

## Conversations with Jains about Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation

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*Drawing on interviews conducted before and after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and social unrest of 2020, this article will review some of the history of Jains involved in interfaith dialogue and cooperation in the United States, starting in the late twentieth century. Naresh Jain, Arvind Vora, Sulekh Jain, Nikhil Bumb, Pankti Gala on behalf of Jains for Justice, and Nirali Sheth describe their various approaches to interfaith work, ranging from apolitical to politically progressive, and give various descriptions of the two Jain practices/values often primary to their interfaith efforts: ahimsā (non-harming, non-violence) and anekāntavāda (many-sidedness of truth).*

*Keywords: Jain, Jainism, JALNA, nonviolence, interfaith, pandemic, ahimsā, anekāntavāda, higher education, diversity, inclusion, COVID, 2020, Black Lives Matter, BLM, LGBTQ, Sikh*

### Introduction

The premodern history of Jainism includes many Jains, especially laymen and monks, engaging in interreligious dialogue and cooperation in the public sphere to increase awareness of Jainism, advocate for Jain communities, build mutually beneficial relationships with the members of other religious communities, and secure employment or patronage with Hindu and Muslim governments in both North and South India.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, they helped preserve the religion to the present day,<sup>2</sup> even though Jains have been, and continue to be, a very small minority in India. While ancient and medieval interfaith cooperation in India was often created around mutually beneficial economic and governing ties, contemporary interreligious or interfaith dialogue is perhaps more intentionally organized, including events during which people of different traditions share views about their own faiths with others who are doing the same. It is often meant to build bridges of friendship and understanding, to encourage peaceful pluralism, to be mutually inspiring, and to promote the common good.<sup>3</sup> Although some types of interfaith work are politically neutral ways of creating both friendly appreciation of “the other” and also a society that is hospitable to people of different faiths or no faith at all, other types of interfaith work include cooperating around largely politically progressive values such as racial, economic, social, and environmental justice.<sup>4</sup> Jains in the United States have been involved in such efforts in connection with interfaith *organizations* as well as in higher education and on the internet.

This article will review some of this modern history in the United States from the points of view of several Jains, both laymen and laywomen, who have been active in interfaith dialogue and cooperation in various ways starting in the late twentieth century. In doing so, it will also

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<sup>1</sup> See Audrey Truschke, “Jains and Muslims,” in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Jainism*, eds. John E. Cort, Paul Dundas, Knut A. Jacobsen, and Kristi L. Wiley (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2020) 330-341; Sarah Pierce Taylor “Jains, Kings, and Kingship in Medieval India,” in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Jainism*; and Christoph Emmrich, “Jainism in the Tamil-Speaking Region,” in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Jainism*, 353–69.

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Sulekh Jain for pointing this out.

<sup>3</sup> See Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah J. Silverman, eds., *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> This is not meant to be an exhaustive typology of interfaith dialogue and cooperation.

provide a brief overview of the Jain values that inform this activity, as well as the various interpretations of them for practical application.

### *Methodology*

This article was written and researched in a collaborative manner that was intentional in its attempt toward a post-colonial method and style within a Western academic context and considering my own white background. Interviews with those who decided to participate in this project were conducted by phone, after which I emailed each participant a transcript of our conversation to check for accuracy and to change as they felt necessary. I interviewed three of the participants both before and also after the social unrest and the COVID-19 pandemic started, two of the participants before, and one of the participants afterward. I interviewed each between one and four times total. The amount of their individual involvement, and therefore sometimes the lengths of their sections of this article, often depended on the time they had at their disposal.

After I completed their individual section of this article, I emailed it to them, along with a rough introduction and conclusion with the other names blocked out. For those I interviewed both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic and social unrest started, I repeated this process with their sections after they were updated. With their approval of the general tone of the article, along with some of their changes of it, and with their permission to email the entire article to everyone involved with their names included, we all conducted a review and revision of the complete article to be submitted for publication. Finally, after I made a few minimal changes, according to reviewers’ suggestions, I emailed this article to them again for their permission to submit it as the final version.

Consistent with the method of this research and writing, this article (1) includes Jain voices in a manner that emphasizes respect for their opinions and viewpoints, (2) mostly refrains from a “colonial” (or “bird’s-eye”) critical analysis, but instead includes minimal explanations to give the reader clarity and context, and (3) includes books and articles written by Jain practitioners in the footnotes along with peer-reviewed academic sources. As the reader will learn, this approach is akin to *anekāntavāda* as it is interpreted below.

### *Ahiṃsā and Anekāntavāda*

Along with promoting an appreciative understanding of Jainism among a significantly larger number of non-Jains, the discussions with Jains involved in interfaith activity included below reveal that at least two Jain values/practices are often at the forefront of their interfaith efforts, and that these are seen to be interconnected in various ways. They are *ahiṃsā*<sup>5</sup> (non-harming, non-violence) and *anekāntavāda*<sup>6</sup> (many-sidedness of truth, relativity). *Ahiṃsā* often provides the

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<sup>5</sup> For more about *ahiṃsā* see a contemporary analysis by the Jain layman Sulekh C. Jain in his book *An Ahimsa Crisis: You Decide* (Jaipur: Prakrit Bharati Academy, 2016); and academic publications from Padmanabh S. Jaini, *The Jaina Path of Purification* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1979); and Sherry Fohr, *Jainism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> For more about *anekāntavāda* see a mendicant leader’s analysis by Acharya Mahaprajna in his book *The Quest for Truth: In the context of Anekanta* (Rajasthan: Jain Vishva Bharati Institute, 2003); and academic publications by Satkari Mookerjee, *The Jaina Philosophy of Non-Absolutism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1978 [1944]); Jayandra Soni, “Kundakunda and Umāsvāti on *Anekānta-vāda*,” in *Essays in Jaina Philosophy and Religion*, ed. Piotr Balcerowicz (Delhi:

code of conduct or motivation for this interfaith dialogue because this dialogue will help to promote a more peaceful understanding between people which will therefore help to reduce violent conflict and deter hatred. *Anekāntavāda* often provides the method or guidelines for such dialogue by understanding that people have different points of view, by trying to understand others' perspectives, and by not assuming your own truth is complete or your own way is the only right way.

Most, but not all, of the Jains included in this article tend toward interpreting *anekāntavāda* as a type of "intellectual *ahimsā*" in promoting open-minded respect for different points of view. This is similar to what Jeffery Long describes as *anekāntavāda*'s application by Haribhadra (a sixth or seventh century Śvetāmbara monk) and Mahatma Gandhi of *anekāntavāda* toward the friendly pluralism of respecting different religious paths as suitable for the needs of specific people at specific times.<sup>7</sup> It is less competitive about which religion understands all (or most sides) of the truth or winning a debate against people of other religions,<sup>8</sup> and more about humility and mutual respect. As Long explains,

In other words, one who engages in philosophical debate and makes assertions without qualification, affirming the exclusive truth of only one point of view, not only fails to express the truth by failing to take into account the many possible perspectives from which a proposition may be validly asserted, but also runs the risk of arousing unwanted passions (such as competitiveness, defensiveness, or anger) in the course of one's discussion and thus further enmeshing oneself in the process of *saṃsāra* (birth, death, and rebirth). This, essentially, is the logic of the argument of those who claim that the Jain philosophy of relativity articulates an ethic of 'intellectual' *ahimsā*.<sup>9</sup>

The karma that results from the "passions" (*kaṣāya*) such as pride and hatred, and from the harming of other living beings, brings misery on oneself later in this life and in future lives as well as impedes the achievement of the soteriological goal, freedom from further rebirth. Therefore, non-harming or non-violence, including intellectual non-harming, and a feeling of friendship with others is called for. Although firmly embedded in Jain ontology and soteriology, this intellectual *ahimsā* is similar to what some Western non-Jain proponents of civil discourse encourage. For example, Sinnott-Armstrong writes,

Two people who hold views at opposite ends of the political spectrum might still be able to cooperate if they share enough common goals, are humble enough to admit that they do not know the whole truth, and like each other enough to listen

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Motilal Barnasidas, 2003) 25–36; Jeffery Long, *Jainism: An Introduction* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009); Melanie Barbato, *Jain Approaches to Plurality: Identity as Dialogue* (Leiden: Brill/Currents of Encounter, 2017); Christopher Chapple, "Two Traditional Indian Models for Interreligious Dialogue: Monistic Accommodationism and Flexible Fundamentalism," in *Dialogue & Alliance* 7 (1993): 18–30.

<sup>7</sup> Jeffery Long, *Jainism: An Introduction*, 154–71.

<sup>8</sup> For competitive uses of *anekāntavāda* in premodern texts see Jeffery Long, *Jainism*. For critiques of *anekāntavāda* as "intellectual *ahimsā*," see also Melanie Barbato, *Jain Approaches to Plurality: Identity as Dialogue*, 135–ff; John Cort, "Intellectual Ahimsa' Revisited: Jain Tolerance and Intolerance of Other," *Philosophy East & West* 50 (2000): 341; and Robert J. Zydenbos, "Jain Ethics," in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Jainism*, 401.

<sup>9</sup> Jeffery Long, *Jainism: An Introduction*, 154.

to each other, understand each other, and work toward mutually beneficial agreements. In contrast, they won't be able to accomplish anything if they despise each other, refuse to listen, are too overconfident, and lose all willingness or ability to reach a compromise. What creates the practical problem, then, is not simply polarization understood as distance plus homogeneity but, instead, antagonism and the resultant inability to move past roadblocks.<sup>10</sup>

Both the intellectual *ahimsā* of Jainism and the civil discourse advocated for in the above quote emphasize humility, amity, and respect for different perspectives. This leads some Jains to believe that their religion is helpful to work in interfaith relations and mediation.

On the other hand, there are other somewhat different approaches to *ahimsā* and *anekāntavāda* that involve helping, across religious and racial (etc.) lines, those who have been harmed. One organization included here, which is oriented around progressive social justice issues, interprets *ahimsā* as mandating protection of the oppressed, because oppression is a type of *himsā* or harm. Likewise, they use *anekāntavāda* as a tool for persuading others to do the same by explaining the points of view of those who are oppressed.

### **Self-Reflections Concerning Contemporary Jain interfaith Work in the United States**

The history of Jain participation with interfaith organizations in the United States includes a variety of non-profit service spearheaded largely by senior first-generation Jain laymen prominent in the local, national, and international Jain communities. Among these laymen are Naresh Jain, Arvind Vora, and Sulekh Jain. Naresh Jain is a co-founder of the International Jain Sangh, and Arvind Vora is a founding member of the Federation of Jain Associations in North America (JAINA).<sup>11</sup> At JAINA, Naresh Jain served both as a Director and also an Interfaith Co-Chair, and Arvind Vora served as an Interfaith Chair. There, they shared outreach work, with Naresh Jain working with The Parliament of the World's Religions<sup>12</sup> and Arvind Vora affiliated with Religions for Peace, starting in the 1980s. They have also worked together to sponsor local interfaith events.<sup>13</sup> Sulekh Jain, a past president of JAINA, has founded, or co-founded, several Jain centers in North America. His primary interfaith work, since the early 2000s, concerns advocating for more understanding of Jainism among a majority of non-Jains through efforts in educational institutions. Starting from 2006 to 2020, a younger generation of Jains involved in interfaith work includes Nikhil Bumb, Pankti Gala/ Jains for Justice, and Nerali Sheth. Nikhil Bumb started his work in interfaith venues similar to his senior predecessors, and this work led him to a career in diversity, equity, and inclusion. The newly-formed Jains for Justice plans to cooperate with various religious groups involved in progressive social justice efforts. Nerali Sheth focuses her interfaith efforts in the relatively new medium of YouTube, creating educational videos about her perspective on the Jain faith. Each of their opinions, as included in this article, are his or her own; each participant does not necessarily agree nor disagree with the others. The

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<sup>10</sup> Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Think Again: How to Reason and Argue* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2018) 21.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.jaina.org/page/AboutJAINA>

<sup>12</sup> <https://parliamentofreligions.org/users/mr-naresh-jain>

<sup>13</sup> Mark Fogarthy, “Gandhi program commemorates Earth Day at First Presbyterian Church of Rutherfordm,” *North Jersey* (April 21, 2016). <https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/bergen/2016/04/21/gandhi-program-commemorates-earth-day-at-first-presbyterian-church-of-rutherford/94651146/>

order of the following sections was determined by similarities and differences in participants' approaches, with the first participant's section including a contextualizing summary of some main Jain practices that he wanted to include in this article for non-Jains who read it.

*Naresh Jain*

Naresh Jain is a Śvetāmbara-Sthānakavāsī Jain layman from Gujarat (although born in New Delhi) and a retired operations manager who immigrated to the United States from India in 1979. Now in his 70s, he has engaged extensively in international, national, and regional interfaith forums. He was a two-term Trustee at the Parliament of the World's Religions, where he chaired the Finance Committee and chaired the Public Relations Committee of the 2009 Melbourne Parliament. At the Parliament of the World's Religions, he also coordinated and participated in Jain and interfaith panels and served as a consultant, presenter, moderator, and organizer in international events held in several countries including Australia, Canada, India, Mexico, Spain, Taiwan, Turkey, and USA. He has also been involved with the Monmouth Center for World Religions and Ethical Thought and participated in programs with the Interfaith Center of New York. He was invited to participate in a panel on *Religions as Social Inspiration* at the American Museum of Natural History after 9/11, and the South Orange Maplewood Community Coalition on Race in New Jersey invited him to speak about the Jain religion and non-violence at the Martin Luther King Jr. observance on January 21, 2019. He is also a co-founder of the EduCare Foundation,<sup>14</sup> which works to help children of any faith or no faith. His articles on a variety of topics (including non-violence, karma, ecology, interreligious experiences, and educating children living in poverty) have been published in newspapers and journals, including his local paper, the South Bergenite.<sup>15</sup> Although now retired, Naresh Jain is still involved in the local Rutherford community in New Jersey where he lives, co-organizing programs in the Presbyterian Church of Rutherford. He is also an Emeritus Trustee of the Parliament of the World's Religions (and was recently a member of its Nominating Committee) and is an Advisor to the Board at the Monmouth Center.

In a conversation in November 2020, he explained about his religion,

This is how I understand and practice Jainism. First, *aparigraha* helps me to understand that attachments, including attachments to myself, cause all kinds of vices and misery. Second, therefore I follow the five-fold code of conduct which includes *ahimsa* (non-harming), *satya* (truth), *asteya* (no-stealing), *brahmacharya* (sexual restraint), and *aparigraha* (non-attachment). Third, *anekāntavāda* gives me a way to make an assessment of a situation and decide what to do by listening to people. *Anekāntavāda* is essentially open-mindedness. I relate this to the mantra "Om" when I speak to non-Jains about it. "O" for open, and "m" for mindedness. It is not simply respecting others' perspectives, but really trying to *understand* them. It also creates good relationships with others, and helps one to have a non-judgmental attitude. Fourth, no one can be 100 percent successful in not harming

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.educarecharity.org>

<sup>15</sup> For example, Naresh Jain. "Peace Through Dialogue 2007—Peace Through Performing Arts," *Parliament of the World's Religions* (March 2015). Originally published at *HereNow4U* in 2007. <https://parliamentofreligions.org/content/peace-through-dialogue-2007-peace-through-performing-arts>

anything or anyone, so we have forgiveness. We give forgiveness and we seek forgiveness in Jainism. This is a very important part of Jainism and is something we do at the end of the annual rites of Paryuṣan.<sup>16</sup>

I think forgiveness would be important for interreligious relationships too?

Yes. Also, once when I was speaking in the American Clergy Leadership conference and was asked about raising children, I explained that forgiveness is important. It advocates seeking forgiveness from others for any harm done to them, even unintentional. Forgiveness is medicine that helps healing as well as to move forward. Friction happens. You didn't agree with each other, some harm was committed, but then if you say you are sorry it is like putting some medicinal ointment on the wound. Forgiveness is very important in Jainism.

As far as his experience with interfaith organizations, Naresh Jain said in February 2019 that he “feels the respect,” and that “perhaps this is because Jainism emphasizes the brotherhood of all people.” When I asked about where he wants interfaith work to go in the future, he explained,

In the last 100 years, more social changes have happened worldwide due to the adoption of non-violent methods. Why? Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela. If the world is getting more polarized, then why not apply this now too? It gave more rights to people in numerous countries. So many other countries became free after India did [in 1947]. Non-violent methods create sympathy for those using them. Now is the time to talk more about non-violence: more public dialogue about non-violence. There is less of a price than if violence is used, and more sympathy for those who use non-violence. The hate seems to be increasing now. Now is the time to expand public dialogue about non-violence.

And in a conversation in November 2020,

Religion is a very large part of people's lives, and where their cultures come from, therefore we need education about various religions in public schools. It is important for people to understand each other, that, for example, parents of Jain children in school will be fasting during Paryuṣan, a period right at the beginning of the school year. Such a course should be a requirement before graduating high school. If you don't do this when people are children, then it is too late and then interfaith dialogue becomes necessary later. You have to start with children to change societal attitudes.

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<sup>16</sup> Paryuṣan is a Śvetāmbara annual holy period of eight days in late summer. Similarly, Digambaras celebrate Daśa-Lakṣaṇa-Parvan.

*Arvind Vora*

Arvind Vora is a Śvetāmbara-Sthānakavāsī Jain layman from Ahmedabad in Gujarat and a retired engineer, who immigrated to the United States from India in 1969. Now in his 70s, he began his interfaith work at the invitation of the then Dean of the Auburn Theological Seminary, Robert Reber, and the Executive Director of the Long Island Council of Churches (LICC), Rev. Robert Pierce. They had obtained a grant to build interfaith engagement in the Long Island area with South Asians and other immigrants who had moved there. What would become the Long Island Multi Faith Forum (LIMFF) began with a first meeting in 1993, which Rev. Pierce and Dean Reber asked Arvind Vora to chair, in part, to avoid Christian domination of the event. This meeting included two people from twelve faiths to present their traditions to the larger community, and was successful in building friendships between communities, including friends who helped Arvind Vora with his English. Since that first meeting, the LIMFF has continued the tradition of people, especially immigrants, speaking for their own faiths at venues hosted by The Lions Club, The Rotary Club, and community colleges. They have held festivals attended by hundreds of people, and have organized more than three hundred Building-Bridges outreach events to schools and other institutions. Also, one local paper started to include regular articles about various faiths. Arvind Vora credits this work with the peaceful response to 9/11 in Long Island, where there was “no backlash” against Muslims or Sikhs. He has continued to serve as the Chairman of the LIMFF since its inception and is also involved in the Shanti Fund which promotes “a culture of peace and non-violence among children.”<sup>17</sup>

About interfaith work, Arvind Vora explained in November 2019,

Interfaith work needs to come from the heart and to touch people’s hearts. Interfaith work is important for promoting *ahimsā*, to promote peace and avoid war, because it helps us understand each other better. *Anekāntavāda* means that other religions have interesting things we can learn. They can give you a new understanding of your own faith. *Anekāntavāda* means that you can convey that you are right, but also understand that they are right too. You can understand other people’s points of view and therefore not become offended or violent.

Later in October of 2020 we talked again, and I asked how he applied his approach to the recent social unrest because of the upcoming federal election.

American society has a problem due to lack of mindfulness training. As such they get excited and don’t realize they are harming others. People are having extreme views and stubbornness. Using *anekāntavāda*, I try to be extremely mindful and balanced, and not easily incited.

And,

Americans are hung up on democracy and the law, but the law is changing. If an authority passed a law that everyone named Arvind Vora could not call themselves Arvind Vora, this would be a big problem. If I do not say my name is

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.shantifund.org>

Arvind Vora then I am lying, and if I say my name is different, then I am both lying and also breaking the law. The laws about slavery were like that. Interracial marriage being illegal was like that. But sometimes you need to accept a situation and minimize the effects. When you try to solve some problems, sometimes it does not work. If I say something and someone else does not accept it, then it is fine. Maybe there is more truth on that side. Applying *anekāntavāda* in life is about not getting upset and not becoming extreme. You explain things in a balanced way, and while you yourself are balanced, and then people sometimes realize that they did not know something important and made a mistake and so may change their minds.

So you are saying that people are becoming unbalanced, extreme, and inciting one another?

Yes! Germany could have come forward with more money for NATO after the US helped them and Japan so much after WWII. And Trump insults others in tweets. Then his supporters put their lives in danger and bring guns to protests or hold political rallies. And there are riots and looting. This does not help in the long run for a civilized society. We need education to help with these problems.

I then brought up Black Lives Matter again, stating my sympathy and desire to help as well as confessing my fatigue with the current social situation. Arvind Vora discussed the situation from various angles and concluded,

We have to accept that we are incapable of solving all of the problems in the world; we are even incapable of solving our spouse’s problems. Your wife tells you are doing something, but it is not easy to change what you are doing. You need mindfulness and to keep your cool. One way to do this is to stay away from the news cycles on electronic devices; it creates too much anxiety and mental problems. Sometimes you need to take a break, which is not the same as giving up. Everything is not quickly solvable, but when you have an opportunity to do something to help in a smaller way, you do so. I will leave you with this. There is a saying “Happy wife, happy life,” but someone told me it is more properly “Happy spouse, happy house.” This is true. Things change after a while; people pick things up and society takes one tiny step for the better.

*Nikhil Bumb*

Nikhil Bumb is a second generation Śvetāmbara-Sthānakavāsī Jain laymen in his 30s, whose parents immigrated to the United States from Rajasthan in India, his father in 1978 and his mother in 1982. His introduction to interfaith work started when he was an undergraduate at Princeton University where some members of the university’s Religious Life Council invited him to join in 2006. Since then he has participated in the Interfaith Youth Network at Religions for Peace, served as a youth representative for ANUVIBHA at the United Nations,<sup>18</sup> served as the Treasurer and on the Board of Trustees at the Parliament of the World’s Religions, and continues to support the latter organization as a Trustee Emeritus since 2019. He has also been a

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<sup>18</sup> <https://anuvibha.org>



contributor about Jainism to the Huffington Post.<sup>19</sup> Nikhil Bumb's interfaith work is now expanded into a career in diversity, equity, and inclusion.<sup>20</sup>

When I asked Nikhil Bumb, in our one conversation in March 2019, what he thought was important for me to know about his interfaith work, he replied,

Generally, Jains are not very well-known, even in India where they are minorities. In this country, we are even a smaller minority. Even if people have heard of Jainism, there are misconceptions, such as the misunderstanding that Jainism is a part of Hinduism. But despite not being well-known and these misconceptions, Jains have gained a great deal of respect in interfaith spaces because their principles of *ahimsā* and *anekāntavāda* naturally lend themselves to interfaith work.

Currently, Jains show up to interfaith events mostly to educate others about their own religion and also to encourage other Jains to participate in such events. I would like to move toward looking at how Jains can participate in these forums by applying our principles, which are useful in interfaith engagements. For example, *anekāntavāda* is about how to consider different points of view about the same situation. People will sometimes refuse to see the opposing side's point of view during conflicts, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but having a Jain in the room, as a neutral third party using *anekāntavāda*, could help with this. We are a religion that does not have conflicts with other religions to begin with, and *anekāntavāda* can further help to provide a neutral perspective and foster communication. I would like to see more Jains doing this.

I have also worked to increase awareness of Jainism. For example, I have written articles for the Huffington Post.<sup>21</sup> But I try to be careful not write in a way that would lead the reader to overgeneralize my experience to all Jains. All Jains do not practice their religion the same way, and I want to respect that, and so I write from my own perspective about my experiences and not to be representative of the faith.

How did you start doing this work?

I grew up in the South of the US where "other" religions aren't always welcome so much, so honestly, I never really talked about my religion or shared with others. In fact, I actively tried to avoid talking about it because I'd end up in some pretty awkward situations and had classmates, neighbors, and random people on the streets regularly trying to convert me. And then I went to Princeton University where some students involved in the Religious Life Council invited me to join as a Jain. That is how my participation in various interfaith organizations started.

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nikhil-bumb/>

<sup>20</sup> For evidence that the younger generation of Jains in the UK also utilizes *anekāntavāda* to navigate diversity, according to Bindi V. Shah, "Jains in the United Kingdom," in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Jainism*, 353-369.

<sup>21</sup> For example, Nikhil Bumb, Neal Daftary, Parth Savla, Priti Shah, and Sonali Vakharia, "Young Jains Share Insights from Parliament of the World's Religions," *Huffington Post* (January 12 2017). [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/young-jains-share-insight\\_b\\_8941276](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/young-jains-share-insight_b_8941276)

Then I moved on to the corporate world where being “the other” is often not very easy, so now I am regularly integrating ideas of diversity, equity, and inclusion at a non-profit dedicated to social impact strategy consulting. It’s still not easy, but it’s easier to do this in a mission-oriented organization rather than in the corporate world, where those of us who are “other” are often told to just keep our heads down and keep quiet when we are marginalized.

Why is it harder in the corporate world?

Corporate systems prioritize efficiency, which is conceived in a way that prioritizes the familiar and ways things have always been done. Other ways may be more efficient or provide other benefits, but because they are unfamiliar, they are less open to trying them out or giving them meaningful space. Inclusion initiatives remain surface-level because the leadership does not prioritize it. Diversity and inclusion take time and it involves uncomfortable conversations about what the leadership needs to change, reckoning with harm done in the past or what wrong is currently being done, in order to make improvements. It requires a shift to the system.

*Sulekh Jain*

Sulekh Jain is a Haryana Śvetāmbar-Sthānakvāsi Jain layman from Delhi who immigrated to the United States from India in 1969. A retired engineer now in his 80s, he served as a past president of JAINA, and was also active in founding, or co-founding, several Jain organizations including The Jain Center of Greater Boston, JAINA library, JAIN SPIRIT International Magazine, and the World Council of Jain Academies. Although still actively involved with the International School of Jain Studies (ISJS), Sulekh Jain’s current focus is on establishing Jain Studies at universities in the US. His book, *An Ahimsā Crisis: You Decide*, advocates for a way of living in the modern world that is compassionate toward all living beings. And he has written articles on a variety of subjects such as *ahimsā*, *anekāntavāda*, *aparigraha* (non-greed), environmentalism, human rights, and interreligious understanding. In one such article, “Love and Compassion for All Beings,” Sulekh Jain explains,

Lord Mahavira emphasized the need for a comprehensive outlook, better known as Anekantavada or multiplicity of viewpoints. For him, there was no question of exaltation or diminution of anyone’s spiritual or ideological contribution and a dissenting opinion was a natural human tendency. The wisdom, however, lies in harmonizing the dissensions.<sup>22</sup>

After reading his articles about *anekāntavāda* and other religions, I had the following two questions in February 2019.

Do you use *anekāntavāda* in interfaith dialogue?

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<sup>22</sup> Sulekh C Jain, “Love and Compassion for All Beings.” *One World Under God* (July 21-August 2, 2018).

My way is not the only way, there are other ways. No one can see the whole truth, there are many angles. If you ask people who know me, they would describe me in different ways depending on how they know me, as my wife, doctor, children. Those descriptions are all part of Sulekh Jain. From their perspective they are right. Many conflicts arise because we think my way is the only way or do not see things from others' points of view. If you use *anekāntavāda* in this way, I think many conflicts will go away. We usually only look at things from our own self-interest. The story of my granddaughter in one of my articles is about how we are all the same at birth. When I looked for her among all the other newly born infants in the maternity ward, she was indistinguishable from the rest. At birth we are all the same, but we acquire different identities from society and then start fighting with each other.

Has interfaith dialogue helped you understand your own religion better?

Yes, you need to come out of your cocoon. Sometimes people can explain their own religion, but when it comes to listening to others' faiths their eyes and ears are closed. Often interfaith dialogue is about tolerating, not understanding. Once I told someone who invites people to speak at these events, "the next time you invite me to talk, ask me to talk about another's religion, whatever that might be." This is the only way I can learn, so I can *understand* another's religion...[...] An interfaith group in LA invited people to write about their own religion, but I wrote an essay on Christianity and it gave me much more appreciation. Some of the ten commandments have to do with *ahimsā*. Religions have so much in common.

Jains involved in education efforts, either in higher education or on the internet,<sup>23</sup> are part of a larger national movement of different religious groups becoming more active in speaking for, and representing, themselves and their own religions. Sulekh Jain's interfaith work in this regard is largely focused on higher education. There is a dearth of scholars of Jainism who are Jain themselves in the United States, while the same is not true for other religions. Sulekh Jain described his on-going efforts to balance this, by establishing endowed chairs of Jain Studies at various universities since 2010, as the most rewarding part of his interfaith efforts. These positions are the result of interfaith cooperation between Jains and Sikhs supporting each other at various universities.<sup>24</sup> With these two communities providing separate funding, Jains and Sikhs have worked together to establish combined endowed chairs of both Jain and Sikh Studies, to establish separate endowed chairs where these are currently combined, and to help each other establish chairs at American universities where only one of them has done so. In doing so they are taking a more active part in the interfaith dialogue among academics in religious studies. Although most of these faculty positions are still held by non-Jains today, Sulekh Jain's intention

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<sup>23</sup> For Jainism on the internet, see Tine Vekemans, "Transnational Connections and Religious Development in the Jain Diaspora Through an Exploration of the E-diaspora," in *Discovering Diaspora: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, eds. Tina Vekemans and Natasha Miletic (Oxford, UK: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2015) 109–120; and Tine Vekemans, "Jainism on the Internet," in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Jainism*, eds. John E. Cort, Paul Dundas, Knut A. Jacobsen, and Kristi L. Wiley (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2020).

<sup>24</sup> Sulekh C. Jain and Harvinder Singh Sahota, "Jains and Sikhs Walking Together," *India West* (November 24, 2019). [https://www.indiawest.com/letters\\_to\\_editor/jains-and-sikhs-walking-together/article\\_121cdf48-0d6f-11ea-a92e-df76102dcb0.html](https://www.indiawest.com/letters_to_editor/jains-and-sikhs-walking-together/article_121cdf48-0d6f-11ea-a92e-df76102dcb0.html)

is toward an eventual change. This is part of a long and continuing post-colonial shift in the history of the study of religions in higher education from non-practitioner scholars from the colonial era (such as E. B. Tylor and J. G. Frazer)<sup>25</sup> to more and more practitioners as scholars of their own traditions.

About this work, Sulekh Jain said,

I took part in a lot of talks between Jains and Sikhs. Jains and Sikhs have established two separate endowed chairs in Jainism and Sikhism at UC Irvine. The signing ceremony and giving the money (\$1.5 million each) was done at the same time in a Jain temple in LA on August 2015. The Sikh chair has been hired and I will be meeting with her soon. There was a clinical professorship in Jain and Sikh Studies created and funded fifty-fifty by Jains and Sikhs at Loyola Marymount University. These are becoming two separate fully endowed chairs; the endowed professorship in Jain Studies has already been established at that university. The University of Santa Barbara had Sikh studies for many years, but now they will also have Jain Studies. Efforts were also started to establish a fifty-fifty funded post doc fellowship at San Diego State University. The Jain and Sikh communities provide social support for each other in this, although they fund these separately. You have to work with Jains and Sikhs who are openminded. We found some of these people. Once when we were introducing ourselves, the Sikh representative (Harvinder Singh) and I introduced ourselves mixing our names together, to have a little fun working together in this endeavor.

During a later conversation with Sulekh Jain in October of 2020, during the pandemic and social unrest, he emphasized (1) the mutual helpfulness during the pandemic that he would like to see continue, (2) supporting the BLM movement through the Jain lay tradition of *dāna* (charity), (3) migration leading to a greater need for interfaith work, and (4) changing the Jain tradition toward helping those who are harmed, and not just refraining from harming others.

The thing that is the common enemy is COVID-19. This has changed behavior. We have co-existence and interdependence, so the enemies of yesterday are working together to find a cure. There are fewer wars than a year ago. The environment is cleaner. People are more cooperative, compassionate. All this is what the interfaith movement is about: caring and sharing. We are connected together, whether we like it or not; we are one, interlocked and in fact entangled with each other. This means we need more in the way of the interfaith movements.

About Black Lives Matter, Black people have been affected more negatively by COVID-19 and the economic situation. It is our duty to care about this. Jains have been feeding thousands of people every weekend. Our Jain community collected a lot of money to provide tablets to poor children of different races so they could continue to receive an education when it went on-line because of

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<sup>25</sup> For more information about non-practitioner scholars considered foundational to the development of religious studies in Western universities, see Daniel L. Pals, *Nine Theories of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

COVID-19. Interfaith is not about tolerating, it is about how we alleviate others' pain and suffering. We support Black Lives, but we aren't going out to march because of COVID-19. I should have been there, but there is the virus. We have helped by donating tablets instead.

The need for interfaith work is great now, and it should become a part of our culture and habit. It should not go away when we get a vaccine. I am in my mid-80s and I receive so many phone calls from my different neighbors (regardless of caste, creed or race) asking if there is anything they can do to help me. Isn't that wonderful!

Due to migration, the world has become one. We have people of different cultures, races living around us. We need to understand each other. All my neighbors were Jain when I lived in India, so there was no need for interfaith work. But the need is greater now because of migration. It is not about just learning about your neighbor, but learning about how you can *help* your neighbor. This is the next growth of interfaith work. We need to move beyond talking with each other. After understanding my neighbor, I need to be a helpful source or partner in the journey of life. If my neighbor has a problem, cancer or something, what can I do for them? [...]

“Live and let live” is wrong, which is what we often say in Jainism. We need to change this to “Live and help others to live.” We are extending ourselves to people in need. Before it was “live and let live:” to not cause suffering. That was passive. Now we are saying, I will not cause harm or *hiṃsā*, and I will also actively help if someone is the victim of *hiṃsā*. Care and share.

And,

About a month ago, we established a joint endowed Chair in Jain and Hindu Dharma at Cal State U, Fresno.<sup>26</sup> This too is the same spirit of breaking the walls between various religions and practicing the interfaith spirit of cooperation and living with each other's help.<sup>27</sup>

### *Pankti Gala and Jains for Justice*

The members of Jains for Justice (J4J) are emigrants from India, or the children of emigrants.<sup>28</sup> An organization open to Jains of all sects and subsects, Jains for Justice was founded in June of 2020 during the protests for racial justice. With a still modest membership of Indian-American college students, graduate students, and young professionals, it is a collective (rather than an individual) effort. So while I conversed with Pankti Gala about their work, she consulted with the other members about what would be included in this publication. She explained the progressive

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<sup>26</sup> Benjamin Kirk, “Historic Partnership Establishes Endowed Chair in Jain and Hindu Dharma,” *Fresno State News* (December 15, 2020). <http://www.fresnostatenews.com/2020/12/15/historic-partnership-establishes-endowed-chair-in-jain-and-hindu-dharma/>

<sup>27</sup> From email on January 1, 2021.

<sup>28</sup> <https://jains4justice.org>

goals of their social justice work, as well as how they employ *anekāntavāda* as empathetic understanding of those who are oppressed and of their points of view. This is an interpretation of *anekāntavāda* that is firmly embedded in *ahiṃsā* in terms of protecting those who are harmed by prioritizing their perspectives in order to not be complicit in, and to help stop, the harm done to them. It is also a perspective that rejects the possibility of victim-blaming based on the karma theory.

During my one conversation in December 2020 with Pankti Gala, she explained,

Jains for Justice was founded a few weeks after George Floyd was murdered and the protests started. A few of us discussed how to make people in our own communities more aware of these social justice issues. There wasn't a Jain organization doing this already, so we founded the group in late June 2020. Jains in this country have been more involved with animal rights, and we also want to focus on social justice in general. We founded Jains for Justice on the three pillars *ahiṃsā*, *anekāntavāda*, and empathy.[...] We are starting with the Jain community, but our goal is to build relationships with, and to support the movements and work of, other faith-based organizations in the US involved in social justice.

How are you applying Jain principles to your work, such as *ahiṃsā* and *anekāntavāda*, and also what specific work you are doing?

We are in different work streams for projects that include gender and sexual identity, disabilities, animal rights, civic engagement, and race/caste/religion. These are the issues we see in our Jain communities in the US. For example, we would like promote veganism and also help people understand the very real class, labor, caste and social justice issues that pertain to diets. For gender and sexuality, we are looking to create pathways for community support and inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community. As an example, we want to do workshops in our communities on pronouns and why it is important for cisgendered persons to specify which ones they use too. This ties into *anekāntavāda*, about trying to understand their [non-binary and transgendered] points of view and experience, where they are coming from.... It is tied to *anekāntavāda* and *ahiṃsā* equally. We want to help folks in our community understand the experience of transgendered folks as well as explain the violence against them.

Would you please explain a bit more about how you are applying *anekāntavāda* to social justice issues? It is a bit different from how some of the other people I have talked to are applying it to interfaith work.

*Anekāntavāda* is about perspectives, understanding where other people are coming from. There was a lot of propaganda floating around the Jain community about things like George Floyd, for example, that he was a criminal so why should it matter what happened to him. So we explained the other side. Dylann Roof [a white man] killed people in a [African American] church and the police sat him on the curb, gave him water, and stopped for food for him after they arrested him. George Floyd may have used a counterfeit bill, but that does not mean it was right for the police to behave the way they did to him. A Jain scholar we spoke to

described *anekāntavāda* like this: when we think about karma, we cannot place ourselves in their shoes and assume what their karma is in a situation [such as bad karma that is resulting in their suffering or oppression]. We have to think about our karma. From that perspective, it is never ok for us to kill, or be complicit in killing, another human being.

*Nirali Sheth*

Educational interfaith dialogue is now taking place on the internet, with religious groups representing themselves on webpages, on twitter, on Facebook, and on YouTube. In doing so Jains, and the members of other minority religious groups, are entering the national conversation in our pluralist society in a way that was more difficult before social media. Nirali Sheth is a Śvetāmbara-Mūrtipūjak Jain laywoman in her 20s, whose mother and father immigrated to the United States from India in 1991 and 1982 respectively, and who posts videos on YouTube as *Firewordsparkler*. Some of these videos are about Jainism, starting in 2016, with interfaith dialogue happening through the comments.<sup>29</sup>

During our one conversation in February 2019, she explained,

I realized at a certain point that no one knew what my religion meant, but I learned every Friday evening about it in my childhood. I wanted to create something accessible for people my age. I wanted people to know about my own religion. People are genuinely interested. I can't speak for everyone in Jainism, and I don't know everything. I still have a Jain community where I live, but a lot of Jains don't and it is harder for them. In high school the principal would not let me take a day off for one of my religious holidays (breaking fast after Paryuśan) because it was not on the official list he had of various religious holidays. So my target audience was non-Jains, and I give a watered-down version of what I learned.

What is it like with questions from non-Jains?

Aside from the trolls, I have had lovely comments. Sometimes the questions are too complicated and sometimes other Jains in the comment section can answer those better. I am LGBTQ and when I answer questions about that, I refer to British colonialism and the conservatism in my religion. It can be hard to answer those questions. You can be kind to people even when they are trolling. I let the trolls be rather than deleting them like some people do.

What has been the best experience for you doing this?

The videos about Jainism still get traction. The analytics show that of all my videos, the Jainism videos are still the most popular. I still try to do one Jain video a year, but I do other types of videos too. I don't want people to think that I am

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<sup>29</sup> Firewordsparkler, "Jainism Q&A | Jainism Basics," *YouTube* (April 2, 2018) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1k9xFu1bIg>

just religious. There is more to me than that. Religion is not the only thing in a person’s life. This is what it means to be human.

## Conclusion

All the different approaches included in this article achieve both a balance and a breadth that no one or two people could have achieved alone. These approaches have overlapping, but somewhat different, priorities that parallel the larger trends in interfaith work across religions and interfaith organizations. These range from non-interfering mutual appreciation to more help-oriented approaches to some combination of these two. These choices are sometimes very fluid as people struggle to decide, and sometimes disagree about, what might be the best way forward, especially during a time of social upheaval such as experienced in 2020.

During conversations before the pandemic and social unrest of 2020, the senior generation of Jains included here—Naresh Jain, Arvind Vora, and Sulekh Jain—prioritized promoting peace and non-violence through interfaith work, as well as asserted that *anekāntavāda* helps to promote mutual understanding by encouraging respect for different points of view. During conversations after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and social unrest, Naresh Jain added an emphasis on the need for forgiveness and for education about religious diversity in public schools, Arvind Vora stressed the need for patience and balance, and Sulekh Jain advocated for reciprocal helpfulness. During conversations before the start of the pandemic and social unrest of 2020, of the younger generation of Jains involved in interfaith efforts, both Nikhil Bumb and Nerali Sheth explained that they apply *anekāntavāda* to their own representations of Jainism in work for inclusion: that their experience and understanding of Jainism is not the only one. While Nikhil Bumb advocated for the use of *anekāntavāda* in conflict mediation, Nerali Sheth’s focus is contributing to an appreciative understanding of Jainism on-line. In conversations after the pandemic and social unrest started, one senior participant, Sulekh Jain, and one junior organization, Jains for Justice, stressed *ahiṃsā* in ways that include both not causing harm to others and also helping those who are harmed. This latter concern is the spirit behind how the younger membership of Jains for Justice applies *anekāntavāda* as a way to amplify the voices and perspectives of those who are harmed by oppression in their work toward various forms of social justice.



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