Affected by Ritual. Predictors of Agreement with Church Marriage Rites in The Netherlands

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Abstract
Why do couples opt for a church wedding ritual living in a modern secularized society. Based on the ritual form hypothesis of Lawson and McCauley, the authors identify the specific church wedding rites as special agent rituals and the rites that form the ritual framework of every eucharistic prayers (eucharistic rites) as special instrument rituals. The participants not only distinguished the church wedding rites from the eucharistic rites, but also discerned a third group of rites, musical rites. 26% of the participants were affected by the eucharistic rites, whereas 63% and 80% were affected respectively by the musical and church wedding rites. The research shows that different indicators of religious socialisation and conceptions of marriage predict the extent to which participants feel affected by the three types of rites. In the case of the musical and church marriage rites the sole influence is the importance attached to participation in ecclesiastic transitional rituals. Conceptions of marriage account for only a small part of the relation between religious socialisation and the extent to which people feel affected by church marriage rituals. Only in the case of the eucharistic rites religious socialisation and conceptions of marriage are decisive. The extent of affection by the church wedding rituals depends most on the importance the participants attach to ecclesiastic transitional rituals. The church is seen as a service institution that dispenses transitional rituals. In this way, the church helps maritile couples and their social environment to cope with the contingent elements of these pivotal moments.

Keywords
church wedding rituals, ritual form hypothesis, religious socialisation, conceptions of marriage

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1. Introduction

Why do people want to have a church marriage ritual? In modern society, marrying in the church has become a matter of choice (Berger, 1980). Some people opt for a church marriage ritual; others do not. Two major social processes have turned the institutions of marriage and the church into a private affair, i.e. an option rather than a necessity. Our modern society can be characterised by the process of individualisation. This process has influenced the religious domain in society and the church in particularly. This transformation of religion is known as secularisation. In line of the process of individualisation and secularisation, one would think that church marriage rites are declining in our society (section 1.1.). Nonetheless, people still opt for a church marriage. Why? Could this be the case because it is a special ritual, rich in symbols and metaphors, which in principle can happen to them only once? Are participants moved by this ritual, whether or not they belong to the church or not? (see 1.2) If church marriage rituals move the participants, it would explain why couples opt for a church marriage ritual despite the fact that church affiliation is low. On the basis of our reflection on the problem of our research, we will formulate two research questions (1.3).

What do we mean by “moved by rituals”? In section (2), we commence by discussing the two modes of religiosity of Whitehouse and the Ritual Form Hypothesis of McCauley and Lawson. We discuss the different rites out of which the church wedding ritual is made up. Then, we characterize the different rites of the church wedding ritual, using the Ritual Form Hypothesis. Our third section describes our research sample and the measuring instrument used to measure the extent of which the participants were affected by the different rites of the church wedding ritual. In our fourth section we describe the results of our empirical research regarding our forementioned research questions. We end our contribution with some tentative conclusions and questions for further research.

1.1 Declining Number of Church Marriage Ceremonies

Since the 1960s there has been a sharp drop in the number of church marriage ceremonies as a result of individualisation and especially secularisation.1

1 In the period from 1950 to 2000 the number of marriages in the Netherlands per 1000 males aged fifteen or older has dropped from 58.3 to 30.7 (Data obtained at http://statline.cbs.nl). In Europe the amount of weddings has dropped from 3.3 million in 1972 to 2.2 million in 2004. If we take a population growth of 8% into account, the amount of weddings per 1000 inhabitants has dropped from 7.9 to 4.2 over this period (Eurostat 2004).