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ARTICLES

Karma and Sin: Doctrines of Consequence as Moral Motivators

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Both sin and karma operate as a type of moral motivation within their respective religious traditions. Within Christianity, sin is deeply tied to questions of the fallenness of human nature and the presence of evil in the world. In Jainism, by contrast, a person's true nature is that of the naturally omniscient and blissful soul, which is obscured by karmic bondage. This karma itself functions simply according to causal principles. Despite these differences, both sin and karma serve as vital drivers of moral behavior. Overall, this exercise in comparative hamartiology opens up a space for interesting conversation and points toward avenues for further engagement.

Religious beliefs and practices are often connected to both moral views as well as soteriological aims. Regarding religions, William Garrett says, "They structure our sense of reality and of human well-being; they serve to identify problems and suggest strategies for the solution of those problems; they condition our hopes and anticipations."[1] Whether through ethical necessity or collective morality, religious beliefs are created and change through time to fit the moral standards of a given period. When combined with soteriology, religious beliefs create a sense of moral motivation with stakes.

In this essay, I plan to examine specifically the Christian understanding of sin and the Jain understanding of karma and compare the respective uses of these as moral motivations. Where relevant, I will contextualize Jainism in light of other Dharmic traditions. I also intend to discuss how Jainism and Christianity motivate their followers to abide by their moral structures in the end pursuits of both religions. As Thomas Cattoi writes:

> The goal of comparative theology is of course not the creation of a syncretic meta-narrative seeking to answer existential questions using the resources of different traditions; rather, more modestly, it seeks to highlight the points of contact no less than the irreducible differences between the ways in which distinct traditions engage analogous issues of ultimate concern.[2]

a Quentin Rice studies religion at UNT and wrote this essay for the spring 2025 session of PHIL 3630 Jainism.

1 Garrett, *Bad Karma: Thinking Twice about the Social Consequences of Reincarnation Theory*, 4.

2 Cattoi, "Flawed Subjectivities: Cyril of Alexandria and Mahāyāna Buddhism on Individual Volition, Sin, and Karma," 37.

I hope to simply shine a light on the similarities and differences between sin and karma, as well as how the two traditions use them, in hopes of gaining a better understanding of the moral motivations of religions in vastly different contexts.

Karma and Reincarnation in Jainism

Karma and reincarnation, while capable of being believed in separately, tend to be considered together.[3] Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism all accept both karma and reincarnation. While their theories of reincarnation may differ, their karmic beliefs tend to be similar. Jainism, however, is distinctive in the sense that Jains believe in karma as consisting of material particles.[4] In order to arrive at this conclusion, they had to follow a line of thought that prioritizes logic to find their truth. But to understand this line of thought, we need to know more about Jain cosmology and goals.

I believe it is important to take a broader look at the goals encouraged in Jainism. By knowing what the end cosmological goal is, it will become easier to understand their practices and beliefs on a smaller, individual level. Firstly, the religious pursuit of a Jain, much like the religious pursuit of a Buddhist, is to transcend the cycle of death and rebirth to obtain liberation.[5] In Jainism, on obtaining liberation or mokṣa, an individual ascends to a realm of liberated souls where there is no suffering. Jainism asserts that it is located at the top of the universe.[6]

The process towards this goal starts and ends with the true self, known as the jīva, "the 'life monad' or, more loosely, 'soul.'"[7] A person's jīva is the only part of them that is sentient. Everything else, whether it be the material world or a person's body, is inert matter. Jains believe that four passions—greed, anger, pride, and deceitfulness—bind karma to the soul.[8] Karma in Jainism is analyzed with scrutiny so that practitioners can fully understand what it takes to rid themselves of it, similar to how doctors and scientists treat diseases. They have even gone so far as to categorize the different kinds of karma and how they interact with a person's capability to obtain mokṣa. The eight major types of karma are separated into four destructive karma particles and four nondestructive ones.[9] The former set of particles, in any quantity, prevent the obtainment of Jainism's "three jewels" of right faith, right thought, and right

3 Garrett, *Bad Karma*, 35.

4 Wiley, "Karman and Liberation."

5 Dundas, "Kaivalya and Mokṣa."

6 Dundas, "Kaivalya and Mokṣa."

7 Dundas, "Kaivalya and Mokṣa."

8 Wiley, "Karman and Liberation."

9 Wiley, "Karman and Liberation."

conduct. The latter set of particles, in theory, do not inhibit the capability of an individual to obtain the "three jewels," but they still are karmic particles and thus a person still needs to be rid of them.

Ideally, a person ceases to obtain karma in any regard. But Jains know that people are not infallible, and so they also seek the destruction of existing karma particles. All karma has a lifetime, and thus each type fades with time, but sometimes their timeline is longer than ideal. It is for this reason that Jains might become monks and nuns. Through a strict mendicant lifestyle, a Jain can learn to rid themselves from karma prematurely, allowing them to pursue kaivalya for their whole lives. Kaivalya is understood as perfect knowledge or omniscience in Jainism. It is the ability to see past the material world and understand the true nature of the soul and is also a prerequisite for obtaining mokṣa.[10] You see, mokṣa is only obtained at the end of a person's final life if they have obtained kaivalya. Notably, both of these are only obtainable if your final vessel is human.

With the pursuit of kaivalya and mokṣa effectively being left to the mendicants, due to them being especially capable of proactively eliminating karma, where does that leave the laypeople? In fact, karma plays a vital role in laypeople's lives across all the Dharmic traditions. For example, Felicity Aulino notes that karmic logic is alive and well in Thailand even among Buddhists who convert to Christianity. Belief in karma encourages and fosters a culture of even-temperedness, even among the newly converted Christians. The Buddhists, similarly to Jains, believe that tempering emotional states leads to a lesser accumulation of bad karma. The Christian converts use the practice of confession, where one privately confesses sins to a trusted priest or pastor, to achieve a similar effect. A culture of equanimity and even aesthetic appeal stems from such tempered emotional states being conducive to the alleviation of karma.[11]

In comparison, due to the accumulation of negative karma coming from any action that harms a living being, Jains are particularly dedicated to nonviolence, with mendicants going to the extreme of gently sweeping an area before they sit or place anything down, just in case there are any bugs or bacteria that could be hurt. Their dedication to nonviolence, of course, extends to their diet, and believing that plants and even minerals have a jīva leads them to be very particular even with the kinds of plants they eat. Although Jain laypeople may not take all the strict vows of mendicants, they nonetheless tend to follow a vegetarian diet, too. Moreover, Jain businesspeople tend to avoid business industries that cause harm, such as large-scale farming or construction.

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10 Dundas, "Kaivalya and Mokṣa."

11 Aulino, "From Karma to Sin: A Kaleidoscopic Theory of Mind and Christian Experience in Northern Thailand."

Sin and Salvation in Christianity

Sin in the various Christian denominations, when compared to karma in the various traditions that believe in it, is a much more divisive topic. The interpretation of the Bible has changed many times over Christianity's lifespan, especially so in regard to the nature of sin. According to the Bible itself, Adam and Eve went against the instructions of God by eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and for their sin He condemned them to walk the earth as mortals instead of living happily in the Garden of Eden.[12] Then, many years later, Jesus of Nazareth, claiming to be the Son of God given flesh, spent his short life teaching compassion and care for the sinners of the earth. He was persecuted for defying the Roman authorities at the time, and was crucified on a wooden cross, destined, according to the Bible, to die for all of humanity's sins.[13] Despite a relatively simple concept, the implications for the rest of the Bible, as well as all of Christian history afterwards, hinged on the understanding of this first sin, dubbed the "original sin" by Augustine of Hippo in the fifth century. In his analysis and writings, he viewed Adam and Eve's sin as a condemnation of human nature, leading humanity to inevitably go to hell due to their inherent wickedness.[14]

For many years, Augustine's determination of the nature of original sin was the gospel taught in Christian churches across the world, but there are other perspectives. One analyzed by Thomas Cattoi in comparison to Mahāyāna Buddhism's iteration of karma is Cyril of Alexandria's interpretation of original sin. Cyril believed that sin was more alike to a sickness or a disease, one that humanity contracted all those years ago in the Garden of Eden. His view is well supported by the symbology used in the Bible commonly depicting Jesus as a healer. Through Jesus Christ's sacrifice, Cyril argues, he gave us the capability to understand our choices and make the virtuous ones again, an ability that Cyril views as lost upon the inception of the original sin.[15]

In modern evangelical belief, Jesus's sacrifice absolved all sinners, past and future, of all sin. But what does this mean for Christians? Well, after death, Christians believe there are two outcomes: your soul, or the part of you that's actually you, goes to heaven or hell. The former might be described as a paradise-like place up above where a person will live eternally in "God's Kingdom," whereas the latter might be described as a pit where a person's soul is eternally tortured and punished for their misdeeds in life. For non-

12 Genesis 3:6.

13 Fredriksen, *Sin: The Early History of an Idea*, 18–36.

14 Fredriksen, *Sin*, 99–100.

15 Cattoi, "Flawed Subjectivities," 31–32.

evangelicals, the conditions for getting into heaven vary, from specific rituals that need to be regularly performed to ascetic practices similar to those of Jain monks.

Moral Motivations

You will notice that Jainism and Christianity have a number of cosmological similarities, such as the soteriological pursuit of both religions being higher planes of existence defined by bliss and an alleviation of suffering. The nature of karma and sin in the two faiths is a more complicated comparison. On the one hand, they both serve as consequential counterbalances—cosmological forces of justice to make an individual's actions in their life matter more in the here and now. However, the nature of the consequence begets a difference worth more attention. In Jainism, karmic consequences take the form of bad karma that can hurt an individual immediately or as far in the future as their next life. For Christianity, there is a cut and dry solution (i.e., salvation via grace), but depending on one's perspective, this might make any sense of justice meaningless. For example, the guarantee that repenting for your sins frees you from them and ensures a ticket to heaven means that the sinner is immediately forgiven, no matter the sin. For the sinner, this is great news! But for the sinned against? As Andrew Sung Park and Susan L. Nelson argue in *The Other Side of Sin*, this can perpetuate a cycle of violence and despair.[16]

Perhaps this cyclical nature of suffering is a similarity between the two faiths; the salvation they offer, as stated previously, is a release from such cycles. While Jainism considers the cycle much longer than Christianity does, due to the nature of reincarnation, both traditions speak of the recurrence of suffering. However, while Jainism focuses efforts on individual liberation, Christianity encourages acceptance and repentance. Kierkegaard writes that "in Christian terminology, death is indeed the expression for the state of deepest spiritual wretchedness, and yet the cure is simply to die, to die to the world."[17] Christians' hope, arguably, lies almost exclusively in death and its promise of eternal afterlife via grace, whereas Jainism values the current life, as well as one's own self-effort, as important due to the unique capacity of a human rebirth to attain kaivalya and hence liberation.[18]

I feel that there is much more discussion to be had on the topic, especially in the realms of specific Christian denominations' views on sin as compared to the Dharmic traditions variations in their systems. Mahāyāna Buddhism, in particular, is delved into in depth by Cattoi, but I would be interested to see Catholicism's more traditional structure compared to Hinduism's

16 Park and Nelson, *The Other Side of Sin: Woundedness from the Perspective of the Sinned-Against*, 13.

17 Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, 6.

18 Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, 7–8; and Dundas, "Kaivalya and Mokṣa."

lengthy history and rich culture as well.[19] There is a vast quantity of different perspectives on soteriology that would also be particularly interesting to investigate further, especially considering the Hindu divine pantheon. Another line of research might be the social dynamics related to sin between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam compared to a similar set of Dharmic traditions. Soteriology and hamartiology have a vast number of different perspectives, and comparing those across traditions with immensely different foundations is one of many routes to truly understanding each other.

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19 Cattoi, "Flawed Subjectivities."

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