1 Personalization and Renewal of Tradition

In the Nordic setting, as in any organized society, marriage is a central social and religious institution, but the Nordic setting is distinctive in that most of the population belongs to the national Lutheran churches. Historically, the Nordic countries constituted homogeneous spaces regarding religion due to little inward migration, and the Lutheran Churches used to be the state religion/church, also known as the “religion of the throne” (Bruce 2000, 34). Despite increased migration, worldview plurality and secularization, the national churches continue to perform many public roles in the Nordic countries, but they are no longer all-encompassing religious-cultural institutions. This change is also witnessed in a decrease in church life-cycle rituals – among them church weddings. According to Norwegian sociologist Inger Furseth and her Nordic colleagues:

A dramatic decline has taken place in church weddings, which amounts to less than half of all marriages in Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Finland in 2013–2014. Since the late 1980s, church weddings have dropped by 33% points in Finland, 28 in Sweden, 22 in Norway, and 15 in Denmark. (Furseth et al. 2017, 47)

Nevertheless, in the Nordic countries, a church wedding continues to be both a religious ceremony and a legally binding marital contract (Christoffersen 2010).

The theological research on marriage has been quite limited during recent decades. From the 1970s onwards, the discussions of cohabitation (Trost 1979; Hafstad 1994) and remarriage of divorcees were hot debates in the Nordic Lutheran churches and societies (Finnäs 1997). Discussions on cohabitation and remarriage seem not to be relevant any longer and the current research is no longer focusing on these topics. In the 1990s, there are a few examples of journals dealing with issues regarding marriage in various Nordic countries. An issue of the journal Social Compass from 1991 deals with marriage in Finland. In response to a new ritual for church weddings, the Swedish journal Svenskt Gudstjänstliv (Swedish Worship-life) published an issue on church weddings in 1992. Nevertheless, these examples are exceptions; marriage was not widely researched in the 1990s.

In the next century, the interest of Nordic researchers turned to homosexual relationships (Pétursson 2014; Johansen and Pedersen 2015; Christensen 2013; Lindberg 2016), and research interest in same-sex unions and marriages seems to continue (Hellqvist and Vähäkangas 2018; Metso and Kallatsa 2018). All Nordic countries acknowledge same-sex marriages, Sweden, and Iceland as early as 2009, the Faroe
Islands the latest in 2017. By way of rather different decision processes, the established churches in Sweden (2009), Denmark (2012) and Norway (2016) all perform same-sex marriage rituals, whereas the Finnish church discusses the need for and regulation of a ritual for same-sex marriage (Hellqvist and Vähäkangas 2018; Metso and Kallatsa 2018). The Faroe church has yet to embark on this discussion.

Recent research on heterosexual marriage has mainly focussed on Lutheran theological perspectives on body and sexuality and, among other things, marriage as a theological metaphor (Gerle 2015). The research on heterosexual marriage ritual in contemporary Nordic societies has been very limited (Jarnkvist 2011; Johansen 2015; 2017).

The strong Lutheran heritage in the Nordic context and the above-discussed lack of research shows how necessary it is to study marital rituals in the Nordic countries. The aim of this article is to introduce our studies on nuptial rituals in two Nordic countries, Finland, and Denmark, and to discuss personalization and renewal of ritual tradition through these cases. Additionally, we will discuss approaches and methods utilized in them. Before going deeper into these studies, it is necessary to introduce some basic theories on personalized rituals.

2 Meaningful Rituals

Rituals adhere to tradition, but they are not static. Rather, all rituals contain an aspect of change (Grimes 2010, 12). Inspired by anthropologist Michael Houseman, Johansen uses the term ‘new rituals’, which are characterized by creative adaptation, and continues the analysis: “the scholarly interest in life-cycle rituals takes into account the fact that churches are placed in modern, secularised societies populated by people who relate individually to religion according to their own decisions and considerations” (Johansen 2019, 485).

Following her study of the personalization of post-mortem rituals, Ramshaw (2010) points out how personalization may facilitate the ability of a ritual to meet the most important requirements of the people involved. She further writes:

This equation of ‘meaningful’ with ‘personal’ is a giveaway of postmodern culture. When people are not embedded in a tradition-bearing community, the rituals of such a community do not seem to speak to their personal experience, the private world that is the locus of meaning making. A ritual is likely to be meaningful to the extent that it is personally constructed or tailored to one’s own experience (Ramshaw 2010, 172).

In the Nordic context with its tight bonds between the Lutheran churches and traditional culture and national identity, church weddings are still a strong signal of traditionalism. A church wedding is a ritual with a long history; it takes place within an established church and it conforms with traditional family values of monogamous partnership (Jarnkvist 2011; Johansen and Pedersen 2015; Johansen 2017). At the same time, recent studies of both heterosexual and same-sex marital rituals show
how marital rituals are constructed as personalized rituals to fit an individual situation (Johansen 2017).

In the following we introduce our respective studies: first, Johansen’s research on heterosexual weddings. Heterosexual weddings constitute most marital rituals, but they have been subject to very little research. Second, Vähäkangas’ research on same-sex prayer rituals. Same-sex marital rituals are a minority but recently they have been the main topic of marital research due to theological discussions and inventions of new rituals in recent years.

3 Traditional and Personal Wedding Rituals in Denmark (Kirstine Helboe Johansen)

How do bridal couples describe their expectations of a church wedding? What characterizes their relationship to the established wedding liturgy? How do pastors understand a church wedding and the established wedding liturgy? With such questions as my guide, in 2012 I embarked on a research project to examine preparatory wedding conversations between pastors and heterosexual wedding couples in Denmark. I selected eight pastors (male / female, younger / older, urban / rural parishes) and they made agreements with one or two bridal couples within the selected time period. In all, thirteen bridal couples participated. All pastors and wedding couples gave their consent to participate in the research project and research outcomes are published without names and places. The research was conducted in a combination of observations and follow-up interviews with both pastors and wedding couples. I am myself a theologian, educated primarily within an Evangelical-Lutheran tradition and I am also member of the Evangelical-Lutheran church in Denmark, but I have received no pastoral training and I am not ordained. In this project, my position helped me side primarily with the perspective of the bridal couple and their guests, and I used my experience as wedding guest to urge them to elaborate certain aspects. First, I observed the preparatory conversation between pastor and bridal couples during which they go through the wedding ritual, select hymns, and talk about the wedding and the couple’s reasons for wanting a church wedding. These conversations lasted about an hour or an hour and a half and usually took place in the pastor’s office, sometimes with a short visit to the sanctuary. Immediately after this conversation, I interviewed the bridal couples about their expectations of the wedding ritual and asked them to elaborate on issues regarding the ritual that came up during the conversation. Finally, after having observed all the bridal couples of a given pastor, I went back to conduct an interview with the pastor regarding his or her understanding of the wedding ritual and asked him or her to elaborate on issues that came up during the conversations. All observations and interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded.
The theoretical framework guiding the research project consisted predominantly of a combination of ritual theories that allowed me to examine how church rituals and the understanding of church rituals are transformed and re-orientated. The hypothesis was that it is not only people’s ideas about religion and values that are undergoing changes, but also their understanding of and expectations to religious practices are subject to similar changes. To build this argument, I combine both well-established ritual theories such as those of Roy Rappaport (1999) and Catherine Bell (1997) and younger ritual theories dealing with new-age rituals such as those of Michael Houseman (2007) (Johansen 2017). My interest was to investigate whether wedding rituals were anticipated mainly as established and fixed or mainly as an individually constructed.

In the analysis of the material, the bridal couples group into two main approaches to the wedding ritual. Both groups agree that a church wedding is something special, and both groups agree that a church wedding is an important tradition, but they differ in the degree to which they think of the ritual as something they construct individually. One group tends to value church wedding as part of tradition and to argue for their own choice of church wedding as a wish to be part of tradition. A groom expresses himself in this way: “When your children are baptized and you expect them to have their confirmation, then you use the church anyway. Even though we are not strong believers [...] this is the place to turn. When it is a big thing, then the church is there.” And a bride explicitly asks for a wedding ritual that is traditional: “Yes, it is all of it ... and that is why you cannot begin to rewrite it or anything, because the church is something very traditional, so you cannot change that, then it would not be the same [...]”

The other group has a slightly different approach. They also wish to have a traditional church wedding, but they emphasise that it was a conscious choice. They had considered whether and to what degree it was the right thing for them before they chose it. A groom expresses this understanding when he says: “It is important [for us] that it is in a church and therefore, it is personal in the sense that it is something we have chosen, and we have chosen the hymns. A big part of it kind of follows the procedures and that is fixed beforehand, but it is us that chose the package. We know that a big part of the package, 80 per cent of the package, was there. We could choose it or not, but we chose it.”

Thus, it is evident in both groups that a church wedding is attractive as tradition, but among the second group, tradition is only attractive in a personalised version. In the words of Ramshaw (2010) as cited above, meaningful is personal – in this study, also when it comes to traditional wedding rituals.
4 Personalized Same-Sex Prayer Rituals in Finland (Auli Vähäkangas)

This section narrates Vähäkangas’ study of same-sex couples’ experiences in connection with a prayer ritual conducted over their registered partnerships and focuses on the pre-legal context of same-sex marriage in Finland. Homosexuality, or more precisely the question of LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex) church members is an internally divisive issue for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF), with an extensive discussion on the role of LGBTI church members taking place from the 1990s up to the present day. The Pastoral guidelines of the ELCF simply indicate that the ritual can involve a prayer with the registered couple and for them. Blessing of a partnership or any other rituals, which could be interpreted as marital rites, should not be conducted (Pastoral guidelines 2011). Despite these delineations, the discussion regarding homosexual members of the ELCF continued even after the Pastoral guidelines of 2011 were given, but no new official guidelines have been provided since the legalization of same-sex marriage.

The data comprises interviews with ten people in 2015. Pseudonyms are used when referring to the interviewees. Unlike many who have written on this subject, Vähäkangas is a heterosexual woman with no direct experience of same-sex partnerships. The interviewees seemed to accept her conducting this study, even though she is not part of the same-sex community. Additionally, Vähäkangas is an ordained pastor of the ELCF which the pastors participating knew in advance. She introduced herself as a researcher from the Faculty of Theology, but I did not hide her pastoral identity either.

The name of the ritual emerged from the interviews and was vividly discussed in them. The name used in the Pastoral guidelines of 2011 is ‘prayer with and for’ the registered same-sex couple, but the interviewees expressed a dislike for this long and complicated name. Some called it a wedding, most labelled it a blessing of a registered partnership and a few simply called it a prayer ceremony. Hanna and her partner had met through girl scouts and chose to call their ceremony ‘woodland – a picnic of love’. They explicitly excluded any traditional elements of a wedding in the ritual but expressed a desire to have an official blessing of their partnership. The reason for avoiding nuptial symbolism was their personal wish to keep the ritual as simple as possible. Hanna further elaborates the idea of a blessing and human value: “For me it’s personally enough to have my faith and the feeling that I was created this way and that I have a purpose and my life has a meaning, as does my relationship, and we are blessed and as valuable as others.” Hanna considered that the pastor, her colleague in the same parish, followed the Pastoral guidelines too closely.

An important part of the action in the ritual was the speech and prayers by the pastor. The interviewees remembered these as the most important part, as this involved the pastor indicating, to both the couple and the congregation present, an acceptance of same-sex partnerships. Heikki elaborates: “That speech when she spoke
about our life, our home and partnership, work, friends and all of our life [...] So, all of our guests were crying and also for me that speech was something that I will remember forever.” Heikki explained how they were standing on a rock in their garden and the pastor preached, “God is like a rock, as eternal as love is.” The metaphor of the rock was very powerful to Heikki because the pastor had chosen a metaphor from his own precious garden to make it especially personal.

Maja and Ritva as well as Sari and Kirsí called their ritual a wedding. In the wedding of Maja and Ritva, the rite took place as a modified wedding ritual of the ELCF, whereas the rite used in the wedding of Sari and Kirsí was modified from the rite of a blessing of a marriage. In both rituals, exchanging of rings was central. Both female couples were actively involved in the rainbow worship community and in their weddings, a special nuptial object, a rainbow-coloured *ryijy* was used. A *ryijy* is a traditional Finnish woven craftwork, a large wall mat, on which the bridal couple traditionally stand during a religious wedding ceremony. The rainbow-coloured ritual elements celebrated the same-sex nature of the partners while also acknowledging their inclusion within the Lutheran tradition. In other words, these rainbow-coloured objects straddled both the resistance and the conformity aspects of a ritual, as they were simultaneously strongly personalized ritual objects tailored for a small rainbow community in a ritual acknowledging the Lutheran tradition.

The most important elements of rituals were ones personally tailored to the couple themselves. The feeling of being accepted and being the focus of the ritual were important. Most of the participants of this study were well acquainted with the Lutheran liturgy, hymns, and other traditions of the church. However, tailored experiences maintained their position as the most meaningful for them. Personalization of a ritual brings the therapeutic or pastoral care element to it. This personalization is possible only when the facilitators, pastors in the case of this study, were willing to conduct personalized rituals and did not follow the restrictions of the Pastoral guidelines of 2011.

One aspect that made the same-sex rituals in Finland very different from each other was that the only given guidelines, the Pastoral guidelines of 2011, did not include a clear rite for conducting such a ritual; rather they only gave a list of restrictions on which things not to include in a same-sex prayer ritual. This left it quite open to the couples and pastors concerned to plan a very personalized ritual even after the guidelines were given.

## 5 Marriage as Tradition and as Broker of Renewed Family Values and Legal Rights

As our two cases show, marriage and church wedding are both – and at the same time – an icon of tradition and traditional values and a broker of renewed family values and legal rights. Johansen’s case shows how a church wedding is seen as and
chosen for its status as traditional wedding and therefore also as part of a wider tradition that takes you through important moments in life: childbirth, adolescence, family building and death, but also points to how one group of bridal couples emphasizes their own personalization of the ritual. Vähäkangas’ case illuminates how nuptial rituals are also part of renewing tradition and moving both church and society in their construction of values.

Thereby, Vähäkangas’ research further supports the general insight that the understanding and legal regulations of marriage have been an important part of the transformation of moral values and legal rights both with respect to gender equality and the acknowledgement of same-sex relations. Beginning with Martin Luther’s transformation of marriage from sacrament to social order, Finnish jurist Anu Pylkkänen (2010) argues that the liberalization and equality of women is closely connected to the reformation – and to some extent secularization – of marriage law. In the same way, the acknowledgement of same-sex marriage with the inclusion of a church wedding ritual is not only an extension of the ritual to include other forms of marital partnerships but also a symbol of the (re)negotiation of family values and alternative lifestyles as well as of the understanding of marriage. This negotiation and transformation takes place at different levels: as pastors’ engagement in the public debate on same-sex marriage (Christensen 2013), as statements in administrative consultations before legal changes (Johansen and Pedersen 2015), and in the personal adaptation of the ritual (Vähäkangas 2019).

Literature on rituals over same-sex marriage reveal that some elements in the same-sex rituals were understood to show conformity, whereas others show resistance. Bell sees the relationship between conformity and resistance as the fundamental dimension of rituals in which the following of an old tradition or the making of new traditions is the dividing issue (Bell 1997, 145). Lash studied same-sex marriage rituals among Canadian Jews and concluded that those rituals which differed from heterosexual weddings and included various same-sex objects were rituals of resistance and those rituals most closely following the liberal Jewish traditions were rituals of conformity (Lash 2012). The division between resistance and conformity was not, however, very clear in the same-sex rituals studied by Vähäkangas, as some of the rituals included both elements. There was some resistance found but the findings stress more the importance of following the Lutheran traditions. In many cases, it was a question of adaptation of rituals to a personal situation, which did not indicate any clear resistance. Implicitly, rituals always carry in them both the transformation and the continuation of traditions which are then negotiated by the community or individuals concerned. Hüsken and Neubert write: “Not only are rituals frequently disputed; they also constitute a field in which vital and sometimes even violent negotiations take place” (Hüsken and Neubert 2012, 1).

This balancing of continuation and transformation, of conformity and resistance, comes to almost subtle expression in Johansen’s study of wedding couples. One group emphasizes continuation of and conformity with tradition; their wish is to have a wedding as it – in their opinion – has always been. But though the other
group is drawn to a traditional wedding, their insistence on personalizing the ritual shows their resistance to being dominated by tradition – tradition is invited into their lives, not the other way around, and this also points to this group as brokers of transformation and renewal. They do not wish to create a new ritual, but they reject pure conformity and insist on transforming the ritual for their purposes. Due to the double affiliation of the studied same-sex couples, they produce more complex forms of conformity and resistance. The religious couples represent a minority in the mainstream same-sex culture and in this way express resistance towards the same-sex culture by following the heterosexual nuptial traditions. Most of the participants interpret religious ceremonies as partly against mainstream gay culture. Ganzovoort, van der Laan, and Olsman (2011, 221) share a similar finding that gay Christians had to negotiate their double affiliation with both Christian and gay culture. This double affiliation is further confirmed by Bos (2017, 188–189), according to whom same-sex culture aimed to be rebellious against all institutions and marriage was interpreted as an outdated and patriarchal institution that bred inequality. These findings indicate the need for renewal and a need for keeping the Lutheran traditions.

Transformation was an essential aspect in the narrated rituals both from Denmark and from Finland, but, additionally, the results indicate the importance of continuation of tradition to the couples concerned. That said, to reiterate, the most important traditions are personalized. This means that the traditions themselves are perpetuated, while ensuring that they hold particular significance for the people involved.

6 Conclusion and Reflections on Methodology

As the two cases and cited literature indicate, the study of wedding rituals may be approached from different angles and therefore also by utilization of different methods depending on what kinds of topics one wishes to research. These different approaches may be grouped roughly into three categories according to their field of interest.

Wedding rituals can be studied at text level. This might be conducted as a legal investigation of the relationship between marriage ritual and marriage law (Pylkkänen 2010), as historical and dogmatic examinations of the meaning and conduct of marriage rituals during church history (Bible readings, prayers, hymns, ritual orders) or as liturgical and ritual enquiries into the liturgical construction of the marriage ritual.

Wedding rituals may also be studied at the discursive level: How, why and in what contexts do people engage in reflections on what the marriage ritual is or should be? Who engages in these discussions? And what kind of understandings do they express? One approach to such an investigation is document analysis by which one might gain insight to positions in different kinds of public discourses (e.g., Christensen 2013; Johansen and Pedersen 2015). Another approach utilizes in-
terview methods to enter into the ways the individuals involved think and feel about the wedding ritual (Vähäkangas 2019; Johansen 2015; 2017; Jarnkvist 2011).

Wedding rituals might also be studied as performed church practices. One approach could be quantitative mappings of the number of weddings, wedding traditions, wedding couples etc., but one might also apply anthropologically inspired methods such as participant observation. The study of the wedding ritual as church practice includes both preparations leading up to the wedding ritual (such as wedding fairs; conversations between pastor and wedding couples; preparations in church, among other things, decorating the sanctuary; communicative acts on homepages and in folders); and the ritual performance itself (what is done, what is sung, how do they dress, how do they sit). This approach is still highly under-researched.

The most central finding of our studies shows that Nordic couples wish to have personalized wedding rituals that at the same time follow the Lutheran traditions quite closely. This indicates that both conformity and resistance, continuation, and renewal of tradition, seem to be important to those Nordic couples who have opted to have a church ritual over their partnership. We cannot compare legal points of view between these studies because the Finnish case did not involve legalization of same-sex partnerships in the church. In the Danish situation, legalization of marriage was also seen to be an essential part of the ritual, and same-sex couples in Finland hope that this will be the future situation in the ELCF as well.

Our chapter additionally reveals that there is very little research on marital rituals in the Nordic countries, and we would request students of theology to focus on the issue in various Nordic institutions. We see that studying marital rituals is inspiring and through it, we can find out central aspects of renewal and conformity in Nordic families, churches, and societies.

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