

# **‘Daarom hebben wij stenen ringen’**

## **Recente ontwikkelingen rond het ritueel van de huwelijksluiting<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Aim and method**

This study aims to trace, describe, and characterize recent developments surrounding marriage rituals. To do so, it links findings of earlier research with a new case study of its own. The latter focuses on marriage rituals in the city of Tilburg at the end of the century. The developments turn out to be as numerous as they are far-reaching. This raises the question whether established theories are still in touch with how these days couples actually arrange and perceive their marriage rituals. In this context the final chapter lists some theological positions that may be in need of reassessment.

### **Structure**

After unfolding its aim and method (chapter 1), the book opens with a broad sketch of postwar developments surrounding ritual in general, and marriage rituals in particular (chapter 2). Having thus painted the background, it then zooms in on concrete rituals. This is done in two stages. First comes a presentation of the findings of an initial exploration by means of observations and interviews (chapter 3). Then the results of a survey are listed (chapter 4). These two chapters essentially state the facts only, and neither expand nor comment on them. This is done in chapter 5. Here the observations and statements of chapter 3 and the numbers of chapter 4 are combined and abstracted towards more general concepts. These may characterize the recent dynamics surrounding marriage rituals. What is essential here is that these concepts are amply substantiated and illustrated with empirical data, as well as compared to the literature. Finally, things are abstracted even further in discussing several theological issues raised by these developments (chapter 6).

### **Summary**

Chapter 2 opens with some national statistics. They show that in the Netherlands fewer and fewer people get married. (In 1970, of every 1.000 unmarried

<sup>1</sup> *‘Daarom hebben wij stenen ringen’ – Recente ontwikkelingen rond het ritueel van de huwelijksluiting* (Tilburg 2004) 292 p., ISBN 90-9018145-8. Bestellen bij: Universiteit van Tilburg, Wetenschapswinkel, 013-4662645, wetenschapswinkel@uvt.nl (prijs € 20,00). Promotie op 2 juli 2004, Theologische Faculteit Tilburg. Promotores: prof.dr P. Post, prof.dr M. van Uden; co-promotor: dr J. Pieper.

men of 15 years and over, 75 got married; in 2000, a mere 31.) The number of *second* marriages, on the other hand, is growing fast. (In the year of the case study, one in every four rituals sealed a second marriage.) Rising sharply as well is the age at which the Dutch get married. In 2000, looking only at *first* marriages, a bridegroom was, on average, 31.0 years of age; a bride 28.5.

As for the Roman Catholic church, here too marriage rites lose a lot of ground; far more than baptism and funeral rites. (In 1975, 35.9% of all marriages were celebrated in a Roman Catholic church; in 2000, only 12.2%.) In Flanders and Germany, this contrast between marriage services on the one hand (getting ever less popular) and baptism and funeral services on the other (holding their ground), is even sharper.

Such developments (towards fewer marriages, even fewer church marriages, marrying later in life, et cetera) must be seen in the light of fundamental socio-cultural processes like detraditionalization, individualization, pluralization and secularization. The overall picture is one of faith and ritual in crisis. Yet, that is not the whole picture, as is readily recognized once undercurrents and low-profile or *ad hoc* rituals, often emerging in surprising places, are taken into account as well. For while liturgical studies spoke of *crisis* in the sixties, *nostalgia* and *compensation* in the seventies, and *paradox* in the eighties (while churches are getting emptier, the fascination for myths and rituals is spreading), it spoke of *interference* and *dynamism* in the nineties, and, be it with reservation, even of *abundance* in the new century. At the same time, *ritual impotence* is observed: when it comes to ritual, most westerners are incapable, inhibited, inexperienced, or have unrealistic expectations.

Amidst all this turbulence characterizing the world of ritual, a few major forces have to be singled out: interplay between the modes of secular, generally-religious, and specifically-Christian ritual; emphasis on the festive and commemorative sides of ritual; emergence of new, often modest (life cycle) rituals; ritual experiment.

Having sketched the broad ritual context, chapter 2 then zooms in on marriage rituals. The above state of flux and differentiation also applies here. This study is essentially concerned with developments in the way couples themselves devise and perceive their marriage rituals. However, to understand these, the main developments in the scripts and options offered to them by state and church must be traced as well.

The current law dealing with marriage rituals dates from 1970. Since then this scenario has been gradually sobered down, losing several elements: reading of the certificate (1974); public notice of intended marriage (1987); handing in of the records (now required at the notification of intended marriage) (1995); sign-

ing of the certificate by the witnesses (1995). Along the same line of reduction, the certificate is no longer an eloquent account, but a table.

However, the law only establishes the framework. It is left to local authorities to flesh this out. And unlike the law, they usually opt for cachet: chic reception, ceremonious entry into an attractive wedding room, intricate welcome, full-fledged speech, stately performance of the marriage proper, elaborate presentation of the documents, extensive congratulations, festive send-off. Municipalities explicitly state that they do so to meet the couple's wishes. This willingness even forced the legislator to retract its prohibition on witness signatures. Registrars had denounced this as ritual erosion.

When it comes to fleshing out the ritual framework, three approaches stand out (in spite of less customer-oriented civil servants worrying about proliferation and stepping outside one's line of business): liturgization, personalization, and pluriformization. They will be discussed in a moment.

The church ritual – in this study: the Roman Catholic ritual – has evolved even more. And just as in the civil case, a distinction is apparent between top (moderate revision) and base (major differentiation).

The formal ordo has been revised twice over the last decades, in 1969 and 1991 (official translations: 1977 and 1996). Compared to the post-Trent uniformity, quite a bit has changed. There is more room for variation. For different situations, different scripts are offered: with or without Eucharist, for religious and non-religious partners. In addition, the scripts list alternatives for almost every text in the service: several invocations, a wide range of readings, fitting prefaces round the table, etcetera. The couple is also allowed to take over some of the pastor's acts. Their role is more active anyhow. For instance, if at all possible, they pronounce the vows themselves. Earlier, all they used to say was 'I do'. And whereas for centuries only the bride received a ring, now both of them do. What is more, to underline the amount of latitude given, the exchange of rings may be replaced by a similar, local custom. Finally, and importantly, the blessing of the marriage has become more central to the rite.

Still, the inculturation of the official ordo seems, on the whole, inadequate.<sup>2</sup> It underestimates just how much the views on marriage have changed since the Second Vatican Council: just about all couples already live together before marrying; the notion of indissolubility is debated; many feel it should be easier to remarry after a divorce; repressive conjugal ethics (e.g. on birth control) get ignored, etcetera. At the base, on the other hand, new and less rigid views have

<sup>2</sup> G. LUKKEN, *Rituelen in overvloed. Een kritische bezinning op de plaats en de gestalte van het christelijke ritueel in onze cultuur* (Baarn 1999) 181, 270.

been taken up to a much larger extent. Here an enormous diversity has grown, not in the least because of the ever more prominent role of the couple in the compilation of the service. Notably absent in this spectrum is, and has been for the last decades, the classical/official ordo.

For the church ritual, the most radical change has to be its shrinking popularity. Already more than half the couples skip it altogether. However, some of them still want to relate their marriage to 'the sacred/transcendent/eternal', whatever its mode (often not exclusively Christian). Thus, though still mainly avant-garde, the non-ecclesiastical religious ritual enters the stage. Usually it takes the shape of a collage of spiritual material, gathered together from all corners of the world.

Thus a wide range of marriage rituals has materialized; civil, ecclesiastical, and generally-religious. To get a well-founded and detailed picture of this range, an open and comprehensive exploration of the present-day wedding practice has been conducted. First a number of quite dissimilar rituals were observed, and five of the couples involved were interviewed. They turned out to both shape and experience their wedding day rather differently. Next, moving from qualitative and synchronic to quantitative and diachronic, two questionnaires were compiled on the basis of this initial exploration. One was sent to all couples that married in the city of Tilburg in 1997. They constitute the younger cohort. The other was for their parents. They make up the older cohort. A good three decades separate their weddings. How did the shape and perception of marriage rituals develop over this eventful period?

The first significant development concerns the wedding day as a *rite of passage*. What for the parents still served as ritual support in and emphasis on their entrance into a new stage of life, is for the younger cohort in many respects more like a confirmation and perpetuation of their life together. True transitions are few and far between. Of the parents, 90% left the parental home somewhere around their wedding day; of their children, only 8%. Of the latter, 85% already shared a household prior to their getting married; of the former, only 5%. In addition, marriage is less seen as a prelude to parenthood (from 76% to 55%). That there is less of a transition is also reflected in the assertion that 'marriage starts a new stage of life', backed up by 99% of the older cohort, and just 55% of the younger. A passage of a more emotional nature is decreasingly apparent as well. Against 82% of the older cohort, only 55% of the younger consider marriage 'highly consequential'. 'Marriage strengthens your relationship' is endorsed by 89% of the older cohort, and only 55% of the younger. Even so, it must be acknowledged that still nearly half of the younger cohort ascribe to marriage *rite of passage* aspects. This applies in particular to the less educated and to those involved in the church.

Religion is among the social factors most in decline. In the older cohort, 92% had a church ritual; in the younger, 41%. Moreover, 84% of the parents in part decided to marry because ‘marriage is the norm in our (religious) outlook on life’. Of their children, only 26% did.

As a result, many no longer dismiss the *civil* ritual as just a prerequisite for the church ritual. For them, it has become the pivot of the day. Of the older cohort, 50% consider it ‘one of the day’s highlights’; of the younger, 69%. Its classification as ‘the most important moment of the day’ gains even more ground, from 33% to 53%. This leaves little room for a civil ritual *free of charge*, going by its halved occurrence (from 20% to 11%).

In detail, the evaluation of the civil ritual has become more favorable as well. It is still predominantly considered ‘traditional’, yet less so than it used to be. This supports the notion of pluriformization: the beaten paths are left for supposedly more original variants. In addition, the civil ritual is experienced more as ‘solemn’ (from 48% to 68%) and less as ‘a matter-of-fact’ (from 55% to 37%). This tallies with the concept of liturgization: the civil ritual gets semi-religious traits. The increase in the perception of the civil ritual as ‘cheerful’ (from 6% to 21%) matches the thesis that the festive side of ritual is getting ever more prominent. It also backs up the feeling that the ritual is getting less businesslike. After all, these two qualities exclude one another to a large degree.

With the ever higher hopes for the civil ritual the question arises as to how much it is able to meet these expectations. The least that can be said here is that the younger cohort rates it fairly positively, especially when compared to the older.

To conclude the subject of the civil ritual, the younger cohort was asked to indicate for each of its elements just how much it moved them. It appears that the more consequential the act, the more it touches the couple. Likewise, the more the couple is personally involved in the act, the more they are moved. The parents have only been asked whether the rite *as a whole* moved them. It turns out that it moved them slightly less than their children.

As for the *church* ritual, here too the changes are significant. In the younger cohort, of all the possible reasons to opt for a particular building, only the *atmosphere*-motive stands out. The difference with the older cohort is immense. Being attractive or intimate, by far the most decisive quality for the younger cohort (62%), is almost irrelevant to the older (8%). Conversely, the ‘bride’s home church’, the one dominant motive in the older cohort (85%), matters little to the younger (12%). These days, couples look for style and character, rather than, as their parents did, for familiarity and a ritual embedded in a solid local community. On the subject of time, both cohorts diverge considerably as well,

with 95% of the younger having both rituals at the same day, versus 57% of the older. This reinforces the impression of the modern wedding day as the big day on which everything comes together as much as possible.

The younger cohort perceives the service more as 'cheerful' (from 17% to 64%) and less as 'businesslike' (from 20% to 2%) and 'traditional' (from 85% to 64%). This adds to the idea that the festive dimension is on the rise within the church as well. Given these huge differences, it is all the more striking that for the rest both cohorts perceive the church service above all as 'solemn', and what is more, both to round about the same extent (90%). This was and is the predominant experience.

Finally, the wedding day *preparations* have changed. The last decades have seen a vast increase in the amount of time invested in either ritual. A preparatory consultation with the registrar is nearly twice as common in the younger cohort as in the older. And as for the church, a wedding service is simply no longer possible without preparatory meetings, often (46%) even three or more. The older cohort talked nowhere near as long to the pastor as the younger. Almost the entire younger cohort (91%) deems these talks pleasant. With 60%, the parents are less enthusiastic. The talks allow both registrars and pastors to give a more personal speech.

Looking over all the contrasts between marriage rituals of the early sixties and marriage rituals of the late nineties, it appears both desirable and possible to condense most of them to a few broader developments, thus reducing the multitude of numbers to a manageable set of more abstract concepts.

With respect to the *perception* of the marriage ritual, three concepts present themselves: secularization, transitionization, and privatization.

*Secularization* here refers to the evaporation of Christianity as a socio-cultural force, and the ongoing retreat of the churches, along with their ritual repertoires, from public life. Marriage rituals too get more and more withdrawn from church and religion (as does the state of being married).

*Transitionization* refers to a change in the nature of the passage marked by the marriage ritual. This once quite sudden switch to adulthood, stable sexual relations, living on one's own, cohabitation and the prospect of parenthood, now passes off *gradually*. (A transition is a *gradual* shift, one phase after the other.) The wedding day is now the optional culmination of an entire series of smaller, sometimes provisional steps, spread out over time. Thus, the *passage* at the wedding day is *perceived* rather than *actual*.

*Privatization* refers to the emergence of the wedding day as a private matter, its festivities increasingly withdrawn from the solidary public realm. Marriage rituals also make much less reference to social contexts that reach beyond the couple's immediate/private relations (like the neighborhood at large, the Roman Catholic tradition, the universal church, etcetera).

With respect to the *shape* of the marriage ritual, four concepts emerge: personalization, pluriformization, liturgization, and aestheticization.

*Personalization* refers to the rise in the number of couples that try to shape their marriage ritual in such a way that they may recognize it as their own. More and more couples include elements in their ritual that they feel make it more uniquely theirs.

*Pluriformization* refers to the decline in uniformity between marriage rituals. On the supply side, the variety gets ever broader. More players enter the market, and per player the offer gets more variegated. On the demand side, more and more couples strive for a ritual that is different from other rituals, mainly to make it, in their view, more interesting.

*Liturgization* refers to secular rituals getting more semi-religious traits. Increasingly, civil marriage rituals incorporate liturgical elements.

*Aestheticization* refers to the growing emphasis on beauty. Possibly more than ever, couples want their ritual to make, above all, an aesthetic and stylish impression.

Seeing all the recent developments described and characterized in this study, it is safe to say that marriage rituals are on the move. This raises the question whether the (theological) reflection on these rituals is in essence still up to date. To conclude the study, some issues are identified that future theological research may need to address. They include: the interplay between the civil ritual and the church ritual (saying 'I do' twice); the ever higher divorce rate, and the pressure it puts on the traditional views on indissolubility and remarriage; the balance between continuity and discontinuity (pluriformization), and between tradition and self-expression (personalization); the role and place of the local and universal church (privatization); the surge in the number of couples that have no or hardly any church involvement, and virtually no experience with ritual; the allegation that these couples really want 'just' a life cycle ritual, not a sacrament; the, in some respects, fading line between ecclesiastical-sacramental and generally-religious rituals; the growing emphasis on the blessing of the marriage; the question who administers the sacrament. It is hoped that this study may contribute to the reflection on these issues.

