

## Ritual (Re)design

# Towards a Framework for Professional Ritual Making in Postsecular Contexts

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### Abstract

Ritualizing, the creative, imaginative, and intuitive act of ritual making has been acknowledged for some time now in the literature. In this study, this intuitive process is studied in more detail from the perspective of ritual theory. The aim is to theoretically strengthen a framework of ritual making for professionals, such as chaplains and celebrants working with renewed rituals. A practical framework comprising three steps of ritual making is discussed in more detail: 1) communicating about ritual theme or cause, 2) the ritual (re)design and 3) performing the ritual. Ritualizing leads to dynamics and possible tensions, such as between introducing new elements and (re)using old ones or between the individual and the collective. The article offers an entry point or building block to understand contemporary ritual making in postsecular contexts.

### Keywords

Ritualizing, professional ritual making, ritual (re-)design, postsecular society

### Introduction

In contemporary Western societies, secular, humanist, intercultural, and interreligious rituals are increasing, such as personalized funerals, humanist or interreligious life-cycle ceremonies, or collective rituals after a disaster.<sup>1</sup> Despite rituals' common characteristics of tradition, repetition, and ritual

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1) Matthew Engelke "The Coffin Question: Death and Materiality in Humanist Funerals," *Material Religion* 11 (1) (2015): 26-48, [doi: 10.2752/205393215X14259900061553](https://doi.org/10.2752/205393215X14259900061553); Margaret Holloway, Susan Adamson, Vassos Argyrou, Peter Draper, and Daniel Mariau, "'Funerals Aren't Nice but It Couldn't Have Been Nicer'. The Makings of a Good Funeral," *Mortality* 18 (1) (2013): 30-53, [doi: 10.1080/13576275.2012.755505](https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2012.755505); Martin Hoondert, Paul Post, Mirella Klomp, and Marcel Barnard, *Handbook of Disaster Ritual, Multidisciplinary Perspectives, Cases and Themes* (Leuven: Peeters, 2021). Agata Rejowska, "System of Collective Representations' in Humanist Marriage Ceremonies in Poland," *Social Compass* (2020): 31-44, [doi: 10.1177/0037768620907569](https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768620907569); Joanna Wojtkowiak, Robin Knibbe, and Anne Goossensen, "Emerging Ritual Practices in Pluralistic Society: A Comparison of Six Non-Religious European Celebrant Training Programmes,"

protocol,<sup>2</sup> rituals do change over time. Sometimes these changes occur very slowly, over centuries and decades. At other moments rituals are adapted more quickly, for example under societal or political pressure. Celebrants, chaplains, and clergy are confronted with situations where existing rituals no longer meet the needs of a particular, secular, or interreligious person or group. In Europe, the US, and Australia, secular and humanist celebrant training programs teach celebrants to co-create new rituals for meaningful life transitions together with families.<sup>3</sup> More recently, during the Covid-pandemic, the meaning and importance of new rituals in healthcare settings have been acknowledged on a larger scale.<sup>4</sup> For instance, rituals have been re-designed when families could not say goodbye to their loved ones or when families could not attend the funeral due to Covid-restrictions. Many alternative and digital rituals have been emerging, such as online prayer and online church services, funeral live streams, drive-through condolences, and rituals specifically for healthcare professionals. Practical guides for chaplains and other spiritual professionals were developed during the pandemic to help re-design rituals in moments of crisis.<sup>5</sup> New and re-created rituals have not only become present in society but are increasingly studied in ritual studies as well.

While the notion of ritualizing, the active form of ritual making, has been acknowledged in ritual studies for many years now,<sup>6</sup> there has been no clear framework to understand ritualizing in more detail that could guide professionals on how to ritualize. Ritualizing is mainly described as an intuitive and imaginative craft.<sup>7</sup> There have been some (online) practical guides and tips on ritualizing. For example, in two chapters in a Dutch book for chaplains, authors have focused on the current issues from a practical perspective with the goal to formulate some guidelines for professional ritual making, such as for chaplains.<sup>8</sup> The aim of this article is to furthermore theoretically discuss these steps in ritual mak-

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*Journal for the Study of Spirituality* 8 (1) (2018): doi [10.1080/20440243.2018.1431287](https://doi.org/10.1080/20440243.2018.1431287).

2) Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and the Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

3) Wojtkowiak, Knibbe & Goossensen, 2018; Jeltje Gordon-Lennox, *Emerging Ritual in Secular Societies: A Transdisciplinary Conversation* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017).

4) Robert Klitzman, Jay Al-Hashimi, Gabrielle Di Sapia Natarelli, Elizaveta Garbuzova, and Stephanie Sinnappan “How Hospital Chaplains Develop and Use Rituals to Address Medical Staff Distress,” *SSM - Qualitative Research in Health* 2 (January 2022): 100087, doi: [10.1016/j.ssmqr.2022.100087](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmqr.2022.100087).

5) [Microsoft Word - Death, Grief and Funerals in the COVID Age\\_V1.docx \(sccm.org\); https://vgvz.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/050720-Afscheidsrituelen-definitieve-versie.pdf](https://www.sccm.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/050720-Afscheidsrituelen-definitieve-versie.pdf), accessed October 4, 2022.

6) Tom F. Driver, “Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual.” (Booksurge 2006). Ronald L. Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

7) Grimes, “Deeply into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage”.

8) Joanna Wojtkowiak, “Leren Ritualiseren,” in *Met lichaam en geest. De rituele competentie van geestelijk verzorgers*, ed. S. Körver, E. Olsman and S. Rosie (Utrecht: Eburon 2021), 112. Joanna Wojtkowiak, “De grenzen van rituele vernieuwing”, in *Met lichaam en geest. De rituele competentie van geestelijk verzorgers*, ed. S. Körver, E. Olsman and S. Rosie (Utrecht: Eburon 2021), 197.

ing and review possible tensions. The research question is: What can we learn from ritual theory for professional ritual making in postsecular contexts?<sup>9</sup> The notion of postsecularity is used here to stress that in contemporary, Western, secularized contexts, religion does not disappear. Postsecular societies are understood as pluralistic, secularized, multicultural, and multireligious, which brings new challenges for rituals and needs to be taken into account in the study of ritual. Religion co-exists next to secularity and can be intertwined in everyday life, as well as in ritual practice.<sup>10</sup> The research question will be answered by an interdisciplinary, thematic review of existing literature on ritual theory from various disciplines, such as ritual studies, anthropology, psychology and chaplaincy studies. As ritual is a concept that is studied in various disciplines, this theoretical review will use insights from authors studying rituals from different perspectives.

## 1 Learning ritualizing: insights from ritual theory

Changing ritual contexts lead to shifts in ritual theory. In the literature, rituals were long understood as traditional, static, and invariant practices.<sup>11</sup> While this might be true within some religious traditions, also religious rituals change. In the literature, there has been increasing attention to the concept of “ritualizing”.<sup>12</sup> Ritualizing is understood as an active, intuitive, and creative form of ritual making; the act of (re-)inventing rituals, often in (semi-)secular, postsecular or interreligious contexts. While ritualizing is often discussed in secular and postsecular contexts, it has also been studied in religious contexts. Theologian Berry studies ritualizing in Christian liturgy from a feminist perspective and argues that religious rituals are also in need of change:

some rituals have become so familiar that they have lost much of their power to move or to convey authentic belief and conviction. Some are out-of-touch with everyday experience, some reiterate

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9) In this article the terms ritualizing, ritual making, and ritual (re)design are used, which all refer to the creative activity of making new or renewed rituals. For the sake of clarity, I will use the term ritualizing in the broadest sense, referring to all activities involved in emerging rituals (spontaneous and planned). Ritual making is used here to refer to more conscious and planned ritualizing, such as by professionals, volunteers or families. Ritual (re)design is used here in terms of concrete creating, imagining and crafting ritual form for a specific context.

10) Arie L. Molendijk, “In Pursuit of the Postsecular,” *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 76 (2) (2015): 100-115, doi: [10.1080/21692327.2015.1053403](https://doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2015.1053403).

11) As de Wildt (2014) rightly states, literal invariance in ritual does not exist. The same action can be performed and experienced in various ways, even among the same ritual participants.

12) Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Ronald L. Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); William M. Jr. McCorkle, *Ritualizing the Disposal of the Deceased: From Corpse to Concept* (New York: Peter Lang; 2010); Joanna Wojtkowiak, “Ritualizing pregnancy and childbirth in secular societies,” *Religions* 11(9) (2020): 458, doi: [10.3390/rel11090458](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11090458).

dogma which the participants can no longer subscribe to, and some elements of contemporary experience are not touched by ritual at all.<sup>13</sup>

While the focus of the current article is mainly on ritualizing in post-secular, Western contexts, religiosity cannot be ignored in the understanding of emerging rituals. Religious and spiritual practices often reflect a “pragmatic plurality”,<sup>14</sup> which means that within one ritual different worldviews can be present among participants, rather than representing one exclusive worldview.<sup>15</sup>

Ritualizing occurs when existing rituals appear to be unfitting in changing societal contexts or when a proper ritual is simply non-existent<sup>16</sup>. Those who are central in these new rituals (e.g. families, clients) might be preferring a more individualized approach to a life event (such as in personalized funerals) or are asking for a ritual that represents a diversity of cultural and religious backgrounds (e.g. multi-faith weddings or remembrance ceremonies after an international disaster). Furthermore, ritualizing occurs when initiatives lead to new rituals, such as memorial services in nursing homes.<sup>17</sup> Ritualizing can be co-conducted by professionals, such as chaplains, (secular) celebrants, civil servants, teachers, nurses, volunteers, and other professionals, together with clients or groups of people who have been confronted with transitional life events or who are looking for ways to celebrate an event in a meaningful way (e.g. municipality, school, soccer club).

Ritualizing thus refers to a broad spectrum of activities of ritual creativity and does not only refer to newly designed rituals. Sometimes elements are spontaneously added to an existing ritual (such as clapping hands during funerals in the Netherlands) that will ‘stick’ with future rituals. Rituals can emerge spontaneously and become visible through digital channels (when a ritual act goes viral and is repeated throughout the world, e.g. clapping for healthcare workers during the Covid pandemic). Spontaneous ritualizing occurs when new elements are added to the ritual that was not planned.

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13) Jan Berry, *Ritual making women: Shaping rites for changing lives (Gender, theology and spirituality)* (London: Routledge, 2009), 8.

14) Nancy T. Ammerman, “The Challenges of Pluralism: Locating Religion in a World of Diversity,” *Social Compass* 57 (2) (2010): 154-67, doi: [10.1177/0037768610362406h](https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768610362406h).

15) “Worldview” is understood here in line with Droogers who defines the term: as a frame that gives answers to ultimate questions of what is considered beautiful, good, true, significant, and authentic, which can be both secular and religious. André Droogers, “Chapter 2. The world of worldviews”, in *Methods for the study of religious change. From religious to worldview studies*, ed. A. Droogers and A. Van Harskamp (South Yorkshire: Equinox, 2011), 17.

16) Paul Post and Martin Hoondert, “Chapter 1. Introduction,” in *Absent Ritual. Exploring the Ambivalence and Dynamics of Ritual*, ed. P. Post and M. Hoondert (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press 2019), 3.

17) Sandra DeForge, “In Memory of Loved Ones Who Have Enriched Our Lives: Helping Staff Create and Hold Memorial Services in Nursing Homes,” *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy* 8 (1-2) (1998): 109-16.

Ritual professionals can become aware of the possibilities of new and renewed rituals and further develop their ritual repertoire. People can learn to ritualize and become ritually sensitive to approach existential and spiritual transitions in ritually meaningful ways. Chaplains are by all means professionals who are ritually competent and who have also been challenged to reinvent rituals, such as during the Covid pandemic. Recent research from the Netherlands reveals that 74% of chaplains provide worship services or ‘contemplative meetings’<sup>18</sup> very frequently to regularly, and 50% provide ritual counseling, such as last rites, very often or regularly.<sup>19</sup> The extent to which rituals are part of daily practice differs in terms of different work fields and worldviews in chaplaincy. Another study from the Netherlands reveals a shift in the attitudes of chaplains from professionals offering specific, religious pastoral care, to being more general spiritual caregivers,<sup>20</sup> which also includes rituals in a broader sense. In the current work context of chaplains, there is a plea for performing new rituals for various groups with different worldviews, such as in moments of crisis, next to the more traditional work. Therefore, chaplains, as well as other professionals working with rituals and questions of meaning, are in need of both knowledge about ritual making and skills for integrating new rituals into their work.<sup>21</sup>

## 2 A framework for professional ritual making

In a previous study among six secular celebrant training programs from four Western-European countries (UK, Switzerland, Norway, Denmark) questions were asked about what kind of skills celebrants need to acquire to accompany secular and humanist life-cycle rituals.<sup>22</sup> The main outcome of the study revealed three steps of ritual making: (a) communication, (b) ritual design, and (c) performance.<sup>23</sup> Communication refers to being a “good listener”, “building rapport”, and being “considerate”, “helpful”, “accessible” and “non-judgmental”.<sup>24</sup> The ritual design was summarized in terms of creativity,

18) In Dutch: ‘*bezinningbijeekomsten*’.

19) Tina Glasner, Carmen Schuhmann, Wander van der Vaart, and Gaby Jacobs, “Levensbeschouwing, Samenwerking en Profileren. Onderzoek naar de Beroepsidentiteit van Geestelijk Verzoekers bij de VGVZ,” *Tijdschrift Geestelijke Verzorging* 23 (99) (2020): 10-20.

20) Tina Glasner, Carmen Schuhmann, and Renske Kruizinga, “The Future of Chaplaincy in a Secularized Society: A Mixed-Methods Survey from the Netherlands,” *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy* (2022): 1-13, doi: [10.1080/08854726.2022.2040894](https://doi.org/10.1080/08854726.2022.2040894).

21) At the University of Humanistic Studies in the Netherlands, a one-year celebrant training program teaches diverse professionals to (re)design rituals professionally. See [Introductie – Kenniscentrum Universiteit voor Humanistiek \(uvh.nl\)](https://www.uvh.nl), accessed October 4, 2022.

22) Wojtkowiak, Knibbe and Goossensen, 2018.

23) Other more specific skills noted in this research were professional, practical and organizational skills, as well as representing a specific humanist organization and behaving accordingly to the values of that organization.

24) Wojtkowiak Knibbe and Goossensen, 2018, 85.

knowledge of ritual time and structure, finding the right tone or language, and balance of ritual elements (e.g. verbal and non-verbal). Performance was identified in terms of performing the ritual naturally and authentically, learning how to use one’s tone of voice, as well as leadership skills. This previous research offers the first building block for understanding contemporary ritual making in more detail. These three steps have been furthermore elaborated on in a practical book on ritual in chaplaincy (see Table 1).<sup>25</sup> The first step is to identify the ritual cause, theme, or motive,<sup>26</sup> the second is the actual ritual (re)design and the final step is the ritual performance. In this section, I want to further elaborate on these steps from a theoretical perspective.

**Table 1.** Practical framework for professional ritual making \*

Ritual cause, theme, motive ** Why this ritual?	Ritual (re)design)	Ritual performance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify ritual cause through</li> <li>• Intuition</li> <li>• Observation</li> <li>• Conversation</li> <li>• Research</li> <li>• Intake interview (by phone or on location)</li> <li>• Open conversation</li> <li>• Survey</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ritual identity and worldview orientation</li> <li>• Who is central in this ritual? Wat are the core values?</li> <li>• What is the theme of the ritual?</li> <li>• Wat is the emotional curve? (From sadness to hope?)</li> <li>• Use of inspirational material</li> <li>• Use of creativity, intuition, imagination</li> <li>• Ritual structure, form, and time scheme</li> <li>• Who? What? Where? When? How?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Natural stage presence</li> <li>• Use of tone and voice</li> <li>• What to wear?</li> <li>• Leadership skills, be visible during ritual and be invisible to give space for core participants</li> <li>• Improvisational ability</li> <li>• Organizational ability</li> <li>• Practice in advance</li> <li>• Instruct volunteers</li> </ul>

\* Translated into English, originally in Dutch: Wojtkowiak, 2021.

\*\* or ritual need in terms of the existential, spiritual, social, societal, and political question.

The practical framework poses more theoretical questions (see Table 2), which will be discussed in this section.

25) Translated into English, originally in Dutch: Wojtkowiak, 2021.

26) The term “ritual need” has also been used, but is complicated and does not entirely fit here. People are often not aware of what their needs are and find it difficult to express these needs. What is more, in secular and humanist contexts, the term “ritual” is not always appreciated and is often related to traditional religion. Instead of speaking of ritual, the professional might refer to a special moment, a moment of reflection, or getting together to “do something”.

**Table 2.** Questions in contemporary ritual making.

	Questions
Communicating ritual theme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the need for this ritual? Who expresses the need (client(s), organization, community)?</li> <li>• What is the central theme of ritual?</li> <li>• How does the ritual relate to a broader sense and (cultural) frame of meaning?</li> <li>• Are there existing symbols, metaphors, and symbolic language/gestures that</li> </ul>
Ritual (re) design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the central function of this ritual? (e.g. rites of transformation, separation, incorporation, recognition, contemplation)?</li> <li>• What are the most important parts/symbolic gestures of the ritual? What is the highlight/climax of the ritual? Where is the ritual tension building up? When is the emotional catharsis?</li> <li>• Which symbol is suitable for (a) need/question and (b) client(s) or community? Is there one central symbol?</li> <li>• Are all ritual elements considered?<sup>1</sup>  <b>Place:</b> Where does the ritual take place?  <b>Time:</b> How long is the ritual? What is the pace of the ritual? How much time do you need to build the catharsis? How often is the ritual performed (ritual frequency)?  <b>Action:</b> What kind of actions are part of the ritual? Who performs the ritual? What actors are performing what kind of actions?  <b>Objects:</b> What objects are used? How do the objects add to the dramatization and stage-presentation of the ritual?  <b>Actors:</b> Who participates in the ritual? Who speaks, acts? Who listens?  <b>Language:</b> What kind of (symbolic) language is used? Does the language fit the ritual participants? Does language help to cognitive simplification?<sup>2</sup></li> <li>• Is there a willingness to participate? Is there an "accepted conventional procedure"?<sup>3</sup>                      Is the ritual a safe space? Can actors withdraw if some parts are too intense?</li> <li>• What is the bodily infrastructure of the ritual?</li> </ul>
Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the performance authentic?<sup>4</sup> Genuine?<sup>5</sup></li> <li>• Are the ritual actor(s) "properly authorized" and under "proper circumstances"?                      Is the ritual performed "correctly" and "completely"?<sup>6</sup></li> <li>• What should be done differently next time?</li> </ul>

1 Grimes, "The Craft of Ritual Studies," 237.

2 Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance between Ritual and Strategy," in *Social Performance. Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Bernhard Giesen, Jason L. Mast (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Robbie Davis-Floyd, "Rituals," in *International encyclopedia of the social sciences* (second edition), ed. W.A. Darity (Detroit: Macmillan, 2008).

3 Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1999), 124.

4 Alexander, "Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance between ritual and strategy".

5 Carl R. Rogers, "Necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change," *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 44(3) (2007/1957): doi: 10.1037/0033-3204.44.3.240.

6 Rappaport, *Ritual and religion in the making of humanity*.

In order to understand how to identify a ritual theme or cause, we need to further elaborate on what rituals do. Rituals give society three “gifts”; they create a social order in moments of transition, a (temporary) community, and accompany a transformation, such as the transition from one (social) status to another.<sup>27</sup> As a ritual specialist, you may find that there is a need for a greater sense of community or to emphasize certain transitions, or to highlight something that has remained in the dark. Ritual is a broad term and refers to different ritual modes, such as ceremony, liturgy, or celebration.<sup>28</sup> In addition to daily, smaller rituals (such as prayer or meditation), ceremonies (such as a funeral or memorial service), celebrations (such as New Year’s Eve or celebrating spring), or weekly reflections may be part of the ritual repertoire of ritual professionals. New ritual moments can also be discovered, such as in cases of moral injury,<sup>29</sup> disenfranchised grief (e.g. divorce, death of ex-partner), new life transitions (e.g. transgender transition, adoption), or rituals in organizations.<sup>30</sup> From a cognitive perspective, frequent rituals, such as weekly religious services, work on our implicit memory, are routinized, and might therefore also “reinforce the status quo” within a specific group (dogmatic mode of religiosity).<sup>31</sup> Infrequent rituals, such as remembrance rituals or rites of passage are less frequent, work more on our episodic memory, lead to higher arousal (imagistic mode of religiosity), and might therefore focus more on dynamics and transitions within a specific group. In ritual making, the frequency of the ritual is related to its function and how the ritual is to be designed.

Rituals have been described as a specific way of cultural, symbolic communication.<sup>32</sup> Unlike cognitive, verbal narrative, or individual conversation, rituals provide an embodied, symbolic, imaginative, and aesthetic perspective on lived experiences, which often have a social component.<sup>33</sup> Rituals create

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27) Driver, 1999, 132.

28) Grimes, “The Craft of Ritual Studies,” 312.

29) Guus van Loenen, “‘Zolang Ik Zweeg Teerden Mijn Botten Weg’. Culturele En Morele Aspecten in Een Casus Geestelijke Verzorging,” in *Weerloos - Weerbaar. Culturele En Morele Aspecten van Verlies*, ed. R. van Uden and L. Vergouwen (Tilburg: KSGV, 2018), 40-54; Tine Molendijk, “Oude En Nieuwe Rituelen Voor Moral Injury,” *Religie & Samenleving* 12 (2/3) (2018): 221-229, doi: [10.54195/RS.12119](https://doi.org/10.54195/RS.12119).

30) Fatih Kursat Ozenc and Margaret Hagan, “Ritual Design: Crafting Team Rituals for Meaningful Organizational Change,” *Advances in Intelligent Systems and Computing* 585 (2018): 146-57, doi: [10.1007/978-3-319-60495-4\\_16](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-60495-4_16); Gazi Islam and Michael J. Zyphur, “Rituals in Organizations: A Review and Expansion of Current Theory,” *Group and Organization Management* 34 (1) (2009): 114-39, doi: [10.1177/1059601108329717](https://doi.org/10.1177/1059601108329717).

31) Grimes, “The Craft of Ritual Studies,” Harvey Whitehouse, *Modes of religiosity. A cognitive theory of religious transmission* (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press: 2004).

32) Gerard Lukken, *Rituelen in Overvloed - Een Kritische Bezinning Op de Plaats En de Gestalte van Het Christelijke Ritueel in Onze Cultuur* (Baarn: Gooi en Sticht, 1999).

33) Gerald C. Cupchik, “The Evolution of Psychic Distance as an Aesthetic Concept,” *Culture and Psychology* 20 (4) (2002): 99-102, doi: [10.1177/13567X02008002437](https://doi.org/10.1177/13567X02008002437); Thomas J. Scheff, “The Distancing of Emotion in Ritual,” *Current Anthropology* 18 (3) (1977): 483-94, retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2741403>, October 4, 2022; Joanna Wojtkowiak, “Towards a Psychology of Ritual: A Theoretical Framework of Ritual

a sense of community through acting synchronically with other ritual actors. Rituals slow down daily life and consciously pay attention to certain life events. These life events can be surrounded by sadness and pain, but also beauty and joy. Authors emphasize that rituals and symbols are suitable when being confronted with the mystery of existence (e.g. death, birth, love, or wonder)<sup>34</sup> because rituals do not provide a direct answer to questions of meaning. Instead, rituals speak to these questions and experiences through a “detour”. By using imagery, symbolism, and symbolic actions, rituals create a physical and psychological space to act, but also leave participants to have their own interpretations of the used symbolism. Some rituals, however, provide clear behavioral directions or ethical frameworks, for example, in many cultures, after a wedding ceremony people are expected not to have other sexual relations.

When new or renewed rituals occur, those involved in the ritual planning (celebrants, chaplains, clergy) need to communicate about the ritual adjustments or ritual design. Ritualizing can be seen as a “co-creation of meaning”,<sup>35</sup> because the meaning of the ritual is co-created by participants during the ritual as well as those who were involved in the ritual making beforehand. The ritual emerges through various influences from those directly involved, as well as those leading or creating the ritual.

Communicating about the ritual theme or cause, means communicating about wishes, world-views and meaning systems. What kind of attitude is helpful for celebrants or ritual makers to be open, non-judgmental, built rapport, and be of service to those whom the ritual is for?<sup>36</sup> The notion of “client knowledge” has been used in counselling literature to stress that clients know themselves better than the therapist and a goal of therapy would be to use that knowledge in the counseling or therapy.<sup>37</sup> Ritual making is not therapy or counselling, although rituals are used in therapeutic contexts. Nevertheless, the notion of client knowledge does apply to ritual making, as the ritual maker needs to investigate the language, symbols and meanings of a specific person or group. The celebrant can use the self-knowledge that people have in order to create ritual elements that are recognizable, emotionally sufficient and meaningful to that specific group. But how can that be achieved?

A classical theory that focuses on building a sensitive attitude in interpersonal communication is Rogers’ person-centered therapy.<sup>38</sup> Rogers argues that the quality of the relationship between client and therapist (or in this case celebrant) lies at the center of any significant transition process and should therefore always be kept in mind. There needs to be psychological contact between two

Transformation in a Globalising World,” *Culture and Psychology* 24 (4) (2018): doi: 10.1177/1354067X18763797.

34) Herman de Dijn, *Rituelen. Waarom Wij Niet Zonder Kunnen* (Antwerpen: Polis, 2018); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1973).

35) Kenneth J. Gergen, *Relational Being. Beyond Self and Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 397.

36) Wojtkowiak, Knibbe and Goossensen, 2018.

37) John McLeod “Developing pluralistic practice in counselling and psychotherapy: Using what the client knows,” *The European Journal of Counselling Psychology* 2(1) (2013): 51, doi: 10.23668/psycharchives.1999.

38) Rogers, “Necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change”.

people and the professional feels genuine empathy and responds in a positive way toward the client. Genuineness also means verbalizing when one has doubt about specific elements, does not understand certain choices or feels unease. For instance, when a group is involved in the ritual planning, but there is one voice dominating the ritual making process, the celebrant needs to mention concerns during the ritualizing process. This also means being emotionally involved in the ritual making and performance, without one's emotions taking over. Empathy is about putting the other at the center of their own experience, not about one's own emotions.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, while we try to connect with the other person, and try to understand them, we can never fully grasp what they are experiencing. Therefore, we need to be aware of the non-knowledge as well. Always remain critical: do I really understand what this person is feeling?

Next to identifying the ritual theme or cause, the actual ritual (re)design is taking place. One crucial aspect of ritual making is knowledge of ritual form and structure. Grimes' ritual elements can be helpful here: what ingredients does a ritual consist of?<sup>40</sup> Grimes writes about the smallest entity in ritual (ritual elements): action, place, time, actors, language, and objects. Having knowledge of these ritual ingredients helps in brainstorming what is needed for a ritual. But the elements alone do not make a ritual. There needs to be a bigger, coherent narrative told during the ritual. Rituals have tension and an antagonistic curve of meaning.<sup>41</sup> Meaning is not just "presented", but enacted. This includes presenting contrasting views, as well as ambiguous emotions that people feel in existentially meaningful moments (e.g. sadness and gratefulness, love and fear, guilt and relief). Rituals embrace ambiguity by using the symbolic form and esthetic translations. The ritual structure also needs to be considered: how long is the ritual? What is the emotional curve in the ritual? Where do we start and where do we want to go during the ritual? What is the most important moment (e.g. what action does the ritual build up to)? The ritual structure often builds up to a catharsis<sup>42</sup> that leads to a central symbolic act at almost the end of the ritual.<sup>43</sup> After these main emotional moments, the ritual often ends or dissolves into another part of the ritual (e.g. after the "Yes" or wedding vows during a wedding, the catharsis is felt when people clap, and in some cultures the couple kisses). In new rituals, it might be difficult to know what the main point is (because it has not been invented yet), but it can help to have a signal point to work the ritual around.

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39) Martha C. Nussbaum, *Political Emotions. Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013).

40) Grimes, "The Craft of Ritual Studies".

41) Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance between Ritual and Strategy," in *Social Performance. Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Bernhard Giesen, Jason L. Mast (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

42) Scheff, "The Distancing of Emotion in Ritual"; Wojtkowiak, "Towards a Psychology of Ritual: A Theoretical Framework of Ritual Transformation in a Globalising World".

43) Gordon-Lennox, "Emerging Ritual in Secular Societies: A Transdisciplinary Conversation".

Creativity is necessary for ritual (re)design. While creativity occurs at the most unexpected moments, it can be guided. Creativity relates to at least three factors: experience, motivation, and creative thinking skills.<sup>44</sup> All of these can be learned and improved, and we can establish conditions to boost our own creativity (e.g. switch off phones and e-mail, block at least 1 ½ hours to work on a bigger project). Knowledge of ritual traditions adds to the celebrant’s experience with ritual and can improve creative thinking skills.

The performance is the final part of the process ritual making. One day the ritual is enacted. Good performance means that ritual participants acts from sincere intentions<sup>45</sup>, genuineness<sup>46</sup>, and that the performance is correct and complete by ritual actors who are “properly authorized”.<sup>47</sup> Planning a ritual in detail does not mean that the ritual will go exactly as planned. There needs to be room for spontaneity and improvisation as well. Using a framework in the ritual making does not mean that the entire ritualizing process can be planned and structured. A ritual is an embodied experience, and the present bodies of participants determine how the ritual feels and whether or not the ritual ‘succeeds’. Performing a ritual for the first time is the most important test and critically evaluating one’s work afterward can help to improve the ritual in the future.

### 3 Dynamics and tensions in contemporary ritual making

Ritualizing leads to new and renewed rituals. On the one hand, ritual changes are reactions to the context in which ritualizing is taking place: cultural and societal changes have led to ritualizing. On the other hand, ritual making can bring forward some tensions within the ritual, as well as the context of the ritual. Being aware of these tensions can help in (re)designing rituals and choosing which approach is fitting within a specific context. The dynamics and tensions are summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Dynamics and tensions in contemporary ritual making

Recognizable, repetitive	<----->	Individualized, unique
Introduce new elements	<----->	Use existing ritual elements
Design from form and material	<----->	Design from intended meanings
Unity, coherence in ritual	<----->	Representative for pluralistic, multifaith community

First of all, (re-)inventing rituals on the basis of individual choice can lead to tension with a collective or higher meaning the ritual refers to. Dutch theologian Lukken writes in relation to the use of rituals

44) David J. Brinkman “Teaching creatively and teaching for creativity,” *Arts Education Policy Review*, 111 (2010): 48-50.

45) Alexander, “Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance between Ritual and Strategy”.

46) Rogers, “Necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change”.

47) Rappaport, “Ritual and the Religion in the Making of Humanity,” 124.

in psychotherapy that there is a “tension field between the repetitive character of ritual, which refers to a higher connection and broader context, and the creativity within the ritual.”<sup>48</sup> Ritual dynamics in ritualizing can become tensions in terms of ritual structure and the interpretation of the ritual by participants or a broader audience. When the ritual is collective and public (instead of privately conducted for one individual), tensions might rise to a broader audience. When the ritual is centered around one specific person, choosing an individual symbol is more obvious. What can help in dealing with this tension is to learn more about ritual symbolism in general.<sup>49</sup> What symbols speak to a larger group within a specific cultural community?

Second, related to the first tension, the new, chosen symbols and acts need to speak for themselves; the form needs to be strong. In new rituals, new elements and symbols are introduced, which sometimes leads to an over-verbalization of the ritual. Too many instructions and explanations can lead to a rational and cognitive focus in the ritual (e.g. too much “first we are going to ..., then we are going to ...”). It is a subtle craft to use elements that people recognize as meaningful, for instance by creating aesthetic distance.<sup>50</sup> Symbols have multiple meanings and thus speak to more than they appear to do, but they need to speak for themselves, without too many verbal explanations (“this means this..., that means that...”). Strong symbols have physical characteristics, that represent the meaning dimensions.

This leads us to the third tension. New rituals are intended to have a certain broader or collective meaning; they emerge because people feel the need to do something with that experience. Having a sense of what the broader meaning is in a highly individualized ritual (see also first tension) is important, but at the same time, it might focus the designing process on abstract meanings and might distract from the material, and sensory form. Meanings should not be explained, but need to be felt. Dutch humanist Van Praag wrote about refraining from a “meeting style” in humanist rituals where the chair opens a meeting in an administrative way.<sup>51</sup> Van Praag writes that contemplative meetings are for the heart and should not stress the rational, cognitive interpretation of the experience.

As new rituals introduce new symbols while sometimes using elements that are part of many other rituals (e.g. water, earth, candle), these new symbols have to be ritualized: the meaning arises from the ritual, not from telling ritual participants what the meaning is. Rituals embrace ambiguities, they do not need to be straightened out, which is why symbols are helpful, as they can represent different things (e.g. a candle can give light in the dark, warmth, but is also temporal, it creates a certain atmosphere, it has beauty, and for some it has associations with Christian liturgy). A symbol is multivo-

48) Lukken, “Rituelen in Overvloed,” 64.

49) See, for instance, Grimes, “The Craft of Ritual Studies,” 320.

50) Wojtkowiak, “Towards a Psychology of Ritual: A Theoretical Framework of Ritual Transformation in a Globalising World”.

51) Jaap van Praag, *Geestelijke verzorging op humanistische grondslag* (Utrecht: Humanistisch Verbond, 1953).

cal. The ritualizing of the symbol, how we treat it in the ritual, creates the meaning.

Fourth, new rituals need to be coherent, to have a bigger narrative or to refer to a broader meaning. In other words, rituals put the individual experience into a broader frame. At the same time, rituals are increasingly created for multifaith communities and therefore the question of inclusivity is of importance here. The question is: who is the ritual community? And how is inclusivity ritualized? Do all religions need to be mentioned and represented? Working with new rituals, especially in interreligious contexts, requires high cultural and religious sensitivity.

Cadge and Sigalow have identified two strategies that chaplains working in interfaith settings use: (1) neutralizing religious and worldview differences and (2) code-switching between different religious languages.<sup>52</sup> The first occurs when a chaplain tries to focus on the human aspect of the encounter and the use of broad language. In the second, code-switching, the chaplain tries to use religious language that fits the individual patient, though it might not be the religious language of the chaplain. An example is, for instance, having an emergency baptism in the neonatal unit by a Jewish chaplain. New rituals also show both strategies: some try to neutralize differences by speaking a general language, addressing all humans, while others code-switch between different worldviews and religions.

Multiple worldviews can be represented within one ritual, but can also be a potential source of conflict. Even within secular contexts, there lives a variety of pluralistic ideas about meaning in life. People can have agnostic, atheistic, or spiritual-religious notions of meaning that are not always clearly exclusive. The ritual identity is an important pillar for the ritual, but ritual identities can be pluralistic.

Another critical issue concerns the reuse of existing ritual elements (e.g. texts, objects, or concepts from specific religious or cultural traditions). Renewed rituals often consist of a mix of old and new rituals. In our globalized world, we have knowledge and access to other cultures and worldviews. This can be a source of inspiration for new rituals, but there are also dangers lurking here. Cultural appropriation is gaining attention in Western societies and should also be included in the reflection and recreation of rituals. Which existing ritual elements (such as text, symbol and actions) can and cannot be “reused” and why? How to contextualize the material that is used within the ritual? Existing rituals can serve as a source of inspiration, but ‘copying and pasting’ existing rituals, especially when it concerns rituals that do not belong to one’s own cultural background, is tricky and might even be misunderstood. Ritual makers recommend being “true to material” and using ritual elements that one is familiar with and not those that are exotic and from far abroad.<sup>53</sup>

Similar to Ammerman,<sup>54</sup> De Wildt argues in her study on religious rituals in schools that pluralism is a natural state in contemporary ritual practices.<sup>55</sup> However, it depends on how one deals with plural-

52) Wendy Cadge and Emily Sigalow, “Negotiating Religious Differences: The Strategies of Interfaith Chaplains in Healthcare,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 52(1) (2013): 146-158, doi: 10.1111/jssr.12008.

53) Gordon-Lennox, “Emerging Ritual in Secular Societies: A Transdisciplinary Conversation”.

54) Ammerman, “The Challenges of Pluralism: Locating Religion in a World of Diversity”.

55) Kim De Wildt, *With all senses: Something for body and mind. An empirical study of religious ritual in school*

ism in ritual, especially ritual in public space. The ritual can be multireligious (“we learn about different worldviews”) or interreligious (“we learn from/through various worldviews”).<sup>56</sup> In the ritual form, one chooses how to represent ritual identity. Is one/are more worldviews named explicitly? Are the chosen symbols implicitly representing one (or more) worldviews? What ritual forms are chosen?

Van Boeijen and Zijlstra argue that we need to be aware of the fact that every design is essentially culturally sensitive.<sup>57</sup> For instance, the person who creates the ritual has a specific cultural identity, the participants have cultural identities, the objects, place, actions, and words or texts also represent a specific culture. Culturally sensitive design starts with being aware of one’s own cultural identity and then integrating this with the wishes and preferences of ritual participants, the individual, organization or group who are central in the ritual.

## 4 Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this article was to shed some light on the process of ritual making from the perspective of ritual theory. A practical framework (see Table 1) was discussed from ritual theory, which led to questions for the celebrant to consider (Table 2). The framework is not meant to be presented as a final model. Instead, it is meant to start the conversation about contemporary ritual making from a theoretical perspective. Contemporary ritual making leads to dynamics and possible tensions (Table 3). Research into contemporary ritual making is starting to become more present and there are still many questions to be considered.

While ritualizing does introduce new elements and symbols, it does take place within a specific cultural context with a specific ritual tradition. Western European societies, in this article studied from postsecular perspectives, have a tradition of Christian religiosity and rituals, and therefore ritualizing is also influenced by these traditions. Another concern is that an individualized approach to rituals might distract from societal and collective questions and meanings. Having an individualized ritual to deal with a hurtful or traumatic experience does not take away how society treats those who are hurt. For instance, rituals regarding the migrant crisis might be created to transition into the new situation, but ritualizing this transition does not solve that humans are put into this situation in the first place. This also poses the question: whose voices remain silent and unheard in rituals?<sup>58</sup> What kind of groups are not represented by ritual in our society? Rituals express collective meaning and tell us what is

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(Jena: edition Peidei, 2014).

56) There are more categories possible, for instance, mono-religious ritual, which might take place within religious ritual making. However, the focus of this article is on ritual making in postsecular contexts.

57) Annemiek van Boeijen and Yvo Zijlstra, *Culture Sensitive Design: A Guide to Culture in Practice* (Amsterdam: BIS Publishers, 2020).

58) I would like to thank my colleague Carmen Schuhmann for suggesting that question.

important to us. “Performances show how a culture or community aims to portray itself in public.”<sup>59</sup> Especially in societies that want to acknowledge painful history, such as increasing the awareness of the decolonization of society, we should ask ourselves what kind of collective rituals and celebrations our society wants to embody and represent? In the Netherlands, for instance, there is growing attention towards celebrating the end of slavery as a national holiday, which would be an example of the political dimension of contemporary ritual making. Who has the power to decide what kind of collective holidays are celebrated?

Another question is: in what respect is designing a ritual similar to designing a product (e.g. table or chair)? When it comes to creativity, celebrants and ritual makers can learn from, for example, methods in design studies, how to improve their design process.<sup>60</sup> There are various techniques that can help in defining the ritual theme or cause, and visualizing the ritual scenes. But the ritual is a more complex “product” because the meaning arises from the enactment of time, place, and people in action. The celebrant can put all ingredients into the ritual, but the actual meaning and ritual experiences only arise when the ritual is performed. What is more, rituals are taking place within (cultural) frames for meaning making and worldviews that the celebrant is only partially aware of. Similar to a product, people might not be satisfied with the finished ritual and evaluating one’s ideas and ritual making process can improve future rituals.

These are some issues regarding contemporary ritual making that need more research. In the future, more research from theory and empirical research could further develop the framework for contemporary ritual making. For instance, by asking professionals, such as chaplains, celebrants, or other spiritual caregivers, what kind of intuition or methods they use in the re-creation of rituals. Next to professionals, people whom the rituals are for need to be consulted. It remains a challenge in ritual studies to capture how people experience ritual, as the embodied experience is only temporary. This can only partly be studied by observation, and also interviewing those who were present during the ritual always ‘only’ entails the reflection on that experience, and not the experience itself. It would be interesting to develop new research methods that give more attention to the sensory experience of ritual, which has already been taking place in, for instance, psychological experiments.

Research into contemporary ritual making is slowly gaining more interest in academia and beyond, and much more theoretical and empirical research is needed to open the black box of ritualizing. This theoretical review has shed new light on some of the processes involved in contemporary ritual making.

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59) De Wildt, “*With all senses: Something for body and mind,*” 38

60) Annemiek van Boeijen, Jaap Daalhuizen and Jelle Zijlstra, *Delft Design Guide. Perspectives - Models - Approaches - Methods* (BIS Publishers, 2014).

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