1 Introduction

1.1 Setup

In this contribution, ritual acts and performances are explored from the perspective of the multidisciplinary platform of Ritual Studies (Post 2015). This chapter argues that this is of use – perhaps necessity – for anyone directly or indirectly involved in religious practices. I seek to provide material for a critical attitude both ‘internal’ via reflection on the nature and essence of ritual acting, and ‘external’ via study of current cultural dynamics that lead to ritual transformation.

The design of this contribution is threefold: (a) It asks: what is ritual? A simple question that on closer inspection turns out to be less straightforward to answer. It seeks to address the phenomenon of the ritual act as well as the study of it. (b) The second part deals with the ambiguities, paradoxes, and ambivalences of rituals. Precisely due to their complex and ambivalent nature, rituals are elusive, unpredictable, and confusing, as well as being exciting and dynamic. (c) The third part shows how rituals are influenced by trends in a specific cultural context, in this case (post)modern Western-European society. It also brings in a critical perspective, known as Ritual Criticism (Post 2013b; Post and van der Beek 2016). I conclude with a note on ritual in times of corona. Ultimately, the purpose of this chapter is to offer a critical lens with which to explore ritual acting as a dominant form of religious practice.

1.2 Ritual Studies

This chapter is framed by the perspective of Ritual Studies, an interdisciplinary platform for ritual research which emerged in the USA in the mid-1970s. Ritual Studies is characterized by an open ‘canon’ of themes, a strong theoretical foundation, a cross-cultural and comparative perspective, and an academic tradition which produces book series, journals, congresses, research programs (Post 2015; Grimes 2014).

Although Ritual Studies can, to a certain extent, be characterized as transcultural and trans-religious, a critical note needs to be added regarding the term ‘transcultural’. Although the tradition of theorizing (Kreinath, Snoek, and Stausberg 2009) and analysing ritual is comparative in nature and therefore could be said to be transcultural, some suggest that rituals should only be studied fully in specific anthropological and cultural contexts. Outside of these contexts, theorizing rituals is based on academic conceptual presuppositions, including that of the ‘semantic trap’. Concepts
always have a load and a history. There are many studies in the *Begriffsgeschichte* tradition that provide critical insights into the concept of ritual (Buc 2009; Boude-wijne 1995).

It is also important to signal how, in current Ritual Studies, attention is strongly focused on the dynamics, change and transformation processes shown by studies on sharing ritual (Post 2019a), failing ritual (Hüsken 2007), denying ritual (Hüsken and Seamone 2013), contesting ritual (Post, Nel, and van Beek 2014), postponing ritual (Faro 2015), negotiating ritual (Hüsken and Neubert 2012), and the absence of ritual (Post and Hoondert 2019). I will pursue this focus on transformation and dynamics in this contribution.

## 2 How to Define Ritual?

### 2.1 “Juggling Clouds”

Ritual is one of those words or concepts that is particularly difficult to define. Words such as landscape, magic, religion, superstition are too: we immediately know what they refer to, we can immediately picture them. But when it comes to forming an adequate description or giving a definition, it becomes more difficult. The search for a description of these types of words is akin to juggling clouds. In addition, there is another aspect that makes it particularly difficult to find a conclusive description of ritual.

### 2.2 Worn Images and Frames

Ritual has been surrounded by a series of ideas that seem to steer the direction of a description in advance as a kind of ‘frame’. This steering can sometimes be misleading. I will now briefly explore and demystify some assumptions, ideas, and expectations regarding ritual (I will use ritual, rituals, rites, ritual acts, ritual performances interchangeably):

- Ritual is connected to tradition; it has an unchanging and fixed character. Ritual is not made, but rather it is inherited, and passed down through history. *Quod non.*

\[1\] Meaning: which not / that is not true.

- Indeed, ritual can just as easily be created anew, it can emerge or disappear.

- Rituals are always repeatable. *Quod non.* There are also unique rituals that only occur once.

- Ritual is always connected to religion. *Quod non.* Apart from the issue of what exactly is to be understood by the term religion itself, ritual is by no means always religious. There are many secular rituals.
Ritual is always a collective act, connected with community. *Quod non.* Ritual can be performed by individuals.

Ritual is of necessity something beautiful, good, and healthy. *Quod non.* Despite the subjective nature of these adjectives, ritual can also be ugly, unhealthy, and undesirable, and it can also fail to meet its aims.

Rituals are associated with major events, such as feasts and festivals, weddings, and funerals. *Quod non.* There are many small, unseen rituals that occur every day within the private sphere.

Ritual is always, above all, meaningful. It is symbolic in nature, referring to something or someone external; it is thus meant to contain multiple deep layers of meaning. *Quod non.* Many ritual experts emphasize the self-referential nature of ritual, ritual does not always refer to something outside of itself, often the performance itself is of central importance.

Ritual should always be a nicely balanced self-contained whole. *Quod non.* Often ritual is a colourful hybrid fusion of very different parts and units. Like for religion per se, the default situation of ritual is that of ‘syncretism’. I like to make a comparison here with the children’s toy Lego: ritual could be seen as being made up of many individual Lego bricks. Describing or analysing a ritual is thus like playing with Lego, attempting to make something out of disparate pieces. One must have an eye open for the composite character of a ritual and try to find the most important units of which it is made up.

This does not make seeking an adequate definition any more straightforward. Nevertheless, ritual does still call for such an attempt. Just as with any academic project, in the study of ritual, we must systematically and critically work towards a definition which possesses a certain general validity (Grimes 2014, 185–197).

### 2.3 A Working Definition

Let me put my cards on the table and present my working definition as I have developed it over the years, I have been studying ritual. For me, ritual is:

> a more or less repeatable sequence of action units which take on a symbolic dimension through formalization, stylization, and their situation in place and time. On the one hand, individuals and groups express their ideas and ideals, their mentalities, and identities through these rituals, on the other hand the ritual actions shape, foster, and transform these ideas, mentalities, and identities. (Post 2015, 6)

Instead of extensively elaborating on this description, I will put it into perspective. I am suggesting that I have demarcated ritual clearly with this working definition. But

---

that is by no means my intention. I used to try to make my conceptual description of ritual as broad as possible, so that it would be open to all kinds of practices and repertoires that I also wanted to include. This working description is for me an indication of what I call core ritual, or ‘full ritual,’ but which does not necessarily exclude other types of acts from having a ritual dimension. That is why I now speak of ‘ritual’ as well as ‘ritual-like’ acts in addition to ritual, I see practices with a ritual dimension. This is not necessarily in line with how Ronald Grimes describes ‘ritualizing’, as being performance that is ‘still wet behind the ears’: still developing into a fully-fledged ritual whilst not yet culturally accepted or framed as a ritual (Grimes 2014, 192–193). I see my thinking in this respect as being more in line with how Catherine Bell presents ritual practice and behaviour that has a ritual dimension, alongside ‘full ritual’ (Bell 1997, 138–169). As an example, let me refer to collective performances after a natural disaster or a terrorist attack. In these contexts, we see all kinds of practices that wish to express compassion, solidarity as well as anger and protest at the injustice or loss. We see how cities all over the world express their solidarity, for example, by installing landmarks with lasers and LED lights in the colours of the country where the attack or disaster took place. We might see people getting tattoos out of a collective compassion (Cadella et al. 2020). For example, after the Manchester Arena attack in 2017 during a performance by Ariana Grande, it became popular to get a tattoo of a bee, as this is the symbol of Manchester. These are all acts which have a commemorative and ritual character, but the question remains: are they ‘full rituals’?

2.4 Qualities of Ritual

Not everyone within the field of Ritual Studies is happy with this search for a definition of ritual, even if it is only a provisional and working description. Many academics decide to walk a different path and instead look for a series of ‘qualities of ritual’, characteristics, dimensions or functions that together provide an image of what ritual is and what it is capable of. There are all kinds of lists of qualities or dimensions in circulation (see Lukken 2005, 35–74; Post et al. 2003, 41–42). Here is a list of some of them:

Ritual relieves and channels emotions and feelings.

Ritual marks and honours, it makes us think about major events, and makes us stop to pay attention. According to Jonathan Z. Smith, paying attention and situating are the basic components of ritual acting: “Ritual is, first and foremost, a mode of paying attention. It is a process for making interest. [...] It is this characteristic, as well, that explains the role or place of a fundamental component or ritual: place directs attention.” (Smith 1987, 103)

Ritual positioning or situating works through this marking. It places us and events on the axis of the past, present, and future. In this way, ritual has an ‘anamnetic’ character.
R ritual also has an ethical side: “One could say that as ritual is a source and norm for a humane perspective on life [...] so ritual is also the source and norm of authentic human action [...].” (Lukken 2005, 69) Ritual is never for free, it is ‘a dangerous game’. The apostle Paul emphasizes this in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 11) when he points to the fact that sitting at the Christian ritual meal is not without its obligations. A separation between the rich and the poor disrupts a solidarity-based community.

As already noted in my working definition, ritual is expressive. It enables us to express our feelings, ideas, dreams, ideals, and ultimately what is ‘sacred’ to us. The range of expressions is wide: from anger and compassion to protest and displeasure.

Ritual is also related to incantation and exorcism. It is a means to ban evil, to implore salvation and healing. This is perhaps the ultimate basic layer of any ritual act: coping with contingency and banning evil.

Ritual is also an act of condensation that enables us to bring enormous complex feelings, ideas or ideals into a simple act or symbol.

Many points to the socializing function of ritual. If you want to transform a school, sports club, or a nation into a group, into a collective or community, then you ensure they have rites and symbols: a club song, a flag, a logo, an anthem, shared meals. Rituals are thus what define the in-group. The founder of sociology Émile Durkheim elaborated on this perspective in an exemplary and very influential way (Durkheim 1964 [1915]).

And finally, a general quality often remains unmentioned: ritual creates a break, a moratorium. Rituals give us a break and the opportunity for ‘recreation’. Without rituals, without feasts, without marking the axes of years and lives, our existence would be an uninterrupted staccato note. Rituals are therefore connected to leisure time and contrast with everyday life. It is precisely in this setting that we see concepts like ‘asylum’ and ‘heterotopia’ in relation to ritual: ritual as ‘other space’ in contrast to daily space and life (Foucault 2005, cf. Post 2010, 100–111).

Thus, ritual enters the picture through certain characteristics and functions. The idea is that the more of these characteristics and functions that can be assigned to a certain action, the more akin to a ritual it is.

2.5 Dynamic Playing Field

We have previously highlighted that rituals are definitely not traditional in the sense of being invariable through place and time. On the contrary: rituals are extremely dynamic and changeable. To get a closer look, it is important to see the wider playing field, which is extremely complex due to the strong contextual dynamics of ritual acts. The use of a schematic representation often helps me to bring some clarity: it allows us to see the playing field of ritual repertoires. A ritual repertoire is a set of ritual practices that display a certain coherence in terms of design, participation, cause, or context.
I present three layers in the inverted triangle. At the base is the basic structure of ritual practices that seems more or less constant through place and time. As mentioned, this concerns banning evil, the prophylactic and apotropaic function of ritual, healing, and coping. I can refer here to many scholars in Ritual Studies, for example Martin Stringer who ultimately sees ritual and religion as being connected by “intimate relationships with the non-empirical other” through ritual practices based on the need to “cope pragmatically with everyday problems.” (Stringer 2008, 113–114)

A middle layer comprises two large repertoires, two important ritual fields that we encounter everywhere, but in changing forms. It concerns the rituals on the axis of life, the rites of passage from birth to death, and those on the axis of the year, usually determined by the calendar, lunar or solar, or a combination of both that in turn are the basis of a ritual annual calendar. Ritual Studies’ authors such as Arnold van Gennep, Victor Turner and Émile Durkheim focused their scholarship on this layer.

In addition, at the upside of the inverted triangle there is the current playing field of ritual repertoires. This is a very dynamic field and looks very different in different places in the world. I offer a general outline of the situation of contemporary Western European culture where I see four major ritual domains with recognizable and dominant ritual repertoires (Post 2011, 13–59; Post 2013a, 149–158). As said, here we see the greatest dynamic shifts: rituals coming and going, changing form, content, and context, we see ‘ritual transfer’ and we witness all kinds of appropriations and transformations.
2.6 Current Playing Field

I wish to focus on four areas or fields in this section. Firstly, the domain of religion. Despite the idea that Europe is largely deemed to be secular, religion is quietly thriving. And indeed, the closure, demolition and repurposing of many church buildings, whose parishes had been declining sharply in number – particularly in the Netherlands and the UK (contexts with which I am most familiar), suggest a marginalisation of churchgoing. However, when the terrain is looked at more closely, it appears that many new church buildings are in fact being built and set up. This could be due to the growth of urban spaces and cities and an increase in migration. The image is thus one of a balancing effect: fewer traditional churches on the one hand and an increase in newly built churches on the other (Post and Hoondert 2019, 57–59).

Secondly, I wish to focus on the vibrant domain of memorial culture in contemporary Western European society: that of remembering and honouring the past through rituals. I refer to funeral rites, and the commemorative culture of the first and second World War. It is interesting to see here how wide the scope of memorial culture is. After an accident or attack, after death and destruction in the public domain, we see all kinds of grassroots rituals: flowers being laid, candlelit vigils, letters and written eulogies left to commemorate losses, including road-side memorials to loved ones killed in traffic accidents. But there are also these ritual markings that occur decades after the event in question, this could be referred to as postponed ritual. We witness this with WW1 and WW2 events, and with Holocaust memorial culture. For example, the Holocaust Mahnmal in Berlin was only opened in 2005 after decades of debates over its complex and sensitive historical context.

A third domain is that of art and culture. The world of theatre, museums, monuments, and heritage is a ritual playing field of its own that is constantly changing.

And finally, there is the field of leisure culture with the important subfields of sport and tourism.

As already indicated, these distinct zones or ritual-sacred fields are especially important to allow us to visualize current ritual dynamics, to indicate the broad playing field or environment in which rituals are situated. In my view, contextualisation is indispensable for understanding and studying religious and ritual practices.

Through exploration of these different fields mentioned above, we gain a better view of the tensions and overlaps between them, as well as how the other layers and repertoires in the diagram interact with each other. The diagram helps me to predict which ritual repertoires will be successful in terms of participation and absorption in the culture, and which are, or will become, marginal. The success of the Camino de Santiago, the medieval pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela, is directly linked to the fact that its ritual is bound up in almost all the fields and layers represented in my schema (Post, Pieper, and van Uden 1998). The Camino de Santiago is an example of a ritual that is broadly and deeply anchored in culture and tradition. Whereas many religious liturgical rituals, especially those of traditional churches, seem to withdraw into their own religious domains and thus have fewer or no roots in
other domains. Newly emerging often Pentecostal and evangelical liturgy tends to explicitly seek connection with other sacred fields for this very reason.

A final important observation about ritual dynamics is the fact that that dynamic itself might be characteristic of current rituals. In our network culture there is a constant flow between and through the fields and layers. Ritual is a flow that constantly changes its core. There is no single core or centre. An abbey or monastery in modern western Europe is still very much a religious centre of prayer and contemplation, but at the same time, it will be a place for relaxation, tourism for historical appreciation, or an experience in nature.

This section has attempted to understand and unpack what we mean by the term ritual. In the next section, we consider the ambiguous nature of rituals, their ambivalences, and paradoxes.

3 Ritual Ambivalences

Rituals are ambiguous and ambivalent (Post and Hoondert 2019). This is part of their ‘nature’. I am not suggesting here that this nature is independent of context, of time and place, culture, and society. It is precisely in these contexts that ambivalence takes shape and therefore ritual always changes in emphasis due to the socio-cultural context at play. Here I do not mean to say that there is a dichotomy or a fixed gap, but rather that there is an interplay. Because of their ambivalent nature, rituals are difficult to categorise and understand, they are elusive, largely uncontrollable, and even unplannable. Religious authorities in particular have often had difficulty with this aspect: rites are not subject to control mechanisms. A common attempt at control is that of written scenarios, directives, and instructions. But ultimately, ritual is always the act itself, the one-off performance. This elusiveness makes rituals complex to understand and describe, as it renders them exciting and attractive at the same time.

I now briefly mention some of these ambivalent aspects.

3.1 The Traditional and the New

There is the tension between ritual as a given tradition on the one hand and as a newly made act on the other. Ritual certainly has the aura of being stored in and handed down from tradition. That is why rituals are repeatable and recognizable or might be seen as being outdated routines. For young people in particular, their traditional aspect can make them seem boring and old-fashioned. This sense of sameness and repetition therefore calls for new forms to be made, it calls for creativity and innovation to freshen and update rituals to the current context and climate. Notwithstanding, the idea that rituals are ‘centuries old’ traditions is often erroneous, and itself a social construct. Eric Hobsbawm writes of this labelling as
'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992; Post 1996). Let us take the Christmas tree as an example of an object which does not in fact go directly back to a tree cult of the ancient Germans but is rather a late nineteenth-and twentieth-century ‘bourgeois’ invention that spread from and through many European countries via German housemaids.

### 3.2 Rituals as Cold and Warm

Rituals can be seen as being simultaneously ‘cold’, by being connected to critical reason, and ‘warm’, via being connected to emotion and empathy. They are both Apollonian and Dionysian. Sometimes the search for a good feeling predominates, the cherishing of the idyll in the ritual, for example like a comforting ‘warm bath’. Sometimes, however, ritual becomes very cool and detached, clean, purified. As with all ambivalence, a call for balance and harmony can easily be made. I think this can sometimes simplify the issue: it is more a matter of dealing with these kinds of ambivalences and nuances in different contexts and situations, of learning to live with them. Where does a funeral perish in exalted expression of individual or collective emotion, and where does a cooler, more sanitised detachment dominate?

### 3.3 The Individual and the Community

A third ambivalence is that of the individual and the community. We constantly struggle with this tension in our rituals. To take the example of the funeral-as-ritual, the (post)modern funeral liturgy focuses on the deceased person in question and their group of mourning relatives. It seems that even in this type of ritual, it is a challenge to navigate the dominance of a ‘culture of self’ alongside a desire for a sense of the collective or the social group. We often possess a strongly idealized image of community, as being a solid, locally bound group (the image of the German *Gemeinschaft*), instead of as an assemblage, a flowing, incidental, and instantaneous community, but still a community no less (cf. the Spanish, Italian *assemblea*). I see this idea reflected in the popularity of the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela. The pilgrim starts with an individual project, leaving family, home, and local community in search of a personal quest. But that individual then meets others and becomes part of the community of fellow pilgrims. We also see this ambivalence reflected in online communities. Communities in cyberspace, for example, are formed by groups of individuals who share a passion or interest (Post and van der Beek 2016). One can therefore be part of quite different communities that are characterized by the interplay of the individual and the larger community.
3.4 Grand and Small

There is also the interplay of grand and small ritual. Often ritual is connected to feasts and ceremony rites, especially those on the axis of life: from birth through marriage, to death and dying. This type of ritual contains some drama and abundance. But small daily rituals are being rediscovered and appreciated. On closer inspection, ritual practice is often a combination of the two forms, grand and small: there may be a prominent concentrated ritual, with small rituals surrounding it. Again, to draw on the example of a funeral, which has a concentrated group celebration in a church or crematorium, but around it there will be all kinds of small rituals at home, in the hospital or elsewhere, before and after the central funeral ceremony.

3.5 Idealism and Reality

Rituals often find themselves in a tension between the reality of their possibilities and limitations, and an idealisation of what they would like to look like, particularly for rituals pertaining to rites of passage, such as weddings and funerals. The media has played a role in this, for example through depictions of weddings and funerals of members of the royal family and celebrities. This has created for many a standard to which to aim. As a result, local celebrations can often feel mediocre or downright disappointing in comparison to the grandiose televised events. Maybe they were not able to afford a professional choir for the service, or they may not have found the right pastor with sufficient competences in the field of speech and performance to deliver the ceremony.

3.6 Inclusive and Exclusive

Ritual is both inclusive and exclusive. It is inviting, accessible, hospitable, but also closed, exclusive. These two poles are important for the character of a ritual: the interplay of form and content in what we call ritual configurations. A Veda ritual, for example, is for most people inaccessible and exclusive in terms of both form and content. A Pentecostal celebration may be more open in its form. Everyone is welcome, with modern popular music, projectors, accessible language. But the content can be very exclusive, a very strict message on religious doctrine, ethics, gender, and sexuality. But, as we will see in our brief description of current ritual trends, we are increasingly seeing a configuration of openness and inclusiveness both in form and content: rituals that are open spaces that people can appropriate and fill by themselves.
3.7 Symbolic and Diabolic

Rituals are symbolic but can also be diabolic. This duality is often forgotten, but rituals are not only and always beautiful and good – they can be devilish like the rituals orchestrated in detail at the annual rally of the Nazi party in Nuremberg in the 1920s and 1930s. Rituals can mask or legitimize discrimination and oppression.

3.8 Useless and Useful

Another ambivalence is seeing ritual as a useless action, or instead as a powerful instrument or act. Any reflection on ritual tends to end up struggling with this paradox. Huizinga (1949 [1938]) strongly emphasizes its ‘useless’ dimension. For him, cult and ritual are directly related to play, and the playing of man is in line with that of a child or an animal. It is just for fun. It contrasts with efficiency, productivity and the search for end-results that now characterizes and dominates human actions. However, other ritual scholars argue that the basic dimension that we already indicated in our scheme is that of incantation. Rituals are productive, are powerful tools that allow humans to cope with setbacks and contingencies, they keep us going in a world of dangers and evil. I think there is no ‘useless / useful trap’ (Wepener et al. 2019, 27–46), but rather, that they are two sides of the same coin. Are rituals not powerful coping mechanisms precisely because they are of a different order? (Post 2019b, 73–76)

4 Some Current Ritual Tendencies and Trends

In a third and final part, we explore how rituals are influenced by external trends and events. Rituals do not exist in a vacuum, they are not independent of time and place, of cultural, social, economic, and political contexts, tendencies, and trends. Because of these external stimuli, rituals change, they inculturate or are put under pressure. General trends in culture also lead to trends in rituals. Sometimes this will directly affect the ambivalences mentioned above.

I illustrate this process through a few topical trends that I have identified in the western European context (Post 2019c). In addition, I also provide a brief critical evaluation. By doing so I introduce more explicitly an important perspective of Ritual Studies, namely that of Ritual Criticism (Post and van der Beek 2016). Ritual study is never only descriptive or analytical but has a critical function and task as well. This criticism can be informed and oriented in different ways. It can focus on the ritual performance, the acting competence, or the lack thereof at the level of the presentation, the ‘craft’ of performing the ritual. Or it can focus on norms and values, on political or religious ideology. Recently, the importance of authenticity in ritual acting is
emerging, along with insights informed by research as presented in Ritual Studies. In the following presentation of trends, I will include Ritual Criticism.

### 4.1 ‘Casualization’

A first trend with a direct impact on rituals in my context, which is that of the Netherlands, is what I call ‘casualization’, the advancement of a casual approach to ritual that manifests itself primarily in the external design, but I think goes deeper and expresses something about our attitude towards the sacred. During funeral ceremonies I often see that people no longer dress specifically for the event, but are instead dressed casually, maybe in jeans and an old sweater. We see the same with cremation. The ashes of the deceased loved one might be collected on a bicycle, and the urn might then be placed on a windowsill along with an array of indoor pot plants. The design of ritual spaces is also a sign of this casualization. The interior of modern crematoria or rooms of silence hardly differs from trendy home furnishings: warm colours, casual chairs, and couches where you can lounge.

This is not the place to elaborate on the tendency of what can be called the ‘domestication’ of ritual. However, referring to Martin Stringer I see a relation with the above mentioned warm emotional side of ritual and ‘an increasing sense of comfortableness and intimacy’ in ritual acting in a global setting of discourses of consumerism and individual well-being. Stringer notices in contemporary Christian worship in both England and the United States: “carpets on the floor, a crèche for the children, PowerPoint technology providing reassuring images, language that does not offend, and music aimed to speak to our emotions and calm us down.” (Stringer 2005, 239)

### 4.2 ‘Eventization’ and ‘Festivization’

A second trend widely recognized is that of ‘eventization’ and in direct relation to it, ‘festivization.’ Large events, especially feasts and festivals, are on the rise. The calendar of festivals in the Netherlands has never been this full (at least before the corona pandemic). Rituals are seen by many as being a special event that requires a great effort. This has been the case for a long time, especially when it comes to those rites of passage that are known as ‘four-wheel moments’, for example when a pram is present during the celebration of a birth or baptism, when a limousine is used to drive to the wedding ceremony or funeral and graveyard. Disasters and commemorations of terrorist attacks, as well as many funerals, are increasingly being held in special event locations or in the public domain. For example, the phenomenon of The Passion, the re-enactment of the Christian passion story through popular music on the streets of a big city, which in the Netherlands has been an enormously popular event every Maundy Thursday since 2011. This modernised version of the passion play originated as a musical TV special in Manchester in 2006.
Rituals are in danger of being overgrown and subsumed by the general tendency of festivization, of the expanding culture of feasts and festivals.

This befits two points of analysis. Firstly, there is the question of what the notion of feast represents in our culture (Post et al. 2001). A feast is based on three main elements: a contrast with or break from everyday life; an underlying reason for the celebration; and a sense of solidarity community, as feasting is not something one tends to do alone. Questions can be asked about the latter two aspects. Is there always a good reason, do we always know what or who we are celebrating? And is there necessarily a solidary group involved?

Here it is necessary to highlight again that ritual acting does not only and always exist in the great gesture of an event or feast. The small ritual is also important.

4.3 Uselessness under Pressure

As we highlighted previously, one of the fundamental dimensions of ritual is that it is determined by the so-called uselessness of play. In a society where there is always a demand for utility and productivity, for efficiency and for results, the uselessness of ritual is under threat. This pressure directly impacts our ritual acting. The Camino de Santiago, the Way of Saint James, for example, like many other pilgrimages, is increasingly being turned into a sponsorship challenge to raise money for a good cause (Post and van der Beek 2017).

4.4 Explosion of the Singular and the Unique

In his richly descriptive and analytical book, German cultural sociologist Andreas Reckwitz points to ‘the explosion of the special and unique.’ (Reckwitz 2017, 7) In the lifestyle of an emerging wealthy middle class, the idea of the special and the unique plays a major role. This manifests itself in eating, in celebrating rites of passage, traveling, education, designing and furnishing a home and garden, and similarly online, designing the homepage of your website and how you come across on social media. For some of these areas of life, experts may be hired, who, in the same way as curators of museum exhibitions, make life appear special and unique. The ritual is also impacted by this. In the German-speaking world, rent-a-pastor.com has been operating with great success (Saß 2019). It is an agency where you hire a pastor / celebrant for a wedding or funeral that presents itself as offering something both special and unique.
4.5 Explaining Rituals

Another emerging trend is that of explanation and commentary. Old city centres are full to the brim of signs outlining the history of particular buildings, how old it is, which architect built it, etc. I see such signs on a large scale when out in nature, signs labelling different species of tree, birds, small mammals, and insects etc. As a people we are becoming increasingly didactic. This pertains also to rituals. For example, during a ritual, the pastor may constantly explain what they are doing, what it means, where it comes from. This is disastrous for ritual. That you light a candle and that it gives light needs no explanation, the act in itself is sufficient. My colleague Walter van Beek once aptly stated: “In a functional ritual, catechesis is superfluous, for an incomprehensible ritual it comes too late.” (van Beek 2007, 49)

4.6 Basic Sacrality

Finally, I mention the rise of what I have come to call basic symbolism or basic sacrality in ritual (Schippers 2015). A lot could be said about this. However, I will limit myself to a straightforward description. Due to all kinds of circumstances, such as the diversity of our globalized network culture, rites and symbols arise that are often very open and basic. Here I refer also to ritual spaces as open spaces, which are opening up more and more to a wider variety of appropriations and recasting (Post 2019b) from the established sacred fields. This can be either recasting of existing ritual sites or of entirely new ones. Richard Meier envisaged such a recasting in the much-discussed design of the Holy Year’s Jubilee Church in Tor Tre Teste on the outskirts of Rome. It is a white open space, open for more focused religious appropriations, but also for more general and individual spiritual ones in the well-known tradition of new spiritual spaces that potentially started with the Rothko Chapel in Houston (consecrated in 1971). It could be said to be an open hermeneutic space. We see the same in the recasting of an old building in the canal zone of Amsterdam under the initiative Huub Oosterhuis, as a new form of ritual space. The motto of this building, which is called De Nieuwe Liefde (New Love) is: “a centre for study, contemplation and debate; a space for spirituality and religion; a stage for poetry, music and theatre.” These are exactly the four fields I distinguished in my scheme of ritual repertoires. However, the space is not restricted to being filled only with white: on Sunday the alternative Christian ‘Dominicus Community’ appropriates a colourful neogothic church in Amsterdam in their own way: they use the space by sitting facing both directions. The recasting of the old Augustinian church in the centre of Eindhoven as the ‘Domus Dela Ceremony House’ is also striking in this context. The

3 Denieuweliefde.com (29.11.2021). Recently it has become a cultural center for language and words (literature, poetry, spoken-word etc.).
space is open for a variety of ceremonies, from music performances to weddings and funerals and conferences.

Rituals and symbols often become open spaces to be filled. Here once again, the Camino de Santiago is an example. The pilgrimage journey is literally a space or vessel to be filled by the pilgrims themselves, through the very act of walking – stepping into, and through, the space. Ritual acting, often consists of basic, archetypal symbols: the sun, light, a tree, a woman, water, earth, fire. It can derive its identity through small details (Post 2013a). Indeed, ‘God is in the details’ (Mies van der Rohe).

5 Coda: Rituals in Times of Corona

I completed this chapter during the corona epidemic in April 2020. In this crisis it has become clear what the position of rituals is in society and how topical many observations in this contribution turn out to be.

First and foremost, the position of rituals appears to be ambivalent. On the one hand, the Netherlands is the main context I have experienced, rituals appear to be both a weak and a soft force. Rituals are not listed as ‘vital processes’ such as those of the medical sector, food supply, police, education etc. Funerals and cremations do of course attract attention, but not directly through the role of ritual experts, pastors, and ritual counsellors. But on the other hand, there are signs that people experience the role of rituals more acutely now that they are not so self-evident. There has been plenty of creativity in the absence of more formal rituals when such rituals have become impossible due to social distancing.

Against the background of what I have presented on ritual and Ritual Studies, I conclude this chapter with some observations about rituals in the time of the corona virus. My observations are preliminary and provisional because a balanced description, analysis and evaluation can only take place after some time has passed, at a certain distance.

Firstly, three aspects that concern the ‘nature’ of ritual have become very striking. I mention the physical, embodied, and tactile dimension of ritual acting. The necessary practice of social distancing has far-reaching consequences for an embodied ritual performance. At the same time, the dimension of healing and coping has come to the fore. And thirdly, partly connected to the first two elements, ritual creativity not only reshapes those existing but now impossible rituals, but creativity is especially manifest in all kinds of practices which have a ritual dimension, as ‘ritual-like’ performances. People sing to each other from balconies, express solidarity, hope, appreciation, and compassion by applauding together.

Existing tendencies are being put under pressure, and this is when often undervalued or forgotten aspects of ritual can emerge. We are now confronted with the fact that many communal rituals must be cancelled, rearranged, and postponed. People begin to appreciate that in addition to grand rituals, there can also be smaller rituals,
at home, in a small circle of friends, family or neighbours. Performing rituals live, as major events is now impossible. The Passion was cancelled, commemorations were called off or postponed. And above all, the media is used to mediate rituals which have begun to be conducted and streamed online. Liturgy, for example is now live-streamed: the celebration is recorded and transmitted from an empty church.

The situation is challenging and a debate about what might constitute ‘online ritual’ (Post and Hoondert 2019) has ensued. As well as those rituals which are recorded and uploaded for an online audience, ‘cyber rituals’, which are live-streamed, only exist virtually. Discussion of the pros and cons of online rituals is topical, especially in a Christian context. Questions abound, such as: Can you celebrate the Lord’s Supper online at home, by having bread and wine in front of the computer screen? Does this appropriately shape the Christian community, or is that only reserved for a ‘real’ in-person gathering and not for a ‘virtual’ one? Here again ritual ambiguity manifests itself. On the one hand, there has been a tendency for some time to see the liturgical meal in relation to food and drink culture of the surrounding cultural context, and on the other hand, we are rediscovering the ritual dimension of food and drink in our culture (Klomp, Smit, and Speckmann 2018).

All in all, rituals during the time of the corona virus, show the dynamics of rituals in the making, and indicate that ritual practices always ask for ritual critique. This contribution is in essence meant as a plaidoyer for approaching ritual – and practices with a ritual dimension – as a form of ‘dangerous play’ that requires a critical attitude.

Bibliography


