

ANEKANT: THE JAINA PATH OF PEACE AND RECONCILIATION

By: Dr. S.L. Gandhi

(Presented at the International Meeting organized by the Community of Sant Egidio and Cyprus Church at Nicosia from November 16 to 19, 2008)

Diversity of Beliefs and Conflicts

Human life is marked by contrary beliefs, ideas, thoughts and philosophies and the wonder is that despite contradictions and apparently heterogeneous character of social life, civilization has continued to march ahead and has achieved spectacular successes in all areas. However the calmness of the stream of social life that seems to have flowed through the zigzag paths and barren lands for thousands of years has been disturbed by wars, genocides, murders and bloody conflicts in the name of religion that raged through centuries after centuries taking heavy toll of innocent lives. With the passage of time intolerance based on caste, colour, geographical boundaries, race, different political systems, divergent approaches to problems and loyalties increased to so great an extent that each opposing group of human beings sought the annihilation of the groups not agreeing with them. Wars were resorted to for settling disputes arising from different viewpoints. Some wars were also fought for the expansion of territories, wealth and women. Most wars were caused by the dogmatic attitude of an individual or a social or a political or a religious group. They held that what they believed alone was the absolute or the whole truth and all other beliefs were heretical and false. The root cause of all violent conflicts is the adherence of an individual or a group to a set of beliefs considering them to be absolutely true and regarding the opposite views as nothing but falsehood. Adolf Hitler's belief in racial superiority led him to kill the Jews on a large scale and push the mankind into the bloodiest Second World War. Racial segregation in South Africa for years was the result of the inbuilt feelings of hatred against the blacks. Most conflicts and wars in the world are being fought either in the name of protecting a particular religious belief or on account of the belief of ethnic and racial superiority. The rising trends of intolerance in all parts of the world stemming from opposite beliefs are

posing real threat to human survival. Human race now possesses weapons of mass destruction which makes it vulnerable to complete destruction. In the midst of the chaotic situation prevailing in all parts of the world what encourages us most is the emergence of a new trend on the international horizon giving rise to initiatives that encourage dialogues, talks and mediation for the resolution of conflicts. The world is now familiar with such terms as relativity, reconciliation and co-existence. The philosophy inherent in the above words which radiates hope of human survival is the Jain Philosophy of *Anekant* and *Syadvad*. As a matter of fact ANEKANT is an eye. A human eye can only see the physical appearance of an individual or an object but it can neither see nor perceive what he is thinking and why he is thinking so. Unless one is able to realize this subtle aspect, one cannot do justice to others' viewpoint and thinking. One cannot understand even the modes of changes taking place in an object.

The Jaina Philosophy of 'Anekant' (Jaina Doctrine of Non-absolutism)

Lord Mahavira the 24th Tirthankar of the Jain Religious Tradition exhorted his disciples to avoid absolutist and one-sided assertion in their exposition of the nature of an object. He advised monks and nuns to have recourse to *vibhajyavad* or the doctrine of alternatives while expounding the nature of a thing. He was opposed to the dogmatic attitude towards individual beliefs. On being asked by one of his disciples which was the better of the two states (i) the state of slumber and (ii) the state of awakening, Mahavira said:

'For some souls the slumber is commendable but for others awakening is wholesome.'

'Why is it so O Lord !?'

'The slumber is wholesome for those who are engaged in sinful activities while for the virtuous awakening is commendable.'

Mahavira didn't approve of the exclusive assertion of the wholeness of slumber or awakening. He avoided exclusiveness in answering all questions. The *Anekant* approach to dealing with others adopted by Lord

Mahavira is relevant even today. It is the only way to promote religious harmony, reconciliation and unity in diversity.

Syadvad or conditional dialectics is a mode of expressing the philosophy of Anekant (non-absolutist viewpoint). The *Anekant* eye is the best way to perceive the physical as well as the subtle modes or changes occurring in the world of objects. With its help we can develop flexibility and non-dogmatic attitude towards others' viewpoints, resolve disputes and extinguish the sparks of war. It is only through the non-absolutistic approach (*anekant*) that a harmonious social climate can be created.

One of the most important achievements of the philosophical period consisted in a synthetic view of the divergent schools of philosophy and the development and extensive employment of the *anekanta* dialectic for such synthesis.

The two important questions of the philosophical debate since the times of the *Upanisads* were:

1. Is it possible to know the absolute truth, the truth in its completeness?
2. Is it possible to give it a verbal expression and exposition?

The different philosophies have made out different solutions to these perennial issues of philosophy. The Jaina thinkers have also presented their own solutions. The first of these questions was answered by them through their epistemological critique, while they tried to answer the second question through their doctrine of *anekanta*. The Jains believe that it is the omniscient *jina* alone who is capable of knowing the truth in its entirety. His knowledge is absolutely perfect free from all sorts of layers of illusion. This explains why such knowledge has no obstruction or hindrance. The non-omniscient are incapable of knowing the truth in its fullness, because the knowledge of such person is imperfect, being a mixture of gnosis and nescience. With the acknowledgement of the gnosis of the non-omniscient, we simultaneously acknowledge his nescience also. In the veiled state of consciousness we find truth and untruth entwined in one. It is only the omniscient who is endowed with perfect knowledge. The expression '*kevalin*' (omniscient) can also be explained as one who is possessed of knowledge alone and nothing else. His is pure knowledge, absolutely free

from nescience. From the viewpoint of knowledge all persons other than the omniscient are possessed of gnosis as well as nescience. This acceptance of the co-existence of gnosis and nescience implies that the truth in its completeness can be known only by the omniscient and not by any other person notwithstanding his being an ascetic of great repute.

In Jaina ontology two kinds of substances are accepted (1) sentient, and (2) non-sentient. Each substance is divided into infinitely infinite units, and each unit into infinitely infinite modes. All these substances with all their integral units, together with their modes in their totality, constitute the complete truth. The monist can postulate the Absolute Truth (independent of anything else), but the dualist cannot agree with him. This is the reason why the Jaina philosopher, as an upholder of dualism, explains truth on the basis of his doctrine of non-absolutism. Truth has infinite modes and the capacity of language is limited. A word can express a single mode at a single moment, and as such the speaker can, in his whole life, give expression to only a limited number of modes. It, therefore, follows that the complete truth can never be explained through words; it is only a part of truth that can be the subject-matter of linguistic expression.

Syadvad – the Methodology of Reconciling the Opposites

The method of viewing or explaining a thing from different standpoints is *syadvada*. The doctrine that an object can be described from different points of view and that a person expresses it in different ways is characteristically expressed in '*syadvad*' – the doctrine of conditional dialectics. In other words, we can say that '*syadvad*' is the language by means of which the Jaina doctrine of Anekant is explained.

Syadvad is composed of two words viz. '*syat*' and '*vad*'. '**Syat**' is a Sanskrit word which means 'from a particular standpoint.' It stands for multiplicity. The word '**vad**' means a doctrine. Thus the combination of the two words '*syadvad*' means the doctrine that expounds the nature of a thing from different standpoints. The nature of an object in this universe is so complex that making an assertive statement may either be incomplete or untrue. The Jains therefore emphasize utmost care in the exposition of the nature of an object and advise adherents of truth to avoid making exclusive statements. In order to determine the character of a thing the Jains recommend sevenfold predication (*saptabhangi*) which is as follows:

- (1) The pot certainly (eva) exists from a certain point of view.
- (2) The pot certainly (eva) does not exist from a certain point of view.
- (3) The pot certainly (eva) exists from one point of view but it certainly (eva) does not exist from another point of view.
- (4) The pot is certainly (eva) indescribable from a certain point of view.
- (5) The pot certainly (eva) exists from one point of view but it is certainly (eva) indescribable from another point of view.
- (6) The pot certainly (eva) does not exist from one point of view and it is certainly (eva) indescribable from another point of view.
- (7) The pot certainly (eva) exists from a certain point of view but it certainly (eva) does not exist and is certainly indescribable from another point of view.

The above proposition is philosophical in nature but the truth is that all our statements in relation to our dealings in this world are made from one or the other standpoint. The sevenfold predication or judgement which the Jains call '*saptabhangi*' is formulated on the basis of the two modes i.e. affirmation and negation. Technically saptabhangi can be defined as a statement in seven different ways. According to Jainas all religious or philosophical systems contain a grain of truth. Fragmentation of humanity into innumerable sects and schisms is the result of the dogmatic assertion made by adherents of a particular faith that what their religious tradition says alone is true and all else is heretical. Any proposition of this sort based on extreme sense of insistence will give rise to intolerance and conflicts. The Jains claim that their *Anekant* approach has in it the potential for ushering in an era of peace and harmony.

The method of honestly accepting and reconciling the apparently contradictory attributes in a thing from different standpoints is called *syadvada*. In a man, we accept seemingly contradictory attributes - that is, we call him father and son, uncle and nephew, son-in-law and father-in-law,

etc., - because they are reconcilable from different standpoints of different relations which he holds with different persons. Similarly, one accepts apparently opposite attributes, viz., permanence and impermanence, etc., in a thing, say a pot, because one reconciles them with one another from different standpoints. The contradiction of opposite attributes in a thing is really apparent and can be removed by viewing the thing from different standpoints. Different standpoints yield contradictory attributes which are synthesised in a coherent whole by *syadvada*. Thus *syadvada* is a method of synthesis.

One and the same person is father with respect to his son and son with respect to his father, uncle with respect to his nephew and nephew with respect to his uncle, father-in-law with respect to his son-in-law and son-in-law with respect to his father-in-law, and so on and so forth. Accordingly, we accept all those opposite attributes - father and son, uncle and nephew, etc. - in one and the same individual from different standpoints of relations he is having with different persons. In the same way, why should we not accept in one and the same thing the opposite attributes, if on reflection we find them reconcilable from different standpoints?

What is a pot? It is well-known that earthen vessels like a pot, a bowl, etc., are produced from the same clay. After having broken a pot, a bowl is produced from the same clay; now, will anybody call the bowl a pot? No. Why? Is clay not the same? Yes, clay is the same but the form or mode has changed. As the form has changed, clay cannot be called 'a pot'. Well, then it is proved that a pot is a particular form or mode of clay. But one should remember that the mode or form is not absolutely different from clay. Clay itself is called 'a pot', 'bowl', etc., when it assumes different forms or modes. So how can we consider clay and pot to be totally different? From this viewpoint it is proved that both the form-of-a-pot and clay constitute the nature of the thing called 'pot'. Now let us see as to which of the two natures is permanent and which is impermanent. We observe that the form-of-a-pot is impermanent. So one nature of the pot, viz. the form-of-a-pot is established as impermanent. And how is the other nature, viz., clay? It is not impermanent. It is so because the forms or modes which clay assumes go on changing but clay as such remains the same. This is established by experience. Thus, we see that a pot has both these natures - one permanent, and the other impermanent. From this we can naturally maintain that from the standpoint of its impermanent nature, a pot is impermanent and from the

standpoint of its permanent nature it is permanent. In this way to see and ascertain both the permanent and impermanent natures in one and the same thing from two different standpoints is a case of *anekanta* (synthetic or synoptic or many-sided) viewing.

Anekant: A Path of Reconciliation and Co-existence

I bow before the principle of *Anekant* which forbids quarrelling on account of divergently opposed views and lays emphasis on discovering common values in all systems of thought. I bow before it because without inculcating *Anekant* attitude in the masses there can be no interaction, no dialogue and the world will come to a grinding halt. Diversity is inbuilt and innate. It cannot be abolished. This reality has to be accepted. Nothing can be said to be absolutely true and nothing is wholly untrue. *Anekant* synthesizes the opposite modes of thought. Without *Anekant* truth will remain illusive and will never be realized. Leave apart the question of knowing the whole truth, even the relationship between family and society can no longer be maintained. *Anekant* is our real Guru who shows us the path to universal peace.

Man has been inquisitive to know the reality from time immemorial. “What is reality?” This question has been asked thousands of time in human history. Whosoever became knowledgeable, asked the above question. ‘Once Gandhar Gautam asked Lord Mahavira ‘kim tattam’ what is reality? Lord Mahavira replied, ‘upnnei’ that one is born is a reality’. But Gautam was not satisfied. If being born is a reality, the world would be overpopulated. So he asked the Lord again. Lord Mahavira replied, ‘vigmei va’ - to perish or to be destroyed is a reality. Gautam’s doubt remained unresolved. If destruction alone is a reality, nothing will be left behind. He repeated the question. Lord Mahavira replied, ‘dhuvei va’ - to remain eternal or steadfast is a reality.

Now Gautam’s inquisitiveness was satiated. He was fully satisfied with the answer provided by the Lord. The truth is threefold. It consists in birth, death and eternity. The reality has three ingredients: creation, total destruction and survival. Both eternal and perishable are reality. Just as we see a pair of man and woman, we find the same in nature i.e. eternal and non-eternal. We find the opposite modes everywhere. Mere oneness is unthinkable. If there is knowledge, there is ignorance. If there is winter,

there is spring. If there is day, there is night. Life goes on on the basis of opposite modes. We need the opposite as well as homogeneous. Our entire system is regulated by contrary modes. We need both opponents as well as supporters.

The Jain philosophy of *Anekant* alone can extricate the world from the mire of violence and hatred. We should always accept the fact that everything we see around us has some or the other element of truth. We cannot dismiss anything as wholly untrue. This approach will minimize violence and hatred to a great extent. It is because of the philosophy of *Anekant* that the Jain *Shravaks* refrain from criticizing and censuring others' viewpoints. The well-known parable of six blind persons seeking to know what an elephant looks like illustrates it further. They were born blind and had no idea as to what a huge animal like an elephant looks like. They decided to know the truth by touching the elephant. One blind person touched the trunk of the elephant and said, 'Oh! it is like a serpent'. The second blind person touched the body of the elephant and said, 'Oh! it is like a wall. The third blind person touched the tail and said, 'Oh! it is like a snake'. Others found it like a pillar, a winnowing fan etc. All were right and all were wrong. Everyone was partially true. The *Anekant* approach is the basis of our survival since it supports coexistence and reconciliation. The world will be a better place to live by if we can realize the truth that the diversity of beliefs in a human society is a natural phenomenon. Any attempt by a fanatic to wipe out the groups who hold different views and enforce the rule of just one faith will be met with stiff resistance and will unleash violent conflicts in all parts of this planet. We must accept diversity as a natural trait of humanity and learn to live in it. Co-existence is possible only if dogmatic insistence on a viewpoint is given up. The Jain philosophy of *Anekant* has in it a potential for survival into the third millennium.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude my presentation by reproducing the most illuminating and inspiring statement made by His Holiness Acharya Mahapragya, the most revered Jain Acharya and the Spiritual Patron of Anuvrat Movement (a Jain peace movement) on reconciliation as enshrined in the Jain Philosophy:

*“It is imperative that we reflect and ponder over the two words while considering the issue of reconciliation i.e. (1) **sanyam** (self-restraint) and (2) **vitrag** (detached or dispassionate attitude). The Jains hold that since social life is governed by passions its roots lie in attachment and infatuation. By religious life we mean moving forward towards a life free from passions and desires. Enmity, opposition, conflicts and disputes result from our passionate feelings. Friendship, compassion, equanimity, goodwill and reconciliation result from our attitude of detachment and freedom from passions. The main aim of the Jain religious tradition is to develop this dispassionate attitude or the attitude free from passions. To say that ‘my religion is the best of all and I have to initiate all the people of the world into it’ is an absolutist view and it gives rise to many complex problems. It can cause not only disputes but may even create a situation leading to a world war. The Jain religious tradition teaches, ‘your religion is good and you are at liberty to say so, but to say that your religion alone is good and no other religion is as good as that of yours it is an attitude of dogmatism and fundamentalism. Insistence on this view causes hatred and sows the seeds of conflict. Lord Mahavira said, ‘those who say that a person would be liberated only if he followed someone’s faith are themselves deluded and cause delusion to others. Jainism has expounded dharma in the light of **anekant** which is embedded in the dictum’ that which you think is truth is only a part of truth. It is not the whole truth. We should try to discover an element of truth in every thought but we should never think that this part of truth is the whole truth, the only truth.*

He further states that Anekant results in a balance. It results in equality – the outlook of equanimity. It makes it clear that Anekant is not a mere philosophical standpoint but it is the philosophy of life. Anekant is accompanied by an entire code of spiritual and ethical conduct without which it can not be explained. When people give vent to a one-sided deluded view, it creates a doubt – an erroneous angle of vision. A large number of people get entangled in it. The world is full of

people who create complications and problems but those who resolve a problem are very few.”

I conclude my views with a paragraph from the commentary on the doctrine of Non-absolutism given by the editor of the English version of Umasvati's Tattvarth Sutra published by Harper Collins in 1994 (page 139)

The philosophy standpoints have an unlimited area of application, there being as many standpoints as there are thinkers. There is no viewpoint that is perfect as there is no science that is complete. And as there can be reality that science does not encompass, so there can be problems that are not solved by philosophy which is an endless quest. The philosophical standpoints, moreover, spread over all fields of thought and language. According to the doctrine, all philosophies are imperfect although they are the glorious blocks that build the grand edifice of philosophy.