

## Religion in Contemporary Society

Good afternoon, Shalom, Namaste, Salaam-Valekkum and Jai Jinendra.

**Notes for Slide 1 →** I want to start my share of presentation with a very basic question. What exactly is a religion? Is there a definition that I can stick to or does it change with time, situation, age, color and so on and so forth? Let's look at some of the common perspectives:

1. Religion is a set of beliefs and practices generally held by a community, for example – the Jain community believes in karma theory. It also believes in the concept of Soul and that all souls render service to each other.
2. Religion is nothing but rituals – Example the Hindu community believes in taking a dip in the holy Ganges to wash out all their sins
3. Religion is a study of ancestral or cultural traditions, writings, history, and mythology,
4. Religion is personal faith and mystic experience. – Example every Tuesday I have to go to a specific temple and pray to a specific God.

The term "religion" refers to both the personal practices related to communal faith and to group rituals and communication stemming from shared conviction and sometime outside of the mainstream as well... negatively also referred as a Cult.

It would be unfair to stick to these very 'bookish' perspectives of religion. In today's fast-changing times and globalizing world, we need to have a look at some more interesting perspectives as well –

Here is a well-educated beautiful girl from a middle-class Indian family. She works at a call center in the outer-skirts of Bangalore, staying about 1000 miles away from her family. For her, religion is something that helps her grow in her career and gives the courage to stay safe and secure while being away from family. For this cute little boy from Africa, religion is something that can feed him at least one meal a day. And for this old man lying on the death bed, religion is nothing but the all-powerful God who can save his life.

**Notes for Slide 2 →** Now let's see how religion is being practiced specifically in India. In one religion they worship the 'lingam' while in another they don't believe in God as a Generator, Operator and Destroyer but they worship the icon and believe in soul enlightenment. In yet another religion they worship the scriptures. And for some, they just practice in their thoughts.

And in today's modern times, online religious life conducted at home or in an Internet cafe has replaced attendance at traditional churches, temples, mosques and synagogues. Some are coming to religion for the first time, in a setting they find as comfortable as their grandparents found a church.

The more we explore the more will we find that religion is being practiced in different ways, shapes and forms in different parts of the world.

As one of the youngsters from our organization, when asked this question about how he would like to practice religion, said – "I'd like the freedom to fashion a personalized style of worshiping and I want to decide that for myself". Really, old mechanisms of religious authority are changing. There is more emphasis on individualism.

The message is very simple. The world we live in, is truly global and we need to learn to live in such a world, appreciate the differences amongst cultures and traditions and practice what Lord Mahavira said almost 2500 years back – Live and Let Live / Jeo Aur Jeene Do

Religion has always been a major factor in the growth of human civilization. In art, music, literature, philosophy, law, moral codes and spiritual texts, many achievements can be traced back to its tremendous influence. Admittedly there have been negative impacts too – mass killings, pogroms, terrorism... perpetrated in the name of religion. And all in the name of a divinity that is believed to be merciful and compassionate.

**Notes for Slide 3 →** Today our world suffers from many problems. They are a result of deep rooted causes like **Poverty, injustice, inequality and fundamentalism.**

People respond differently when placed in a situation of conflict. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King responded to poverty, injustice, inequality and fundamentalism through nonviolent action; however terrorists use violence and intimidation. If we wish to eliminate the world problems, we need to address these root causes and that too via nonviolent methods.

I personally believe that the most divisive breeding ground today for these world problems is **fundamentalism**, particularly religious fundamentalism.

**Notes for Slide 4 →** So what do we mean by Fundamentalism? Fundamentalism is many things to many people. It is a strict and literal adherence to a set of beliefs or principles. It is tunnel vision. It is an absolutist view. Fundamentalism can be religious, political, or personal. Though not all fundamentalists are violent, many people use religious fundamentalism to justify violence.

The fundamentalist proclaim their belief is infallible and that only they have the Truth. To reach their objective, fundamentalists supersede the wishes of the majority of the population, trample the views of the minority of the people, and hijack the political process for their objectives. Any means, violence or intimidation, justifies their end.

Fundamentalism is dangerous in a world where we as people with different color, race, ethnicity, religions, sexual orientation, and personal views need to live harmoniously. What we as a group need to do with the help of organizations like UN, UNESCO, other government and non-government bodies, etc. is to divert people from being a fundamentalist and turn them into an open-minded person, a person who is willing to listen to other views as well.

**Notes for Slide 5 →** Let's quickly have a look at couple slides that showcases the multiplicity of views and perspectives. What you see on the slide is water. The way you and I look at this water depends on our state of mind. An absolutist will say – this is water and only water whereas a person who is open-minded will be willing to respect the fact that this can be something other than water in a different form. For example the person sitting at a beach and enjoying the sea waves, may look at this water as sea, the person building a snowman looks at this as snow. That's based on his state of mind at that point in time. Remember **the Truth does not change, perspectives do.** And we human beings fight over perspectives thinking that we are fighting for the Truth.

**Notes for Slide 6 →** Let's look at one more example. What do you see here? And now? Do you see how a rabbit with a carrot in the 1<sup>st</sup> picture is a duck with beads in the 2<sup>nd</sup> picture? Again nothing has changed except our perspective. The world around us consists of the beads and the carrots which can sway us to see the world in a particular way. We need to recognize the beads and the carrots and the influence they have on our perspective, and in addition we need to look within ourselves. As we search for our own perspective, we must keep in mind, at all times that multiple perspectives exist.

**Notes for Slide 7 →** The big question before us is: Are we going to revert to mediaeval patterns of religious wars and conflicts? Are we going to be an absolutist and be jailed with only one school of thought? Are we going to be narrow-minded and behave like dictators? Are we going to swayed with only one perspective and be convinced of that perspective? Or are we going to have freedom to explore different views.

**Notes for Slide 8 →** And the bigger question before us is: What's the solution? Can we eradicate fundamentalism? Can we develop a non-absolutist view? The solution, as per Sri Aurobindo, would be to recognize that the real truth of religion is in the spiritual experience and the soul of which it is an outer formation. What is needed today is a rediscovery of some of the insights of various religions and

cultural traditions for a decisive break-through, a quantum leap into a new spiritual dimension. And this is exactly what is happening in today's contemporary society. Specifically the younger generation is picking the best of the breed from various schools of thought. They are keeping it simple and not allowing rituals to play in. And most importantly they are still practicing the key principles.

The 3 key principles that I believe are the answer to today's world situation are—

1. Non-Violence
2. Non-Possessiveness
3. Non-One-Sidedness

All of the above are an integral part of Jainism and each and every member of our organization, Young Jains of India, practices it. We all have been hearing about Non-violence. But let me revisit the definition of non-violence once again. It means respect for human rights and peaceful co-existence. What is most important when we talk about non-violence is to not hurt anyone even through our words and thoughts. That's the real way to practice non-violence. Remember that most of the time physical violence starts because of mental violence.

Non-possessiveness is a very broad term again. To some it means renunciation of the world. We believe in that in a different manner. For the next generation, what is most important is to limit their possessions and not create a big gap between the rich and the poor. We have seen in an earlier slide that inequality is one of the root causes.

The most important and critical one in achieving peace and harmony is the principle of non-one-sidedness. It's also called as multiplicity of views. It clearly means respect other people's views, respect the diversity that exists in the global world today and be a non-absolutist. If you really think about it and practice in your day-to-day life, this principle can help you even improve your own personal life.

We got to find different ways to educate people about this principle. How can organizations like UN, UNESCO help increase the mutual understanding between different religions, cultures and traditions of the world? Surely debates like the one we are a part of today helps achieve the same to a certain extent. There shall be continuous flows of information, knowledge and ideas using all the form of media and other Information and Communication Tools that we can.

**Notes for Slide 9 →** Let me quickly give you a brief introduction about the organization that I represent – The Young Jains of India, popularly called as YJI. It was established in the year 2005 to promote the principles of non-violence, non-possessiveness and non-one-sidedness. It is a roughly 2500 people organization with focus on the younger generation between the age of 18 and 40

years. YJI emphasizes a lot on self development along with social service, career guidance and networking.

**Notes for Slide 10 →** The other organization that I represent is the Power of Peace Network (PPN). PPN is a bold 21<sup>st</sup> century initiative designed to help us know and appreciate who we are in the world. Its vision is to harness the power of communication and information for mutual understanding and peace. A UNESCO-stimulated broadcast and internet innovation, PPN is meant to become an independent network force with a sustained global reach and presence.

Both these organizations believe in the principles that I shared with you earlier.

**Notes for Slide 11 →** Let me live you with this last slide and I'll let you interpret this slide your way. What I am trying to convey on this slide is basically a representation of souls that are trying to climb the ladder of enlightenment and achieve 'nirvana'. One thing is quite obvious that all these souls are helping each other in reaching the 'ultimate', as very aptly said in Jain scriptures 'Parasparopagraho Jeevanam' which in simple English means – "All souls render service to each other". And this is exactly how I see the role being played by the religions in the contemporary society.

Speaker → Manish Kasliwal

Organization → Young Jains of India, YJI

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Email Address → [manish@yjindia.org](mailto:manish@yjindia.org); [manishkasliwal@yahoo.com](mailto:manishkasliwal@yahoo.com)

Web Page → [www.yjindia.org](http://www.yjindia.org)

Telephone No → +91.98202.96247