Ritual Dynamics in Late Modernity
The Case of the Emerging Field of Collective Commemoration

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This dissertation begins with showcasing a single ritual All Souls' Day project taking place in the Dutch town of Oudewater. Straight away, however, it becomes clear that in order to understand this project, it needs to be seen in the light of larger issues. Not only is this ritual project part of a larger Dutch phenomenon, but this phenomenon, in turn, proves to be a salient case study for investigating ritual dynamics in our late modern times in general. The combined study of these two themes, i.e., the emergence of a ritual field of collective commemoration, and the things this emergence can teach us about contemporary ritual dynamics, provides the backbone of this dissertation. By studying ritual dynamics at its social level, both on a macro- and on a micro-scale, at the level of the dynamics of history, as well as at the level of its structural dynamics, varied topics such as the emergence of this ritual field, the role of tradition in this emergence, the challenges faced by those involved in its emergence, and the concept of ritual design are explored. Brought together, these investigations allow us to consider the ritual dynamics informing the emergence of a ritual field of collective commemoration in its entirety, and to extrapolate on these findings in order to contribute to our understanding of religion in late modernity.

First, however, **chapter one** sets the stage by defining the wider category of collective commemorations that is at the heart of this dissertation, and by highlighting the various stages of research informing it. In particular, chapter one argues that what most fundamentally informs the concept of collective commemoration, as it is used in these pages, is the idea that 'collective' in this sense serves as a double referent. It refers both to those who are commemorating and to those who are being commemorated. As such, it rules out both commemorations conducted in private or small inclusive groups, as well as commemorations of individuals or of specific categories of the deceased, such as the war dead or those who died of a particular disease. All Souls' Day is the perfect example of such a rite, but as the findings put forward here illustrate, it is far from the only ritual practice fitting the bill. As to the methodologies employed

to investigate the rites falling within this category, two stages can be identified. The first stage concerned the construction of a large database of various rites of collective commemoration and served as the foundation for chapters two and three. The second stage consisted of ethnographic fieldwork regarding six cases selected from the database. For both stages, several methodological issues had to be considered. In the case of the database, this concerned the choice to focus on the organizational dimension, the make-up of the database itself, comprised of rites organized in Catholic, Protestant, and non-ecclesial settings, and the sources to be used. In the latter case, an online research strategy was involved, making use of a variety of websites to acquire data. For fieldwork, the main methodological consideration pertained to the criteria used to come to a selection of cases that was both varied and representative. A further consideration pertained to the methods of recording: audio recordings were made of the interviews whereas extensive note taking was used for the participant observation during the rites themselves as well as for the preparatory meetings that were attended.

As stated, this dissertation starts with the claim that an All Souls' Day event in the town of Oudewater could actually be said to be part of a larger phenomenon, with similar collective commemorations being found in other Catholic parishes, in Protestant congregations, and even outside the churches. **Chapter two** further explores that claim. It asks how this wider phenomenon should be classified or categorized. How do these Catholic, Protestant, and non-ecclesial rites relate to one another? Can these various rites even be said to be part of one phenomenon if they are affiliated with different institutions? In light of such questions, it is argued that we are in fact dealing with something that can be dubbed a 'ritual field'. In order to assess this claim, use is made of Fligstein and McAdam's theory of fields, from which a set of five criteria is distilled. Applying these criteria, it becomes clear that the phenomenon can indeed be qualified as the emergence of a strategic action field geared towards collective commemoration. In other words, it could be described as an emerging ritual field. The emergence of this ritual field was evidently made possible by the religious crisis of the 1960s, which created an arena for innovation in which the idea of organizing collective commemorations was opened up to a wider range of social actors. Next, within this arena, these social actors started to become more oriented towards each other, and have also begun to share more and more ways in which this arena is understood. In terms of ritual dynamics, these developments show us how, on the macro-level, societal upheaval might first seem to lead to decline, but instead turns out to function as a springboard for renewal. Interestingly, within the new constellation that has emerged, things still have not yet fully stabilized themselves, and show signs that they might not even do so at all.

Chapter three sets the issue of social dynamics aside for a moment and instead focuses on the dynamics of history, asking what role tradition has played in the emergence of this ritual field. In particular, it is argued that labeling the emergence of this field as simply being a matter of bricolage or ritual invention is not doing justice to the reality of the situation. Instead, it is argued that the way tradition figured into the emergence of this field can best be described as 'innovating with traditions'. Again, explorations were made of the entries of the database, with its subdivision making it possible to approach the issue at hand from three angles: the Catholic subcategory provided a setting with a prior tradition of collective commemoration, the Protestant one a setting without such a prior tradition, and the non-ecclesial subcategory concerned a setting where what was missing was not only a prior tradition but also a community to carry it. This also highlighted the seemingly inherent instability of the emerging ritual field again. Rather than invention of tradition, we seem to be dealing with a fluid network of emerging, renewing, and interconnected local traditions which are the result of people innovating by taking elements from various traditions, chief among them being those associated with Catholic All Souls' Day practices. Traditions, in other words, are both made use of and aimed for. In terms of ritual dynamics, this implies that tradition itself has been swooped up in the dynamics affecting ritual. In late modernity, tradition itself has seemingly become much more 'dynamized'.

The **fourth chapter** revisits the level of social dynamics, albeit this time on a more local scale. As was mentioned above, instability can be considered an inherent quality of modernity. Conversely, ritual is traditionally considered to be about stability. This chapter deals with what happens when people concern themselves with ritual, despite the instability of our late modern times. In particular, it argues that a specific set of challenges can be identified with which these people are confronted and that these are overcome by an attitude of embracing the very aspects that characterize contemporary society. This attitude is dubbed 'liquid ritualizing', and is contrasted to earlier forms of 'rooted' ritualizing. Unlike in the previous chapters, such findings were not based on the data contained in the database, but on fieldwork conducted at six locations where collective commemorations were organized. The challenges looked at concerned creating a 'good' ritual, attracting an audience, and ensuring repetition. The attitude of 'liquid ritualizing' with which these challenges were addressed, and with which the opportunities hidden within them were identified, are an openness towards ritual transfer, the importance of networks, the importance of locality, and, finally, an embracing of instability as a virtue as much as a vice. This ambivalent stance towards instability is particularly interesting when talking about ritual. On the one hand, such instability is challenged when wanting to construct and maintain local traditions and identities. On the other hand, the liquidity of late modern society is made good use of in the methods employed to achieve these goals. Both ritual transfer, i.e., innovating with traditions, and

networking rely on such liquidity. The result is a sort of dynamic balancing act between innovation and repetition within which the former comes easiest in late modern times, thereby turning the latter into something that has to be worked for in order to achieve it.

The **fifth, and final, chapter** concerns itself with the level of structural dynamics by tackling a paradigm within the field of ritual studies which focuses very much on what is called 'ritual design'. By exploring a range of various theoretical concepts in relation to a specific set of examples from the ritual field investigated here, it asks what structural aspects of ritual are obscured when rites are only studied from the viewpoints of this popular paradigm. As in the previous chapter, these examples are taken from the six case studies that were studied through participant observation. Analyzing these examples showed that there is, indeed, more to ritual than its design alone. First, conflating framing too much with ritualizing means the set-apart nature of ritual is easily overlooked. Second, when focusing on verifiable efficacy, like the ritualists themselves tend to do, non-verifiable efficacy is easily lost sight of. Third, paying attention to ritual failures helps show the fragility of ritual design, yet tends to hide the resilience of ritual performance and the importance of emergence. Fourth, and finally, focusing on ongoing innovation and change means the impact of time and repetition is too easily relegated to the sidelines. Interestingly, it was also shown that the ritualists involved seem to be more aware of such oversights than ritual scholars generally appear to be, a fact that might be credited to their desire to make use of such structural ritual dynamics in order to achieve certain goals in a setting in which such things generally do not tend to last. When approaching such findings from the perspective of ritual dynamics in general, it now becomes clear why it is important to study such dynamics at all its levels. Ritual is not only dynamic in the sense that it changes over time through the actions of various agents and in response to various social changes, but also in that its structural dynamics make it transformative in its own right.

Although the four main chapters outlined above each tackles their own question, these questions also build upon one another and bring forth a final, more fundamental, issue: if all of the different levels at which ritual dynamics are at play within the ritual field of collective commemoration are taken into account, what does this tell us about the position of ritual and its dynamics in our late modern world? It is by considering this final question that the wider relevance of this dissertation becomes apparent as well. Not only can rites of collective commemoration be considered a telling example of what is happening with ritual in our current times, ritual itself can be taken as a telling example of what is happening to religion and culture in late modernity. As we saw, ritual dynamics can be identified on various levels, and each of the four main chapters asked a question pertaining to one such level. Bringing these levels together, it becomes apparent that whereas ritual has adapted to the fluidity of late modernity

on the level of social and historical dynamics, its structural dynamics are instead relied upon to challenge that same fluidity. After the religious crisis that marks the beginning of late modernity, the fluidity of society at large seems to have been very much embraced in how traditions have become resources rather than guidelines, in how ritualizing is given shape in order to deal with contemporary challenges and opportunities, and in how the social relationships underpinning these processes are given form. In this regard, ritual today could almost be said to be hyper dynamic. Contemporary ritual is also dynamic in another sense, however. This is evident in how traditions are not only made use of selectively but are also aimed for, as well as in how the structural dynamics of the rites themselves are relied upon to achieve such goals. In other words, while ritual has, in response to the fluidity of late modernity, become much more dynamic on the social and historical level, its own structural dynamics provide those involved with a way to challenge that very fluidity as well. Ritual, in other words, has shown itself to be capable of adapting to its late modern context, but at the same time engages that context as well and, as such, helps shape it. This final claim is relevant not only because of what it might tell us about the role of ritual in late modernity, but also because it might help us understand how other aspects of religion or culture in general have been affected by – or are affecting – late modernity as well. Such issues cannot be addressed on the basis of the data discussed here, of course, but at the very least, the claims made here regarding ritual dynamics can also be used as a springboard to tackle such questions in other domains.