Six Characteristics of Toxic Religion That Most People Must Address in Order to Be Free:

By Jim Palmer

1. Instant-transformation theology replaces the real work of healing.

The idea that "the old is gone and the new has come" can create the illusion that change happens in a single dramatic moment — a prayer, a conversion, an altar call. This bypasses the truth that transformation is a long, rigorous process of inner work, self-responsibility, and often professional support. Real healing requires time, honesty, and sustained engagement with the parts of our lives that need repair, not a miraculous reset button.

2. The doctrine of inherent depravity cripples a person's sense of self.

When people are taught that they are fundamentally bad, sinful, corrupt, or untrustworthy, they learn to doubt their own inner wisdom. This theology undermines the development of self-confidence, self-trust, and self-determination — the very capacities required for a healthy, autonomous life. Shame becomes the operating system, and it keeps people small, dependent, and afraid of their own agency.

3. External rule-keeping replaces inner depth and self-understanding.

Toxic religion often focuses on appearances, behavior management, and checking the right boxes. This keeps people preoccupied with compliance instead of exploring the deeper layers of their identity, wounds, and patterns. When the emphasis is on "looking right," there is little room to address the root causes of suffering or to cultivate genuine inner freedom.

4. Waiting for divine intervention creates passivity and avoidance.

When people are conditioned to wait for God to intervene, fix, or rescue them, they often avoid taking the actions necessary for their own growth. This passivity can delay healing for years. Growth requires agency — the willingness to make decisions, seek help, set boundaries, and take responsibility for one's life. No one can do that work for us.

5. Surface-level community replaces the relationships we actually need.

Many religious environments rely on meeting-based, program-driven interactions that lack the depth, vulnerability, and honesty required for real transformation. People may be surrounded by others yet remain emotionally isolated. Healing requires relationships where truth can be spoken, pain can be witnessed, and authenticity is welcomed — not managed.

6. Separatist subculture limits exposure to the wider world.

Toxic religion often encourages people to stay within a closed system — socially, intellectually, and culturally. This cuts them off from relationships with people who are different, and from fields of knowledge that could expand their understanding and support their growth. When exploration is discouraged or forbidden, development is stunted. Freedom requires curiosity, diversity, and the willingness to learn beyond the boundaries of a single belief system.