory of evolution compatible with your religion?

Jain scriptures say that the universe is continuously evolving according to the laws of nature and the attributes of the entities such as souls, matter and energy, space and time. Further, according to Jainism, the absolute truth comprising the nature of reality exists but we can know it only partially. Thus it is not possible for us to ascertain Darwin's theory of evolution. It should be pointed out that the theory of evolution and many other scientific concepts are not relevant to the practice of our code of ethics.

34. Are environmental concerns part of your religious ethic?

The Jain scriptures enumerate the functions of the various entities of the universe. TATTVAARTH SUTRA states that the function of living beings is to help each other (PARASPAROPAGRAHO JEEVAANAAM). Thus all living beings of the universe are interdependent. Thus we must protect our environment for our own survival and for the sustenance of all other living beings. The code of ethics entails that we minimize our passions, especially greed, avoid exploitation of others, and practice non-possessiveness. Thus conservation of natural resources and preservation of environment is an important aspect of Jainism. A layman learns this important lesson by practicing ANARTHADAND VRAT - the augmenting vow of limiting needless activities.

35. Do animals have any moral standing?

In Jainism, one of the attributes of soul is consciousness. The consciousness of worldly souls is obscured to various degrees by the blanket of karmic matter. Accordingly, animals do possess cognitive faculty (UPAYOGA) and thinking facility (MANAH). It is observed that animals learn activities such as picking their food, looking for shelter and protecting themselves. They can be trained to perform a variety of acts and they do not attack their trainers and handlers. Thus they exhibit some discrimination. As an extension of these facts, depending on their mental development, different animals may conceivably have some moral standing.

36. Does your religion predict an end of time? If so, when will that be and what will the world be like for humans?

Jain religion believes that all entities of the universe are eternal. Time is one of the six entities in the universe. Thus time is eternal. The universe does undergo ascending and descending cycles like crests and troughs of waves. During an ascending cycle, the level of morals in society and the state of peace and harmony in society increases while during the descending cycle, the opposite happens.

37. Is sex outside marriage permissible?

38. Is sex only for procreation?

39. Is masturbation allowed?

40. Is genital sex the only morally permissible type?

One of the five virtues taught by the Jain scriptures is chastity. It is called BRAHMACHARYA in Sanskrit, which literally means dwelling in one's soul. This implies that an individual should enjoy the attributes of his/her intrinsic pristine nature. In plain words, BRAHMACHARYA means purity of body and mind. Consequently, the practice of the virtue of chastity implies abstinence from all kinds of sensual activity because it involves passions that lead to karmic influx. In this context, there is little difference between sex outside marriage, sex for procreation, masturbation and other types of sex. All these have some undesirable influence on our lives. It should be pointed out that all living beings have instinctive desires for food, sleep, fear and sensual pleasure. Every individual can not be expected to adopt total celibacy but we are expected to think discreetly, understand that one practice may be less offensive than another and set proper limits for himself/herself.

41. Are there moral codes regarding dress and hairstyles?

According to Jainism, affectionate regard (MOORCHHA) for material possessions should be minimized by laymen. Monks inculcate this virtue of non-possessiveness completely and householders do so partially. Householders gradually minimize their possessions and means of creature comforts because individuals amass materials on account of affectionate regard and possessions, and in turn, lead to affectionate regard, which is an aspect of passions. Thus limiting one's material possessions is part of the Jain code of ethics. The details about dress and hairstyles is a matter of personal preference at least as far as householders are concerned.

42. Is transvestitism immoral?

43. Is homosexuality immoral?

Transvestitism involves deriving pleasure from dressing in the clothes of the opposite sex. Thus it is covered by the virtue of purity of body and mind (BRAHMACHARYA) described above. Homosexuality also falls into the same category. Both kinds of activities involve passions and stain one's thoughts and feelings as do other sensual activities to a greater or lesser extent. Consequently, a rational individual sets a limit on such activities for himself/herself.

44. Should all people have equal rights under the law even if they engage in immoral behavior?

Jainism teaches that we should not distinguish individuals on the basis of their moral behavior. We do not preach and try to change others beliefs and practices. We condemn the improper actions but not the individuals. As far as granting equal rights under the law is concerned, it is function of the government and administration for the purpose of maintaining equity, justice, order, peace and harmony in society.

45. Should gay marriages be recognized by the state?

Jains believe in secularism - complete separation of church and state. Making laws and enforcing them is not the role of religion. We believe that basically, the code of ethics preached by all religions is similar and that society will be better off if the laws are made without any bias toward any particular religion.

46. Is it immoral to have more than one spouse at a time?

The virtue of purity of body and mind (BRAHMACHARYA) entails setting limits as indicated above. Thus obviously, having only one spouse at a time is highly desirable in the practice of partial celibacy for householders. Jain monks observe total celibacy and so the question of multiple partners does not arise in their case. It should be remarked that having multiple spouses is bound to lead to problems, conflicts and passionate arguments, which comprise mental violence and may lead to physical violence as well. Jains should refrain from such situations that have potential for violence.

47. Is divorce acceptable?

Jains are expected to develop a rational view of reality. We should realize that all are human with all kinds of strengths and weaknesses, virtues and shortcomings. The self is no exception to these verities. Further, divorce entails serious violence of feelings and thoughts, even if children are not involved. Thus divorce and the situations leading to divorce should be avoided at all cost in view of the Jain practice of the virtue of nonviolence. Our belief in reality also tells us to accept reality. Divorces do occur, mostly in the heat of passions and we have to treat such cases as any other aspect of reality.

48. Are the roles played by men and women a moral issue?

The Jain code of ethics comprising of the five virtues of nonviolence (AHIMSA), truth (SATYA), non-stealing (ACHAURYA), purity of body and mind (BRAHMACHARYA) and non-possessiveness (APARIGRAH) is the same for men and women. Both men and women are supposed to play their common roles of helping each other, working for the common welfare of all humanity, and protecting the environment. Each is responsible for his/her moral conduct.

49. Are men and women separate but equal?

Reality is that there are certain inherent differences between males and females, man and women. For example, mothers give birth, and the two parents have somewhat different instincts toward their children, and in general, play somewhat different roles in raising them. Nevertheless, the two are equal in the eyes of Jainism for the concerns of welfare of their children and the roles played by them are equally important. Due to present circumstances, these roles are changing to some extent, but this does not change view of Jainism regarding their equality.

50. Is the use of drugs and/or alcohol allowable?

Alcohol is known to suppress one's inhibitions. Drugs and alcohol impair an individual's ability to discriminate between good and bad, right and wrong, propriety and indecorum. They generate numerous problems and conflicts among people. This amounts to self-directed mental violence. It contributes to physical violence of self and of others. Drugs and alcohol are addictive - one becomes dependent on them and loses one's discretion and independence. Jains believe in supremacy of nonviolence so they are expected to stay away from these substances.

51. Should prayers be allowed in public schools?

In a society based on the principle of separation of church and state, there is no room for prayer in public schools. Supporting such practices in the name of promoting moral values, ethical conduct and sense of patriotism sends a wrong message because no prayer is divorced from some religious tenets.

52. Should the state subsidize religious schools or programs?

How can a secular state subsidize religious schools or programs? This will only create competition for recognition, ill will and conflicts among various sections of society. Church and state should remain in separate spheres.

53. Is the food a person eats a religious and/or moral concern?

Almost all religions place some restrictions on food and diet. In view of the virtue of nonviolence, Jainism teaches vegetarianism. It is good for our mental and physical health. A non-vegetarian diet entails killing of animals while growing grains, fruits and vegetables involves less violence. It is also good for the environment because production of animal foods requires more natural resources than production of vegetarian foods.

54. Is gambling allowed?

Gambling involves greed and it is addictive. In many instances, it leads to personal and family problems and ruins the well-being of one's family. Jainism teaches us to avoid the situations that may lead to problems and violence of any kind.

55. Is smoking allowed?

Smoking is not good for one's health. It is addictive. Thus it is self-directed violence. A Jain is expected to refrain from such activities. In fact, the Jain scriptures teach the householders not to indulge in businesses and enterprises that involve the sale or promotion of smoking, gambling, alcohol, drugs, pornography and other instruments of mental and physical violence.