

Avery Santiago-Flores  
May 2, 2021  
RST 136

Anekāntavāda in the Catholic Church: A Proposal for Vatican III

*Anekāntavāda* is a religious perspective within the Jain tradition that translates as “manypointedness”.<sup>1</sup> This concept is a deeply empathetic philosophical principle that encourages open discourse and unity between groups of people regardless of a difference in perspective. Melanie Barbato defines *anekāntavāda* as “the teaching of non-one-sidedness” and “plurality”.<sup>2</sup> According to the Jain principle of *anekāntavāda*, there are multiple angles from which to observe something, and all perspectives deserve attention and consideration-- even those that are not immediately apparent. As Barbato explains in “Anekāntavāda and the Dialogic Identity Construction”, this core principle is one of the many reasons why Jainism is one of the oldest, longest practiced religions in the world.<sup>3</sup>

In recent years, more and more Catholic-raised people have been defecting from the Church due to philosophical and moral disagreements with the structure of the Church and the principles of the Church authority. Affiliation with the Catholic faith can provide a fundamentally important sense of cultural and social unity for those raised within the Church, and this form of alienation has left many with significant cultural ties to the faith, but no moral or philosophical motivations to stay involved in the Church or contribute to inter-religious discourse regarding the many issues that the Catholic Church faces today. The Jain principle of *anekāntavāda* can serve to mitigate these tensions between the faithful and the apostates in the Catholic Church, in order to reunite those who feel alienated from the faith. Through “dialogic identity construction”, *anekāntavāda*’s teaching can provide leaders within the Catholic Church

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<sup>1</sup> John E. Cort, “Intellectual Ahimsa Revisited” in *Philosophy East & West*, vol. 50, no. 3. (July, 2000), 324.

<sup>2</sup> Melanie Barbato, “Anekantavada and Dialogic Identity Construction,” in *Religions*, (Nov 2019), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

with a framework to "engage with other views constructively" while simultaneously "[maintaining] a coherent sense of self", ensuring that changes to the principles of the faith will not challenge the fundamental identity of Catholic individuals.<sup>4</sup> Thus, *anekāntavāda* has the potential to stabilize Catholic identity in much the same way that it stabilizes Jain identity.<sup>5</sup>

There are three major issues contributing to the increased phenomenon of defection from the Church among former-Catholics. The first of these major issues that is alienating modern Catholics from the Catholic Church is the Church's long and shameful history of pedophilia and child abuse, which historically has been hidden and covered up in order to protect offending Church members for many decades. Second, the Church's stance on homosexuality and gay marriage has been alienating and offensive to many modern-minded individuals raised within the Catholic faith. Finally, the Catholic Church has consistently failed to validate the religious beliefs and practices of those who consider themselves Catholic but come from non-Western traditions (often traditions that were colonized by Catholic mercenaries), forcing those who practice non-Western forms of Catholicism to consider their beliefs and practices 'unofficial' or not sanctioned by the Church and therefore not truly Catholic.

I would like to propose a hypothetical case study in which the principle of *anekāntavāda* can be extracted from the formalities of Jain logic and philosophy and be employed as a practical philosophical approach to argue for opening a new Vatican Council meeting, which I will refer to as "Vatican III". This council meeting would be the first Vatican Council meeting to be located in the Americas, as a symbolic gesture of unity and goodwill, with the goal of encouraging Catholic discourses to be viewed from a different, but equally valid, perspective in alignment with the Jain principle of *anekāntavāda*.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 2.

The council meeting of Vatican III should take the following concrete steps to bridge the gap between these differing perspectives within the Catholic faith. First, there must be concrete financial reparations for the victims of pedophilia within the Church, with full acknowledgement and responsibility taken on behalf of Church leaders for the crimes committed, and a zero tolerance policy adopted for instances of sexual abuse by Church members. Second, there must be a restructuring of the clergy to increase oversight between clergy-members and bishops, encouraging transparency between members of the parish and the clergy in regards to relocation of clergy members who have been accused of crimes. Third, the Catholic Church should embrace the many homosexual and LGBT members of its community and turn away from antiquated interpretations of homophobia in the Bible by endorsing gay marriage within the Church. Finally, there must be a restructuring of dogma in order to be more inclusive of non-Western specific Catholic practices, such as the worship of “unofficial” saints and the use of practical magic in worship via new policies that would be inclusive of these non-Western practices.

By embracing the principles of *anekāntavāda*, the gap between modern-minded members of longstanding Catholic culture and conservative-minded Catholics can be bridged. When the aim of “manypointedness” is adopted, those who are committed to the Catholic faith and to maintaining a Catholic culture can come to understand that there are many ways in which to be Catholic, just as there are many interpretations of the Bible and the teachings of Jesus Christ. Although many traditionalists fear that a restructuring of Catholic principles and dogma through proposed policies such as a third Vatican council meeting will change the core identity of Catholic beliefs, the philosophy of *anekāntavāda* teaches us that religious harmony and social unity can be maintained even among those who disagree.