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VIII. The Religious Order and Ritual

1. Holy Places of Worship

Members of the Sikh community in India perceive their religious congregation as a company of spiritual devotees, who worship God. The congregation is referred to as the “company of the saints.” Living in this congregation (Satsang, Sangat), their mutual inspiration and devotion manifest the hidden spirituality within a devotee. “In the holy company, one becomes holy as it washes away the sins and helps to proceed towards virtues.... With the attainment of holy company, the mind is purified.” Following a path of service, the community feels a spirit of mutual love and respect, fellowship, and a sense of equality with the other members of the religious family. The Sikh religion was founded by ten Gurus beginning with Guru Nanak (1469-1539) and ending with Guru Gobind Singh (1675-1708).¹ The Sikhs approach compares with their contemporary 16th century Protestant “communion of saints” and the “congregation of saints,” which result from “the righteousness of life or spiritual righteousness of believers that arise in them ... because of the renovation and sanctification that occurs in believers.” Also, the Sikhs like many Protestants, place a great deal of emphasis on their religious scripture, which they refer to as the Adi Granth.² There are some similarities between the teachings of the Protestants Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-64) and the Sikh gurus beginning with their contemporary Guru Nanak.

In Sri Ramakrishna’s words, “God pervades the universe everywhere, but you cannot see Him everywhere. He manifests Himself more readily in sacred temples which are full of the spirit of devotion diffused by the life and spiritual practices of the devotees of former times. Know that there must be manifestation of God in places where countless people have long practiced austerity, japa, meditation, prayer and worship with a view to realize Him. Through their devotion, spiritual ideas are present in these places in a solidified form, as it were. Hence there man

easily feels the awakening of spirituality and realized Him. From time immemorial, numberless Sadhus [Holy Man], devotees and men of realization have come to these holy places to have a vision of God, and have prayed to Him with an outpouring of their hearts, setting aside all worldly desires. Therefore, though equally present everywhere, God manifests Himself specially in these places.”³ “Know for certain that there is a special manifestation of God where for a long time many people have practiced austerities, concentration, meditation, japa, prayer, and worship in order to attain His vision. Their devotion has caused a spiritual atmosphere to solidify in that place, so that one can easily become spiritually awakened and have a vision of God there.”⁴

Since the main vehicle of liberation in Hinduism has traditionally been initiation by a competent guru, Indians have made fewer statements concerning the nature of the church, than have the adherents of the Biblical religions. For the Hindus a second source of liberation is the holy city of Benares, which might be conceived of as a large church. Many Indians believe, “By special grace of Shiva, all those who die in Benares receive the illumination of true knowledge at the moment of death.”⁵

A church or temple is a place of worship that serves as a space for common prayer where the community gathers and venerates the Divine. The building might face in a particular direction for a certain reason. Joseph Trigg indicated that Origen of Alexandria (c. 185-254), “sincerely considered the church a unique vehicle of God's grace. The church and the church alone made accessible to human beings the truth about God and standards of morality that made it possible to advance toward personal knowledge of God.”⁶

The Swiss Protestant reformer Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) taught, “According to the teachings of Paul, the invisible Church is that which came down from heaven, that is to say, the Church which knows and embraces God by the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. To this Church belongs all who believe the whole world over. It is not called invisible because believers are invisible, but because it is concealed from the eyes of men who they are: for believers are known only to God and to themselves.”⁷

Sacred Space “includes places that are constructed for religious purposes, such as shrines and Temples or Temenoi [sacred land], and places that are religiously interpreted, such as [holy or sacred] mountains or rivers. It includes spaces that can be entered physically, as the outer geography of a holy land,

imaginatively, as the inner geography of the body in Tantric yoga, or visually, as the space of a mandala.” Certain locations are designated as special places of worship because of their historical association with Holy personages and religious events. They serve as a reminder of historical events that occurred at that location in the past. The devotee attempts to overcome the temporal distance between the present and the historical event. An attempt is made to remanifest the sacred power that was present during the original event. Sacred space is intrinsically sacred and has the power to evoke a religious response. Often times religiously significant events occur at these locations such as celebrations, festivals, image worship, specified ritualistic practices, music, and meals. It is a place where Divine power manifests itself, where the images of deities are located, and a place to communicate with the deities who have graciously consented to dwell there. Brahman-God is omnipresent, but is more manifested in one location than another. The intension of Sacred Space is for a pious group vibration to be created there.⁸

Sacred Time involves holy days, festival occasions, and a specific time of day that are celebrated periodically, weekly, or daily in conjunction with a religious event. Historical events of the past are renewed and re-empowered in the present.⁹ Calendrical rites are performed according 1) to the occurrence of predictable natural events such as the onset of a season or the position of the moon or sun (like Easter), 2) on a birthday or ascension date, 3) day of the week in relation to the month (like Thanksgiving), 4) first day of new year, or 5) an assigned date. The original events are relived; an attempt is made to recreate the sacred power that was present during the original event. Past and present are integrated, providing a sense of continuity. Can we also say Sacred Time is when we have a spiritual revelation? Sacred Time exists outside the realm of religion as exemplified by nonreligious holidays to commemorate important historical events.

For more on this subject see: Yogic Practices, Meditation, and Prayer, Section 8. Holy Places of Worship.

2. Initiation and Baptism

Indian: “Whatever sin is found in me, whatever evil I have wrought, if I have lied or falsely sworn, Waters, remove it far from me” (RV 1:23.22; 10:9.8).

New Testament: “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:5; cf. Eph. 5:26). “Repent and be baptized every one of

you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38).

There are a number of similarities between the Indian initiation ceremony (diksha) into spiritual life and Christian baptism that is a form of initiation. Since there are variations among the Indians in the initiation ceremony and Christians in the practice of baptism, the following eleven commonalities do not hold for all groups. Most often both Indian religious initiation and Christian baptism are:

1) considered to be a universally valid and a permanent ordinance practiced for many centuries. There is no known period in the history of either religion when they were not performed.¹⁰

2) administered only once during a person’s lifetime (Eph. 4:5) unless a devotee is converted to another religious order that follows another initiation practice.

3) performed at any age during a devotee’s lifetime, though adulthood is preferred, and some Christians reject infant baptism.

4) administered following a traditionally prescribed procedure by a religious professional (e.g., a priest, preacher, or guru), though there are some exceptions to this in Christianity. Jiva Goswami (c. 1511-96) the Bengal Vaishnavist follower of Sri Chaitanya indicated that an authentic guru initiates a disciple (chela) “in a mantra according to the prescribed method” that has been handed down from time immemorial and never claims to be innovating a new procedure. Ramakrishna mentioned, “Ritualistic devotion consists in ... performing worship in a prescribed manner.” A Christian minister should follow the accepted method and not alter the procedure for administering baptism.

5) performed on special days during a specified auspicious sacred time. Particular shrines within the temple or church are often designated as sanctified places of worship, being consecrated areas separated from other areas. Ritual involves prescribed gestures, postures, and bodily movements. During the ceremony sacred words are also recited. Venerated articles or objects might include water, pictures, images, special clothing, and various other paraphernalia that are part of the sacramental ritual. A sacramental such as a crucifix acquires an objective holiness due to the blessing placed on it.¹¹

6) an objective empirical power (virtus operativa) that is more than subjective. The Indian view as reported by Daniel Acharuparambil, O.C.D. (b. 1939) Archbishop of Verapoly, India, is that, “All agree that mantras are charged with an

inherent spiritual power, but normally it is dormant. It is to be awakened in order that it may produce the desired result, and the awakening is effected by the guru. While imparting the mantra to the disciple, the guru intentionally instills into it his own spiritual energy which dynamizes the Divine force embedded in it. The disciple, then, by his japa or the constant repetition of it and concentration and meditation on it, realizes its salutary fruits..... It is to be borne in mind, however, that the communication by the guru of a mantra, called mantra diksha, though the most common form of initiation, is not the only one. Other types also are recognized, such as initiation by touch (sparsa diksha), initiation by sight (drg diksha), and initiation by thought (mano diksha).” Sri Ramakrishna employed these methods of initiation. They involve use of the hands, “gazing into the disciples eyes” and the use of the mind. In time transmission of an objective substantial spiritual energy, awakens the Divine power within the recipient transforming their inner life.¹²

Catholics believe “The efficacy of the sacraments, and especially of baptism, was assured ‘ex opere operato,’ by the sheer performance of the act, rather than ‘ex opere operantis,’ by the effect of the performer upon the act.”¹³ Baptism and the other sacraments are effective in themselves, because their primary effects are due to the direct work of God’s grace mediated through the sacrament. In baptism the Triune Godhead bestows the gift, not the priest who administers it. Potency of baptism comes from the active agent, which is the Holy Spirit operating through the Word of God, in association with the water. It is God who washes away the sins of the baptized person, not the administering minister.¹⁴

7) influenced to some extent by the condition of the recipient. Indians place emphasis on the devotee’s actions after they are initiated. The act of initiation conveys spiritual potentiality in a seed form and not in a state of full bloom. For the purpose of objectifying the seed spirituality, the guru’s instruction must be practiced faithfully and steadfastly throughout the disciple’s life. Gradually the bondage's of the soul are removed, and the spiritual aspirant is led to Brahman (God). Both Lutheran and Reformed Protestants (16th-17th centuries) “maintain that faith must be present in the recipient if the sacraments are to function as means of grace; the mere performance of the rite will not convey grace.” “To receive the grace of baptism the adult must have faith, hope, the desire at arriving at the grace of God, penitence for sin, the will to obey the Divine law.”¹⁵

8) employed to bring the recipient into the religion. In many Indian orders those people initiated by a guru, maintain a special status superior to that of the

other group members. Through the rite of baptism, the church receives new members into the Christian community (Mt. 28:19; Gal. 3:27-28).¹⁶

9) functional for the remission of sin. Jiva Goswami taught that the act of initiation by a guru destroys the sins and bad karmas of the devotee. “The worthy Masters awaken the Divine power in them” preventing them from committing future sins.”¹⁷ Ideally in the act of baptism an inner conversion will occur, whereby the guilt of the person’s sins is forgiven and washed away (Acts 2:38; 22:16). There is a death of the old self, when Christ through the grace of baptism frees an individual from the burden of original sin and the penalty of actual sins committed. While the guilt is removed, still the possibility to commit future sins remain, but a reformed believer will acquire merit if they do not yield to these temptations.

10) responsible for the spiritual regeneration of the recipient. Jiva Goswami maintained that initiation is a necessary prerequisite for the proper worship of Bhagavat (God). It quickens spiritual growth, and is an aid in attaining a true understanding of Bhagavat’s nature, of one’s own unique relationship to the Divine, and of the particular form of the Lord whom the devotee is to worship. When the energy of initiation is transmitted to a worthy disciple, it awakens the latent spiritual power in them. The experience of Bhagavat cannot be attained by the process of reasoning, but is revealed by means of initiation by a qualified teacher. “Initiation is so-called because it destroys sins and produces spiritual knowledge by the knower of the truth. All persons are transformed when they are initiated in mantras by worthy Masters.”¹⁸ Baptism is the sign of God’s grace-presence within us. This transform us, giving a new meaning and power to all of our actions.¹⁹ “And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him” (Mt. 3:16-17; Mk. 1:10-11). When a believer is baptized, they receive “the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Act 2:38; cf. 10:47-48; 1 Cor. 12:13) and are sanctified and justified (1 Cor. 6:11). “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.... For you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:27-28). Baptismal regeneration yields a new birth, for the reason that a spiritual transformation occurs by virtue of the presence of God within the individual (Jn. 3:5-6; Col. 2:12).

11) major factors in leading to liberation-salvation. Many Indian religious orders teach that initiation conveys liberation from the earthly plane of existence with the death of the physical body, or at the very longest after three future

lifetimes. The medieval Catholic Church considered baptism to be an absolute necessity for obtaining salvation, and as a rite that overcomes the ominous effects of original sin (Jn. 3:5; Tit. 3:5). Contrary to this, some Christian churches assert that salvation is possible without baptism, since soteriological grace is offered in other ways. Baptism is the sacrament of spiritual rebirth, of being cleansed of all sins and incorporated into Christ, and of receiving the grace of salvation.²⁰

Four main differences between Indian religious initiation and Christian baptism are: 1) most gurus carefully select the persons whom they plan to initiate. Indian scriptures state that a spiritual guide should not give the knowledge of Brahman to an unworthy aspirant (Svet. Up. 6:22; Mait. Up. 6:29; Chan. Up. 3:11.5-6). “To that pupil who has duly approached him, whose mind is completely serene, and whose senses are controlled, the wise teacher should indeed rightly impart the Knowledge of Brahman” (Mun. Up. 1:2.13). Some Indian gurus require a rigorous preparation period lasting a year or more, before they will accept a disciple for initiation. To see whether the pupil is ready for initiation, the guru may test them in many ways. Only a qualified aspirant will be able to properly follow the teachings and the required discipline. A worthy disciple must have a general comprehension of the sacred scriptures, be able to discriminate between the good and the pleasant, renounce many worldly desires, control their mind and senses, live a moral life, be able to concentrate when meditating, have faith in the scriptures and the guru, and have a fervent desire for liberation.²¹

While the selection process is not stressed as much in baptism, some Christians support this idea. According to Augustus Strong (1836-1921), “The proper subjects of baptism are those only who give evidence that they have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit.... those only are to be baptized who have previously repented and believed.... in addition to a profession of faith with the lips, some satisfactory proof that this profession is accompanied by changes in the conduct” (Mt. 3:2-6; Acts 2:37-38, 41; 19:4).²² In many early Christian churches up to 450 A.D., an aspirant had to undergo special training (catechumenate) before being baptized. “During several, often seven, weeks of ascetic, educational, and liturgical training they were prepared for baptism. The educational training consisted usually in lectures on the Apostolic Creed and the significance of baptism. This training culminated usually at Easter with Baptism and their first participation in the Lord's Supper.”²³

2) the efficacy of initiation is largely determined by the spiritual power of the

guru and the organization they represent. Initiations by some gurus and some religious organization may not lead to spiritual regeneration or to liberation. To be fit to initiate others, the teacher must be a representative of a legitimate organization, have knowledge of the scriptures, be virtuous, truthful, free of pride, renounce worldly desires and passion, and have attained immediate experience of Brahman (God). Having received the revelation of a Divine form, they have the power to liberate the disciple from worldly bondage.²⁴ Jiva Goswami taught, “All persons are transformed when they are initiated in a mantra by a worthy Master. They are reborn.” Initiation of an aspirant by a competent Master who can liberate his disciple from worldly bondage is of the greatest spiritual help. Only a Master who is virtuous, pious, and compassionate should be served. (For more details see Section 4. Be Instructed by a Teacher).²⁵

Christians believe baptism operates through the power of God, not the presiding minister. “The efficacy of the sacraments, and especially of baptism, was assured ‘ex opere operato,’ by the sheer performance of the act, rather than ‘ex opere operantis,’ by the effect of the performer upon the act.”²⁶ The Christian Donatists (4th-early 5th centuries) a North African sect that were considered to be heretical because they held the “rigorist” position that the efficacy of the sacraments like baptism and the Eucharist depends on the personal sanctity of the presiding minister and not on his office. They also held “the puritan conception of the Church as a society which is de facto holy, consisting exclusively of actually good men and women.”²⁷

3) the guru personally takes on the karma and responsibility for the liberation of their disciple. In the latter case, the guru after his/her passing continues to assist the disciple throughout the initiate’s lifetime. Sri Ramakrishna said, “The Guru is a mediator. He brings man and God together, even as a matchmaker brings together the lover and the beloved.... The disciple never criticizes his Guru. He must implicitly obey whatever the Guru says.”²⁸

4) initiation centers around the giving of a mantra (a sacred name of Brahman) which is to be recited for the rest of the disciple’s life. Christians invoke the name of the Triune God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at the time of initiation (Mt. 28:19), but this phrase is not likely to be repeated daily by the disciple throughout their life like a mantra. The nature of Brahman-God’s holy name is charged with spiritual power. It is a symbol of the Divine that is identical with the Lord.²⁹ Swami Brahmananda (1863-1922) clarified, “With the aid of a mantram it is

easier to practice concentration of the mind on one Chosen Ideal [Ishta Devata, that aspect of the Deity that you worship]. Without the mantram the mind wanders from one conception of God to another; and never succeeds in concentrating upon any. And without achieving perfect concentration nothing can be accomplished in spiritual life.”³⁰

Initiation is a “Rite of Passage” (a term introduced by the French anthropologists Arnold van Gennep in 1909), being a religious ceremony that marks a critical transition in the life of an individual from one phase of the life cycle to another. In the initiation ceremony one receives a mantra that connects the person with a particular aspect of Brahman-God known as the Chosen Ideal. Unlike the other rites of passage, the desired goal of initiation and baptism is to promote passage after the death of the physical body to a higher plane of existence. Initiation provides emotional support and knowledge signifying a new identity, privileges, roles, and obligations.³¹ Important psychosocial functions are fulfilled such as a social framework, a sense of belonging. It involves entry into a religious society fostering a special unity through a shared identity of values, enhanced through a common ritual. One learns to conform to the societal norms of the religious organization.

3. Indian Ritual and the Christian Eucharist-Communion

Indian: “Good men, who eat the remnant of the sacrifice, are freed from all sins” (BG 3:13; cf. LM 3:118). “They eat the food which has been blessed in the sacrifice. Thus, they obtain immortality and reach eternal Brahman” (BG* 4:31, p. 65).

New Testament: “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life” (Jn. 6:53-54; cf. Mt. 26:26-28; Mk. 14:22-25; Lk. 22:19; 1 Cor. 10:16). “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” (1 Cor. 11:26; cf. 23-25).

Mimamsa ritualists contend that the instrumental effects of the execution of the religious sacrifice manifest an unperceivable karmic potency (apurva), which acts as a necessary connection between the sacrificial cause and its effect. It endures until the desirable effect is produced in the sacrificer, and then it becomes

nonexistent. According to Pramathanath Tarkabhusan, “An invisible potency is admitted which issues from the sacrifice and which endures till the fruit is generated and which resides in the soul of the sacrificer. This is called apurva. It ceases on producing the result. It is also otherwise called merit or demerit.”³²

Another large religious group the Vaishnavists affirm the concept of the Arcavatars, which is an objective spiritual body manifestation of Brahman (God) present in and through a sacred image (Arca). The Lord graciously expresses His Divine nature, bliss and power to the devout worshiper through the religious image. Unlike the Divine Incarnations that manifest only once, Arcavataras are permanent incarnations of Brahman-God that are part of our empirical existence. In addition, Brahman (God) manifests spiritually through food offerings, visitations, and visions apart from religious images. It is the spiritual body of the deity that is substantially present in the food offering. S. S. Raghavachar comments, “Arca is the manifestation in the images and symbols men worship. The significance is that God in authentic objectivity constitutes the image.... This account of the arca implies that matter is not intrinsically and incurably undivine. It is a vibhuti (glory) of God and in that very fact lies its being and powers. To a godless vision it may appear merely material. The pure matter through which Divinity does not shine at all is a creature of the materialistic illusion.”³³

Srinivasa (dasa) (fl. 1625) pointed out that the deity graciously descends with a nonmaterial spiritual body into the image (or we might add into the food offering) for the benefit of the worshiper. According to this religious school, the Arcavatar (also called Murti) is a spiritual form and body, which Brahman (God) assumes when He discloses Himself to a human being. Referencing to Srinivasa(dasa), Klaus Klostermaier indicated, “The Murti is the Arcavatar of Vishnu [the deity] who, without remoteness of space and time accepts for his body any substance chosen by the devotee and descends into it with a non-material body; He becomes dependent on the worshipper for bath, food, sitting, sleeping ... The consecration of the Murti is one of the most interesting rites--through this act the material image becomes 'ensouled' by God and henceforth can be a sacrament to men: touching it, sipping the water in which it had been bathed, feeding it, fanning it, etc. all these acts become 'sacramental' for the worshipper.”³⁴

Swami Saradananda (1865-1927) imparted in his definitive biography of Sri Ramakrishna, “Earlier in his sadhana [spiritual practice], while offering food to the [Divine] Mother, the Master [Ramakrishna] would see a flashing ray of light emanate

from the Mother's eyes, touch the offered food articles, gather their essence, and then withdraw back into Her eyes. But now as soon as he offered food, and sometimes even before that, he would see the Mother Herself seated to eat the food, the luster of Her body pervading the whole temple. Hriday told us that one day he went to the shrine and watched as the Master took a hibiscus flower and a bel leaf in his hand to offer at the feet of the Mother. He held them and meditated, but then he suddenly cried out: 'Wait, wait! Let me say the mantra first, and then You can eat.' He then offered food to the Mother before finishing the ritual."³⁵

In agreement with this Swami Shivananda (1854-1934) emphasized, "God is in the image in a special sense. When one makes sufficient progress Godwards, one will see that God is there and even accepts our offerings of food through rays of light touching what is offered. This has been seen by Sri Guru Maharaj [Sri Ramakrishna] and the Holy Mother."³⁶

Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) expounded that the sacraments are necessary for salvation. They demonstrate how physical objects can be utilized for the purpose of attaining salvation. It is easy for common people to apply themselves to corporeal and sensible things, which they can effortlessly comprehend. "God provides according to his condition. Now, man's condition is such that he is brought to grasp the spiritual and intelligible naturally through the senses. Therefore, spiritual remedies had to be given to men under sensible signs." "Certain blessings using sensible things are provided for man, whereby man is washed, or anointed, or fed, or given drink, along with the expression of sensible words, so that man may be reminded through sensible things that intelligible gifts come to him from without, and from God, Whose name is expressed in sensible words." "It was fitting that God should provide man with a spiritual medicine by means of certain corporeal signs; for if man were offered spiritual things without a veil, his mind being taken up with the material world would be unable to apply itself to them."³⁷ Only when the sense of the words or meaning of a sentence is altered, do the sacraments of the Eucharist or baptism become invalid. "If that which is omitted be not a substantial part of the form, such an omission does not destroy the due sense of the words, nor consequently the validity of the sacrament."³⁸

Concerning the Eucharist, the Anglican Bishop of London, Nicholas Ridley (c. 1500-55) rejected the idea of a substantial presence of Christ in the bread and wine. As outlined by Geoffrey Bromiley, "Ridley does not deny the power of the

Word. He does not relate it, however, to a change in substance. He relates it to the effectual presence of Christ's body and blood by the Spirit even though bread remains bread and wine, wine.... What Ridley denies is what is for him the pseudo-miracle of substantial change. What he affirms is the true miracle of a real presence by the Word and Spirit.”³⁹

It is written in the book of Matthew, “Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’” (Mt. 26:26-28; cf., Mk. 1:22-24; Lk. 22:17-19). The Christian ceremony of the Eucharist commemorating the Last Supper, in which bread and wine (or grape juice) are consecrated (made sacred) and consumed, is based on this Biblical passage. According to the teaching of the Catholic Church, Transubstantiation is due to the actions of God, “the change of the whole substance of bread into the substance of the Body of Christ and of the whole substance of wine [or grape juice] into the substance of the Blood of Christ.” This change is brought about by the Eucharistic prayer through the efficacy of the word of Christ and by the activity of the Holy Spirit. Christ is truly and substantially present in the Eucharist. The outward sensory properties of the bread and wine (or grape juice) remain unaltered. How this occurs is a mystery that surpasses human understanding according to the Catholic Church. Martin Luther denied the process of transubstantiation but believed that Christ is really present at the Eucharist through a “sacramental union.” Anglicans and Presbyterians also reject transubstantiation.⁴⁰

Anthony Wilhelm writes that Catholics teach that Christ communicates His grace through the words and actions of the sacrament. “A sacrament is a sacred sign of worship by which we come into intimate personal contact with Christ and receives His grace.... Through them we come into intimate, personal contact with Him giving us grace. When we take part in a sacrament, Christ’s presence is also concealed, but He is there, affecting us intimately by his love.... A sacrament, if entered into with faith and love, always affects us interiorly, always gives us grace. The sacraments intensify our faith and our love of God and our fellow man, as well as making our sufferings bearable and meaningful. Each sacrament, then, makes us more like Christ.”⁴¹ The Council of Trent as interpreted by Geoffrey Bromiley adds, “To profit from it, we must come with true hearts, right faith, and fear and

reverence. If we do, God, propitiated by it, will grant grace, penitence, and remission.”⁴²

In summary, religious rituals are efficacious because:

- a) an unperceivable karmic potency (apurva) issues from the sacrifice into the soul of the recipient of the sacrifice, producing an auspicious effect (Mimamsa),
- b) the spiritual body of the deity is substantially present in the image or food offering (Vaishnava, Srinivasadasa),
- c) a ray of light emanates from the eyes of the deity, touches the food offering, gathers the essence, and then withdraws back into the deities’ eyes. This can be perceived only by the highest souls (Ramakrishna, Shivananda),
- d) there is a real presence of the Word and Spirit in the Eucharist-Communion (Ridley),
- e) Christ is substantially present in the Eucharist (Catholics),
- f) Christ communicates His grace through the words and actions of the sacrament (Catholics), and
- g) it is easier for humans to grasp the spiritual and intelligible reality through corporeal and sensible objects (Aquinas).

Sri Ramakrishna’s vision of a light issuing from the eye of the deity, would account for the purification of the Eucharist-Communion food offering where this event takes place. Vaishnavists accept the idea of the Arcavatar as an objective spiritual body incarnation of Brahman (God), manifesting in and through a religious image (Arca). Therefore, a religious image can be far more than a symbol of Brahman (God), if the Lord reveals His/Her presence to the pious worshiper through the living image or the consecrated elements of a religious rite. Following this line of thought, Brahman (God)’s living presence in the Christian Eucharist-Communion might be conceived as the real presence of the spiritual body incarnation of Christ.

4. Be Instructed by a Teacher (Guru)

Indian: “Only knowledge which is learnt from a teacher leads to the highest good” (Ch. Up. 4:9.3; cf. 6:14.2; Kat. Up. 1:2.7-9). “Approach a guru who is well versed in the *Vedas* and always devoted to Brahman. To that pupil who has duly approached him ... the wise teacher should indeed rightly impart the Knowledge of Brahman” (Mun. Up. 1:2.12-13; cf. Svet. Up. 6:23; cf. BG 4:34; 13:25). “Of him

who gives natural birth and him who gives (the knowledge of) the *Veda*, the giver of the *Veda* is the more venerable father” (LM 2:146; cf. 2:144, 148, 200-01, 233-34; 4:162; 12:83).

Old Testament: “And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands upon him” (Dt. 34:9; cf. Jn. 20:22-23). “He who walks with wise men become wise” (Prov. 13:20; cf. Mt. 5:14-16; 1 Cor. 4:15-16). “Stand thou in the assembly of the elders, and whoso is wise, cleave unto him. Desire to hear every discourse, and let not a wise proverb escape thee. Look for him who is wise, and seek him out earnestly, and let thy foot wear out his threshold” (Sir. 6:34-36; cf. Acts 8:30-31).

Shankara in the *Upadesha Sahasri* (1.4-1.5) taught, “The teacher possesses tranquility, self-control, compassion and a desire to help others, who is versed in the Śruti texts (*Vedas*, *Upanishads*), and unattached to pleasures here and hereafter, knows the subject and is established in that knowledge. He is never a transgressor of the rules of conduct, devoid of weaknesses such as ostentation, pride, deceit, cunning, jugglery, jealousy, falsehood, egotism, and attachment. The teacher's sole aim is to help others and a desire to impart the knowledge.”⁴³

The Bengali Vaishnavist Jiva Goswami explained that, “The worthy Masters awaken the Divine power in themselves and transmit it to the worthy disciples in the form of mantras, thereby awakening their dormant Divine power. Hence, God is the real Master who initiates earnest aspirants through the medium of human Masters.... Initiation by a competent Master is of great spiritual help. The greatest Master is a presence pouring the Divine consciousness into all who are receptive around him.... A person who is desirous of knowing the nature of the supreme good should resort to a teacher, who is well versed in the *Vedas* and the other scriptures, who is devoted to God, and who has acquired tranquility by conquering passions.... Those who are rational should hear instructions from the adepts about the secrets of acquiring discursive knowledge of the supreme reality and integral experience of Brahman.”⁴⁴ Ideally the master should be a realized soul who has trodden the path of spiritual illumination, and is a vehicle through which the Lord speaks. The guru accepts the responsibility for the disciples (shishyas, chelas) religious life, initiates the pupil and gives them a mantra charged with spiritual potency, teaches the inner meaning of the sacred scriptures, imparts instructions in accord with the disciple's ability, works for the welfare of the disciple and guides

them to the final goal, awakens their latent inner potentiality by transmitting spiritual power to the disciple, and act as a mediator between Bhagavat (God) and the disciple which brings about their liberation. A spiritual guide should be served and venerated with humility, for the reason that they reveal the nature of the Lord and impart liberating knowledge to their disciples. If a guru is egotistical, and immoral they should be abandoned.⁴⁵

Sri Ramakrishna emphasized, “When a man becomes pure and perfect, the sweet influence of his character spreads everywhere, and all who seek the Truth are naturally drawn toward him. He need not go in search of an audience to listen to him.” Holy teachings come from Brahman-God through the words of a spiritual man. “If a white cloth is stained even with a small spot, the stain appears very ugly indeed. So the smallest fault of a holy man becomes painfully prominent.” “The guru is the mediator. He brings man and God together, even as a matchmaker brings together the lover and the beloved.”⁴⁶ “Better than reading about Benares is hearing about the place from the lips of one who has actually visited it; but the best is to see Benares with one’s own eyes.” A higher-level guru has an understanding of the specific inner nature of the disciple, in order to lead them along the prescribed path. “The teacher should judge the fitness of the student before giving him instruction” and the student should observe the guru to see whether they practice in word and deed what they teach. When the devotee is initiated, the guru willingly accepts responsibility for their sins.⁴⁷ The mind, “changes its nature according to the things amongst which it lives and acts.... By constantly living in the company of holy men, the soul becomes restless for God.” “To attain God a man must have favourable conditions: the company of holy men, discrimination, and the blessings of a real teacher” “First, the company of Holy Men. That awakens shraddha, faith in God.”⁴⁸

The following spiritual practice was stressed by Swami Shivananda, “As a result of association with the holy, one reaches the state of being freed from all worldly attachments. All wants and desires are then destroyed root and branch, and one feels the nearness of God.”⁴⁹ “Look here, the Lord Himself says that holy association is unique—without any parallel. On account of holy association, one attains the most covetable state of desirelessness. It destroys attachments at their very roots and brings one very close to God.... Holy company is so effective that it generates love of God. Who is genuinely holy? Only he in whose heart is installed the Lord. One is blessed with the company and grace of a truly holy man as a result

of good deeds performed in many lives. Holy association can change the course of one's entire life and bring about results that last for a very long time. We know it from our own experience.... One is bound to have one's spiritual impulses roused if one comes in contact with an illumined soul. How do we know whether a person has truly realized God or not? Herein is the test: the presence of a man of God will evoke spiritual thoughts and emotions.... Just as in approaching fire one feels the heat, in the same way one is filled with the thoughts of God by meeting a man of God."⁵⁰

Jewish Hasidism under the impetus of the Polish mystic prophet Baal Shem Tov (1700-60) emphasizes that a saintly individual known as a "zaddik" is the mediator between a spiritual aspirant and God. "The righteous man, or 'zaddik,' is one who has reached the ideal of communion in the highest degree, and therefore appears before God as 'one of His own.' The role of the zaddik is that of mediator between God and ordinary people. Through the zaddik salvation of the soul is achieved, and earthly blessings are obtained: it is merely necessary to believe in the power of this mediator and favorite of God, who has more or less influence in the 'higher spheres.'"⁵¹ The holy man, his thoughts constantly on God, raises the prayers of his followers and all their other thoughts. "Two assumptions are basic to Israel's doctrine of the zaddik: the recognition of the existence of superior individuals whose spiritual qualities are greater than those of other human beings and who are outstanding in their higher level of devekut [adhesion of the soul to God] ... In order to fulfill his destiny the zaddik must at the same time observe the mitzvah of devekut, and maintain contact with the material world through the circle surrounding him, even those who are counted among the sinners.... The task of the zaddik is to teach the people to worship God by means of devekut and to cause sinners to repent. The zaddik descends spiritually to the sinner, associates with him, and by his own ascent raises him and restores him to goodness, aiding him in purifying himself of his blemishes.... 'When the zaddik descends from his heights it is an expression of the quality of mercy, in order that he may associate with the masses and elevate them.'"⁵²

Ramakrishna's disciples included a Private Guru like Swami Turiyananda who excelled at teaching individual disciples and a Public Guru like Swami Abhedananda who was prominent when addressing large audiences.

Holy company is imperative, since most people have a wide variety of samskaras (mental impressions) of varying qualities and living in the right environment will awaken the auspicious characteristics.

Significant Others (or Other) are those people who have the greatest impact on an individual's life, self-evaluation, and on his acceptance or rejection of social norms. Expectations of significant others are often potent influences on the individual's own aspirations. The term was first mentioned by the American psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan (1892-1949) posthumously in 1953.⁵³

For more on this subject see: *Swami Vivekananda on Religious, Ethical, and Psychological Practices*, Ch. I. Yogic Practices, Meditation, and Prayer, Section 9. Be Instructed by a Teacher (Guru).

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²¹ Acharuparambil (1980), pp. 13-16.

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