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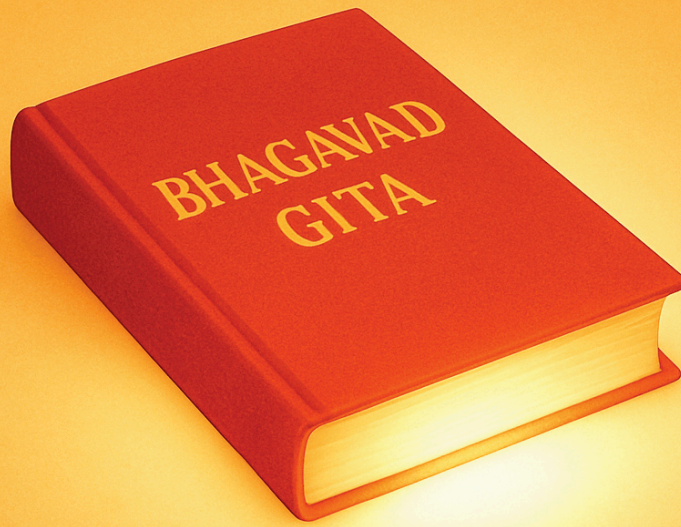
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The Gita's Revolt Against Ritualism

Acharya Prashant explores the divide between inherited ritual and true spiritual inquiry, using the Gita to challenge ego-driven religion and inspire inner transformation.

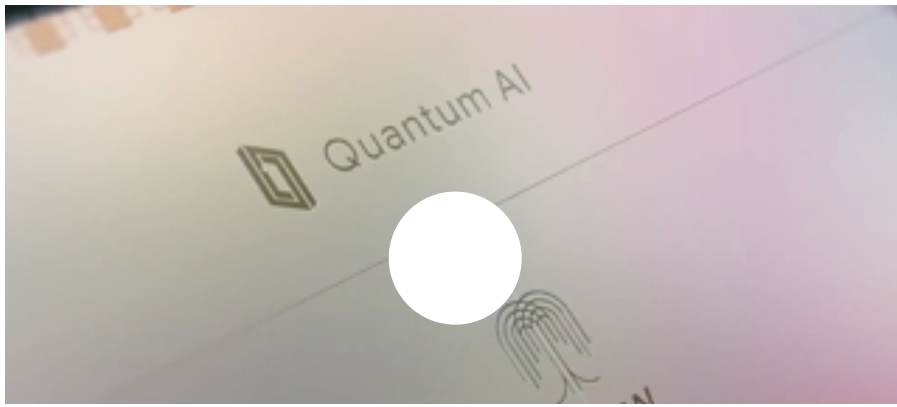
By: Acharya Prashant

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Most people do not arrive at religion through inquiry but inherit it— through tradition passed down by parents, neighbors, and priests. They often put sacred texts on a high shelf, calling them holy, but hardly examine them with genuine curiosity. Conditioned to superficially respect them without digging deeper, they miss out on the rich wisdom those pages truly hold. As a result, rituals are followed without understanding, and beliefs are held without critical thought. Across cultures, from Africa and Europe to China and India, religious expression appears diverse.

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The symbols, ceremonies, and stories vary widely. Though the language and practices differ, the common underlying intention remains the same: the pursuit of material prosperity, security, and comfort. In this model, good and bad are defined not by ethics or deeper understanding, but by how well they serve individual desires. The divine is often reduced to a provider, rituals become a means of transaction, and people begin to expect rewards or consequences as outcomes—turning spiritual engagement into a subtle negotiation. Much of what passes as religion today has become a culturally accepted means for securing material benefits—often rooted in fear, driven by longing, and quietly serving the ego's appetite for comfort and control. This stands in stark contrast to the timeless spiritual wisdom found in the highest expressions of human inquiry such as the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Taoism, the teachings of saints like Kabir Saheb, etc. To see why this divide came about, we first need to look at how religious ideas evolved historically. Let us consider the Vedas, among the oldest scriptures known to humanity.

Timeless Insight Versus Time-Bound Tradition

The early Vedas brim with offerings, rituals, and enunciation of set responsibilities. The ritual-based sections of the Vedas, known as karmkand, reflect an early and important phase of spiritual development, when people sought meaning through symbolic acts, repeated ceremonies, and age-old stories. As the journey deepens, Vedanta emerges as the culmination of Vedic wisdom, moving beyond commandments, rituals, and even the worship of deities. Eventually, it turns inward, asking the essential questions: Who am I? Why am I suffering? What brings lasting peace? Similarly, large portions of many other religious scriptures across the world— from the Abrahamic to the Chinese—are dominated by descriptions of beliefs, and commandments governing behavior. Not every part of a scripture may necessarily offer timeless guidance. Some parts are clearly tied to the time in

which they were written. A statement like “The great travel on horseback” would hold only historical and symbolic meaning today. ^

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However, teachings that speak to lust, greed, anger, envy, pride, and illusion still resonate across generations. These inner struggles have been part of humanity for as long as we can think back, and it's this core conflict that Vedanta works to shine a light on. Ritual-oriented texts may hold historical or literary significance, but they do not offer the liberating insight that Vedanta provides as a philosophy. Religious texts that emphasize rituals or belief-systems may still hold cultural, symbolic, or literary value today—but unless they point toward inner transformation, they cannot be taken as genuine spiritual guidance.

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The Gita's Radical Rejection of Ritualistic Worship

To make this contrast between ritual and true religion plain, Shri Krishna offers a striking image in Bhagavad Gita, Verse 2.46: If the entire earth were covered in water, what need

would there be for a small pond? That is the relative worth of the ritualistic parts of the Vedas. Today, many of these traditions may still hold historical or cultural value, and belong more in museums than in the life of a sincere seeker, while the true teachings of Vedanta, which lead to self-realization, remain both timeless and urgently relevant. When investigated closely, most rituals are anchored in the promise of reward. Ask what a particular act signifies, and the answer is usually, “Do this, and you will receive that”—with the reward almost always tied to material or emotional gain.

Temples, mosques, rivers, and hills become sites where people submit their wishlists to the divine. Verse 2.46 and the previous verses 2.42 to 2.45 of the Bhagavad Gita reject this bargaining and offer a sharp critique of cultural piety. They challenge not just superficial traditions but the very foundation of organized religion. In verse 2.42, Shri Krishna says: O Arjuna! Those of limited understanding, driven by desires and attached to Vedic rituals for pleasure and heaven, get deluded by flowery words. True knowledge of the self does not arise in such minds. And in verse 2.45, He says: The Vedas deal with the three gunas; Arjuna, transcend the three gunas. Here, He explicitly rejects the ritualistic sections of the Vedas that focus on material rewards, describing them as practices driven by desire for Prakriti, the ego and its objects of interest. Arjuna is urged to rise above such pursuits and free himself from the grip of the ego and the imagined world it fabricates through perception and yearning.

The Marketplace of Ritual and Reward

In the Bhagavad Gita, spirituality is not about keeping the ego intact but about seeing through its illusions. While popular religion allows the ego to flourish and camouflage under religious attire, the Gita demands its complete dissolution. One may chant mantras in the morning, act unethically during the day, and return to evening prayers, without ever confronting their dishonesty or inner contradictions. But the inner person stays the same, still led by selfish urges, now disguised as devotion. Many cultures quietly accept shows of faith without genuine inner change. Mainstream religion, or lokdharma, often reinforces this pattern by offering social approval in place of critical thinking and introspection. It is unfortunately operating like a marketplace, where people seek emotional or material fulfillment, treating dharma as something to consume or perform rather than a path to transform. This is why institutional religion has become one of the most enduring and profitable enterprises. With no physical product to sell, it offers stories the ego is eager to embrace. Those searching for meaning, influenced by confusion and inherited beliefs,

readily buy in. The Gita dismantles this model entirely, challenging the foundation of desire-driven faith and replacing it with radical self-inquiry. ^

Act Without Desire: The Path of Effortless Action

When you strongly want something, it begins to shape your behaviour, even without your knowing. Your actions start to revolve around it, hoping it works out, while quietly fearing that it won't. In contrast, when action flows from a clear mind unclouded by personal motives, it unfolds without resistance and becomes spontaneous and effortless. Organized religion says, "I act because I want something." The Gita says, "When I see clearly, right action follows on its own." This is the central teaching of the Gita: Nishkamna or desireless action. It is action flowing from clarity, where the sense of being the doer fades away. Like a driverless car in motion, action flows naturally, without the sense of "I am doing this." Such teachings unsettle the foundation of popular religion, which is built around the ego's need to consider itself the doer of actions. As a result, we often tend to worship only those aspects of the scriptures that reassure the ego, while ignoring the ones that demand inner transformation. That is why many are more drawn to the Krishna of the Puranic tales—adored for his charm, divine play, and accessible emotional appeal—while the radical teacher of the Gita, who speaks of self-inquiry and ego-transcendence, is often overlooked.

Breaking Free from Inherited Religion

Within us lies a mind that first generates desire and then imagines a divine figure to fulfill it. Around these imagined deities, we construct customs, often without understanding their symbolic meaning. When rituals arise from such a foundation, they become a veil over reality. Instead of dissolving the ego, they often end up reinforcing it. What we need today is not merely more temples, nor the unthinking repetition of ceremonies that may please or entertain but fail to awaken inner honesty. What we need is the courage to question the practices that keep the mind entangled in surfacelevel performances.

Those who truly live by Krishna's teachings are often seen as revolutionaries, almost as if truly understanding the Gita is some kind of rebellion. But the real question is: Why remain loyal to just rituals he so clearly rejected? Only when cultural sentimentality, folklore, and fear-driven conformity are discarded does true religion emerge—where rituals end, and honesty begins. Acharya Prashant, a philosopher and teacher of global wisdom literature, is the founder of the PrashantAdvait Foundation. A bestselling author who brings timeless wisdom to urgent modern questions, he has been recognised for his contributions to thought and ethics—with honours from PETA ('Most Influential Vegan'), the Green Society

of India ('Environmental Leadership'), and the IIT Delhi Alumni Association ('National Development').



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