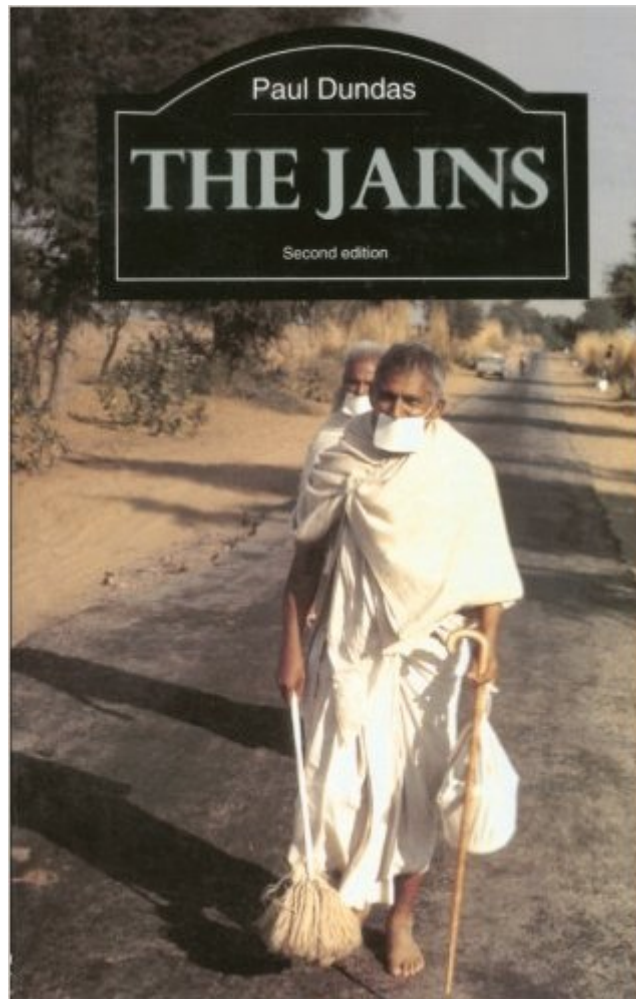


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The Jains (The Library Of Religious Beliefs And Practices)



Synopsis

The Indian religion of Jainism, whose central tenet involves non-violence to all creatures, is one of the world's oldest and least-understood faiths. Dundas looks at Jainism in its social and doctrinal context, explaining its history, sects, scriptures and ritual, and describing how the Jains have, over 2500 years, defined themselves as a unique religious community. This revised and expanded edition takes account of new research into Jainism.

Book Information

Series: The Library of Religious Beliefs and Practices

Paperback: 368 pages

Publisher: Routledge; 2 edition (August 25, 2002)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0415266068

ISBN-13: 978-0415266062

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 0.8 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (5 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #722,647 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #24 in [Books > Religion & Spirituality > Other Eastern Religions & Sacred Texts > Jainism](#) #1126 in [Books > Reference > Encyclopedias & Subject Guides > Religion](#) #5672 in [Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Religious Studies](#)

Customer Reviews

This book gets really detailed, and it's hard to keep track of some of the histories and nuances in philosophy. Nonetheless, my mother was amazed at how completely the author covered Jainism, and I'm learning alot myself (we're both Jain).

The author does a very thorough job introducing the reader to Jainism, its history, its sacred days, its customs and its sects. Indian language vocabulary is also well-explained (mostly Sanskrit). The one thing grossly lacking in this book is citation of scripture. As I recall, there may be a sentence or two of Jain scripture in the entire book. It has long been my belief that the best way to learn about the beliefs of any religion is through its own source text(s). The author does state that there is no definitive canon of Jain scripture, but the book could have been made about 25% larger through some reasonable scriptural selection, or, alternatively, 25% of the existing content could have been

cut to provide the reader some feel for Jain scripture. This is the only negative criticism that I have to offer. Aside from this one criticism, this is an excellent book and I recommend it highly.

Reviewed by Dr. Andrea Diem-Lane Paul Dundas's book on Jainism, *The Jains*, is indeed an impressive tome, detailing the differences between the two major sects, the Svetambara and the Digambara, and highlighting key Jain doctrines. Moreover, the author extends great effort clarifying the role of the ascetic and of the layperson, and walking the reader through the rich history of the Jain tradition, from the Formakers to the medieval period to recent times. In the introduction to the text, Dundas asserts his goal to "alert students of world religions to the richness of Jain history and to present it as far as possible in terms of the experience of those Jains, past and present, ascetic and lay, who have participated within it." His phenomenological and social-historical approach gives the reader a sense of a Jain world view, albeit analyzed from a scholarly perspective. "Universal History," as Dundas calls it, is the Jain's version of the history of the world, and so all events, historical or religious, are reinterpreted in light of this. For instance, many Jains view the Hindu Vedic writings as really written by a Bharata, the first Jain universal emperor of this world era and Rama and Krishna of Hindu lore as Jain laymen. Even the Hindu goddess of wisdom, Sarasvati, is revered as a Jain. While there is an attempt in Jainism to incorporate Hindu themes and figures, there is also an animosity for Vedic sacrifice and the lack of commitment by numerous Hindus to follow the message of ahimsa. Ahimsa, states Dundas, is the main distinctive feature that sets Jainism apart from other Indian traditions. While Buddhism, Hinduism, and other religions of South East Asia may embrace notions of benevolence and empathy, Jainism embodies universal compassion at a level greater than perhaps any other world religion. One of my favorite quotes in this book was from a modern Jain trying to raise awareness about ahimsa to the world stage: "If an atom (anu) has in it the monstrous power to destroy the world, amply demonstrated in the unprecedented holocaust at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, I want to tell the world that we have its counterpart in anuvrata—a small or atomic vow (i.e., ahimsa) which alone has the power to ward off and counter the threat of an atomic bomb." Even though Jains today are undoubtedly devoted to ahimsa and to a vegetarian diet, the author investigates the rare exceptions when Jains have deviated from this. A prevalent example occurs today in East Africa, where some Jains have been known to eat meat in this cultural setting and a few even to work in the meat industry. Diaspora Jains (which includes at least 45,000 in North America, 30,000 in Europe and England, 20,000 in Africa, and 5,000 in Asia) are certainly challenged as they have to confront their new social environments. Though most Jains

remain quite faithful to ahimsa, it seems not all are. Intriguingly, there is even evidence found in the Jain scriptures themselves of meat eating in ancient times. Jain religious literature, surely, is filled with rules of the most minute detail how not to cause any harm to other living creatures, great or small, going as far as not eating at night since insects can fly into your food in the dark hours without your knowledge or not wading in the water so not to cause harm to creatures within it. However, in the case of famine or to cure a sickness meat on such very rare occasions may have been allowed. When recently reading the Jaina Sutras, specifically the Akaranga Book 2, Lecture 1, Lesson 10, I was taken aback when I came across the following passage that seems to endorse non-vegetarian food: "A monk or nun on a begging-tour should not accept meat or fish containing many bones, so that only a part of it can be eaten and the greater part must be rejected. If you want to give me a portion of whatever size, give it me; but not the bones." One is reminded here of Buddhist monastics who can eat meat as long as it was not killed by them or for them. Yet, throughout the rest of the Jain writings, the requirements to follow ahimsa are so strict one is told where to urinate so not to harm beings on the earth and how not to hug another or scratch one's skin so not to injury any creatures on the skin. There is no doubt that Jainism advocates ahimsa and vegetarianism. But those rare cases where meat eating was allowed (whether in ancient times or in modern East Africa) one witnesses how complex the topic can be. Another fascinating subject in Dundas' book is the Jain's relationship with war. I just completed the production of a 4 minute Youtube film on Jainism and ahimsa, which concluded with the statement that Jainism is one of the only major world religions which has not engaged in war. This line in the film sparked some controversy, as a few viewers commented that this is not the case. To clarify, drawing from Dundas' text, Jain laypersons are allowed to use martial skills defensively but not offensively. Be that as it may, the true warrior, according to Jainism, is the ascetic, who bravely battles and conquers his inner passions. As for Jain kings waging war, Dundas delineates that there is a Jain manuscript, the Lorebook of the Beginning, which details how a Jain king would behave, often focusing on becoming a righteous Jain monarch, overcoming one's own inner passions and keeping the kingdom free from heretical doctrines. However, the writer does state that kings of ancient times in India were obliged to plunder and increase boundaries of their realms through military means at the expense of their neighbors and this would have carried more weight than any duty to observe the Jain principle of non-violence. And so Jain kings may have been compelled to follow this directive. Thus, perhaps the caveat should be added to the film that Jain kings might have engaged in war, but did so to follow their obligations as a monarch and not as

a Jain. The religion itself does not promote warfare. Whether Jains themselves have been victims of war is something to consider. There appears to be Hindu art which portrays a Jain massacre but references to such an event are lacking in the Jain writings. When Islam entered India, a sort of war was declared on idol worship and this directly impacted the Jain community. Many statues throughout India were destroyed, including Jain shrines. The Jains relationship with Muslim rulers was a times friendly and at other times not. Akbar in the 16th century seemed to work with the Jains, even housing Jain manuscripts in his library and befriending the Jain teacher, Hiravijaya. When asked "what is the true religion," the monk told Akbar it was compassion for all life forms. So moved by the response, it is said that the emperor ordered the release of caged birds, the prohibition of animal slaughter on Svetambara festivals, and the protection of Jain temples from Muslim assault. Akbar's son, Jahangir, was not as benign toward the Jains but still worked with them, declaring an edict for Jains to freely worship. Furthermore, Dundas briefly mentions that the 15th century Jain teacher, Lonka, may have rejected idols after his contact with the Islamic religion. Perhaps he was inspired by the iconoclastic message or perhaps he witnessed the destruction of Jain idols by Muslims and thought it best for prosperity sake to redirect one's focus away from religious images. Whatever his reasons, this Jain thinker seemed to enkindle the Svetambara sub-sects, the Terapanthis and the Sthanakvasis, who both reject icons of the Jinas. Altogether, it can be argued, Islam has played a somewhat significant role in Jain history. As we can see, many valuable insights about Jainism are covered in this masterful work. One of the more fascinating sections for me was when Dundas discusses the Jain's connection to the Sant tradition of India, especially since my graduate studies focused on the sants. While not a great deal is covered connecting these traditions, he does state that "Jains participated in the culture of the sants, the poet-saints of medieval India, and like them produced devotional poetry." The author continues to claim that "the imagery and language of (Jain) poets such as Banarsidas and his imitator Dyanatray is often very close in style to that of a figure such as Kabir." Hence, the Jain mystical poets imitated the poetry of the sants. In this same section of the book he asserts that Jainism is an atheist religion rejecting the idea of a creator god but embracing the idea of God (paramatman), a divine principle, living within all beings. This latter view too matches Sant ideology. Yet, unlike the sants who concentrate on meditation as their religious requirement for moksha, Jains do not practice meditation in same structured way. Jain instructions on meditation are vague and abstract, claims Dundas, having lost the scriptures that deal with this topic. Despite meditation not receiving full attention as fasting and other devotional rituals have, the Terapanthi sub sect seems to have developed a new interest in meditation, as they borrow from

Theravada Buddhist techniques. The future of Jainism, proclaims this scholar, may be somewhat bright, despite the drop in numbers as many Jains blend into Vaisnava Hinduism. The reason for his optimism lies in the fact that the environmental approach of Jainism (an eco-religion of sorts) makes this tradition very relevant today. Hopefully, the message of compassion for all creatures is heard around the world. As for the Jain's perspective on their own future, Jainism, they say, is an eternal religion with a new set of 24 Tirthankaras to appear in the next world era. Mahapadma will be the first of this lineage. Dundas does state that the list of 24 past Jinas was probably made in the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE, in partial imitation of the lists of Vedic seers found in the Upanishads extending the origins of the pro-pounders of the doctrine back into the past. Whether there were 24 past historical Jinas, with a future 24 on their way, one cannot say, since it falls out of the realm of scientific verification. Nevertheless, one thing is clear after reading this informative text: Jainism is a remarkable and inspiring tradition with a great deal to teach us all.

Paul Dundas has produced some serious and valuable scholarship on Jainism. Academics wishing a deeper appreciation and understanding of Jainism than most introductions can give will like Dundas' work. Beginners will find it hard to digest. Dundas has successfully and critically presented a broad account of Jain beliefs and history. The strength of the book -- its thoroughness and density -- also may be a deterrent to the new reader. The Jains, a small religious group believing in an immortal soul, are indigenous to India, and affirm many of the ideas of their Hindu counterparts, but are critical of other Hindu doctrines. Jains do not have a traditional place for "God" or "Gods", but do for the omniscient Tirthankaras. Dundas work in portraying the Jains will have lasting value.

I thought I knew so much about Jainism until I read this book, I learned so much more about the culture and beliefs of the Jains and Jainism.

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