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Ritual Sponsorship – the Institution of Godparents in Baptism and Naming Ceremonies

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At the beginning of their lives, and very soon after birth, the majority of children in Norway will have two or more godparents. In connection with the church baptism of the child, or alternative rituals, special persons will be formally connected to the child and a potential life-long relationship is thereby established.

In 2004, a total of 74.8 per cent of all infants were baptized in the Church of Norway. The rest of the infants underwent other rituals, or did not have any ceremonies or celebrations at all. The most common alternative ritual is called the *naming ceremony* (in Norwegian *navnefest*), which is held in connection with the birth and naming of a child. Some naming ceremonies are private and some are public events arranged by the Norwegian Humanist Association. In 2003, 2.5 per cent of all newborn children attended a humanist naming ceremony in the Norwegian Humanist Association. We have little data on how many attend a non-Christian religious or private ritual. Unfortunately, very few statistics are available in this area. I assume that approximately the same number of people have a private ritual as have a naming ceremony in the Norwegian Humanist Association.

Table 1: Baptised children and children who have undergone a naming ceremony of all infants. Per cent.

Infant Baptism and Naming Ceremonies				
	The Church of Norway (the Evangelical Lutheran Church)	The Catholic Church in Norway	Infant Baptism in other Churches*	The Norwegian Humanist Association
2004	74.8	1.2	(figures not yet available)	(figures not yet available)
2003	75.2	1.6	0.3	2.5
2002	77.2	1.1	0.4	2.2

* Other churches includes: The Evangelical-Lutheran Free Church, the Methodist Church, the Swedish Church in Norway, the Antroposophical Christian Church, Det Norske Misjonsforbund and the Orthodox Church in Norway (St. Nicolai).

The Norwegian Humanist Association offers non-religious rites of passage (naming ceremonies, confirmations, weddings, and funerals) as a service to the humanist community and others who want to participate without being affiliated with the association.

The private ritualization of birth and naming consists of a special party for family and friends, which they call a naming celebration. The way they arrange the private naming celebration varies greatly, especially in terms of the degree of ritualization. We can roughly split this into two sub-categories – secular and religious celebrations. Parents, who want to have an alternative ritual for their infants, or make a ritual themselves, do not have many opportunities available to them in Norwegian society. No alternative religious institutions, which come under the New Religious Movements, offer special naming ceremonies. Only private persons who are a part of the movement offer such rituals. Rarely are there any announcements in magazines or exhibitions of alternative rituals for baptism. Some parents who are involved in New Religious Movements make their own rituals, often guided by ritual experts. The ritualizations seek inspiration from Norse mythology, or Sámi, Celtic or Christian traditions and non-Christian religions.

For my doctoral thesis I have conducted interviews with 19 parental couples that had either christened their child or used a humanist or private naming ritual.¹ 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 here, I will try to ascertain what kind of meaning old religious symbols and relatively new rituals have for people today. How do the baptismal parents and the parents who had opted for a naming ceremony understand the institution of

¹ This study does not include participant observation. To make good interviews I tried to create a serious foundation for the question guide. Part of my preparations involved taking part in humanist and private naming ceremonies. Before I started to conduct interviews I attended two of the Norwegian Humanist Association's naming rituals, one in Oslo and one in Trondheim. For private naming rituals I had experiences from three naming ceremonies from my husband's family.

godparent, who do they appoint for godparents and what kind of wishes do they have for the godparents' relation to their child?

I have organized my sample according to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of field. The ritual structure in my sample is as follows: eight parental couples have christened their child or children in the field of the Church of Norway, four couples have attended the naming ceremony in the field of the Norwegian Humanist Association, three couples made a private religious naming ceremony themselves within the field of New Religious Movements, and three couples made a private secular naming ceremony themselves within “the general social field”.

Table 2: The ritual structure in the sample according to the field the parents are ritualizing in

Parents structured after the field they have ritualized in			
Church of Norway (Baptism)	The Norwegian Humanist Association (Humanist Naming Ceremony)	New Religious Movements field (Private Religious Naming Ceremony)	The general social field (Private Secular Naming Ceremony)
Knut and Nina	Monica and Geir	Ellen and Trond	Anita and Per Kristian
Arne and Randi	Kristin and Bjørn	Marianne and Daniel	Stein and Elisabeth
Hilde and Göran	Erica and Tor	Anne and Jan	Lone and Ole
Heidi and Svein	Tone and Terje		
Hege and Lars			
Linda and Thomas			
Rune and Elin			
Kjell and Magdalena			
Lene and Morten			

Of the 11 parental couples who had a naming ceremony, all but four had godparents for their children. Ellen and Trond, Anita and Per Kristian, Monica and Geir, and Kristin and Bjørn have not assigned godparents for their children.

Giving the child godparents seems to be a general way of acting regardless of what kind of ritual the parents choose for their children. Appointing godparents and giving the institution meaning are to a great extent in accordance with the same criteria. Beyond the principles of honour there are three other dominant principles which together establish a pattern for appointing godparents: choosing a person who is capable of taking care of the child if the parents should die or be severely injured, the godparents' possibility of giving the child religious and human resources and that the godparents should make a balance between the maternal and paternal families, or both family and friends, or just friends. These are actions and comprehensions, which are part of the same cultural meaning system. We can view the meaning of godparenthood as a weaving with its threads as a deep collective and social structure. The understanding of the institution of godparent and the way the institution is practised when it comes to appointing godparents are parts of this structure and form part of the history, symbols, thinking and action of society. This can be summed up in the words of Catherine Bell and Pierre Bourdieu and their term of “social body”. The institution of godparent is a dominant part of the construction of the social body.

The appointing and the viewing of the institution according to the fields are not alike in all respects but are alike in some respects.

There is a strong connection between how the parents view the ritual and how they understand the institution of godparents. If they give the baptism, or the private naming ceremony, a religious content, they emphasize the godparent's religious tasks. The religious understanding of the ritual has also great impact on choosing godparents. Some of the baptismal parents argue in accordance with the Church of Norway's understanding of baptism and choose godparents who do not oppose Christian baptism. The parents in the sample (Heidi, Arne, Hege, Lars, Linda, and Thomas) who have an understanding of baptism as a religious ritual want at least one or only religious godparents. This group of parents emphasise the godparent's capability of interceding on behalf of their children. The parents who made their own naming ceremony and gave it a religious content do not think it is important to find Christian godparents but rather godparents with spiritual qualifications. They want that the relationship between the godparent and the godchild to be filled with spiritual content. They want godparents who have the possibility to be a kind of spiritual co-wanderer for the child, even if they are not very easy to find. This means that they do not want a kind of spiritual

coach for their child but a potential friend or interlocutor, and that this friendship with an adult should be filled with spirituality.

There are three important strategies for appointing godparents: choosing from family and friends, only family or only friends. The dominant strategy among baptismal parents is to appoint both family and friends. The most common combination in establishing a godparent group is one or two relatives from the paternal and maternal family, together with one or two friends of the parents. Obvious candidates for godparents are the closest family members: grandparents, uncles and aunts. If the parents only have one sibling, it is common that he or she is also chosen as a godparent, especially if the child is the first-born child of the parents. If close relatives are not chosen, a close friend of the family who played an important role during the mother's or father's adolescence is chosen.

Parents who had a naming ceremony primarily appoint friends as godparents. If they choose a relative, he or she is often supplemented with a friend. For baptismal parents and naming parents the main differences are often between the number of godparents and the gender composition of the godparent group. Naming children have fewer godparents and the majority of baptismal children have female godparents. Naming children often have the same number of female and male godparents.

Having religious or spiritual wishes for the content of the godparent-godchild relationship does not exclude wishes for other qualities as well. It is important to have godparents representing different kinds of values, experiences and knowledge. This attitude to the institution of godparent is very common among baptismal as well as naming parents. They want the relationship to develop into a mutual friendship. They hope that the friendship should not end at confirmation age but to continue to a lifelong relationship. Having wishes is not the same as expecting that wishes will come true. The parents do not want to put demands on the godparents, as this goes against their understanding of the institution of godparent. They do not understand the institution of godparent as being constituted by duties and rights, but only by rights and possibilities for the godparents to give of their human as well as religious resources.

When it comes to honour and godparenthood as a social security net, baptismal parents and naming godparents approach the institution alike. Many of the parents used the word honour

or similar words to explain why they asked family or friends to be godparents, and the ritualizing of the godparent role, with solemnity and festivity was a way of honouring the godparents. Godparenthood has an important social function in serving as a social security net. In case of death or an accident the parents hope that the godparents and the closest family will represent a social resource for the child. In a critical situation, if the parents should for some reason be unable to take care of their child, they want the godparents to be aware of their responsibility and serve as a social and economical security.