

# Hindu rites of passage and the Christian sacraments

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THE BASIC PRINCIPLE OF THE HINDU VISION and way of life is the unity of the entire realm of reality. Each individual born into this world has to be progressively integrated into the process which makes up this unity. The Hindu rites of passage are meant to achieve this integration. They are called *samskaras* – rites which initiate the individual at the decisive moments of his or her life into a higher, holistic and transcendent realm. In a sense they act like sacraments by sanctifying the person, by awakening consciousness of the divine dimensions of the life-process. In this article we shall become acquainted with the important elements of the four basic Hindu rites of passage and reflect on them theologically. The details of the rituals are taken from the *Grhyasutras*, the ancient manuals for the ordering of social and domestic life.

## *Marriage rites*

Marriage is the foundational sacrament for Hindus. It is through marriage that the family is founded, and the family in turn forms the basis for social life. Marriage is understood not just as a bonding between two persons, but as a contract between two families. Deeper still, it has a mystical meaning. 'Besides the two human parties, the bride and the bridegroom, there is a third element in the marriage, the spiritual or divine element.'<sup>1</sup> The bride and the bridegroom are made to realize that they are given to each other by God. Through marriage they participate in the cosmic marriage between the heavens and the earth. Hence on the earth the sacred fire is lit as symbol of the Sun, the Lord of the heavens; the entire ceremony takes place around the sacred fire. From this fire a flame is taken home after the wedding and the Lord of Fire continues to be a divine companion in their family.

The main elements of the rite can be briefly summarized. Once the couple express the desire to get married, their parents give formal consent in consultation with an expert in genealogies. The auspicious time of the ceremony is fixed on the recommendation of an

astrologer; that is important because the celestial bodies and the deities are going to be witnesses to the ceremony. Then, on the morning of the day of the wedding, the bride and bridegroom, in their respective homes, take the nuptial bath in scented water accompanied by the recital of Vedic verses which purifies them for the new life. They are taken in festal procession to the place of the rite, normally the home of the bride, or the wedding hall of the temple. A priest is called to be the master of ceremonies.

At the outset, the father of the bride officially proclaims his consent to give his daughter in marriage. He says: 'In the pursuit of righteousness (*dharmā*), prosperity (*artha*) and love (*kama*) she should not be transgressed'. To this the bridegroom promises: 'Transgress her I will not'. And to his question, 'Who has given this bride to me?' the father of the bride replies: 'The God of Love!' The father places the folded hands of his daughter into the hands of the bridegroom who takes them respectfully and says: 'I take thy hand for the sake of happiness, that thou may live to old age with me, thy husband. The gods have given thee to me that we may rule over the house. This I am; that thou art. That art thou, this am I. The heaven I; the earth thou. Come let us marry.'

With hands joined they go round the fire three times with the invocation: 'Lord of Fire, to thee they have in the beginning carried round the Sun with the bridal procession. Mayest thou give back the wife to the husband together with offspring.' Each time the bridegroom makes the bride tread on a stone with the words: 'Be firm like a stone; tread the foes down, turn away the enemies'. The bride then offers grains to the sacred fire praying for fecundity and prosperity. Together they take seven steps towards the north, beseeching blessings of the deities on the various elements of domestic life. With this the nuptial bond is declared irrevocable. The bride is sprinkled with water by the bridegroom. The bridegroom affectionately touches the heart of the bride, reaching over her right shoulder, and says: 'Into my will I take thy heart; thy mind shall dwell in my mind; in my word thou shalt rejoice with all thy heart. May the Creator Lord join thee to me.' Then the assembled relatives and friends go up to bless the newly wedded couple.

The festal meal follows. After a lot of merry-making according to local customs, the couple are taken in procession to the home of the bridegroom. The mother receives her new daughter-in-law with offerings of flowers and incense. In the evening the bridegroom leads her to the door and shows her the pole-star. Looking at the

star he makes an oath: 'I bind thy heart and mine with the knot of truth. May thy heart be mine; may my heart be thine.' And she adds: 'May I be steady in my husband's family'. For the next three days they observe continence as a reminder that self-restraint is essential for the durability of marital love.

The entire wedding rite is based on a number of religious convictions regarding the nature of marital life. Firstly, it is God who binds the couple's hearts together. Secondly the nuptial fire permanently kept at home is a reminder of the gracious presence of God in their family life. Thirdly, marriage is regarded as a participation in a cosmic process of union. Fourthly, the marital bond is held to embrace all aspects of life, emotional and spiritual, social and ecological. Finally, without a certain amount of self-restraint there is no growth in marital love.

#### *Rites related to childbirth*

To conceive a child, to give birth to it and to nurture it represents a human participation in a divine work. There is a basic Hindu belief that every child is a gift of God, a joy and a responsibility for the parents. As Tagore says: 'Every child brings us the good news that God has not lost his joy in human life'. There are various different rites related to the birth of a child. The more important elements are the following.

A short time after the marriage a ceremony invoking the blessings of the god Vishnu and the goddess Saraswati for the conception of a son is performed by the husband at home. In the fifth month of pregnancy the husband draws a red mark on the hair-parting of the wife with a bunch of fruits to the accompaniment of prescribed mantras and purificatory rites. This is to keep the embryo free from the attack of evil spirits. Soon after the birth the father breathes thrice upon the baby and gives it the first auspicious nourishment made of ghee, clarified butter, on a golden spoon. He prays to the Vedic deities Mitra and Varuna for long life and intelligence for the child. The baby is washed clean and laid on the mother earth for a moment and the father asks for blessing: 'O Mother Earth, I know thy heart,' he says. 'May we see a hundred autumns.'

Some time during the first four months the child is taken out on a moonlit night, and the parents offer it to the moon to the accompaniment of Vedic chanting. This is to invoke the blessing of Indra in overcoming the forces of darkness. Then on an auspicious day during the first year the child is given a name. Holding the child in his

hand the father writes two names on stones and lights an oil lamp before each. He prays to Agni, the Lord of fire, to inspire the proper name. Having chosen the name, he whispers it into the right ear of the child and places the child on the lap of the mother. With this ritual it is believed that the name is actually given by God.

At a point between the fifth and the seventh months the feeding ceremony is conducted. Accompanied by Vedic chants, special food made of rice is prepared and given to the child. This is to evoke the divine digestive fire in the body of the child. Minor rituals are conducted at the time of the first cutting of the hair and the piercing of the ears. When the child is mature enough to learn the alphabet it is brought to an elderly teacher. Keeping the child on his lap, the teacher holds the child's right thumb and makes it write the sacred syllable *AUM* on a plate of rice. Mantras are addressed to the god Ganapati to invoke blessings on the child's pursuit of learning.

These and other rites which accompany the birth and growth of a child reveal the following insights regarding the unity of human and divine creation. Every child is a gift of God, and a responsibility for the parents. For the growth and prosperity of the child, for its health and learning, there is need of God's special grace. Every child is an integral part of the totality of life's evolutionary process.

### *Initiation rites*

Between the ages of eight and twelve the boy is brought to an enlightened master for initiation into the period of the study of the scriptures. This is like a second birth for the boy as he is being born to the spiritual world of the seers. Imbibing the heritage of the ancestors he is to grow in wisdom and virtue. He then enters upon a twelve-year-long process of assiduous study and discipline leading to spiritual enlightenment and moral integrity. It is during this period that the Brahmin boys learn the Vedas, the Kshatriyas master martial arts and the Vaisyas get training in commercial pursuits.<sup>2</sup> Girls are given the necessary orientation at home. This period is a sacred time in the life of the adolescent.

The rites of initiation articulate this sacred dimension of life. On the morning of the auspicious day the son takes the farewell meal with his mother who has nurtured him all these years. Relatives and friends are also invited. His hair is cut and only the tuft is kept on the crown of the head; he then takes a ritual bath and puts on a new loin cloth. He is brought by his father to the master, the teacher or *acarya*, in the latter's dwelling-place or *ashram*. The master asks for

his name which is a symbol of his readiness to accept the boy as a disciple. The master then offers him new clothes with the verse: 'In the way in which the divine Teacher put the garment of immortality on god Indra, thus I put this garment on you for the sake of long life, splendour and strength'.

To the accompaniment of rituals and invocations the master holds the hand of the disciple, touches his heart and says: 'Into my will I take thy heart. Thy mind shall follow my mind. Thou shalt attend on my rituals single-handed. May the Divine Teacher join thee to me.' He then touches the boy's navel and exhorts him to practise continence during the period of discipleship. There follows the most important item of the rite: the investing of the student with the sacred cord, made of three strands or threads symbolizing the three constituent forces (*guna*) of nature: truthfulness, passion and darkness. This is a constant reminder to the student to be in harmony with the entire realm of reality, and to fulfil his obligations to the ancient seers, the ancestors and the cosmic powers of life. The cord is worn over the left shoulder, hanging under the right arm. The master also gives the initiate a staff to remind him that he should be a permanent pilgrim of Truth.

The master then pours water into the hands of the disciple and purifies him for performing the sacrifice or *yajña*. He then teaches the disciple the primal Vedic invocation, the celebrated *Gayatri mantra*, which is addressed to the Lord of Light:

*Aum*, the Earth, the Sky and the Heavens! We meditate upon the glorious splendour of the divine Vivifier; may He enlighten our intellective faculty.

With this mantra the initiate performs the first ritual of offering to the fire. He lives with the master for twelve years in an intense pursuit of spiritual insight and character-formation. He has to repeat the *Gayatri mantra* in the prescribed way, perform the rituals, live an ascetic life, beg food for the master and for himself, and do the household works in the ashram.

These initiation rites reveal the following perceptions regarding the integration of the young person into the harmony of God's creation. Learning is an integral spiritual pursuit carried out under the guidance of a master. God, however, is the real teacher, and God's blessing alone will transmit wisdom. The human teacher is the representation of God on earth. Asceticism and discipline are essential

for learning and spiritual integration; a pure mind supported by a life of continence is essential for spiritual growth.

### *Funeral rites*

Death is inevitable in life, but not the end of the life process. 'What is born will die, what dies will be reborn again.'<sup>3</sup> The Hindu is exhorted, therefore, to face death with calmness and trust in God. The dying one is helped to fix the mind on the divine Lord, to repeat the name of the Lord with devotion and thus surrender their breath to the divine Breath. After death, the body is given over to the purifying flames of the sacred fire. These are the main elements of the rites related to the last passage.

Immediately after death the body is washed clean, wrapped in a new white cloth and laid on a mat on the ground. After a few hours it is carried on a wooden stretcher to the funeral site. The funeral procession is headed by the chief mourner, usually the eldest son of the dead. He carries in a jar the flame kindled at the domestic fire. The Lord of Fire that was a companion from the day of the marriage now accompanies the dead to the last rites. The mourners repeat the name of the redeeming Lord *Hari* and verses which urge the dead to join the ancestral spirits and *Yama*, the deity of death.

The body is laid on the pyre situated in the midst of three fires. After some purificatory rites conducted by the priest, the chief mourner takes the flame brought from the home and walks three times around the body. He lights the pyre with the prayer:

Agni, Lord of Fire, consume not this body to cinders, nor give it pain, nor scatter about its skin or limbs. May the eye join the sun. May the breath join the Winds. Take the spirit graciously to the abode of his ancestors.

Cremation is understood to be the consummation of all the sacrifices one has performed in life. Hence the invocation to Agni: 'From him thou art born, may he in return be reborn from thee'.

On the third, fifth or seventh day after the cremation the bones are collected, ritually purified and placed in an urn. Before burying it in the earth the Vedic prayer is said:

Make a vault, O Mother Earth; do not press down upon him. Grant him easy access. Afford him shelter. Cover him up with the skirt of

your robe, just as a mother envelops a baby. Be a home for him, a place of refuge forever.

A few days after this burial rite an expiation ceremony is conducted at home to help the soul of the dead person enter the world of the ancestors. The main item of this ceremony is a sumptuous meal with relatives and senior Brahmins, who represent the ancestors.

These funeral rites reveal how much life and death are regarded only as phases of an ongoing evolutionary process of life. God accompanies the human beings on their earthly sojourn, and in the life after death as well. The living continue to be associated with the destiny of the dead. The life-breath of the deceased merges with the cosmic stream of breath-energy.

### *Theological perceptions in the Hindu samskaras*

These four *samskaras* are based on the integral world-view of classical Hinduism. The Vedic seers sensed a cosmic principle that permeates the entire realm of reality and holds everything together. They called it *Rta*.<sup>4</sup> The entire world of gods and humans evolves out of *Rta* and is maintained through it. This immanent principle of harmony permeates all aspects of human life as well. At the decisive stages of the evolution of life its presence is powerfully felt. The Hindu *samskaras* make this presence effective and celebrate human experience of it.

In this celebration human beings and deities participate together. That is to say that the rites performed on the earth have their resonance in the world of the deities. Classical rituals are meant to sustain the cosmic evolution of *Rta* and hence even deities can be said to depend on the rituals of human beings.<sup>5</sup> In return their human counterparts stand in need of the blessings of the deities. Thus the interdependence of human beings and deities is articulated in the Hindu rituals and *samskaras*. As the *Bhagavad Gita* puts it, 'Mutually nourishing you shall attain prosperity'.<sup>6</sup>

Who are these deities, the *devas*? From the iconographic, ritual and mythical expressions one may get the impression that they are independent beings existing in the heavens. The Sanskrit term *deva*, however, means the translucent one. In the classical Vedic world-view the *devas* are the cosmic powers through which the One Divine Light shines.<sup>7</sup> Indra, Varuna, Soma, Surya, Rudra, Vishnu, Brihaspati and all other *devas* are in fact representations of the cosmic forces of divine life. Hence Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Space

are revered as channels of the divine life-energy and used in symbolic forms in the rites. The rites of the *samskaras* thereby help human beings experience their resonance with the totality of reality. Human beings can be seen as part of the cosmotheandric unity of reality, and through the *samskaras* they sustain this unity. They are, therefore, religious rites which have cosmic implications.

God is experienced as the ultimate source of this unity and harmony. The divine energy vibrates through the cosmos and through human life in the *Rta* which permeates everything, in the form of the particular *devas* who transmit it to us. It is in this sense that we can speak of the divine energy binding the hearts of the bride and the bridegroom in marital love, bringing forth and nurturing the child, enlightening the mind of the initiate and finally taking the soul of the deceased person to the world beyond. The *samskaras* articulate the breakthrough of this divine energy into the world at such auspicious moments of life.

*Samskaras* are, in short, cosmic events. Hence the profusely symbolic use of natural elements such as fire, water, stone, incense, food-grains, ghee, flowers and fruits. Dance and procession, circumambulation and bodily postures, ritual baths and rhythmic singing, the chanting of *mantras* and invocations, all enable the participants to feel this resonance with the totality of creation in a bodily way. There is a holistic understanding of religious expression, divine and human integrated, in the Hindu *samskaras*.

### *Theological reflection on the Christian sacraments*

Trying to imitate the rituals of another religion is bad inculturation. But an open encounter with the world of symbols of another religion can help Christians to discover the deeper meaning of our Christian symbols and to bring to life some of the lost dimensions of our rituals. Understanding the Hindu *samskaras* may inspire us to make our sacramental practice more experiential and relevant to life.

The holistic world-view of Hinduism could challenge us to rediscover the significance of a cosmic Christology. In the light of the theology of John and Paul, Christ is to be experienced as the divine power and presence in the heart of reality. The Logos, made flesh in Jesus, is the Life of all beings, and the Light of all human persons. By sacrament we would then mean an intense awareness of the presence of Christ as the Life and Light of the world. Through the particular sacraments one is deeply inserted into the cosmic process of redemption unto the state when God will be all in all.



In this light sacraments are to be understood as dense moments in the universal process of the Spirit recreating everything in Christ. In a sacrament is our awakening to the cosmic theophany: we let the divine Light shine through our being. 'When the light in you shines forth your whole body will be full of light!' (Lk 11:36).

A proper sense of the body has been lacking in much Christian spirituality. We tend to bracket out the body when we stand before God. Although we do use certain elements related to the body in the sacraments, the rituals all too easily tend to become wordy and abstract. In the Hindu *samskaras*, on the other hand, bodily postures and movements play a vital role. In a bodily way the devotees participate in the rituals. With due sensitivity to the local culture, meaningful postures and movements could be developed in the Christian practice of sacramental rituals. In fact, of course, the primal sacrament is the manifestation of the Word in a human body. Again, in this light every sacrament could be an intense experience of the body as the temple of the divine Spirit.

Another significant element of the cosmic world-view of the Hindus lies in the way symbols are taken directly from nature. We have, for instance, seen the central role that the symbol of the fire plays in the *samskaras*. Other cosmic elements like earth, water, stone, incense, flowers and gong-vibrations create an atmosphere conducive to resonance with nature during the rituals. The participants of the rituals are not just onlookers; they are enabled through these elements to feel a deep oneness with the totality of reality. Bearing this in mind, Christians could be helped to discover the symbolic meaning of the things of nature in their daily life. Participation in the sacraments would then give rise to an eco-sensitive spirituality – for which there is such a desperate need today. We have to realize that the earth is sacred, the abode of the Lord and body of Christ. When a slice of bread, which is the fruit of the earth, becomes the body of Christ, there is revealed an invitation to perceive the entire earth as the potential body of Christ. In this sense eucharist is the sacrament of the earth.

Finally, the Hindu *samskaras* can further help Christians to realize the importance of the sacraments for the Christian family – the *domestic church*. It is pastorally important to explore the possibilities for conducting some of the rituals of the sacraments not only in the parish church but within the intimacy of the family. This could mean a return to the practice of the early Church. In the Hindu rites of passage the persons most concerned – the couple, the teacher, the

pupil – are the celebrants. They are the ones who celebrate the breakthrough of God's grace in the concrete phases of life; the priest is there only as the master of ceremonies. Could this challenge us to raise critical questions about the centrality of the clergy in the performance of rituals? Does this not remind us that the sacraments are celebrations of the whole People of God?

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## NOTES

1 Rajbali Pandey, *Hindu samskaras: socio-religious study of the Hindu sacraments* (Delhi: Motilal, 1987), p 226.

2 These are the three 'twice-born' classes within the classical Hindu caste-system.

3 *Bhagavad Gita* 2.27.

4 The Vedic concept of *Rta* has a number of connotations, ranging from fixed or settled order, law and rule, to sacred action and divine truth.

5 See Raimundo Panikkar, *The Vedic experience: Mantramāñjari* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1977), p 351.

6 *Bhagavad Gita* 3.11.

7 Mariasusai Dhavamony, *Classical Hinduism* (Rome: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1982), pp 40–43.