# How to Study Jainism? Constructing ‘Jainism’ as an Object of Study

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## Abstract

In 2001 indologist Robert Zydenbos resolutely dismissed James Laidlaw’s monograph on Jainism in a review, arguing that it combined “Western social science discourses” with superficial ideas about ‘Jainism’. To understand this apparent clash between philological and anthropological studies of ‘Jainism’ I look into representations of ‘Jainism’ as a ‘religion’ and its establishment as a separate object of inquiry in so-called Jain(a) Studies. To ask how something known as ‘Jainism’ became established as a ‘religion’ we must investigate the category ‘religion’. In particular I discuss the differences and sometimes conflicts between text-based and ethnographic based accounts of what ‘Jainism’ is and who the ‘Jains’ are. Highlighting these differences in relation to the notion of lived religion, I argue that ‘Jainism’ is used to denote different but overlapping empirical fields, whose constituent parts are configured in very different ways.

## Introduction

One would assume that the main object of study in the study of religion is just that, ‘religion’.[[1]](#footnote-1) Yet, the persisting debates concerning the application of the concept ‘religion’ make it legitimate to ask what objects studies of religion actually study. As a way to investigate how ‘religion’ becomes an object of study this paper will investigate a phenomenon known as ‘Jainism’ that emerged as a distinct ‘religion’ in 19th century western academia.[[2]](#footnote-2) Behind this investigation looms the larger issue of the category ‘religion’ itself, its definition and usage (Smith 2004, Stausberg 2009). Definitions of ‘religion’, be they functional or substantive, point at a vast array of phenomena and human activity sometimes categorised in various sub-compartments or dimensions (Smart 1996). When ‘Jainism’ is recognised as a ‘religion’ it must be based on some definition of the latter, but one crucial element revealed by turning to the history of the study of ‘Jainism’, is the role played by different academic disciplines in the process of defining ‘religion’ and construing one particular ‘religion’ as an object of study.

Representations of ‘Jainism’ as a ‘religion’ and as a separate object of inquiry started being published in academic publications by philologists. Such representations eventually lead to the establishment of Jain(a) Studies as a separate field of study.[[3]](#footnote-3) With representation I here simply mean academic accounts of a given phenomenon, in this case ‘Jainism’. Such representations always entail a definitional element in that they delimit their object of examination and further organise the constituent parts of this object in a specific way. Because there is no a-priori religion ‘out there’ they cannot be purely descriptive, instead they actively shape the object of study by performing two central tasks: 1) carving out an empirical field, and 2) shaping the interior of that field by highlighting certain aspects and downplaying others, delineating a centre from a periphery. They tell us where (not) to look for ‘Jainism’, and further suggest how to relate its constituent parts.

The aim of this paper is to examine the development of such representations in the history of the study of ‘Jainism’. That history saw a major change in the 1980s when anthropological studies on ‘Jainism’ started appearing, complementing a field that until then had been largely dominated by textual studies. The ‘Jainism’ emerging from these studies differed so markedly from its predecessors that it seems natural to ask to what extent the same phenomenon – identified as ‘Jainism’ – presented and analyzed by philologist and anthropologists has been the same thing.

## The Traditional Representation of ‘Jainism’

While the term ‘Jain’[[4]](#footnote-4) was becoming an evermore used etic and emic term in the 19th century, they were considered by many Europeans to belong to some form of ‘Hinduism’ or ‘Buddhism’. One of the earliest forms of the term ‘Jainism’ appeared in 1831 as “Jinism” (Flügel 2005: 2). Yet, it was first in 1879 that the indologist Herman Jacobi made the decisive contribution that would lead to the establishment of ‘Jainism’ as an independent ‘religion’ (Cort 1990: 52). Jacobi presented textual evidence in ancient Buddhist and Hindu sources for the recognition of a separate group of ascetics known as the *nirgrantha*, i.e., the knotless or unattached ones. This group had come together on the basis of a peculiar soteriology focused on ascetic practices. It was further discovered that ascetic descendants of these individuals had cultivated a vast bulk of literature, the study of which lay the foundation for the academic establishment of ‘Jainism’ as a ‘religion’. The origin of what I call the traditional representation of ‘Jainism’ dates back to philological work on some of these texts by German indologists in the 19th century.[[5]](#footnote-5)

John Cort (1990: 44-7) has noted a series of traits in the traditional representation. It typically opens by establishing ‘Jainism’ as a *shramana* movement - a reaction to the ritualistic Vedic traditions. The life of Mahavira, who for the historian can be construed as the founder, is then given in detail according to scriptures. Then follows a historical survey including the writing down of a canon, early growth, accounts of Jain-influenced dynasties and the rise of aniconic sects in late medieval times. The presentation then leaves history to give a more in-depth presentation of doctrine. Ontology and epistemology is presented before turning to karma theory, which leads to a presentation of ascetic and lay life as per textual prescriptions. The final part typically ends with a short description of other lay practices and rites, temples, art, iconography together with some notes on “present condition”.

Although the idea of a Jain canon, founder, and a set of doctrines unconnected with history are all problematic, this portrayal need not contain any factual mistakes as such (Cort 1990: 45-7). It nevertheless provides a specific representation of ‘Jainism’, defining the central from the marginal. Thus, ‘Jainism’ is primarily identified by its historical origin and the dominating interest of the earliest participants as per scriptures. This in turn becomes the defining core out of which all other facets derive. This has important consequences for the understanding of lay Jains since there was no systematised, prescribed conduct for those supporting the Jain ascetics at this early stage.[[6]](#footnote-6) ‘Jainism’ is presented as a reaction to the ritualistic Vedic traditions (cf. Jaini 1979: 1), although rituals constitute a major component of the religious lives of many lay Jains. Lay life is mainly dealt with as it appears in the later normative manuals on lay practice, i.e. as textual prescriptions and ideals. But even here laypeople are devalued since, as Jaini puts it (1979: 160), “the vows of the layman are really just a modified, relatively weak version of the *real* Jaina vows” (original emphasis).

No clue is given concerning actual practice of ideals in this representation. Either we naively assume that it simply follows normative prescriptions, or it simply falls outside the scope of the ‘Jainism’ presented. At the centre of the total empirical field that makes up ‘Jainism’, towards which the main thrust of the investigation is aimed, we find normative doctrines connected to the early scriptural soteriology, but unconnected to any particular time or place. That which is not elaborated in these doctrines is seen as marginal or even antithetical to ‘Jainism’. Many practices of laypeople are therefore briefly described at the end or omitted.

## Anthropological Reactions: Questioning the Importance of Doctrine

The traditional representation of ‘Jainism’ became increasingly questioned as anthropologists entered the scene in the 1980s. Lay Jains particularly received attention, making up as they do the vast majority and having been marginalised in the past. As Marcus Banks observed (1986: 448), “the ideology and belief of the lay community has been progressively supressed…in order to emphasize the independent and radical nature of Jainism.” John Cort also reflected on the tension between the earlier representation of ‘Jainism’ and what he encountered in the field, concluding that “the study of the Jains and the study of Jainism are different studies” (1990: 43). The former, he claimed, looks at practices and believes of contextualised people whereas the latter investigates a branch Indian intellectual history.

Method determines material - the stuff of which empirical fields are made of – hence they are crucial in defining objects of study. Yet, to fully separate ‘religion’ from its adherents and treating them as two separate objects of study would be odd. The challenge inherent in Cort’s observation was how to relate the two. One way to approach this is to ask to what extent philologically and anthropologically inclined representations aim at separate empirical fields and investigate how they have differed in understanding the constituent parts of these fields. While the traditional representations of ‘Jainism’ tended to proceed without much theoretical hesitation, the anthropological reaction led to more self-conscious representations that did not necessarily accept ‘religion’ as the most suitable term for ‘Jainism’.

It was clearly felt that traditional representations had tended to revolve around an abstraction, a set of ideals, whereas these scholars’ emphasis was on people (ibid: 63): the title of the new standard introduction book on the subject was *The Jains*, not *Jainism*. A certain uneasiness with the term ‘religion’ could be sensed behind this move from system to people. Perceived to be too tied up to doctrines and theology, scholars sometimes preferred to talk of “civilization” (Cort 1998: 6, 12). In *The Jains*, Dundas defines ‘Jainism’ as something similar to a culture or civilization that provides a moral universe that can be located in diverse areas such as doctrine but also in festival celebrations and the business activities of laymen (1992: 7).

Michael Carrithers suggested we think of ‘Jainism’ as a historical stream, “a patterned flow of contingencies and aspirations, routines and imaginative responses” (1990: 141). This would deny the existence of a more doctrinal ‘Jainism’ outside any particular socio-historical context. Hence, although ‘Jainism’ began as a soteriological project among ascetics, we need not find that project intact when we enter the stream at any particular time or place, although it will possess the potency to generate a way of life more or less patterned on that original project (ibid: 145-7, 155). The transmission of this potency exists not so much in doctrine as in poems, images and rituals that carry with them specific ideas of individuality and morality (ibid: 156-8). Any simplistic link between doctrine and practice is denied and the connection between the two will vary according to contexts.

Perhaps the most noticeable trait in these new representations of ‘Jainism’ as compared to the traditional, is the repositioning of doctrine as simply one of several elements. James Laidlaw, following Carrithers but also reflecting the growing concern with embodiment, has gone the furthest in dethroning the importance of doctrine. “It is an obvious point” he states, “that people generally do not learn their religion by proceeding, so to speak, from the logical ground up – premises first and entailments later” (1995: 8). Religious practice is learnt from childhood on and often takes place without any theory to explain it (ibid: 9). People have different responses to such practices and might learn meanings from them that are validated by doctrine, but attempts to make doctrine historically or logically antecedent to practice are part of the production of doctrine and theology, and only as such are they subject to anthropological enquiry. We do not empirically observe doctrine leading to practice, but only practice itself, followed by verbal responses to these practices in which that chronology may be claimed. “Jainism can be made to look like the ordered execution of a single doctrinal program” and “some of its greatest minds have always wished to make it so”, yet that is not to be accepted, only observed (1995: 21).

## Relating Anthropology and Indology: ‘Lived’ and ‘prescribed Jainism’

Laidlaw’s Jainism is a far cry from the traditional representation. While his monograph was generally well received, the indologist Robert Zydenbos resolutely dismissed it as combining “Western social science discourses” with superficial ideas about ‘Jainism’ (2001: 1227). Laidlaw had justified a disregard for essential Jain intellectualism by presenting contradictory quotes from “less learned laypeople” (ibid): “Two millennia of literary activity, in which people of the most highly literate community in India have expressed and explained themselves, disregarded with a single stroke of the pen in the name of modern research methodology!” (2006: 51-2) As if anticipating the review, Folkert and Cort observed a few years earlier that there was still “some disjunction between philological and anthropological studies” in the field (1997: 346). What exactly lies behind this disjunction?

A potential answer to this could be located in the recent interest in ‘lived religion’, which precisely concerns the carving out of specific empirical fields and understanding its constituent parts.[[7]](#footnote-7) The term was introduced by Robert Orsi (1997: 7) as a way to look at particular people’s actual practices rather than doctrines and reified constructs such as ‘Protestantism’. Following suit, Meredith McGuire (2008) has argued that the study of religion has tended to prioritize what she calls ‘prescribed religion’ at the cost of what actual individuals practice in their everyday lives. Unlike systematic presentations of religions, lived religion is often not “fixed, unitary, or even particularly coherent” (ibid: 185). Like Laidlaw’s ethnography, the data aimed at here is embodied practices of ordinary individuals rather than doctrines and official spokespersons; in other words, an empirical field only accessible through fieldwork and potentially only loosely related to doctrines and sacred texts investigated by philologists. Hence, Laidlaw proposes to explain conduct in terms of ideas and interests that individuals can be shown to possess, rather than to “invent an entity” like ideology or world-view (1995: 8). For scholars leaning towards the traditional representation on the other hand, the lived religion of a particular Jain is only a part of ‘Jainism’ in as much as it relates directly to doctrines. Hence, for Jaini (1979: 191) prescribed practices of normative texts “constitute the fundamental modes of religious expression for the Jaina laity”, while Zydenbos’ holds that “Jaina life” can only properly be explained by a “Jaina ontology” (2001: 1227).

 The notions of lived and prescribed religion clarify certain points, but also provoke further questions. The set of doctrines and practices presented in scriptures might be identified as ‘prescribed Jainism’. The actual practice of prescribed ‘Jainism’ might be called ‘lived Jainism’. The relationship between the two is a key issue here. For Jaini and Zydenbos the former defines and elucidates the latter, but for Laidlaw and proponents of lived religion the nature of this relationship is much more uncertain. Take the example of fasting practices among contemporary Jain women. While these practices are described in ‘prescribed Jainism’, doctrinal theorizing need not be formative in a concrete individual’s actual practice, i.e. in ‘lived Jainism’. More important might be the circles of friends and kin among whom she lives, memories she has, her sense of place in the immediate world (work, school, friends), the stories she has been told by those she loves, and bonds of commitment and loyalty to particular friends and kin (Orsi 2002: 169). The ‘Jainism’ active here is not a set of doctrines, but ‘Jainism’ as discussed and practiced, modified and constituted within the social world of her surroundings, i.e. a thoroughly local and lived Jainism (ibid). This might or might not include the active presence of ‘prescribed Jainism’. The ‘lived religion of Jains’ is not of real interest to Jaini and Zydenbos unless it corresponds to a ‘prescribed Jainism’. While this position would delight orthodox Jains it ignores the fact that the ‘lived religion of Jains’ typically goes beyond ‘prescribed Jainism’ (Carrithers 2000). ‘Lived Jainism’ often co-exists and blends with beliefs and practices outside ‘prescribed Jainism’ (ibid: 834).

 The lived religion approach is clearly a reaction to reductive textualism that assumes scriptures to be the main locus of ‘religion’, and the related view that practice is simply about realising textual ideals. The polar pitfall of this, however, would be to lose sight of ways in which prescribed religion is present lived religion. Not only in the practices it suggests but also other areas of life not specifically aimed at in the scriptures. When McGuire acknowledges that prescribed religion is “surely part of the picture” in lived religion (2008: 17) she does not explore this further, an omission suggesting that overly somatic approaches can come with textual blindfolds. Characterised by a high level of education and an increasing shift of emphasis from ritual to reflection, one would assume that the ‘religion’ of the contemporary Jain community is shaped in different ways by ‘prescribed Jainism’. But because Jain soteriology is not to be practiced by all, there is not one ‘prescribed Jainism’ for ascetics and laypeople in any given context. To complicate things further, the lived religion of either might influence the other. Hence, the study of lived religion cannot not commit to any pre-conceived idea concerning the relationship between prescribed and lived religion.

## Concluding Remarks

‘Jainism’ as a study of object has been, and can be construed in different ways. Philological and anthropological representations, as sketched above, offer partially overlapping empirical fields. Both cover elements like doctrine and fasting practices, but disagree in how the two relate to one another and the rest of the constituent parts of their respective fields. They offer different ways of envisaging just how ‘Jainism’ can be said to exist in the world. One is primarily found in an intellectual literary tradition of texts and the few who master and engage directly with it, the other is played out in everyday social life of the majority. The former leans towards viewing ‘Jainism’ as a disembodied text-based set of doctrines, as a unique intellectual strand in the history of Indian philosophy. The other model leans towards viewing ‘Jainism’ as practiced by those people we recognise as Jains. Its empirical field goes beyond prescribed interpretations and practices, and while it will find elements of that above-mentioned intellectual strand, that strand’s bearings upon actual practice remains open to interpretation. In others words, we might construe a ‘prescribed’ or a ‘lived Jainism’. This tentative division of all phenomena that might be considered part of ‘Jainism’ into two categories indicate the complexities inherent in the category ‘religion’, not only in the scope of phenomena that it might aspire to cover, but also in the interdisciplinary nature of its study. It suggests that theoretical discussions on the religion category might draw benefit from considering the role of different academic disciplines in the study of religion - such as philology, anthropology, religious studies/study of religion, psychology, Indology and area studies, neurology, sociology, history, archaeology and philosophy - and the type of empirical data they work with.

The history of the study of ‘Jainism’ can thus be construed to be leading us to two separate empirical domains whose interconnection remains an open question. This very question is a challenge not only in the study of ‘Jainism’, but also ‘religion’ in general in the wake of scholars’ increased interest in embodiment in the last few decades. If actions speak louder than words, as recent academic trends would seem to have it, how are we to think about ‘religions’ in general, the place of doctrines therein and representations of them?

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1. I put ‘religion’ in single quotes to make clear that there is no one meaning attached to

the term, but rather various suggested meanings presented in previous scholarship. It remains open to interpretation, and it is this very openness I wish to retain here. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I put ‘Jainism’ single quotes for same reasons as noted in footnote 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The ways in which the term ’Jainism’ was appropriated by insiders as part of colonial identity politics and legal struggles will not be considered here for want of space. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The notion of ‘Jains’ is problematic as it covers a highly heterogenic group with unclear boundaries to other communities. I will nevertheless use it here for pragmatic reasons to denote individuals who tend to revere the Jina – the omniscient individual – as the most exalted. They may roughly be divided into two categories, ascetics and lay people. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Classical expressions of the traditional representation are found in Glasenapp (1925), but also later incarnations such as Padmanabh Jaini ‘s *The Jaina Path of Purification* (1979), which I will give some references to here. Jaini’s book served as the standard introduction book to ‘Jainism’ prior to Paul Dundas’ *The Jains* first published in 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Texts fully describing and prescribing sets of codified practices for laypeople started being produced during the first centuries AD. Hence, a fully developed ‘Jainism’ for laypeople to practice developed after the ascetic tradition. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ‘Lived ‘religion’’ is associated with the works of Orsi (1997, 2002) and later McGuire (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)