

Celebrating unions

An empirical study of notions about church marriage rituals

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Introduction and research issue

The thesis is the product of a liturgical study of notions about church marriage rituals.¹ Our focus was people's notions about church marriage rituals, more particularly those of people who have recently (within the past year) attended a church marriage. Hence it is a liturgical study within the discipline of empirical theology.

Cohabitation patterns in the Netherlands have changed greatly. People who get married tend to do so at a later age. One does not get married first in order to cohabit, but does so after a period of cohabitation, which is regarded as a sort of trial marriage. More and more children are born out of wedlock. Couples have sexual relations earlier, long before cohabitation and marriage. Homosexual couples can have their partnerships registered and same-sex marriage is permitted. The divorce rate has increased drastically. Does all this make marriage a relic from the past, something that has become totally redundant, associated with ideas and values that no longer accord with modern society?

Yet there are still people who opt for marriage and even for a church marriage. Which people still feel a need to get married in church these days? Are they the last religious people in the Netherlands? What do they think about marriage and church marriage rites? What do they believe they will experience from that ritual?

These questions are elaborated upon within the context of the Dutch society. Two major social processes are influential, the individualisation and secularisation of society. Individualisation is regarded as a process in which individual freedom and development have become key values in a society marked by dramatic growth of the economy and increased affluence. Three dimensions of individualisation are taken into account, de-institutionalisation, traditionalisation and privatisation. The implications of individualisation for the religious domain are known as secularisation. This implies decreased religiosity, adaptation of the contents of religion to social changes, and a decline in the influence of ecclesiastic institutions on society.

Key concepts

Our research belongs to an area of liturgical studies which is seen as part of empirical theology. Liturgical studies uses concepts from anthropology and

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ritual studies. The ritual studies classification of marriage rites as a rite of passage has been particularly influential. The author of this classification, Arnold van Gennep, categorises a great variety of rituals as rites of passage. Their hallmark is that they accompany or effect a transition. According to Van Gennep major changes in the lives of individuals or groups are always accompanied by a confrontation with the sacred. The ritual eases the confrontation. It could be a change of location, for instance crossing a border, a transition from one social group to another, psychological transitions (also called crisis rituals), or religious transitions entailing crossing the boundary between the sacred and the profane. The transition could be a one-off event, as when a tribe occupies new territory, or recurrent occasions such as the changing of the seasons. The change may affect the entire society, a particular social group, or individuals.

Another feature of rites of passage is their threefold structure. As a rule one can discern rites of separation, an intermediate phase (liminality) and integration rites. Although the various rites are distinguishable in most instances, Van Gennep does not claim that all three kinds necessarily occur. Following Van Gennep there have been many publications on rites of passage. Victor Turner concentrated on the intermediate (liminal) phase and its function in facilitating the change and re-stabilising society. Sometimes the term 'rites of passage' loses its classificatory quality and is applied to any rituals that accompany important moments in a human life.

Although social rites of passage could be classified separately, virtually all transitions are characterised by individuals or a group crossing from one social category to another. In the case of marriage rites this is the most important dimension. According to Van Gennep at least one marriage partner leaves one household and moves into a new home or that of the other partner. But does this apply to present-day bridal couples, since most of them have already started a home of their own when they started cohabiting? To what extent can church marriage rituals still be classified as a social transition ritual?

In ritual studies church marriage rituals can be characterised in another way. A marriage ritual is a feast. In major feasts time is a key dimension. Jan Assmann calls it a temporal shift. The rite interrupts ordinary time with a mythical sense of time. It is no longer a matter of here and now but of genesis/origin and destiny. The focus is not simply on the bridal pair and their marriage ritual, but on the origin of marriage and the destiny of husband and wife until the end of time. This mythical sense of time makes the couple perceive themselves differently. That is why feasts create identity and, in that sense, meaning. At many marriage ceremonies there are references to how the couple got to know each other and there is much talk about future challenges and hopes for a happy life together. But according to Assmann's theory the main concern is about the *mythical* sense of time, in which foundational cultural stories and, even more important, images and metaphors from the stories are focal. In church marriage rituals these are stories and images from the Christian tradition, such as the creation story and the wedding at Cana. But to what extent do such images and

stories from the Christian tradition still have a place in church marriage rituals? Rituals are increasingly attuned to the bridal pair. For instance, Bible readings are replaced by poems and lyrics. Moreover, are the Christian images and stories still sufficiently intelligible to the secularised participants in the ritual to create meaning? Is there still any relation between the past, present and future of the bridal couple and the origin and destiny of husband and wife according to Christian tradition? Are church marriage rituals able to break through mundane reality and make room for meaning in a religious temporal perspective? Hence in addition to our first question about the extent to which church marriage rituals can be classified as rites of passage, we want to determine to what extent these rituals are able to break through the everyday perspective on time and introduce a religious temporal perspective.

But it is not self-evident in how far the participants understand the church marriage ritual as a rite of passage or an altered temporal perspective. As a result of individualisation marriage comes about in quite a different way and one could ask whether it still entails a transition. Secularisation could mean that Christian images and stories are no longer understood and that a mythical sense of time in no way breaks through ordinary reality in the course of the marriage ritual. Hence we settle for a more generic term, namely the goal of the ritual. What is it aimed at – a transition, an altered temporal perspective, or something altogether different? Hence we investigate the social or temporal goal of church marriage rituals.

Liturgical studies examines church marriage rituals from perspectives other than that of ritual studies. They are not seen simply as rituals but more specifically as a liturgical service in an official ecclesiastic setting. A liturgical service has various aspects. We confine ourselves to two of these that relate to the problems associated with marriage and marriage rituals discussed above. Thus if we ask ourselves why people still opt for a church marriage if cohabitation practices have changed so much, that translates firstly into the question of the form they feel that ritual should assume. In other words: how should church marriage rituals be performed if liturgical services are grounded in the institutionally based Christian tradition on the one hand, and in practices that have changed radically over the past fifty years on the other? Secondly, the problem raises a question of people's individual experience of church marriage rituals. If despite new cohabitation practices people still opt for this specific ritual, what experience do they hope to derive from it?

The first question about the form of church marriage rituals highlights a specific aspect of modernisation generally and individualisation in particular, namely the demise of self-evident frameworks. The result is that one is obliged to make choices. It is no longer possible simply to live according to religious (to Westerners, Christian) norms and values. Modern people have to clarify their position in confrontation with modernity. That applies particular to those who want to get married in church. They cannot (and don't want to) simply subject themselves to the customary rites of a church marriage. Modernity (*inter alia* as

a result of greater mobility and improved communications) means that people are aware of all sorts of alternatives to the once dominant tradition. Religious tradition is no longer taken for granted. The fact that people are individuals living in modern society requires them to choose and thus devise their own ritual. In so doing they must relate to modernity, in which, as mentioned in the first subsection, both the church and marriage have become problematic institutions as a result of individualisation and secularisation.

The question of the experience of liturgical rites relates closely to the observation that, despite the fact that marriage is no longer obligatory in terms of social norms and that the number of church marriage rituals has declined sharply (see above), there are still people who opt for a church marriage. Is this because of something that they think or expect they will experience during the ritual? The question links up with a debate in liturgical studies about the experience of church rituals since the liturgical reforms of Vatican II. On the basis of a new theology of the church and the sacraments the reformers sought to make church rituals more transparent to enable believers to participate actively and comprehendingly. This means that the sacraments are no longer actions performed by the clergy *in persona Christi* but by the church in the sense of a community of believers (clergy and lay people), Lorenzer on the other hand, maintains that the liturgical reforms have replaced the sensory, symbolic interaction between officiant and believers with a discursive one, resulting in a loss of meaning. In the case of church marriage rituals this debate raises the question of the extent to which the ritual affects the participants.

Among the liturgical aspects of church marriage rituals, this thesis examines the form of the ritual and the way participants experience it. That brings us to four key concepts in our research:

1. the social goal of church marriage rituals
2. the temporal goal of church marriage rituals
3. the form of church marriage rituals
4. the experience of church marriage rituals

Research questions

The main issue described in the first section is that, despite social changes as a result of individualisation and secularisation (which mean that the institution of marriage is no longer prerequisite for cohabitation and which have changed living together as such), there are still people who opt for marriage and for a church marriage to boot. Hence the research question in this thesis reads:

What ideas do participants in church marriage rituals have about the ritual and to what extent do these ideas relate to their religiosity and their notions about marriage

This umbrella question can be broken up into the following sub-questions:

1. What concepts do participants in church marriage rituals discern in regard to
 - (a) the social goal of church marriage rituals?
 - (b) the temporal goal of church marriage rituals?
 - (c) the form of church marriage rituals?
 - (d) the experience of church marriage rituals?
2. To what extent do participants agree with these notions about church marriage rituals?
3. To what extent do discrepancies in participants' notions about church marriage rituals relate to differences in their religious socialisation?
4. To what extent can the influence of features of participants' religious socialisation on their notions about church marriage rituals be explained by their conception of marriage?

Our concepts of religious socialisation are based on the theory of Emile Durkheim. In his view a given groups' religion constitutes a kind of collective consciousness that acts as mortar for that social community. The more closely people are integrated within the community, the more they endorse its values and norms, because they have more contact with socialising actors.

Religious socialisation may influence ideas about church marriage rituals. But in how far does this apply to religious socialisation generally or only to the conceptions of marriage that more or less derive from that socialisation? In Western society marriage (and relational life before marriage) has seen enormous shifts in values in such areas of marriage as the contract, having children, sexuality and love. Our fourth research question deals with the influence of these four values.

Sampling design

To answer our research questions we decided on a survey design. On the basis of our concepts and the elaborations on these we devised measuring instruments and compiled a questionnaire. The aim was to discover the views, not merely of pastors and bridal couples, but of all participants in Catholic wedding services. As noted already, secularisation has meant that not all the people participating in the ritual are church members. As a result our population extends beyond church members, Roman Catholics and even Christians. Our sample of 150 parishes was drawn randomly from a list of all Roman Catholic parishes in the Netherlands. In these parishes the first three couples married in the period January to July 2005 were approached to complete our questionnaire (most parishes had fewer than three weddings that whole year). Because we also wanted to learn the ideas of participants other than the couples themselves, the latter were asked to provide particulars of six wedding guests: three who are involved with a church and three who are not. This enabled us to measure the ideas of both people who are involved with a church and people who have no

such involvement. As a result our findings can be generalised to a population comprising all participants in Catholic marriage rituals in the year 2005.

Results

The full depth of the results cannot be summarized without dealing with every key concept separately. Here, we confine ourselves to a few general conclusions. Since the participants do not perceive the social goal of the church marriage ritual as either a transition of a confirmation, we postulate a combination of the two in terms of identity reconstruction. Using Hermans' and Ricoeur's narrative identity concepts we understand the social goal of the ritual as plotting. Bride and groom have their own biographies which partially interrelate. During the marriage ritual new elements, more particularly those associated with the life they have built up together, are integrated with their entire past, which gives their life a new plot and the couple acquires a new identity. This new identity provides a new perspective for the past and the future. This is the temporal goal of the church wedding ritual. The ritual provides both a transcendent and an immanent perspective on the past and the future. The social and temporal goal of the church wedding ritual have implications for the form of the ritual and its participants. Although the participants unanimously think that everybody should be able to participate in the ritual, this does not mean that it should be adapted to them. The participants discern a deductive from an inductive notion regarding the form of the ritual. Still, in their eyes the two notions do not exclude each other. Regarding the ritual experience, the participants are mostly affected by the marriage and musical rites and not by the eucharistic rites, which form the framework of the ritual. The specific marriage rites such as the giving of consent, the exchange of rings and the nuptial blessing affect almost all of the participants. The same holds for the musical rites (singing of special hymns, listening to performed or recorded music). Religious socialisation has a strong influence on the notions about the church marriage ritual. In some cases this influence can be explained away by conceptions of marriage. In most cases a part of the influence of religious socialisation remains unexplained. This holds especially for the influence of religious socialisation on the experience of the marriage and musical rites. Regarding the experience of these rites, the only influential attribute of the participants' socialisation is the fact that they think it is important to undergo the ecclesiastic transition rites, baptism, marriage and funeral.

Liturgical practice

Our results ask for careful attention to the preparation and performance of church marriage rituals. Especially the reconstruction of the life stories of the marital couples can be facilitated during the marriage preparation and the ritual. Church marriage rituals can also be a way for churches to show non church involved people their relevance.