

When ritual masquerades as religion's true inner essence

Buildings, rituals, identities come and go. They cannot be the heart of religion.



ACHARYA PRASHANT

A question often arises: if spirituality is about inner transformation, why do societies still quarrel so fiercely over temples, mosques, churches, and shrines? Why is the defence of religious symbols carried even to the point of bloodshed?

The uncomfortable truth is this: when we lose access to the real treasure within, we cling desperately to substitutes. A poor man with nothing but a cracked vessel in his hut will fight ferociously if you try to take it away. Not because the vessel is valuable, but because in his eyes, it is all he owns. Humanity, having forgotten its inner riches, clings in the same way to rituals, buildings, and labels. What should have been a gateway to freedom becomes the excuse for bondage.

HOW RELIGION LOST ITS FUNCTION

The very word "religion" points to a return: going back to one's essence. In India, *adhyatma* carries the same meaning: knowing the self. Yet this original sense has been steadily eroded. Instead of showing us the mirror of truth, religion today has become a way to escape it.

True religion unsettles you. It forces you to see what you would rather avoid: dishonesty, insecurity, fear of death. That is why the Upanishads were likened to a mirror.

They did not comfort, they revealed. But mirrors are dangerous for the ego: they show the blemishes. Over time, priests and institutions found it safer to replace the mirror with marble walls. Temples and cathedrals rose high, rituals grew elaborate, and religion was largely reduced to a soothing spectacle. A shrine became the equivalent of a massage: momentary comfort, no transformation. The mirror was gone, and with it, the possibility of liberation.

FIVE RUPEES OR ONE PIECE OF BREAD

If all I possess is a five-rupee note, its loss feels like the loss of everything. I will clutch at it as though my life depends on it. But if I have discovered a billion within, even the loss of a thousand will not disturb me.

So long as we do not know the vastness of our inner wealth, we will keep clashing over the little tokens we mistake for religion: clothes, customs, rituals, or identities. In almost all sectarian violence in history, from Europe to the Middle East to South Asia, the deepest fault line has not been land or language but religion turned into identity. Each side clings to its "five rupees," blind to the immeasurable treasure within. The picture is no different from the desperation of the starving, fighting over a dry crust, not because of its worth, but because they believe it is all they have. Humanity has been repeating that same desperation for centuries.

HOW FALSE RELIGION WORKS

False religiosity always begins with the ego as it is and then builds a defence



system around it. If I dislike someone, I can invent a myth or even a scripture to justify my hatred. If I crave sweets or meat, my festival will elevate that craving into divine injunction. Instead of dissolving my tendencies, false religion sanctifies them.

This is how "scriptures" get reverse-engineered: the ego writes its own history, and then calls it sacred. What should have exposed our condition ends up justifying it.

That is why festivals so often reinforce who we already are rather than liberate us. Desire, wrapped in sacred language, continues its old dance. Religion becomes a toy in the hands of the ego.

By contrast, the scriptures India once called *apaurush-eya*, "not of human making," were not meant to defend the ego but to expose it. The Upanishads, uncompromising mirrors of truth, are conspicuously absent from our popular observances. We are comfortable with folklore that entertains us, but wary of wisdom that unsettles us.

WHY WE RESIST THE MIRROR

Look honestly into the mirror, and you see not the hero you imagined but a beggar: restless, fearful, dependent. No one likes such a sight.

And yet, paradoxically, this discomfort is the beginning of freedom. The day you acknowledge this discomfort, you open the possibility of moving beyond it.

Instead of facing this truth, we have built a religious industry around soothing the ego. Priests, gurus, and clerics often promise "peace" and "positive vibes." Petals are showered, rose water sprinkled, incense burns, music plays, and we feel temporarily consoled. But peace obtained through self-deception is not peace; it is cowardly surrender.

False religion thrives on this cowardice. It tells us that if we bend our backs and praise a powerful lord, social, political, or divine, crumbs will be thrown at us. This bargain, dressed up as devotion, is the very opposite of dharma.

Real religion is rebellion. It rebels against the false, against the cowardice that prefers comfort over clarity. It is not about making peace with lies; it is about dropping them so the truth may shine.

BEYOND RITUAL, TOWARD THE TIMELESS

Buildings, rituals, and identities all come and go. They cannot be the heart of religion. What is timeless is our love for truth, for reliability,

for eternity itself. That love explains why we shrink at dishonesty, why we resist betrayal, and why we fear death. Deep within, something in us yearns for the changeless.

To live by that yearning is religion. To smother it under customs is irreligion. No building is eternal, no ritual eternal, no tradition eternal, but the call of truth is. That alone deserves the name *dharmā*.

This is also why Vedanta distinguished *Shruti* from *Smriti*, and *adhyatma* from *lok-dharma*. The former point to what is timeless, not of human making; the latter are local traditions, bound to time and place. Our tragedy is that we confuse the two, and then defend the local as if it were eternal.

WHEN RELIGION BECOMES IRRELIGION

Wars, discrimination, exploitation, even climate devastation: trace them deeply, and you will find the same root, false religion. When identity replaces inquiry, when comfort replaces clarity, when preservation of the ego replaces liberation from it, humanity condemns itself to repeat the same conflicts.

That is why the world burns over crumbs. In the absence of inner treasure,

people cling to symbols and call them sacred. Across continents and centuries, the line of battle has so often been drawn in the name of religion. But what was really at stake? Not the timeless, only the five rupees of identity mistaken for wealth.

And this irreligion not only divides communities, it also fuels the greatest crisis of our times: the destruction of the planet itself. The same mindset that sanctifies greed as devotion is the mindset that scorches the Earth. Inner dishonesty becomes outer devastation.

THE TEMPLE OF CLARITY

The answer does not lie in building more shrines or asserting identities more loudly. It lies in restoring religion to what it once meant: the courage to turn inward. Customs are not religion. Comfort is not liberation. To begin with, the question "Who am I?" is the first act of real faith.

Religion is not meant to soothe you but to shatter your deceptions. Until we dare to face the mirror, we will keep fighting over trifles and calling them eternal. The real temple is not carved in stone but in clarity. If that mirror is absent, then every ritual, every sermon, every shrine is only another mask for the ego.

Religion is not here to decorate our lies; it is here to end them. To mistake comfort for dharma is the oldest sin; to insist on truth, whatever the cost, is the only religion. * Acharya Prashant, a philosopher and teacher of global wisdom literature, is the founder of the Prashant Advait Foundation and a bestselling author who brings timeless wisdom to urgent modern questions.