

# Comparing religious rituals: hinduism and christianity



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## **INTRODUCTION**

The comparative analysis presented in this term paper is really focused on two religions namely Hinduism and Christianity, because they play a major role in defining today's world spirituality and thinking. Hinduism is the world's oldest religion while Christianity is the world's largest religion so comparison between those two religions is really critical in serving our purpose in a perfect manner. In each religion, there are several rituals that a person has to conduct during his lifetime. Here we are going to discuss the three main rituals and a method of worship for both the religions. The three most important rituals, that we are discussing, are initiation ceremony, marriage ceremony and the death ceremony. In Hinduism there are quite a few initiation ceremonies however Upanyana the ritual that gives permission to any Hindu to study the Vedas and Upanishads provides the most important transition in his or her life. Similarly the marriage ceremony and death cremation ritual are very important in any religions, especially in Hinduism since it believes in souls and reincarnation.

### **Initiation Ritual in Hinduism**

In Hinduism, the rituals can be summarized to sixteen stages and each of them is dedicated to God by a ritual called " Samskara". The Samskaras starts with birth ceremony and ends with the death ceremony cremation.

The most important Samskara in a Hindu religious life is the ' sacred thread' known as " Upanyana" ceremony. This ceremony takes place between the ages of eight and twelve years. The importance of this ceremony lies in the

belief that when a boy is initiated with the sacred thread, it means he is ready to accept the religious teachings.

Upanyana goes back to 3000 BCE before the birth of Lord Krishna. It was only performed for the young boys of the three casts known as Brahmins, Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas. These three classes are said to be 'twice born' because the sacred thread ceremony is basically a spiritual second birth, but the Shudras or servant class are not permitted this ceremony. The boy's head is shaved prior to the initiation in order to symbolize the second birth. In Upanyana, the young boy is given the sacred thread and hence obtains the religious right to study Vedas and Upanishads.

In this ritual, worship of Lord Ganesh is performed and then the holy waters of the pot. With the holy water the sanctification of the place and the assembly is done. The priest declares the purpose of the ritual and asks the permission of the assembly to conduct the ceremony. Then the ceremony of wearing the sacred thread is performed by tying the holy wrist band. The grains are sprout in pots by the ladies symbolizing the environmental care. The young boy receives the last meal from her mother before entering the school with relatives and friends. He needs to get his head shaved in order to enter into the austere life detaching himself from his previous life. Then the bathing ceremony is conducted with holy water. The holy fire is prepared and the boy is dressed in the attire of Brahmchari. Initiation then starts with 11 mantras of 11 different deities for protection against all kinds of troubles in studies. The boy gives 11 sacrifices in the fire. Then after the initiation to Gayatri Mantra prayers are offered to Sun-god. Then the holy ashes are smeared at specific spots in the body chanting mantras. The boy assures the

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Guru to perform Brahmacharya duties regularly with devotion. He then goes around for alms starting with the mother and also receives blessings from the gathering and honoring guru. Ladies wave the vermillion and sacred grain containing water.

In this ritual three different materials are used for the thread. It is believed that these three threads stand for different classes: a special grass for the Brahmin, a bow string for the Kshatriya and wool and hemp for the Vaishya. These three threads are also supposed to remind the Hindu that he must control mind, speech and body and also they stand for the three major Hindu deities – Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma. The knot used to tie these three strands together is called “ Bhrama granthi”.

The ceremony finally ends with a ritual bath after which he is entitled as “ Snatak”. This ritual bath symbolizes the boy’s new role in life.

## **Initiation Ritual in Christianity**

In Christianity, churches insists that each person following the religion understands the meaning of the all the beliefs and follows them with complete agreement. Christians are supposed to make their own commitment. So Christians have the initiation rite called ‘ Confirmation’ – it is the act that confirms and strengthens the beliefs and commitments which were initially made by the parents on their child’s behalf. Confirmation is generally conducted before adult baptism and hence can be considered as an initiation rite. Initiation generally starts around the age of six or seven. For a Roman Catholic, the child is prepared for First Confession and First Communion during that time and then confirms his or her beliefs between

the ages of 11 and 14. While in the Anglican Church, confirmation is conducted between the ages of 11 and 16 and only after this ceremony he or she receives Holy Communion. Often the ceremony of confirmation includes the First Communion.

In any way, in both the churches the Bishop, on behalf of the church, asks the person to affirm his or her faith in the teachings of the Church. Then after naming, the Bishop confirming his or her affirmations welcomes them into the full fellowship of the Church. He does this by laying his hands on them indicating two significances. Firstly it bestows the power of the Holy Spirit upon the person to empower him or her to be and to live as a Christian. Secondly, it links the person to the very roots of Christianity through the bishop who was also empowered by the previous bishops and hence creating a link which goes back to the earliest Christians. After this ceremony their families usually held a party to celebrate the person to become “ one of them”. Family members and family friends bring gifts. Gifts might include a bank account in his/her name or some fixed deposit and also stuff like briefcase, an expensive pen.

## **Marriage in Hinduism**

The most important ceremony after the initiation ceremony is the wedding ceremony. There are different variations in these ceremonies and rituals. A prospective match is looked for the children from their own community or caste. In this process of looking for a match, the parents take a help of a holy priest who compares the jathakam or janampatri of the bride and groom.

Janampatri is basically a booklet in which the characters and future of a person are written down depending upon the positions of the nine planets  
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when the person was born. However modern day couples usually approve each other before their 'arranged' marriage is approved by their parents. In fact the approval of the elders is slowly becoming a formality and the marriages among different communities and castes are becoming common.

## **Engagement**

This is an important pre-wedding ceremony. In this ceremony the two families agree with the wedding and also decide the date of the wedding. The couples exchange the engagement rings.

## **Barni Bandwana**

This is held fifteen days prior to the marriage at the groom's place. The pundit (priest) performs a puja of Lord Ganesh so that the wedding ceremony can happen without any kind of mishaps. During a Puja, a Mauli (thread) is tied to the hands of parents and the groom to save them from evil eyes.

## **Mayara**

This ceremony is common to both the bride and groom. The maternal uncle of the bride or groom is supposed to bring gifts to her sister and the bride or groom. In fact in some parts, the maternal uncle is supposed to give gifts to all the close relatives of the bride or groom.

## **Sangeet Sandhya**

This is an evening of musical entertainment which takes place about two to three days prior to a wedding either in a Banquet hall or at home. It is arranged by the bride's family for bride and groom.

Similarly they have Tilak Lagwana and Mehendi Lagwana before the wedding ceremony in which the bride's family draws a Tilak on the forehead of the groom while the bride has her hands and feet being applied with Henna.

## **During Marriage festivities**

Hindus have several rituals during the marriage but the most important ones are as follows.

### **Aarti**

The groom's party is received at the entrance of the wedding venue with a ' diya' placed on a platter and the bride's mother takes the Aarti of the groom with it. It symbolizes that they try to purify the soul of groom before the marriage since marriage is the bonding of two souls and not just the bonding of two people and two families.

### **Kanya Daan**

In this ritual, the bride's father gives away the daughter by the libation of the sacred water symbolizing that he is giving away the bride to the groom. The groom recites the Vedic Hymns to Kama the god of Love for pure love and blessings (with his shoes off) and in the meanwhile the bride's sisters steal the groom's shoes and ask for money in return.

### **Saptapadi**

The Saptapadi literally means seven steps but it is referred to as the seven rotations taken by the bride and groom around the holy fire which is considered as the most important component of Vedic Hindu weddings. The holy fire is seen as the witness when the couple makes vows to each other.

Also bride and groom are tied by a knot denoting a lifelong bond between them. Each circuit of the consecrated fire is led by either the bride or the groom, varying by community and region. Usually, the bride leads the groom in the first circuit. The bride leads the first four circuits while the groom leads the last three of total seven circuits. With each circuit, the couple makes a vow to promise to make full effort to give a happy relationship and household for each other. The seven vows taken are as follows.

“ To provide for food always (Hindu)”.

“ To give you excellent health and energy (Hindu)”.

“ To ordained in Vedas, during your life time (Hindu)”.

“ To give you happiness in life (Hindu)”.

“ To make your cows and good animals grow in strength and in numbers (Hindu)”.

“ To make all the seasons be beneficial to you (Hindu)”.

“ To make the homams (sacrifices to be done in Holy Fire) to be performed by you in your life as ordained in Vedas, successful and free from hindrances (Hindu)”.

## **Marriage in Christianity**

In Christianity, the union between man and woman is predestined by God. Since Christianity believes in souls it can also be seen as a bond between two souls. As per Jesus’s message that wedding is a relationship, a union so

real and intimate that 'the two become one flesh'. So in a Christian marriage, husband and wife are treated as one. The weddings are conducted in church with all friends and family members. There are different views on holding marriages and have diverse ways of conducting it.

## **Pre Wedding Rituals**

Before wedding, an engagement ceremony is kept. After this, there is a hen party known as the Bridal shower in which all the females gather at the bride's place and rejoice by singing and dancing. The gifts are showered on the bride and then the bride offers them a pink cake with a hidden thimble. The woman who gets the thimble is supposed to get married next. Similarly the groom celebrates the Bachelor's party with his male friends.

This is considered a wild party bash, wherein he celebrates his last night as a bachelor. Raising a toast is a must here. At some places, just like the Hindu wedding, the bride and the groom are applied turmeric and sandalwood paste. It is known as Haldaat ceremony. However, in Goa it is known as Ross, wherein the couple is applied coconut paste in place of turmeric. After all these rituals, finally the wedding day arrives.

## **Wedding Rituals**

On a wedding day, a car is sent from the groom to pick up the bride and the groom waits for it outside the church. Then they enter the church together, after the Best man of the groom welcomes her with a bouquet of flowers. Then the couple walks down the corridor with arm in arm. The priest who is been awaiting them bless them with the best wishes. The priest then reads psalms from the Holy Bible and then the sermon known as Homily on the

holiness of the wedding. After that, he asks question to the groom and the bride referring to their consent for the marriage. After they take each other as their lawfully wedded wife and husband, priest declares them as ‘ Husband’ and ‘ Wife’. The couple then makes vows to stay with each other through thick and thin and promise to give all the happiness they can. The couple then exchanges rings which are blessed by the priest first, to instill love and faith between the two. The family, friends and the gathered people blesses the couple. Finally the wedding concludes after the marriage registration and the couple walking down the aisle, arm in arm. The church then sends off a copy of the signed paper to the Registrar of Marriages.

### **Post Wedding Rituals**

Generally a Reception follows the wedding which is basically a celebration party. It is considered a grand affair, that’s when the couple is welcomed by the guest. After that, the couple cuts the wedding cake and the Toastmaster offers a toast in the honor of the newly-wed couple. Then the party goes on and people celebrate it with dance and dinner party. Nowadays people keep a live band present for the people to swing on.

### **Death and Cremation in Hinduism**

Death is considered the last Samskara in Hinduism. When a Hindu person dies, his or her dead body is bathed and wrapped in clean, mostly white khadi cloth. The white color also signifies the purity of the soul after it left the body. Similarly at the ceremony of cremation, all mourners are supposed to wear only white clothes since white is considered to be the color of the mourning. A priest conducting the ceremony purifies the body and pyre by sprinkling holy water and in the meanwhile keeps singing or chanting <https://assignbuster.com/comparing-religious-rituals-hinduism-and-christianity/>

religious hymns or songs. The ritual of the body to be set alight is only done by the eldest male child of the deceased, or the closest male relative. Hindus in India are cremated upon open grounds upon wooden pyres, but because of scarcity of wood more and more people have started using the cremation chambers. The ashes of the person's remains are gathered and placed in a pot. This gathered ashes must be immersed in one of the holy rivers.

However, if one is not able to immerse it into the holy river, any river or body of water that meets the ocean can work. Generally the holy water from Ganga is poured in the mouth of the deceased or mixed with the ashes following cremation. The cremation ceremony should be performed within three and a half days of the death and the ashes of the deceased must be immersed within three days (Death and Afterlife in Hinduism). If it is not done within that time frame, additional rituals are needed to be carried out. However the practice of cremation is not universal among all the Hindus. People of various regions and castes may also bury their dead as well. However, most of the Hindus prefer cremation in comparison to burial, even if burial is the common practice of the family.

## **Beliefs**

“ This is based on the belief that a Jiva is made up of five elements of prakriti (nature) which need to be returned to their source upon its death. Of them fire, earth, water and air belong to the body and come from this world, whereas the fifth element the ether (fine matter) belongs to the domain of the subtle body and comes from the higher worlds. By cremating the body, the elements are rightfully returned to their respective spheres, while the

subtle body along with soul returns to the worlds beyond for the continuation of its afterlife (Death and Afterlife in Hinduism)”.

Hindu funeral rites actually have two purposes. They are conducted in order to make sure a soul’s happy migration to the other world and also save its family members from the after effects of pollution consequent upon the death of a kin.

“ According to Hindu beliefs, when a person dies, irrespective of whether he is far or near, his family members are polluted by the very process of his death and remain so for some time till the soul completes its journey to the other world and till they are purified through rituals(Death and Afterlife in Hinduism)”.

## **Funeral Rites in Christianity**

### **Conveyance to the Church**

Unlike in Hinduism, the burial of the dead body is preferred in Christianity. In the funeral rites the first stage is the conveyance of the body to the church. At a particular time, the clergy men are assembled in church and a signal is given by the tolling of the bell. The parish priest goes to the house of the deceased with the rest of the company; one cleric carries the cross and another holy water. The coffin is sprayed with holy water before it can be taken out of the house. The priest with his assistants speaks the psalm “ De Profundis” with the antiphon “ Si iniquitates”. The procession then leaves for the church with the cleric carrying cross goes first, followed by the members of the clergy carrying lighted candles. The priest walks immediately before the coffin and the friends and family of the deceased while others walk

behind the coffin. When the procession reaches the church the antiphon Exsultabunt is chanted, and as the body is borne to its place the responsory “ Subvenite” is recited. According to the present rubric if the corpse is of a priest the head is supposed to be facing toward the altar while if the corpse is of a layman then the feet are to be turned towards the altar.

## **Ceremony in the church**

The second stage involves series of prayers, funeral Mass and absolution. The prayers offered are the “ Office of the dead”. Candles are distributed in the congregation during the Mass. The candles are highly associated with the Christian funeral. These are to be lit during the Gospel, and during the absolution. This is due to a symbolical reference to baptism whereby Christians are considered the “ Children of Light”

## **Absolution**

The absolution is a series of prayers for pardon that are spoken over the body of a deceased Catholic right before the burial. The absolution of the dead does not forgive sins instead it asks God for the person’s soul does not have to suffer from the punishment due to the sins which were forgiven during the person’s life. The “ Libera me, Domine” is sung while the priests incenses the coffin and sprays the holy water on it. Then the priest says the prayer and then In Paradisum is sung when the body is carried from the church to the gravesite.

## **Ceremony by the graveside**

The corpse is taken to the grave after the absolution. Then the priest blesses the burial plot. A newly dug grave is considered blessed while land never

used for cemetery needs to be blessed by sprinkling holy water. The priest then speaks the antiphon “ I am the Resurrection and the Life”, after which the coffin is lowered into the grave. Then the Lord’s Prayer is said silently, and the coffin is again sprinkled with holy water.

Finally, after one or two brief responses, the following ancient prayer is said:

“ Grant this mercy, O Lord, we beseech Thee, to Thy servant departed, that he may not receive in punishment the requital of his deeds who in desire did keep Thy will, and as the true faith here united him to the company of the faithful, so may Thy mercy unite him above to the choirs of angels. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen” (Catholic).

Then the priest speaks the final appeal to the God

“ May his soul and the souls of all the faithful departed through the mercy of God rest in peace” (Catholic).

That’s how the graveside ceremony and the burial ceremony are conducted.

In Summary, death rituals from both the religions make an effort to comfort the souls and try to relieve the souls from the pain. However in Hinduism, the deceased is not forgotten in any occasions and also the generations coming on make sacrifices to comfort their ancestor’s soul. Nonetheless, both the religions believe in soul leaving the body during death and reincarnation. However Christianity does not openly admit the belief in reincarnation, in fact it states it in a different way by saying that eventually all the souls will find their way back to their corresponding bodies and will relieve themselves from the pain.

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## **Conclusion**

The comparison between the two religions showed us how being similar in many respects their rituals differ from each other in a high manner. We found that there are pointing similarities between the motives behind performing the rituals. As in Christianity, only with Confirmation one becomes a Christian similarly in Hinduism one has to undergo the ritual of Upanyana in order to be able to study Vedas which makes him/her a real Hindu. Also in Hinduism we saw that Upanyana was only performed for males and during cremation also only males were allowed to enter the cremation site because females are thought as emotionally weak to be able to see their loved ones getting burned. However in Christianity males and females are given equal opportunity to perform the rituals. Even though having the same ideas behind conducting these rituals the style of performing these rituals is totally different.