

# Rituals and Sacraments

Rituals, Sacraments (Christian View)

By Dr. Thomas Fisch

Christians, like their Islamic brothers and sisters, pray to God regularly. Much like Islam, the most important Christian prayer is praise and thanksgiving given to God. Christians pray morning and evening, either alone or with others, and at meals. But among the most important Christian prayers are the community ritual celebrations known as "The Sacraments" [from Latin, meaning "signs"]. Christians also celebrate seasons and festival days [see Feasts and Seasons].

Christians believe that Jesus of Nazareth, who taught throughout Galilee and Judea and who died on a cross, was raised from the dead by God in order to reveal the full extent of God's love for all human beings. Jesus reveals God's saving love through the Christian Scriptures (the New Testament) and through the community of those who believe in him, "the Church," whose lives and whose love for their fellow human beings are meant to be witnesses and signs of the fullness of God's love.

Within the community of the Christian Church these important ritual celebrations of worship, the sacraments, take place. Their purpose is to build up the Christian community, and each individual Christian within it, in a way that will make the Church as a whole and all Christians more and more powerful and effective witnesses and heralds of God's love for all people and of God's desire to give everlasting life to all human beings.

Each of the sacraments is fundamentally an action of worship and prayer. Ideally, each is celebrated in a community ritual prayer-action in which everyone present participates in worshipping God. There is not space here to set forth the full meaning and significance of these ritual celebrations. But the basic elements and functions of each will be described.

Roman Catholic Christians, as well Christians of the various Eastern Orthodox Churches believe in seven sacraments. Most Protestant Churches (or Churches of the Reformation) accept only two. This present article sets forth the Catholic and Orthodox viewpoint.

The Seven Sacraments are: Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, Ordination, Marriage, Reconciliation, and The Anointing of the Sick.

The two most important sacraments are Baptism and the Eucharist. Baptism is the ritual prayer-action through which a person becomes a member of the Christian community, the Church. The heart of the ritual is a ceremonial washing – either by water being poured over a person's head, or by someone being completely immersed under water. The person doing the washing (the "minister" – usually a priest or deacon) says: "I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Then the person

being baptized is anointed with a special perfumed olive oil ["Chrism"]. Through these actions the newly baptized person becomes a new member of the Church, is joined to Christ (sharing in Christ's new risen life) and comes into communion with God (who Christians believe is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). Baptism gives a person a new birth into God's life, and takes away all the person's sins.

The very next thing that happens (if the newly baptized is an adult or a child who is old enough to understand) is that the new Christian immediately joins in the community ritual prayer-action called "the Eucharist" ("Eucharist " means "thanksgiving" in Greek).

The Eucharist is the most important of the Christian Sacraments. It is celebrated every Sunday, the first day of the week. All the members of the Catholic or Orthodox Christian community in a place come together in an assembly. Hymns and prayers are offered to God. Readings from the Jewish and Christian Scriptures are read aloud for all to hear. The presiding ordained minister explains the Scripture readings and exhorts us to live as God teaches us.

Then the central action takes place. Some bread and wine is placed on the altar-table. The priest or bishop prays, in the name of the whole assembly, a great prayer of praise and thanksgiving to God, thanking God for all His great gifts to us – especially for Jesus Christ and for His life, death, and resurrection. Everyone present affirms this prayer by answering "Amen" (a Hebrew word which means "so be it" or "yes, we agree!").

Catholics and Orthodox understand this great prayer of Thanksgiving as a sacrificial action in which we offer ourselves to God in and through Jesus Christ. It is our real participation in Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice of himself on the cross out of obedience to God and love for all people. We believe that during the prayer of Thanksgiving, God, through the power of His Holy Spirit, transforms the bread and wine placed on the altar-table into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

Then the members of the assembly (beginning with the ordained bishop or priest who is presiding, or leading the ritual action), each receive some of the transformed (or "consecrated") bread and wine – which we believe to be the Body and Blood of Christ.

After all have eaten and drunk, there is another short prayer and all are dismissed to "go forth in peace to love and serve the Lord" especially in all people.

These two sacraments, Baptism and Eucharist, are the "Major Sacraments". The other five sacraments are related to and centered in these two.

Confirmation is the completion of Baptism when the bishop, the ordained head of the Christian community in a particular city, first prays a great prayer of praise to God, asking God to send His Spirit upon those being confirmed. Then he anoints the head of each already Baptized Christian with Chrism and "seals" them with the Holy Spirit.

Reconciliation [the Reconciliation of Sinners, often called "Confession"] is the sacramental ritual celebration by which sinners, especially those who have committed very serious sins (offenses) against God or against other human beings [called "Mortal" or deadly sins] are forgiven and reconciled to God and to the Christian community [the Church]. It consists of the sinner confessing his or her sins to a priest or bishop [who represents the whole Church], a prayer of absolution (or forgiveness) offered by the priest or bishop, and the person's making restitution ["penance"] for his or her sins. In this way the sinner is reconciled to God and to the Church. During the prayer the priest or bishop declares God's forgiveness of the person's sins.

Ordination is the ritual action by which the primary male leaders of the Church community [bishops, priests, and deacons] are established. The sacramental ritual of ordination is centered on a great prayer of praise and thanksgiving to God, prayed by the bishop [who presides over the Church]. He prays in the name of the whole Church community who all answer "Amen" to the prayer. This is accompanied by the bishop's laying his hands on the head of the man being ordained.

A bishop is the head of the full Orthodox or Catholic Church community in a city. A priest is a leader who shares in the ministry of the bishop. Both bishops and priests are able to preside at [conduct or "celebrate"] the Eucharist. A deacon is an assistant who serves the Christian community under the direction of the bishop.

The foundations for Christian Marriage are found in the book of Genesis, the first book of the Christian Bible. Catholics and Orthodox believe that God's original will for human marriage is the marriage of one man and one woman ["monogamy"] that is permanent, faithful in love, and open to life. Within Christianity such a marriage is viewed as a sacrament or sign of God's love for all people and of Jesus Christ's love for the Church.

As with all the sacraments, marriage is a reality to be lived out over the course of a lifetime. But also, like the others Christian marriage begins in a community ritual prayer-action, the wedding.

The Christian marriage ceremony includes a gathering of the community, prayer, readings from Scripture and teaching by the ordained leader. But this ritual-action is centered on two events. First, the man and the women, in turn, speak their vows to each other, promising to love and honor each other as husband and wife for their whole lives. Second is another great prayer of praise and thanksgiving to God which the ordained leader prays in the name of the whole assembly (and which all answer "Amen!") that God will bless this married couple and join them together in Christian marriage.

The last sacrament to be described is the Anointing of the Sick. When a Christian is very seriously sick with a sickness that may result in death (or when a person is weakened by old age) the bishop or priest is asked to come to the sick person. Then, along with as many members of the Christian community as can be present, the ordained leader prays a great prayer of praise to God, invoking God to send His love and healing upon the person who is sick. The leader also lays his hands on the head of the sick person and

anoints him or her with oil that has been blessed [the "Oil of the Sick"]. In this way Christians believe that the prayer of the community will comfort and strengthen the sick person, and that God will raise them up.

Each of these sacraments is an act of worship given to God by the Christian community under the leadership of its ordained ministers. Each is also a participation in God's overflowing love and salvation which extends to all people and which Christians believe has been pre-eminently realized in Jesus Christ who died for the sins of all human beings, and who rose from the dead to reveal the full extent of God's love and the new and unending life that God is offering to every human person.

This is only a general summary designed for this website. More complete information can be found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part Two, paragraphs 1066-1690.

### *Rituals and Sacraments (Sunni Islam)*

Dr. Adil Ozdemir

Islam as a religion has traditionally been classified into a set of beliefs or creeds (*i'tiqadaat*), acts of worship (*'ibadaat*), and legal transactions (*mu'amelat*). Some add to this a number of prescribed punishments (*'uqubaat*) for certain acts that violate *Sharia*, or Islamic law. Yet it is also important to understand Islam in a holistic sense. Literally meaning submission and surrender to the will of God, Islam is an all encompassing attitude of mind, extending to cover both the internal and external deeds of a believer. In this comprehensive sense, the very life of a believer is considered worship to God. Faith (*iman*) in this large, generic sense is itself an act of worship that covers seventy branches, the greatest of which is witnessing to God.

In addition to meaning acts of worship, the term *'ibaadat* means both service to God and creatureliness. Human beings are addressed in the Qur'an as "my creatures" or "my servants." In this generic sense *'ibaadat* and Islam (submission, surrender, obedience, dedication and devotion to God) are synonymous. For some Muslim scholars, faith and actions are inseparable, and failure to do the will of God means a loss of faith that puts the person outside the borders of Islam. However, the majority of Muslim scholars assert instead that actions are distinct from beliefs, meaning that those who fail to practice may still be believers and remain in the domain of faith, as long as they keep faith in God and accept his authority and validity.

Even though in a generic sense acts of worship (*'ibaadat*) and Islam are comprehensive terms covering a believer's every good deed of virtue and moral action, technically they were made to refer only to certain fundamental acts of worship universally known as the five pillars of Islam. These pillars are the word of testimony (*shahaadah*), the daily prayers (*salaat*), fasting (*siyaam*) during the month of Ramadan, almsgiving for the poor (*zakaat* or *sadaaqah*), and pilgrimage to the *Ka'bah* or house of God (*hajj*). Although the

five pillars appear separately and without system or detail in the Qur'an, they are described as a set of formulated acts in the manuals of Islamic law. All five acts are prescribed and obligatory for every sane, healthy, free, able Muslim. Each act is to be compensated for when neglected and made up immediately or later.

Profession of faith in God and Muhammad as His messenger (the *shahaadah*) is universally accepted as a sign of initiation to the religion of Islam and the community of Muslims. The *hadith* (or sayings of the prophet) of Gabriel Gibril describes Islam as the *shahaadah*: "Islam is testify that there is no God but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God." The *shahaadah* is an expression, a word, and a statement of faith in itself, and as the first pillar of Islam is the most decisive act of a believer. Some Muslims believe saying the *shahaadah* once in a lifetime is sufficient. However, scholars have disagreed as to whether the *shahaadah* is simply an expression of the tongue, an action of the body, or an affirmation of the heart.

The daily prayers (*salaat*) are unanimously accepted as the most visible act of a Muslim. Praying is a commandment of God in the Qur'an, and the prophet asked believers to pray as they saw him pray. He encouraged Muslims to pray by likening prayer to the moment of escalation to the presence of God, the ultimate truth, reality and existence (*al-migraaj*).

The prophet also compared ritual ablution, or cleaning oneself with pure, fresh water prior to and in preparation for prayer, to swimming in a river flowing near a house. In practice, water is sometimes unavailable, and in this case Muslims are allowed to use clean soil or sand. The important point is that, for Muslims, physical purity and ritual purity are essential to purity of heart. Modesty in clothing, turning to the *Ka'bah* (the most sacred site in Islam, located in Mecca), and observing the time are all basic external elements of prayer. The times for the prayer are before sunrise, at noon, following the zenith of the sun at mid-afternoon, after the sunset, and in the evening.

In modern times as in the past, there is often tension between an individual's internal deeds of the heart and external actions of the body. Although sincerity, integrity, purity and unity have been the achievable and intended goals for all Muslims, Muslim scholars have placed varying emphasis on the importance of internal life compared to outward appearances (as visible fruit of the internal). The Qur'an urges believers to uphold the integrity and unity between their internal and external lives, but is also aware of the human condition. It categorically accepts repentance, forgiveness and transformation (*tawbah*, *afw*, and *islaah*). Among Muslims today, moderation in worship practices and belief is widespread, as it was in the beginning of Islam. Perfectionism, fanaticism, and extremism exist, but have always been quite rare.

In the English language, the pillars of Islam are often referred to as Islamic rituals, Islamic rites, or even Islamic sacraments, as an approximation to the Christian sacraments, rites, rituals and religious ceremonies. Many Muslim authors, however, prefer terms like Islamic pillars or pillars of Islam. Nevertheless, there seems to be at least some similarity between religious acts and works in Islam, Christianity, and other religions, in that acts and works

are instituted and practiced to generate blessings and sanctity for the believing individual and community. Still, the rituals of each religion have their own particular character.

## Rituals and Sacraments (Shi'i View)

Dr. Liyakat Takim

Shi'is share with Sunnis the major rituals that Muslims are required to perform. These include the daily prayers, fasting during the month of Ramadan, paying the poor tax, and the performance of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca.

However, Shi'is engage in other rituals and sacraments that Sunnis do not. These rituals are connected to the commemoration of the martyrdom of the third spiritual leader (called Imam), Husayn b. 'Ali and to the remembrance of the lives of other Imams. The massacre of Husayn and his forces at Kerbala, Iraq, in 680 was an important milestone in Shi'i history as it affirmed notions of injustices endured by the progeny of the Prophet and exacerbated a passion for martyrdom and grief.

The Shi'i notion of sanctity and holiness is markedly differently from that of other Muslims. This is because Sunni religious events are confined to daily or weekly prayers and annual events in which Muslims from different ethnic backgrounds congregate. The Shi'is, on the other hand, have their own calendar of days wherein venerated Imams and holidays are clearly marked as distinct from profane time. Besides holding daily, Friday, and *eid* prayers, Shi'i communities hold functions to commemorate the martyrdom of Husayn, the birth and death anniversaries of other Imams and events like *eid al-Ghadir*, when the Prophet is reported to have designated 'Ali b. Abu Talib as his successor. Other holidays include the day of *Arba'in* (the fortieth day after the death of Husayn) and *Mubahila*. It is reported that, on this day, the Prophet brought his family when challenged to a curse by a Christian community. The Christians reportedly preferred to sign a peace agreement than curse the family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*).

Such events are marked in different ways by the Shi'is. South Asian and Khoja Shi'is reenact and commemorate the events of Kerbala with their own culturally generated symbols and modes of expressions. They insist on having replicas or symbols of Kerbala in their centers. These include a special *dharikh* room, which often contains a depiction of the horse of Husayn and his sword. Included among the replicas are the symbolic representation of the '*alam* of 'Abbas (lit. a flag symbolizing the bravery and courage of 'Abbas) in the form of a palm, a cradle that symbolizes Husayn's six month old child who was also killed in Kerbala, and other traditional replicas of shrines.

Khoja Shi'is come primarily from East Africa and India. In many Khoja centers, symbols that evoke stories of the martyrs of Kerbala are carried through the crowd in the hall after the main lecture. These take the form of a coffin draped in a white cloth colored with red dye, as if bloodstained, and the '*alam*. A cradle is also paraded to remind the faithful of

the innocent youthfulness of 'Ali Asghar, the infant son of Husayn. The Khojas often decorate these symbols with garlands of flowers. Many attendees will even consume parts of the flowers, believing them to contain blessings (*baraka*) and curative powers. The purpose of the symbols is to encourage weeping and engender a sense of commitment and devotion to the Imams. Through the symbols, a Shi'i is able to identify with the Imams and the sufferings they endured.

Another important Shi'i ritual is that of flagellation. In Shi'ism, flagellation is a composite term that includes the use of swords and knives to cut the head (*tatbir*), chains (*zanjir*), as well as striking of the chest (*matam*). *Tatbir* is the most violent of these acts and is practiced by only a small portion of the Shi'i community. *Matam* or *latmiyya* designates the formal ritual acts of breast-beating and self-flagellation that are generally undertaken by all Shi'i groups. However, the methods and forms of flagellation vary between the groups. The Khojas, who share many rituals with South Asian Shi'is, often perform their *matam* in a rhythmic, circular movement call *saff*. This form of flagellation is foreign to South Asian, Iranian, and Arab Shi'is who will often stand in straight lines while striking their chests. The diverse ways of flagellating that are practiced by the disparate ethnic groups means that they will not feel comfortable engaging in this ritual together. Such rituals construct boundaries that further segment the Shi'i community.

Like many other religions, Shi'ism has taken on distinctly indigenous forms in the different lands that it has spread. The practices of "popular Shi'ism" are where the differences are most pronounced. Popular practices are often the most important agents in spreading a religion in lands where it is foreign and must be understood through a reconstructed native understanding. After the establishment of the Safavid empire in Iran in 1501, Iranians created a popular-based ritual called the *taziyeh*, a dramatic reenactment of the events at Kerbala. Subsequently, the *taziyeh* has assumed different forms as various Shi'i groups have expressed their devotion to Husayn in a myriad of culturally-conditioned forms. In the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent, for example, *taziyeh* refers to a replica of the tomb of Husayn that is constructed, paraded in processions, and then kept in special sanctuaries within the precincts of the mosque. In Iran, the same term signifies passion plays that depict the events in Kerbala. In Lebanon, *taziyeh* refers to a gathering to mark Husayn's martyrdom.

Besides the rituals and symbols outlined above, a key element in the commemorative gatherings is a lecture and recollection of the martyrdom of Husayn in Kerbala, called *majlis*. The *majalis* (pl. of *majlis*) are lamentation assemblies where the stories of the martyrs of Kerbala are recited for the evocation of grief. Narratives associated with the Imams are often heard in the *majlis*. These gatherings have also been used to recount the persecution endured by the Shi'i Imams, evoking thereby, the emotions of the audience. In addition, their virtues, miracles, and valor are recounted. In this way, the human and supernatural qualities of the Imams are enshrined in the hearts and minds of the attendees.

Participation in the *majlis* congregation became an important medium to reinforce Shi'i beliefs and identity. Although lectures are held at the Shi'i centers throughout the year,

the Shi'i faithful congregate in large numbers during the month of Muharram, the month when Husayn was killed. The *majlis* is an important ritual as it helps mediate Shi'i Islam to the community.

Within the fractured ethnic communities, it is possible to speak of a wide array of religious practices. It is the Muharram rites that differentiate Shi'is from Sunnis and all other Muslim sects. The rituals outlined allow the believer to experience Kerbala precipitating individual and communal reflection insofar as it challenges the believers to base their demeanor on the paradigmatic actions of the Shi'i Imams. At the same time, the various Shi'i rituals demonstrate a great deal of diversity within the overarching unity of devotion to the family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*). They are traditionally generated, cultural specific rituals that have no textual basis in Shi'ism.

Besides the rituals, religious institutions provide a conducive environment to articulate and affirm beliefs. Articulation of a distinct Shi'i belief system and identity is most evident in the Shi'i centers. The calligraphy in the centers, for example, is a mixture of Qur'anic verses and salutations to or names of those killed in Kerbala. Many of them narrate the virtues of 'Ali and the other Imams. Drawings in the Shi'i centers may depict Lahiq, the horse of Husayn, or mention the names of the members of the Prophet's immediate family, i.e., Muhammad, 'Ali, Fatima, Hasan, and Husayn. Pictorial representations of the Ka'aba are fixed next to the domes and shrines of the Imams in Kerbala, Najaf, or Mashad. Some Iranian and Arab centers will also have the pictures of 'Ali, Husayn, or 'Abbas. Sunni centers will prohibit such depictions.

It is these genres of distinctive Shi'i symbols and icons that create Shi'i space and identity. These visual words and symbols convey the message that distinguishes Shi'i from Sunni Islam; they also affirm the charismatic authority of 'Ali and his descendants, the Imams, and that salvation is attained through the recognition of the authority (*wilaya*) of the Imams. These icons and engravings link the local Shi'i center to the universal Shi'i message; yet, since they are culturally conditioned, they often particularize that message. Collectively, these features are also important in transmitting Shi'ism to the next generation.

#### Points of Agreement, Disagreement, and Points for Further Discussion

One important point of discussion between Islam and Christianity is the role of mediation between the believer and God. In Islam, every soul is able to contact God directly without the aid of an intermediary or an intercessory person or institution. Islam teaches no office of mediation—not even for the holy prophets—and there is no official body of authority to confer on the believers any sense of sanctity or blessedness. Instead, through worship Muslims enter into direct relationship with God the creator, sustainer, guide and keeper. The example and teachings of the prophet provide a guide for his followers in worshipping God, and the five pillars of Islam (the testimony or witness, daily prayers, fasting during the month of Ramadan, pilgrimage to Mecca, and almsgiving to the poor) are both duty.

Another point of discussion is this: both Catholics and Shi'is venerate saints and martyrs in their traditions. And both are challenged-- Catholics by Protestants, and Shi'is by



Sunnis-- as to the authenticity of such veneration. Is honoring a saint tantamount to idolatrous worship, or *shirk* (the most serious sin in Islam)? This is a point for serious discussion both among Muslims and Christians themselves, but also between Muslims and Christians. Wahhabi Muslims in particular have historically opposed both Shi'i and Sufi practices of honoring saints and gathering at the tombs of saints. Furthermore, Wahhabis have destroyed the some of the tombs of the saints in areas under their control. This is a point of active disagreement and hostilities within Islam.