

Priesthood in the Indian Religions

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1. Introduction

This article is an attempt to make a brief study of priesthood in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Hinduism may be considered the mother of all the religions of India; all other religions are in some way related to Hinduism. Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism were born as reactions against some unacceptable practices and customs in Hinduism.

2. Priesthood in General

In the study of religions, the terms *priest* and *priesthood* are used cross-culturally. In the strict sense of the term, two identifying factors are present in the description of a priest: (1) The priest performs a sacrificial ritual, usually at a fixed location such as an altar. (2) The priest does so as a specialist on behalf of a community.

Etymologically, the English word *priest* comes from the French word *prêtre* and ultimately from the Greek *presbutēs*. This Greek term, however, means "elder". Semantically, the main words whose meaning corresponds to "priest" are *hierreus* in Greek, *sacerdos* in Latin, and *kohen* in Hebrew.¹

¹Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Second Edition, Vol. XI. New York: Thomson Gale, 2005, p. 7394.

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2.1. Priesthood in Non-Western Religions

Priests in the West generally wear ceremonial robes while officiating and have distinctive clothing. Hence, the visitors from the West to Japan called the robed personnel of temples “priests,” whether Shinto or Buddhist. Priests in the Latin Catholic tradition are unmarried. Hence, the Western visitors to Sri Lanka, Thailand, etc. are inclined to refer to Buddhist monks as “priests”. Priests are inducted into their office through ordination; therefore, there is a tendency to consider ritually initiated specialists in divination, exorcism, healing, etc. of the tribal societies as priests. Priests deliver sermons and moral injunctions; hence, we find occasional references to the *‘ulamā’* or the religious scholars of Islam as priests, although they are neither ordained nor do they perform ritual sacrifice. We should also remember that traditional Islam is radically opposed to the idea of priesthood.

In the wider cross-cultural sense, therefore, a priest is any religious specialist acting ritually for or on behalf of a community. In other words, a priest is an intermediary set apart by a recognized induction into office and functioning on behalf of the community.²

2.2. Eligibility for Priesthood

Priests in various religious traditions may be divided into two groups: hereditary priesthoods and vocational priesthoods. In the case of hereditary priesthood, the priestly prerogatives and duties are the special heritage of particular family or tribal lineages. For example, the ancient Hebrew priesthood was reserved to the Levites, or the descendants of Levi. Similarly, Zoroastrianism, the national religion of pre-Islamic Iran, which today still claims a hundred thousand Iranian and Indian inherents, accept hereditary priesthood. The *Brahmin* class of Hinduism is another important example of hereditary priesthood. In the traditional Hindu caste system, the priests (*Brahmins*) are given the highest rank in terms of prestige and respect. Generally, priests in the hereditary priesthood will marry, so that the line may be perpetuated.³

In contrast to this, in the case of vocational priesthood, members are recruited from among the good young people in the community. It has the advantage of selectivity for devotional, intellectual and moral qualities. All branches of Christianity recruit the candidates for priesthood on a vocational basis. Celibacy could be demanded as a requirement for vocational priesthood, as do most of the rites

²Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 7394-95.

³Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 7395.

in the Roman Catholic Church. However, many vocational priesthoods permit marriage, such as those of the Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox and other Eastern Christian Churches, including several Eastern Catholic Churches.

In the vast majority of the world's religious traditions, eligibility for priesthood has been restricted to males. The Hindu, Buddhist, Zoroastrian and Christian traditions had until modern times exclusively male clergy. Judaism also restricted the rabbinate to males. However, in modern times, various branches of both Christianity and Judaism have begun to ordain women to serve as the ritual and spiritual leaders of the communities. Only in some primitive tribal traditions and some traditions of Shintoism and the religions of ancient Greece, Rome, etc., we find evidence of priestesses.

3. Hindu Priesthood

Hinduism is a religion with an elaborate system of rituals and ritualistic practices. Therefore, priesthood is an essential factor in Hinduism and the priests have to play an important role in the performance of the Vedic rituals. Hindu priesthood had its origins in the Vedic religion, in which the primary focus was on the rituals and sacrifices. Around the middle of the second millennium B.C., the Indo-Aryan society was apparently divided into a threefold hierarchy of social classes with religious as well as economic functions. The priestly class was considered the highest, then the warrior group and finally the ordinary people performing the pastoral, artisan and agricultural functions. The priestly group (*Brāhmin*) was divided into different groups, being responsible not only for the various cultic functions, but also for the composition and preservation of the sacred Scriptures.

3.1. Vedic Priesthood

During and after the period of the Ṛgveda, the importance of the role of the priest in the Vedic religion grew considerably. The initial verse of the Ṛgveda identifies *Agni*, the fire god, as divine priest and *hotr* or the invoking priest:

*OM! agnim île purohitam; Yajñasya devam rtvijam; Hotāram
ratnadhātāmam*

I magnify Agni, the Priest; The divine Minister of the
sacrifice;

The Offerer of oblation, supreme Giver of treasure.⁴

⁴*Rgveda* I. 1.1.

Here *Agni* is depicted as the mediator par excellence between God and man. The sacrificial fire carries the human offerings to the gods and brings back the divine gifts necessary for human beings. *Agni* has a priestly role and has a threefold function: divine, human and earthly. This verse contains in a nutshell the whole of man's primordial religiousness: praise, mediation and sacrifice.⁵

In the early Ṛgvedic period, the sacrifices were very simple; there was only one fire, the domestic fire and the householder himself was the *hotr* or the sacrificial priest. Later, the grand *Śrauta* sacrifices were developed: periodical and regular, occasional and special, such as *rājasuya*, *aśvamedha*, etc.⁶ These sacrifices required a multitude of priests. They were celebrated by the wealthy, the nobles, and especially the kings. In contrast to the domestic (*gḥya*) sacrifices, in these sacrifices the rich *yajamana* did very little himself; his chief duty was only the liberal payment of *dakciGa* to the officiating priests. During the Ṛgvedic period, there was the ceremony of "choosing and formally inviting the priests" (*Itvigi-varaGa*) by the sacrificer (*yajamāna*).

The duties of the four classes of priests were now clearly demarcated: (1) The *hotr* (the invoking priest) recites appropriate verses from *Ṛgveda* to invite and glorify the gods. This is done in preparation for the offering of *soma*. (2) The *udgātr*, the singing priest, has to be well-versed in the various permutations and combinations of the melodies (*sāmans*) and is to chant verses from the *Sāma Veda*. They are chanted at the *soma* sacrifices and were mainly addressed to Indra (the *soma*-drinker and the warrior-god), to *Soma*, and in a minor way to *Agni*. (3) The *adhvaryu* priests recite mantras from the *Yajurveda*. (4) *Brahman* is entrusted with the general supervision of the whole ritual. In addition to his preeminent priestly role, later he was also given an advisory role (*purohita*) in the royal court. The *purohita* in the Ṛgveda is known to have been employed by a king, a rich *kṣatriya* or *vaiaya*. The *purohita* (literally "placed in front") performed all the domestic rituals of the king's household. The *purohita* linked to a king could become a powerful state figure.⁷ The best example for this is *Kautilya*, the court *purohita* to Emperor Chandragupta Maurya (4th century B. C.), who is the author of the influential political treatise known as the *Arthasāstra*.

⁵Cf. Raimundo Panikar, *The Vedic Experience: Mantramāñjari*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass (reprint) 2001, p.36.

⁶These sacrifices required three fires: 1. *Gārhapatya* with a round altar 2. *Dakṣiṇa* with a semicircular altar 3. *Ahavanīya* with a square altar.

⁷Cf. S. Radhakrishnan, ed., *The Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol. II. Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1962, p. 467.

The *Zgveda* itself refers to eight priests: *Hotr*, *Potr*, *Neṣṭr*, *Agnidh*, *Praasaṣṭr*, *Adhvaryu*, *Udgatr* and *Brahman*. The *agnidh* serves as a kind of assistant to the *adhvaryu*. His duties are kindling the fire, keeping it burning, etc. The *praśaṣṭr* (also called *upavaktṛ*) functions as an assistant to the *hotr*, especially at the animal sacrifice, helping him to recite his verses properly.⁸

Gradually, there developed a system of schools (*śākhās*) to safeguard and transmit oral traditions, each linked to one of the Vedas. These schools, in course of time, produced a specialized and highly skilled priesthood that was eventually to be found throughout the Indian subcontinent. Gradually specific handbooks also were compiled for particular sacrificial rituals and *samskāras*.

During the Upaniṣādic period, there came a real transformation in the role of the priests; now he is clearly differentiated from the sacrificial or ritual priest. The sacrifice ceases to occupy the central place. The earlier Upaniṣads held aloof from the study of the Veda and the sacrifices. The Veda is said to be not the true means of knowledge. In the Chāndogya Upaniṣad VII. 1, Narada confesses that all his Vedic learning has not taught him the true nature of the Self. In VI. 1, Śvetaketu, despite his study of the veda for the prescribed period, came back conceited and not well instructed. We can find several Upaniṣādic passages, which make hostile references to the Vedic Sacrifices. In the place of the sacrifice and the study of the Vedas and performance of penance, they substitute knowledge as the all important thing.

The period of the Epics, *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, presents a more popular faith than which was concerned with the sacrificial ritual and the speculations arising out of it. Hence the priest of the sacrificial ritual is of less importance, while the *purohita* gains prominence. The priests of the Epics may be divided into two groups: the ordinary priests, whose life is spent in the simple surroundings in the performance of their normal functions; the spiritual advisers of the kings, who were also the spiritual instructors of the royal youth. This office was hereditary in the same way as the monarchy. As the guru and *purohita* of the king, very often the priest appeared to be very influential. Priests, as mediators between kings and gods, presented themselves as the gods on earth.

3.2. Hindu Priesthood from the Classical to the Modern Period⁹

By around 500 B.C., the Vedic sacrificial structure and its priesthood faced a kind of reaction or rebellion because of the

⁸Cf. Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. XI, p. 7405.

⁹Cf. Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. XI, p. 7406.

overemphasis on external rituals neglecting the true internal spirit and devotion. This came not only from the non-Vedic Buddhism and Jainism, but also from the Vedic Aranyaka, Upanisadic and Yogic traditions. Some altogether rejected the ritualistic sacrifice, while others gave less importance to the sacrifices and emphasized interiority and true devotion. The popular theistic movements promoted devotion (*bhakti*) and worship (*puja*) almost neglecting *yajña*, the Vedic sacrifice.

Gradually, the complicated *śrauta* rituals lost their importance, while the simple Vedic domestic ritual system (*grhya*) continued to be an essential factor in Hindu faith and practice together with its priesthood. Now the Brahmins are divided into two groups: Temple priests and *purohitas* related to the higher castes as *yajamanas* (patrons of sacrifices). Increasingly, Brahmin priests found themselves to be one category among specialists of the religious matters, as Hinduism gradually broadened its base to accommodate virtually every religious expression of the multicultural Subcontinent. Non-Brahmin religious specialists, who had been accorded neither prominence nor legitimation during the Vedic-Brahmanic period, began to gain more space in the Hindu religious matters.

By the early medieval period, the “priesthood” of Hinduism began to be divided into three groups, each with its own interior hierarchy: (1) A remnant of the Vedic Brahmins (*Vaidikas*), whose textual and ritual locus remained one or another Vedic School (2) A larger segment of the Brahmins, whose textual and ritual base was not the Vedas, but the Sanskrit Epics, Puranas and Agamas or their regional vernacular renderings (3) A far larger group of non-textual priests, uneducated but not unlearned, drawn largely but not exclusively from the lower castes and marginally Hindu tribal peoples, connected with a number of localized shrines and cult phenomena. They were more concerned with hero and goddess cults, spirit possession, exorcism, divination, healing, sorcery, astrology and so on. Traditional remote villages have priests practically for every caste and sub-caste.

The twentieth century Hindu priesthood retains many features of the past, including the hereditary Brahmin caste priesthood on the top of the social structure, although the prominence of the priestly class has been much reduced. The village or urban Brahmin or non-Brahmin *Purohita* may be called upon to recite *mantras* on special occasions, perform or advise on life-cycle rites, perform the ceremony for inaugurating a new house, provide horoscopes, sanction marital arrangements, advise on sickness, counteract the

evil forces, consecrate the images of the household shrine, and so on. In general, a *Purohita* (Hindu Priest) is accepted as the mediator between the human and divine worlds.¹⁰

4. Buddhist Priesthood

The English word "Priest" is frequently used by both Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike to refer to the Buddhist monks. It is a commonly accepted fact that this is more due to the Western Christian influence than to the Buddhist understanding of religious vocation:

For all practical purposes, ecclesiastical and social, the priesthood in Buddhism is coterminous with the order of monks (*Saṅgha*). Every ordained member of the *Saṅgha* is qualified to act as priest, and to perform those duties which in Buddhism may be considered to attach to the office. Of priestly function, however, in the narrower, more restricted sense of the term with which Western ecclesiastical history is familiar, Buddhism knows nothing. The monk or priest, in so far as he has obligations and duties towards the laity, is the servant of all, for their edification and conversion. His relation to them is that of a minister to their religious necessities, and a confidant and guide on all the critical occasions of life, as they on their side serve his temporal needs and provide him with the requisite minimum food and clothing. In neither of the great schools of the North and the South is there any suggestion of the thought that through a human intermediary man may or must approach unto God; and Buddhism has no order or ritual of sacrifice to require the services of an officiating priest with expert knowledge of the modes and significance of the rites.¹¹

In fact, Buddhist monks are more concerned with cultivating wisdom (*prajñā*), mental concentration (*samadhi*), and good conduct (*śīla*) in pursuit of personal spiritual perfection than with the performance of mediating ritual acts for the religious or material benefit of the laity. Moreover, a glance at the early Buddhist scriptures would make it clear to us that Buddhism was originally opposed to the performance of rituals as a means of spiritual advancement. In fact, Buddhism was born as a reaction against the exaggerated ritualism of the Brahmanic religion. In

¹⁰Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 7406.

¹¹James Hastings, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. X. Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, Third Impression, 1952, pp. 288-289.

Samyuttanikāya 4:218-220, Buddha ridicules the ritualistic practices of Brāhmin priests. In the Buddhist tradition, Buddhist monks (*Bhikkhus*) do not become involved in the relationship between devotees and their deities.

In every Buddhist tradition, holy men (*bhikkhus*) have been clearly associated with the cultivation of internal spiritual qualities than with the external ritualistic practices. The Sanskrit and Pali terms used to denote Buddhist holy men are respectively *bhikṣu* and *bhikhu*, which literally mean 'beggar' or 'mendicant', i.e., wandering monk, who lives on alms.¹²

4.1. Origin of Ministerial Aspects of Buddhist Priesthood

In early Buddhist literature, however, the Buddha is depicted as a compassionate teacher who foresaw the need for a priestly or ministerial dimension of Buddhist mendicancy. While this priestly dimension was not expressed through the clerical performance of rites, it is nevertheless evident in the Buddha's injunctions to "wander for the benefit of the many," to become a "field of merit" (*punyaḥṣetra*) for the laity, and to preach *dharma* (law, order, truth) to those seeking understanding. When these injunctions are understood in relation to the altruistic ethic of *dāna* (the perfection of giving) and the metaphysical centrality of *anātman* (non-self, selflessness), the basis for a mediating priestly role of service within the context of the Buddhist religious vocation becomes evident.¹³

The priestly dimension of the Buddhist religious vocation assumed greater degrees of importance and specificity as the tradition spread beyond India to East and Southeast Asia. In the process of acculturation, Buddhist holy men actually assumed many of the responsibilities and functions of ritual specialists indigenous to those areas... In both Theravada (Way of the Elders) and Mahayana (Great Vehicle) traditions, Buddhist holy men have become ritual specialists who serve the laity through popular ritual practices whenever specific needs arise. They also minister to the needs of the laity in non ritualized ways.¹⁴

Chinese religions, especially Confucianism, have been characterized from ancient times to the present by an exceedingly deep reverence

¹²Cf. Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol.XI, p. 7407.

¹³Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. XI, 7407.

¹⁴Ibid.

for ancestors. It is the duty of the living to remember and venerate their deceased forefathers. In the light of the fact that renunciation of social and family ties is incumbent upon Buddhist monks, Buddhism came under severe criticism from Chinese religious traditions. To mollify Chinese criticism, Buddhists consciously popularized the legendary narration that the Buddha assured Maudgalyāyana, one of his closest disciples that his departed mother could be saved, if a community of monks would come together and pray for her soul. This legend became the basis for the widespread practice of Buddhist monks praying for the dead of their lay supporters.¹⁵

In Japan, the chanting of Scriptures on behalf of the dead is one of the very important responsibilities of the Buddhist monks. Thus Buddhist monks share the priestly duties regarding the primary rites for the salvation of the dead with Shinto priests, who are generally called upon to officiate at birth or naming ceremonies and weddings. Thus it is apparent that Buddhist clerics share a complementary role with priests of other religious traditions. In Japan, the ritual responsibility of caring for the dead fell to Buddhist clerics, while their Shinto counterparts ritually assist the living during occasions of ceremonies at the important moments of their life.

The ritual care of the dead forms an important part of the priestly role of Buddhist monks also in the Theravāda countries like Burma, Thailand and Sri Lanka. Following the death of a family member, families assemble for commemoration rites on the seventh day, after three months, and after one year. On these occasions, monks are invited by the family to receive alms, to preach or to chant sacred scriptures. The Karmic merit derived from these religious acts is then transferred to the departed. The subsequent anniversary dates of family deaths also are annually commemorated in the same manner.

The basic reason for the continued care of the departed is rooted in the concept of karmic retribution and rebirth. The ultimate path to *nirvāṇa* is one that spans many lifetimes, and it is the obligation of the family members to assist their departed kin in progressing to this ultimate goal. The specific role of the Buddhist monk in these rites is crucial. On the one hand, his presence constitutes a worthy object for the performance of meritorious actions, because he symbolizes the virtues of the Buddha, the *dharma* (the teachings of the Buddha) and the *saṅgha* (the community of the followers of the Buddha). On the other hand, his sermons invariably focus on

¹⁵Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 7408.

the central reality for Buddhists that all conditioned life in *samsara* (repeated cycles of birth, suffering and death) is transitory. Hence, man's goal in this life should be to attain *nirvāṇa*. It is the monk's calling to make known this message.¹⁶

Another important priestly role of the Theravāda Buddhist monks is the performance of *paritta*, the chanting of selected Buddhist *suttas* (*sutras*) in Pali, which when recited are believed to be infused with special sacred protective power. The chanting of these *suttas* usually lasts the duration of a night, but in some cases may last for as long as a week or a month, depending upon specific purpose. The chanting is performed by a number of monks seated under a *mandapa*, specially constructed canopy. *Paritta* may be performed on any occasion that signifies a new beginning or that needs to be considered auspicious. Of all the priestly roles performed by the Buddhist monks, the chanting *paritta* best epitomizes sacerdotal responsibilities, for it is within this ritual context that the monk most significantly performs the task of mediating sacred power for the benefit of the faithful.¹⁷

One ritual of the *śrāmaṇic* origin showed in a special way the close bond between the religious order and the laity. The *bhikṣu* (monk) was expected to receive his sustenance from the charity (*dāna*) of pious laity. The monks would walk around the villages every morning to collect alms. By giving gifts to the monks, the lay person would obtain merit (*punya*) necessary to be reborn in a state more favourable for spiritual or material progress.

In the earlier Buddhism, in the coenobitic life of the monks there was no room for explicit acts of devotion. The monk's religion was limited to a life of solitude, asceticism and meditation. With the institutionalization of Buddhism, however, there originated new forms of lay and monastic practice. The monastic brotherhood gradually began to play a priestly role in the Buddhist community.¹⁸

¹⁶Cf. Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religions*, Vol. XI. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987, p. 543. Also Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. XI, p. 7408.

¹⁷Cf. Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religions*, Vol. XI, p. 543. Also Lindsay Jones, *ibid.*

¹⁸Cf. Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. II, p. 1107: One important non-ascetic ritual was the worship of the relics of the Buddha and his immediate disciples. The relics were placed in a casket, which was then deposited in a cairn or tumulus (*stupa*, *caitya*), to which the faithful would come to present their offerings. Another important practice was that of pilgrimage to the sacred sites sanctified by their relationship to the life of Śākyamuni, especially his birth place, the site of the Great Awakening, the site of the First Sermon, and the spot where the Buddha was believed to have died. Tumuli were built on the sites as commemorative monuments. Monasteries near such sites assumed the role the caretakers of the shrines.

4.2. Buddhist Priests and the Laity

Buddhist monks have also traditionally filled the roles of spiritual advisers and teachers of the laity. In ancient times eminent monks were selected by the royalty to educate the elite youth. It is also not uncommon for both monks and nuns to counsel laity regarding personal or family problems. The community of monks is considered as a place of spiritual refuge for the laity.

Modernization and the influence of other religious traditions, especially of Christianity have affected the Buddhist idea of priesthood in significant ways. The communities of monks, for example, engage themselves in social services in Theravāda countries like Thailand, Sri Lanka, etc. In Japan, weekend meditation retreats are offered by monks as therapeutically beneficial for people, who are supposed to be under stress and strain in the high-intensity pace of the Japanese life-style. Practically in all Buddhist countries, temples and monasteries organize pilgrimages to famous historical sacred places and shrines.¹⁹

It is also to be noted that of late many trained Buddhist laymen and laywomen have assumed professional priestly vocations. These lay priests and priestesses, however, do not see themselves in competition with the priestly work of Buddhist monks. Rather, their ritual transactions are seen as complementary to the work of monks. It is generally accepted that the efficacy of the lay priests and priestesses in their intermediary role between the human and divine depends on the living of a pure moral life.²⁰

5. Priesthood in Jainism

Jainism is a very ancient form of non-vedic religion. In all probability, it arose in the later Vedic period. According to the Jainist tradition, Vardhamana, called Mahavira (the great spiritual hero) was the last in a series of *Tīrthamkaras* (ford-makers).²¹ It is believed that twenty-three *Tīrthamkaras* preceded him. Jainists consider Mahavira to be the reformer and reviver of their religious tradition and not its founder.²²

¹⁹Cf. Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religions*, Vol. XI, p. 544.

²⁰Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. XI, p. 7409.

²¹*Tīrthamkaras* (ford-makers) - this term refers to the twenty-four *Tīrthamkaras* (Prophets) of Jainism. They have already crossed the ocean of *Samsāra* and they are the ones who help others to cross the ocean of *Samsāra*. Hence they are called ford-makers.

²²The word Jainism is derived from '*jina*', from the Sanskrit root '*ji*' = to conquer. '*Jina*' would then mean 'the conqueror' i.e., the one who has conquered his passions, his own self and the world. Jainism- thus means the religion of the followers of *Jina*. This is an epithet usually given to Vardhamana Mahavira. He is believed to have lived in the 6th Cent. B.C. He was almost a contemporary of Buddha. The Jains themselves think that their religion is eternal and is revealed again and again generations after generations (*yugas*).

5.1. Religious Practices

All Jains are members of the four-fold congregation: monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen. They share a common belief in the *triratna* (three Jewels): *Samyagdarsana* (right faith), *Samyagjñāna* (right knowledge) and *Samyagcarita* (right conduct). The Jain monk / nun is expected to live a life of *nirgrantha*, "free from bonds" both external and internal. The monks and nuns take the five great vows (*mahavratas*):

1. *Ahimsa* - not to injure any living being. The doctrine of *ahimsa* is no doubt very vital in India. But the way in which it has been made to pervade the whole code of conduct is peculiarly *Jain*. Here injury is understood as comprehending injuring by thought, word or deed.
2. *Satya* - Truthfulness
3. *Asteya* - Not to Steal
4. *Brahmacarya* - To lead a celibate life
5. *Aparigraha* - To renounce the world

In the case of the laity, they are the same except that the last one is replaced by the vow of contentment, i.e., to be satisfied with the minimum. The precepts for the ascetics (*Sramaṇa* = Monks) are more severe, therefore they are called the *mahavratas*; the vows for the lay men (*Sravaka*) are less severe and are called *anuvratas*.

5.2. Ascetic Life in Jainism

The Jain monks (ascetics) are considered the true representatives of Jain values. From the earliest time onwards there existed also the order of nuns in Jainism. However, the Jain nuns have always been given only a subordinate position to the monks.²³

In order to enter the Jain ascetic community, the novice (male or female) undergoes a preliminary initiatory period during which key texts are memorized and the implications of ascetic life conveyed. In the formal ceremony of initiation, the presiding senior monk gives the novice, as tokens of entry into a transformed pattern of life, a new name and various implements: *Śvetambaras* - a pair of robes, an alms bowl, a whisk symbolizing non-violence, a staff and a mouth-shield. *Digambaras*, who must henceforth go naked,

²³The most important words used to designate the monks are: *Nirgrantha* (the bondless), *Muni* (the silent one), *Sadhu* (the pious), *Bhikṣu* (mendicant). The nuns are called *Nirgranthi*, *Bhikṣuṇī* or *Sādhvī*. Some disputes appear to have arisen among the monks at the end of the 4th Cent. B. C. Finally, in 7 A.D., the community of monks split into two main groups: the *Digambaras*, ("the sky-clad" and thus naked), and the *Śvetāmbaras* ("the white-clad").

is given only a whisk and a water pot for cleaning himself after evacuating bodily wastes. In ancient times, the novice used to pluck out his hair as a sign of extreme renunciation. However, the general custom today is to shave the head. Thereafter, the ascetic will be considered a member of a lineage which traces its teacher-pupil relationship back to Mahāvīra, in the case of the Digambaras and to his disciple Sudharman, in the case of the Śvetāmbaras.

Right religious conduct is minutely defined, giving rules for habitation and wandering, begging, study, confession and penances. During the four months of the rainy season, the religious groups remain in one locality; now a days fixed places of shelter (*upāśrayas*) are prepared for them, often near a temple. The householders visit them there to ask for advice and listen to their teachings. During the rest of the year, the monks and nuns wander from place to place. Day and night are divided into four equal parts (*pauruṣis*) with prescribed duties: the first and the fourth *pauruṣis* of both day and night are reserved for study; the second of both day and night for meditation; the third of the night for sleep, and the third of the day for alms-begging. The begging tour is very important in a community, where the members have no possessions at all. Both the monks and lay people are obliged to be strictly vegetarian. There are also stringent directives regarding the quantity and frequency of the meals to be taken. Begging and fasting must be conducted with great care. Confession (*ālocana*) and repentance (*pratikramaṇa*) also form an essential part of the regular life of the monks and nuns. They are to take place at regular intervals, at least once a fortnight.

In the community of monks and nuns, age and hierarchy play an important role. Elders look to the material and spiritual welfare of the community; the *Upadhyaṃya* is a specialist in teaching the scriptures; the *Ācārya* acts as spiritual master.²⁴

The ideal ending to life for the Jain ascetic is the freely undertaken fast unto death. This is understood as the highest means to purify oneself of all the “negative factors”. This supreme and ritualized act of austerity is to be performed only by advanced practitioners. This involves progressive withdrawal from food and drink, which in turn culminates in death in a state of pious awareness. Such a heroic end will invariably ensure a positive rebirth.

5.3. Role of Priests in Jainism

In Jainism, there is no officially accepted priesthood in contrast to Christianity and Hinduism. The Jainists do not also attribute any

²⁴Cf. Mircea Eliade, Ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religions*, Vol. VII. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987, p. 509.

priestly role to their monks. Nor do the Ascetics assume for themselves any priestly function in the proper sense of the term. The only service they render to the laity is that of giving them advice in their needs and also giving them discourses in religious matters.

6. Priesthood in Sikhism

The word *Sikh* means disciple or student; it is a derivative of the Sanskrit word *śiṣya*. Sikhism is traced to the person and ideology of Guru Nānak, who was born in Punjab in 1469. At the age of twenty-nine, Guru Nānak had a special religious experience. Then he wandered far and wide in India spreading the message of the oneness of the Ultimate Reality and the consequent unity of humanity.

Sevā, voluntary service, was for Nānak an essential condition for moral discipline. Through service to their community, *Sikh* believers cultivate humility, overcome egoism, and purify their body and mind. *Sevā* could be in the form of attending to the Holy Book, sweeping and cleaning Sikh shrines, or preparing and serving food. It also includes helping the larger community by building schools, hospitals, orphanages and charity homes. *Langar* is both the community meal and the kitchen in which it is prepared. *Langar* testifies to the social equality and family-hood of all people.²⁵

6.1. The *Guru Granth*

Guru Arjan, the fifth of the ten Gurus, with the help of a scribe, compiled the *Guru Granth* in 1604. He gathered together the passionate expressions of the Sikh *Gurus*, Hindu *Bhaktas* and Muslim Saints. Guru Arjan did not accept the boundaries between Sikh, Hindu or Muslim. According to him, the spiritual language was common to all. Whatever was in tune with the spiritual vision of the founding *Guru*, was included in the *Granth*. In a divided world of religions, in which God was either *Rām* or *Rahim*, the worship was either *namaz* or *puja*, the place of worship *mandir* or *masjit*, Guru Arjan brought together voices that expressed a common spiritual quest. His firm conviction was that the knowledge of the Transcendent was not attained either through servitude to a god of the Hindu pantheon or through the worship of *Allah*, but through an active recognition of and participation in the divine will.²⁶ Today the Sikhs firmly believe that the Holy Guru Granth Sahib is the perpetual Guru and that in their religion there is no place for a human Guru.

²⁵Cf. Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. XII, p. 8393.

²⁶Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 8394.

6.2. Worship²⁷

Reading the sacred verses from the *Guru Granth*, hearing them, singing them, or sitting silently in the presence of the *Guru Granth* is the core of the Sikh ritual. The Sikhs take care to have a room in their homes enshrining the *Guru Granth*. Both at home and in public places of worship, the *Guru Granth* is treated with the highest respect and veneration. Sikhs everywhere bow before the *Guru Granth* and in its presence seat themselves on the floor. They remove their shoes and cover their heads in the presence of their holy book. The *Guru Granth* is opened at dawn. The act of opening of the Holy Book is called *prakāś*, "making the light manifest". At dusk, the *Guru Granth* is closed. The closing ritual is called *sukhāsan*, "to place at rest."

The *Guru Granth* is read for all rites and family celebrations (a new house, a new job, an engagement); for all occasions of difficulty (sickness, death, etc.).

6.3. Rites of Passage

In Sikhism, there are four rites of Passage: name giving, amṛt initiation, marriage and death. For all Sikh rites of passage, recitation of *kirtans* (hymns of praise), readings from the *Guru Granth*, recitation of *ardas* (daily prayers) and the partaking of the *langar* are the central activities.²⁸

6.3.1. Name Giving

Sikh children are named in consultation with the Holy Book. While the book rests on the cushions, a reader or a family member holds the *Guru Granth* closed with both hands and then gently lets it open at random. The child is given a name that begins with the first letter appearing at the top of the left-hand page. The child receives also his or her first *kara* or steel bracelet.

6.3.2. Amṛt Initiation

No particular age is fixed for this ritual. It may be as soon as a boy or a girl is old enough to read the scripture and comprehend the articles of Sikh faith. The initiation is open to all, irrespective of sex, nationality, race, social standing or caste, if only he or she is prepared to accept the rules governing the Sikh community.²⁹

²⁷Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 8396

²⁸Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 8397.

²⁹It is performed according to the pattern established by Guru Gobind Singh on *Baisākhī* 1699. There is a firm tradition among the Sikhs that during the *Baisākhī* (the first day of the Indian New Year) festivities in Anandpur that year, the Guru and his wife prepared *amṛt* and five men from different castes sipped it from the same bowl. The drink purified them of all mental constraints, ending centuries of hereditary oppressions of caste, class and profession.

6.3.3. Marriage

Anand Karaj (joyous event) is the Sikh rite of marriage. No words or gestures are directly exchanged between the bride and the bridegroom. No legal formalities are fulfilled between their families. The wedding takes place either in a *gurdwara* or in the home of the bride, with everyone seated on the floor in front of the *Guru Granth*. The ceremony begins with the father of the bride giving one end of a long scarf to the bridegroom and the other end to the bride. Through the auspiciously coloured scarf (pink, saffron or red) the couple is bonded together. Holding the scarf, the couple then walk around the holy book four times. The four circumambulations are accompanied by readings from the *Guru Granth* by a reader. After each circling of the Scripture, the bride and the groom touch their foreheads to the ground and then rejoin the congregation by seating themselves on the floor in front. Bowing together to the *Guru Granth* symbolizes their acceptance of each other. They are solely and equally bound to the sacred word rather than to any legal or social authority.

6.3.4. Death

Life and death are regarded as natural processes. Just as each day that dawns must set, so must all people depart. The dead body is carried on a stretcher by the closest male relatives and friends of the family to the funeral ground, where it is cremated. As it is customary, the oldest son lights the pyre. The body returns to the ultimate elements: the fire of the person merges with the crematory flames, the breath with the air, and the physical body with the earth. Finally, the ashes and bones of the person are immersed in the flowing waters of a river or a stream. As in the case of any other ritual, the funeral rituals also are accompanied by the reading of the *Guru Granth*. A ceremony takes place on the tenth day with prayers recited for the peace of the deceased. At the death anniversary, the family organizes a *langar* for the community.³⁰

6.4. Attitude of Sikhism towards Priesthood

Sikhism does not have priests, because one of the main reasons for the origin of Sikhism was the protest against the Brahmin domination and caste system. Guru Nanak's teachings were, in fact, directed against the pretensions of the priestly class. Sikhs only have custodians of the *Guru Granth Sahib* (*Granthi*). Any Sikh, male or female, who can read *Gurmukhi* script, may read the *Guru Granth* in the *Gurdwara* or in their home.

³⁰Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 8397.

7. Priesthood in Christianity and the Indian Religions

The thrust of this essay is not to make a detailed comparative study between Christian Priesthood and the priesthood in Indian religions. When we look from outside, the first impression we may get is that Hindu Priesthood has characteristics, which are very different from those of the Christian priesthood. However, when we make a closer look at this issue, it will become clear to us that, although there are important differences, there are also certain important similarities between the two concepts of priesthood. The most crucial difference between the Christian Priesthood and the Hindu Priesthood is that the Priesthood in Hinduism is hereditary. Hence, celibacy is not required of a Hindu priest, as in the case of priests belonging to some rites of the Catholic Church. Although priesthood played a very key role in Hinduism from its earliest period, it is not so organized and regulated as in Christianity.

All the important moments in the life of a Hindu is to be sanctified by religious rituals, which are called *Samiskāras*, as we have Sacraments in Christianity. The initiation ceremony is very important in the life of a Hindu. This is the official introduction of an individual into Hinduism, during which the sacred thread is given to the male members of the three higher castes. Through this ritual the person becomes the "twice born", the first birth being the physical birth. The second birth is believed to be the spiritual birth. This *samiskāra* may be compared to our sacrament of Baptism, which is a new spiritual birth into the Church through the grace of Christ. For both the services of a priestly minister is required. At the time of marriage, funeral, death anniversary, etc. solemn *samiskāras* are to be performed in Hinduism, all of which require the services of a trained priest. We know that the situation is the same in Christianity also. Trained and ordained ministers are necessary for administering all our sacraments. In both Christianity and Hinduism ordinary believers may obtain the services of priests offering gifts to the invited priest. In both the religions, people approach the priests for advice and guidance on important matters of life. Finally, in both religions priests are seen as official mediators between the divine and the human worlds.

Buddhism and Jainism do not have the office of officially trained and instituted priests. However, in both religions, monks and nuns are held in high esteem and accorded great respect. In course of time, could be due to the influence of other religions, Buddhist monks assumed the role and functions of the cultic priests. This situation is comparable to the role of religious priests in Christianity, especially in the Catholic Church. In Jainism, however, the monks

remained mostly in their original spirit. They are mainly engaged in their pursuit of spiritual perfection through rigorous asceticism and other prescribed religious practices.

The situation in Sikhism is in a way unique. From the beginning they were negative in their attitude towards cultic priests and till today they remained the same. For the Sikhs, the only religious practice they have is reading from the *Guru Granth* on all important occasions like naming ceremony, marriage, funeral, etc. And any member of the Sikh Community, male or female, may do this. Hence, we may say that Sikhism has only a kind of universal priesthood. This is in full agreement with the special emphasis of Guru Nānak on the universal brotherhood and sisterhood of all human beings. Here we could very well recollect the fact that Christian tradition also emphasizes the universal priesthood of all the baptized. "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people..." (I Peter 2:9).

From our study it is clear that Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism have very different ideas regarding priesthood and the role of priests in their respective religions. Hinduism is a religion of gods, goddesses, temples, rituals and many ceremonies and celebrations. Therefore, priests have a very vital role to play in the life of the ordinary Hindus. Because of the complicated rituals and ceremonies, which Hindus have to perform in their personal and social life on different occasions, they need specially trained priests.

Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism all originated as reactions against some negative factors in Hinduism, especially the exaggerated ritualism and the domination of the priestly class. Therefore, none of these religions has priests in the strict sense of the term, nor do they have specialists to perform rituals and to play the role of mediators between the human and divine worlds.