Cleansing Rituals within World Religions

Teacher Background

Water is necessary for life. Many religions require believers to cleanse themselves either prior to prayer or as a significant ritual at least once in their lives.

Washing as preparation for prayer

It is obligatory for all Muslims to wash before praying, a ritual ablution is called \textit{Wudu}. They are required to begin by washing their hands up to the wrist three times, starting with the right hand; wash their mouth three times; wash their nostrils, inhaling and exhaling three times; wash their face three times (forehead to chin, right ear to left). Then they wash their arms up to the elbow three times. To wash their head they must wipe the head with wet hands starting from forehead to back of the head; repeat from back of the head to forehead; rub outside of the ears with wet fingers, inside with wet thumbs simultaneously. They wash their feet up to the ankles three times starting with the right. The water must be pure and clean: if there is no water they are permitted to use sand. The aim of the purification ritual is to remind the Muslim that prayer is the purification of the soul, as water is of the body.

Buddhists perform the Bathing of the Buddha ritual to celebrate the birth of Buddha and for participants to pray for peace and inner harmony. Hindus believe that rivers are a symbol of the god who gives life. They believe that bathing in a holy river is important because it cleanses them of any evil that they might have performed.

Some suggested rituals are listed below:

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\textbf{Christianity (Baptism)}

Christian churches use baptism as a symbol for a person's declaration of faith in Jesus Christ, initiation into the Christian community and their commitment to the repentance of sins. Churches regard this as a sacred ritual.

Water represents purification in many religions. In Christianity, a new believer often is baptised with "Holy Water" in front of the congregation to declare their faith in God. Scripture records that Jesus was baptised before the start of his public ministry.
Islam (Ritual Ablutions; Wudu)
It is obligatory for all Muslims to wash before praying, ritual ablation is called Wudu. They are required to begin by washing their hands up to wrist three times starting with the right hand; wash their mouth three times; wash their nostrils, inhaling and exhaling three times; wash their face three times (forehead to chin, right ear to left). Then they wash their arms up to the elbow three times. To wash their head they must wipe the head with wet hands starting from forehead to back of the head; repeat from back of the head to forehead; rub outside of the ears with wet fingers, inside with wet thumbs simultaneously. They wash their feet up to the ankles three times starting with the right.

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Hinduism (Bathing in the Ganges)
The most famous centre of pilgrimage for a Hindu is the city of Benares or Varanasi. The city is situated on the banks of the sacred river Ganges. The town is especially sacred to the god Shiva (the destroyer), to die in Varanasi and have one’s ashes thrown into the Ganges is said to bring deliverance from rebirth (Moksha - the end of the rebirth cycle). Pilgrims who return home often take a bottle of Ganges water with them. Many pilgrims bathe in the river; they believe it washes away their sins so it is a cleansing process.

Along the Ganges are special platforms called ghats, which have steps which allow the pilgrims to get to the river. The ghats are also used to cremate the bodies of people who have died. Every Hindu hopes that they will be in Varanasi when they die, and that after their bodies have been cremated the ashes will be thrown into the river.

Judaism (Festival of Sukkot)
Otherwise known as The Feast of Tabernacles. The name comes from the Hebrew - Sukkot; meaning - tabernacles, booths. It comes from the command in Leviticus 23:42-43. The impermanent leafy shelters were to remind the Israelites of God’s faithfulness during their forty years of wandering in the wilderness. The tabernacles symbolised the need to depend on God for provision of food, water, and shelter.

The Mishna describes a major ceremony of Sukkot, called the Ceremony of the Water Drawing (in Hebrew called Nissuch Ha-Mayim), and is rooted in the agricultural nature of the feast. Rain was a prominent feature in the celebration of Sukkot.

The water-drawing ceremony was a joyous occasion. The priest would draw water from the pool of Siloam in a special golden pitcher. He would be joined by a crowd of people who would return with him to the Temple - through the water gate.