

Ida Marie Høeg
Research Associate
Centre for Church Research
Oslo, Norway

Leipzig ISSR, July 2007

The interest in rituals in sociology of religion has mainly focused on three topics:

- Ritual attendance (services/mass and rites of passage)
- The participants' approval of the rituals' content
- The social functions of the rituals

The experience aspect of the rituals has been a subordinate theme in both the strictly religious sense and in a wider sociological sense, and if it has been researched, it is because the participant's experiences have differed from the ritual's content or could not support the content of the ritual in terms of belief.

Rituals are much more than belief and approval. Rituals are bodily actions. On the one hand, they are social patterns of action which can take form as expected practice, duty or habit, and on the other hand, ritualizing is the expression of the preferences, tastes, reality orientation and experiences of a group of people. Rituals affect the whole human being –body, intellect and feelings. Even though there is a widespread conception in Western culture that it is possible to separate the biological, physiological and psychic side of man, this is not the situation in all cultures (Heelas 1986:244). Pierre Bourdieu and Catherine Bell claim that there is no fundamental division between body and mind in ritual activities (Bourdieu 1977:87-95, Bell 1997:81). Binary oppositions between the psychological and the physical are opposites only in appearance. The actor's relationship to the ritual actions becomes visible through the bodily mediated and anchored behaviour. Through a bodily process of experiences the mental and the social structures combine and decide how the actors relate to the ritualizing on a symbolic, value related and emotional level (Bourdieu 1977:87-95).

In the relatively few studies in the field of sociology of religion in which religion and experience have been a research topic, the focus has been on rituals. The focus of the research

has usually been marginal groups – sects and subunits, (McGuire 1988), alternative religion – Feminist spirituality, Paganism and Witchcraft (Heelas and Woodhead 2005:3, Beckford 2003:182), and age divided groups (Northrup 1997). Women are focused on more than men (Northrup 1997), and the main interest has been on congregations and faith communities where feelings play an explicit and important role in the religious life. In the case of research on Christian, Muslim and Jewish religiousness, the studies have looked into what lies to the side of the official religion; the private area and the less visible. This focus on alternative and unofficial religion has, in my opinion, been necessary. This work has contributed important new material, has widened the perspective on religion and pointed out that there is much more than just mainstream religion. Nevertheless, I would claim that official and institutional ritualizations are an unexplored area and that a bodily perspective might bring new aspects of the actors' relations to religion into view.

Infant baptism, which is the theme of this paper, is in my opinion an example of a ritual full of sensual power, and to many baptismal parents this particular ritual practice triggers many emotions. In this paper I will concentrate on the emotional and the sensual aspects of the ritual practice of the parents, not on the interpretation or the function of the rituals, nor on attendance at the rituals. However, it is important to point out that there are very close relations between ritual emotions and ritual interpretation (Spickard 2005:355). My intention is to examine this close relationship and not only show the emotions of the parents and what it is about the infant baptism that triggers senses and experiences, but also how they put words to and understand their emotions. A bodily perspective implies looking at what the parents have actually experienced. My study shows that the following aspects of infant baptism aroused emotions:

1. The obvious and natural – the expected order of the infant baptism
2. The peculiar aesthetics of baptism
3. God's presence in the bodies of the parents, the children's bodies and in the room

Method

Before I discuss which aspects of infant baptism arouse emotions, I will say some sentence about method. This study approaches ritualizing within the framework of narrative research. It is based on 18 in-depth interviews conducted among parental couples that had christened their child. The interviews were conducted in Norway between September 2002 and January

2003. The interviews had two main topics: the interlocutors first focused on their experiences of the rituals and the reasons for choosing the ritual. The second part focused on what kind of religious or existential questions or topics they considered as parents who relatively recently had changed their status from being childless to being a mother or a father, and if there were any connections between the parents' general concerns when they became parents and what they believed the rituals reflect. To pursue these two subjects, I will try to ascertain what kind of meaning old religious symbols have for people today.

My strategy for the selection of cases for my in-depth case-study research was to obtain information about the significance of various circumstances for different categories and dimensions: religiosity/worldview, church involvement, class and gender. I selected the sample on the basis of expectations for information content and took my sample partly through the so called “snow ball method” and partly through my own network.

What is culturally natural?

To most parents it feels natural to baptise their child. When the child was born, their “practical mastery” led them to the Church of Norway. Patterns of thought and preferences made baptism the “right” choice and for some also the obvious choice. Choices are not always conscious (Bourdieu 1997:44). Bourdieu’s sociology has been referred to as the sociology of body and emotions (Prieur 2000a:3, Prieur 2000b:9), meaning that our actions are not always guided by our consciousness, and that practices, patterns of thought and preferences, habits and customary reactions are often more important factors. The history of the individual expresses itself through what is felt as obvious and natural. Without having reflected very much on either the choice or the personal reasons for it, the parents think that their choice of baptism was the obvious and right one. This is not, however, the same as saying that the socialized body is programmed. The baptismal parents know that many parents who are baptised themselves do not choose baptism for their own children. Nonetheless, they felt that this was the most natural thing to do with respect to their view on life.

The obvious, the natural and the habitual are also emotionally charged and must not be forgotten. The same natural attitude that some baptismal parents have towards the choice of baptism does also fit their experiences with the baptismal service. They keep their mind on the order of the baptism and on proper behaviour in such a setting. The words that should be said, were said, the movements in the room were performed as they should be, the vicar

officiated as he or she use to do, the organ was playing, hymns were sung, well known prayers were prayed and the vicar was present for the photo session after the service. Even though the experience is characterized by a certain personal distance to the ritualization, the parents felt it a positive thing that the expectations were fulfilled and that nothing wrong or unexpected occurred. The term “good” or “ordinary” is a common description of their emotional experience of the infant baptismal services.

Aesthetics, buildings and music

There is a dichotomy between the parents’ emphasis on the church building as part of their experience of the baptism and little or no experience of the particular church prior to the sermon. The building speaks more to the feelings of the parents who have never been to that church before or who have only visited it occasionally for baptisms or weddings, than to those who go there regularly. To the parents who pay occasional visits to the church, the building presents itself as a symbol of their closeness to all its architectural and aesthetic qualities. If the building is old and very “churchlike”, it arouses strong feelings. To those related to the church throughout childhood, who themselves and their family have personal memories from the church where the baptism takes place, the building acts as a symbol of the family. The baptismal service evokes strong emotions of kinship and belonging.

The music, the interior of the ritual room, ritual clothing and objects interact and give rise to good feelings. The baptismal parents stress the pictorial art of the room, the furniture and other pieces of artwork. To the baptismal parents, it was not necessarily the beauty of the church that moved them, but the fact that it was exclusive, something typical of the service that you only experience in a church. Music has great emotional potential, especially when it is recognizable. The baptismal parents were not very interested in the textual content of the hymns, but focused on the good atmosphere created by them and the fact that they were familiar. Together with the movement in the room, the peculiar aesthetics of the church create an elevated harmony.

Infant baptism and religion

For some of the baptismal parents, participation in the baptismal service of their child was a religious experience. When I am speaking of religious experiences here, I do not necessarily mean experiences producing very strong or intense emotions. The emotions may also belong to a softer register, for instance the feeling of something being safe, good or right.

Furthermore, these emotions need a religious interpretation. That is, you have to perceive what you feel as an experience of something divine or holy, or of extraordinary energy or power, or of something transcendental. It is equally important to underline that a religious experiences do not need to be based on a direct meeting with the transcendental, but can as well be an experience of the transcendental as the source of a situation or an event, communicating through it (Nelson 2005:194-195).

The intensity of the emotions may vary. By the baptismal font, four of the baptismal mothers, who are neither religiously active in any parish nor go to church regularly, felt the presence of God in the church and that God gave the baptismal children his protection through the ritual performance. While by no means strong and absolute feelings, there was nevertheless an experience of God. Two other mothers, Nora and Heidi, both had strong emotional experiences of the presence of God. Nora, who is a devoted Christian and active in her local parish, felt the presence of God and at the same time that God was the reason why she was standing there with a fine and healthy child. The belief that God had created her son and made him healthy filled her with thankfulness to God. Heidi, who characterizes herself as "seeking", and has little to do with the church, also felt the presence of God during the baptism. She interprets the performance of the blessing as God entering into the life of the child and starting to protect it. The baptismal performance had its bodily manifestations. She had tears in her eyes during the baptisms of both her sons.

There is a clear relation between religious belief and religious emotions. The six above-mentioned baptismal mothers all have a religious belief of one kind or another. On the contrary, none of the five fathers in the sample who also have a religious belief experienced God's presence during the baptism.

The parents are characterized by the fact that the Lutheran church is not one to put much emphasis on emotions as a source of religious renewal or to focus on common experiences with the faith. Meredith McGuire claims that collective rituals produce a common resonance that deepens the religious experience (2002:21). The Church of Norway has poor conditions for a common resonator in which religious emotions are valued, and may be expressed and interpreted. The church does not exactly disseminate a language in which its members can receive, express and explain their emotions. Those of the parents who had experienced the presence of God or felt that God gifted his protection to their child, gave the clear impression

that this was not a subject they had discussed with other people. The vocabulary of such emotions was scarce and talking about them seemed alien to them. The baptismal theology of the Church of Norway does not confirm the mothers' feeling that the baptism gives God's protection to the child. This is not a part of the official baptismal theology – what is conveyed through the discussions prior to the baptism or in the written information the parents receive from the Church. The mothers did not experience any emotional fellowship with their partners in the experience of the presence of God or the baptism as an act of protection. In other words, they were alone with their religious experiences and reflections.

Not only did Nora and Heidi experience that God filled their bodies with his power, but also that God was present in the church. The sociologist Timothy J. Nelson reminds us how important interpretations and perceptions of the relation to God are for religious emotions (Nelson 2005:194-196). To Nora and Heidi, God's presence was not something reserved just for them, but an exposure for all the participants. All those present had the possibility to feel the presence of God. Nora and Heidi will possibly agree that this may vary from person to person. But even though faith in God will be of great importance to whether you feel the presence of God or not, there is no direct coherence between religious belief and religious experience. We have seen that the fathers with a religious belief did not experience that God filled them with his power, was present in the church or in their child. Linda Woodhead claims that it is neither the intensity or depth of the emotions, nor the subjective, individual orientation, but rather the emotional "outer-directedness" that separates Christian spirituality from Holistic spirituality (Woodhead 2006:53). Generally, we may say that the religious orientation of the baptismal mothers is typically Christian; it is outer-directed. Nora's religious experience resulted in her feelings transgressing herself – she directed her thankfulness and happiness to God. But God is not only an external entity to the baptismal mothers. God is also a power that can fill a body and a church; fill the baptismal children with his protecting power and fill the bodies of the participants.

Summary

Infant baptism is a great event and an emotional field. Emotions related to baptism follow two directions. In one group of baptismal parents, the experience of the ritualization is rather characterized by satisfaction than strong emotions. The emotional satisfaction is closely related to the motivation for ritualising. The parents' emotions are centred around what is motivating the baptism – what seems natural to do when a child is born, and what good can be

expected from tradition. This group of parents has no religious interpretation of the baptism neither does it reap a religious benefit from it. The other group of baptismal parents has different emotional experiences with baptism – emotions that relate to God’s presence in their own bodies, their children’s bodies and in the church. These variations in emotional strength and orientation notwithstanding, both groups of parents share the aesthetic experience of being in a church, and the vision of the church as a symbol of the place where they live or of their family.

Literature

Beckford, James A. 2003. *Social Theory and Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bell, Catherine 1997. *Perspectives and Dimensions*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge studies in social and cultural anthropology. 16. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [*Esquisse d’une théorie de la pratique, précédé de trois études d’ethnologie kabyle, 1972*]

Bourdieu, Pierre 1997. *Af praktiske grunde. Omkring teorien om menneskelig handlen*. København: Hans Reitzels Forlag. [*Raisons pratique. Sur la théorie de la’action, 1994*]

Hellas, Paul 1986. “Emotion Talk across Cultures” i Rom Harré (ed.) *The Social Constructions of Emotions*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, s. 234-266.

Heelas, Paul & Linda Woodhead with Benjamin Seel, Bronislaw Szerszynski & Karin Tusting 2005. *The Spiritual Revolution Why religion is giving way to Spirituality*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

McGuire, Meredith B. 1988. *Ritual Healing in Suburban America*. With the assistance of Debra Kantor. New Brunswick, N.J.:Rutgers University Press.

McGuire, Meredith B. 2002. *Religion. The Social Context*. Fifth Edition. Belmont: Wadsworth Thomas Learning.

Nelson, Timothy J. 2005. *Every Time I Feel the Spirit. Religious Experience and Ritual in a African Church*. New York: New York University Press.

Northrup, Lesley A. 1997. *Ritualizing Women: Patterns of Feminine Spirituality*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press.

Priour, Annick 2000a. "Innledning v/temaredaktørene" i *Sosiologi i dag* årg. 32 nr.1-2 2002. s. 3-5.

Priour, Annick 2000b. "Sosiologi og raseri" i *Sosiologi i dag* årg. 32 nr.1-2 2002. s. 7-11.

Spickard, James V. 2005. "Ritual, Symbol and Experience: Understanding Catholic Worker House Masses" i *Sociology of Religion a Quarterly Review* vol 66 No.4 Winter 2005.

Woodhead, Linda 2006. "On the Incompatibility between Christianity and Holistic Spirituality. A Reply to Jan-Olav Henriksen" i *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* no 1 2006 vol. 19.