CHAPTER SIX

MATRIMONY: VALUES AND RITUAL,
AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF THE RELATION BETWEEN
MATRIMONIAL VALUES AND NOTIONS ABOUT
THE FORM OF ECCLESIASTIC MARRIAGE RITES

Remco Robinson and Hans Schilderman

1 Introduction and Research Questions

Ever since scientists first became interested in the phenomenon of ritual, the spotlight in ritual studies has fallen on certain pivotal moments in human life. After Arnold van Gennep published his seminal work in 1909, rites of passage emerged as a separate category. Marriage is a major ritual marking a crucial transition in human life. At least one of the partners leaves his or her old situation to embark on a new one. This change can have a tremendous impact. Yet marriage and marriage rituals in Western Europe are not uncontroversial.

When we look at developments in the area of marriage and cohabitation, the question immediately arises: what is happening to marriage? The number of marriages in Europe has declined from 3.3 million in 1972 to 2.2 million in 2004. Taking into account a population growth of 8%, it means that the number of marriages per 1000 inhabitants dropped from 7.9 in 1972 to 4.8 in 2004. In addition people are marrying later. The average age for women has risen from 23 to 27. The number of divorces has quadrupled, from 0.6 per 1000 inhabitants in 1960 to 1.9 in 2002. On average divorces happen 11 to 12 years after marriage (Eurostat 2004, 15–128).

Marriage as we know it in Western Europe today may be regarded as a stage in a long-term, cultural historical evolution. Before the Industrial Revolution most people still lived in extended families comprising two or more generations. They jointly earned a livelihood, so marriage involved all members of the family. Partners were often chosen by parents on economic grounds. As a result of the Industrial Revolution and concomitant urbanisation this unit was disrupted and the nuclear family, comprising parents and their children, emerged (Kaa & Lesthaege
170 1986, 9–12). After all, wage earning meant that people no longer had to rely on several generations for their livelihood. It also meant that they could choose their own marriage partners. Physical and emotional attraction became the main motives for marrying (Allan & Crow 2001, 56–62; Klein & White 1996, 49–58).

In the 1960s social change proceeded apace. Numerous social movements (human rights, student, pacifist, civil rights, gay rights and especially feminist movements) shook the foundation of the nuclear family. It became clear that marriage and the family were not necessarily the ideal societal form (Aulette 1994, 11–14; Kaa & Lesthaege 1986, 12–24). In fact, one might say that the individualisation process that started during the Industrial Revolution with the break-up of the extended family into nuclear units had gone further. Whereas the basic societal unit used to be the family, it has now become the individual. As a result marriage lost its exclusive position and extramarital cohabitation, premarital and extramarital sex, illegitimate children and divorce became more and more common (Kaa & Lesthaege 1986, 12–24). Marriage assumed a new form as one of various societal forms.

Apart from the cultural historical form of marriage, the way couples experience their married state is important. Until the 1970s marriage in Western society was experienced as a pre-eminently Christian institution. Since the Middle Ages the church had tried to take control of marriage so as to prevent clandestine marriages. Ever since the end of the Roman Empire it was the sole agent that could administer marriage, however imperfect its system. Hence religion and marriage went hand in hand. The Reformation and the Council of Trent strengthened the—now various—churches’ control over marriage.1 The separation of church and state from the late 18th century onwards eventually made marriage the responsibility of civil authorities (in most countries). But until the 1970s the churches’ moral influence remained unimpaired.

All this changed in the latter half of the 20th century. Then secularisation and de-institutionalisation set in in most European countries. Throughout Europe the number of church members per generation declined. People also increasingly failed to practise their faith actively (attending church services, personal prayer, support). Finally faith itself

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1 Despite the Reformers’ view that marriage was a matter for civil authorities, practical factors and the civil authorities’ unwillingness to take responsibility for marriage meant that it remained in the churches’ hands (Brink, 1977, 113–118, 120–122, 129–139).