

Action

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Many individuals perform actions that could be considered to have some sort of religious or spiritual significance. More common, however, are collective sacred actions or rituals performed by the larger religious community. Action in the context of religion and religious traditions has many functions. In some cases, it is even believed to contribute to maintaining the cosmic order and balance of the cosmos, perhaps preventing the forces of chaos from acting in the world. You will look at examples from East and West to see that without certain intentional actions, rituals, and traditions, the religions they represent would not be what they are. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Tibetan Buddhism
2. Hinduism
3. Islam
4. Judaism

1. Tibetan Buddhism

Some branches of Tibetan Buddhism practice the 12 day Kalachakra Initiation Ceremony, a community action, or **ritual**, that involves creating an elaborate, colorful, and sacred design called a mandala using tiny granules of colored sand. The monks spend eight days making the large, intricate mandala, which is based on a model that has existed in the tradition for thousands of years. The ceremony and the mandala are based on a text called the Kalachakra Tantra and represent the three wheels of time.

During the final four days, the mandala is used for initiation. When initiates or newcomers to the tantric school meditate on the images and the mandala, they attain a vision of the Buddha body and the vision of divine emptiness. The mandala and the energy of the community are also used for generating compassion and extending peace to the world. Only certain parts of these initiation ceremonies are shared with the public.



TERM TO KNOW

Ritual

“Sacred action”; a set of words or actions that are spoken or conducted in the same or a similar way over time, according to accepted religious, social, or other convention.

2. Hinduism

A very public ritual in Hinduism is the practice of going on **pilgrimage** to various cities of the gods. India has a very long history of pilgrimages. These journeys to holy cities are part of the lives of most Hindus.

It is traditional to dip your body in the Ganga, or the Ganges River, to honor the goddess Ganges. This ritual is believed to expedite one’s release from the karmic wheel of reincarnation and suffering and, thus, bring the person closer to a state of freedom.

Varanasi, also called Benares, is considered to be the holiest of Hinduism’s holy cities, and it is the destination of many pilgrims. Hindus call it the city of Shiva, because according to tradition, it was this god who founded the city. Varanasi is one of the seven cities that offer release from suffering, or Moksha. Many Hindu pilgrims travel from one city to the next for this reason, honoring and offering their devotion to the particular god of each city.



DID YOU KNOW

The Kumbh Mela, a Hindu pilgrimage, is said to have more participants than the Hajj, the great Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. The Kumbh Mela is often considered the largest pilgrimage on the planet.

In pilgrimages, a ritual is performed by the public community of adherents within a holy place at a specific time. However, as with the Tibetan Kalachakra tantra, there are entire rituals or parts of a ritual or ceremony that are reserved for established practitioners and members of a particular subset of the religious community.

Another important Hindu celebration is Diwali, commonly known as the festival of lights, a five-day festival that involves the lighting of small clay lamps that are filled with oil. This light signifies the triumph of good over evil. These lamps are kept on during the night, and one’s house is clean. The intention is to make the goddess Lakshmi feel welcome. Each day has a special significance. Honoring this allows the tradition to be integrated with daily life and transmitted from one generation to the next. During the festival of Diwali, all the celebrants wear new clothes and share sweets and snacks with family members and friends.



TERM TO KNOW

Pilgrimage

A journey undertaken by a believer that has a sacred purpose and/or a sacred destination.

3. Islam

In the religion of Islam, one of the foundational tenets of the faith, called one of the five pillars of Islam, is the pilgrimage to Mecca, or the Hajj. It is a spiritual journey to Mecca. It is here where the prophet Muhammad was born and where he had his revelation. It’s the most holy city for Muslims. It is here where the first mosque, the

Kaaba, or Noble Cube, was built. It is believed to have been constructed in 2100 BCE by Abraham, the patriarch of the three monotheistic faiths, and his son Ishmael.

During the Hajj, six million pilgrims come to Mecca to circumambulate the Kaaba. The circling of the Kaaba represents the unity of believers and their collective faith in one god. Turning seven times counterclockwise in worship represents this commitment. Since performing the Hajj is one of the five pillars of the Islamic faith, if one can afford it and is physically able, one must do so before dying.

4. Judaism

The Jewish tradition has a ritual of breaking the glass at a Jewish wedding. This is either done after the bride has received the ring or at the end of the ceremony. The specifics vary from one locality to the next.

Amidst all the celebration and cheer, the breaking of glass, usually crushed by the groom with his right foot, represents the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. The collective participation in this section and its witnessing expresses that despite the joy of the occasion, Jews everywhere still mourn the loss and destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.



SUMMARY

Sacred actions that have some kind of religious and spiritual significance are often referred to as rituals. Some ceremonies include certain ritualistic aspects. You looked at examples from **Tibetan Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism**. Pilgrimages, such as the Hajj or the Kumbh Mela, are very public festivals, whereas some ritual actions are reserved for a particular subset of a religious community. You also learned about the festival of lights called Diwali in Hinduism, and the tradition of breaking the glass in a Jewish wedding as a way of maintaining community cohesion in light of the loss of the temple in Jerusalem.

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