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RITUAL PRAXIS. DEFINING PASSAGE RITES FROM AN ACTION PERSPECTIVE

Hans Schilderman

Conceptual Problem

Ritual is a primary expression of religious praxis. In that respect it has always offered a normative significance for the reflection of the faith. Since ages hence, the public expression of faith in liturgy may not always have occupied a cardinal position in reflection on faith, but it has always been focal to it.\(^1\) From a perspective of empirical theology, this offers one of the obvious motives to study ritual practice in liturgy with regard to its overt forms; its attitudinal foundation in belief and the actual ways in which people gain significance from liturgy for their faith and daily lives. Liturgy can be regarded as the public expression of religious attitudes in ritual actions, in which the meaning attributed to the ritual is explicitly and performatively embodied in ritual praxis (Bell 1997, 76–83; Garrigan 2004). Thus liturgical studies—taken as an empirical discipline—should at a basic level clarify both value orientations and ritual orientations and explain the processes of religious meaning according to which these values come to be ritualized. At the same time however, one has to include in this explanation the changing liturgical scenery in terms of the ritual actors in their respective context. In various modern countries liturgical practices undergo a process of religious de-institutionalisation that puts to debate the value and ritual orientations on the one hand and the processes of meaning giving on the other. Moral and religious values are questioned by processes of pluralisation and individualization and increasing numbers of people may look upon ritual as an irrational fit to contemporary norms of modern behaviour. Moreover, the processes of meaning giving are affected by the secularization process, leaving to doubt whatever significance religious

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\(^1\) This was traditionally expressed in aphorisms like ‘Ligem credendi lex statuit supplicandi’ (let the rule of worship determine the rule of faith; Pope Celestine I to the bishops of Gaul in 422) and ‘lex orandi, lex credendi’ (the rule of prayer is the rule of faith; Prosper of Aquitaine, also 5th century).
ritual may have had. To many people their reasons to participate in liturgy have grown unclear, as is illustrated by the sharp decline of church participation in the last decades in various countries of Europe. Thus one of the likely objects of empirical research in liturgical studies focuses at the issues that are at stake when participating in religious ritual located in modern contexts. In this particular research effort, liturgical studies may benefit from an interdisciplinary cooperation with scholars from sociology, anthropology, ritual and performance studies. What can we learn from this interdisciplinary discourse when we aim for an insight into what can be called a liturgical crisis of modern churches?

In this contribution, we will clarify and answer this question from a conceptual perspective by focussing on key rites: rites characterised by both great personal relevance for participants and great significance for the social structure of which these individuals are part. Among these key rites, the so-called rites of passage feature prominently, marking transitions such as those at the start of life, the choice of a marriage partner, and death. This article deals with these transitional rites, more particularly in relation to the process of de-institutionalisation in which they are caught up. A focal issue is whether classical definitions that describe such rites as rites of passage are still adequate. The classical term ‘rites of passage’ is well established. In several languages the French term ‘rites de passage’ has actually become part of colloquial speech. It refers to all kinds of ceremonial customs that mark transitions in the course of life. In scientific literature, too, the concept is entrenched. Yet anyone who traces its origin to the book Les rites de passage (1909) will find that the author, Van Gennep, does not really link it with theoretical or conceptual notions. It is simply an umbrella term without any great taxonomic pretensions, and Van Gennep uses it cautiously rather than with analytical fervour for classification. Although ‘rites of passage’ is a classical term in liturgical and ritual studies, its theoretical usefulness for contemporary research is questionable. This applies particularly to ritual studies based on empirical research, which is where conceptual validity—that is, the use of terms that describe empirical phenomena as accurately as possible—is especially important. In addition to these conceptual comments there is also a strategic motive for exploring the term’s applicability to research. Liturgical studies, which are increasingly conducted in the framework of religious studies, requires proper integration of the approaches of theology, religious studies and the social sciences. That is yet another fitting reason for theoretical debate
on the concept of rites of passage. Hence this article is to be seen as an invitation to such interdisciplinary debate.

One could ask what rites of passage actually are. What concept does the term refer to, and does that concept really convey what the empirical study is designed to measure? Of course, the question can be answered ex post facto. In that case we assume that our knowledge is incremental and that a clear image of the attributes of liturgical experience emerges in the course of the research. However, such an answer is rightly accused of inductivism: it generalises from the particular by dispensing with logical (rule-governed) explanations of the knowledge one has gained. That is why ex ante answers are so important: clear conceptual analysis at the outset ensures the feasibility of an empirical test that could falsify rule-governed assumptions. Put simply, every study requires clear formulation of the problem beforehand, even if only to preclude third order errors, that is, solving problems that were mis-conceptualised. In the rest of this article, therefore, we explore what rites of passage are and in how far definitions prior to empirical study enable us to gain proper understanding. In so doing we distinguish between the goal, form and meaning of rites of passage, and discuss their relationship in a short reflection on their institutional function.

**Defining Goals of Passage Rites**

What is the goal of rites of passage? Some authors maintain that rites have no goal at all: they are activities with intrinsic meaning that cannot be reduced to some function beyond the rite itself. But if one regards liturgical studies as an action science, the notion of a meaningless rite is a contradiction in terms. Liturgy is ritual behaviour that is by definition meaningful, and reconstructing that meaning is a primary goal of liturgical studies. The question of the goal of rites crops up regularly

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2 We adopt the accepted terminology that regards rite (ritual action) and ceremony (ritual action process) as action entities, and ritual and ceremonial as the concomitant prescriptions for action. For a survey of anthropological classification and definition problems see Bell (1997, 93–137). For such problems in regard to rites of passage see Snoek (1987, 57–89).

3 A third order error corrupts research by mis-conceptualising empirical reality before undertaking research, as distinct from first order errors which entail rejection of a valid null hypothesis, and second order errors that entail acceptance of an invalid null hypothesis (Dunn 1994, 184).
in research, since it is not always clear what transition is ritualised in the liturgy of baptism, marriage or burial. Does baptism ritualise new church membership, or the start of life and concomitant nurture? What is the real focus in a marriage ceremony—the institution of marriage or the quality of the relationship? Does a funeral service ritualise the deceased's transition from life to death or the grief of the relatives? The question underlying such obscurities concerns the influence of culture on the rite and the values motivating it. That is also the key question when it comes to the constant factor in rites of passage: what transition does it refer to?

A classical goal associated with rites is that of regulating status. Rites of passage are said to mark changes in the statuses and roles that people fulfil in the course of their lives. Status indicates the rights and duties associated with a given position in society. A role is such status in action, that is, a person's practice regarding rights and duties that more or less correspond with social expectations of a particular status. A rite of passage publicly recognises the transition from former to new status. The goal is to give the rights and duties associated with the new social position both a personal or attitudinal character and social recognition by the group which assigns that status. Ultimately, then, the goal of a rite of passage is socialisation. A pertinent point here is that such authors as Van Gennep, Eliade and Turner consistently use the term 'rites of passage' in a typically anthropological, and more specifically ethnological, conceptual context. They study rites of passage in the context of 'primitive' (in the sense of non-Western, premodern and institutionally more or less undifferentiated) cultures. This research strategy of studying rites of passage mainly in primitive cultures has diverse motives. One is that a focus on primitive peoples makes it possible to study the origin of cultures, and specifically of rites, in situ, thus affording insight into the phylogeny of ritual behaviour. Or it represents what Durkheim explicitly calls a 'simple case' that does not unnecessarily complicate the already difficult process of ritual research. Whatever the reasons for conceptualisation based on the study

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4 In religious studies the assumption that the adjective 'primitive' also means 'underdeveloped' has proved untenable. Tylor's view that primitive religion is based on logical (attribution) errors has been refuted by anthropologists like Levi-Strauss and Eliade, who prefer to speak of concrete thinking without losing sight of the complexity of primitive cultures.
of primitive cultures, the question is whether knowledge and insight generated by such research is relevant to the study of rites of passage in Western, modern and institutionally highly differentiated cultures. If rites of passage are regarded as social status regulation, one cannot but conclude that primitive and modern cultures differ fundamentally in this respect.

In the 1930s Linton made a distinction between ascribed and achieved status. According to him status is culturally ascribed on the basis of social points of reference like gender, age, family relationship or class. Ascribed status is culturally determined. It expresses occupation of more or less fixed social positions and is marked by highly predictable role behaviour. Status ascription occurs in all cultures but is particularly prevalent in primitive and traditional cultures. An achieved status, by contrast, is expressive of individual qualities and initiative, of competition and excellence. These statuses are readily changeable, which makes the normative character of social positions less unambiguous and the concomitant role behaviour less predictable. People are born, get married and die in social and cultural positions adapted to the requirements of time and place. In modern cultures status is variable and flexible. It is acquired and influenced by personal effort. A person's status is not primarily dependent on belonging to a community, tradition or language group, but on what he or she does with it through personal conduct. If—as we are assuming—rites of passage ritualise status transitions, then Linton's distinction is highly pertinent. In cultures predominantly characterised by ascribed status rites are a means of formally regulating and effecting social status transitions. In cultures that put greater emphasis on personal achievement of social statuses, on the other hand, rites of passage have primarily expressive significance: a change in status is morally or aesthetically stamped. In primitive and traditional cultures, the assumption goes, rites of passage have a regulatory purpose: they regulate previous and new statuses in the social structure of that culture. The complementary assumption is that in modern societies rites of passage have an expressive purpose:

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3 "Ascribed statuses are those which are assigned to individuals without reference to their innate differences or abilities. They can be predicted and trained for from the moment of birth. The achieved statuses are...those requiring special qualities...They are not assigned to individuals from birth but are left open to be filled through competition and individual effort." (Linton 1936, 115).
they depict social statuses in a variable social structure that is constantly on the move.⁶

Rites of passage as we know them from traditional Christian liturgy derive from a cultural era that was pre-eminently characterised by ascribed status. Not only were the role requirements of gender, age, family relationship and class relatively fixed, but the religious point of reference was itself unassailable, providing a divine canopy for the social strata of the culture. The contemporary cultural context of Christian liturgy in modern nations is characterized by strict separation between church and state. This makes the significance of religious rites for social status transitions debatable, at any rate in the sense that rites no longer fall under a divine canopy. Because the present-day cultural context is marked by a typical achievement orientation, the role requirements of social strata are no longer fixed. As a result the religious orientation ipso facto disappears. This puts traditional rites under pressure: they are gradually disappearing or adapting to new procedures of status achievement. That is clearly reflected in contemporary experience of rites of passage. Infant baptism is a rite of passage which confers the status of church membership on a child. But this practice conflicts with the values of autonomy and self-determination. Hence it is sometimes said that children should decide for themselves whether they want to be Christians and church members when they are old enough to make such a choice on their own. You are no longer born a Christian or member of a church, you have to make that decision for yourself. This view has some theological legitimacy, in some respects reflected in the confirmation ritual, but at the same time it raises questions about infant baptism. At first glance marriage is a different proposition. It is based on a carefully considered personal decision by the couple and the marriage ceremony ritualises that choice. Yet here, too, the status transition is less self-evident than it seems. In the first place the ritual institution of marriage is increasingly preceded by a protracted spell of cohabitation; and secondly, the bond appears to be less indissoluble afterwards because of the more or less common practice of divorce and dissolution of marriage. In modern social contexts the institution of marriage is increasingly dependent on the couple’s own efforts to

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⁶ The distinction is naturally not meant to classify cultures, but to distinguish between ideal types of ritual goals. This raises an empirical question: in how far and under what conditions do combinations of ascription rites and achievement rites actually occur in certain cultures?
maintain the quality of the relationship, and hence of the marriage itself. Finally even death turns out not to be immune to the personal control to which an achievement orientation disposes us. The funeral liturgy does not mark the deceased’s transition from life to death and a possible afterlife, but is more of a farewell ceremony commemorating the person’s acquired status. This is particularly evident in the focal position of the deceased’s curriculum vitae in the liturgy. Gradually funeral liturgy is becoming less standardised and is tailored by relatives, who use it to express their own status. Even more explicitly, liturgical forms are chosen according to the deceased person’s dictates in a ritual testament. Thus even after death the deceased maintains a ritual hold—albeit proactively ‘in memoriam’—on the status achieved in his or her lifetime.

Both traditional and modern societies have status transitions, characterised sometimes by ascription, sometimes by achievement. But in traditional contexts roles and positions are significantly more resistant to change than in modern societies. This does not leave the cultural factor of ritual unaffected. Whereas in traditional societies the rite appears to intervene in the social order in the sense of regulating it apparently independently of the efforts of the actors, status transitions in modern contexts are expressive and are thus more directly linked with the actors’ efforts and their own interpretations of the transition. By using the term ‘rite of passage’ generically with reference to baptismal, marriage and funeral rituals such major differences are camouflaged. Indeed, one might ask in how far one can still speak of a ritual transition in the case of achieved statuses. It is also debatable whether one can assume ascribed statuses among a modern public without allowing for the way they are interpreted by the primary and secondary ritual actors.7

Hence instead of referring generically to rites of passage it makes more sense to distinguish between goals of ascription and achievement. Ascription rites express the ritual actors’ ties with a community; the accent is on being part of a given history and culture and on speaking a common language. Achievement rites refer to the importance of the person’s own actions in attaining a particular social status. They express

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7 Whereas the religious codes of traditional liturgy put the accent on the primary actor (the child, the bridal couple, the deceased), new liturgical texts also refer to the secondary actors (parents, peer group, the bereaved). Such differences in liturgical form not only indicate changed liturgical goal orientations, but also suggest a different position for interpretation of the ritual in the liturgy.
the personal profit or loss of a social status. Ascription and achievement rites are not mutually exclusive: both goal orientations are encountered in the rituals of modern societies. But one can justifiably hypothesise that they are based on different value orientations, each relating to the social points of reference (strata) where the statuses apply. This calls for research, in which the distinction in ritual goal orientation is examined in relation to traditional and modern value orientations, with due regard to differences in the social location of participants in the liturgy.

Defining Forms of Passage Rites

A second, more complex issue to be considered in regard to rites of passage is the relation between the various rituals of which such a rite is composed. What determines the form of a rite of passage? It is generally accepted that rites of passage have a form comprising a sequence of rites of separation ("rites de séparation"), transition ("rites de marges"), and incorporation ("rites d'agrégation"). This leads to the supposition that there is a sequential form for certain ceremonies, which on those grounds can be classified as rites of passage. In the ideal type of these rites, it is assumed, the first phase detaches actors from the status they have hitherto occupied in the social system. In the second phase they reach a ritually intermediate stage: they are divested of every kind of status attribute and are not bound by the role requirements of any social position whatever. Finally, in the third phase they are incorporated into their new status and the concomitant role expectations are ritually installed. But the assumption that rites of passage possess a definite form that may be described as a ritual phase model is an unfortunate one. Van Gennep himself, who describes rites of passage as a formal pattern, is none too explicit about the phase attributes of the pattern he categorises.a In some ceremonies the accent may be mainly on rites of separation, as in the case of death, whereas in others like marriage ceremonies incorporation rites are focal. Sometimes the emphasis is on a rite denoting separation, sometimes on a no man's land, sometimes

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a Van Gennep makes his distinction in the framework of a ritual classification problem (séquences cérémonielles) and as a ritual pattern (schéma). But he does not refer to a phase model; on the contrary, he shows that the various rites are differently accentuated in different ceremonies, which makes it problematic to demonstrate the form of specific ceremonies according to a generic or universal phase model of rites of passage (Van Gennep 1909, 13–15; 275–279).
on incorporation, but not always in that order. The rites do not display the same incidence, frequency, intensity or sequence. That means that, strictly logically, one cannot speak of rites of passage at all. There is, moreover, a suggestion that 'something' in the ritual effects the separation, transition or incorporation, but this dynamics is not developed into concepts or propositions. That makes the classification less discriminating: one observes what is done (ritualised)—and anthropological literature provides many detailed, colourful descriptions of ritual activity—but the authors tend to assume rather than expound its meaning.

At first glance there seems to be a much simpler explanation for the form of rites of passage, namely the course of history. Every culture has a tradition history, in which ritual forms gradually evolve in relation to the functions of the social system. Thus the order of service in liturgical practice does not observe a logic of ritual phasing according to the three dimensions of rites of passage. Instead it conforms to the normative logic of liturgical codes as these have crystallised in the religious tradition and church order. But this genetic argument based on historical and institutional determination of the coherence of ritual forms is unsatisfactory in empirical liturgical studies. Thus it fails to explain the varying value attached to ritual forms and affords no insight into processes responsible for changes in these forms. An explanation in terms of increasing institutionalisation does not adequately account for the mental, social and cultural dynamics of ritual expression. And a historical explanatory model offers no insight into the motives for liturgical participation, the decline in such participation, the enormous international disparities in this regard or the emergence of new rituals. We are not referring only to manifest differences between cultures but also to processes within the same culture. How does one account, for instance, for the massive decline in ritual participation according to the religious/eclesiastic canon in secularised cultures and the increase—albeit mainly associated with specific incidents—in mass ritual participation at secular public ceremonies?\footnote{Cf. the more or less spontaneous ritualism prompted by the death of victims of mindless violence and of public figures like Princess Diana in England, or Fortuyn, Hazes, Van Gogh, in the Netherlands.} Here one finds that the formal aspects of rituals as spelled out in canonical texts, codes of conduct and conventional metaphors are becoming less meaningful, whereas informal rites occur more or less spontaneously in the public domain.
The relation between formal and informal aspects of rituals is also a fundamental debating point when determining the object of research in ritual studies. The point at issue is whether it is scientifically more profitable to study established rituals which, by virtue of their institutional incorporation into social and cultural systems, present stable, fertile research objects, or whether it is actually better to study rituals in statu nascendi. In the first case, as in Bell’s work, the accent in describing rituals is on formalism, more particularly the relation to traditionalism and unvarying, rule-governed actions (Bell 1997, 139–155). In the second case, as in Grimes’s work, the emphasis is on informalism, at any rate in the sense that it is better to study rituals at their inception (‘c-merging ritual’), because that is where rites acquire their own meaning in the real-life, creative reconstruction (‘performance’) of the ritual by the actual participants (‘re-invented ritual’) (Grimes 1990; 2000). Such emphases of formalism and informalism need not be seen as antithetical if they are treated as aspects of a dynamic, interactive process. Then formalisation and informalisation are social processes that not only put rites in historical and cultural context, but also offer a socio-scientific explanation for the form they assume. How should this social dynamics be interpreted when it comes to the form of rites of passage?

To answer this question we refer to the description of liturgical studies as an action science. To this end we narrow it down to a social action science. Rites in liturgy are social actions. Their meaning resides not only in the framework of personal meaning but also in the social interaction during ritual actions. More than that, social meaning is the condition, substance and purpose of the interactions in which ritual actions take shape. In his formal sociology Simmel explains an aspect of social behaviour that is relevant in this context. He uses the term ‘Geselligkeit’ (sociability) to convey the social nature of behaviour. It refers to the meaning that characterises behaviour as a typical group orientation, dynamically related in the concerned involvement of the individual with the group (‘Taktgefühl’) and of the group with the individual (‘Diskretion’). Simmel defines this dynamics in terms of an almost Kantian maxim as the need to offer everybody else the maximum of social meaning that is compatible with extracting maximal personal

10 ‘Soziales Handeln... soll ein solches Handeln heißen, welches seinem von dem oder den Handelnden gemeinten Sinn nach auf das Verhalten anderer bezogen wird und daran in seinem Ablauf orientiert ist’ (Weber 1976, 1).
meaning. In Simmel's sociology sociability does not represent a legal remedy but is more in the nature of a game: a social expression of ultimate meanings of fellowship that can be exchanged disinterestedly for the very reason that it does not accentuate the link with specifically personal meanings. The social meaning of actions is manifested in etiquette and other behavior that the relevant culture seeks to develop. The indeterminacy of sociability is important to maintain the continuity of this dynamics. As soon as meaning becomes particular (subjective in the Weberian sense) the actions start serving personal or group-specific interests. That is very relevant to status transitions, since they pertain to specific positions (strata) in a society.

Hence rites of passage may be defined as a dynamics of informalisation, in which status differences are played down, and formalisation, in which they are emphasised. Simmel's notion of sociability may be seen as a demythologisation of Turner's notion of communitas. Both concepts stress liberation from the normative restrictions imposed by social statuses, social positions and personal roles, but there is little reason to assume that sociability is linked with the liminal state that Turner claims to discern only in the second phase of transitional rites. In contrast to communitas, sociability is not a 'contingent' experience at the interface of social contexts, but is more of an intentional game in which the essential meaning of those contexts is developed. Hence it is not an anti-structure that interacts dialectically with a 'normal' societal structure, as Turner would have it, but actually a normal structure that makes itself the theme of community life without any self-interest. That dynamic character precludes rigid phasing, such as confining liberation from status to the second phase only. In the first place, social context becomes the theme of rites of passage by disinterestedly expressing that context's intrinsic meaning. Secondly, rites structure context by regulating and managing status positions. The formal attributes and conditions that determine interaction in the course of a ritual can be identified through empirical observation.

The obvious means for studying the dynamics of formalisation and informalisation is social interaction theory. Simmel's concept of sociability is very compatible with theories on the development of social
conventions, which Elias and Goffman made the object of their research. Here interactionism refers to theories that connect the development of behavioural direction through psychological functions with the historical construction of social functions (Elias 1969, 434–454). According to interactionist authors ritual forms evolve in a subtle dynamics of formalisation and informalisation. Whereas formalisation refers to the identification of role and person in behavioural codes, social contracts and institutional rules, informalisation denotes diverse, always highly personalised interaction styles that allow some latitude for interpreting role requirements. Modern societies are characterised by increasing interplay of these dimensions. On the one hand the civilising process results in more and more procedures to regulate social interaction, particularly the formulation of rights in the public domain; on the other hand social life is becoming amorphous and unpredictable as a result of the ‘outlawed’ area permitted in the private domain. Informalisation corrects this by appealing to trust relationships. The proliferation of divergent, highly personalised interaction styles leaves more scope than before for interpreting role requirements in the face of the dominant process of formalisation. Informalisation manifests in changes in the interaction between the private and public domains; in the emotion–reason polarity; in the harmonisation of spontaneous and calculated behaviour; in relations between community and bureaucracy; and in the interplay of particular and universal value orientations. Cultures, more particularly national cultures, manifestly differ as regards the dynamics of formalisation and informalisation. Comparatively speaking, at least, it is justified to hypothesise that social boundaries between formal and informal behaviour are fluid in modern societies. If it is true that the demarcation of the public and private domains differs between countries, this should be particularly evident in rites of passage. Comparative, cross-national research would reveal that.

If the form of rites of passage should indeed be studied in terms of the dynamics of formalisation and informalisation of social behaviour rather than the sequence of the transition, what determines the form of these ritual interaction styles? To answer this question we cite an interaction theory that focuses on social regulation of behaviour. In her conceptual study of the informalisation process Misztal identifies three principles that regulate a growing dynamics of formalisation and informalisation. The first principle is respect. It regulates everyday social intercourse through a mixture of personal freedom and convention
that expresses decency, civilisation or civility. The second principle is reciprocity, which arises whenever relations are aimed at conscious exchange from different social positions and roles are regulated by social expectations. Here the dynamics is in the nature of sacrifice in return for gain, in which a combination of instrumental and non-instrumental behaviour gives the actions social significance. The third principle is responsibility, in which the dynamics is typically intimate. Interpersonalities are marked by direct identity display with a high emotional quality characterised by mutual concern (Misztal 2000, 68–103). According to Misztal’s hypothesis these principles regulate the harmonisation of formal and informal aspects of social behaviour in individualised, de-conventionalised modern societies. According to our hypothesis, such principles apply particularly to the performative form of social interaction styles that make up ritual behaviour. In that case the best way to research the form of modern rites of passage would be in terms of such interaction styles and can be guided by subsequent research questions. Form in such research would relate, firstly, to respect, in the sense of assigning ritual actors shared value orientations that at the same time discreetly shield their private lives because of the normative demarcation of the private from the public domain. When, how and in regard to which value orientations does such respect assume ritual form? Secondly, the form of rites of passage can be studied to determine what social contract is implied. Which status requirements are abandoned and which are incorporated, and how is the ‘social price’ of the social contract determined and paid? Finally, how intimately is the identity of the actors depicted in the ritual, and how are responsibilities defined in this regard?

Such questions naturally call for more detailed conceptual and empirical research into the way in which formalisation and informalisation of social behaviour influence ritual interaction styles. By researching rites of passage in terms of interaction styles, as opposed to a phase model, the theoretical focus shifts to their connection with social and cultural reality. That strikes us as a more fruitful approach to studying the concrete form of rites of passage in modern societies.

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12 Elias’s notion of respect should be construed as protection of privacy. Privacy upholds the legitimacy of social regulation of the public domain by invoking the freedom of action of all individuals in the private sphere.
Defining Meaning of Passage Rites

Besides the goal and form of rites of passage we have to consider a third question: that of their meaning. More particularly we want to know whether and to what extent rites of passage are assigned religious meaning. The question is pertinent, since religious aspects of rites of passage, while highly relevant in primitive cultures, have manifestly lost some of that meaning in modern cultures. Anthropological literature consistently highlights the close connection between religious and social aspects of rituals, in which rites of passage nonetheless tend to intervene. Van Gennep refers to ‘le pivotement... de sacré’: the pivot of the sacred shifts through the secular domain and in its passage imparts a sacred character, whereafter its profane nature is restored (Van Gennep 1909, 15–17). Hence rites of passage themselves are continually in transit between the profane and the sacred domain. Anyone making a social status transition always traverses the sphere of influence of the sacred. This offers typical support for Durkheim’s claim that religion is very much a ‘social thing’: God and clan are one.\(^{13}\) A remarkable feature of anthropological literature on primitive cultures is that the difference between sacred and profane is always described topically in terms of times, places and artefacts. Sacred and profane represent domains that can be located in space and time, and are then cordonned off by taboos. But in (transitional) rites the sacred also appears to be mobile: it is not absolute but dependent on ritual rules bound up with particular situations, territorial domains and moments or phases in time. Sacredness thus is variable: what was once profane can become sacred, and what was sacred in one context becomes profane in another. Ritually, then, the sacredness or profanity of something is both self-evident and contingent. At least, it is connected with changes in social position, role and status which, to an outsider, appear fortuitous. By the same token the social structure reflected in a rite of passage is sacred or profane depending on its position in the course of the ritual. Primitive rites of passage, therefore, are rituals to which people submit at a particular time and place by virtue of an identification of their sacred social character.

\(^{13}\) Durkheim refers to totems uniting God and the clan: ‘Si donc il est, à la fois, le symbole du dieu et de la société, n’est-ce pas que le dieu et la société ne font qu’un?... Le dieu du clan, le principe totoémique, ne peut donc être autre chose que le clan lui-même, mais hypostasié et représenté aux imaginations sous les espèces sensibles du végétal ou de l’animal qui sert de totem’ (Durkheim 1909, 108).
Whether this also applies to religious rituals in modern societies is a matter for debate.

This debate is relevant if one considers that in modern societies secularisation has eroded the sacred, while ongoing individualisation has weakened social bonds. The rationalisation that characterises modern societies has disenchanted (‘entzaubert’) the relation between sacred and profane. The term ‘disenchantment’ (‘Entzauberung’) derives from Weber. One observation that is rarely made is that Weber’s somewhat metaphorical concept of ‘Entzauberung’ refers not so much to the loss of certain propositions about reality as to the new confidence in the possibilities of human action. It is not increasing scientific knowledge or rational insight as such that is taking its toll of religious belief, but the resultant realisation that human intentionality has a far broader range than it was initially assigned. Secularisation has less to do with the death of metaphysics than with the triumph of freedom. Ultimately Weber’s point is that it is not chance that reigns supreme but faith in the normativeness of the human will.¹⁴

Weber’s notion of disenchantment tells us two things about religious meaning. Firstly, the social and religious domains are not interchangeable in the modern mind. Enchantment of social reality by religion conflicts with rationality, which presupposes that only a disenchanted worldview has any claim to realism. As a result the ritual process of naive—because regulated exclusively by actions and convention—identification of sacred and profane aspects of reality has become suspect. Secondly, on the basis of the same rationalising process the sacred is seen as a characteristic of intentions rather than of topical realities. If the sacred does feature in the modern mind, it is not so much as a replication of reality according to a metaphysical scheme of nature and supernatural reality, but as meaning assigned to one’s own actions according to a scheme of immanent and transcendent action. In the case of transcendence religious reality surpasses human capacities, while in the case of immanence it interacts with human actions. To understand modern rites of passage these viewpoints are

highly pertinent. In modern rites of passage Van Gennep’s ‘pivot of the sacred’ should be seen as conscious attribution of religious meaning to social actions. According to this notion of secularisation, ritual is the conscious expression, freely chosen from other possibilities, of what is experienced as sacred at a given moment. Empirically this meaning is obviously variable, especially in regard to value orientations and ritual orientations. In the case of value orientations we can distinguish between social (or secular) and religious value orientations. The distinction is important because, in view of our secularised modern culture, we cannot take ritual participants’ religious value orientation for granted. In the case of ritual orientations we can distinguish between immanent and transcendent features of rites. Since our concern is with liturgy, we can take religious features as our point of departure, but in so doing we must take account of the implications of a distinction between immanent and transcendent action.

A major implication of such an approach relates to elements of meaning in the liturgy: the signs, texts, codes and metaphors in which meaning is ritually expressed. These elements can have immanent or transcendent points of reference. In the case of Christian liturgy this can be explained with reference to the three pre-eminently meaningful figures in liturgical ritual—God, Jesus and the Spirit. Liturgy presents various images of the one God, each with its own theological implications for human intentionality. Theistic God images put the accent on a transcendent God, creator and ruler of the universe, who can therefore intervene unilaterally in, or counter to, human actions. Deistic God images present God as the origin of human existence, but are dubious about supernatural doctrines and the revelation of absolute divine attributes. A deistic God image is open to natural theology, which recognises God in human intentionality. Pantheistic God images, which identify God with all reality, put the accent wholly on immanence. Human intentions remain intact but are not readily distinguishable from divine intentionality. Panentheistic God images allow for a dialectic between immanence and transcendence and treat intention as a challenge, possibly also an enigma, to religious meaning. These God images may be found not only in Christian tradition and the history of the church and theology; they are concretely present among people here and now: God images vary empirically (Van der Ven 1998, 171–204; 143–169).

Differences in assumed or implied intentionality apply to Jesus images as well. Thus one can distinguish between a ‘descending’ and an ‘ascending’
Christology (Schoonenberg 1991; Haight 1999). A descending christology contains Jesus images that emphasise Christ’s transcendence via the metaphysical conception of Jesus descending to earth from his supernatural state and assuming a natural form in order to accomplish his salvific work among human beings. Christ may be accepted or rejected, but human intentionality does not really play any other role. An ascending christology, by contrast, has manifestly immanent aspects. It entails Jesus images which express God’s closeness to humans in terms of salvation history rather than metaphysically, with the theological emphasis on the religious and moral choices that God presents to people in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Such differences in Jesus’ salvific significance are also empirically observable and relate to social location (Van der Ven en Biemans 1994, 89–93).

Finally, the Spirit represents an important meaning in liturgy. The Spirit may be seen as God’s activity or power. This divine intentionality can be experienced in God’s call, either through Jesus or otherwise, or in the experience of personal response to that call in moral behaviour or prayer, which is its religious expression. Various images of the Spirit, like those in the New Testament, display a dynamics of call and response (Dingemans 2000; Dunn 1998). That dynamics has both transcendent aspects (God’s intention) and immanent aspects (human intentions), and may be linked to experiences of ‘grace’ such as salvation, justification, affection, transformation and celebration (Schillbeeckx 1977, 436–468; Schilderman 1998, 153–167).

In liturgy the foregoing images of God, Jesus and the Spirit have not only referential and regulatory meaning but also, in an empirical sense, pre-eminently performative meaning. The transcendent and immanent images vary in liturgical valence, that is to say, in their positive or negative appeal to participants’ various value orientations. Addressing this liturgical valence without striving for effect is a rhetorical skill: it relates to the art of influencing or persuading. That implies the importance not only of the qualities of ritual officiants (‘ars celebrandi’) and proper selection and expression of elements of ritual meaning (‘ars liturgiae’), but also of assigning significance to the suggestibility (‘ars imaginandi’) of ritual actors.  

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15 Suggestibility here refers to openness to images rather than the truth claims of such images. Hence the debate need not be conducted in the classical terms of suggestio falsi and suppressio veri: suggestion is interpreted only in the formal sense of an idea prompting action.
concept of imaginary actions. One facet of the problem is the relation between perception, cognition and intention. Unlike perception, which is bound up with propositions that explain the perception, imagination pertains to the possibility of adopting a perspective in which belief and perception to some extent interact freely. Liturgy is aimed at this interaction; it appeals to people’s freedom to be convinced of the religious reality it depicts through its ritual, textual and musical images. Liturgy offers a focus for drawing inductive and abductive conclusions, based on religious customs, that confirm the belief expressed in the ritual (Raposa 2004, 113–127). This rhetorical art is particularly important in rites of passage: do the religious images in the liturgy, both immanent and transcendent, acquire positive or negative valence for the value orientations that participants associate with the social occasion? From the point of view of empirical studies in liturgy this raises the basic issue of the relation between value orientations and ritual orientations, and the way in which the context of ritual actors influences or fails to influence that relation.

Redefining Passage Rites

So far we have commented on the definitions of goal, form and meaning in rites of passage. In doing so we hope to have offered a revised concept of passage rites that is fit to address the problems that appertain to a modern understanding of religious ritual. Do these definitions facilitate a new understanding of the institutional crisis of established liturgies? An answer to this question goes far beyond the scope of this contribution. We therefore limit ourselves to a short indication of those research questions that locate the concept of liturgy in one exemplary theory of institutional functions.

What are the institutional functions of liturgy? This question is important, because we know that the church—albeit with many national and cultural variations—is undergoing a process of de-institutionalisation. Modernisation has affected the institutional form of the liturgy, in which the accepted goals, forms and meanings of rites of passage are embedded. De-institutionalisation may be regarded an institutional dysfunction. Depending on one’s choice of a theory one can indeed identify various institutional functions and dysfunctions of liturgy. By way of illustration one could cite the sociologist Parsons’s institutional theory. He describes institutional functions in terms of his so-called LIGA model, which
distinguishes between value orientations like beliefs, values and norms (latency); social integration, which is what gives a group structure and cohesion (integration); goal development, being the programme and activities through which goals are formulated and pursued (goal-attainment); and adaptation, being the staffing, material and financial means to realise the goals (adaptation) (Parsons 1965, 30–79). Van der Ven applied Parsons’s LIGA model to an analysis of the church, referring to liturgy as one of the ecclesiastic sectors in which these functions are realised in concrete actions (Van der Ven 1993, 81–83). By following his suggestions, we can indicate the deinstitutionalization processes that affect liturgical praxis. The declining meaning of liturgy may be described as an erosion of key functions fulfilled by liturgy. Liturgical latency may be regarded as the subjective and social meaning associated with ritual actions. If ritual fails to express or evoke that meaning, liturgy will de-institutionalise. Liturgical integration refers to the cohesive force that liturgy exercises on a group, which also structures the group. If the social bond is lacking for whatever reason or if a ritual fails to forge that link, liturgy will de-institutionalise. Liturgical goal-attainment refers to the liturgical programme, that is the order of service and the various forms in which the religious meaning of the ritual is pursued, partly for the sake of its social cohesive power. If these forms do not serve that purpose, they exacerbate the dysfunction of liturgy. Finally, liturgical adaptation is important: the means to attain liturgical goals have to be created and utilised. If that does not happen, for reasons inherent in liturgy or external reasons, it undermines the institution of liturgy.

Of course Parsons’ theory offers but one of many possible ways of analysing and explaining institutional functions and dysfunctions of liturgical praxis. Nevertheless, taking into account this theory raises questions of research that are crucial to understand the changing setting of passage rites. Thus, a liturgical practice should be based on actually present—though laten—values and convictions that are associated with the major events in human life, such as birth, marriage and death. In order to deal with this latency-function, liturgical valence is crucial: rites of passage may not be effective at all if they fail to address the actual values that are related to a contemporary understanding of status and the social requirements of their transition. That is especially relevant to the integration-function of liturgy. If, for instance, achievement-aspects are not taken into account in liturgical practices and solely ascription aims are implied, and furthermore, a proper mix of formal and informal requirements is not pursued, group-identification
may well fail to be present at all. That is especially relevant to our case, since passage rites are always attended by participants who, for all their mutual differences, maintain close ties with the primary liturgical actors. Their mutual bonds have to be re-established in the very acts that liturgy invites to participate in. The religious goals of passage rites—as they are framed in the sacred imagery and gestures of liturgy—do not work simply by following ritual rules of conduct but also depend on the capacities of the participants to be welded together exactly because their latent values are being touched upon and put in a shared perspective of the new statuses into which the primary actors are being introduced. The question of adapting liturgy to its respective environment should therefore not be put in negative terms, as if it would be detrimental to its perennial significance. Although the actual practice of harmonizing the sometimes dissimilar values and expectations of ritual participants and meeting the practical requirements of local contexts can be painstakingly difficult, it also offers a basic key for the interrelationship of the previous functions of liturgy that we mentioned. It takes seriously the evident fact that statuses have to be understood in the personal, social and cultural contexts in which they gain significance. The ‘pivot of the sacred’ tolls through this landscape to the extent that ritual officials authentically and effectively reach to and raise the latent values through the community that is congregated to celebrate the new status that is to be attained.

Thus there is every reason to pursue further conceptual study and empirical research into a main question of liturgical praxis: what is the relationship of the goals, forms and meanings of rites of passage on the one hand and the aforementioned institutional functions of liturgy on the other? The effort to answer this question requires both a redefinition of passage rites and a keen view of the practical implications of the institutional function of liturgy. For this answer this contribution offers a first step and an invitation to further exploration.

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Edited by
Heinz Streib