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## Lifecycle Rituals

Well it's been a while since I posted a paper for your enjoyment, and since these have all been due by now I hope I'm not transgressing any ethics by putting up my world religions comparison paper. Plus it is a good way to procrastinate on writing my next one, messing around here on the blog. Anyway, there will be a lot of text stuff (italicizing, etc) that won't translate over and I haven't time to fix it. So sorry about that. Hopefully you can still see the general idea. I sure learned a lot from writing it and I hope the same is true for you. Also hope I didn't screw up my research too badly. I tried to be as faithful as I could to both traditions, while still pointing out some of the troubling elements. Enjoy!

### **Passages: A Comparison Study of Christianity and Hinduism through the Lifecycle**

#### **Introduction**

Rites of passage – called samskāras in Hinduism – provide a fascinating point of comparison between the Christian and Hindu faiths. Lifecycle rituals offer a glimpse into practices and devotion of the faithful and allow the student of world religions to observe how adherents experience life stages in their religious communities, and how they are shaped by the journey.

This paper will draw primarily upon Roman Catholic rituals (although many of the comparison statements will apply equally to non-Catholic Christians' rituals).[1] This choice, while limiting, still represents the largest segment of Christianity worldwide, and that which has had the most historical influence on Christian denominations in Europe and the United States. Moreover, Catholicism has a structured ritual life that provides a clear point of comparison with Hindu rites.

Likewise, a focus must be chosen from the wide world of Hinduism.[2] Most of the classical samskāras are only for men in the “upper” three varnas (the station that determines one's life duties). The “most popular” sixteen of these will be dealt with below, though there are many variations according to geography, gender, varna, and family tradition.[3]

Samskāra is a difficult term to translate. It denotes religious action, but not simply formalized ritual. It is infused with a deeper meaning, much like the Christian term “sacrament”: implying mystery, promise, and ontological significance.[4] Thus sacraments and samskāras lend themselves to comparison. They provide culture, rules, taboos, and structure to spiritual and societal life in both traditions. Their elements will be explored sequentially through the life cycle, from pregnancy and birth, through childhood and puberty, on to adulthood and finally, death.

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## **Pregnancy and Birth**

There are several samskāras surrounding pregnancy. The first is garbhādhāna, or conception, which is quite meticulously planned, “in a definite manner calculated to produce the best possible progeny.”[5] Next is pumsavana, or “a rite quickening a male child,”[6] and sīmantonnayana, “in which the hairs of a pregnant woman were parted” by her husband.[7] The former reveals the preference for a son (most of the samskāras are for males) and the latter is related to medical practices intended to “preserve the physical and mental health of the pregnant woman.”[8] The jātakarma ceremony is performed at birth, before the umbilical cord is cut.[9] Thus the child comes into the world surrounded with a rich ritual heritage that has confirmed the desire for his or her presence in the family and, it is hoped, laid the foundation for a happy and prosperous life.

There are almost no Roman Catholic rituals related to pregnancy or birth. The medieval practice of the “churcing of women” involved the new mother going back to church after a set number of days, to reenter the Christian community and give thanks for a successful birth. It was largely a purity rite, which gave the woman permission to leave her house again following childbirth. This provided protection for the mother, who may otherwise have been sent back to the fields to work when she was in a fragile state of health.[10] The churcing of women liturgy has fallen out of use, but it may be worth reinstituting as a rite of celebration for new mothers.

Christians could perhaps learn from Hindus how to better acknowledge and celebrate the stages of pregnancy and birth. The samskāras of conception and pregnancy affirm the woman’s special state and the hopes of the couple. Because of a long history of embarrassment and shame around the body (particularly the female body), Christians have not developed a ritual structure surrounding this most important event. Many women are not able to bring their pregnancies into their religious life at all. Thus, the only commonly practiced Catholic birth ritual is baptism of the baby, effecting initiation into the Christian faith and Church membership.

Infant baptism has been practiced since at least the beginning of the third century ce,[11] and historically involved naming the child as well.[12] In present practice, baptism usually takes place within six months of birth, and often much earlier. Though it is a birth ritual in timing, in its meaning it may be compared to Hindu initiation. To this topic we now turn.

## **Childhood and Puberty**

There are a number of samskāras that document the child’s early life:

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nāmakarana (name-giving), niskramana (first outing), anna-prāśana (first feeding), chūdā karana (first haircut), and karnavedha (ear piercing).[13] There are also educational samskāras: vidyārambha (learning the alphabet), upanayana (initiation), vedārambha (commencing Veda study), keśānta (shaving), and samāvartana or snāna (the end of being a student).[14] The most pertinent of these for comparison with Catholicism is upanayana, or initiation. Upanayana brings a young man into “full citizenship of the community” and affirms his race, social status, and resultant privileges.[15] It is a complex ceremony that marks “a new era in the life of the initiate,”[16] a time of religious study and commencement of “the continuing, life-long process of ritual self construction.”[17] An important change in his identity occurs as well, as he now calls himself “twice-born.”[18] The ceremony takes place around puberty (unlike Catholic initiation at birth).[19] Despite the different timing, upanayana has similar purposes to baptism.

A baptized Catholic child is brought into full communion with the Church and is considered a member from baptism onward; both initiations provide relational identity in a particular community. Also like the Hindu initiate, the baptized child embarks on religious education, or catechism, which leads to the rites of confirmation and first communion. These are integral to the Catholic’s “life-long process of ritual self construction,”[20] through participation in Eucharist and penance. Confirmation takes place when “the young person can knowingly and freely choose Christian faith,”[21] and in this way is similar to the timing of upanayana.

But what is key, in both traditions, is that a fundamental change in being is believed to take place: in upanayana the Hindu receives “birth from the Veda” and in baptism the Christian is clothed with Christ and adopted as God’s heir.[22] Both religions believe that their rituals not only indicate a new life stage, but, by their performance, change the very ontology of the initiate. Hinduism and Christianity share an understanding of initiation as rebirth into a new identity, as well as community acceptance and the start of religious education.

### **Adulthood**

In both religions, marriage is the next rite of passage, and unmarried persons are, if not rare, at least not normative.[23] Catholics are offered a sacramental alternative to marriage in ordination (for men) or holy orders (for both sexes). These involve a lifelong commitment to the Church, and require public vows of

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celibacy and poverty. They are perfectly acceptable – even admirable – alternatives to married life. No samskāra alternative to marriage exists; in India, singlehood carries negative connotations, and is especially demeaning for rural women.[24] Yet there are rare substitutions: for instance, women in certain parts of northwest India may choose to be sādhin:

Their title is regarded as a feminine form of sādhu (holy men), and they see themselves and are seen by fellow villagers as a kind of ascetic, albeit in a strictly limited sense. Theirs is a wholly respectable status, as their title itself implies, and no disrepute attaches to either the women themselves or their families.[25]

Sādhini are not to be confused with Christian nuns; they do not take formal vows, and although they remain celibate, they are not cloistered but actively engage in worldly affairs. And they are quite extraordinary; for the vast majority of Hindus, marriage is their adulthood samskāra.

The Hindu marriage ceremonies are called vivāha, and marriage is considered a “religious duty incumbent [sic] upon every individual.”[26] Marriage is the most complex of the samskāras, comprised of 35 ceremonies intended to symbolically “cover all the aspects of married life.”[27] Differences abound when it comes to arrangements, as to whether the bride and groom know one another or are even cousins, or whether a “love match” is allowed.

In Christianity, marriage is considered a holy sacrament. Though rarely arranged by parents, Catholic marriages must take place between two Catholics (so if one party is not in the Church he or she must join; otherwise, the wedding cannot take place under a priest). Non-married Christians are not usually ostracized; but marriage is defined by the Church as the only appropriate situation for sexual relations and is strongly encouraged for the raising of children.

For Catholics, marriage is the paradigm of human friendship, in which “the love relationship of a Christian couple [sacramentalizes] the relationship between Christ and the church, between God and humankind.”[28] Scholar Rajbali Pandey (1907–1971) offers this description of Hindu marriage that could easily translate to Christianity:

Hindu marriage which the nuptials solemnize is not a social contract in the modern sense of the term, but a religious institution, a sacrament. By it we mean that besides the two human parties, the bride and the bridegroom, there is a third superhuman, spiritual or divine element in marriage. The physical conditions of the two parties are always subject to change and, as such, they cannot form the permanent basis of marriage. It is on the third element that the permanent relationship between the husband and the wife depends.[29]

Despite the differences in how each may approach marriage, here is evidence of a strong similarity in the two religions’ understanding of the sacred union of

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husband and wife.

## **Death**

The final samskāra in a Hindu's life is antyesti, or funeral ceremonies. "While living, a Hindu consecrates his worldly life by performing various rites and ceremonies at the different stages of his progress. At his departure from this world, his survivors consecrate his death for his future felicity in the next world."<sup>[30]</sup> This ritual arose in part from the practical needs of disposing of the corpse, as well as allowing the survivors to be purified and the soul of the dead to be released.<sup>[31]</sup> Hindu custom usually dictates cremation, and many recitations, gifts, processions, and rites surround the preparation of the body and actual burning.<sup>[32]</sup> Following the cremation, additional ceremonial actions are carried out by the mourners to ensure the soul's safe journey away from the body. They continue making offerings and rituals at specified times following the death.

Catholics practice one final rite of passage prior to death, when possible, called extreme unction. This ritual allows the dying person a final confession and Eucharist, to prepare the soul to meet God. Christians also believe in the afterlife, and anticipate a future bodily resurrection (for many centuries this meant that burial was preferred over cremation). Christian funerals recognize the grief of survivors, yet are hopeful occasions in which the future resurrection of the deceased and her reuniting with the survivors is emphasized. Often prayers will take place in the home, and frequently a wake (all-night prayer vigil) will be part of the death rites.<sup>[33]</sup> The funeral service is at the church, usually including Eucharist, and an additional brief service is offered at the grave, "petitioning God to receiving the soul of the departed."<sup>[34]</sup> As in Hinduism, rituals of remembrance are offered at set times following the death. In both traditions, while overt attention is paid to the ongoing life of the deceased, the ceremonies also serve to provide comfort to the survivors through familiar and symbolic ritual behavior. In the end, this is the primary purpose of any lifecycle rite: to contextualize a status change through religious activity: offering communal fellowship, spiritual meaning, and identity.

## **Ministry Application**

The value of ritualizing life stages is recognized throughout world religions for its psychological and social value in the life of individuals. This comparison study of Hindu and Christian rituals has allowed me to more clearly understand how deeply embedded these rituals are in a practitioner's life, how they form identity, and how they can assist in interfaith dialogue.

In working with persons (in any capacity), it is vital to understand how the rituals that may have surrounded their life stages have affected their psyche, emotions, and relationships. Those who reject religion have often experienced ritual in a negative way – often because it was compartmentalized, and thus the

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person is unable to connect it to everyday life. This is why lifecycle rituals are a vital element of Christianity: every stage of life (not just those that we have mentioned) needs to be integrated into the faith of the individual and affirmed by the Church. Many aspects of childhood – especially early childhood, when so much socialization takes place – are better ritualized by Hindu samskāras. Christians must commit to bring God into every stage of life, so as to raise holistic Christian adults who recognize God's hand throughout their lives. It is also important for ministers to note the identity-forming aspect of lifecycle rituals. So much of who a person becomes is wrapped up in how their family and culture of origin ritualized the lifecycle. Acceptance and belonging in a community (as in the initiation rituals compared above) gives a person a place in the world. Whether pubescent changes were celebrated or shamed makes a huge impact. Healthy awareness of mortality can be fostered by the ritual life surrounding funerals and can be quite beneficial even for young children. When done properly and consistently, ritual can be put to very positive use in forming strong Christian identity.

Finally, as I hope to engage in interfaith dialogue in whatever vocation I may pursue, this study has offered me many new insights and tools to encourage better relationships between those of many faiths. Often misunderstandings occur across religious boundaries because of ignorance regarding formational rituals. Our identity may be largely wrapped up in rites of passage that are completely foreign to those of other traditions. Thus, learning about one another's rituals is not only fun and interesting, it provides a fundamental connection between persons at the deepest level. For example, a Christian and a Hindu may truly connect over their shared understanding of marriage as a sacramental relationship between three parties, one of them divine. Finding such common ground leads to better understanding and cooperation (though of course we should never neglect differences – we learn as much or more from them!).

## **Conclusion**

This brief comparison of the lifecycle rituals of Hinduism and Christianity has sought to uncover some of the similarities and differences between the faiths. But three significant, overarching differences must be mentioned before concluding: first, most of these Christian rituals are available to all persons, regardless of social standing, while the Hindu rituals are largely reserved for the upper varnas.[35] Second, Christians celebrate these rites of passage for both genders, not only males (except for ordination, which, in Catholicism, is only available to men). And third, adult converts are more regularly found in Christianity. This paper has focused on rituals from birth so as to cover the entire lifecycle and offer clear comparison. But this does not necessarily apply to all Christians, and certainly not to most converts (who tend to be past childhood).[36]

These differences emphasize that the rites described above are actually quite specialized and may not apply to the majority of those practicing various types of Hinduism or Christianity. Indeed, marriage and funeral rites may be the only

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samskāras in which most Hindus participate (or are eligible to do); and certainly Protestant rites of passage are different from Catholic. Thus, while points of comparison may be made, they are not universally applicable. It would be inappropriate to assume that all Hindus and all Christians celebrate all the rituals in the ways mentioned above. But by comparing some of the representative lifecycle rituals of these two religions, from birth and childhood through adulthood and on to the next life, one finds openings for dialogue – and that is always the primary and final goal of undertaking studies such as this.

[1] Additionally, the terms “Christian” and “Church” throughout this paper will refer to this particular branch of the Christian faith, while recognizing of course that there are many other kinds of Christians.

[2] Note that varnāshramadharmā is the most common self-designation for those the West calls “Hindus,” but as this paper is for a Western audience, “Hindu” will be used as a concession to common parlance.

[3] Rajbali Pandey, *Hindu Samskāras: Socio-Religious Study of the Hindu Sacraments*, 2nd ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1969), 23.

[4] Pandey, 15.

[5] Pandey, 59. Many Catholics may understand the timing aspect of this ritual – their conceptions are also meticulously planned, if the couple is practicing natural birth control (the only type permitted by the Church!).

[6] *Ibid*, 60.

[7] *Ibid*, 64.

[8] *Ibid*, 69.

[9] *Ibid*, 73.

[10] Walter Von Arx, “The Churching of Women After Childbirth,” in David Power and Luis Maldonado, eds., *Liturgy and Human Passage* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 70-71.

[11] Tertullian disapproves of it in his treatise *De baptismo*.

[12] Paul F. Bradshaw, “Christian Rites Related to Birth,” in Bradshaw and Lawrence A. Hoffman, eds., *Life Cycles in Jewish and Christian Worship* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 21-22.

[13] Pandey, xviii-xix.

[14] *Ibid*, xx-xxii.

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- [15] Pandey, 111-112. See also Brian K. Smith, "Ritual, Knowledge, and Being: Initiation and Veda Study in Ancient India," *Numen*, Vol. 33, Fasc. 1. (Jun., 1986), 69, who points to the predominance of class differentiation in this rite.
- [16] Pandey, 140.
- [17] Smith, 65-66.
- [18] Pandey, 112.
- [19] In this regard, Protestant initiation is more similar, in that many Protestants also wait to initiate until a child is an adolescent or older (when she reaches the "age of accountability" and is held responsible for her sins).
- [20] See note 17 above.
- [21] Bernard Cooke, *Sacraments and Sacramentality* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1983), 146.
- [22] Smith, 67, and Galatians 3:27-4:7.
- [23] Prior to Vatican II, Catholics understood ordination and holy orders to be "higher" callings than marriage, but now marriage has been deemed an equally holy calling.
- [24] Peter Phillimore, "Unmarried Women of the Dhaula Dhar: Celibacy and Social Control in Northwest India," *Journal of Anthropological Research*, Vol. 47, No. 3. (Autumn, 1991), 331.
- [25] Phillimore, 332.
- [26] Pandey, 153.
- [27] Pandey, xxiii-xxv and 233. Space does not permit a full rendering of these rituals, nor those of Catholicism, but their richness and lively history is certainly worthy of further study.
- [28] Cooke, 93.
- [29] Pandey, 226.
- [30] Pandey, 234.
- [31] Pandey, 236.
- [32] Much attention in the West has been devoted to the practice of sati (in which the widow throws herself on the funeral pyre), but this was always
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somewhat rare, and is nearly obsolete in present times (Pandey, 252).

[33] Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, "Christian Rituals Surrounding Death," in Bradshaw and Hoffman, 201.

[34] Westerfield Tucker, 208.

[35] Socio-economic status can affect Christians' access to priests and churches, and therefore the timing or availability of ritual acts, especially historically.

[36] Perhaps rituals should be developed that will take adults through the stages of Christian maturity, in an age-appropriate way. Why should all the catechism be for the children?

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