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Religion on the Borders: New Challenges in the Academic Study of Religion.

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## **Understanding Ritual**

### **Introduction**

The pluralisation of European and Norwegian culture, in which a number of different religions and philosophies of life are now represented, has resulted in the availability of new rituals as an alternative to those of the church. This even applies to rituals linked to birth and the choosing of names which have long been the monopoly of the church, and increasing numbers of parents now choose private or civil naming ceremonies instead of infant baptism. The fact that rituals are a natural part of life and are linked to a very personal sphere of experience makes it particularly interesting to examine people's views on the new alternatives to baptism. When it comes to research on rituals, the English anthropologists Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw are calling for more focus on the players themselves; in what way do those who take part in rituals understand and experience the rituals they participate in? (1994:268)

The aim of this presentation is to analyse the consequences of pluralism, with a focus on rituals relating to the beginning of life. This article gives a presentation of the "alternative parents" – those who have chosen a name-giving ceremony for their children under the auspices of The Norwegian Humanist Association (Human-Etisk Forbund), or a New Age naming ceremony, or a private naming celebration together with their family and friends. The

theme of this presentation is the players' (i.e. the parents') approach to and reflections on ritual events, based on their own experience. With recourse to the theories of Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw (1994), I will analyse to what extent the parents perceive these naming ceremonies as rituals and present their views on what a ritual should consist of.

**General framework**

Humphrey & Laidlaw describe rituals according to their degree of ritualization – in terms of the ritual's predetermined or archetypal *script* as they call it. If the ritual has a set text and is carefully prepared, practiced and directed, then it has a high degree of ritualization (ibid: 7-8). Rituals with a weak script are performative and more self aware, improvised and experience-orientated. In the latter case, it is the effect of the ritual that is important and not the actions and rendition dictated by the script (Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994:8).

**Data and research questions**

My analysis is based on interviews with 4 pairs of parents who have chosen a humanistic naming ceremony for their child, three pairs who have held a private party to mark the giving of their child's name and three pairs who have arranged a New Age religious naming ceremony. Important criteria for the selection of interviewees for the survey were: a wide range of social backgrounds, civil status, philosophy of life or religious faith and equal representation of both sexes. The qualitative interviews were conducted from a phenomenological perspective, with emphasis on the interviewees' own descriptions of what they have experienced (see Kvale 2000). The interviews were "partly structured" and the themes examined were naming ceremonies, the interviewees' choice of a ritual and their situation of life and faith/philosophy of life. The interviews were carried out during the period from September 2002 to January 2003, each one lasting between one to two and a half hours. The interviews were recorded on tape, transcribed and subsequently anonymised.

Table no. 1

Parents classified according to their choice of ritual

|                   |                |                |
|-------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Naming Ceremonies |                |                |
| <b>Norwegian</b>  | <b>New Age</b> | <b>Private</b> |

| <b>Humanist Association</b> |                   |                      |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| Monica & Geir               | Ellen & Trond     | Anita & Per Kristian |
| Kristin & Bjørn             | Marianne & Daniel | Stein & Elisabeth    |
| Erica & Tor                 | Anne & Jan        | Eva & Ole            |
| Tone & Terje                |                   |                      |

### **Attitudes to the ritual script**

The parents' attitudes have several aspects in common, despite their different choices of ritual. Their approach is to a large extent centred on the ritual's celebratory character and on its meaningfulness and framework. These themes illustrate the concerns of parents when it comes to rituals, but they also point to another important point: celebration, meaning and ritual ceremony reveal how the parents' choice of naming ceremony is based on their thoughts about the "script". Their reflections on celebration, meaningfulness and framework are also significant when it comes to their appraisal of a high/low script.

Generally speaking, the parents have strict ideas about what constitutes a ritual and what a good ritual should consist of. A generally expressed view is that a high degree of ritualisation ("high script") is something positive, while a low degree of ritualisation ("low script") is negative. According to the parents, a high degree of ritualisation implies a ritual that has qualities such as a sense of celebration, meaning and a strict framework. The parents who have held a privately arranged naming ritual stressed first and foremost the importance of ritual meaning and a sense of celebration. A high degree of ritualisation is also important to the New Age parents and implies meaning that can be understood as religious transformation. For parents who have chosen a humanistic ritual, a high degree of ritualisation means a strict framework and a sense of celebration.

### **Ceremony**

There is a clear difference in attitude between those who chose a religious and those who chose a secular ritual regarding ceremony as an element of ritualisation. The parents who chose a humanistic or private ritual were in favour of celebration and ceremony to mark the naming of their child because in their view this is a necessary ingredient of a ritual, as opposed to everyday life. For these parents, ritualisation and ceremony are two sides of the

same coin. The ceremonial aspect is for them an essential and intrinsic part of the ritual action. Anita and Per's private naming party had a low script. However, Anita feels that the speech that Per held for their daughter Julie distinguished the event from a normal family birthday celebration by giving it a special ceremonial quality. They evaluate the quality of the ritual according to its degree of ceremony, but only to a certain extent. Moderately ceremonial is in their view better than just slightly ceremonial, but they feel that an excessive degree of ceremony results in an overformal and cold ritual.

The New Age parents are only interested in ceremony to a small extent. For them, the message is the most important ingredient and ceremony is only of interest if it can underline the content of the naming ritual. Ritualisation in their case was not designed so that the participants would experience it as particularly dignified or ceremonial. Rather, they focused on the philosophical message and its effect on those present. The main issue for them was whether their philosophy of life was mediated in the most authentic way possible so that the adult participants were able to understand it and the child was spiritually enriched by means of words, objects and movements. The atmosphere created is important for these parents, but again only as a contribution towards the meaning that the ritual was meant to evoke and fulfil and not for its own sake. If the intention behind the ritual was understood and fulfilled, then the naming event also had a positive atmosphere in their opinion.

### **Meaning**

Meaning is a major and important issue in the parents' perception of what constitutes a ritual. Their interpretation of ritualisation reveals quite a variety of approaches to the necessity for a ritual to include a certain meaning. They also differed as to how much importance they laid on the aspect of meaning in connection with ritualisation. For several of the parent groups, the links between meaning and ritualisation are strong. For certain of them, this connection is the only, or one of only a few factors, that constitute a ritual and determine its degree of ritualisation. Those parents who do not give priority to meaning focus on other values such as ceremony/atmosphere and fellowship with their partner and with friends and relatives.

The humanistic fathers are in search of a life philosophy; they were curious to know what the humanistic philosophy could give them in their situation of life and if they could adhere to it as a life philosophy. They were critical to the humanistic naming ceremony because of its weak ideological content, where the ritualisation was similar to a infant baptism, but where

the philosophy of the Humanistic Association was hardly communicated or applied in connection with the ceremony to mark the birth and naming of their child.

The New Age parents were also interested in meaning as an aspect of ritualisation. The way they arranged their naming party was influenced by their desire that everything they did should be meaningful. They wanted to communicate their religious view of life to those present in such a way that they did not compromise their own beliefs.

The fathers who held a private naming celebration also had the same attitude to the meaningful content of the ritual. Even though they agreed with the New Age parents that the ideal ritual is one that fully complies with the parents' view of life, they felt that realising this ideal was an insurmountable task. Neither did they feel that they had the competence to be able to ritualise their own philosophy of life. For this reason, they avoided mentioning their philosophy of life at the naming celebration.

The humanistic mothers and the mothers who arranged a private ritual are not so interested in the aspect of life philosophy. For them, it is not so important that the ritualisation surrounding the welcoming of the child should be an expression of the participants' view of life or contribute to a greater understanding of this. They appreciated the ritual primarily because of its musicality, aesthetics, the fellowship with their partner and the child and the positive atmosphere evoked rather than because of the meaning behind the ceremony. For example, Elisabeth wanted the naming event to be playful and full of joy and celebration because these were important values in her life.

### **Framework**

A stringent framework and strict control are two elements that are often concurrent and linked to ritual leadership or authority. The parents set store by the ritualisation following a plan and being led by a person who has insight and control over the proceedings. In the case of the parents who had arranged a private ritual or had a New Age naming celebration or a humanistic ceremony, a strict framework was a positive factor and a necessary precondition for the event to be perceived as a ritual.

The New Age parents were keen to have control – everything was planned in advance. The pairs themselves, and especially the mother, assisted a little by their spiritual mentors, decided

what was to take place. Hardly anything was left to chance or to other people. The way the New Age naming celebration was conducted and the concrete result were characterised by careful planning, a strict framework and a clear understanding of who were the authoritative persons at the event. In the view of these parents, the preparations, together with other experience of rituals, had a decisive effect on the success of their naming celebration.

Across the various different rituals chosen to mark the birth, naming and welcoming of their child, all the parents have a similarly strict view of what constitutes a ritual framework. The parents' opinion on what constitutes a ritual and what is needed to make it a positive experience also reveals quite an authoritative view of ritual activity. The parents depict the ritual as an event where there is considerable distance between the master of ceremonies/the person leading the ritual and the other participants both as regards the planning and the actual execution of the ceremony. The person(s) leading the ritual are in a position of authority and the participants are to a large extent assisted by the leader of the ritual as to the sequence of events and who should do what. The participants follow the leader's instructions as to whether they should be active or passive, smile or be solemn, applaud or keep silent. The participants are not required to improvise unless they have been told to do so in advance or unless the form of the ritual makes it possible to do so. The parents only allow interaction on equal terms within predetermined limits. A common feature amongst all the parents is that they do not consider an extensive use of involvement as a ritual benefit or necessity. They do not want those directing the ritual to democratise the procedure or allow the participants to take responsibility and improvise in the various phases of the ritual or do so in unison more than to a very small extent. Instead of allowing the proceedings to evolve in a spontaneous fashion, the parents prefer the master of ceremonies to keep control and conduct the ritual actions in accordance with their convictions. This also applies to the preparations. The parents do not look positively on giving the ritual players equal status and see therefore no need to involve them in the preparations.

### **Summary**

The factors that the parents are generally concerned about in relation to the ritualisation of the beginning of life are a festive/ceremonial atmosphere and a strictly ordered form with a clear ritual leadership and authority. Meaning is the factor that arouses the greatest differences of opinion about ritual activity. The New Age parents and the fathers who opted for either a humanistic or a private ritual appraised the ritual activities according to how much meaning

they contained and how far the ritual reflected their philosophy of life. The mothers who chose a humanistic or private ritual laid little weight on meaning as a necessary component for ritual activity.