

BAPTISM AND HOLY COMMUNION: An Analytical Study

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The striking contrast or remarkable similarity found amongst the various religions undoubtedly intrigues me and compelled me to write about them in an enlightening way. Christianity is the most widespread religion around the world and the foundations of this religion are its sacraments. In Christian teaching, a sacrament is both a means of obtaining a spiritual blessing and an outward sign of an inward reality. There are a total of seven sacraments namely; Baptism, Eucharist, Confirmation, Marriage, Holy Orders, Confession and Extreme Unction. Although all seven of these are of supreme significance but Baptism and Eucharist hold an exalted position because Christians belonging from every denomination see them as a necessary step to attain the true spirit of belief in God and Jesus. This article is based on these two sacraments and in it I have defined and explained them in an elaborate way and written their importance in the light of New Testament, a range of renowned Christian authors' books and also a bit of my experience. Baptism marks the start of life as a Christian; it involves being immersed completely in water or being sprinkled with water. It is a sign of death and resurrection as well as cleansing from sins. Christians celebrate Eucharist in remembrance of Jesus' death and resurrection by sharing bread and wine. Jesus, at his last meal with his disciples, broke bread among them saying "Take, eat, this is my body which is given to you. Do this in remembrance of me." Then he passed around a cup of wine saying "Whenever you drink, do so in remembrance of me." Christians have ever since shared bread and wine in remembrance of Jesus' death and resurrection. These two sacraments are the binding and uniting force of the Christians worldwide.

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Christianity is the monotheistic religion centered on the life and teachings of Jesus. Followers of Christianity, that is, Christians, believe in His virgin birth, in His sinless life, in His miracles, in His vicarious and atoning death, in His bodily resurrection, in His ascension to the right hand of the Father, in His personal, future return to this earth in power and glory to rule a thousand years. It is the most widespread religion of the world and has about 2.1 billion followers.

The Christianity religion has been a powerful cultural force and historical influence. And I have had an opportunity to witness their rich cultural, religious and holy norms and rituals as a comparative religion researcher. Two years back I was awarded the post doctoral research scholarship which took me to the United States of America. I reached there on the 2006 Advent Sunday (the Sunday before the Christmas) and stayed there for whole next year. Prior to this stay in America, my expertise on the religion of Christianity was only limited to books and research but this time I practically visited churches of various denominations and different Christian communities. This enlightened me to a great extent about the rites, sacraments, festivals and celebrations of Christians. These customs were certainly very interesting to observe and had an attention grabbing factor attached to them. This article is based on my experiences and research conducted on the sacraments but I will confine myself to the two most significant and the staunchly practiced sacraments only.

As cited in World Religions Today, "The seven sacraments (Baptism, Eucharist, Confirmation, Marriage, Holy Orders,

Confession and Extreme Unction) which developed by the late Middle Ages, provided ritual assistance to the Christian at every stage of life from birth to death. The concept of 'sacrament' has its roots in the Greek word for 'mystery'. The sacraments of Christianity, by uniting humans to God and eternal life, were said to guarantee salvation from sin and death. These sacraments are taken to be the outward and visible signs of God's inward, invisible grace (forgiveness and assistance), helping Christians grow spiritually and morally toward holiness or saintliness. A revolution came with the coming of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century when only Baptism and Eucharist retained the status of sacraments. The other five rituals were rejected on the ground that they could not be found as such in the New Testament. However, many of these 'rejected' practices are observed in some Protestant denominations as rituals but not sacraments in the full sense." (1)

While my stay at America for research, I kept a keen look on the everyday lives of the Christians and found that whatever the sect or creed of the followers of Christianity or the extent of liberalism in the thoughts and actions, Baptism and Eucharist were duly practiced though in a variety of forms. Similarly, during my residing in India, where Christians exist as a minority, these two sacraments were the most unwaveringly followed. Moreover, even in our country the same pattern is seen to be pursued.

Thus it can be clearly seen that 'Baptism' and 'Holy Communion' are two sacraments that are almost universal in

Christianity in some form since they are recorded in the Gospels as acts of Jesus.

The word baptism comes from the Greek *baptein* which literally means to plunge, to immerse, to dip, or to wash. So the religious ritual which included the immersion in water came to be known as baptism.

In the catechism of the Catholic Church, it is stated, “Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life and the gateway to life in the spirit and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the church and made sharers in her mission: ‘Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the world.’”(2)

“The early Christians followed the Jewish practice of ritual immersion for new converts in which the person’s whole body was submerged in a river, lake, or special pool. For Christians, however, full submersion was seen as participation in Christ’s death in the tomb; the emergence of the body from the water was equated with Christ’s resurrection and departure from the tomb. The submersion was accompanied by the words, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, the son, and the Holy Spirit.” (3)

A Christian baptism is administered in one of the following forms, performing the action once or thrice.

- **Aspersion:** The sprinkling of water on the head.
- **Affusion:** The pouring of water over the head.
- **Immersion:** A method of baptism employed at least from the second century, whereby part of the candidate's body is

submerged in the baptismal water which is poured over the remainder

- Submersion: Submersion (also called "total immersion" or, loosely, "immersion") is the form of baptism in which the water completely covers the candidate's body.

The New Testament on various points states baptism being an integral part of Christianity and along with it, its significance.

“The Sacrament of Holy Baptism was instituted by Our Lord after His resurrection, when He appeared to His disciples and said, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” (4)

In the New Testament after Jesus gave the command about baptism, every example of a conversion specifically mentions baptism. None of these converts ate, drank, slept, or continued their journey until they were baptized. It was always immediate.

“The necessity of this baptism was further stressed by the Savior when He said to them, He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.”(5)

“The Savior commanded His disciples to teach the Faith and to baptize all nations.” (6)

“Shall we persist in sin..? No, no! We died to sin: how can we live in it any longer? Have you forgotten that when we were baptized into union with Christ Jesus we were baptized into his death? By baptism we were buried with him, and lay dead, in order that, as Christ was raised from the dead in the splendor of the Father so also we might set our feet upon the new path of life. For if we have become incorporate with him in a death like his, we shall also be one with him in a resurrection like his.” (7)

T. Patrick Burky in his book, *The Major Religions*, explains baptism in relation to Christianity religion in such words, “To become a Christian is to participate in Jesus’s death, resurrection, and eternal life. Through baptism, we share in Christ’s life, which overcomes both the spiritual death of sin, and also the physical death of the body.” (8)

The baptism can take place in the age of infancy or upon reaching adolescence. Basically this decision bases upon the basis of which denomination of Christianity one belongs to.

Quoted from *Religions of the World*, “In some traditions babies are babies are baptized as a sign of belonging to God; in others, adults are baptized only when old enough to make their own choice. Being dipped in water and raised out of it is a sign of death and resurrection as well as cleansing from sin.” (9)

Michael Molloy states in his book, *Experiencing the World’s religions*, “Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and the more ceremonial forms of Protestantism practice infant baptism. Other forms of Protestantism insist that the ritual should be done only as

a voluntary sign of initiation, and, as such, baptism should be reserved for adults only.” (10)

Now the question arises as to who can be baptized, by whom, and what is the right way to do so. There has been a long debate on this topic since a very long time and a division has occurred between the followers in the practicing pattern.

Donald G. Bloesch throws light on this issue in his book such words, “There is no Biblical specification as to who baptizes whom.” (11)

“After Peter and the other eleven Apostles finished speaking to the crowds on the day of Pentecost, they baptized a large number of people. Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. “(12)

“The baptism of a believer should be done ‘in the name of Jesus’ only.” (13)

Andrew Das in his book *Baptism in New Testament* states, “The ordinary ministers of Baptism are the bishop and priest. But long as that scriptural mandate is followed, then there is apparently no other Biblical instruction as to how the baptizing is to be done or who does it. In case of necessity, anyone, even a non-baptized person, with the required intention, can baptize but the intention

required is the will to do what the church does when it baptizes.”
(14)

Now moving on to the other most consecrated sacrament, Eucharist also called as Holy Communion or Lord’s Supper.

Ignazio Silone in his distinguished book ‘Bread and Wine’ states, “The biblical foundation for Holy Communion is what Christ Himself did at the last supper. It is generally considered to be a commemoration of the Last Supper, the final meal that Jesus Christ shared with his disciples before his arrest and eventual crucifixion. The consecration of bread and a cup within the rite recalls the moment at the Last Supper when Jesus gave his disciples bread, saying, "This is my body", and wine, saying, "This is my blood.”(15)

“In the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread, and gave thanks; broke it, and gave to his disciples, saying: Take and eat, this is my body given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.”(16)

“Again after supper, he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it for all to drink, saying: This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. Do this for the remembrance of me.” (17)

“On Christ’s own promise, Holy Communion is a pledge of heavenly glory and of our bodily resurrection from the dead.” (18)
The core rationale behind this sacrament is;

“By eating the bread and drinking the wine consecrated by a priest or minister who represents Jesus, Christians believe they are partaking of the body and blood of Jesus (for some literally, for others spiritually) who died for their sins on the cross and brought them to eternal life.”(19)

This shows that Christians see Holy Communion as a sharing in the blessings gained by Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. Furthermore, any act of self-giving is a sacrifice, and, as Christians believe that Christ gave himself to humankind in the communion so this rite is practiced by them to celebrate and commemorate this memorable event.

“A Eucharistic service generally has the following elements:

- Confession of sins- this is to obtain forgiveness from God
- Bible readings and sermon
- Creed- a statement of faith to say what Christians state what they believe
- The offertory- where the bread and wine are brought to the altar
- Blessings of bread and wine- a retelling of the last supper where the bread and wine are blessed and the words of Jesus at the last supper ‘this is my body’ (bread) and ‘this is my blood’ (wine) are repeated by the minister/priest.
- The communion- this is where the congregation receive bread and (sometimes) wine.” (20)

The feasting constituting the Eucharist is actually thought to be spiritual nourishment coming literally from the bread and wine presented. Huston Smith writes,

“This personal presence of God in the elements of communion distinguishes it significantly from the other sacraments, but it does not vitiate the common bond that unites them all. Each is a means by which God, through Christ’s mystical body, literally infuses into human souls, the super natural power that enables them so to live in this world that in the world to come they may have life everlasting.”(21)

There are differences in emphasis between Christian denominations in respect of the Eucharist.

“For Roman Catholics the Eucharistic service, known as the mass, is the very center of their worship, and member of the Roman Catholic Church are obliged to take communion at least once a year. Active Roman Catholics take it weekly or even daily. Daily communion is less common in other denominations, but weekly communion is known in the Anglican and several other churches.” (22)

The sacrament of Eucharist is not only a religious obligation or a custom which is to be necessarily followed rather it serves many other spiritual purposes.

Saint Irenaus simply declared that,

“When our bodies partake of the Eucharist, they are no longer corruptible as they have the hope of eternal resurrection.” (23)

Saint Cyril of Jerusalem said,

“The reception of the Eucharist makes the Christian a ‘Christ bearer’ and ‘one body and one blood with Him.’” (24)

The church officially teaches that,

“Every effect which bodily food and bodily drink produce in our corporeal life, by preserving this life, increasing this life,

healing this life, and satisfying this life- is also produced by this Sacrament in the spiritual life.” (25)

“Holy Communion/ Eucharist cure the spiritual diseases of the soul by cleansing it of venial sins and the temporal punishment due to sin. No less than serving as an antidote to protect the soul from mortal sins. It preserves the supernatural life of the soul by giving the communicant supernatural strength to resist temptation, and by weakening the power of concupiscence.” (26)

“The sacrament of Communion gives us a spiritual joy in the service of our Lord, in defending his cause, in performing the duties of our state of life, and in making the sacrifices required of us in imitating the life of our Savior.” (27)

“One notable thing is that only the baptized people are capable of the effects of the sacrament of Eucharist. Moreover, the doctrine of the Church is that Holy Communion is morally necessary for salvation, that is to say, without the graces of this sacrament it would be very difficult to resist grave temptations and avoid grievous sin.” (28)

“According to theologians, there is a divine percept by which all are bound to receive communion at least some times during life.”(29)

And the most important aspect that ties the Christians tightly with the Eucharist is the bond formation between the believer and God. As Boylan says,

“As Boylan says, "All love demands union; the more ardent the love, the more complete the union it seeks. The love of our Lord for us is no exception. It is through the operation of the

Eucharist that He brings us to union with Himself, and it is through the Eucharist that He communicates to us His Divine Life, His Divine nature.” (30)

Now I would like to add in my sheer experience too. During some research work, I had a chance of conversation with a native Christian woman so interrogated her about these two sacraments. While she answered me, her eyes shone brightly and told me in an earnest tone that after getting baptized, it seemed like your whole being has achieved tranquility and the same goes for communion, once you have gone through the ritual of Eucharist, eternal peace, contentment and pleasure captures you physically and mentally.

Conclusively, the Holy Baptism and Eucharist constitute the foundation of unity among the Christians all around the world, enabling them to believe in God, hope in Him and to love Him through theological virtues, allowing them to grow in goodness and to affirm their belief in Jesus steadfastly.

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