

BOOK REVIEWS

Christopher Key Chapple, ed. *Jainism and Ecology: Non-Violence in the Web of Life*. Cambridge, Mass.: Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 2002. xliv, 252 pages.

In many ways, the two most intriguing documents in this thought-provoking and competently produced book of the Harvard Religions of the World and Ecology Series are the preface and the appendix. Whoever only reads the preface of L. E. Sullivan, the general editor of the series, may get the impression that “religion and ecology” is just one of those themes in academic publishing that are periodically contrived to cash in on the *Zeitgeist*, but devoid of any relevance in the real world. By contrast, the appendix, a reprint of the short “Jain Declaration of Nature” that was submitted in 1992 to Prince Phillip (Worldwide Fund for Nature) by L. M. Singhvi, the then Indian High Commissioner in Britain and current Bharatiya Janata Party representative of Rajasthan in the Upper House of the Indian Parliament, was composed for the sole purpose of propagating the Jain philosophy of nonviolence (*ahimsa*) as “a viable route plan for humanity’s common pilgrimage for holistic environmental protection, peace and harmony in the universe” (p. 224). The text is a veritable manifesto of Jain environmentalism, and has provoked an interesting debate, which is documented in this volume, between the proponents of a “Jain ecology,” the majority of them Diaspora Jains, and skeptical voices, notably of John Cort and Paul Dundas; two leading non-Jain scholars of Jainism whose contributions are published together with the papers of C. K. Chapple and P. S. Jaini in part two of the volume under the title “Challenges to the Possibility of a Jain Environmental Ethic.” The book has three additional sections: “Jain Theories about the Nature of the Universe” (part one), “Voices within the Tradition: Jainism is Ecology” (part three), and “Tradition and Modernity: Can Jainism Meet the Environmental Challenge?” (part four). Part four contains only a single article, by Anne Vallely, which figures as a kind of synthesis within the dialectical structure of the volume.

Singhvi’s “Jain Declaration of Nature” is effectively a political manifesto (if you follow Jain ethical principles, then the world can be saved) dressed up with a concoction of unsupported factual and doctrinal claims as an universal ethical code for “ecological harmony and nonviolence” which apparently “formed a vital part of the mainstream of ancient Indian life” (p. 217). It has three sections: (1) Jain teachings (nonviolence, interdependence, the doctrine of manifold aspects, equanimity, and compassion), (2) Jain cosmology, and (3) the Jain code of conduct (five vows, kindness to animals, vegetarianism, self-restraint and the avoidance of waste, and charity). The text begins with the statement

that the ecological philosophy of Jainism “has always been central to its ethics, art, literature, economics and politics” (p. 217). The author then posits that this orientation continues to shape the life of the “ten million Jains estimated to live in modern India” (p. 216; census figures for 1991 suggest 3.4 million); that the Jain principle of *ahimsa* (nonviolence) informed “Gandhi’s civil disobedience” (p. 218; most Jains reject hunger strikes as a form of violence). These claims are followed by citations of the authoritative words of the prophet Mahavira (“he said”; none of his words have been transmitted verbatim), and personal claims such as: “Ancient Jain texts explain that violence (*himsa*) is not defined by actual harm, for this may be unintentional” (p. 219; the oldest texts emphasize the exact opposite). Throughout the text, the author talks about “the” Jains, although the doctrine of *jiva-daya*, or pro-active protection of all living beings, is rejected by orthodox anti-interventionist Jain traditions (p. 220). Singhvi concludes that the code of the five basic principles of conduct (*mahavrata*) for the path of salvation of the homeless world-renouncing Jain ascetic “is profoundly ecological in its secular thrust and its practical consequences” (p. 223), but hastens to add that the word *ecology* comes from the Greek word *oikos*, or home, the meaning of which the ancient Jain scriptures (read: a disputed passage of the Tattvartha-Sutra) expanded to all aspects of nature: “Life is viewed as a gift of togetherness, accommodation and assistance” (p. 219). One can only speculate why this tract is celebrated by many Jains as one of Jainism’s most significant contributions of recent times. Its message has been echoed unanimously by the three Jain activists which contributed to part three of the book: Sadhvi Shilapi (“The Environmental and Ecological Teachings of Tirthankara Mahavira”), Bhagachandra Jain “Bhaskar” (“Ecology and Spirituality in the Jain Tradition”), and Satish Kumar (“Jain Ecology”). None of these articles adds anything new. In fact, they “fit more within the genre of a sermon than an academic paper,” as Chapple notes in his lucid introduction to the volume (p. xl).

In his article “Green Jainism? Notes and Queries toward a Possible Jain Environmental Ethic,” John Cort articulates the antithesis of Singhvi’s questionable propositions: “To put it boldly, as of the early 2000s there is no Jain environmental ethic per se. Statements that Jainism is an inherently environmental religious tradition or that Jainism has always ‘enthroned the philosophy of ecological harmony’ [Singhvi] are largely untrue as statements about history, and I would argue that such misstatements will hinder more than help in the development of a Jain environmental ethic” (p. 65). Cort states the obvious when he writes that “Jains on the whole are an aggressively accumulating community, while the value of non-possession (*aparigraha*) is at the center of the stated ideals” (p. 80). Contemporary Jains have indeed, after initial hesitation, embraced industrialization wholeheartedly and recent attempts of Jain modernists to import the Western ecological agenda have only created more practical dilemmas, such as the reforestation of the sacred Satrunjaya hill

in Gujarat at the expense of poor local herdsmen who were excluded from the area with the help of the state authorities. Cort asks the question whether the Jain laity could find other ways not to “monopolize resources for themselves and externalize the social and environmental cost onto the poor” (p. 79). In his view, a future Jain environmental ethic can only be developed through the rationalization of the “lived environmental ethic” (pp. 66, 84), which is implicit in the practices and habits of the “Jains in the world” (to quote the title of his last book which strives to lay out the required hermeneutical methods), since the universalistic renunciatory “ideology” of the Jain path of liberation rejects interventionism in worldly affairs altogether (on p. 74 Cort opines that the Jain doctrine of *anumodana*, or mental approval of the actions of other’s, implies an interventionist agenda). The rest of the article offers richly annotated practical suggestions for Jains how such an ethical framework could be developed after all, e.g., by exploring: the Indic equivalents of the word *nature*, local “sociobiological” contexts and sectarian attitudes toward the environment, relevant Jain narratives, Jain biology, creative responses to ethical dilemmas, and developing environmental rituals, etc. It is hard to see, however, what this alternative scheme would add to the scripted medieval codes of conduct for the Jain laity, which inform most “Jain” aspects of local life.

Paul Dundas’ critique “The Limits of a Jain Environmental Ethic” contains a philological point-by-point refutation of some of Singhvi’s claims to historical and moral precedence of Jainism as the world’s first environmentalist doctrine (“trivialization of Jainism into strings of platitudes” [p. 99]). After reiterating the fact that nature as such has “no autonomous value for Jainism” (p. 97), he focuses on the defeatist ecological implications of the “teleology of decline” in classical Jain universal history, and on the Jain critique of the “elephant ascetics” (*hastitapasa*), who in order to save other living beings killed and ate only a single elephant per year, in canonical Jain texts and commentaries which point out the number of microorganisms that are cooked together with the elephant meat in contrast to the total nonviolence of Jain ascetics who live only on food cooked by others (pp. 99–101). He then moves on to an interesting mediaeval text by Ratnasekhara Suri on the “Purity of Business Activity,” which contains no second thoughts about the environment; and finally to the seventeenth-century Jain monk Yasovijaya’s defense of the “necessary” acts of injury to both the living earth and the creatures that live in it during the digging of foundations of Jain temples, wells etc.: “even in activity relating to religion, a little evil caused by violence can be approved” (cited, p. 110). In summing up, Dundas expresses his uneasiness with the “modern, ultimately secular, Western-derived agenda” of the new Jain ecology (p. 111): “Contemporary environmentalism seems to me to be a particular issue into which Indian religious traditions are co-opted somewhat uneasily if their own often highly ambivalent presuppositions about nature and the world are not fully taken into account” (*ibid.*).

The contributions of Chapple, “The Living Earth of Jainism and the New Story: Rediscovering and Reclaiming a Functional Cosmology,” and of Padmanabh S. Jaini, “Ecology, Economics, and Development in Jainism,” are not really a challenge to the new Jain environmentalism, and could have been shifted into any of the other sections of the book. Chapple also highlights the point that “environmental activism at best could earn a second place in the practice of the Jain faith . . . ancillary to the goal of final liberation” (p. 137). But the bulk of his article is dedicated to outlining “parallels” between the concept of the “living world” in Jainism, which interprets the elements of water, fire, etc. as life forms, and to “vitalistic” interpretations of the cosmos by contemporary scientists such as Brian Swimme, Thomas Berry, and David Abram. P. S. Jaini, a renowned Jain philologist, does not directly address ecological issues. He points to the historical fact that “Military service is a permissible occupation for a Jain layman [but not for a monk] . . . as a last resort in guarding the interests of one’s prosperity, honor, family, community, or nation. Thus Jains are not total pacifists” (p. 145). The rest of his article recalls the mediaeval blueprints for nonviolent forms of business in a text-dogmatic fashion (“Jains have been able to achieve for themselves a measure of wealth and prosperity, while at the same time contributing to the well-being of society at large” [p. 147]), and praises Singhvi’s “Declaration” (p. 149), and Acarya Mahaprajna’s book on the economy of Mahavir.

Nathmal Tatia, another acclaimed philologist, has chosen a similar impressionistic approach. He ends his article “The Jain Worldview and Ecology” with a self-created list of eight commandments, or “Jain guidelines to meet the ecological crisis,” which echoes Acarya Tulsi’s (1914–1997) well-known modern list of small vows (*anuvrata*), which is not mentioned. The most specific commandment is number four: “Do not make the accumulation of wealth an aim of your life. Live simply and share time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need” (p. 15). Tatia’s article has been lumped together under the heading “Theories about the Nature of the Universe” with John M. Koller’s article “Jain Ecological Perspectives,” which elaborates the idea that the Jain principles of *anekanta-vada*, or “nonabsolutism” (p. 20) and *ahimsa* together can form “an effective basis for ecological thought” (p. 32), and with Kristi L. Wiley’s important article “The Nature of Nature: Jain Perspectives on the Natural World.” Wiley is the only contributor, apart from Dundas, who takes the constraints of the *karma* theory for a “Jain” ecological theory serious and who discusses the unbridgeable contrast between the classical individual-centered Jain ethic and the holistic or “ecocentric” versions of modern ecological theory (p. 38). She investigates in great detail the issue of causing harm to “one-sensed living beings” (*ekendriya*) such as stone, fire, water, and air (of particular interest are her observations on the *suksma ekendriya*) in the Jain cosmology—a concept which will be new to any uninitiated reader—and

concludes: “It is unclear to me how ideas expressed in Jain texts might be used in support of holistic views of environmental ethics. . . . I can see no evidence in Jain texts for the devaluation of individuals within a given class, be it humans or one-sensed beings, in favor of the group or species” (p. 48).

In the concluding article of the volume, “From Liberation to Ecology: Ethical Discourses among Orthodox and Diaspora Jains,” Anne Vallely argues that the emergence of “Green Jainism” is an “entirely natural and involuntary development within Diaspora Jainism “as it takes root in the sociocultural context of North America” (p. 206), due to a misunderstanding of classical Jainism by the culturally uprooted “nonsectarian” second-generation Jain youth. For classical Jainism, violence against other living beings is in the first place violence against one’s own self, i.e., the prospect of being freed from karmic bondage and liberated: “For most Jain youths, however, violence refers principally to harm done to others, and *ahimsa* is primarily about alleviating the suffering of other living beings. . . . This sociocentric understanding of Jain ethics has led young Jains to “extend” the practices of nonviolence to areas [e.g., veganism] into which the first generation (and orthodox Jainism more generally) has not ventured” (p. 205). Vallely constructs an opposition between a “traditional orthodox liberation-centric ethos” and “a sociocentric or “ecological” one” (p. 194) which she associates with immigration, nonsectarianism and interfaith dialogue (no evidence for Christian influence is furnished). However, instances of “sociocentric” interpretations, which can hardly be identified with “ecological” theory as such, can already be found in India in the earliest manifestos of Jain modernism at the end of the nineteenth century, if not earlier. It remains to be seen how prevalent such views really are among Diaspora Jains.

Overall, the contributions in this volume provide sufficient evidence for the argument that traditional Jain attempts to reduce the use of natural resources in order to minimize violence and thus to improve the chances for a better rebirth and ultimate salvation have implications for ecological theory and practice. However, with notable exceptions, most contributors could not resist the temptation to throw in their other favorite pickings from the Jain religious texts for the rainbow coalition of weekend Jains, peaceniks, and advocates of alternative living to create new amalgamations of ideas and sound bites (“conflict resolution,” “interfaith dialogue,” “pacifism,” etc.) which find only a weak resonance in the concerns and practices of the Jain communities (notably in India) itself, which, on the contrary—and this may not be coincidental—become more hedonistic and conflict ridden by the day.

An open-minded reader, who is not instantly repelled by the proselytizing tone of many contributions, will nevertheless enjoy a highly engaging book which creatively reflects the present Diaspora Jain discourse on the practice of nonviolence toward all living beings from a perspective of Jain modernism. The main appeal of the volume lies in the paradoxical role reversal, which casts

non-Jain academics as defenders of ancient Jain ascetic principles and practicing Jains as advocates of ecological activism.

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